

I am of a generation that will never achieve easy familiarity with the computer. There are exceptions: a few of my contemporaries have learned to use this contraption and to speak about it as if they had been to the manner born. But most of us, even if we sit at our keyboards for hours every day and even if we have learned to appreciate the machine's enormous advantages, approach it each time with some trepidation or perhaps I should say mistrust, never being quite sure whether it won't at some point suddenly flash on an incomprehensible message about illegal commands. We don't really feel quite in charge, rather like an inexperienced rider on a spirited horse.

Even more important, perhaps, than this sense of insecurity is our realization that, at best, we make use of only a small portion of the extraordinary potential of the devices on our desks. I became particularly aware of this recently when, with some reluctance, I moved from a 286 PC with some tens of megabytes of memory to a Pentium-powered PC, more than a gigabyte, CD-ROM player, etc., etc. Not only can it do much more than I would ever need, but even within the range of my word processing use, it can perform dozens of tricks and shortcuts that would simplify my work - if only I understood more fully some of the basic principles and their application. And when for the first time I ventured forth into the World Wide Web, I promptly got lost.

I bring up these rather trivial and personal details because I realize that they constitute a microlevel example of a broad principle: the more extensive the capabilities of the modern devices that are becoming part of our lives, and the more information at our fingertips in cyberspace, the greater the need for guidance and mentoring. The greater the choice of what we can do and the more formidable the range and detail of information to which we have access, the more urgent the need for help in figuring what is important and what is not, what choices we need to make and what priorities we should set, what adds to our understanding and what is irrelevant. My age helped to drive this home when I started with my new computer—but that need for help with interpretation and synthesis exists for individuals of all ages.

Indeed it is that need that is at the heart of a basic change that is beginning to take hold in higher education today. It is the realization that our principal developmental task as individual faculty members and collectively as an edu-

cational institution is not to teach but to help students to learn. Our role as purveyors of information is rapidly being challenged by a range of non-academic providers who are likely always to be a step ahead of most colleges and universities in the investment they can make in technology and in the sophistication (as well as mass appeal) with which they can package their goods. Of course that does not mean that academic institutions should abandon the dissemination of information. Every educational and formative activity has a didactic component that ensures that our students not only learn to think, but also have things to think about. But increasingly our emphasis must shift to the learning process and to helping our students absorb, digest, and make sense of the bewildering array of facts and figures to which they now have ready access.

And what is true for the formal instructional processes in our colleges and universities holds as well for our broader responsibilities as educational institutions. Our constituencies more and more need our assistance in finding their way through the glut of information that is available to them. Our role increasingly extends beyond that of traditional knowledge dissemination to a much more interactive collaboration which clarifies what information is needed and pertinent, that helps to interpret and to synthesize it, and that results in enhancing the learning capacity of our external stake holders.

Because this must be a highly interactive process, it is most effective on a local and regional basis, with a good deal of personal contact and dialogue. We have learned to communicate in a variety of ways over vast distances, and are therefore not limited geographically in our outreach. But more and more of the research of many social scientists on regional economic and social development has indicated the importance of geographically dense and therefore intense networks. These facilitate communication and feedback; they can lead to a broad variety of unanticipated connections and reinforcements; they can add up to something greater than the sum of their parts. Hence the paradox that gives meaning to the mission of metropolitan universities: the more extensive the realm of cyberspace and the globalization of information and communication, the greater the need, as well, for a university's *regional* role in providing guidance and interpretation. Because we must shift our emphasis from teaching to learning in our outreach and professional interaction as much as we must do so in our traditional classrooms, the direct interaction of our metropolitan universities with local and regional governments, private enterprises, community groups, and other constituencies is

steadily increasing in importance.

And as we help our external constituencies “learn to learn,” we ourselves gain understanding, and so do our students who are involved in the process. That is the essence of the concept of “service learning” which was the theme of the preceding issue of *Metropolitan Universities*.

The current issue focuses on another very important aspect of outreach: our interaction with community colleges. Many, indeed perhaps in all, metropolitan universities, the majority of graduates did not begin their post-secondary studies at the institution from which they eventually receive their baccalaureate degrees. Many of our upper division students transfer from a community college. Hence the nature and quality of our relationship to institutions in the two-year sector of higher education is as important for us as it is for them. I am most grateful to Howard London of Bridgewater State College and to Kate Smith of Temple University for gathering and editing a set of thoughtful and informative articles on that subject.

# Metropolitan Universities: Who Are We?

**We are** located in or near the urban center of a metropolitan statistical area (MSA) with a population of at least 250,000.

**We are** universities, public and private, whose mission includes teaching, research, and professional service. We offer both graduate and undergraduate education in the liberal arts and two or more professional fields. The latter programs are strongly practice-oriented and make extensive use of clinical sites in the metropolitan area.

**The majority of our students** comes from our metropolitan regions. Our students are highly diverse in age, ethnic and racial identity, and socio-economic background, reflecting the demographic characteristics of their region. Many come to us by transfer from community colleges and other baccalaureate institutions, many are place-bound employees and commuters, and many require substantially longer than the traditional time to graduate, for financial and other personal reasons.

**We are** oriented toward and identify with our regions, proudly and by deliberate design. Our programs respond to regional needs while striving for national excellence.

**We are** strongly interactive. We are dedicated to serve as intellectual and creative resources to our metropolitan regions in order to contribute to their economic development, social health, and cultural vitality, through education, research, and professional outreach. We are committed to collaborate and cooperate with the many communities and clienteles in our metropolitan regions and to help bridge the socio-economic, cultural, and political barriers among them.

**We are** shaping and adapting our own structures, policies, and practices to enhance our effectiveness as key institutions in the lives of our metropolitan regions and their citizens.

