“The Role of Comprehensive Universities in Regional Development”

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# Introduction

I am still relatively new to this organization, but one thing I have noticed is that there is a very wide range in what we mean by “graduate,” and that we tend to think of it from the perspective of our own institution. So, let me begin by giving you some of my context:

* The city of Mankato is a secondary business center of 50,0000 people roughly 85 miles southwest of Minneapolis/St. Paul, with a market area about 125 miles in radius with 250,000 people.
* MSU was founded shortly after the Civil War as an Indian School, soon recast as a Normal School, then a Teachers College, then Mankato State College. In 1975 it became a University, and in 1999 it was renamed “Minnesota State University, Mankato.”
* MSU is part of the Minnesota State College & University system (MnSCU), which includes 35 institutions in 54 communities (there is hardly a Legislator in the State that doesn’t have a MnSCU institution in the district.).
  + There are 7 State Universities, 8 Community Colleges, 10 Technical Colleges, and 10 Consolidated (community & technical) Colleges in MnSCU.
  + MSU has the largest graduate school and is the second largest institution in MnSCU.
* We have about 1700 graduate students in 34 departments;
  + about 40% of our students are in the College of Education,
  + about a third to a quarter of them are full-time.
* MSU and South Central Technical College (another MnSCU institution, also located in Mankato) are equal partners in the “Center for Continuous Learning (CCL)”—a one-stop shop where the community can access continuing education, customized training, and off-campus courses from either (or both) institution. I will talk more about the CCL later.

# The Role of A Comprehensive University in Regional Development

The task set for this panel was to discuss the role of comprehensive universities in regional development. Each of us was asked to approach this discussion from the experiences of our own institution—in effect, to discuss the role of “*a* comprehensive university.” Let me suggest that there are three terms to the task set for us, and that the meaning of each is ambiguous:

Comprehensive University: I suspect there are a number of connotations we carry around for this phrase. Let me suggest three:

* *“The Little Normal that could”:* I was at lunch at a NCURA conference shortly after becoming graduate dean. During the course of the introductions, one of my table-mates blurted out, “Oh, so you must be wanting to develop doctoral programs!” It seemed inarguable to him that every Master’s program wants to “grow up” to become a Doctorate. It was not self-evident to me. The character of our research, the relationship between our research and our teaching, the role of service, and the interests of our students are distinctly different from those of a “D1” school, and I chose to pursue my career at a “public comprehensive” for just those reasons.
* *Polytechnic*: Clark Kerr argued that the natural role of Master’s-level institutions is high-level preparation of technical/professional practitioners, as is done in Europe. Some have found this mission to fit our roots, although my institution is not one of them.
* *The old Carnegie “comprehensive” institution*. In its Latin roots, “comprehensive” means “pulling it all together.” For a “comprehensive” institution in this sense, all the types of higher education coexist in some measure.
  + Often the institution may focus more on grounded and applied theory than on basic research;
  + more on speculative and developmental learning than on technical training;
  + more on professional preparation than on liberal arts.

But all these forms find some place in a comprehensive institution.

* + On the one hand, such institutions carry the risk of being “jack of all trades and master of none.” Failure to specialize may indicate an inability to focus, with a consequent loss of energy and rigor.
  + On the other hand, as Lewis Thomas points out, it is the undifferentiated organism which stands the best chance of surviving rapid change—“climax species” don’t lead to the next succession. “Focusing on flexibility” (and isn’t that what interdisciplinary, applied programs are about?) can be a strength, especially in times of change.

Regional Development: There are also a number of problems with this seemingly straightforward phrase:

* *What is the “region?”* Is it a sub-State area, like southern Minnesota? A multi-State area, like the Upper Midwest (this was part of the reason for our recent name change)? For an institution that draws internationally, the United States could even be a “region.” And with the advent of the Internet, does it even make any sense to talk about “region”?
* *Economic development—or something more?* Often, when Legislatures use “regional development” talk, they are meaning economic development. But there are many more meanings—community development, human development, natural resource development….
* *“Capacity building”* One of the more interesting forms of regional development, from the point of view of higher education anyhow, is building the capacity of the people in a region to provide for themselves—economically, and also politically, socially, artistically, ethically. This may be the closest fit between regional development and the traditional understanding higher education has of itself.
* *Access to opportunity.* Particularly in rural areas, a major barrier to capacity building is access to opportunity.
  + With fewer providers of higher education, often one has to leave the area to pursue one’s interests, feeding the rural “brain drain.” In Mankato, the Chamber of Commerce has mounted a “Welcome Home” campaign to encourage young adults who grew up or studied in the area to “Make it Mankato” as they pursue their careers—and MSU is featured as part of the attraction back (both the educational opportunities and the results of those opportunities—like our Theater, the Music Series, and our Premier Speaker’s Series).
  + Peter Hutchinson, when he was Vice President of Dayton-Hudson Corporation (now Target), once said, “Why does Dayton-Hudson give so much back to the community? You’ve heard it called corporate social responsibility. Don’t believe it. It’s corporate self-interest. I want to work with the best that graduate from Harvard and Stanford Business Schools . And how can I convince them to come to the vast, wasty north of Minnesota unless it’s by showing them it’s one heck of a great place to live.” It works that way in rural Minnesota, too.

What Is Our “Role”? Even this one word is freighted with baggage:

* First, is this question descriptive or normative? Are we asking what have we been doing, or what *should* we be doing?
* If the question is normative, who speaks for the region? Who says what we “should” be doing? Is it the Legislature? Or perhaps the Chamber of Commerce? Or the taxpayers? Or some other special interests? Or the residents? If it is everyone who lives in the region, how can 250,000 people speak their will?
* And why is this even an issue? Why do we assume that *comprehensive* universities should play a role in regional development? Is this somehow specific to their mission, or is the same charge incumbent on liberal arts colleges and Doctoral I institutions?

