

The sky is not falling, but it is sagging here and there over the academic establishment. Colleges and universities are not about to disappear, but they are facing increasing competition in areas in which they believed themselves invulnerable. If they are to continue to play a vital societal role into the 21st century, academic institutions need to take a long, hard, and self-critical look at themselves, to reexamine their values and their priorities, and to identify what needs to change, and what needs to be maintained. All of that appears self-evident to the leadership in most metropolitan and urban universities, already deeply engaged in such reexaminations and redirection.

Unfortunately, the realism displayed by these institutions is not as yet universal throughout the system of colleges and universities. Many administrators and faculty members continue to be very complacent, myopic with regard to our internal shortcomings and all too ready to blame external ignorance and philistinism for waning public confidence.

Twice during the past two weeks I witnessed two examples of this ostrich attitude. The first followed a presentation by Bob Zemsky, the widely known editor of the Pew Policy Perspectives and head of the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania. In what seemed to me to be both very clear as well as very persuasive terms, he warned his audience that the negative implications of declining public confidence were substantially aggravated by the rapidly growing competition faced by our colleges and universities by non-academic sources for many of their traditional activities. He called for a basic reevaluation of the role as well as the mode of operation of colleges and universities.

Even more recently, at another meeting, Peter Ewell, Senior Associate of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) in Denver, and widely known for his work on assessment, spoke of the dangerous gap between what is being said out there, and what the academic world is hearing. He warned of the danger of external regulation if we do not do the job ourselves, and called for renewed collective responsibility within colleges and universities in order to bring about necessary changes. He too, it seemed to me, was very clear in his focus on the need for the academy to take a good, hard look at itself.

Yet in both cases, respondents appeared to miss that point. A senior official of a state coordinating agency for higher education at one meeting, and the head of a major state university at the other, spoke in almost identical terms about the need to bring about better public understanding of our work and our achievements. In both cases there was some acknowledgement of the value of ongoing self-evaluation and continuing improvement, but the basic message, unmistakably and regrettably, was the same: our academic house is basically in order, and we should do a better job selling ourselves to legislators and the public at large. After all, both respondents said, higher education continues to be highly valued.

Of course it is, and we hardly need to belabor that. That is not the issue. Consider health care: everyone surely believes in good health care -- but a majority of the population questions the ability of the existing health care system to provide it. Similarly, there are beginning to be voices out there which call into question whether colleges and universities, as they are presently constituted and operated, are the optimal providers of higher education. Already both the private and the public

sector are turning to non-academic providers of advanced education, research, and technical assistance. That is the issue to which we need to address ourselves. There are proliferating non-academic sources of advanced instruction, even some with degree-granting authority. Government and private sector laboratories and institutes are a substantial source of both basic and applied research. The number of consulting enterprises is legion. All these providers of various aspects of higher education exist because there is much demand for advanced instruction, pure and applied research, and technical assistance out there -- and because a lot of clients are convinced that they can obtain what they need more cost-effectively and in a manner more relevant to their needs by going to non-academic sources.

In his remarks, Zemsky repeated the old story about the major railroads who foundered earlier in this century because they thought they were in the railroad business and did not realize that they were in the transportation business in which they were getting lots of competition from new kinds of providers. He made the same point about the management of IBM thinking of themselves as being in the hardware and software business when they really were in the information business. These are somewhat facile epigrams. But the underlying point is very valid: we need to tackle questions about the nature of our societal function, and how this is changing as a result of evolving societal needs, as well as new ways in which we can perform our tasks.

In spite of the simplifications of the statements about Union Pacific and IBM, they provide one valuable lesson: even well established institutions can run into serious difficulties if they fail to realize that their roles have broadened beyond traditional bounds. With the advent of automobiles and later airplanes, transportation became more than railroading. Fiber optics and satellite dishes, information highways and 500-channel cable, are expanding the information business well beyond mainframe and personal computers. Similarly, the function of universities and colleges has expanded beyond its traditional bounds, and each individual academic institution must make its choices and set its priorities within a much broader range of activities. Society today makes more varied demands on its academic institutions, but it also offers them a wider range of opportunities for action: a greater diversity of potential clients in a wider variety of settings for the instruction they provide; escalating targets for professional outreach and the dissemination of knowledge; and a mounting set of issues requiring the most sophisticated multi-disciplinary basic and applied research. Thus the growing competition is offset by increasing opportunities, if institutionally and individually we have the flexibility and the initiative to take advantage of them.

Metropolitan and urban universities willing to reexamine and adapt their structures, procedures, and habits have begun to establish activities in which they have a clear comparative advantage over all non-academic competitors within their region. The mix of activities depends on regional conditions, and changes over time and from institution to institution. There are traditional activities as well as new ones; competitive instruction occurs in classrooms as well as by e-mail, independent study, and off-campus sites; departmental programs of instruction and research projects are supplemented by interdisciplinary ones. Different faculty are beginning to be rewarded for different mixes of teaching, outreach, and research.

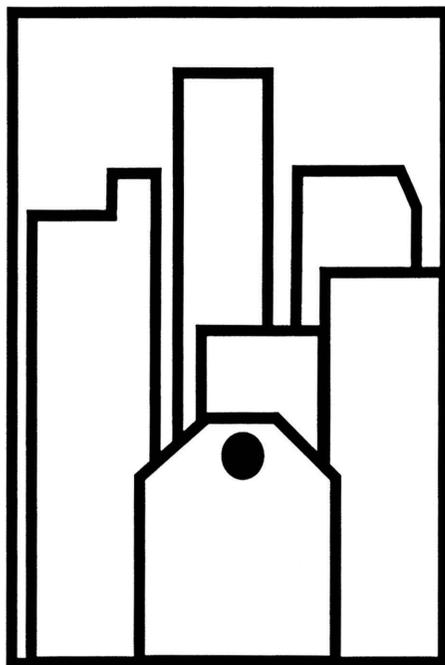
All academic institutions need to engage in appropriate reexamination of their function, their values, and their priorities within this broadened framework. There is no need to panic, but certainly no room for complacency. Let's stop telling each other that all would be well if only we could do a better job in public relations.

This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* reflects the essential role of the fine and performing arts in the interaction of metropolitan universities and their constituencies. What our institutions can achieve in terms of cultural enrichment of their region is every bit as important as their social and economic impact. This is well illustrated by the articles in this issue, and I am most grateful to Dean Alex Sidorowicz of Towson State University for his splendid contribution as guest editor.

THIRD CONFERENCE OF

Metropolitan Universities

The University of
Arkansas at Little Rock
will host the
Third Conference of
Metropolitan Universities
March 19 through 21, 1995



METROPOLITAN
UNIVERSITIES

Tentatively, the conference will focus on clarifying the mission of metropolitan/urban universities and linking the reward structure of faculty to this mission.