COUNTING PUBLIC SERVICE: CAN WE MAKE MEANINGFUL COMPARISONS WITHIN AND AMONG INSTITUTIONS

Robert L. Church
Michigan State University

Prepared for an ASHE Symposium on
"Broadening the Carnegie Classification's Attention to Mission:
Incorporating Public Service"
November 18, 2001

I approach our topics from a direction different from that of my colleagues. My perspective as administrator and researcher has focused on how an institution might most effectively specify quantitatively what it expects academic units and individual faculty to contribute to the institution's public service mission. But the perspectives are complementary. If the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education is going to move forward with its plan to incorporate public service as a dimension of its classification scheme, it will need to have from each institution one or two verifiable indicators representing service. Those institution-wide numbers will have to come, I believe, from aggregating measures of the degree to which the various parts of the institution meet the service obligation.

This won't be an easy task. To date the Carnegie Classification has categorized institutions on the basis of things individual institutions do or don't do – they fall in one classification if they give a certain quantity of doctorates, in another if they give masters but not doctorates, etc. Within groupings, institutions are again divided according to the number of degrees offered and sometimes the number of fields in which they are offered. But distinguishing institutions based on a public service dimension is not so simple or clear cut. Public service occurs in nearly all institutions of higher education but it does not do so in discrete, comparable units (like credit hours, or degrees) that would distinguish, say, the highly committed from the moderately committed institutions. Most of the activities that fall under the rubric of engagement or public service lack the consistent transactional nature that allows us to believe that credit hours offered or kinds of degrees awarded or research monies received adequately represent teaching and research. Finding the common scale or measure that will allow us to compare a finance professor giving a talk to the local Kiwanas club to a professor and her class working with a community to redesign the town's waterfront is daunting. To be indicative, it seems to me, any categorization along these lines is going to have to judge institutions' degree of effort on a continuous scale as a proportion of that institution's overall effort. A useful example is the Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) which gathers data on the percentage of its overall expenditures an institution devotes to each of its mission components. The challenge is finding an accurate way to monetize public service effort so that one is comparing apples and apples from campus to campus. IPEDS, at least as I have seen it at my institution, does not do the job – more on that later.

We are facing these issues of defining consistent measures and scales at Michigan State that can be used to establish expectations of what individuals and units are to contribute to meeting the institution's public service mission. Although there are many good and valid reasons to refrain from developing concrete numbers in a still evolving field, the leadership at MSU has, after a decade of high-minded rhetoric about outreach, grown impatient to have productivity measures in this field to help guide them in the management of faculty time and other resources. The University Outreach office has attempted to respond to that requirement as quickly as possible (which, because of the complexity of the work, has been none too quickly, I assure you). I want to describe our efforts under three headings: (1) the general definition of public service and its implications for measurement, (2) the specific activities MSU has chosen to count, and (3) a review of the data we collect and how we hope to make sense of it. I don't want to give the impression that we have confronted all the issues or that we have adequately solved all (or even most) of the ones with which we have struggled. But I believe that a review of our efforts will help us think more clearly about the purpose and the feasibility of adding a public service dimension to the Carnegie Classification.

Definitions

The first issue for us at MSU and for the Carnegie Classification is defining what is meant by "public service." Which of the many activities in which universities engage should count in the public service mission column? My experience suggests that we should adopt a term more focused than "public service." It is too amorphous, too broad a term to carry much meaning in a classification scheme. On the one hand, it's a bit like the "service" category in faculty portfolios – the rubric under which the assistant professor lists everything that she can't force into the "more important" categories of research and teaching. The term is less a description of an activity or a mission and is more a catchall for a hodgepodge of unrelated activities. On the other hand, "public service" designates the overall purpose of most higher educational institutions – it is, after all, the basis for our tax exemptions -- and therefore virtually everything that an institution does is "public service." We find many colleagues – especially those who seldom if ever interact with audiences outside the university – arguing that preparing undergraduates to be good and productive citizens is "public service" and that research on even the most esoteric topics constitutes "public service." It has been an interesting experience that when we threaten to institute measures of service that might affect the reward system, faculty who couldn't care less about outreach or service are very quick to identify whatever it is that they do as worthy of being measured. "Public service," thus, can be used to mean anything from the most mundane task to the most elaborate and scholarly activity.

