

# Comments Regarding the Appropriate Role of the Modern Public University

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February 17, 2006

Let me begin by making a series of claims that I intend to justify later in my presentation:

- The most successful communities of the future are likely to be those that have public universities within their borders (that is, metropolitan universities).
- The most successful of this group of communities is likely to be those in which the public universities are still developing today. (UNC Charlotte, UT Chattanooga)
- A public university is owned by the public and exists solely to serve the public good.
- A university is a unique type of organization, a unique type of business, if you will.
- A university is forever!

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Now let me return to my first couple of claims about successful communities and public universities.

One of the most widely-read books currently in the market is *Thomas Friedman's, The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. In the book he speaks to the impact on the world economy of the geopolitical changes brought about by the end of the Cold War and of the new technologies. He concludes that the economic playing field has flattened and opened up “to more people in more places on more days in more ways than anything like it ever before in the history of the world.” He further writes that, “Upgrading human capital is critical in a flat world” if we are to successfully compete.

You can find the same message, with a slightly different twist, in the work of Jim Collins who wrote *Built to Last* and *Good to Great*. He believes that lasting excellence in corporations seems to stem less from decisions about strategy than decisions about people. He argues that this is true because the world is uncertain and the key thing you can do to prepare for that uncertainty is to have the right people with you.

Frankly, I believe Collins may have overstated it. I think success of an organization, or of a community, derives from the right decisions about people and the right decisions about strategy.

In this flat world of Friedman's, having the right people is key to competitive success. By “right people,” we mean people who are appropriately trained and educated to be good workers, but also to be good citizens, to be good human beings.

To ensure that the “right people” exist in a community is not solely the responsibility of universities. Other educational and social agencies share that responsibility. However, universities play a pivotal role, especially public universities. And that role is becoming increasingly pivotal. Less you question that statement, just ask yourself, “Is UT Chattanooga more important to this community today than it was ten years ago? Will it be even more important ten years from now?” I suspect that each of you answered “Yes” to both questions.

Let me, then, reiterate one of my initial statements.

- The most successful communities of the future are likely to be those that have public universities within their borders.

But I also stressed the value of having a public university within your community that is still developing. Why?

A university, through its faculty and staff, does three things: provides educational programs, conducts research, and provides service. But in doing these “three things,” keep in mind that universities operate on long planning horizons in concert with principles and practices that have evolved over many hundreds of years—principles and practices that, in my opinion, are the basis for our having the best system of higher education in the world.

But, by definition, a developing university is still changing. It is adding programs, adding new people, especially faculty. The changes that take place in a public university such as UT Chattanooga must be driven by its purpose of serving the “public good” and, in doing so, helping ensure that the “right people” are here in Chattanooga, here in Tennessee.

Who decides what a public university should do to serve the “public good?” Well, there are many cooks in the kitchen! That is, there are many external constituents that must be heard including elected officials; governing boards; advisory boards; businesses; social agencies; K-12; cultural agencies; and so forth. And as a university becomes more important to the future well-being of its community, as is the case with UT Chattanooga, it will get more and more advice from these external constituents about what it should be doing.

The administration, especially the academic administration and faculty leadership, must listen, evaluate, and ultimately decide what instructional, research, and service programs make sense for the community and for the university. The leadership of UT Chattanooga has been doing this for years. And with Roger Brown, you have someone who is particularly skilled at interfacing between the university and the community and guiding the development of new programs that are needed. Early in his career at UNC Charlotte, he was given responsibility for overseeing a new MPA (Masters of Public Administration), a graduate program designed with a focus on local government. Today, the impact of that program is widely felt throughout the Charlotte region.

I should also note that his wife, and best friend, Carolyn was responsible for planning, implementing, and overseeing another program at UNC Charlotte that was specifically designed to respond to an identifiable community need, a Masters in Health Administration. So you have brought to Chattanooga two individuals who are highly skilled at interfacing between the academy and the public.

Now a few comments about the uniqueness of universities and why that uniqueness should be recognized and even protected if you want to have a truly good public university that can respond to the needs of this community and state over a long period of time.

Even though there are things a university can do and must do to ensure the “right people” are here, there are things a university, even a public university, cannot do. I think it important for the leadership external to the university to have some understanding of the fundamental nature of a university if, working with the leadership of the university, you are to fully bring to bear the considerable strengths of the university on service to the community and state.

A brief history lesson can perhaps help explain the fundamental nature of a university, that is, uniqueness of this type of business.

America higher education derives from higher education in Europe, particularly higher education that emerged in France, Great Britain, and Germany.

The University of Paris, that opened its doors in the twelfth century, is considered to be the mother of higher education as we know it. This was followed by the establishment of the great universities in Germany and in Italy in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In Great Britain, the University of Oxford was founded in 1264 and Cambridge in 1318.

What were the characteristics of the early institutions that cause us to consider them to be our forbearers?

- A physical presence;
- The name “university,” which means an association of masters, that is, faculty;
- Faculties with their deans; officers such as rectors; and, yes, even chancellors;
- The notion of a “curriculum of study;”
- The concept of a degree being awarded upon completion of a curriculum;
- And even the concept of tenure, even though early on it appeared to deal with “physical protection” rather the “intellectual protection.”

The first university in North America, Harvard, was established in 1636, nearly 150 years before the U.S. became independent or Massachusetts became a state. Other private universities followed—Yale, Dartmouth, Princeton and so forth.

