

Redefining and Repositioning Outreach in the University

A panel of administrative officers from three leading universities agreed that redefining and repositioning outreach in the university in times of diminishing resources and erosion of public trust is not easy and requires a thoughtful, strategic approach. Allen presented the image of a bridge between the university and the public which has been broken and needs to be fixed so that crossing by both is facilitated and increased. What is needed is an open system in which ongoing quality exchanges between university and community are possible and occur in a shared environment of co-learners. In that setting, the knowledge of the campus and the knowledge of the community converge and the roles of both teacher and learner are shared.

However, university rules, policies and procedures are often impediments to developing meaningful partnerships with communities and other collaborators. Trust is often lacking. The new paradigm is more than increased service, and outreach, while a better term, still suggests one-way communication and contribution. In its broader definition, outreach is the transfer and exchange of knowledge between the institution and society. “Knowledge outreach is about sharing it,” observed one panelist.

Panelists concurred that “in reach” (knowledge coming from the community into the university) is a critical accompaniment to outreach if the university and community are to find solutions to complex community problems. As a response to the broken bridge metaphor, Ramaley suggested that the university join the community in a kind of “Renaissance Fair,” which depicts the multifaceted free-forum needed to capitalize on the contributions of the various outreach partners. The university and the community must arrive at a shared agenda and recognize that the “cult of the expert” will no longer suffice. Universities can use natural forces in society to move the agenda forward. Today, for a variety of reasons, many other organizations and agencies are also focusing on collaboration and looking for partnerships as an effective way to integrate efforts, provide service, and collectively deal with complex issues. Because land-grant and urban universities have missions that overlap, they can work together on problems of common interest.

Service learning, or student involvement in outreach, is critically important and represents a “strong addition.” Opportunities for both graduate and undergraduate students to volunteer, with outreach projects integrated into their academic programs, benefit both the students and their communities. A member of the audience commented that service or action learning can be a “light bulb experience” and may be a way to engage faculty members in outreach.

Faculty do not come naturally to doing outreach because they are trained otherwise, but they can acquire necessary skills. Faculty members are often unclear about how noncredit outreach will be viewed within the academic community; this type of contribution is different from credit-hour generation or published research output. Faculty need workload

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guidelines and universities must hold discussions about consulting policies, overload pay for outreach, and faculty needs concerning promotion and tenure. Sometimes, consulting for pay may be the appropriate outreach strategy.

Motivating faculty members to participate in outreach is not easy. The rewards for doing research are known, and satisfaction in teaching accumulates over time; outreach falls somewhere in between. Feedback from adult learners and community partners helps faculty know they are making a difference. Rewards and incentives are important and present systems may need to shift.

Probably the greatest challenge in repositioning outreach is the need to develop quality indicators or benchmarks to measure outcomes and success. While continuing to evaluate faculty effort for quality, quantity, impact, degree of originality, and creativity, universities must also evaluate outreach by using indicators that the external community believes measure success. Society must see that research and outreach programs are making a difference.

If transformation is to occur, universities must visibly invest in outreach. While they must make real shifts in the investment of resources as interests and needs change, universities must not seem to be “taking away from other important functions” to support outreach. Unit-level mission and commitment, and individual faculty integration, are essential for the successful repositioning of outreach within the university. As Simon suggested, “Outreach can be used as a lever of change in the process of radical incrementalism.” Transformation will come about through the integration of outreach with teaching and research agendas.

When outreach becomes an integral part of teaching and research, the need to define it as a separate aspect of the university’s mission will no longer exist. If integration is successful, “outreach” will cease to be part of the vocabulary of the academy, and university service to communities will be *with* them and not *to* and *for* them.