

## “IF WE ONLY TOLD OUR STORY BETTER...”

### Re-envisioning State-University Relations Through the Lens of Public Engagement

BY DAVID J. WEERTS

A prevailing notion among higher education leaders is that public relations and marketing efforts must be intensified to boost legislative support for colleges and universities. However, this view fails to consider whether the academy might increase its standing among legislators and the general public by becoming more productively engaged in state problems. By embracing the principles of public engagement, universities could position themselves as solutions to problems and leverage public and private support for research, teaching, and service in relation to public interests.

Recently, a friend told me about a conversation his eight-year-old son, Jackson, had with his grandmother about his Christmas gift wish list. Grandma asked her grandson, “What would you like for Christmas?” Jackson shrewdly replied, “Well, Grandma, what can you afford?”

Intended or not, lobbying for higher education has taken a similar tone with state legislatures. Howard Bowen’s classic *revenue theory of costs* suggests that colleges and universities raise all the money they can and spend all the money they make in pursuit of institutional prestige and ambitions.<sup>1</sup> In their quest for state dollars, college leaders increasingly are frustrated with legislators and the general public about the perceived lack of understanding of the benefits of higher education. A common exhortation among campus leaders is, “Legislators just don’t understand the impact we make on this state and region. We need to do a better job of getting our message out. If we only told our story better, we could get more support from the legislature.”

Such claims are tough to substantiate. Institutions are spending more than ever on branding and strategic marketing. Clever television spots, billboards, and glossy brochures tell the story of our campuses

in colorful ways, and expensive economic impact studies tout the billion dollar impacts of higher education. And yet, state appropriations for colleges and universities have not kept pace with the rising costs of educating students. So what’s the problem?

Economic recessions explain many of the dips in appropriations for higher education since the early 1980s. And since public colleges can raise their own money through tuition, grants, and gifts, they are an attractive place for budget cuts in dire fiscal times.

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To be sure, a complex array of economic and political factors explains much of the changing financial landscape for higher education during the past three decades. However, a more fundamental yet often ignored issue is the eroding relationship between states and public higher education, especially land-grant institutions. Over a decade ago, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Colleges declared that land-grant universities were arrogant, out-of touch, and not organized to serve the needs of society. Even the famed Wisconsin Idea—a Progressive Era notion about the University of Wisconsin—Madison’s service to the state—has been scrutinized by locals.

David Blaska, columnist for *Isthmus* in Madison, Wis., declared recently that “... the narrative behind the Wisconsin Idea, is that the experts on Bascom Hill [academicians] would instruct their lessers, especially legislators popularly elected by the rabble, to scrape the manure off their boots before they enter the State Capitol.”<sup>2</sup>

Many academics reading this quote would cringe while arguing that land-grant institutions have contributed to the nation in important social and economic ways. Given the many documented successes of such institutions since their establishment in 1862, this point is well taken. However, as Blaska’s quote illustrates, the criticism surrounding higher education’s relationship with the public may be more about *how* academics engage with legislators and the general citizenry, not about the overall productivity of the academy.

## Challenging the Expert Model

Economist Ronald Ehrenberg referred to the value of land-grant universities as “major transmitters of knowledge to American farmers, consumers, workers, and industry.”<sup>3</sup> Ehrenberg’s use of the word “transmitters” captures the widely understood division of labor between academicians, state leaders, and the public at large: professors (experts) create the knowledge, and legislators and the public consume it.

This one-way expert model strains state-university relations in two ways. First, the

approach fails to take into consideration the needs and contexts of intended recipients—the public. Consequently, elected officials may not view faculty research as addressing the most important issues of the day. Universities are often criticized for being irrelevant, and the one-way model feeds into such criticisms.

Second, the expert model gives short shrift to the idea that knowledge

lives in many places, and that universities are just one species living in a larger knowledge ecosystem. Through the lens of the expert-model, state and community partners are often seen as receptacles for depositing knowledge, rather than partners in exchanging and applying knowledge to the benefit of society. Such an orientation triggers comments like Blaska’s about the elitism of higher education.

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## Becoming a Solution to a Problem

In charting a future course for state-university relations, it is important to rethink how university contributions might be understood in the larger framework of state priorities. In his classic book, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, John Kingdon sheds light on how legislative agendas emerge.<sup>4</sup> His research suggests that public priorities typically surface as problems to be solved, and savvy policy entrepreneurs attach solutions to these problems.