In forming this country, there was great debate about the rights and responsibilities of the central government versus state’s rights. The resulting constitution gave the federal government no role in education. That is, by default, education at all levels became the responsibility of the states. Two of the 13 original states moved very quickly to put in place state-supported, or public, higher education; North Carolina and Georgia. The forerunner of the University of Tennessee admitted students in 1794, two years before Tennessee became a state! In general, the great public universities initially emerged in the South where there had been few private universities.

Of course, the landscape of American Higher Education has changed a great deal over the last 200+ years. It is highly diverse with some 3,700 public and private; not-for-profit and for-profit. Maybe 150-200 relatively large with a comprehensive array of programs.

Still, there is a relatively modest federal role, unlike most other developed countries.

But certain fundamental characteristics haven’t changed. Earlier I mentioned several that can be traced back 700-800 years. I would strongly suggest that if these characteristics have such a long history and have been retained as this country’s highly diverse system of higher education has developed, these characteristics are not likely to change in good universities and that external leaders should probably not try to force major change in these characteristics.

Let me talk a bit more about some of these characteristics, especially those that affect the way in which a public university can interact with the community.

The real strength of any university is principally determined by the quality of its faculty, not its administration nor even its athletic teams. So what do faculty do?

We normally talk about their responsibilities in terms of teaching, research, and service. While most state funding might be tied to enrollment, within a university the teaching load is such that research can be pursued and is, indeed, expected. In fact, a very large part of the basic research done in this country takes place within its universities as a routine part of faculty activities.

In using the term research, I mean scholarly activity, which for the arts equates to artistic works—paintings, set design, etc. In each case, the researcher is striving to add to the body of knowledge, or scholarly work, that under girds his or her discipline.

How is this research or scholarly work evaluated? Normally, it is evaluated by disciplinary peers located outside of one's home institution. An engineering faculty member might write a paper and submit it for inclusion in the program at an international conference or a national, or even regional, journal. An arts faculty member may submit a piece to be included in a juried show.

Regardless of the discipline, my point is that a large portion of the professional work of a faculty member throughout his or her career is judged by disciplinary peers, in many instances, now located throughout the world. For a faculty member to have a successful career, in general, that judgment must be positive.

So you might say that a faculty member naturally has split loyalties. Faculty members are certainly loyal to the home institution and their community, but they also must be loyal to their discipline and engaged in activities that bring recognition from the national and international structures related to that discipline.

If you want to hire and keep good faculty, you must recognize these split loyalties and support your faculty in exercising, successfully, both loyalties.

Service is, in my opinion, the most misunderstood of faculty roles. In general, our reward systems are heavily based on teaching and research. Service is normally given less weight.

What is service? It can be categorized as university service, service to one's discipline, and professional service. By professional service, we mean that a faculty member's expertise is brought to bear on some external topic. But so much professional service that might be seen as of value to the community is not given much value within the academic world. Let me explain by looking at my own discipline, engineering.

Would it be a good thing to organize the engineering faculty at UT Chattanooga into a unit that provided free engineering services to small business?

On the surface, the answer would seem to be "Yes." But I think the appropriate answer is "No." Why? The assistance most small businesses need is at the baccalaureate level, not at the Ph.D. level. To provide that assistance with engineering faculty would be an inappropriate use of their talent. Further, it would take them away from those activities in teaching and research for which the university is normally funded and for which faculty are normally evaluated and rewarded over a career. (Remember my comments about split loyalties.)

If you want a university to provide those types of services, incremental funding should probably be provided so that appropriate staff can be hired and directed. And this is frequently done. We have long had a state-supported unit affiliated with UNC Charlotte that assists the polymer industry in the state. However, they have their own specialized staff.

We have long had an organization on campus entitled the Urban Institute that principally serves county and city governments, as well as not-for-profits, in the Charlotte region. They receive a line-item state appropriation and employ their own staff which receives additional funding through contract work. The Institute sometimes encounters work that appropriately involves faculty and/or students. But most of their work doesn't.

Is there professional service activity that should involve faculty and/or students? Absolutely (and we have clear examples at UNC Charlotte)! But for faculty, there generally needs to be a research element that, when completed, produces a piece of scholarship that can be added to the knowledge base of the faculty member's discipline. And for students, there absolutely must be a worthwhile educational purpose. We must not engage students in "gofer" type activities even though such activities might be of value to some external entity.

I am impressed with the decision to locate UT Chattanooga's high tech incubator on campus. This provides the best opportunity to appropriately engage faculty and students in assisting the start-up of new companies.

But faculty bring much more to a community than what they might contribute through "professional services." These are highly skilled individuals, individuals who tend to be engaged in their community independent of any assigned or university-sponsored activity.

Let me now conclude these remarks?

I hope I have reinforced your opinion about the importance of having UT Chattanooga in this community.

I hope you will be continuously engaged in debating and determining the "public need" that can be served by your public university.

I hope I have given you some sense of the unique nature of universities and why these uniquenesses are good, should be recognized as good, and should be considered as you work to identify ways in which this university can and should expand its interaction with the community.

Lastly, I hope I have given you some historical context for the special event you will observe tomorrow, the installation of Roger Brown as Chancellor of the University at Tennessee at Chattanooga, a university that will be here forever!