2000 Academic Convocation

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The Engaged University: Our Partnership with America

This convocation is an occasion to celebrate Texas A&M’s progress and to discuss where the university is headed. So what, you may ask, does the president of Penn State University know about the future of Texas A&M? I wish to share with you the vision that has come out of years of work by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities. As chair of the commission, I — along with your president Ray Bowen — was privileged to help shape this vision that holds great promise for the success of our nation, our institutions and the students we serve.

Let me begin with a story that illustrates the importance of readjusting our vision for the 21st century despite the many achievements the nation’s land-grant universities can claim to date.

It’s a story about two men who fell on hard times. Try as they might, they just couldn’t seem to find work. Then one day, they heard that a museum was willing to pay $50 a piece for live rattlesnakes, so, in desperation, they hiked to a remote area renowned for its large snake population. But as they scaled a steep ledge, the rock gave way and they tumbled down the bank right into a rattlesnake pit with hundreds of angry rattlers. "Look!" one of the men shouted excitedly. "We're rich!"

There have been times in higher education that we may have felt we were facing some pretty tough odds, but like the snake catchers we have discovered that by taking a different approach, we can turn what first appears to be a no-win situation into a positive force for change. We must be willing to try new ways of thinking about what we do if we are to be successful.

The work of the Kellogg Commission offers a model that transforms our historic mission of teaching, research and service into a forward-looking agenda of learning, discovery and engagement in keeping with the changes that characterize our society. I’d like to elaborate on this blueprint to renew our partnership with America.

The Kellogg Commission

Serving on committees is about as central to life in higher education as football Saturdays and editorials in the student newspaper. Most of us have put in more than our share of hours on various committees and commissions, and read plenty of reports produced by those groups.

Quite a number of those reports have found prominent places on our bookshelves, where they have been consistently shown to produce some of the best academic dust in America. So it would be quite understandable if one were a tad skeptical about yet another higher education panel issuing yet another series of reports about yet another crisis facing America’s universities.
But the work of the Kellogg Commission is distinctly different from any that I’ve seen in my years in higher education administration — for a number of very important reasons.

One is the people. The Commission was made up of 24 university presidents — including Texas A&M’s — who came from many different types of institutions, with very different viewpoints. They shared in common a passionate willingness to express our views. And that passion is reflected in the work that has emerged from the Commission.

The Context for Change

It could easily sound like hyperbole to stand up here and say that we have entered an era of change that is unprecedented in the history of American higher education. But many of us believe that it is true.

There was a time when universities were content to adopt a sort of “Field of Dreams” approach to life — if we build it they will come. For most of our history we were omniscient faculty who told our students what they needed, when they could get it, and what they would pay for it. But those days are rapidly becoming a fond and distant memory. Changes in technology, demographics, competition, and legislative expectations are all coming together to alter the way we operate.

At the same time, competition between universities and other agencies for use of state tax dollars is becoming ever more severe. In Pennsylvania, for example, tuition has replaced state support as the primary source of funding for state-related universities. While this phenomenon is more pronounced in Pennsylvania, virtually every state has seen a similar trend.

A report by the Council for Aid to Education said that assuming tuition increases no faster than inflation, by 2015, U.S. colleges and universities will fall $38 billion short of the annual budget they will need to educate the student population.

In Texas, your state Legislature has acknowledged the importance of education and has recognized that knowledge is one of the state’s most valuable economic assets. This is certainly a step in the right direction.

But our institutions still find themselves in a changing marketplace with changes in the traditional assumptions about higher education that include broad attacks on everything from tenure to increasing tuition to faculty workloads to the role of research to the place of affirmative action.

As if that were not enough, all of this occurs as we are being expected to educate more students more efficiently. The U.S. population has doubled since 1930, but during that same time, enrollment in higher education has expanded tenfold. In the past 50 years, college attendance has ballooned from roughly 25 percent to 60 percent of each high school graduating class. It has been estimated that our nation must be prepared to educate 4 million more students by 2015 simply because of population growth. As the proportion of the population that wants to attend college also increases, that number will be even higher.
And those students are very diverse. Adult and part-time students have been the fastest growing segment of higher education enrollments. Adult students — those age 25 or older — now represent about 43 percent of our students nationwide. Minority enrollments totaled 27 percent in 1997, compared to 16 percent two decades before. Here in Texas, minority students account for more than 35 percent of the student population at public, four-year institutions. Greater racial and ethnic diversity can be anticipated for the future for all institutions as a result of the growth rates for minority populations in the United States.

