

# Aligning Missions With Public Expectations

## *The Case of Metropolitan Universities*

The most important words in the title of this piece are probably “public expectations.” During the past several years of troubled economic times in our country, higher education has unquestionably lost credibility with our various publics and come under critical scrutiny from parents, legislators, and state policy makers who believe that our costs are out of control and increasingly question the effectiveness and quality of what we do. In addition, higher education is of course very much affected by the current economic downturn. The most popular form of one-upmanship now practiced when university presidents gather is “I have suffered deeper cuts than you.”

Of course, higher education has experienced financial reverses in the past. But the current situation differs in that our difficulties result as much from lost public confidence as from the current recession. Unlike other tough times, we cannot now expect an early return to “business as usual,” regardless of when economic recovery occurs.

What then can we do? I recently heard the chancellor of a leading state university system characterize the present circumstances as “the first instance of financial crisis which is beyond the influence of higher education leaders.” For the short term, the chancellor is probably correct. Our problems have been a long time developing. They mirror those in the private sector, and will not go away through the application of a short-term policy Band-Aid. But for the longer term, higher education leaders must fashion a response to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Our work is simply too important to cop out by concluding that our enterprise is the victim of forces beyond our control.

I believe institutional leadership can ensure the long-term future of higher education by promoting three principal responses. First, we must overcome the widespread confusion regarding what we are trying to do. In short, we must respond to thoughtful higher education leaders who have for a generation told us that we must develop clear missions and identify institutional niches. Second, we must cease our resistance to defining productivity and relating it to quality and instead insist that our faculty define these concepts in ways that the public finds convincing.

And finally, we must embrace assessment as it is understood outside the academy, namely, by demonstrating measurable value added.

To date, we have focused most of our attention on the second and third of these issues, largely because of state-mandated assessment and wide interest in total quality management, which works only with a qualitative baseline and outcomes measurement. But unless we do something about mission uncertainty as a first step, we risk letting others define our goals. They will do so simplistically and narrowly. For example, they might define our task exclusively in terms of undergraduate teaching. If we allow this to happen, we risk the destruction of much of what is valuable in American universities.

Yet up to now we in higher education have done a terrible job of describing our purposes. We pay much lip service to the importance of clear-cut missions — but we fail to articulate them. Most of us have read dozens, if not hundreds, of institutional mission statements. Yet few of them are specific enough to tell an outside observer very much about the priorities or specific objectives of institutional performance. Instead, such documents are pious statements of principles, which are valid but so broad as to be interchangeable among institutions.

## Traditional Models of Higher Education

The absence of useful mission statements stems, I think, from a larger problem, namely, the absence of acceptable success models. Despite the proliferation of institutions, American higher education recognizes only two models within which baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate institutions want to compete: one of these is the comprehensive research university; the other, the liberal arts college. Prestige can be accomplished only by excelling in one of these models. To choose another model risks institutional isolation and the conclusion, both on and off campus, that one's mission lacks legitimacy and value.

Yet neither of these models provides a satisfactory response to current public expectations. Our comprehensive research universities maintain a global or national focus, usually with little concern for their immediate environment. Their reward system places primary value on research, which furthermore is defined in a narrow fashion as basic research. Teaching, particularly undergraduate teaching, is not always highly valued in such institutions, and professional service, except in certain professional fields, remains unappreciated and unevaluated. Liberal arts colleges, on the other hand, give commendable emphasis to undergraduate teaching, but virtually exclude research and professional service, which are the distinguishing characteristics of a university.

One reason so few alternative success models exist is the widespread and unfortunate reliance on the Carnegie Classification, developed originally in order to make statistical comparisons more meaningful. The Carnegie Classification aggregates institutions only on the basis of level of highest degree, size, amount of sponsored research, and numbers of Ph.D.'s awarded. It steadfastly refuses to recognize the existence of other doctorates. Imbedded in the Carnegie scheme is a perhaps unintentional

pecking order that defines as prestigious only the models designated Research Universities I or Liberal Arts Colleges I. Everything else is a second- or third-tier facsimile or an ill-defined mishmash called "doctoral-granting" or "comprehensive." The Carnegie Classification fails because it emphasizes a limited number of narrowly defined institutional *characteristics* instead of institutional *philosophy* or *mission*. The Classification counts things while missing the essence of institutional purpose.

## Metropolitan Universities Model for Higher Education

In 1990, forty-nine university presidents subscribed to a "Declaration of Metropolitan Universities," which is reprinted on page 94 of this issue. They proclaimed allegiance to a new success model, which gives their institutions an opportunity to define meaningful missions that respond to public expectations. The model is called the "Metropolitan University," defined in its simplest terms as an institution that accepts all of higher education's traditional values in teaching, research, and professional service, but takes upon itself the additional responsibility of providing leadership to its metropolitan region by using its human and financial resources to improve the region's quality of life. Metropolitan universities consider it their mission to address the problems of metropolitan America; problems that, now more than ever, should be at the heart of the national agenda for the new century. My colleagues Charles Hathaway and Karen White and I described this model in greater detail in the first issue of this journal, in the pages of which the model has since been elaborated and given further definition.