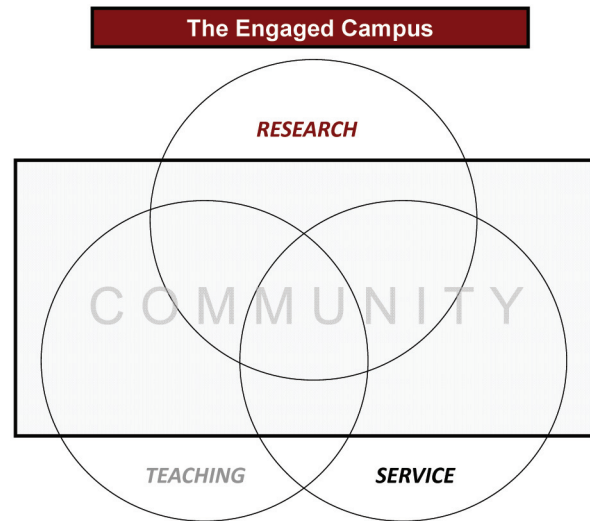
When solutions are successfully matched to problems—sometimes in serendipitous ways—various agendas or policies are elevated over others. Kingdon's lesson for higher education is that solutions to problems get on legislative agendas, not agencies or institutions. Simply put, in order to become a state priority, colleges must become a solution to a problem, not another problem to solve.

The public engagement movement, pioneered by Ernest Boyer in the early 1990s, is instructive for reorienting our campuses to become solutions to problems. It involves rethinking the one-way expert model. Public engagement emphasizes a shift away from the expert model toward a collaborative, two-way model in which state and community partners play a significant role in creating and sharing knowledge to the mutual benefit of institutions and society.

Figure 1 illustrates that community partners are situated at the center of teaching, research, and service at publically engaged universities. While the term "community" may be uniquely defined depending on institutional missions, the principles of reciprocity and mutual benefit are central to engaged campuses. Several works provide evidence about how engagement can improve student learning, enhance traditional research, and have significant impacts on communities.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1**

*The Integration of 'Community' in Research, Teaching and Service Activities at The Engaged Campus*



Source: Andrew Furco, "The Engaged Campus: Toward a Comprehensive Approach to Public Engagement," *British Journal of Educational Sciences* 58, no. 4 (2010): 375-390.

Moving toward a two-way model of academic work would have profound implications for the practice of state-university relations. More broadly, it would significantly alter practices across the external relations spectrum—communications, advancement (fundraising), lobbying, and community relations.

Under the engagement model, external relations professionals would move beyond broadcasting the accomplishments of the university and, instead, reposition themselves as conveners, problem solvers, and change agents who address societal problems through knowledge generation and exchange. It is in this larger context that lobbying, communications, and even fundraising could occur.



## Moving from Institutionally Centered to Publically Centered

A move toward a two-way model of external relations requires a critique of the current narratives underpinning current practices. Today's external relations strategies are largely institutionally centered, with the guiding question being, "What can legislators, donors, alumni, and friends do to better support our campus?" From this frame, external relations officers typically act as buffers to protect the faculty core and promote institutional ambitions.

In contrast, an engagement narrative is publically centered and poses a series of questions, including the following:

- What are the most pressing needs, challenges, and opportunities facing our community, region, and nation?
- How can our campus be an instrument for addressing these challenges?
- How do we engage legislators, donors, alumni, and friends to be strategic partners in meeting regional, state, and national goals?

From this perspective, external relations officers act as brokers, conveners, and change agents in the advancement of a larger public agenda.

