

LEADING THE ENGAGED INSTITUTION

James C. Votruba

**Capstone Address
2005 Invitational Conference
Benchmarking University Engagement
Michigan State University
May 24, 2005**

It's a real pleasure to be back on the campus of my alma mater and to

be part of this conference.

I grew up in East Lansing. While my parents weren't attached to the University, I can still recall faculty members at my parents table talking about their work to improve lives and strengthen communities in cities and rural areas throughout Michigan and around the globe. These were powerful images that I expect had a very deep influence on the direction that my career has taken.

During my studies at MSU, I had the opportunity to be surrounded by faculty who integrated cutting edge research with teaching

and what we now refer to as outreach or public engagement.

They were doing what Bob Weisbuch, President of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation describes as “enacting knowledge” in all three dimensions of academic work. The notion of silos of professional activity had no place in their view of what they did.

It was all part of a seamless fabric.

I had the good fortune to return to MSU in 1989 as the University

was

embarking on an effort to define the scope and qualities of the modern land grant university. At the core of this work were several fundamental questions that go to the heart of any university.

What is our core mission? Our core values?

Who do we seek to serve?

What do we have to offer them?

What forms will our service take?

What qualities define “engagement”?

How do we know when we’re succeeding?

In 1997, I left MSU to become president of NKU, a 14,000 student comprehensive university located in the Greater Cincinnati metropolitan area of about 2M people. Over the past eight years, we’ve been working to strengthen and institutionalize engagement as a core campus mission. At the same time, I’ve remained active with several large research universities that have been focused on the same questions.

In my view, over the past ten years, the national dialogue on engagement has really began to mature. We’ve moved beyond 30,000 ft. advocacy to probing a deeper understanding of the work itself. This conference is a vivid example. However, we still have much to do.

American higher education has always been closely aligned with larger national priorities. Indeed, it was the American

university that brought science to agriculture, provided the workforce for industrial expansion, created the pathway for inter-generational mobility, assured a well educated middle class as a basis for informed citizenship, contributed to national defense, and pushed back the frontiers of knowledge in every aspect of modern life. Indeed, we could reasonably argue that every aspect of our work represents dimensions of “engagement”.

What is it that the public expects from its universities today?

They want well prepared graduates who have the skill sets and knowledge required to function in today’s world and to drive today’s knowledge-based economy.

They want cutting edge research and development that contributes to national priorities and fuels innovation.

But they also want more.

They want us to be full partners in helping to:

Strengthen P-12 education

Expand economic growth

Enhance governmental effectiveness

Protect environmental quality

Nurture the non-profit sector

And much more.

This is what we call engagement. It may involve:

Applied research

Technical assistance

Demonstration projects

Outcomes assessment

Policy analysis

And a host of other ways in which knowledge can

**“enacted” to address the needs of people and
their communities.**

**While American higher education has, in recent years, experienced
enormous progress in both our thinking and action in the**

engagement domain, it seems to me that we need to focus our attention on three areas where progress must be made.

First, we must go much deeper in understanding how we assess engagement?

I know that Amy Driscoll is here from the Carnegie Foundation for the

Advancement of Teaching. Carnegie is working to define a new

classification element related to engagement. In my view, this would be a major breakthrough in establishing the importance and centrality of this work but, for this to occur, we must have measures that can be applied across institutions.

This is why this conference is so terribly important.

Second, we have got to make progress in strengthening institutional alignment in support of engagement. Over the years, I've

worked with dozens of universities, representing the full spectrum from research-intensive to comprehensive, on efforts to strengthen engagement. Two years ago, I chaired a national study of over 400 AASCU campuses on engagement.

The good news is that, on most campuses, there is lots of creative and exciting engagement going on. The bad news is that this work is often at the margin rather than at the core of the institution's mission and is very person dependent. Our goal must be to

weave this work so deeply into the fabric of our campuses that presidents, provosts, deans, and chairs can come and go but the work will continue to thrive.

Third, we need to see progress on the public policy front. Since WWII,

the federal government has created the most powerful research engine on the planet through massive resource streams that

support both the institution and the principal investigator. At the same time, state's have contributed enormous amounts of research capital and infrastructure support.

