

*Universities can help advance society through the provision of public service and generate a substantial return on this investment. There are many vehicles for public service, including volunteerism, serving as the convener of groups, conducting relevant policy research, collaborating with government and business, and involving key public officials in our efforts. With the right incentives, faculty members can be encouraged to undertake major public service efforts that make a difference. But planning and policy program staff need to rethink their roles, serve as catalysts, take risks, aim high, and lead.*

# Incorporating Public Service into the University Mindset

In the Summer 1994 issue of *Metropolitan Universities*, I covered some of the incentives needed to encourage public service. I discussed the idea of a value concept in order to describe how public service can be integrated positively with teaching and research. I focused mostly on involvement in service projects that benefit faculty members and their institution. I ended with the question of how the public service concept might be institutionalized.

In this article, I focus on additional ways in which university planning, policy, and other programs can respond to the public service missions of the university, thus bringing additional recognition, prestige, and resources to the university. I suggest that public service should be part of the university mindset and provide an example of how this change in attitude is being accomplished at Georgia State University in the heart of Atlanta.

## Introduction

At Georgia State University we take our role as an urban university seriously. We take to heart our

public service mission. In fact, we have a goal to give back to the community some of what we take. We believe that we are part *of* the community, not apart *from* it. It may be somewhat easier for us to adopt this stance because we are at the center of a major city in a rapidly growing urban region—a city that is the state capitol and beneficiary of a healthy and rapidly growing economy. With the intersection of the north and south MARTA transit rail lines adjacent to our campus; with the Underground Festival Market and the state legislature a block to our south; with the Martin Luther King, Jr. historic district and the county hospital our neighbors to the east; and with the hospitality industry to the west and north, we would have a difficult time *not* being part of the community.

How involved should a university be in its community? That has been a somewhat prickly question for higher education. There is very real disagreement in academic circles about the public service roles universities should play in their communities. This disagreement is matched by disaffection in government and business, both of which view higher education with increasing skepticism. Legislatures are demanding accountability. And according to a Census Bureau study released earlier this year, business has lost confidence in colleges and universities. Many lawmakers and employers don't think we can get the job done! The real debate centers on how fully America's universities are responding to the needs of society, and how well they serve their various constituencies.

### Changing Times

Now is the time to embrace the service aspect of our mission. Change is in the air for higher education. Unfortunately, the public's support for us is like an oil slick: it is far reaching and expansive—but it doesn't go beneath the surface. People recognize that we're important, but they can't articulate what we've done because we've told our story so poorly.

Last year, a nationally renowned pollster told an AAU conference that recent polling statistics indicated serious rumblings of discontent from the public. They were unhappy about the cost of education and how universities spend their money. This pollster told his educator audience: "When America is done with health care, they're coming after you guys."

On top of this, I often hear faculty members and administrators say that legislators just don't understand academe. This is not so. Georgia State University is located one block from our state capitol, so I interact often with

legislators. Let me tell you, they *do* understand higher education, and many legislators are not happy with what they see. Furthermore, they are hearing from their constituents, who are also not happy with what they think they know about higher education. Many business leaders share this concern about the responsiveness of our colleges and universities. I serve on several boards, and I hear the skepticism of the CEOs. They wonder: When is higher education going to get with the program?

Public anxiety and lack of information are a toxic cocktail for universities. In the context of the current political climate, I think the mixture signals that higher education must change.

But before I suggest these changes, I want to state clearly that we must continue to underscore the *basic* premises of our missions. Georgia State currently does this: our new academic strategic plan presents seven core commitments. Three of these address the linkage of professions to liberal education and service to the community:

- adhering to a liberal education *even in the professional disciplines*;
- expecting *faculty and students to participate* in scholarly pursuits;
- and
- focusing on *public policy and the theoretical research* that helps formulate policy.

Each of these core commitments responds to the recognition that the combination of academic excellence and urban relevance is central to the development of Georgia State University. Calling for relevance in what we do doesn't mean that universities should focus exclusively on serving their neighbors. But we can and should organize our enterprises to reflect the simple reality that we are part of the larger community.

Universities do not exist to save cities. At the same time, cities need universities more now than ever because of the leadership we can provide. The question is, how are we going to build on that leadership for the future? Between now and 2020, things are going to get tougher for our cities. The problems plaguing them are more persistent than we had imagined. You know the list: crime, inadequate housing, disintegrating infrastructure, tenuous race relations, and lackluster education.

In light of these issues, we also face an uncertain future relationship with the federal government. On one hand, we have the "unfunded mandate" legislation, which has more to do with lifting mandates than with providing

the money to accomplish important goals. And on the other hand, we have a Congress that talks of passing along more control to cities and local governments—control being another word for responsibility.

So, what should we do? How can we serve without losing sight of our primary reason for being—educating students and advancing knowledge? How can we incorporate service to the community into the university mindset?