At Michigan State we have chosen to concentrate on university interactions with the external, non-academic community that are closely linked to faculty scholarship. We focus on how the university as an academic institution with teaching and research expertise uses its unique capacity in direct interaction with external audiences. We chose to identify that area of activity as "outreach" – in a deliberate attempt to distinguish it from "public service," "service," or "extension" – but we could just as well have called it "engagement." I will use the terms interchangeably. Our primary goal was to establish fulfillment of the university's public service mission as an obligation of the regular faculty, to make it part of faculty work rather than something the University accomplishes through units without meaningful ties to its academic core. Too much of the work of serving state constituencies at MSU was falling to separate institutes, centers, and offices that have little interaction with regular academic units and their faculty.

In 1993 a faculty committee recommended defining outreach as activity which involves academic staff with external organizations and communities in a reciprocal learning/teaching situation where the outcomes increase both the external partners' capacity to address issues and the academic staff's capacity to produce scholarship that better reflect the realities outside the laboratory or the library. Relying heavily on Boyer's work on redefining scholarship, we formally defined outreach as "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 that are consistent with university and unit missions." [Report of the Provost's Committee on University Outreach, 1993, p. 1] In many ways this definition has turned out to be overly restrictive. Many faculty do not see how the definition (and more especially the shorthand phrase distilled from it – "outreach as scholarship") relates to their academic work. Broadening the definition of scholarship, as Boyer and others had suggested, makes much more sense to scholars in the disciplinary traditions of the social and behavioral sciences than it does to those in the traditions of physical, biological, and engineering sciences. Further, identifying outreach as a "form of scholarship" has led to seemingly endless discussions of what kind of products or artifacts should result from the faculty member's outreach activities to confirm that activity as scholarship. Frankly, those discussions ended up so focused on the academy's standards of judgment that concern about being responsive to society's needs pretty much vanished.

As we proceeded more deeply into the measurement process, its difficulties and ambiguities led us to adopt implicitly a broader definition of outreach. The work to devise indicators or measures that would apply across the institution and would make sense to faculty and administrators in a wide variety of academic units was a real test of concept; I recommend the process to all who are trying to implement a mission commitment to engagement with their surrounding community. Although we have not rewritten MSU's definition of outreach, the definition adopted by the University Continuing Education Association's new Community of Practice on Outreach and Engagement captures most of our current thinking: "Outreach and engagement is the mutual exchange of intellectual resources and expertise between the university and its much broader external community of government agencies, businesses, nonprofit organizations, community groups, and individuals." This definition keeps the focus on intellectual resources and on reciprocity – that engagement involves the mutual exchange of expertise, not simply a dissemination of academic findings to the public. It is this sense of public service that would, I believe, be a most useful notion for the Carnegie Classification to try to capture in a revised schema.

Choosing to focus on public service closely connected to academic units and faculty expertise requires us to make a special effort to identify indicators within the core of academic work. One "easy" answer might be to adopt the IPEDS method for surveying expenditures on the "public service" mission, in dollars and as a percentage of the institution's overall budget. However, this method illustrates, I think, misleadingly simplistic approach to assessing outreach commitment. To respond to IPEDS, Michigan State scours its table of accounts and assigns to "public service" all those that have an academic element but don't appear to fit under "research," "instruction," or "academic support." This category includes accounts set up to receive and expend client payments – clinical services, largely. It also includes accounts explicitly established to receive outside funds for delivering service – Cooperative Extension is the major element, but public broadcasting and dozens of small endowments to support such things as a refuge for students and staff who are battered and abused or a discretionary fund for the director of the cyclotron also appear in that list. But the process does not identify and tabulate the outreach or engagement activity located at the heart of the academic institution – the community psychologists who take their students into communities to help design more effective channels of communication among social service agencies in a medium sized city or the education professor advising the State Board of Education. Because these engagement activities are not separately budgeted, they don't appear. Thus, the three people who provide support to service learning are included in the IPEDS count but the community work of 40 or so faculty and the nearly 1,500 students in their service learning classes doesn't appear. Practice plan earnings appear but not the medical school's intervention to lower the incidence of heart disease in an African-American community.

We have found that the kind of outreach and engagement that are integral to the research and teaching work of the faculty do not normally appear as separately budgeted activities. We believe that the true measure of an institution's commitment to outreach lies in the degree to which that activity is integrated and that measures that don't tabulate at the faculty and academic unit level will fail to portray that commitment accurately. This, then, is the dilemma. It is very difficult to identify, or isolate, measures of activities that are embedded in academic work. But not to do so results in distorted picture of this mission dimension. So at MSU we forged ahead.