Indeed, the finest example of university engagement ever created on a national scale was the Agricultural Experiment Station and the Cooperative Extension Service, both supported by a combination of massive federal and state resources. This support made it possible for land grant universities to serve those who could not afford to pay the full cost of the service. Is it possible to forge similar policy support for engagement?

I'm going to leave the question of measuring engagement to all of you and turn my focus today on the two other challenges: institutional alignment and strengthening public policy support.

Several years ago, I had a university president say to me, "I've given speech after speech emphasizing the importance of engagement

in the life of the campus. We hired a new associate provost to oversee this effort. Still nothing seems to have change. What can I do?”

In their 1994 book, Built to Last, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras offer us some insights for addressing this question.

Collins and Porras studied eighteen companies that achieved and maintained very high levels of performance over many years.

Here’s what they discovered.

First, these companies were very clear about their products and their markets. They knew who they served and with what.

Second, every element of the company was aligned to support those outcomes.

Here’s an example from our world. At the major research universities, every element of the campus is aligned to support the generation of externally funded research. President and provosts may

come

and go but the work goes on without a pause.

By contrast, it is rare to find this same level of institutional alignment around engagement.

Let me ask you, how aligned is your campus to support engagement? Here are several questions that may help you respond.

First, to what extent is engagement part of the intellectual foundation of your campus? Is it defined clearly and guided by a coherent set of values and principles. Is it clearly understood how it relates to other mission dimensions? Is there a clear understanding of the potential benefits and risks of this work? In developing community partnerships, are the “rules of engagement” well developed and understood? What’s our value-added and, by inference, what are our limitations in the engagement domain? How about the ethical dimensions of this work?

Second, is public engagement prominent in the university's overall vision and strategic priorities? How about the colleges and departments?

Third, is campus and community interaction institutionalized?

Are campus leaders visible and substantive participants in civic life? Does the campus involve the public in strategic planning and the selection of key campus leaders?

Fourth, is the ability to lead the engagement mission an important criteria for the selection of key campus leaders?

Do search announcements emphasize this leadership dimension when searching for presidents, provosts, deans, and chairs?

Fifth, do faculty and unit-level incentives and rewards support engagement involvement? Is this work important in

salary,

promotion and tenure decisions? Are there campus revenue streams that support this work? Are there rewards for units that commit to this work as a core element of their mission? (Community Outreach Partnership Grants)

Sixth, is there adequate infrastructure to support engagement?

Are there “boundary spanning” units that draw from multiple disciplines and help link the campus with the community? Are there engagement professionals who provide support to faculty involved in this work?

Analogous to health professionals who surround and support physicians. Is there a single point of contact for the public in accessing the resources of the campus?

Seventh, do campus organizational policies and procedures make it easy for faculty to engage in this work? Do the “little things” align? For example, meal reimbursement.

Eighth, is there a clear expectation that each academic unit is responsible for serving the full breadth of the academic mission including engagement? Are there expectations related to both quality and productivity across the full breadth of the mission? Is there accountability related to these expectations? How about measures!

Ninth, does the process of faculty recruitment, orientation, and on-going professional development reflect the importance of engagement? Take a look at your Chronicle ads. Do they reflect this priority? How about your faculty development programs? Faculty cannot be expected to intuit themselves into this work. How about department chair development in order to support their leadership across the full breadth of the mission? In my experience, chairs are the most overlooked group of leaders in the

campus innovation process. True on our campus!

Tenth, is engagement built into the curriculum? Are there opportunities for students to participate in service learning

and other forms of community-based learning?

Finally, do campus communications and communicators reflect the importance of engagement? Is the importance of engagement found in the speeches of your president, provost, and deans? How about your governing board? Are campus ceremonies, recognitions, and awards reflective of the importance of engagement?

These questions will be answered in different ways by different types of institutions. Together, they can provide a useful diagnostic for leaders who want to develop strategies for strengthening engagement as a core campus mission.

Beyond the campus, there is an important role for state level

coordinating and governing boards to play in supporting the campus engagement function.

