

The Engaged University Today Outreach Scholarship Conference

Remarks by Graham B. Spanier

Over a four-year period from 1996 to 2000, a commission of twenty-four university presidents and chancellors set out to change the practices and values of public higher education, a fairly lofty agenda. One of the areas studied by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, which I chaired, is the focus of this three-day conference—the topic of engagement.

Several reports were published by the commission during that time period, but one titled *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution (Kellogg Commission 1999)*, which offered a number of recommendations and a model to transform our historic mission of teaching, research, and service into a forward-looking agenda of learning, discovery, and engagement, perhaps captured the most attention. I would like to take a few moments to refresh your memories about this report before we ask ourselves “how far have we come?”

In the Kellogg Commission’s report, an engaged institution was fundamentally defined as having these three characteristics:

- An engaged institution must be responsive to the needs of today’s students and tomorrow’s—not yesterday’s.
- It will enrich student experiences by bringing research and engagement into the curriculum and offering practical opportunities for students to prepare for the world they will enter.
- And it will put knowledge and expertise to work on problems its communities face.

The report identified a number of strategies, including making engagement part of the core mission of our universities. On the surface, these strategies are deceptively simple, but their underlying implications are so substantial that what was really being considered was a transformation in our institutions, a transformation so great that it would change the way we operate, the way we teach and learn, the way we look at research, and the way we communicate with those outside the institution. In short, it would affect everything we do at every level.

The other strategies identified by the Kellogg Commission include:

- Developing specific engagement plans that recognize engagement as a priority;
- Encouraging interdisciplinary research, teaching, and learning;
- Developing incentives to encourage faculty and student engagement; and
- Securing funding streams to support engagement activities.

The report also repeatedly emphasized engagement as a partnership—between universities, communities, government, business and industry, and other educational institutions—partnerships that allow us not only to share our knowledge with the public, but to also listen to our constituents as a prerequisite to helping solve some of society’s most pressing problems.

Along with putting knowledge to work, putting students first is also a vital part of engagement. Through our teaching missions, America’s colleges and universities have a profound potential to influence the future of what is now commonly characterized as a learning society. Our mission is to serve a diverse group of learners across the life course, and that group is growing daily. Opening up our institutions to new audiences through technology, satellite locations, flexibility in scheduling, simplified policies and procedures, expanded support services, and other such efforts is an important part of putting students first. An engaged university is a student-centered university that focuses on the quality of the educational experience.

Many new technologies that are highly supportive of anytime, anywhere learning are assisting us in our engagement quest, creating unprecedented opportunities for outreach.

- Currently, more than a half billion people worldwide have Internet access (*Nua Internet Surveys 2004*).
- Nearly half of all American households now use the Internet, with more than seven hundred new households being connected every hour (*National Science and Technology Council 2000*).
- More than 56 percent of all degree-granting institutions in the United States offer distance education courses (*NCES 2003*).

I am not one who believes that modern information technologies will displace the primacy of resident instruction in institutions

such as ours, but I believe that the current rigid distinctions between distance education, commuter, and residential students will be increasingly blurred. The convergence of distance education and resident instruction is among the most significant unacknowledged trends in higher education today. It creates exciting prospects for educators, and I believe it will be a major growth area. In the future, we can expect to see students living on campus while taking online classes from their dorm rooms. We will see some online students commuting to one of our campuses for an occasional resident instruction course. There will be more flexibility in scheduling.

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The potential of online learning is staggering. It took thirty-eight years for the radio to acquire fifty million users and thirteen years for television to become as common, but it took only four years for the World Wide Web to attract the same number of users (*United Nations 2000*).

I have just given you a very condensed version of the Kellogg Commission’s report on engagement that I believe continues to change and shape higher education in America.

In the last five years, there has been an unprecedented level of discussion about this topic in both the public and private sectors. The fact that you are here at an engagement conference—five years after our report—still exploring ways to become a more deeply engaged institution means that higher education values the concept of engagement and understands the importance of responding to the needs of the communities it serves.

So, how far have we come? In my estimation, we have made tremendous strides. As all of you know, change in academe—real and lasting change, the kind that requires shifts in attitude and thinking—takes time. Over the last five years, there have been a number of significant accomplishments toward a more meaningful engagement agenda, including:

- The establishment of a committee by the Committee on Institutional Cooperation, the academic arm of Big Ten schools, to define engagement, benchmark, and measure it across the CIC.

