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The metropolitan university, along with all of American higher education, faces significant demands and tightening constraints. These conditions also comprise an opportunity —if university leaders use the occasion first to define the public interests in their institutions and then take steps to align institutional work more closely with those public interests.

Metropolitan Universities and the State Perspective:

The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

The commitments expressed in the mission statement for metropolitan universities, as set forth by a group of your leaders, are heartening indeed. Much of what I have to say should serve to commend and reinforce those commitments.

When asked to address this conference, I was given a topic. It had to do with the relationships between your institutions and state coordinating boards and other entities of state government. What I did, I admit, was to look at the topic and immediately reinvent it to provide cover for what I really want to say.

Here is my line of reasoning. The public metropolitan university is likely to relate to several state entities: the governor's office, the legislature, the higher education coordinating board or other SHEEO agency, and so forth. The job of those people is to serve the public interest in the state. Therefore, I want to start from the premise that the state's interest in your institution is precisely equivalent to the public's interest. And the important questions are only indirectly about how to work with the state politicians and bureaucrats—how to get their attention, their support, their money. The larger, more difficult, and more rewarding questions are about defining the public interest and reinventing a university in ways that inescapably align it with those interests.

The "State Perspective"

I begin by asserting flatly that there is a *compelling* public interest in the success of the metropolitan university. I am not going to argue that "the State" necessarily knows that — that the governor's office and the legislature and the state higher education agency have finally agreed on something — and you're it . . .

I am not going to tell you that the important education constituencies and power brokers in your states have come together, looked dispassionately at good data about the state's demography, economy, and social problems, spent some time in candid but rational and inclusive dialogue about the kind of education system that's needed to ensure productivity and quality of life for the state's citizens—and decided that the metropolitan university is a central and indispensable element in that system . . .

It would be nice if this were the case; this sort of process actually *has* happened in some places—under the leadership of our esteemed colleague from Virginia, for example—but so far it's too rare a phenomenon.

I am absolutely not going to suggest that there's now a clear and agreed-upon set of priorities for education in your state, that everyone recognizes the metropolitan university's role in addressing those priorities, and that the tangled web of often conflicting state policy and regulation has been untangled to provide you with the flexible and supportive policy environment that you need to get your job done . . .

And I'm sure not going to come anywhere close to saying that the state is now ready to ignore its Medicaid obligations, stop building prisons, curtail childhood vaccinations, set aside K–12 reform initiatives —or even choose not to fund community college enrollment growth— in order to send new resources your way, because of the importance of metropolitan universities to the future of the state.

No, all I'm saying—and I will say it again—is that there is a compelling public interest in the success of your institutions.

I believe that is true. But because in most places, most of the things I've just described haven't yet happened, I reiterate that there are those two critical tasks that leaders of the metropolitan institutions have to be engaged in: defining what that compelling public interest *is*; and then focusing your institution squarely, resolutely, and effectively on responses to that interest.

For a few moments, I would like to offer some thoughts aimed at defining the public interest in metropolitan universities.

Defining the Public Interest

Let me begin with an assertion that I quote from a wonderful speech made last October by Earl Lazerson, President of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville:

> "It is as important for the country that an inner city student at Northeastern Illinois University graduate as a competent science teacher bound for a career in the Chicago public schools, as it is for

> a North Shore [of Chicago] student with an SAT of 1400 to graduate as an electrical engineer from MIT and work for Motorola."

As Lazerson asserts, "We must insist on the highest quality and recognize the value added by education in *both* achievements."

Now I'll go further and argue that the public interest in the metropolitan university is defined pretty much in direct relation to a description of urban conditions in America. What would such a description reveal?

- vast disparities in wealth,
- high concentrations of poverty,
- gated luxury housing developments literally walled off from the "undesirable elements" who just happen to be neighbors and fellow citizens,
- high concentrations of ethnic minorities and new Americans,
- a high proportion of families headed by single females,
- high school drop-out rates approaching 50%, with even higher rates among Latinos and African Americans,
- significant disparities in education achievement levels and college-going rates across a variety of dimensions: ethnicity, economic class, school location, etc.,
- disparities in the qualification of public school teachers who work in inner city vs. suburban schools,
- serious divisions along racial lines,
- crumbling physical infrastructure in the inner city,
- far more unskilled laborers than jobs requiring no skills; complaints from business and industry about the lack of well-prepared candidates for their jobs,
- loss of a sense of community in neighborhoods both wealthy and poor,
- unacceptably high rates of infant mortality, preventable childhood disease, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, substance abuse, death by violence, and alienation by neglect,
- and all of this in a context often characterized by entrenched public bureaucracies, patronage, corruption, and hardball politics.

In other words, what you see in your service areas every day is the collision of two Americas: the third world country that is our inner cities, situated right in the midst of our first world nation. This is a recipe for disaster.

I paint a bleak picture, absent for now the brush strokes of hope and renewal—and there are some, but not enough. For the moment, though, I'm going to leave the bright colors in their jars and try instead to sketch another gray-colored picture for you. It is a picture of the broader public context within which higher education currently operates.

