

Reconnecting with a Shared Public Mission in Sharing Governance

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I want to start my comments with the premise of this meeting that leading American universities face growing and somewhat novel stresses to their traditional missions and that these stresses have implications for shared governance and especially for the faculty's role in guiding and fulfilling those missions.

To put that premise in context and to frame my comments, I think we need to point to the many renditions of those traditional missions that have always been in play—ranging from what Steve Schomberg and I some time ago labelled as the alternating pulls of the *university as monastery and the university as marketplace*.² That is to say that the mission of universities has varied back and forth from very inward and reflective to very market-driven and transactional.

At the risk of caricature, one could say that university administrations and boards have increasingly become more market-driven and transactional, making decisions in an environment controlled by rankings, by pressures on cost and productivity, by under-funding from states for public institutions and heavy pressure on endowments for privates. Meanwhile, in a similarly simplistic characterization, one could say that faculty have become more disciplinary-focused and in that sense monastic, reacting to an environment of fierce competition for external funding, global networks that make local connections less relevant, and escalating performance pressures for tenure and promotion.

This means that as administrators and boards orient decision-making to fit the current pressures of the higher education marketplace (which change with economic and political cycles), the faculty, by contrast, look beyond the institution and in some sense beyond the fluctuating public zeitgeist, connecting most deeply to particular disciplines and their norms and reward structures, even as some also work to engage in communities beyond the campus but close to home.

With these two different trajectories in mind, I would say that we need, if we want to reinstate more common cause between leadership and faculty in shared governance, to find some additional dimensions of the university's mission on which to collectively focus. This is where I would argue we can look to another model of universities and their public mission—one with roots in the histories of both American private and public institutions. This model, as Schomberg and I argued, actually sits poised between the monastery and the marketplace,

¹ This is a panel presentation delivered at the University of Pennsylvania in a symposium organized by the University Faculty Senate on "The Roles and Responsibilities of Faculty: A Conversation with University Presidents," April 6, 2016, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

² Cantor, N. & Schomberg, S. (March/April 2003). Poised between two worlds: The university as monastery and marketplace, *EDUCAUSE Review* 38 (2), 12-21.

drawing scholarly expertise (from the monastery) and fulfilling a desire to serve the needs of the broader public (and its marketplace). And, in the context of today's discussion, I would say that a focus on the public good may well be beneficial for invigorating shared governance.

This alternative model, which your colleague Ira Harkavy and many others in the Anchor Institution Task Force,³ myself included, label as the *university as anchor institution*, encourages an expanded focus on collaborations that address the “sticky” challenges of urban and rural communities by engaging in high-impact scholarship and encouraging broad democratic access. Universities as anchor institutions make commitments that while place-based and in that sense attuned to local realities, often resonate globally, and draw to the table many participants across disciplinary networks and in the public sector (citizens, scholars, public officials, industry, agencies, and so forth).⁴ It envisions universities as enduring partners with the public, and in that sense makes decisions with less detachment than the monastery while at the same time with less trendiness than the marketplace.

Three examples of areas for shared decision-making with an eye toward the public good

In the short time today, I thought it might be useful simply to illustrate this approach to decision-making in research universities by looking at three critical challenges in the public arena to which we might all turn our intelligence and collective voice. In each instance, progress on a “public” challenge requires some institutional self-examination and a change in our own norms and practices, and this is where shared governance could have its greatest impact.

Challenge 1: Broadening participation in the “land of opportunity.” As a first challenge, consider the fact that in many of the urban and rural communities of America (and across the world), higher education is simply not on the radar and/or within reach of the vast majority of the next generation talent pool. There are of course many reasons for this beyond our own doing—rising inequality, under-resourced K-12 schools, mass incarceration, and more—but there are also things that we could do as a sector to improve the picture, and if we don't, we will face a crisis both of public trust and of global competitiveness. For example, as Charles Blow noted recently in *The New York Times*, we could face a “future segregated by science” if we do not diversify the STEM-educated workforce and professoriate, and soon.⁵ How do we come together—administrators and faculty, universities and communities, to remedy this problem?

Cultivating talent expansively. There are numerous strategies—too many for today's short time—including partnering with K-12 in our communities and creating pathways from community colleges (where most first generation students will have their start in higher education) to four year institutions.⁶ There is also one critical elephant in the room that requires a

³ See the Anchor Institution Task Force, www.margainc.com/initiatives/aitf. Cantor, N. (Fall 2009). A New Morrill Act: Higher Education Anchors the ‘Remaking of America’. *The Presidency*. 12 (3), 6-21.

⁴ Cantor, N. & Englot, P. (2016). Not Taking Democracy for Granted: Higher Education, Inclusion, and Community Trust. In S. Bergan, T. Gallagher, and I. Harkavy (Eds.). *Higher Education for Democratic Innovation*, Strasbourg: France, Council of Europe Higher Education Series.