The purpose of this article is not to provide further details about the model, but rather to urge all metropolitan universities to promulgate and to use this model explicitly both internally and externally as providing guidelines and measures of excellence for our institutions. Any new institutional model must possess all the necessary characteristics of a success model:

1. The model must be understandable;
2. The model must be valid and legitimate;
3. The model must be inclusive, with room for institutional differences, in order that a sufficient critical mass of institutions can and will choose to adopt it;
4. The model must constitute a vision that can excite faculty, students, and community; and, finally,
5. The model must allow an institution to measure its progress and be seen by its constituencies as excelling.

How then does the metropolitan university concept stack up against the criteria that are necessary for a viable success model?

**1. Is the metropolitan university mission understandable?** The answer is clearly yes. In the first place, it is easy to grasp the basic idea of a university that interacts strongly with its region in a variety of different ways. Secondly, our metropolitan focus is equally understandable. The

nation is no longer composed of cities surrounded by pastoral countryside. Instead, our metropolitan areas now consist of heavily populated strips or metroplexes that include numerous satellite communities as well as a central core, all highly interdependent. The 1990 census places nearly 85 percent of the American population within metropolitan statistical areas, most of them living outside center cities. Everywhere, planning is becoming regional. One might choose the designator "urban" to describe this model, and metropolitan universities must accept the urban mission. But they must be more than urban institutions. Our publics understand the distinction between the terms urban and metropolitan and see metropolitan as more inclusive and more descriptive of our current society.

### **2. Is the metropolitan university mission valid and legitimate?**

One may consider this criterion from two completely different perspectives. First, is it legitimate in an organizational sense? Second, is it valid in terms of relevance to the current historical context? In both cases, the answer is again clearly yes. Many of our institutions came into existence in response to community needs. Their missions within their state systems frequently reflect a relationship to community, both by tradition as well as by specific assignment. And, increasingly, public expectations reinforce a commitment to community. In that sense, the metropolitan university mission is legitimate. It is also valid in the larger context. The problems of our society are mainly metropolitan problems: promoting regional economic vitality, bringing our minority populations into the mainstream of society, developing political leadership, improving public education, delivering affordable health care, providing for the homeless and the elderly, and addressing environmental concerns. A mission that accepts *leadership* in solving metropolitan problems — as opposed to simply responding when called upon — is an important mission, and certainly a valid one for the coming decades.

### **3. Is the metropolitan university mission inclusive, that is, is it one which sufficient numbers of institutions can choose in order for the model to gain national understanding and acceptance?** Again the answer is yes, if one keeps the focus on mission or philosophy rather than upon detailed institutional characteristics. The metropolitan mission need not be restricted by geography. Some institutions located in cities will choose other missions. Many institutions located in the suburbs, or even beyond, may choose to accept the metropolitan philosophy. They may be large or small, graduate or undergraduate, doctoral-granting or not, public or private. Service to place-bound students, continuing education, applied research, professional service, and local economic partnerships are all activities commonly found in metropolitan universities, and may prove to be critical functions in solving metropolitan problems, but no one institution needs to emphasize all of them. Between 150 and 200 institutions in our country can comfortably accept the designation "metropolitan university. With such a critical mass, and with the mission's inherent responsiveness to public expectations, the metropolitan university could promptly become a nationally acceptable success model.

### **4. Does the metropolitan university mission constitute a vision that can unite and excite our faculty, students, and community?** Here the answer is problematic because the vision can only succeed through active

promotion by institutional leadership. We start with certain handicaps. Most members of our faculties were trained at comprehensive research universities and tend to define institutional success in terms of their alma mater. Many of our students define success in terms of traditional residential universities or liberal arts colleges, with all of their presumed virtues. Many of our community leaders define institutional prestige in terms of the models with which they are familiar. Therefore, leadership will be required to communicate the advantages of creating our own identity rather than emulating missions defined for others. If they think about it honestly, the faculty, students, and community will recognize that most institutions will not succeed in duplicating comprehensive research universities. If nothing else our states will not allow it. Must we therefore settle for seeking to be among the "best" of second- or third-tier research universities? I think not.