<u>Outreach Activities</u>

I want to turn now to the specifics of determining which academic activities we decided to count. A group of about 25 faculty worked for the better part of a year to identify the areas of faculty work to be included in the data collection efforts and to define what was to be included in each. Eventually we classified outreach activity under five headings: instructional outreach, outreach partnerships, clinical service, service learning, and resources for the public. I'll describe the decisions we faced as I go along. But in all cases we have sought to restrict the activities to be counted to those that related to the scholarly work and that employed the disciplinary expertise of the faculty participants.

<u>Instructional Outreach</u> includes off-campus credit and noncredit instructional outreach programs that are designed and marketed specially to serve external students/learners (who are neither campus degree seekers nor the institution's staff). Because Michigan State returns to the

offering unit some or all of the fees paid by participants in either off-campus and/or noncredit classes and thus has well-spelled-out rules for distinguishing regular students from “non-traditional” students, this was an easy category for us. We specifically meant to exclude instruction targeted at other academics and also noncredit courses offered to campus staff by the library, the computing center, and human resources. We are collecting information on noncredit instruction on the basis of participant hours – that is, a CEU-like seat-time measure that can be aggregated across varied instructional formats. Other institutions will surely have more trouble drawing the line between “regular” and “nontraditional” students. Is the divider full- versus part-time, on- v. off-campus; younger v older than 26? But I believe this is a very important category and one that the Carnegie Classification project might want to look at separately. With demand for lifelong learning growing and more institutions responding, it would be useful for researchers to know which institutions have responded to that demand as a central part of their mission and activity.

Outreach Partnerships refers to unit-sponsored initiatives undertaken with and in service to one or more constituencies external to the university. Such initiatives need to be consistent with unit missions and utilizing the commitment of unit resources such as explicitly assigned faculty. They need to involve shared goals, expertise, and resources, and result in mutually identified benefits including scholarship by faculty engaged in the partnerships. Example partnerships are those with schools, health organizations, nonprofit organizations, business, industry, and government agencies and may include research, capacity-building, cultural enrichment, evaluation studies, policy analysis, technical assistance, and technology transfer. This category is meant to contain those projects in which faculty interact with external groups on a continuous basis in a reciprocal relationship in which the faculty member is both learning and teaching. One of the central debates revolved around whether paid consulting should be included. Our final determination was that it was impractical to use source of funding support as a cutter. On the one hand, it would be an interesting measure of institutional commitment to see how much of its own money it was willing to spend in supporting faculty engagement with external constituencies. On the other, we believe that one of the most telling measures of outreach quality is the willingness of those external constituencies to spend their own money to support these partnerships. Indeed, we believe that external support for outreach is a primary quantitative measure of outreach activity. As we discussed this category, we wrestled with the problem of distinguishing between outreach that contributes to scholarship and "service" that does not. In the end we determined that we could not develop criteria for such discriminations that would apply across the broad spectrum of disciplinary and professional tradition and decided that as long as the project met the other criteria (partnership, reciprocity, commitment of unit resources, etc.), we had to leave it to the faculty filling out the data forms to include or exclude the project on the basis of its scholarly contributions.

Clinical Service includes all patient care provided by university faculty through unit-sponsored group practice or as part of their clinical instruction, and by medical and graduate students as part of their professional education. I find this a highly debatable category; we included it only under substantial pressure from the medical and nursing faculties. Numbers gathered under this category are virtually entirely a function of the size of the institution's health and psychological programs and not a result of any separate commitment to public service. We don't believe an institution starts an audiology clinic, for example, to serve the public but does so rather to build a training program for on-campus students. A Carnegie Classification measure that includes clinical practice will most likely simply be a measure of the size of an institution's health complex and will not, I feel, tell us much about an institution's commitment to public service.