The Public Context for Higher Education

1. Escalating Expectations and Demands.

Higher education enrollments are projected to continue to climb—in a country that already has the world's highest participation rates. The impact will vary dramatically among the states, with some experiencing declines while others, like Arizona and California, are seeing extraordinary increases. The obvious issue here is access—and how we're going to continue to respond to the conviction that Americans have both a need for and a right to higher education.

A companion conviction, expressed in numerous reports, by numerous leaders, and in the National Education Goals, is that American youth and adults must achieve far higher levels of knowledge and skills for future employment and citizenship. And the nation still faces challenges to ensure the participation and achievement of growing minority populations.

2. Continuing Fiscal Constraints.

Following the 1980s, one of the most affluent decades in its history, American higher education is experiencing a downturn in revenues, and a decline in its proportional share of the state budget, that is likely to last far beyond this recent recession. That is partly—but I think not predominantly—because legislators and governors don't love higher education anymore. It is more a result of the hard reality of fierce competition for limited public resources. At many levels, legitimate public needs simply exceed the resources available to address them.

3. Concerns About Quality.

All of you worry about what happens to quality when demand goes up and resources go down. The public worries too, and that concern increasingly is expressed in terms of questions about "return on investment." When college costs are going up, they wonder, why are services to me—or my kid—going down? During one week in March, there were major primetime pieces on both NBC and CNN about this issue. The NBC Dateline segment was entitled "Paying More, Getting Less?" The coverage depicted skyrocketing tuition, rising at three times the rate of inflation, with students at the same time experiencing huge classes, difficulty in even getting the classes they need for graduation, lack of access to professors, and heavy use of teaching assistants. Further, it suggested through interviews that the universities are not all that concerned about the situation. "Teaching has become the unwanted orphan of the university," said one critic. And a Berkeley faculty member said, "Our current Chancellor says that teaching is important. I must tell you, though, that most faculty don't believe him." His point was, of course, that the rhetoric is out of sync with the reward system.

The CNN piece, by the way, raised quality concerns about research as well as teaching. At one point the reporter read titles of articles from a number of journals, clearly questioning whether the research had any value beyond the author's quest for tenure.

All of these forces interact, of course, creating enormous dilemmas. My colleague, Jim Mingle, Executive Director of the State Higher Education Executive Officers, has recently argued that the three vectors of access, costs, and quality are on a collision course, and that the collision can only be avoided if one or more of those factors is redefined or significantly altered. The tough choice we face, he says, is either to alter the current cost structure, redesign the delivery system and improve its effectiveness—or dramatically to reverse our longstanding commitment to expanded access.

The public will have a voice in this choice; and the public is beginning to demand that state governments act to foster a stronger connection between societal expectations and the priorities of the academy. From the institutional point of view, the best response to that reality is clearly a proactive response. The operative motto here is "Do or be done unto." What does this mean? Very likely, it means changes in our institutional priorities, resource allocations, reward structures, traditions, and habits—so that we are doing voluntarily what it is the public needs done.

Squarely in the middle of all of this—standing at the intersection of concerns of the public, of policymakers, and of college and university presidents—is the state higher education agency and its executive officer or SHEEO. If I had to take a stab at describing what their greatest challenges are right now, I would guess the following:

First, they have to struggle, as you do, with the access/costs/quality collision.

Second, they have to do that—should be doing it—with a *systemic* view: what are the overall purposes and priorities of this state? What kind of *system* of higher education will best serve those purposes and priorities? What are the potential contributions of the various institutions within that system? And what kind of policy framework will support and encourage the work of varied and autonomous institutions in addressing the public interest?

Third, they have to find new ways of dealing with the intragovernmental competition for resources. My guess is that competition cannot be won by damning Headstart or health clinics or highways, but only by very convincing cases made about the public's return on the public's investment.

Finally, we should acknowledge that SHEEOs are more than a little likely to spend more than a little of their time dealing with a phenomenon that can best be described (borrowing a phrase from Frank Newman) as "legislation by pet peeve." When are legislators most likely to engage in this behavior?

- when their phone calls and newspapers and televisions keep telling them that students can't get classes, never see professors, and on and on.

- when public institutions fail to work together (the most frequently heard complaints currently are about the perceived failure of universities to work with community colleges on student transfer and with the public schools on education reform.)
- when they perceive that institutions are stonewalling initiatives aimed at promoting student outcomes assessment and institutional accountability.
- when they see what they believe is evidence of poor stewardship of public funds — the stories about faculty who don't teach (or don't teach much), about presidential perks, about administrative bloat, and so on.

Risking oversimplification, I will suggest that your effectiveness in working with your state higher education agency will be a function of two things: one is your participation in and contribution to the resolution of the issues just described; and the second factor is your own work on responding to the public interest.

