

Time Is Running Out

Legislative and other external rhetoric about higher education is sounding a theme that should profoundly worry the members of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities. More and more one hears the statement—expressed at times as part of a general bashing of the academy—that states need only two categories of four year institutions: one, or in some larger states, a small number of research universities. For the rest the public interest requires establishments dedicated only to instruction. That view is shared not only by a growing number of state legislators and some governors, but also by some heads of state-wide coordinating boards—as we in Massachusetts know only too well, being subject to particularly strident and denigrating comments from the chairman of our coordinating commission.

Given those external threats to our existence as comprehensive universities dedicated to more than teaching, we can both individually and collectively as a Coalition follow a number of strategies. One is to close our ears to all this pressure, to hunker down and hope that it will all just go away. There is always a lot of sand around into which we can stick our heads, and that has often worked in the past—perhaps it will work again.

A second approach is to keep repeating our cherished mantra: research is essential to good teaching. No matter that no one has ever really demonstrated it—except perhaps for advanced undergraduate seminars and doctoral instruction. No matter that it is difficult even for a committed researcher to demonstrate how the quality of a lower division composition course or even a literature survey is noticeably increased by the production of a monograph on an Elizabethan poet. No matter above all that the public has long ago stopped buying that argument. All too often we continue to use it to justify faculty time and university resources spent on research.

Fortunately there is a third strategy—although the time may be running out to apply it successfully. It is to realize and to raise public awareness of that crucial statement in our collective statement of identity:

“We are dedicated to serve as an intellectual and creative resource to our metropolitan regions in order to contribute to their economic development, social health, and cultural vitality...”

Many, indeed probably all members of the Coalition are involved in a number of activities that contribute to this purpose. But many of them continue to be the result of individual faculty initiatives or, in some cases, the efforts of a school or

department. That may not be sufficient to project to legislatures and the public at large our ability, to be the kind of intellectual and creative resource to which we aspire, and that we have the capability to do so precisely because we engage in research. We will need to develop more systematic and institutionalized mechanisms to ensure that the results of our research (and that which takes place elsewhere) is rapidly and effectively communicated to where it can be applied, made useful, and (not coincidentally) enhanced and enriched by the very act of application. It is a strategy to show, in very concrete terms, that by linking research to its application, the metropolitan university can indeed become a major resource to its community.

And when the metropolitan community experiences how the university as a whole—as more than an aggregate of isolated activities—can enhance school reform, contribute to economic development, encourage technology transfer, help to create new enterprises and modernize existing ones, then there is reason to believe that this community will recognize that a regional university can and should be more than a teaching institution, yet through its emphasis on outreach and interaction, fundamentally different from the traditional research university. It would have been easier had we begun to do so a decade or more ago, but there still may be time to escape the false but widely held belief that four year institutions are either traditional research universities or teaching institutions.

The implications of all this for faculty professional service are obvious. In the first place it must be properly recognized and rewarded—which in turn means well documented and peer reviewed.

Secondly, as suggested above, it must be institutionalized and systematized so as to ensure a whole that is greater—and more visible—than the sum of fragmented, uncoordinated efforts that are inevitable if academic outreach is left primarily to individual initiative.

If we manage to establish ourselves as a collective intellectual resource, we may be able to escape the Hobson's choice that now confronts: to be traditional research universities, which would misuse our capabilities, or to be limited—and funded—by our instructional function, which fails to make adequate use of them. Time is running out—but I don't believe that we have any choice but to try.