Service Learning includes civic or community service performed by students in conjunction with an academic course or program. These service experiences must be organized by the university, be performed by the student in response to a significant community need, and be collaborative efforts involving the community, the student, and the instructor. While these activities may occur under several headings – such as service learning, practicum, or internship – they must always be carefully integrated with the student's academic experience and should incorporate frequent, structured, and disciplined reflection on the linkages between the civic/service activity and the content of the academic experience of which it is a part. To insure that it remained connected to the realm of academic expertise and scholarship, we sought to exclude from service learning purely volunteer student activity in the community that was not formally connected with the student's academic work. But the general issue of how strictly to interpret "service" was difficult to settle. Because students most often choose to serve, either as volunteers or as part of a class, both to serve society and to learn more about career choices and build resumes, we found it difficult to determine when an activity moved from our service-learning category into a "career preparation" category where it would not be counted. Should we count tutoring in K-12 schools as part of a teacher preparation program or interning with a government agency that caps the pre-law preparation program? It appears likely that we will divide the service-learning category into two parts, a general one and one that includes only those instances where faculty report a significant relationship between the students' community activity and their own work with the organizations in which their students are placed.

<u>Resources for the Public</u> includes university resources, developed and maintained through scholarly activity and provided to the public. Resources for the public may included managed learning environments (museums, libraries, gardens, galleries), virtual environments (web sites, public broadcasting), education materials and products, and short-term learning events. If instructor-directed activities lie at one end of a continuum of learning experiences, public resources fall near the other end of the continuum. They are mostly learner-directed in that learners usually visit/participate on their own, decide when and how long to visit/participate, and choose which of the available interpretive materials to use. This category includes activities where the application of scholarship and the experience of the external audience is widely separate in time and/or space. Universities put on hundreds of activities for the public each year and distribute thousands of informative publications. Although all may represent public service in some way, we do not include all of them in our outreach measures. We only include those performances, exhibits, pamphlets, CD-ROMS, etc., where faculty and academic staff were

significantly involved in the design of those events or artifacts. Thus we exclude a great many public services unrelated to the academic core – making campuses available for local fund raising events, pulling down PBS signals and rebroadcasting them to the local community, entertaining thousands with intercollegiate sports, hosting a traveling art exhibit or a touring ballet company. But our faculty also create and produce radio and television programming that our public stations present, they curate art shows, they create museum-based learning experiences, they prepare pamphlets and manuals designed to guide outside organizations or individuals as they deal with issues – criminal justice professors preparing guidelines for schools, law enforcement, and counselors to use in the event of a Columbine-type incident or manuals on land-use planning to help local governments confront urban sprawl. We believe that the latter activities should be counted as outreach while those in the former list, surely important to the university as a community citizen, do not qualify under the rubric of sharing of academic expertise.

What characterizes all of the modes of outreach that we seek to count (and does not characterize those we do not want to include) is that they are all in some sense discretionary. They represent decisions by the institution to invest its resources, resources that it could use elsewhere, to fulfill its commitment to its mission of public service. Basic to all of the activities we want to count is the fact that they involve faculty in forms of teaching and research that are less "efficient" than the standard methods. Although engagement activities surely enhance the learning, teaching, and research activities of those who participate in them and are thus "reinforcing," those activities tend to be labor intensive and of uncertain outcome. Incorporating a service learning experience in a course takes more faculty (or staff) time than a standard lecture discussion format, time that is no longer available for preparing a grant application or advising students. However fruitful working with a community to address, say, the issue of youth violence may be for the researcher, the process of collaboration is virtually by definition much more time consuming and unpredictable compared to conducting research in the library or the laboratory. Thus the college or university that decides to share the resources that mark it as a unique institution – its academic expertise – with the community is making a resource allocation decision. It is the evidence of those decisions that we should seek to measure. All public and probably most private institutions claim in a mission statement that they are committed to public service. But beyond the easy rhetoric, how much effort does each institution invest in that mission? Whether an institution elects to use more or less of its resources to serve the public has to be the real measure of commitment to the public service mission. And that is what I hope that the Carnegie group can capture in its classification scheme.

Data Collection

Finally, let me turn to Michigan State's data collection effort. Within the five types of outreach activities, our online questionnaire gathers data in three broad categories that will form the basis for comparison among units and an indication of whether a unit is increasing or decreasing its commitment to outreach. We collect data from every faculty and academic staff member but ask each to report separately on each project in which they are engaged – thus some faculty complete more than one form. And because many projects involve multiple faculty, we receive multiple forms for a single project. The first set of data elements identifies the resources devoted to the project – those coming from the university, the community partners, and third party partners. These measures include faculty and agency time, cash expenditures, and in-kind expenditures. We are particularly interested in the assessment of resources provided by the external partners in the outreach projects because that indicator provides a rough parallel to the measures of external funding used to delineate research "productivity." The second set of data elements is designed to indicate "scope." We want to know the geographic location(s) of the activity, its duration, the major issue or concern it addresses (e.g., K-12 education, environmental preservation, health, economic development), the number of external partners, and the number of academic units involved. The third data element is a brief description of the project.

