An Added Dimension of Mission: Metropolitan Colleges and Universities

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INTRODUCTION

One of the hallmarks of the American system of higher education is its diversity: there are more than 4,000 institutions of varying sizes, types, and purposes. Unlike centrally planned systems, the American higher education landscape is a tapestry of institutions—public and private, selective and open-access—each with a distinct mission and purpose. This diversity has long been recognized as leading to the strength and character of American higher education (Birnbaum, 1983; Clark & Youn, 1976; Morphew, 2009). Benefits from this diversity include increased options for students with different learning styles or goals, contributing to student outcomes and social mobility; individual colleges and universities developing areas of strength and focus, leading to competition, innovation, and the replication of successful models; and responsivity and the ability to adapt to changes in society and its needs (Birnbaum, 1983). Whether it has a history of 300 years or is a new institution, each school's mission and purpose has developed in line with its local context and history.

Few colleges or universities see themselves as ivory towers, separated entirely from the world beyond their walls. However, different institutions negotiate their relationships with external communities differently, and there are myriad ways that universities and communities are engaged with one another. This article seeks to illustrate the way in which one diverse group of institutions—known as "metropolitan colleges and universities"—attempts to form intentional and mutual relationships with their communities. The universities in this group go far beyond service activities in their neighborhoods or community partnerships; they seek broad-based interactions and missions that are responsive to the needs of their cities and regions. This article outlines the diversity of American higher education, explores the concept of university mission, and examines the engagement of two of the metropolitan universities.

THE SECTORS

Because the American system of more than 4,000 institutions is vast and complex, scholars have attempted to classify and group them. The most widely used classification system is that provided by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Its basic classification divides higher education institutions into four groups by the types of offerings they provide: there are doctorate-granting research universities (283 universities), master's colleges and universities (about 650 institutions), baccalaureate colleges (about 750 colleges), and associate's colleges (about 1,800)[1.] This classification gives us broad outlines of the differences between sectors, though it also masks significant differences within the groups and similarities across groups. The differences within classifications can be seen, for example, by examining the varying amount of research conducted at the 283 doctoral-research universities; the 50 institutions (18% of this classification) that do the most research receive 63% of all federal research money and the top 100 institutions (35%) receive 85% of federal funding (Benjamin, 2003). So while the University of Michigan, which performs about $700 million in sponsored research, and Andrews University in Michigan, which performs less than $30 million in sponsored research, are in the same category, there are clearly wide variations within classifications. In addition, there is significant overlap between schools at the margins; for example, a baccalaureate college might look very similar to a master's college that grants bachelor's degrees and a few master's degrees (e.g., Metropolitan College in Denver, which in 2008 exclusively granted bachelor's degrees, and Metropolitan State University in St. Paul Minnesota, which granted 1,369 bachelor's degrees and just 154 master's degrees). Zemsky, Shaman, and Shapiro (2001) offer another classification scheme, arguing that colleges and universities can be classified into five categories, not by looking at degree offerings, but rather by taking into account various attributes including selectivity and graduation rates. Their five categories range from the selective and elite "medallion" institutions to those "convenience/user friendly" institutions that enroll a large proportion of part-time and intermittent students.

WHAT IS MISSION?

Though defining mission is difficult, as it is an elusive and ambiguous concept, each college and university, irrespective of its sector, has a distinct and unique mission. While many institutions have mission statements that give a sense of purpose and *raison d'etre*, these statements are not a definitive source of information about a college or university's mission. Though they can serve to help define institutional priorities, motivate people, and legitimize the institution, they are often vague statements with language designed to appeal to and signal various constituents both on and off campus (Morphew & Hartley, 2006).

Many scholars have articulated differing conceptions of what a college or university's mission should be. Stanley Fish (2008) argues that the university should focus its attention solely on teaching and research and avoid forays into other activities such as service, civic engagement, or the ethical development of students. He argues that a narrowly defined focus on teaching and research is difficult enough; a focus on developing students in other ways or helping the community is beyond the scope of the university's responsibility. Fish's is a minority opinion; most scholars argue for a broader public purpose. Derek Bok (1982, 1991, 2005) outlines a vision of the university that

values research, teaching, and service, and engages students and faculty members with the wider society. He argues that the university has a responsibility and the mission to improve the human condition. While Amy Gutmann (1987, 2008) agrees that universities must engage with their communities and the world—in part because it enhances student learning and faculty research and offers a way to spread knowledge—she also cautions that universities cannot and should not attempt to solve all social problems; they are not "short-term service stations" to society or a replacement for social welfare agencies. Giroux and Giroux (2004) go further and argue that the university *must* attempt to redress all social ills from racism to inequity and alter structures that simply seek to reproduce the existing social order. These thinkers and others (e.g., Levin, 2003; Shapiro, 2005) illustrate the range of opinions about the degree to which colleges and universities should engage in their communities and the world. With varying legitimate points of view, each college and university has the opportunity and the responsibility to articulate and enact a particular mission.