These trends present either an insurmountable challenge or an extraordinary opportunity. As John F. Kennedy once said, "Actions deferred are all too often opportunities lost," so the nation’s public universities are mobilizing to take charge of the change that surrounds them, led in this effort by the Kellogg Commission. The opening statement for the commission said this: "Institutions ignore a changing environment at their peril. Like dinosaurs, they risk becoming exhibits in a kind of cultural Jurassic Park: places of great interest and curiosity, increasingly irrelevant in a world that has passed them by. Higher education cannot afford to let this happen."

We certainly don’t want to be like the fellow’s wife who used to cut off both ends of the ham before she cooked it. When the fellow asked her why she did that, she said because that’s the way her mother always did it. One day, he got the chance to ask his mother-in-law why she cut off both ends of the ham before she cooked it. And she said because that’s the way her mother did it. Well, when the holidays rolled around, Grandma was visiting. The fellow asked her why she cut off both ends of the ham before she cooked it. She said, "That’s simple. I never had a pan big enough to get a whole ham in it."

Let’s not cling to methods simply because that’s the way we’ve always done things. In the view of the Kellogg Commission, change must come from within our institutions in response to the changes that are all around us. Like Penn State, Texas A&M is embracing this opportunity. You have outlined a plan for change in your Vision 2020 report — a progressive document that recognizes a central theme for the Commission — that our universities must be fully engaged with our communities.

The idea of engagement has everything to do with the public confidence and support we can expect to win in the years ahead. I am focusing today on this theme of engagement because it encompasses so many of the other concerns that the land-grant university of the 21st century must embrace — concerns about students, about access, about lifelong learning, and about campus culture.

The Engaged University

The tripartite mission of teaching, research, and service that is the tradition of America’s land-grant universities and that has proven again and again its value to the progress of the nation gives institutions such as Texas A&M and Penn State a head start. The grassroots learning communities fostered by cooperative extension, the support for lifelong learning provided by continuing and distance education and public broadcasting, and the partnerships underlying technology transfer activities that are hallmarks of public and land-grant universities all were ahead of the times in encouraging a learning society that has now fully emerged.
We are entering a new chapter in the evolution of our institutions. There is emerging a renewed commitment to outreach, to students, to progress, recognizing that higher learning must keep up with the profound changes that are taking place in society if universities are to remain centers of lifelong learning. If we are not supportive of the learning needs of people of all ages and the expanding knowledge needs of society, other educational enterprises will surely supersede us in this intellectually demanding world—enterprises that won’t have the rich interplay of disciplines and missions that makes the university so well suited to promote economic, human, and cultural progress.

So what does it mean to be an engaged university? I’d like to reiterate something that Peter McGrath touched upon during his talk at this very same event last year, but that bears repeating. At the most fundamental level, an engaged university will:

- Respond to the needs of today’s students and tomorrow’s—not yesterday’s.
- 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 put knowledge and expertise to work on problems its communities face.

**Putting Students First**

Many of you may have been thinking about engagement primarily in terms of a new twist on outreach and therefore may be surprised to hear me speak about students first. Through our teaching mission, America’s colleges and universities have a profound potential to influence the future of what is now commonly characterized as a learning society. The key is to broaden our notion of students to include so-called non-traditional learners, to place them at the center of our learning communities, and to be committed to meeting their needs, wherever they are, whatever they need, and whenever they need it. Institutional flexibility is an essential characteristic in serving a diverse group of learners across the lifespan. We are greatly assisted in embracing this quality by the new technologies that are highly supportive of anywhere, anytime learning. In a recent report from the computer industry, it was estimated that by the year 2002, 490 million people around the world will have Internet access. 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 most significant growth area in American higher education will be in distance and continuing education.

National statistics underscore the market for lifelong learning. They show that nearly half the adult population in our nation—some 76 million people—pursue some form of continuing education annually. Forty million participate in work-related courses and 38 million participate for personal enrichment. Nearly 60 percent of these individuals have a college degree.