Propositions for the Metropolitan University: What the Public has a Right to Expect

At this point, I'd like to put on the table a series of propositions about what the public has a right to expect from your institution. This listing is somewhat off the cuff, and I'm sure you can improve on it; I know some of you already have. But here goes:

- The public has a right to expect that you know what you're in business to do—and what you're NOT in business to do . . . Among other things, this means that if you're not in business to be a major research university, you won't feel compelled to accumulate those trappings, to emulate their systems and reward structures, to adopt their particular symbols of prestige.
- The public has a right to expect that you will give your highest priority—and the bulk of your energy and resources—to the mission of excellence in teaching and learning.
- The public has a right to expect that you can describe the characteristics and competencies of a graduate from your university, that you can do so in a way that depicts what is distinctive about the educational experience provided by your institution, and that you will be able to document the extent to which those desired outcomes are actually achieved.
- The public has a right to expect that the curriculum you offer will be responsive to the needs of the community—that it will carve pathways leading to real jobs, real academic advancement, real efficacy as a citizen of the community.
- The public has a right to expect that concern for equity will pervade your institution—that you will have in place mechanisms to ensure and monitor the proportional participation and comparable achievement of minority students, that curriculum and teaching

will honor and encourage difference, that harassment and discrimination will not be tolerated.

- The public has a right to expect that you will work in constant, genuine, and effective partnership with other publicly funded institutions—especially the community colleges and the public schools. (This expectation relates to the efficient use of public resources, to the provision of real opportunity for the disenfranchised, and to the necessary but often neglected role of higher education in the K–12 reform efforts.)
- The public has a right to expect an accounting for the return on its investment in your institution. How well are students performing? How efficiently are resources being used? What impact is your work having on the broader community? How have the conditions of metropolitan life changed because of your efforts?
- The public has a right to expect that your institution will be a resource for *and a partner in* the community's work on important public problems. You may have to be selective about where you can help, because as you know, the problems are large and numerous: urban redevelopment, health care planning, homelessness, welfare reform and coordination of social services, workforce preparation and development, resident-managed housing, environmental clean-up and protection, public school reform, the preparation, retraining, and development of teachers for those restructured public schools, race relations, neighborhood and community organization, the strengthening of arts and culture, the revitalization of democracy. . . .

With all of this work to do, I'm willing to risk the wild and anti-intellectual assertion that we *may* not need, at the public's expense, some of the journal articles on academic minutiae that some of your faculty members *may* be writing to achieve tenure in your institution. Here I note with gratitude the part of the mission statement for metropolitan universities that asserts, in paraphrase, "Our research must seek and exploit opportunities for linking basic investigation with practical application and for creating . . . scholarly partnerships for attacking complex metropolitan problems, while meeting the highest scholarly standards of the academic community."

Imagining a University

The Clinton era has begun with a lot of talk—and even some intended action—about "reinventing government." Those of you who have read David Osborne and Ted Gaebler's book have an idea what that may mean. They say that it means designing new ways of delivering public services—that government entities must be less bureaucratic and more entrepreneurial, more characterized by these terms: catalytic, community-owned, competitive, mission-driven, results-oriented, customer-driven, decentralized, market-oriented. . . . How might these principles apply (or not) to education systems and institutions? An interesting

question—and one, by the way, that the governors, SHEEOs, and others discussed at the ECS Annual Meeting in July 1993.

At the same time, as you know, there's a lot of talk about the need to *reinvent the university*—also along lines that bring the university's operations into greater alignment with the needs of students and the needs of society. Richard Heydinger and others are at work "imagining a university" with different organizational structures, new reward systems, dramatically changed approaches to curriculum, new ways of allocating research dollars to focus more on important public priorities, and much greater attention to teaching and learning. Molly Broad has raised the possibility of establishing "charter universities" borrowing the concept of charter schools from the K–12 reform movement, so as to free selected universities from constraining policies and regulations, and encourage them to innovate. Ernest Boyer's book, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, has helped to engender discussion within the academy. And a handful of institutions (Syracuse comes to mind) are reconsidering fundamental structures and traditions.

We are not talking here about the possibility for marginal change. The talk is not about establishing a center for teaching excellence or an office to promote minority student retention or a project to improve teaching skills of adjunct faculty and teaching assistants. The talk is about serious rethinking and fundamental redesign of the university. It's about taking on all the sacred cows and goring all the oxen. This talk, you see, is about tough, risky business. "Who needs it?" you ask. And the answer may be, "The public needs it." So maybe it's our job.

Conclusion

So here we are, at an important juncture for our universities, our communities, our states, our society. To paraphrase Dickens, it is the best of times, and it is the worst of times. It is the illustration of that description you have heard about the Chinese symbol for the word *crisis*: a combination of the symbols for danger and opportunity. As John Gardner said, "The prospects have never looked brighter and the challenges have never been greater. Anyone who is not stirred by both of these statements is too tired to be of much use to us in the future."

It is the best of times, and it is the worst of times. And honestly, I can think of no place where the challenges are greater or the opportunities brighter than in the metropolitan universities. Perhaps yours can be the places where the university is reinvented *in the public interest*. I think you are not "too tired." I believe that I am preaching to the choir, as they say. I believe that you are where you are because you see already the task at hand and are already engaged in the difficult work. America has high stakes in your success. May the road rise to meet you and the wind be always at your back.