One could propose numerous responses to those questions. Georgia State University has answered them in five primary ways:

- Promoting individual volunteerism
- Convening groups
- Establishing centers of research
- Collaborating with government and business
- Appointing key public officials

### Promoting Volunteerism

Most of us were taught by our parents that we are supposed to give back to our communities through volunteer activities. That is expected of us as citizens. The same principle applies to universities. We members have individual responsibilities to give back to our communities. Such a volunteer effort can be centered in and driven by the planning, policy and similar departments, but it cuts across many other units.

We have two major volunteer efforts underway. One, called Volunteer GSU, is intended to coordinate all individual volunteer efforts on campus. The second is the Georgia State component of The Atlanta Project, for which we have hired a fulltime coordinator to work with all of our colleges and departments participating in President Carter's all-out war on the most critical issues facing the city. This effort is paying off. Georgia State has more volunteers in the Atlanta Project than any other organization.

At Georgia State, many of our students share their community service experiences in the classroom and integrate them into research. Our nursing students screen migrant workers for health problems. Our law students help the working poor with their tax appeals to the IRS. Our language students teach English to immigrant mothers so that they can be more involved in their children's education.

Volunteerism offers opportunities for research, learning, and service. Through Volunteer GSU, we put thousands of students, faculty and staff volunteers into schools and neighborhoods to lend a hand. I'm now pushing

to get faculty and staff represented on every major board in Atlanta, to get them involved, and to get them close to the city's decision makers. With this kind of presence, Georgia State has an opportunity to serve where needed and get a great return on its investment.

### **Convening Groups**

Because of their pools of talent, universities are ideal for convening groups and individuals on important topics. Just during the past year at Georgia State, we welcomed numerous groups to campus as they tackled various public policy issues—reinventing government, labor-management relations, and health care reform. These individuals and groups helped focus public attention on important issues. And our faculty and staff members were able to provide visible assistance.

The result? People now think of Georgia State as an excellent forum in Georgia to hold a policy debate. And we're taking advantage of that sentiment by trying to attract other groups to campus to debate important issues.

### ***Centers***

Georgia State has been able to influence public policy by developing research centers on critical issues facing our state and nation. No role is more natural for a university than framing the debate surrounding these issues, providing analysis, and helping to shape public policy. Georgia State University guides Atlanta and the state in many ways, but the most prominent is in public policy. We conduct public opinion polls of state residents, and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* regularly publishes the findings. We have a center that is rewriting the state's tax codes. Partly as a result of recent efforts to convene groups on critical issues, Georgia State established new centers for fiscal research and health policy with funds provided by the state legislature.

### ***Collaboration***

Because they are at the center of various decision making arenas, universities have the opportunity to lead major changes through collaborative efforts. Two prime beneficiaries of collaboration in Atlanta are the public schools and The Atlanta Project neighborhood clusters. In both areas, faculty members have spearheaded service projects with highly visible and tangible results.

We also stepped forward to the new city administration. Last year when Bill Campbell was elected mayor of Atlanta, we housed his transition team on campus, and several of our faculty and administrators were players on that team. More recently, the university helped the city of Atlanta prepare its application for a \$100 million empowerment zone designation. And we succeeded.

Basically, we have learned to extend ourselves. We have encouraged others to think of us as a resource. By doing so, we are creating all kinds of opportunities for students, faculty and staff.

### **Appointing Key Public Officials**

Because of our location in a major urban area, it is possible for us to appoint key government officials to our adjunct and visiting faculty. During recent years, we hired two former chiefs-of-staff to the former and current governors. We also appointed a former governor and a former mayor and United Nations ambassador to privately funded public policy professorships. Not only do these lifelong public servants bring a wealth of experience to the classroom, they're also invaluable in opening doors for faculty members, providing service themselves, and helping to increase our visibility to the public. In addition, many faculty members find new forms of collegiality in teaching with former public officials.

So, the bottom line for planning programs is: provide leadership to local governments in times of increasing uncertainty and use these relationships to position our departments and institutions better.

### ***Providing Needed Encouragement***

Public service is an essential ingredient in a university's educational mix. Planning programs can and should lead the way in public service. But it's also important that encouragement be provided, especially if faculty are to be more engaged in university outreach. Several types of encouragement are possible.

### ***Resources***

Simply put, we need to find the money to support organized efforts and research centers. Georgia State has been able to do this not only with grants, but also with special appropriations from the governor and general assembly. Support for our research centers has also come from state and foundation

sources. Often small amounts of seed money can be used to begin a project that will eventually receive support on an ongoing basis.

### ***Leveraging***

Public service should not stand alone, and it can leverage other activities. It needs to be linked to research, external money, and publication. Volunteer activities lead to contacts that lead to grants and other sources of support. Moreover, these experiences can provide good material for faculty publication efforts.

### ***Promotion and Tenure***

The value of public service should be clearly stated in all media used to recognize and reward faculty and staff members, including promotion and tenure documents. Universities should take a hard look at promotion and tenure guidelines and clarify the rewards of public service. Georgia State has already added such a statement to its promotion and tenure documents.