I have learned from my own scholarship over the past decade that a publically centered approach to academic work may be the most effective way to leverage both public and private support for higher education. But it requires more than a

glitzy marketing campaign; it requires hard work and an institutional commitment to the two-way engagement model. Here are some practical steps to consider:

### Create a Public Agenda for the Campus

As large, anarchical organizations, land-grant institutions simultaneously pursue multiple, often competing agendas.<sup>6</sup> Among these agendas, it is important to nurture a high-profile public agenda that focuses on the most salient problems facing a state or region. While most public agendas for higher education typically focus on degree

attainment, a public agenda for a campus could be broadened to focus on key problems which prohibit progress in a state or region (e.g., adult literacy, failing schools, land use, etc.). Such an agenda should be created in conjunction with university leaders, state and regional partners, and public input via community forums.<sup>7</sup>

Arizona State University President Michael Crow is arguably the most high-profile leader who has adopted a

publically oriented model for his campus. Through his "New American University" initiative, Crow is positioning his institution to be an important player in key issues in the southwest, such as immigration and water use. In a recent panel discussion at the annual meeting of the Association for Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), Crow suggested that flagship campuses must be systematically engaged in critical problems facing our states, and that by doing so they could raise the value proposition of such institutions.<sup>8</sup>

Crow's strategy may be instructive for University of Wisconsin–Madison leaders who are in the throes of designing the New Badger Partnership—

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an initiative largely aimed at releasing the campus from bureaucratic constraints to increase flexibility and reduce costs. From the lens of public engagement, the model could be strengthened by adding a publically centered component to the partnership.

Currently, the New Badger Partnership is largely framed within the expert model. Chancellor Biddy Martin declares, "If anything, we are more committed than ever to the Wisconsin Idea, to using our international stature and quality to serve citizens at the local level."<sup>9</sup> A critique of the Partnership, however, is that it perpetuates a "just trust us, we'll keep serving you" message (one-way expert model), which may fuel skepticism about the institution's commitment to the people of Wisconsin. Developing a two-way strategy for engaging Wisconsinites in addressing critical state problems could give legs to a mutually beneficial partnership—one in which the public is more intimately involved.

### **Incentivize Innovative Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship Related to the Public Agenda**

Today, faculty reward systems at land-grant institutions are rooted firmly in the one-way expert model. Promotion and tenure hinge upon a scholar's ability to produce peer-reviewed scholarship and create a narrow niche of expertise within a discipline. National leaders of engagement are making strides in helping campuses rethink faculty rewards within the context of the two-way engagement model.<sup>10</sup> For example, universities are revising tenure codes to include engaged teaching and research as legitimate avenues for faculty contributions. In addition, engaged scholars in the arts, humanities, and design are strengthening the civic purposes of their disciplines through the non-profit collaborative, *Imagining America*.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond tenure codes, there are other strategies that leaders could use to incentivize engagement. At my own institution, the Office of Public Engagement

awards "engaged department grants" to departments that seek to adopt public engagement as a core value in departmental teaching, research, and service. Moreover, the institution's Center for Integrative Leadership sponsors forums to exchange ideas with university and community leaders to address economic and social problems in Minnesota.

Beyond faculty, students also could be challenged to think about how their college experience might contribute to the public agenda. Andy Furco, associate vice president for public engagement at the University of Minnesota, has posed the idea that incoming students could select a problem focus corresponding with their major so that their academic work could directly contribute to addressing an important state or community issue. Using Wisconsin as an example, a UW–Madison student from Rhinelander might major in rural sociology or economics and choose job creation in northern Wisconsin as their primary problem focus. Throughout the student's career, he or she would engage with community partners in northern Wisconsin to devise and implement job creation strategies in the region. This exchange might be facilitated through service-learning programs that already exist on the campus.

### **Raise Public and Private Awareness—and Money—in Relation to Public Agenda Themes**

Setting a public agenda for a campus would provide a platform for re-conceptualizing university communications, lobbying, and fundraising. Communications pieces could highlight progress on the public agenda, and legislative action networks—such as the Badger Action Network—could be mobilized around agenda themes. Such an orientation would help educate alumni and the general public about how the academy conducts its work in partnership with the state. Through this partnership, public relations strategies could unfold and even stave off negative press.



## VIEWPOINTS

Consider this example. Recently, the University of Minnesota experienced a public relations crisis when a light rail route was planned only steps from sensitive research equipment. University scientists were concerned that the vibration could disrupt their labs. Despite their best arguments, the university was portrayed in the media as the villain—standing in the way of completing necessary infrastructure.

Now imagine that the institution’s legislative advocacy network was organized around a public agenda and that a component of that agenda was curing childhood diseases. Childhood disease prevention advocates could have made the case to state officials that the rail route would derail progress in the lab essential to Minnesota families. Had the university ignited the passions of its advocacy network around real-world problems, concerned Minnesota families could have reframed the “university as villain” message to a positive message about Minnesota scientists producing life-changing research. Such a message from concerned citizens would trump any press releases from the university making the same case.