AN ADDED MISSION: METROPOLITAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

A group of American institutions has defined themselves as being "metropolitan colleges and universities," that is, higher education institutions committed to the urban centers and metropolitan areas in which they are located. These schools span Carnegie classifications, are both public and private, and range in size from small colleges to large universities. Far from being simply located in metropolitan area, these colleges and universities are committed to their cities and regions, providing teaching, research, and service that explicitly address local concerns. In the teaching and education of students, these universities commit to serving residents of their region, including diverse and underserved students, students of all ages, and the "place-bound" students that cannot travel long distances for their education. Research at metropolitan universities focuses on

linking basic and applied research, and on "creating interdisciplinary partnerships for attacking complex metropolitan problems" (Declaration of Metropolitan Universities, n.d.). And the service activities performed by these institutions strengthen and support the local area, including individuals, nonprofit organizations, and economic development. Lynton (1996) writes,

A metropolitan university's regional orientation and strong commitment to serve the intellectual needs of its surrounding communities and constituencies, the resulting diversity of the student body, the focus on the education of practitioners, and the emphasis on outreach through applied research and technical assistance add up to an institutional model very different from that of the traditional research university (p. xiii).

Metropolitan universities seek to be publicly engaged institutions and are described by some as "stewards of place." The American Association for State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) notes that a publicly engaged university should meet four criteria. First, it must be "place-related," meaning that they have important links to their surrounding communities. This does not limit their potentially global engagement, but it recognizes the connection and commitment to their localities. Second, these universities require an interactive "give and take by the university and its partners" in which the university learns from its surrounding area, and does not always act as the "expert" bringing knowledge to the community. Third, interactions with the community should be mutually beneficial, in that engagement activities should be "responsive to public needs in ways that are appropriate to the institution's mission and academic strengths" (AASCU, p. 7). In this way, the university is not simply taking from the community, nor should the community expect to receive services beyond the university's scope. Fourth, engagement activities should be integrated across the institution—at different levels, in policies, incentives, and by faculty, staff, and students.

Two Metropolitan Universities

Metropolitan universities enact their missions in different ways yet in line with the principles of regional stewardship and commitment to the metropolitan area. Two institutional examples are Northern Kentucky University, which serves the northern area of its state and the metropolitan region of Cincinnati, which is just over the border of Ohio; and Portland State University, located in and serving downtown Portland, Oregon. Northern Kentucky's regional and metropolitan engagement emphasizes capacity building in the region through education and economic development. Portland State, on the other hand, seeks serve its region through real and sustained partnerships and by providing students with an understanding of the urban area and the region.

Northern Kentucky University. NKU's regional stewardship spans a number of counties in northern Kentucky, as well as serving the metropolitan region of Cincinnati. It is located in an area that has many strengths, including Cincinnati, which has a cost of living ten percent below the national average thus making it attractive to businesses; important service firms, such as law and advertising agencies; other large businesses that have headquarters there (e.g., Proctor and Gamble) or major branches of a larger institution (e.g., Fidelity Investments); and sports and cultural activities (Marcus, 2008). However, there are also many challenges facing the region, including low high school completion rates; a low percentage of residents with bachelor's degrees; an aging population as younger people move away to find work; and a dependence on agriculture in rural Kentucky (Marcus, 2008). Under the leadership of president James Votruba, Northern Kentucky University has sought to involve itself directly in the community, finding mutually beneficial ways for the university and the community to collaborate. NKU sees itself as providing vital services to the community, gaining resources and knowledge from the community, and as an institutional citizen.

NKU seeks to contribute to the region through its teaching, research, and service missions. It sees the education of students as part of its metropolitan university responsibility by tying its education directly to the needs of the region, thus shaping its teaching goals with regional stewardship in mind. For example, the university encourages students to major in fields in which local businesses have indicated they have needs, including "information, finance, science and technology, healthcare, and social services" (Marcus, 2008, p. 8). Further, since the proportion of northern Kentucky residents with bachelor's degrees is just 10 percent in some areas, compared with the national average of almost 30 percent (Marcus, 2008, p. 9), the university is seeking to increase the number of students who graduate with bachelor's degrees. In these ways, increasing educational attainment of the broader population is a main mission of the university and a way to make a major contribution to the region.

