

# Epilogue

## **Paul A. and Francena L. Miller\***

The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), announcing in November 1995 a grant of \$1.2 million from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, reported: “A fundamental premise underlying the work of the Commission [to be established by the grant] is that in the next century the public service and outreach role of the university will be its central obligation and the ‘culture’ of universities must reflect this obligation.”<sup>1</sup>

Devising strategies in light of a similar outlook was the aim of the Capstone Symposium, hosted by Michigan State University (MSU), October 22-24, 1995. The event reviewed the MSU five-year project with lifelong learning and university outreach, supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The symposium’s background paper was the 1993 report of the MSU Provost’s Committee on University Outreach entitled *University Outreach at Michigan State University: Extending Knowledge to Serve Society*.<sup>2</sup> Case studies from the host and other institutions formed the core of the agenda. With some 350 participants, most attending as small teams from public institutions, alternate plenary and concurrent sessions addressed positioning of outreach in the university, defined leadership roles, reviewed the promise of internal and external partnerships, and compared models for change in the “academic culture.”

## **Highlights**

The symposium’s major concern was outlined in the opening plenary. Peter McPherson, the MSU president, emphasized that “society will not wait long” for universities to strengthen their responses to urgent social needs and pressures. Russell G. Mawby, chairperson of the MSU Board of Trustees and chairman emeritus of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, extended several challenges: the shifts underway to local control, the puzzle of fitting specialized solutions to generalized problems, the impact of the information revolution upon universities and society, and grievous rifts in civil society. James C. Votruba, vice provost at MSU, emphasized the challenge of expanding access to shared learning opportunities for both community and university.

Carol Cartwright, president of Kent State University, described midway in the symposium the mounting need of interdisciplinarity within and among universities and the changes required in faculty roles, assignments, rewards, and evaluation criteria. In the final plenary, Peter McGrath,

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## **Footnote**

\*Paul and Francena Miller, both with major interests in higher adult education, were invited to attend the symposium and share their reflections. Paul Miller is former provost of Michigan State University and president emeritus, Rochester Institute of Technology, and Francena Miller, long a professor of sociology, is former dean of home economics, University of Connecticut.

president of NASULGC, chaired a panel on the implications of federal devolution to local government, and the pressures thereby exerted on social, occupational, and civic institutions. William Richardson, president and chief executive officer of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, closed the symposium by underscoring the importance of higher education speaking and acting cooperatively on its national mission; entering into carefully designed partnerships; and serving to strengthen both policy institutions and the capacity of citizens for putting knowledge to work in the information age.

Among the needs and principles arising from the symposium's discussions were the following:

- Closer and more effective connections must be found between teaching, research, and service.
- New models are needed in order to prepare, assign, evaluate, and reward faculty who foster such connections.
- New ways to attract, allocate, and organize human and financial resources are required to sharpen university responses to social problems.
- The outreach agenda, connected to teaching, research, and service, should be shared by departments, centers, institutes, colleges, and other divisions, as well as the university as a whole and, when appropriate, by institutional systems and associations.
- Interdisciplinary teams with the skill to focus knowledge and experience on societal problems must be encouraged, along with the development of skills in forming partnerships with external groups.
- Increased collaboration should include greater participation of students and faculty in service learning.
- Present outreach models, e.g., Cooperative Extension, lifelong learning, centers and institutes, and the emerging collaborative practices among departments and colleges, should be tested, adapted, and applied more widely in the university.

### **Enduring Challenges**

It is unlikely that any participant departed without recognizing three underlying challenges to academic form and function: First, uncertainty remains on how best to position the outreach function in the university. Second, whatever the reforms to encourage outreach, they risk being blocked by the professoriate's traditional emphases and style. Third, knowledge along disciplinary lines, when brought to bear upon today's problems which cross those lines, pleads for interdisciplinarity, better understood and practiced.

## **Positioning the Outreach Effort**

The MSU Report reads: "Outreach is a form of scholarship that cuts across teaching, research and service. It involves generating, transmitting, applying, and preserving knowledge for the direct benefit of external audiences in ways consistent with university and unit missions." This model helpfully changes the traditional definitions which can separate rather than unify "teaching, research and service"; e.g., the metaphor of the "three-legged stool" used often by land-grant institutions. While "service" is kept in place, "outreach" becomes a feature that is part of each and serves to connect the three functions and at the same time distinguishes on- and off-campus environments and activities.