### Leverage Public and Private Support

In the world of philanthropy, most major gifts are made to solve problems, not to serve institutional priorities.<sup>12</sup> Yet, development offices today are largely organized in a show-and-tell model, touting the work of the experts seeking private support. Like state officials, major donors are largely left out of the discovery process and typically left to receive periodic updates about the use of their gifts.<sup>13</sup>

In a two-way model, donors would connect their philanthropy to the public agenda by considering

how their gifts could solve real-world problems of interest to them. In this context, donors would be engaged as part of the learning community and have more interaction with faculty and students on specific problems. College and university-wide campaigns might be designed within the context of a problem-oriented agenda. For example, UW–Madison education alums living in Milwaukee may already be involved with addressing many of the complex problems in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). A regional campaign might target Milwaukee-based UW alumni to support university-MPS partnerships.

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Dollars already invested in the university might be leveraged with state funds to incentivize giving in relation to a public agenda. For example, the Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment is a competitive grant program designed to foster public engagement and advance the Wisconsin Idea. Using the engagement model as a guide, the endowment might be anchored in a public agenda for Wisconsin. In

keeping with the two-way engagement model, an advisory board of external partners could work with UW faculty to select awardees. Finally, part of the endowment could be used as matching funds to incentivize giving for a state-wide focused campaign toward the public agenda (like the MPS example above).

Making such changes would delight problem-focused donors, as well as legislators who seek evidence that the university is making an impact in their districts. Table 1 provides a brief comparison of how the one-way and two-way models differ in orientation and practice.<sup>14</sup>

**Table 1**  
*Traditional and Engagement Models of University Relations*

	<b>One-Way Expert Model (Traditional)</b>	<b>Two-Way Engagement Model</b>
<b>Underlying Narrative and Questions</b>	<p>Institutionally centered:</p> <p>What can legislators, donors, alumni, and friends do to better support our campus?</p>	<p>Publically centered:</p> <p>What are the most pressing needs, challenges, and opportunities facing our community, region, and nation?</p> <p>How can our campus be an instrument in addressing these challenges?</p> <p>How do we engage legislators, donors, alumni, and friends to be strategic partners in meeting regional, state, and national goals?</p>
<b>External Relations Office Roles</b>	<p>Broadcast campus contributions to external stakeholders</p> <p>Seek external support for institutional priorities</p>	<p>Act as conveners, problem-solvers, and change agents to address public problems (local, state, regional, national, global)</p> <p>Seek external support for mutually beneficial goals (public and university)</p>
<b>Lobbying and Advocacy</b>	<p>Mobilize advocacy networks in relation to campus priorities</p>	<p>Mobilize advocacy networks in relation to public priorities (public agenda for the campus)</p>
<b>Faculty Roles</b>	<p>Rewarded for peer-reviewed scholarship</p> <p>Provide expert testimony for state and other partners</p>	<p>Rewarded for peer-reviewed scholarship <i>and</i> publically engaged scholarship</p> <p>Work in collaboration with state, community partners, students to address critical public issues</p>
<b>State Legislators</b>	<p>Solicited for tax dollars to advance institutional priorities</p>	<p>Engaged in learning communities to help solve most pressing societal problems</p> <p>Engaged in forums on problem issues</p> <p>Solicited for tax dollars to advance a public agenda</p>
<b>Alumni, Donors, and Friends of the University</b>	<p>Solicited for volunteerism and philanthropy in support of departmental, college, and institutional priorities</p>	<p>Engaged in learning communities to help solve most pressing societal problems</p> <p>Solicited to volunteer and give in support of solving these problems</p> <p>Engaged in forums on problem issues</p>



## The Continued Roles of Traditional Scholarship and Global Engagement

The entire university need not be run on the engagement model. Universities need basic research conducted in the lab that may not have immediate benefits to society, and traditional methodologies are important to advancing disciplinary knowledge in many fields. After all, vaccines likely are not created through public engagement, although the need for vaccinations might be framed within the larger agenda of public health.