⁵ Charles Blow, A Future Segregated by Science?, *New York Times*, February 2, 2015.

⁶ Roland Anglin, Elise Boddie, David Troutt, Nancy Cantor, and Peter Englot, Fulfilling Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dream: The Role for Higher Education, *The Conversation*, January 18, 2016.

change in our ways—a change which both faculty and administrators/boards could tackle together with a little courage—and that is to put a bit less emphasis on standardized tests as measures of merit. We as an educational “industry” have relinquished the identification and cultivation of talent to a testing industry, allowing very narrow indicators of potential (that do not predict academic futures well and that are known to have disparate impact by race and class) to rule our decision-making. As Vanderbilt astrophysicist Keivan Stassun says, for example, the reliance on GREs for graduate admissions in STEM fields is a real obstacle to broadening participation—and one that alternative models of talent cultivation can easily replace if we have the collective will.⁷ And it will take collective will on all parts, as it means a change in practices and a willingness to turn a bit of blind-eye to the rankings war.

Challenge 2: Improving the quality of public discourse. We see in everything from debates about climate change, immigration, and global conflict and security, to the painful politics of xenophobia and the emergence of inter-group conflict that rip communities apart, an absence both of evidence-based conversations and of a willingness to face the ghosts of history that emerge repeatedly today. Can universities—faculty, leaders, boards—join hands in communities to bring a broad and diverse inter-generational public to the table for discussions in ways that create a richer public narrative for our collective good?

Dialoguing across difference ourselves. To help galvanize a more thoughtful, inclusive, evidence-based public discourse, though, we also need to examine our own university communities, coming together to “put our ghosts on the table” in honest but non-finger-pointing ways.⁸ If the public is to trust us as thoughtful, honest brokers and conveners, we too have to have those “difficult dialogues” (as the Ford Foundation once called them) that build social connection in a richly diverse, opinionated, and divisive social landscape. This is, in my view, a task well-suited to the power of shared governance to address.

Challenge 3: Building strong, prosperous, just communities. Whole groups and their communities today are challenged by struggles for an economic foothold, for educational attainment, for citizenship, for health and safety and environmental justice. How can we as universities have an impact in communities, on these sticky issues of social justice and economic prosperity? Can we apply our well-honed expertise from the public humanities to business, from STEM to STEAM, from public education to criminal justice? Certainly the answer in the abstract is affirmative, as there are many examples to point to lately in which the expertise of faculty and resources of universities have been applied in truly democratic and critical ways.⁹ One only needs to look, for example, at the impact that researchers in partnership with local citizens and professionals had in helping to reveal the Flint water crisis when government was failing at all

⁷ Casey Miller and Keivan Stassun, A test that fails: A standard test for admission to graduate school misses potential winners, *Nature*, 510, 303, 2014.

⁸ Nancy Cantor, Mirror, Mirror: Reflections on Race and the Visage of Higher Education in America, *The Conversation*, June 23, 2015.

⁹ Harry Boyte (Ed.). *Democracy's Education: Public Work, Citizenship, & the Future of Colleges and Universities*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015; Sjur Bergan, Tony Gallagher, and Ira Harkavy (Eds.). *Higher Education for Democratic Innovation*, Strasbourg: France, Council of Europe Higher Education Series, 2016.

levels. Can we learn to partner in our communities as we do so well in our disciplinary networks, and is this something that a shared governance voice could encourage?

Rewarding and supporting publicly-engaged scholarship. Yet, once again, there are obstacles to such publicly-engaged scholarship and community-based partnerships that come directly from pressures within our universities that need collective attention. We need to consider, for example, how our norms for career trajectories, promotion incentives, workload expectations, and the like, sometimes work against the proclivity of our best faculty (and professional staff and students) to take on complex community-based research and expansive community-based, cross-sector partnerships. These obstacles arise both from the norms of disciplines and departments, but also from the pressures that administrations/boards place on faculty for short-term productivity and external funding, when this kind of work is often collaborative, time-intensive, and the funding that supports it is rarely directed to the bottom-line of our institutions. So, again, this is an arena ripe for the voice of shared governance to examine.

Looking to better the world over ourselves

In sum, I would say that what is perceived as a diminution of shared governance and faculty sway in recent decades has several important elements that actually can be reversed in part by more deliberate attention to the significant role that faculty and educational leaders and boards can play in orienting universities substantively more in the direction of serving the public good and less with an eye toward the betterment of individual and institutional status. In this regard, I have some optimism as we sit here in the “home” of Benjamin Franklin and imagine that we might collectively achieve a renewed focus on the kinds of communities we want to build—diverse communities of scholars and students and citizens who care about the world, about democracy, about our neighbors, and about the nature of the society in which we live and work.