MSU emphasizes that this model must be rooted in the unit level, especially departments, for its basic guidance and workability. Guidance and coordination can be encouraged by chairs, deans, and central officers of general administration, but the major responsibility for devising and conducting outreach programs rests with the faculty at the unit levels. While the symposium revealed a concern for achieving such decentralization, given low academic priorities for outreach activity, consensus prevailed that the unit level is key to changes in academic culture. Other models were described which provide continuing mechanisms of guidance and coordination at the center, notably at the Pennsylvania State University and the universities of Wisconsin and Minnesota. Representatives of Portland State University also outlined a metropolitan university model geared to a common learning partnership between university and community.

## **Changing the Academic Culture**

The ultimate answers to the debate on centralized and decentralized models will likely combine features of both, at least until reforms in the professoriate and in academic culture are further developed. Given that most institutions are only beginning these reforms and have yet to institutionalize the changes, positioning the outreach function will remain experimental and challenged for some time. Despite the lively rhetoric, reforms in academic culture must overcome a long period of socially constructed faculty roles, organization, and specialization. In addition, for most of the twentieth century research training grew as the pivotal feature of graduate study. Generating new knowledge will surely remain a basic duty of the university and the professoriate. But reform will focus on the power of the disciplines, peer approval, and prestige systems, all to be modified in order to create and sustain effective connections between teaching, research, service, and outreach.

Another obstacle to establishing a stronger legitimacy of the outreach function is the brevity of tenure for university leaders. Policies and

programs remain in flux, a condition which may become an expectation and ignored. What may be extant at one moment is changed or dropped at another. Change within the professoriate and academic culture will result from clear and persistent encouragement over a period of time. Moreover, change adopted institution by institution will require a general reinforcement throughout the academic system. Graduate schools must be enlisted to help foster more general advance of faculty leadership and participation in outreach planning and practice. Alas, a slowing of outreach reforms by tradition can be found where least expected. For example, recently reported research, albeit requiring more verification, suggests the Cooperative Extension workers may be constrained by traditional contexts with less<sup>3</sup> attention given assessment of new needs by program planning councils.

### **Interdisciplinarity**

Better utilizing connections and relationships stood out as perhaps the prevailing idea of the symposium. These connections — from cooperation among academic units to the complex integration of disciplinary knowledge — are ever more required when addressing today's problems. Case presentations provided many examples, although time limits prevented a deeper look into the meaning and method of interdisciplinarity. The conclusions were clear — no matter whether the outreach model is decentralized, centralized, or some measure of both, universities must ready themselves for more interdisciplinary practice. Although central university support is part of the mix, this practice belongs primarily to the departments and colleges. Disciplines are the properties of core departments and gain dependable support from general funds. Centers and institutes, which in some universities, as at MSU, equal the number of departments, may conduct interdisciplinary work with less dependable support. Perhaps a more important issue resides in the career uncertainty of those who serve in such centers. More study of interdisciplinary activity is in order — what it means, how to do it, and how to sustain it. A large and scattered literature on the topic is available (this ranges from case studies of special fields to epistemological explorations to university organization to such recent groupings of the natural and social sciences as departments of Science, Technology and Society — STS). This literature, which might contribute to the formation of interdisciplinary teams engaged in integrating and focusing differing knowledge systems and resolving conflict, reportedly is read by few in the scholarly community.<sup>4</sup>

Effective internal management of interdisciplinary relations will also yield positive outcomes for trustworthy collaboration between universities and with other organizations. Such partnerships form the foundation which enables colleges and universities to join in common cause, especially as it is clear that no one institution can do all that is expected of it. Future problems of society will likely demand both interdisciplinary and

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organizational collaborations. Society may be expected to establish new institutions if present ones fail to meet these demands.

This condition of mature connections among disciplines on the campus will inspire and shape partnerships in the university's external environment. At this point another ethic comes into play — one that we believe the symposium emphasis, the MSU Report, practice, and other trends, all encourage — that colleges and universities must do better at working together. Many associations to advance academic institutions came into place in past decades. But they cannot be said to have dealt sufficiently with matters of public concern. Some, as in official statewide systems, may inspire adversaries at the expense of collaborators. Public evaluation of academic outreach in the future will likely take into account what single institutions do, as well as their collective impacts on issues of such magnitude that no single place can hope to have noticeable impact.

