
Comment

Unanswered Questions about Public Service in the Public Research University

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Public service in the public research university is more important than ever before, but there is a need to discuss even the most basic questions about the subject. For example, what is meant by service? Who should be served? What methods should be used to evaluate service? What strategies and structures would strengthen service? What is the social responsibility of the university? This article addresses several such questions and some of the issues they raise. It draws on work in diverse fields and recognizes emerging efforts to develop knowledge in ways that serve society.

Public service in the public research university is more important than ever before, but there arises a need to discuss even the most basic questions about the subject. The future of service will involve a variety of participants, including university administrators and faculty members, public agencies and private institutions, elected officials and community groups. Yet, what do we know about public service, and what questions remain for future discussion?¹

This article raises several such questions and some of the issues they suggest. It assumes that the public research university is a public institution with public responsibilities; that knowledge is an intellectual resource for the welfare of society; and that research and service are complementary activities in which excellence in one can enhance the other. It attempts to contribute an approach to service that would broaden the scholarly responsibilities of the university and would make knowl-

edge more accessible to society (Hackney 1986; Lynton and Elman 1987).

This article provides perspectives on public service as work that develops knowledge for the welfare of society. This approach to "public service" contrasts with, but does not diminish, the importance of "professional service" through participation in professional associations, "university service" through membership on campus committees, or other forms with which faculty are familiar. These forms also would benefit from discussion, although my focus here is on public service.

Some think it is efficient to combine these various approaches to service into a single evaluative category, but it may be more appropriate to distinguish among them and develop the features of each. These are distinct approaches, each with its own roles and responsibilities. They sometimes may occur together in mutually reinforcing ways, but there are benefits to emphasizing what is particular to each rather than to attempt a grand embracing conception. Knowledge development for society is neither participation in professional associations nor membership on campus committees, and each should have its own documentation, evaluation, and reward.

This article draws on work in various academic disciplines and professional fields and is here addressed by a member of faculty senate and campus committees con-

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cerned with the subject. These committees represented all ranks of tenured and nontenured faculty from a range of disciplines and fields. We lacked resources to conduct research of our own and recognized the need for more systematic study, while also wanting to communicate our concerns.²

The following are not the only questions to arise, but they are some of the important ones.

WHAT IS MEANT BY SERVICE?

Many definitions of service are used in the public research university. For example, *Professional Service and Faculty Rewards*—the report of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges compiled by Sandra Elman and Sue Marx Smock (1985, 15)—defines service as “work that draws upon one’s professional expertise or academic knowledge for the welfare of society.” This report states that

the basic question relates to whether or not the work requires expertise in one’s academic discipline; and, if so, does the work:

1. create new knowledge,
2. train others in the discipline or area of expertise,
3. aggregate and interpret knowledge so as to make it understandable and useful, or
4. disseminate the knowledge to the appropriate user or audience.

What activities should be included as service? Elman and Smock (1985) suggest that answers lie in responses to the following questions: Does it create new knowledge? Does it train others in the discipline or area of expertise? Does it make knowledge more understandable and useful? Does it disseminate knowledge to the user or audience? They include activities within general categories of applied research, consultation and technical assistance, instruction, products, and clinical work and performance. But they do not include work with campus committees or professional associations unless these draw upon expertise or knowledge.

This definition of service would not appeal to those who believe that all civic duties should receive faculty reward; that time on campus committees or in professional associations should substitute for public service in the community; or that the university is an arena for private initiative rather than an institution with public responsibilities. But it would appeal to those who believe that the university is an important intellectual resource whose faculty should develop knowledge for the welfare of society. These ideas have a history that extends from Ezra Cornell and Leland Stanford to the Morrill Act and the Wisconsin Idea (Hackney 1986).

Is it “service” if a chemical scientist serves as mayor and produces a book on the subject, but “research” if a political scientist does the same? What if an engineer

consults for a corporate client and uses the data for a scholarly publication; if a physicist works for a public agency and submits the report for purposes of promotion; if an artist gives a performance and includes a videotape in the annual salary review; or if a social scientist struggles against discrimination in the community and brings his or her ideas into the classroom?