System leaders can work with public policy makers to develop a public agenda that establishes goals and metrics for state-wide progress related to such areas as economic growth, improvement of K-12 education, public health, and other quality of life indicators.

System leaders can create clear expectations that campuses will be evaluated based in part on their efforts to address this public agenda as well as on student enrollment and research productivity.

Here, we are again brought back to the importance of measuring both the quality and quantity of this work. Ironically, at a time when states are demanding that universities fully engage issues related to their economic and social progress, I know of no state that collects and reports productivity data related to engagement. For reporting purposes, it's as if no such activity

exists.

Let me now turn to the public policy arena.

Think about it for a moment. Since WW II, the federal government has generated the most powerful university-based research enterprise in the world. This has been accomplished through massive amounts of federal research support that is directed to both the individual P-I and the institution in the form of overhead. The result has been to create an enormous incentive for both the individual scholar and the institution to engage in research that is tied to national priorities.

Add to this federal funding, substantial amounts of contract research from the private sector, coupled with state level support, particularly for research infrastructure, and we have multiple funding sources that combine to make research a potential campus revenue center.

On the instructional side of our mission, many campuses receive

state funding based, at least in part, on enrollment productivity. If we retain our own tuition, we can use enrollment growth, particularly at the margin, and in net revenue producing programs, as a revenue strategy. In other words, instructional productivity, like research, is also a potential revenue strategy.

Public engagement is a different story. Rarely are there significant funding streams at either the federal or state level that are designated to support this work. Those who need our assistance are often not able to cover the full cost of our programs and services, which leaves us the difficult option of serving only those who can afford to pay or absorbing the major share of the costs in order to serve clients like K-12 education, small businesses, local governments, and non-profits, all of which are vital components of strong states and regions. We all know that, when confronted with difficult financial times, universities, like businesses, are drawn to

maximize revenue centers and reduce cost centers which can place public engagement at risk.

It seems to me that its time to focus on creating public policy, with accompanying resource streams, that supports the campus engagement mission.

In this regard, there are a few encouraging signs. Several states, including my own, are developing what I earlier described as public agendas that they expect higher education to address. Much of the focus is on supporting economic growth and strengthening education top to bottom. These public agendas often include five and ten year goals along with metrics to measure progress.

Kentucky has recently proposed the creation of a Regional Stewardship Trust Fund that will provide comprehensive universities significant funding to help address issues of regional concern. Other states are beginning to provide resource streams to support university involvement in state

priorities such as K-12 and economic development including commercialization. In the case of Kentucky, the funding will carry the requirement for universities to demonstrate progress in addressing challenges important to the state. Where progress is not demonstrated, funding can potentially be withdrawn.

My point is to stress that, if state's want to harness the full capacity of universities to impact economic and social progress, public policy must be developed to support engagement. Public policy has had a profound impact on shaping the nature and scope of American higher education. I would argue that engagement is not likely to achieve a truly central status in the life of the American university until it's supported by the public policy process.

In closing, it seems to me that the challenge to university leaders is to make progress in these three critical domains related to

public engagement.

First, we must think ever more deeply about how we go about measuring the quality and quantity of this work. Can we craft measures that allow us to capture the richness and impact of our engagement work and also allow us to report in ways that are easily understood by the public? Can we establish measures that allow for cross institutional comparison?

Second, we must align our campuses so that engagement is woven into

the fabric of the institution at every level so that the departure of key “champions” doesn’t put the work at risk.

Finally, we must work to forge a new era of public policy that supports the extension and application of knowledge in order to address the major challenges that confront our states and their communities. It’s been done before related to agriculture and rural development. It can be done again as it relates to the

economic and social challenges of the day.

This is pioneering work that we're doing! It's work that requires us to think anew about the nature of the university, who we serve, and how that service is provided. It requires us to examine our academic culture, how we organize ourselves, and the values that we, as academics carry into our relationships with the public. And it requires us to form "communities of innovation" in which we can learn from each other, push each other's thinking, and reinforce each other's work. This is why this conference and others like it are so very important.

Its good to be back on the banks of the Red Cedar and to a place and a group of kindred spirits who are thinking deeply about this engagement work. Thank you.