Instead, I am suggesting that engagement be promoted as a legitimate form of scholarship, teaching, and learning, alongside traditional methods. National leaders of engagement talk in terms of “making room” for engagement as a valued practice within the academy. In his influential work, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, Boyer emphasized the “scholarship of discovery” in his view of a reformed academy.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, an engagement model does not mean that land-grant universities should abandon their work in international contexts. On the contrary, international collaborations could be a robust component of the engagement agenda in which worldwide partnerships are forged to tackle global problems. As the world becomes a smaller place due to advances in technology, these partnerships are all the more logical.

## Looking to the Future

Yes, we need to tell our story better, but it needs to be a different story than the one we have been telling. It needs to be a story about the university acting as a partner in transforming our states and communities, no matter how community is defined. It needs to be a story about collaboration,

trust, respect, and joint problem-solving. It needs to be a story about how private and public dollars are fully leveraged to make a difference in our regions through the venue of higher education.

Boyer famously said, “I have a growing conviction that what is needed [for higher education] is not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation’s life.”<sup>16</sup> While economic problems are likely to impede state funding for higher education in the near future, engagement may provide a platform for universities to play a more meaningful role in the nation’s life, and then, ease back onto state agendas.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Howard R. Bowen, *The Costs of Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980).
- <sup>2</sup> David Blaska, "Blaska's Blog is 'Stupid' for Voting for Scott Walker and Ron Johnson," blog entry, *The Daily Page, Isthmus*, November 22, 2010, <http://www.thedailypage.com/daily/article.php?article=31347>.
- <sup>3</sup> Ronald G. Ehrenberg, *What's Happening to Public Higher Education?* (Portsmouth, NH: Greenwood Press, 2006), p.xix.
- <sup>4</sup> John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*. 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995).
- <sup>5</sup> The following sources provide a broad overview of the philosophies, practices, and contributions of public engagement in higher education: Hiram E. Fitzgerald, Cathy Burack, and Sarena Seifer, eds., *Handbook of Engaged Scholarship: Contemporary Landscapes, Future Directions, Volume 1: Institutional Change*. (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010); Hiram E. Fitzgerald, Cathy Burack, and Sarena Seifer, eds., *Handbook of Engaged Scholarship: Contemporary Landscape, Future Directions, Volume 2: Community-Campus Partnerships*. (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010); Barbara Jacoby, *Civic Engagement in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009).
- <sup>6</sup> See Michael D. Cohen, James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen, "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17 (1972): 1-25. The authors characterize large, complex universities as "organized anarchies."
- <sup>7</sup> Currently, state public agendas for higher education primarily focus on degree completion. See Gordon K. Davies (2006). *Setting a Public Agenda for Higher Education in the States: Lessons Learned from the National Collaborative for Higher Education Policy* (Washington, DC: National Collaborative for Higher Education Policy, 2006), [http://www.highereducation.org/reports/public\\_agenda/public\\_agenda.pdf](http://www.highereducation.org/reports/public_agenda/public_agenda.pdf).
- <sup>8</sup> Michael Crow, "Future of Public Research Universities" (plenary session, Annual Meeting of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities [APLU], Dallas, TX, November 14, 2010).
- <sup>9</sup> University of Wisconsin–Madison Chancellor Biddy Martin, "Bucky in the New Millennium," <http://budget.wisc.edu/bucky-in-the-new-millennium>. Reprinted with permission from *Madison Magazine*, where this column originally appeared.
- <sup>10</sup> The National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement provides external peer review and evaluation of faculty scholarship of engagement, as well as consultation, training, and technical assistance to campuses who are seeking to develop or strengthen systems in support of the scholarship of engagement. See <http://www.scholarshipofengagement.org>.
- <sup>11</sup> See <http://www.imaginingamerica.org/>.
- <sup>12</sup> Kay S. Grace and Alan L. Wendroff, *High Impact Philanthropy: How Donors, Boards, and Nonprofit Organizations Can Transform Communities* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2001).
- <sup>13</sup> See a complete discussion of this issue in David J. Weerts, "Toward an Engagement Model of Institutional Advancement at Public Colleges and Universities," *International Journal of Educational Advancement* 7, no. 2 (2007): 79-103.
- <sup>14</sup> See note 10. A complete model also is discussed.
- <sup>15</sup> Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).
- <sup>16</sup> Ernest L. Boyer, "The Scholarship of Engagement," *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 1, no. 1 (1996): 11-20.





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