

Part Ten: Postscript

The Provost's Committee on University Outreach represents an important effort in the history of Michigan State University. In this final chapter, committee chairperson Frank Fear reflects on the experience from personal and institutional perspectives.

Chapter 19

A RETROSPECTIVE ON THE COMMITTEE EXPERIENCE²⁹

Within hours of completing the final draft of our committee's report, *University Outreach at Michigan State University: Extending Knowledge to Serve Society*, I reached for the next book in my seemingly endless stack of readings. That next book was also a report, *Campus Life: In Search for Community*, published in 1990 by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Unsuspectingly, I was about to read words that would have a special meaning given the effort just completed:

A ringing call for the renewal of community in higher education may, at first, seem quixotic. Not only has cultural coherence faded, but the very notion of commonalities seems strikingly inapplicable to the vigorous diversity of contemporary life. Within the academy itself, the fragmentation of knowledge, narrow departmentalism, and an intense vocationalism are...strong characteristics of the collegiate...experience (p. 63).

Had I read these words several years earlier, perhaps I might have declined the invitation to chair the Provost's Committee. These words would have reinforced my belief that committee work of this sort can quickly become a painful experience.

But it was not the words quoted above that caught my particular attention that day. It was the passage that immediately followed:

Still, we believe [that]...by bringing together the separate parts...[we] can create something greater than the sum, and offer the prospect that the channels of our common life will be renewed and deepened.

It did not matter that the Foundation was addressing the undergraduate collegiate experience. The words applied equally well to our committee.

²⁹ Reprinted from: Frank A. Fear, "A Community of Scholars Creates a New Way of Thinking about Outreach, and Positions Michigan State in a National Leadership Role," *CONNECTIONS* (Fall/Winter 1993: 2-3).

As I reflected on what I had just read, it seemed ironic that a task the committee had left to the end of its deliberations was, in effect, the force that helped forge our community. That last task: *define scholarship*. Although we felt—almost from the beginning of our discussions—that scholarship was central to our conception of outreach, we had not defined it. As we neared the end of our time together, we felt that it was important to be clear about this all-important concept. We quickly reviewed a number of literature sources, but could not find a definition that communicated about scholarship powerfully and coherently. So we created our own definition:

We believe that the essence of scholarship is the thoughtful creation, interpretation, communication, or use of knowledge that is based in the ideas of the disciplines, professions, and interdisciplinary fields. What qualifies an activity as "scholarship" is that it be deeply informed by accumulating knowledge in some field, that the knowledge is skillfully interpreted and deployed, and that the activity is carried out with intelligent openness to new information, debate, and criticism.

In a very real way, this definition also describes the nearly two-year effort undertaken by the Provost's Committee for University Outreach. Twenty faculty members, representing nearly every corner of the university, came together for the purpose of preparing an institutional report. Scholarship was virtually the only characteristic that we shared. We certainly didn't share a professional interest in outreach; some of us were heavily involved and invested in outreach, but others wondered aloud why they had been selected to serve on an outreach study of this sort. But we connected as scholars, used that connection to create and sustain community, and produced a cutting-edge report as a result.

And the words of the Carnegie report quoted earlier apply amazingly well to our experience: the separate parts create something greater than the sum. It had to be a collective effort because no subset of us could have produced this work. Each member contributed uniquely and importantly. Not one committee member would have or even could have defined outreach at the outset in the way that it is expressed in the final report.

To get from where we started to where we ended, committee members did what good scholars always do: we brought our perspectives, remained open to new information, and engaged in vigorous debate. In so doing, we created a new way of thinking about outreach—a way of thinking that carries with it a corresponding set of new institutional policies and practices.

What is the essence of this new way of thinking? For one thing, it positions outreach at the center of what a university is and does. It is a way of thinking that, to quote the report, "construes outreach as a mode of scholarship that can enrich and sustain the intellectual vitality of units throughout the campus, and supports the integration of the multiple dimensions of a scholar's life."

It is a way of thinking that conceives outreach as scholarship that cuts across the teaching, research, and service functions of the university. This is an integrative perspective that serves as a powerful counterpoint to the zero-sum arguments of "doing more of this means doing less of that." We advance a new nomenclature—outreach teaching, outreach research, and outreach service—to suggest that there are various outreach forms of scholarship. Given this conception, it is not surprising that we strongly oppose the view that outreach and service are coterminous.

We propose that outreach must be conceived as part of the academic mission of our university. It is better conceived this way, we believe, than as a program or activity that is conducted by

certain units and not others, and by certain people and not by others. In this vein, lifelong education and extension are outreach components.

And, while we do not propose that every faculty member must participate in outreach at all times during their MSU career, we do argue that every academic unit has responsibility for outreach. We further propose that primary responsibility for planning outreach should be lodged as closely as possible to the unit level. Along this line, we challenge our colleagues to form communities of scholars at the unit level to determine how they can best satisfy their corporate responsibilities—as employees of Michigan State University—and fulfill their unit's mission-related obligations.

Adopting our way of thinking will require a transformation of Michigan State University. To effect this transformation, we offer 20 recommendations organized in seven categories. To be realized, some recommendations will require more action at higher and at central levels; other recommendations will involve more action at the unit level. To be sure, coordinated leadership across the institution will be necessary if the vision we describe is to become reality.

Without question, it will take fortitude for outreach to be recognized, stimulated, and rewarded in the ways that we describe. Because of this, it is possible to classify our report as radical in concept and vision. But, in another way, we offer a traditional perspective—one that links naturally with our land-grant heritage. We are, after all, an institution that has a covenant with society, an institution whose very existence depends on whether society believes it is worth supporting.

Some suggest that higher education is at a crossroads. For these analysts, at issue is either self-reform or external reform. Perhaps this issue, and the corresponding challenge, is best expressed in the closing section of our report:

This change process can be led by the Academy if it moves appropriately and deliberately. At issue is not whether change will occur, only when it will occur and who will lead it. Sometimes organizations do not see the need to make necessary change, fail to move quickly enough, or resist change even when others call for it....The all-important question is: Will Michigan State be at the forefront?

If history gives us any insight into the future, I believe the odds are in Michigan State's favor.