Yet in a survey conducted for the Kellogg Commission, more than two-thirds of the higher education and political leaders who responded identified a long list of obstacles to supporting lifelong learning at public universities. These included skepticism about faculty members' expertise in teaching via
distance education; the lack of a consumer-driven orientation to education; lack of incentives for faculty to integrate technological innovations into the curriculum; and limited institutional flexibility to bring about change. These obstacles also included a model of education that emphasizes teaching rather than learning; the lack of a student-centered orientation to education; lack of faculty involvement in programs emphasizing lifelong learning; lack of professional development opportunities for faculty to enhance their use of technology for teaching and learning; and the lack of financial support for curricular innovation.

Opening up our institutions to new audiences through technology, satellite locations, faculty development, flexibility in scheduling, simplified policies and procedures, expanded support services, and other such efforts is an important part of putting students first. An engaged institution also will focus on the quality of educational experience, making every effort to prepare learners for the challenges of life in contemporary society.

Old models of education no longer apply.

Certainly we must continue to encourage the development of skills, but these now include the skills of information science and technology and the multicultural skills that undergird success in an internationalized society. As always, we must continue to expose students to new perspectives and convey the essence of a given field to its majors, but we do so now realizing that such efforts represent only a shrinking sample of what might be studied or a freeze-frame in a body of knowledge subject to sometimes exponential growth.

Given these constraints, and recognizing that in an increasingly complex world the ability to understand, to evaluate and to respond creatively to challenge and change will influence virtually all aspects of life, we must somehow equip students to continue to learn long after they leave us. Equally important, we must open their hearts as well as their minds to this task. Intellectual capital is of tremendous importance to the future. Yet so is the extent to which our institutions promote character, conscience, citizenship and social responsibility among those whose lives we touch.

Involving students in meaningful research and integrating the community into the academic experiences of our students are promising approaches to help mold tomorrow’s leaders. Research opportunities give students important experience in problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork and communication, all useful lifetime skills.

Internships, practicums and service learning opportunities provide students with experience in dealing with real-life situations in businesses, organizations and communities. These experiences have many rewards. For students, they provide the impetus for critical reflection, expand horizons, and encourage responsibility and good citizenship. For the organizations involved, there is work of value being done, often on a volunteer basis. Our universities benefit as well from the good will and partnerships such activities foster.

As the oldest publicly supported university in Texas, your institution — as well as those across the nation — already offers these experiences. Yet such efforts can be greatly expanded to involve more students and can be integrated more closely into the overall educational experience.
Putting Knowledge To Work

Another characteristic of an engaged university is putting knowledge to work. Through our research capacity and the expertise of faculty, institutions such as ours have tremendous resources for enhancing the quality of life. This has been demonstrated time and again in the role the nation’s universities play in promoting economic development through technology transfer. Our role in promoting human development also has contributed much to the health and well-being of people throughout the lifespan. Yet the needs of society remain great: the Kellogg Commission has identified on its list of potential areas for university engagement the many issues related to education and the economy; agriculture and food; rural America, urban revitalization, and community development; health care; children, youth, and families; and the environment and natural resources. There are others that could be added as well.

Despite our historic involvement in such areas, issues of policy, practice and perception prevent universities from engaging with them as fully as we might. It’s been said, for example, that universities have disciplines while people have problems. The academic culture tends to be such that the reward structure reinforces allegiance to the discipline nationally and internationally. This deters faculty from a broader institutional agenda of outreach and engagement, yet faculty involvement is absolutely essential in creating truly engaged institutions. It also discourages the interdisciplinary approaches that are needed to solve some of the most complex problems of our society.

In one of its reports, the Commission discussed campus culture. We need to reinstate a sense of institutional coherence that more effectively supports our mission. It is especially important that such change be embraced at the departmental level, given the powerful role that departments play in the lives of faculty.

The academic culture also tends to be a bit lofty. We have to be open to learning from and with our collaborators in the community. Engagement is really a two-way street that should impact the university as much as it impacts our partners. In the words of the Kellogg Commission, “The purpose of engagement is not to provide the university’s superior expertise to the community but to encourage joint academic-community definitions of problems, solutions and success.”