Through its research and service missions, the university also seeks to provide services to support the region; this is accomplished by using the university's expertise and capacity to work with businesses to benefit the region. President Votruba was the co-chair of a regional development plan, Vision 2015, "a community-planning project designed to position the Northern Kentucky region to better compete in a global, knowledge-based economy" (Pelletier, 2006, p. 4). The project, which includes sustained contributions by NKU, is focused on identifying ways in which the region might revitalize itself by addressing the areas of economic competitiveness, excellence in education, livability, urban renaissance, and governance (Vision 2015, 2006). Further, faculty and staff are involved in initiatives on campus such as the Center for Economic Analysis and Development, which provides direct help to local businesses and organizations. Its mission is to increase NKU's visibility as an institution committed to regional stewardship and economic development through economic analysis and business research conducted for the benefit the organizations

of our region. This will be accomplished by developing the institutional infrastructure in economic analysis necessary to enhance the region's economic growth and development. As such, the CEAD will serve as a vital link between NKU and the regional community by collecting, analyzing, and disseminating business, economic and demographic information. (CEAD, n.d.)

CEAD seeks to use the resources of the university to help the region improve itself by publishing information relevant to the region and serving as consultants to provide more specific information to local businesses. In these ways, the expertise and resources of the university have a direct benefit in the region.

Portland State University. The motto of Portland State University in Portland, Oregon is displayed in large letters on a bridge: "Let Knowledge Serve the City." Since the mid-1990s, PSU has explicitly embraced its urban identity, connecting with its city and the broader region in numerous and tangible dimensions. It is located in Portland's "downtown area, surrounded by many district neighborhoods with varying needs [and the] majority of PSU's students come from these neighborhoods" (Jacoby, 1999, p. 28). Further, its location in the greater Portland area and Pacific Northwest are parts of its identity that are manifest through programs and the institution's mission. The university seeks to engage with the community, not just through one or two programs, but in a wide array of deep and sustained programs, including through partnerships with city organizations and through the education of students with citizenry skills. In fact, its former president, Daniel Bernstine, said, "My vision of a university is so thoroughly engaged with its community that people throughout the region refer to it as 'our university'" (Colby et al., 2003, p. 75). Further, PSU seeks to ensure that all members of the university community—students, faculty, and administrators—are involved in the region through myriad academic, social, and service programs.

PSU's curriculum seeks to instill in students a familiarity and understanding of its city and region. Students are encouraged to engage in service-learning courses—in fact 6,500 students do per year (Dubb, 2007)—in which they perform service activities as part of a classroom-based course, often directly interacting with members of the community. In addition, the PSU curriculum seeks to broaden students' capacities in moral and ethical reasoning and in critical thinking, in some cases in conjunction with local concerns (Colby et al., 2003). For example, as part of a required Freshman Inquiry course, students have as options "The Columbia Basin: Watershed of the Great Northwest" and "The Many Places of Portland," in which they learn about the greater region from different disciplinary perspectives (Williams & Bernstein, 2002, p. 261). Further, a senior capstone project often helps students to understand their city and region by working in "interdisciplinary student teams in work on in-depth community-based projects, usually over two quarters" (Colby et al., 2003, p. 177).

Portland State seeks to involve its faculty in research and service in the community as well. Promotion and tenure decisions for faculty recognize the importance of applied and integrative scholarship, and these values are beginning to become institutionalized (Thomas, 2000). PSU's promotion and tenure guidelines articulate the following: "Faculty engaged in community outreach can make a difference in their communities and beyond by defining or resolving relevant social problems or issues, by facilitating organizational development, by improving existing practices or programs, and by enriching the cultural life of the community" (Policies and Procedures, 1996, p. 7). Further, faculty are encouraged to become engaged with the community; for example, there is assistance available for designing courses with community engagement, understanding community-based work, and doing such research.

Conclusion

The American system of higher education is very diverse, with colleges

and universities of all types, sizes, and missions. The traditional classifications often delineate categories such as research universities, comprehensive four-year institutions, baccalaureate institutions, and community colleges. Far from being a discrete sector of higher education, metropolitan colleges and universities cut across sectors and come in many shapes and sizes; some are residential campuses serving traditional students, some serve commuter and adult populations, and others serve a diverse population drawing from their urban or regional areas. However, all metropolitan colleges and universities seek to be a part of their communities and regions. None takes the ivory tower position advocated by Stanley Fish and solely focuses on teaching and research without concern for the community or ethical development of students. These colleges and universities are dependent on their context and place which help them to define their missions and goals. For example, the broad needs of the northern Kentucky area drive the priorities of NKU, leading them to encourage students to study in areas of high need and to focus on providing economic development assistance to the region. Meanwhile, PSU's very different local context in Portland explains its engagement with the urban community through service learning, community partnerships, and engagement with the greater region. It is not desirable to have every college or university with the same mission or purpose, and these metropolitan colleges and universities fulfill a vital place in their areas and in our society. Metropolitan colleges and universities should be recognized for their unique contributions to the urban centers in which they are located.

ENDNOTE

[1] In addition there are special-focus institutions (e.g., stand-alone medical schools or seminaries) and tribal colleges. Non-degree-granting schools make up another significant group of institutions.

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