- The growth of invention disclosures and the increase in the number of patents from university research, an indicator of our increased efforts to provide the knowledge we are discovering to the public.
- The creation of a number of task forces to identify barriers to university-industry partnerships.
- The formation of a task force by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, which published *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place (AASCU 2002)*, a strategic engagement guide for campus leaders.
- The establishment of the Clearinghouse for the Scholarship of Engagement, designed to provide external peer review and evaluation of faculty engagement. It also provides consultation, training, and technical assistance to strengthen the engagement agenda for universities.
- A prolific response from individual institutions, which have developed everything from Web sites dedicated to engagement activities to reports focusing on the topic.

A variety of engagement models also have emerged. For example:

- Michigan State has created a conceptual framework for university outreach and engagement, outlining interdisciplinary efforts and applications to undergraduate education. It is also documenting outcomes and impacts.
- The University of Illinois has created a handbook for including public service in the promotion and tenure process.
- North Carolina State is embracing a broad, inclusive view of scholarship and engagement and has drafted a document outlining the values of and the faculty responsibilities tied to engagement.

Nearly every public institution has, in some way, embraced the idea of engagement, knowing that our involvement with the communities we serve has everything to do with the public confidence and support we can expect to win in the years ahead.

In following the strategies outlined by the Kellogg Commission, no two institutions will be alike in the ways they undertake engagement. I'd like to briefly tell you about the model I am most familiar with here at Penn State. Our model emphasizes the integration of teaching, research, and service, cutting across disciplinary lines. We identified five interdisciplinary

areas for special initiatives: the life sciences, materials science, environmental studies, information sciences and technology, and children, youth, and families. In all five areas we made a multi-year funding commitment and created opportunities for students to venture out of the classroom and into the community.

We also restructured Penn State in a number of ways to develop more effective linkages with partners and constituents. We joined together Penn State Cooperative Extension, Continuing and Distance Education, and Public Broadcasting under a new position of vice president for outreach. Our technology transfer units are more closely bridged to this new unit as well. Our twenty-four-campus system was restructured, adding flexibility to offer more baccalaureate degree opportunities.

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We also created the Penn State World Campus, a virtual university, and our faculty reward system has been restructured to encourage outreach in teaching, research, and service within the criteria for tenure and promotion. In addition, our University Faculty Senate has a standing Committee on Outreach responsible for identifying such efforts, establishing evaluation methodologies to ensure quality, and creating recognition measures to reward outstanding performance.

I am proud of the progress that has been made, not just by Penn State, but throughout higher education. However, we have more to do. Despite all of the progress, our institutions are still often unappreciated by the general public, legislators, and other constituents. Just last month the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2004) issued its report card for higher education. Public colleges and universities did not fare well, underperforming in a number of areas, such as access, learning, and affordability.

The drivers of change outlined in the Kellogg report—such as shifts in demography, calls for accountability, increasing competition, and flagging resources, to name a few—have not lessened, but have become more compelling. In my estimation, we are still in our adolescence in our efforts to embrace the concepts outlined by the Kellogg Commission’s report. I believe our progress

would have been greater, had so many universities not been stymied by a lack of financial support from their states in the last few years. Timing is everything, and unfortunately interest in the topic of engagement coincided with a period from 2001 to 2004 in which significant cutbacks in public funding of public higher education occurred. These funding challenges not only slowed higher education's efforts, they also caused us to question how we could fully embrace an engagement agenda when our state governments are literally telling us they do not wish to fund it. For Penn State, only 11 percent of our budget comes from state support. Contrast this with the 20 percent we received when I arrived here in 1995, and you can see how funding an engagement agenda could be problematic.

Looking ahead realistically, the issue might really boil down to what extent we find it appropriate to use undergraduate tuition to fund the engagement agenda. Outreach is a hard sell within the university community. I would guess that you would have to stop a lot of undergraduates and their parents on the street before you could find one that would say, "Sure, raise my tuition \$1,000 to better serve the people of Pennsylvania." We need to face up to this funding dilemma, which means we are going to have to become more entrepreneurial. As Albert Einstein said, "In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity."

We must be more open to charging fees for some of our outreach services. If no one is willing to pay for them, that may be a signal that the service is not needed. We don't give away undergraduate education or room and board for free. Reluctant as we are, we must start thinking along these lines, because states are not stepping up to the plate.

We must continue to explore creatively new ways of partnering to respond to emerging needs. We need to more intensely push the use of technology as a way to support the learning needs of people of all ages and to expand our access.

We need to continue addressing the challenge of adequately recognizing engagement in our faculty reward structure.

We need to persist in educating those within and outside our universities about the importance of supporting this agenda.

We must identify opportunities with the greatest payoffs. In times of budget struggles, trade-offs will need to be made so that we can carry on our engagement agenda.

In closing, let me say that the nation's universities are on a promising path of transformation. We have come a long way in just a few years with considerable promise in the next few years.

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About the Author

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