

RESEARCH AND INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND NICHE

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Every university operates within a context, which, at its center, is relatively constant, although its expression changes very rapidly at times. This context is comprised of charge (mission), culture, and institutional type. These three aspects combine to render every institution unique.

The university is, in the first instance, a place to educate students; everything else is added on or happens in support of the central mission of teaching and learning. Without the teaching and learning mission, universities would be research institutes. Having said that, we also acknowledge that research and graduate education grew rapidly in the post-World War II era, and in recent times, our expectations for research have increased as the country depends more and more on its universities for research and development. During the last fifteen years or so the research mission has expanded to include a technology transfer component (read economic development). While every research university works to the limits of its ability to expand the research and development effort and secure funding to do so, this happens in a context in which education retains primacy.

Viewed from this perspective, research and creative work at a university enhances the undergraduate experience in important ways, from the nature of the faculty to exposure to the processes of inquiry and creation. Research and creative work are the very foundation of graduate education.

It should be noted that all this happens in the presence of a state and federal agenda. The federal part of the agenda is focused, for the most part, on research and research funding, and the state level agenda is founded and evaluated primarily on the basis of undergraduate education. These two forces frequently are in conflict. The degree of conflict is dictated to a significant extent by the degree to which state government comes to understand the relationship between the potency of research in its universities and the long-term enhancement of the state's economic base. On any given day, however, most legislators are driven by the most immediate concerns of their constituents, which stem primarily from issues of undergraduate education.

The four-state region of Kansas, Missouri, Iowa and Nebraska provides an interesting long-term study in the ways universities are viewed as economic development engines. Driving through the various states, one is reminded that, by comparison, Kansas spends a lot of money on highways (judging by the

consistency of the driving surface). Leafing through data on comparative funding of research universities, it is equally evident that the other three states place far more emphasis on funding their universities. Time will tell which model yields the highest outcome in socioeconomic terms.

These funding patterns reflect more than 100 years of the political decision-making process, which, today, defines each state's approach to such matters. The outcomes therefore, have very, very deep roots and, in fact, reflect the history and culture of the individual state. Reflecting their intensely populist ethos, the citizens of Kansas have created a system that maximizes post secondary educational opportunity for traditional age students. This has resulted in a high participation rate via community colleges, technical schools and colleges, regional and research universities. In terms of resources, it has resulted in a comparatively low per student funding level, and a comparatively high per capita funding of post secondary education. Thus the resource issues, which affect the research universities in Kansas, are not a result of penury on the part of the taxpayer, but rather an unusually high degree of dilution resulting from emphasis on participation rate.

A central point is that these circumstances are not an accident. It is how Kansans have wanted it to be for well over a century, and changing the pattern is not going to happen overnight. In fact, one could argue that Kansas has it right. That certainly is so if a high participation rate is the right priority, the current fiscal straits of some community colleges notwithstanding.

Within this milieu, each university has a mission, or charge, and a culture of its own, based upon which it must establish a niche of optimal competitiveness for the future. At Kansas State University (KSU), for example, within the traditional mission of a land grant university, our strongest position, within and without, is that of a truly student-centered research university. A very decentralized, college-oriented administrative system and culture, which honors teaching and learning as well as research (and extension), has evolved over more than a hundred years. Today, our university has both strengths and weaknesses as a result of a long, incremental process of academic evolution. The trick is to emphasize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses in today's environment. The descriptor "student-centered research university" can best express our strengths at KSU. A long, gradual acquisition of traditional strengths and weaknesses characterizes every research university in the country, although the descriptors differ, at least in terms of emphasis. Having said all this, every research university must pursue the enhancement of its research base, within its unique context of culture and fiscal circumstances, as aggressively as possible. Reasons to pursue research include: creating an atmosphere of inquiry throughout the university; providing an appropriate research base to support doctoral programs; furthering economic development; and obtaining (grant and contract) money to fund graduate student stipends and expand the scientific equipment infrastructure.

In order to accomplish this at a competitive level in today's extraordinarily under-funded environment, it is, in my view, necessary to recognize that the standard model of a complete scholar (in which each faculty member is expected to produce optimally in teaching, research and service over the entire course of a career) is too constraining to be affordable. Faculty who fall short in research over an extended period of years, underutilize other talents and tend to burn out. The resources attached to their research time are utilized poorly or not at all. Every person is different to begin with, and circumstances change on an individual basis over one's career. Ernest Boyer (1990) understood this as the basis of his landmark publication *Scholarship Reconsidered*, in which he introduced a new vernacular under the terms scholarship of teaching, discovery, integration and application.

A framework is thus provided in which, over the course of a career, each person's strengths and passions can, to a greater extent, be capitalized upon, thereby enhancing the collective productivity of any academic unit. The truth is that, over the course of a career, not everyone is equally able to maintain a nationally competitive level of research (or other creative) output. An even smaller number are able to establish and maintain a national reputation, and an even smaller percentage are able to consistently frame the right questions to the right funding agency to bring in resources at a level that can allow competitiveness in research. So, while it is in everyone's best interest to celebrate and capitalize upon those who can "do it all," we should recognize that not everyone can, and the university has many different kinds of important work to do. Within the scholarly milieu, then, it is most effective to engender enough flexibility in the system of roles and rewards to allocate work according to individual strengths, to the extent possible—especially during the long post-tenure period.

The collective productivity of an academic unit, be it a department, college or university, is, of course, guided by its mission and molded along the contours of its culture by its existing and potential strengths and by the expectations of taxpayers and tuition payers. Research (and other creative work) is an essential tool in continuously creating the most aggressive and innovative advances in the service of knowledge for the sake of knowledge, and it also serves the people who pay the bills.

Reference

Boyer, Ernest (1990). *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriat*. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.