### ***Investing in Hired Help***

It may be necessary to have paid staff coordinate the various volunteer efforts to increase their payoff. Georgia State has done this with The Atlanta Project by hiring a professional to coordinate volunteer efforts. This streamlines the logistical and administrative processes associated with a widespread volunteer effort. It also sends a signal that we're serious about participating in the community, and lets faculty know that their time is valuable and that they deserve support.

### ***Getting Your High Profile People Involved***

If universities truly are to lead, they must get high profile faculty involved in service. The reason: these faculty will set an important example. Service will also provide them opportunities to interact with key external individuals. Take the lead yourself. University administrators and senior faculty members should lead by example. We need to walk the walk and become involved in public service ourselves.

### ***Advertising***

Planners do great things, but we do not always advertise ourselves effectively. People in power can use what planners provide. But we need to prove that we can be useful. Why should decision makers look to us? Are we

really the most dependable, innovative, active members of our communities? Perhaps we are, but who knows it? We are seldom in the press. So, we need to advertise what we are doing. We can start by adopting the "Headline News" approach and use factoids—little statements of fact to advertise succinctly what we are doing. An example: "Each of our faculty members has an externally funded public service project." We need to brag about our accomplishments as planners. As they say in Atlanta, "if it's true, then it ain't bragging." We need to step forward at the right time and promote the public service accomplishment of our universities.

Ted Turner was our commencement speaker last June. He concluded his speech by explaining why he has been so successful. Planners need to heed his words: "Early to bed, early to rise, work like hell, and *advertise!*"

### ***Taking the Lead***

Incorporating public service into the university mindset implies that higher education should play a leadership role in advancing society. And it should. In many ways—shaping public policy, being a resource, and serving the community—urban universities can take the lead in helping cities through their service missions. In taking a critical look at ourselves and embracing our public service missions—intelligently and as entrepreneurs—we can also lead in higher education.

But what if our actions are seen as being out of step with the rest of higher education? Will our peers and colleagues take us seriously if we come across as being too applied, too community oriented? Some faculty members feel that if research helps solve a problem, it forfeits academic integrity. And some administrators think public service weakens the reputation of the institution instead of enhancing it.

I disagree. In writing its new strategic plan, Georgia State reaffirmed its commitment to scholarship and academic integrity—as well as sharpened its focus on the issues facing the community in which we are located.

Already, we're seeing the return on our public service investment. Our working relationships with state and local governments have made it easier for us to do business. Our public recognition is at an all-time high. We're getting more financial support from both the public and private sectors. In addition, we have strengthened our ability to recruit students and faculty.

While we can gain from being involved in public service, we still have a lot of work to do to maximize our public service effectiveness. In short,

we've got to lead the cities, too. Because of our resources and location, we have an obligation to address the issues and problems of all urban areas.

We also need to be involved out of enlightened self interest. If we do not use our expertise to help solve the problems around us, we may well be left alone with those problems as other organizations and businesses escape to other locations. In addition, our locations in major cities also have state, national, and international dimensions. Our urban universities can become centers for learning about the vast array of issues found in the living laboratories of metropolitan environments around the globe. This knowledge should be shared with international scholars, and then through our policy efforts and our service projects, we can participate in the solution of difficult national and international problems.

This requires a change in the university mindset, however. We must look at our public service endeavors as *true* opportunities to make a difference by applying knowledge to pressing problems. In this article I have identified a number of resources and media that can help us to frame our public service responses and increase our effectiveness to our communities. But I will repeat my disclaimer: urban universities do not exist to save the cities. Yes, we examine the problems. Often we pose solutions. Most certainly, we produce the men and women who will make the difference in tomorrow's cities.

But our role is that of a catalyst. Urban universities are universities first. We exist to educate, to explore, and to extend ourselves. Our client is the student, our product is the graduate. Turning students into graduates—developing their minds so that they can lead us tomorrow—that is the essential role of an urban university. Our public service mission need not be in conflict with this purpose.

We often miss opportunities to serve, however, because we avoid risk and do not have a framework in place through which to respond. So, I suggest that we be more assertive about what we can contribute to our many constituencies, and develop templates to guide our responses. We can set up volunteer coordinating efforts, establish one or more research centers, bring on paid professional staff who can leverage opportunities, serve as a place where groups feel free to convene, and reach out to former government officials.

Planning programs are particularly well positioned to make a profound impact on society through public service. We need to decide that this is

important. We need to take some risks. We need to lead. We need to aim high.

A short time ago, Milt Campbell, the Olympic decathlon gold medalist was in Atlanta. He said he always aimed high because he “wanted to stand on the top step.” This is the time for universities to stand on the top step. We can begin by renewing our commitment to public service

Note: Aspects of this paper were presented at the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning annual conference in Phoenix on October 4, 1994 and at the University of Cincinnati’s 175th anniversary conference on March 3, 1995.