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Metropolitan universities should develop their missions and programs in ways which more genuinely reflect the realities of metropolitan life in America. Only in this way can a real "metropolitan vernacular" emerge which will, in its turn, help focus university resources and expectations. Engagement at all levels and in many forms can best be achieved and realized when authentic audiences, partners, and communities can see in the university a mirror of their own dynamism, diversity, and destiny.

Metropolitan Vernacular:

Toward a Logic for Metropolitanism

Some time ago I had the opportunity to visit a small state university in the Great Plains region. This university defined itself, in large part, through its rural mission. Some might argue that this was redundant since the state's land-grant university was, by tradition, the place where rural issues and needs were being addressed. But a growing chorus of critics of the land grant system have argued that this is far from the case and that the critical study of the issues facing rural and small town Americans is far from adequately addressed by the land grant system. This small regional institution was, in a sense, a statement of that critique. Through its instructional, research, and public service missions this university has rooted itself in the community. Instead of an "executive" business administration program geared to the needs of major corporations, the needs of small business firms — the real engines of the U.S. economy — are the focus of programming. An appreciation and bias for technology appropriate to the needs and realities of limited-resource farmers, service sector firms, and manufacturers, has shaped those aspects of the institution's curriculum. And in its teacher education, health, and human services offerings, as well as in the humanities and social sciences, rural conditions and issues undergird many of the university's courses, research projects, and public service commitments. Indeed, a highly integrated multidisciplinary "rural studies" program exists as part of the "core" of courses and experiences students at the university complete so that they emerge with a common vocabulary as well as a set of functional skill sets and tools — critical thinking, writing and communication, quantitative decision making, and aesthetic appreciation — which are broadly applicable and enduring. Lest we think that this is purely particularistic or parochial, it must be noted that emphasis is placed upon the universality of the rural experience throughout history and in all cultures. While

there is no "rural algebra" nor a "rural introduction to philosophy", the rural fact of the university is both its pedagogical venue and reality. This community of teachers and learners is, in my judgement, well on its way toward realizing its identity as a vernacular institution.

So it must also be with the metropolitan university. But what might this mean in a functional sense? How does the metropolitan university become a vernacular institution? First, the very definition of the metropolitan university must reflect the metropolitan reality. This does not mean that the institution must become an "urban" university in the conventional sense of the term. That is not enough. Metropolitan regions are complex, highly textured, and complicated. They include cities, diverse sprawling suburban areas -- where the majority of Americans currently dwell and increasingly work -- and a surprisingly substantial number of rural and small town communities. Indeed, the kinds of resource, community, and social conflicts evidenced in the urban/rural fringe are among the nation's least well understood. To be a genuinely metropolitan university in this context means that the very variety of metropolitan life must be a subject of the university's interests and commitments.

Second, the metropolitan university ought to see itself as both "in" and "of" its region. Many of the nation's oldest and greatest universities are located in cities. But the fact that they are "in" a city does not mean that they are "of" the city. Part of the reason for this lies in the fact that many of these very same institutions are private and manifest little sense of obligation or responsibility for the communities in which they reside. Such shortsighted views are changing but they have often made these institutions points of conflict for the community.

Another reason lies in the stigma too often attached both to locally-based, applied scholarship and to public service. There is about too much of American university life an arrogance and hubris which finds distasteful the local and regional and the applied. It is too ordinary, too lackluster, too unexceptional. Metropolitan universities which permit themselves to be characterized by this mentality find their very rationales and support undermined. And given that most are publicly supported institutions, university condescension and aloofness simply will not do. I write this not to imply that only the problems of "greater" Dayton, Kansas City, Birmingham, Chicago, Baltimore, Atlanta, Phoenix, or Portland are worthy of study. On the contrary, the significance of our lives is best understood and appreciated in comparison with others and then not at all without an abstract, critical, and often detached perspective. This is fundamental and necessary for, at bottom, the quality and integrity of any university is but a reflection of its openness to inquiry and its nature as a catholic community. But an emphasis upon the local can be a focus on the stuff and drama of the human experience, in all of its manifestations and texture. Context need not suffocate. Rather it can inform and provide connection.

Third, metropolitan universities can realize their promise as vernacular institutions through meeting the needs and challenges posed by the complex and diverse demographic characteristics of their students, the neighborhoods and communities with which they interact, the market geography of the emerging economy, and the organizational and institutional tapestry of which they are a vital part. Therein lies what is perhaps most exciting and compelling about the metropolitan vernacular. These universities are still in the process of becoming, not unlike the metropolitan areas of which they are a part. They have missions which require them to be both "in" and "of" their communities and regions. They are very often being pulled in many directions precisely because they are institutions which matter and have capa-

bilities that can and often do make a difference in people's lives. Metropolitan universities define new areas of knowledge, deepen our understanding and appreciation of older ones, provide opportunity for the critical assessment of the fine, performing, and applied arts, speak to the realities of both longstanding and newly emerging professions, and create new technologies and skill sets, and provide access to populations often historically ignored or under served by traditional institutions, all while remaining laden with a potential only partially realized and a sense of possibility.

Metropolitan areas lack coherence and a sense of integration. Identity is often lacking and with that an absence of civic culture and shared civic responsibility. Instead enclaves have come to exist which reflect segmented and segregated lives and interests. This too typifies the modern university which is often little more than a "multiversity cafeteria," what Bellah and his colleagues in *The Good Society* have described as "a congeries of faculty and students, each pursuing their own ends, integrated not by any shared vision but only by the bureaucratic procedures of the 'administration'." If they do not provide greater connection, coherence, and understanding, then metropolitan universities will fail to realize their potential as vernacular institutions. They will continue to mirror the confusion and growing discontinuity which defines the nature of contemporary American life. The metropolitan university will but mimic social disintegration rather than project and realize its capacity to recreate culture and society along lines which are far more authentic.

Suggested Reading

Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, *The Good Society*. New York, A. A. Knopf, 1991.

Is your institution a metropolitan university?

If your university serves an urban/metropolitan region and subscribes to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Metropolitan Universities printed elsewhere in this issue, your administration should seriously consider joining the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities.

Historically, most universities have been associated with cities, but the relationship between "the town and the gown" has often been distant or abrasive. Today the metropolitan university cultivates a close relationship with the urban center and its suburbs, often serving as a catalyst for change and source of enlightened discussion. Leaders in government and business agree that education is the key to prosperity, and that metropolitan universities will be on the cutting edge of education not only for younger students, but also for those who must continually re-educate themselves to meet the challenges of the future.

The Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities brings together institutions who share experiences and expertise to speak with a common voice on important social issues. A shared sense of mission is the driving force behind Coalition membership. However, the Coalition also offers a number of tangible benefits: ten free subscriptions to *Metropolitan Universities*, additional copies at special rates to distribute to boards and trustees, a newsletter on government and funding issues, a clearinghouse of innovative projects, reduced rates at Coalition conventions. . . .

As a *Metropolitan Universities* subscriber, you can help us by bringing both the journal and the Coalition to the attention of your administration. To obtain information about Coalition membership, please contact Dr. Bill McKee, University of North Texas, by calling (817) 565-2477 or faxing a message to (817) 565-4998.

