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ABSTRACT

Public service in higher education is an important function of American colleges and universities. The nature and purposes of higher education can be revealed through three popular metaphors--ivory tower, social service station, and culture mart. It can best be fulfilled through ideas of value, social criticism, social problem solving, or social activism. Although service activities vary across different types of institutions, the easiest way to categorize public service is by external recipient: service to the community, to state and local governments, and to business and industry. Community service is especially important for community colleges, but governmental links are important to state universities, and research universities can develop formal research partnerships with corporations. (LB)

# ERIC DIGEST

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## *Public Service in Higher Education: Practices and Priorities* *

*by Patricia H. Crosson, University of Pittsburgh*

Service has long been a distinctive part of higher education in the United States. Most administrators and faculty members would identify service as one of the three major functions of their institution. They would describe with rhetorical flourish countless programs and projects in service to society. Most of these same administrators and faculty members would also say, however, that service is quite a distant third after teaching and research and that institutional priorities and reward systems—unwritten yet well known—operate against service in higher education. The questionable priority and doubtful reward value are especially apparent when the "service" is public service for individuals and groups external to the campus rather than service to the academic discipline or to the institution.

### Is Public Service an Important Function?

The subject of college and university public service involves an ongoing debate about its role and importance in higher education—a debate that is inextricably linked to fundamental questions about the nature and purposes of higher education. Different perspectives on the nature and purposes of higher education are revealed through three popular metaphors—ivory tower, social service station, and culture mart (Adelman 1973). Each concept of higher education is characterized by a different definition of service and differing perspectives on the nature of service and its role and function in higher education. Service can be provided through the fulfillment of teaching and research, through "ideas of value," through social criticism, through social problem solving, or through social activism. Each form of service has its advocates in the historical and contemporary literature.

Throughout the history of higher education in the United States, the concpet of service and references to service have been used to justify claims for public support. Often service in this sense is taken to mean the fulfillment of teaching and research. Charles William Eliot asked rhetorically in his 1869 inaugural address at Harvard:

> *And what will the University do for the community? First, it will make a rich return of learning, poetry and piety. Secondly, it will foster the sense of public duty—that great virtue which makes republics possible* (Hofstader and Smith 1961. p. 263).

The concept of service, linked with notions of utility, has also been used throughout our history to justify and rationalize new departures in higher education. From the expansion of the classical curriculum to include scientific studies to the creation of land grant college, professional schools, interdisciplinary institutes and centers, and recent programs of technology transfer, we have made the case that each new endeavor was necessary as a service to society.

The ideal of public service was perhaps best captured by Andrew S. Draper in a 1907 commencement address:

> *The American university will carry the benefits of scientific research to the doors of the multitude. It will make healthier houses and handsomer streets, richer farms and safer railways, happier towns and thriftier cities, through the application of fundamental principles to all the activities of all the people* (p.41).

The missionary overtones and the zeal of Draper's rhetoric pervade discussions of service throughout the literature and can be found in much contemporary writing, but Derek Bok (1982) captures somewhat better the current tone of the debate:

> *By 1970, then, the issues were clearly defined. Should universities turn inward and dedicate themselves to learning and research for thier own sale, benefiting society indirectly through advances in basic knowledge and the education of able*



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*students? Should they continue instead to respond energetically to society's requests for new services, new training programs, and new forms of expert advice? Or should they take the initiative and set their own agenda for reform by deciding for themselves which programs to mount and which projects to encourage in order to bring about social change?* (p. 66).

During the decades between Presidents Draper and Bok, we have abandoned the zealous notion that higher education can be all things to all people and have returned to ask, as President Eliot did in 1869, what services can or should higher education perform for the community. Each of the choices Bok posed as questions has many advocates, and each continues to be defended in the name of public service.

It is unlikely, however, that single "yes" or "no" answers to these questions will be formulated for higher education as a whole or for any college or university. The debate over the social responsibility of the university is a continuing debate.

## What Services Should We Perform?

While we have debated the issues of the role and function of service in higher education, we have been engaged in extensive and various service activities. We have offerd noncredit community service programs responsive to every conceivable educational need and interest from basic English to belly dancing. We have made our facilities available for and helped sponsor cultural and civic activities. We have developed special training programs for business and industry and for local state government employees. We have created extension programs, technical assistance centers, and other special units to help solve specific social and policy problems. We have been engaged in research services through contractual arrangements and consulting for every conceivable external agency. All of these areas and more are college and university public service activities.

Draper's ideal has been most fully realized by Clark Kerr's multiversity, but all types of colleges and universities are involved in public service. Service activities differ across types of institutions—public or private, two-year or four-year colleges and universities—and among institutions of the same type. The easiest way to categorize public service, however, is by external recipient: service to the community, service to state and local governments, service to business and industry.

Community service is especially important for community colleges. Community colleges have developed exciting programs and activities, and the literature contains and interesting debate over the extent to which community service is or should be the major function of the community college. Many state universities are experimenting with new offices and programs intended to link their institutions more closely to the legislative and executive branches of state and local government. Formal research partnerships have been developed between public and private research universities and major corporations to foster the immediate application of scientific breakthroughs to new products and economic developments.

We continue to debate the issue of what services are best and most appropriately performed by colleges and universities. At the same time, we continue to innovate, to develop model programs and practices, and to experiment with new approaches to the delivery of service.

## How Should We Organize for Public Service?

The problem for college and university administrators and faculty becomes one of making choices and decisions. How should a particular institution define itself in relation to society? Should we assume a variety of social responsibilities and make public service something more than an added dimension in higher education? What specific organizational structures, personnel policies, and financial mechanisms will clarify the role and function of public service and enable service to be performed effectively?

The literature on service in higher education provides no easy answers to these questions. Although it includes little in the way of formal research results and evaluation, it does reveal how some institutions have answered these questions and contains many ideas worthy of close examination. Many institutions have developed formal policy statements of public service. Other have created high-level offices or other special units to coordinate service activities. Still others have experimented with ways of documenting and assessing service for decisions about personnel. Some state and local governments have provided specific resources for service activities beyond those targeted for research and teaching; others expect services for free. Perhaps the most difficult, as well as the most enduring, question of public service is the question of how we can afford it—or indeed whether we can afford not to do it.

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