## Afterthoughts

The sense of a closing century and the opening of another was felt throughout the symposium. Portrayals of a new kind of university arose from the focus on public need and university outreach, even as the symposium's plan directed the participants to method and strategy. Clear awareness and pride in the strength and contribution of American universities were everywhere acknowledged. But an anxiety also lurked in the discussions that certain unexpected consequences of what universities had wrought in, say, the twentieth century, had congealed into societal problems of such magnitude that only a new kind of university could successfully address them. In noting this tension between pride and concern, it was natural for us as observers to reflect on its meaning for public universities and, particularly, land-grant institutions, thus stimulating these afterthoughts. A question arose: "While recognizing the basic imperative of the university's independence, must not public needs in the future be better incorporated into university priorities?"

The creative powers of science and the violent horrors of war and bigotry joined to shape the twentieth century. The university prospered in concept and presence as the citadel of science and a chief sponsor of the technologic miracles contributing to improved health, personal comfort, and previously unimagined opportunities for human attainment. Universities incubated science and its uses in technology as ruling themes of culture, but is it possible to conclude that they have taken equal interest in the consequences? Universities cannot alone solve society's problems. "But will not the next century demand an improved balance of these interests?"

One major impact of land-grant universities, both past and present, provides an example of such contentions. The benefits of the food system revolution in the past century are incalculable. But as the food system

industrialized and the need of agricultural workers declined, the people left behind inherited declining services, more problematic employment, and mounting disadvantages of relatively less income and cultural enrichment. The swelling exodus of ill-prepared rural migrants would translate rural poverty into an urban poverty with dire consequences of its own. A fear also continues to grow that technological pressures on natural resources may become so great as to be unsustainable. One may reasonably conclude from these unintended circumstances that land-grant universities have not completed a basic mission. In its most direct form, the question looms: "What may be done to alleviate the uncertainties faced by nonmetropolitan communities?"

Modernizing agriculture became a unifying aim of land-grant universities in the late nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth century. May not a massive response be made to issues of youth, families, schools, and supporting agencies as the twenty-first century draws near? Such a national movement would foster more effective partnerships with private and public entities, stimulate interdisciplinary research, adapt present and develop new service delivery models to meet youth's various needs, and strengthen policy and leadership development. A call for an intentional resolve of this kind on the part of higher education would revitalize the academic system and mobilize support for it, not unlike that which followed the G.I. Bill and the appearance of the Soviets' Sputnik.

Finally, it is difficult to ignore the seeming disconnection today between the extent and growth of the knowledge functions and the perceived weakening of civil society. Urgent calls mount in the dwindling years of the twentieth century for a recrudescence of a more civil society. No institution, and especially the university, may be excused from attending to a civic process which:

- Seeks a better balance of emphasis between economic and civic cultures.
- Helps people reconcile the often conflicting values of equality and freedom.
- Becomes a stronger helpmate to those engaged in voluntary action.
- Assists people to understand and cope with the turbulence and complexities of contemporary problem solving.
- Expands the participation in the information revolution and with the technologies spawned by it.

To summarize these afterthoughts on university outreach that reflect on both expected and unexpected consequences, few words do better than those of Ortega y Gasset from his classic *Mission of the University*: "...the university must intervene, as the university, in current affairs, treating the great themes of the day from its own point of view: cultural, professional,

and scientific....In the thick of life's urgencies and its passions, the university must assert itself as a major 'spiritual power,' higher than the press, standing for serenity in the midst of frenzy, for seriousness and the grasp of the intellect in the face of frivolity and unashamed stupidity....Then the university...will become an uplifting principle in the history of the western world." <sup>5</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "\$1.2 Million Kellogg Grant Funds Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities." *Newsline*, November 1996. Vol. 4, No. 9, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> ***University Outreach at Michigan State University: Extending Knowledge to Serve Society.*** A Report by the Provost's Committee on University Outreach. Michigan State University. October, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> David P. Mills, Jr., Ronald M. Cervero, Christine A. Langone, and Arthur L. Wilson. "The Impact of Interests, Power Relationships, and Organizational Structure on Program Planning Practice: A Case Study." *Adult Education Quarterly*. Vol. 46, No. 1, 1995, pp. 1-16.

<sup>4</sup> Julie Thompson Klein. ***Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory, and Practice.*** Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990. See also Julie Thompson Klein and William G. Doty, Editors. ***Interdisciplinary Studies Today.*** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Ortega y Gasset. ***Mission of the University.*** New York: W.W. Norton, 1944, p. 91.