

Places of Public Purpose



By **Constantine W. (Deno) Curris**

Though the early 19th century marked the establishment of the nation's first public universities, it is widely recognized that the passage of the Morrill Act establishing our land-grant universities was the impetus for the development of public higher education throughout the states. In signing this legislation, enacted in the midst of the Civil War, President Lincoln described the authorized land-grant institutions, not as "public universities" but rather as "the public's universities."

The Morrill Act delineated its purposes "to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, including military tactics, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes." In accepting these grants of land to finance public universities, virtually every state elaborated on those purposes with words such as "providing education for the working classes" and "promoting scientific agriculture." The common ingredient in the establishment of these institutions was that they were to serve societal needs. They were to be places of public purpose.

The normal school movement, which sprung forth a few years later, and which led to the establishment of a far greater number of institutions than the Morrill Act authorized, likewise, was based on fulfilling public needs; namely, the provision of sufficient numbers of capable teachers for each state's elementary and secondary schools. This dearth of

teachers for the public schools was a function not only of depleted ranks due to Civil War casualties, but also resulted from the nation's demographic and geographic growth.

In subsequent years, Congressional action extended land-grant legislation to serve the needs of the nation's African-American populations, and expanded the scope of the Morrill Act to include federal funding to support research activities in support of agriculture and the mechanical arts, as well as establishing outreach or extension programs to ensure that citizens in all parts of the country benefitted from "the public's universities." The 20th century ushered in the development of community colleges and urban universities, as well as the transformation of normal schools into comprehensive universities, often serving the needs of the regions in which they were located. These developments furthered the concept that these public universities were to be places of public purpose, a mission that distinguished them from their private or independent counterparts.

Over the past few decades the commitment to public purpose, the bedrock of public institutions, has eroded. As less emphasis has been placed on its historic mission, public universities have placed greater focus on the education of individual students pointing to wage gains for college graduates in comparison to students with only a high school education. The message to the public emanating from our campuses has been the articulation of the benefits to the individual, not the benefits to society. As the proportion of non-resident students has risen on many campuses, particularly the larger publics, the implicit value of the institution to the citizens of its state is further clouded. While this new narrative of the public university's value to the individual is both true and noble, we must recognize that we are coming close to replicating the long-standing mission of most private or independent institutions and blurring the distinction between publics and privates. As a result, a new conversation has emerged in several states as to the amount of subsidy states should provide to its public institutions. That conversation tends to benefit private institutions, as they point to higher graduation rates, more efficient operations, and the greater value

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the state receives from the modest amounts accorded to students attending private institutions as opposed to the considerably larger per student subsidies appropriated to its public institutions. In short, we are losing the battle for public and legislative support, in good part because of messages we have made to emphasize our contributions to private gain rather than to the public good.

America's public universities need a new narrative that focuses on the distinctive purposes and contributions of public universities and is geared toward re-establishing the historic covenant between citizens and their universities. It is not enough for this new narrative to be espoused by educational and civic leaders; it must also be embraced by faculty and staff. Every public university should focus on defining its public purposes and developing plans to communicate those purposes to their constituents and the public.

One critical element in such a narrative would be the significance of affording opportunity for higher education for all capable students. When data show that high school graduates in the highest quartile of ability and the lowest quartile of economic capability pursue higher education in no greater percentage than high school graduates in the lowest quartile of ability, but in the highest quartile of economic capability, we clearly have a significant problem that does not portend well for our common future. AASCU has commendably taken a leadership role advocating that *all* capable students be afforded opportunity. While opportunity must be afforded, we must also ensure that opportunity is affordable. This latter point was persuasively enunciated by Dr. F. King Alexander, who pointed out that the university he formerly led, California State University, Long Beach, enrolled more Pell Grant recipients than all the Ivy League institutions combined. The public good encompasses the importance of all segments of our population pursuing affordable higher education. That goal should be central to the public purpose commitment of virtually every public institution.

A second element needed in the public university's narrative is a commitment to the economic development of the region or state

Civic engagement requires students to come to terms with their individual duty as citizens, to become active participants in democracy itself, to understand the work of citizenship, and to understand that citizenship involves responsibilities as well as rights.

it serves. Unfortunately, this commitment is given more lip service than substantive support. Public institutions readily observe that they educate graduates who become part of the workforce, thereby suggesting a contribution to economic development. While true, we need to note that private institutions make the same claim. In the public's eye there is little differentiation between sectors relative to preparing graduates to enter the economic workforce. What needs to distinguish public universities is a commitment to instructional, applied research, and public service efforts targeting economic development needs in each state, with a special emphasis on inner cities and rural reaches that have sustained economic and demographic losses. This is a historic function of the public's universities and one needed today. A section of the original Morrill Act stipulated that each state provide an "annual report including state industrial and economic statistics." Implicit in this provision was an expectation for institutional engagement with economic development and some level of accountability to the public.

If public universities are truly to be "Stewards of Place," then a renewed focus on institutional commitment to the economic fortunes of its citizens is a reasonable expectation.

Public universities were created and expanded to serve the needs of the states and nation. They were not created to replicate private universities; they were established to be places of public purpose. For decades, honoring this mission has generated public support and decent, if not generous, financial appropriations. We need to ask ourselves to what degree the erosion of this commitment is related to the appreciable reduction in state financial support and the distressing decline in public approval, and how each public university should respond. **P**

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