We've chosen a somewhat heterogeneous group of indicators because we are seeking to measure both quantity and quality as well as gather information rich enough to provide the basis for communicating more persuasively with the public about the University's commitment to its public service mission. Thus we use the first family of data elements to derive a monetary figure measuring resource expenditures, converting time into dollars. This will become our "quick and dirty" number against which we judge our effort. But we will also analyze those numbers to keep track of external resources devoted to the work because external contributions provide one measure of the usefulness, or at least the perceived usefulness, of the university's work to the audience to which it is targeted. The second family of data elements, the one focused on "scope," captures some quantitative indicators but is more oriented toward indicators of quality. We believe that outreach projects that involve partners who contribute time and money to the effort are generally projects of higher quality than those in which the community is a more passive recipient of university largess. Similarly, projects that sustain their involvement with the external constituents tend to make more lasting impacts. We believe that a land-grant university should spread its outreach efforts across its state and beyond, and it should have a fairly balanced portfolio in terms of topics addressed. In the spirit of the adage that "society has problems and universities have disciplines," good outreach projects should involve a variety of academic perspectives. This second group of data elements will not be converted to a single number but will rather be assembled into kind of matrix or spreadsheet showing either the scope of an academic unit's work or of the university's efforts in addressing a particular issue. Thus we can review the matrix with an eye to judging whether, say, the college of education is partnering with an economically and geographically representative group of school districts. Or we can review a matrix including all of the institution's projects addressing land use issues to determine whether all the relevant departments are involved and, again, whether the external partners are geographically representative. The project descriptions – the third element – are used to identify exemplary projects that warrant further study or can serve as foci for telling the "story" of the University's outreach efforts to the people of Michigan.

But there are real problems in doing this measuring work, problems that speak to and raise questions in my mind about the feasibility of the Commission's goal. It's clear that collecting these data within each institution will be expensive. The data collection instrument is longer than we would like and requires considerable thoughtfulness on the part of those completing it. Furthermore, it is necessary to massage the data carefully in order to develop the single numerical measure of commitment. And because much of the data consists of estimates (of faculty and partner time, of in-kind contributions, and the like), the results are likely to be soft. And there is every opportunity for inconsistency as faculty and departments interpret definitions differently. Our data collection goal within our institution is to collect a rich array of information that we can use as a management and communication tool in a number of different ways. We are much more likely to pay attention to examining changes in an academic unit's portfolio of outreach projects over time than we are to using the single number to establish that department "a" does more than department "b."

Inevitably, the richness and complexity of the data is eroded as we convert that information to a single index number or even two. Of course, such a conversion will be necessary if we are going to be able to group institutions according to their commitment to their public service mission. So one question is: can we achieve a consistent definition of public service across institutions and agreement on how to count or characterize that activity that would provide the basis for distinguishing among institutions of higher education? Even were the answer to that question a resounding "yes," there is a prior question – do we gain enough understanding of the higher education enterprise to justify the effort entailed?

The Carnegie Classification was originally established as a research tool to provide a consistent categorization of the nation's many higher education institutions. It has in part turned into a ranking system. From my perspective as an outreach administrator, I would like to see outreach count for more in the process that ranks institutions against each other, just as I would like to see it counted more heavily in the reward system within my university. But as a researcher of higher education, I'm not sure how the contemplated categorization helps us get beyond the already existent categories of land grant, metropolitan, and the like. At the level of our single institution, I am convinced that when we have collected all of our data, the overall numerical indicator of unit effort will tell me little that I don't already know about relative productivity in outreach across Michigan State's academic units. The information gathered will be very useful in comparing an individual unit's productivity over time and in allowing us to survey the institution's overall portfolio of projects. And the completed process – by having faculty document their outreach activities along with their research and teaching efforts – will be a big step toward having outreach count in the allocation of "rewards" to faculty and units. But developing a number that let's us know that the School of Social Work does more outreach than the German department is simply not worth the trouble. The same issue applies at the macro or multi-institutional level: will a national effort to collect data about public service tell us more than what we already know – that a combination of membership in a particular category of institution (land-grant, metropolitan) and institutional size already reliably predict outreach commitment and performance.