These questions of the proper role of the comprehensive university imply the issue of integrity. Like Esau, are we selling our birthright for a bowl of porridge? This is a question which is being asked beyond the confines of the campus Administration building. A recent cover story in *Business Week*, called “The CEO Trap,” warns that many corporations find themselves selling long-term sustainability for short-term stock market gains. On the other hand, if we don’t survive in the short run, we won’t survive.

I can’t answer for liberal arts institutions or research institutions, but I do think the fate of comprehensive universities *is* tied to the fate of their regions. Granted, as an institution the university is one of the longest surviving institutions created in the West—50 of the 60 corporate entities surviving from the Middle Ages are universities. But a long tradition may have been comforting the tyrannosaurus, too. Besides, just because Oxford survives doesn’t mean we will.

* I do not mean that we, like (say) the two-year colleges, draw primarily from the base of our immediate region. At my institution, about 30% of the graduate students come from the immediate region, about 30% come from elsewhere in the State, about 30% come from the Upper Midwest, and 10% come from around the US and abroad.
* But it is from the local region that we primarily draw the internship opportunities for our students, the applied research projects and contracts that support graduate assistantships and lead to theses, and the professional practitioners who join us as adjunct faculty for advanced graduate courses.
* I sometimes express this issue to my faculty as “Giving back to the community that supports us.” If we don’t do that, I do not think we will survive.

## As for selling our birthright, what appears to be “porridge” to one person might be “polenta” or “gumbo” to another—and the basis for running a gourmet restaurant.

## What We Have Learned From the CCL

For the last three years, MSU and South Central Technical College have been partnering in regional development through the Center for Continuous Learning. Minnesota has both technical and community colleges. While the community colleges drew on the traditions of the 4-year college, the technical colleges came from the tradition of the public school districts. We have learned a number of things from our experiences together and from the perspectives that our different traditions bring to those experiences.

As with most start-ups, the CCL has “reinvented” itself several times already.

* The CCL began as a “virtual center.” But local businesses were not uniformly ready to operate “virtually” (nor were we).
* We also began with a philosophy of “anytime, anywhere, anything,” but found that we shouldn’t promise what we couldn’t deliver. Local businesses wanted *their* plans, on *their* schedule, at *their* place—but at *our* rates!
* So we shifted gears, and focused on building face-to-face relationships (funny how the classics still work).
  + The first relationships we had to build were between ourselves.
  + Then we had to build them with *each* of the local businesses.

Over the last couple of years, we have developed several successful programs together.

* We have written and won several grants for workforce development (partnered between MSU, SCTC, and a local business). These have included going into a business and training its people in technical skills like salesmanship and computer networking and educating them in professional skills like organizational development and personnel management. Sometimes this has involved the same people.
* Working with a high-tech business incubator in the community, we have developed a contract to provide training, both to the companies in the incubator and to the general public.
* We have created an internship development program which helps businesses outside the immediate community gain access to the hundreds of students (from both institutions) who are looking for internship placements each year.
* And we have pooled our efforts to provide common sites for off-campus provision of our credit courses, offered in a variety of non-standard formats (cohorts, weekends, modules).

In summary, we are expanding access to the resources of both institutions for our communities.

From MSU’s side, we have learned a number of lessons from our technical college partner. We have become more respectful of a number of tensions in how we see our missions and roles.

* We knew there would be tension between “training” versus “education,” although we had not expected to find ourselves providing training to employees who already had a baccalaureate degree. While in the ideal we can still describe the distinction, we are finding ourselves increasingly in situations where the distinction is blurred.
* We learned to appreciate the tension between “customer satisfaction” and “academic integrity”—and found these are often similar issues, but with a different locus for determining the value. What the “customers” want is not always what the Academy thinks they need. Neither set of values is “wrong,” and we have had to learn to negotiate our differences in ways that respect the values of all our partners.
* Our partners on the technical college side are used to “rapid response,” while our tradition favors thoughtful preparation.
  + We are a large, loosely-coupled organization; we commonly need 6 months to pull together and proof and print and distribute the course bulletin for next term. Our technical college partner can do it in two months—and thus has much more flexibility in responding to market shifts. On the other hand, our business partners consider a month to be a very long time for responding to their requests.
  + They are also used to responding to a business customer’s need, whatever it might be (if need be, they will hire from outside to offer training a customer wants); our tradition is to offer what our people are prepared to offer, but beyond that we “stick to our knitting.” A focused approach such as ours may serve both the community and the institution when the community has other options. But we are finding that the community becomes impatient with this approach when you are perceived as “the only game in town.”
* Partnership involves more than just *this* project.
  + Partners involves building for the long haul
  + Partners watch out for each other’s needs. As Morris Axelrod’s research on what he calls “altruism” demonstrates, if a relationship is one-time, each partner looks for only one’s own advantage; but if a relationship is to continue over time, each partner must see to it that the other partners are at least satisfied.
  + Partners share information with each other—good and bad—so their efforts can stay synchronized. One of our partners likes to call it “The Treaty of No Surprises.” A partnership can survive some fairly nasty shocks, as long as the other partners feel that they are facing them together.

I wish I could tell you how successful we have been, and how rapidly our region is growing because of our efforts. I can’t; we are only at the beginning of this journey. But if we don’t have the answers, at least we are coming closer to understanding some of the questions.