I am not saying that all faculty must be individually involved in the engagement agenda. But if the collective faculty agenda is not one of engagement, our universities simply will not make the difference they should. The leadership of faculty, by virtue of our shared governance systems, has a tremendous influence on everything our institutions do. At Penn State, we have restructured our faculty reward system to encourage outreach in teaching, research, and service within the criteria for tenure and promotion.

Among other factors that work against engagement, universities are characteristically slow to respond. At the same time, it can be difficult to make the long-term commitments that gain the confidence and trust of community partners, particularly in assuring the stability of funding necessary to support long-term relationships.

Transformational Strategies
The Kellogg Commission has identified five strategies to make universities fully effective partners for the 21st century. These are deceivingly simple at face value, but their underlying implications are so substantial that we are really talking about a transformation in our institutions.

First, institutional leaders must work to make engagement so much a priority that it becomes part of the core mission of the university. It must be reflected in the full range of activities, and in every field of endeavor.

Second, specific engagement plans must be developed that recognize that this priority is not something separate and distinct but built into everything we do.

Third, interdisciplinary research, teaching and learning must be encouraged as part of the engagement agenda.

Fourth, incentives must be developed to encourage faculty and student engagement. There are a number of dimensions here, among them promotion and tenure review, balancing individual faculty involvement with the collective contributions of a department, and even the role played by accrediting bodies and other external agencies.

Finally, secure funding streams must be sought to support engagement activities. Partnerships, fees, and internal allocations are all possibilities. The greatest promise seems to lie in developing new partnerships with public agencies and the private sector.

The Penn State Model

In following these strategies, no two institutions will be alike in the ways they define institutional engagement. Let me share with you briefly some of the things we are doing at Penn State. Our model emphasizes our land-grant tradition and the integration of teaching, research and service.

This integration cuts across disciplinary lines to address important societal issues in terms useful to the people who live and work in the communities we share. Five interdisciplinary areas have been identified for special initiatives: the life sciences, materials science, environmental studies, information sciences and technology, and children, youth and families. We have made a multi-year commitment in each of these areas to build faculty, enhance programs and encourage collaboration, both internally and with relevant corporate and community partners.

In the case of information sciences and technology, we have moved with lightning speed to create a new school to address the tremendous workforce needs for skills in this area. Now in its second year of operation, the school has 1,300 students enrolled across 19 Penn State locations. The School of IST is a model of engagement, having been built from the ground up in partnership with the businesses and industries it will serve, a continuing partnership we view as essential to the school’s success.

In all five areas of interdisciplinary priority, we are creating new opportunities for collaboration to address critical challenges in Pennsylvania and the nation. We are also providing opportunities for
students to venture out of the classroom and into the community. For example, it is a goal of our Honors College that every one of its students have at least one reflective service experience.

We also have restructured Penn State in a number of ways to develop more effective linkages with partners and constituents. The outreach function has been bolstered by creating a partnership of two major and previously disconnected units of the university to serve the needs of the public better. Cooperative Extension and Continuing and Distance Education and Public Broadcasting have been joined under a new position of Vice President for Outreach and Cooperative Extension. Our technology transfer units are more closely bridged to this new unit as well. The purpose is to enhance participation, coordination, and collaboration across the University in bringing the resources of all of our colleges to the people of Pennsylvania.

As part of our partnership with our communities, we have also restructured our 24-campus system to provide more degree opportunities to meet the needs of location-bound learners and local employees. In addition, the Penn State World Campus, a virtual university whose students are location-bound, was created in 1998. Since that time, it has grown to nearly 3,000 students already.

The Future

Like the 12th man, our institutions of higher education, with their rich land-grant tradition, must extend our research, teaching and service for the common good. We must be always ready to step in and respond to the needs of our states and the nation.

In closing, let me say that broad societal change has created unprecedented opportunities for the nation’s universities to become fully engaged with their communities and make a difference in the quality of life. From my vantage point with the Kellogg Commission and at Penn State, I believe we are entering an era of heightened responsiveness among our institutions that will prove highly rewarding in the years to come.

This transformation will change our focus from teaching to learning, out of a concern for outcomes. Research will be part of a broader emphasis on scholarship that recognizes not just discovery but also the application and dissemination of knowledge. And the notion of service to society will be a guiding force for virtually every area of institutional endeavor.