But the fundamental reason for not emulating the comprehensive research institution model is that it is the wrong model for our times. Derek Bok spent much of his final year as president of Harvard University speaking eloquently about the need for universities to address our society's most pressing problems: improving public education; delivering efficient health care; and, building economic competitiveness. He again expressed this need most eloquently in his keynote address on "Regaining the Public Trust," which opened the 1992 AAHE National Meeting. Derek Bok is absolutely correct, but Harvard is not likely to accept this challenge as a central part of its mission, and neither is Michigan, Wisconsin, UC Berkeley, or any other comprehensive research university. And they need not change. The institutions most likely to transform themselves and thus to address the real problems of society are in fact the metropolitan universities. For our faculties, students, and communities, the metropolitan university model can be a transforming vision because it speaks to what universities should be and not to what they too frequently are or have been.

**5. Does the metropolitan university mission provide a context in which our publics can accurately gauge our success?** Against whom do we measure ourselves now? Is there a common understanding of our successes? Are we credited appropriately for the accomplishments of our faculty and students? Unfortunately, for many institutions, the answer is no. Instead, we are compared to institutions with remarkably different traditions and missions. How much more satisfying it would be if we were evaluated on the basis of how well we do what we say we intend to do rather than how we compare to a model or set of characteristics irrelevant to our own purposes.

Substantial progress must be made on two fronts in order to bring this about. In the first place, the defining mission of metropolitan universities must become more widely understood and accepted both inside and outside our institutions, by our own faculty, students, and administrators as well as by parents, business people, legislators, and community leaders. We must continue to strive toward greater recognition of the legitimacy, importance, and challenge of our task. Secondly, we must concentrate on defining and applying appropriate measures of excellence applicable to metropolitan universities. It is not enough to say

that we should not be measured against *inappropriate* standards. We must agree among ourselves and then promulgate to our constituencies the standards that are *appropriate* to our mission. We need to clarify questions such as:

- What are measures of educational success applicable to a student body diverse in background, preparation, and mode of attendance ?
- Can institutional standing be defined in terms of value added and outcomes rather than selectivity in admissions ?
- What are the criteria of quality of student life for a commuter campus with many part-time students of all ages?
- What are definitions of scholarship and standards of excellence for the broad range of faculty activities needed to carry out the metropolitan university mission ?

The model of the metropolitan university will not be successful until we develop valid answers to these and similar questions, and gain their acceptance within and outside the academic world.

## Conclusion

Competition among institutions with similar missions can be positive and constructive and can ultimately produce "prestige" in the best sense. Prestige is neither irrelevant nor trivial. Prestige will build pride among our students, faculty, and ultimately our community at large. With sufficient prestige, we can become the institution of choice for students from our community and for our local employers. And community pride ultimately translates into increased private investment in our institutions, as well as strong support within our state systems and legislatures. We will never be prestigious measured against somebody else's model. When a metropolitan university succeeds, satisfaction will come from achieving eminence based not on being a second- or third-tier copy of someone else's vision, but through excelling in one's own.

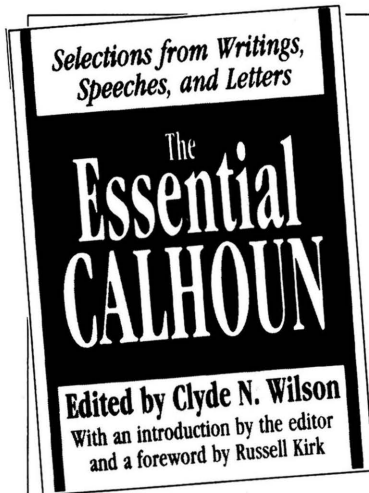
The metropolitan university model is by no means the only conceivable alternative to the comprehensive research university and the liberal arts college. Institutions such as Miami University of Ohio have worked creatively on a "public ivy" image, which emphasizes undergraduate teaching within a university context. Ball State University, located far from any metropolitan area, has worked diligently to define and popularize the model of a comprehensive regional university reaching out to serve a widely dispersed population. But the metropolitan university movement is one that is well underway and is commanding the support of increasing numbers of institutions. A metropolitan university conference held in April 1990 led to the Declaration I mentioned at the beginning of this article. This journal, now in its third year of publication, provides a medium through which those of us at similar institutions can share experiences and shape our definition. In April 1993, the University of North Texas will host the second Metropolitan University Conference, at which I hope we can expand our circle and enhance the understanding of

our model. Further details about this conference can be found on page 93 of this issue.

The metropolitan university model responds to public expectations for our institutions. By clarifying our purpose, we take an important first step toward defining productivity and quality and assessing our outcomes realistically and meaningfully in ways that ultimately restore the public trust in what we do. The metropolitan university can become the dominant success model of the twenty-first century for higher education.

### Author's Note

This article is based on a presentation at the National Meeting of the American Association of Higher Education in Chicago on April 6, 1992. The session was entitled "Aligning Missions with Public Expectations: the Case of Metropolitan Universities."



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