Does the quality of service differ if its product is a scholarly book, journal article, technical monograph, or nonjuried report? Does it matter if the work serves a large public agency or private corporation that gives money to the university, or helps a small community group in a low-income area that writes a brief letter of appreciation? Does it matter if the work is paid by a client, used in a lecture tour, or submitted for an award? Does it matter if it receives national or international recognition, or gets a few lines in the neighborhood newsletter? New initiatives are needed to differentiate among categories of service and units of production.

Should the university have a singular definition or standard of service that informs all approaches on campus? Or should each campus unit be expected to clarify its own meaning or standard? Many definitions of service can be provided, but is it possible to evaluate performance or achieve excellence without discussion of the word?

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SERVICE?

Public service is a desirable activity with positive benefits for the university and for society. Service can provide faculty with new life experiences and broader perspectives that stimulate the creation of knowledge. Many faculty with narrow academic backgrounds would benefit from interaction with people outside their small circle. There is no contradiction between productivity in research and service. On the contrary, studies suggest that some faculty who score high in service also score high in research publications and student evaluations of teaching (Marver and Patton 1976; Patton and Marver 1979).

Service, therefore, can build a foundation for development and dissemination of knowledge and skills in the classroom and the community. Faculty who engage in service may more easily overcome disciplinary barriers, relate theory to practice, and apply teaching skills conducive to experiential learning and student needs. Service can produce positive curricular changes and strengthen credence of new courses of study at the university (Checkoway 1981).

Service also can benefit the university as an institution. It can help the university fulfill responsibilities to society, build support for academic activities, and generate funds for educational programs. It can improve communications with constituents, represent a more diverse

range of groups in the system, and create an institution that serves the broader public rather than special private interests.

On behalf of society, service can provide knowledge and skills responsive to needs. It can help develop capabilities and capacities of individuals and provide consultation and assistance to public and private institutions in efforts to solve problems and achieve goals. The university has resources in knowledge and education that could more significantly serve the local, national, and world communities. But does the university serve this function with the same commitment as the fight for research dollars or the effort to fill the football stadium?

WHO SHOULD BE EXPECTED TO PERFORM SERVICE?

In an institution created by a legislature and supported by taxation, which employees should be held accountable for their service? The legislator or taxpayer might answer "all" employees without understanding the wide variation in the ability or willingness of university personnel. The faculty member might answer "some" and expect business, medicine, engineering, or other professional schools to play the leading role for the university in the community.

But some of the most challenging questions arise from discussion of service in literature, sciences, the arts, and disciplines whose participants may feel peripheral to the question. What about the philosopher who emphasizes the dilemmas of daily life, the physicist who analyzes the practical problems of a popular technology, or the artist who prepares an exhibit for display in a public place? What are some innovative examples of the person of letters, the scientist, or the artist who makes knowledge more understandable and useful to an audience?

WHO SHOULD BE SERVED?

Some universities take the general community as their population, develop programs for all within their reach, or remain aloof from the idea of serving particular groups. However, universities that try to serve everyone may serve no one, replicate existing inequities or imbalances in the population, and open themselves to dominance by those already advantaged by resources rather than to expand educational opportunities for others with previous disadvantages or special needs. Institutions that reach out to an entire population may find themselves influenced by individuals or groups with preexisting resources in money or power.

Other universities identify particular groups as their population and develop special programs responsive to their needs. They may seek out the "best and brightest" in one place, people from particular geographical territories or functional fields in another, or those with a history of exclusion in yet another. The effort to serve

excluded groups often engenders campus and community controversy—especially from firstcomers whose money or power gave them an earlier advantage—although there is less awareness when the university serves large public agencies or private institutions. Who are the clients of the university? Are there categories of clients that should be developed for clarification on campus and in the community?

Knowledge for whom? Most universities either ignore the question, emphasize the broad representation of the general community, or respond to the most powerful stakeholders in their environment. It is no surprise that universities often replicate resource allocations or power distributions from the community to the campus. Thus the influence of business, medicine, or engineering in the community may increase their influence in the university. Given the public nature of the institution and an emphasis on broad representation, however, there is no a priori justification for overrepresentation of any particular stakeholders; the explanation is primarily political.

Who should be represented in the institutional process that produces the program planning and resource allocation decisions of the university? There are no a priori conceptually correct categories for representation. Representation is not a neutral fact but a normative value that begs the question: What ends do we want to achieve? Given the ends, the relevant categories ought to be represented. If the ends are clear, then the objectives of service ought to be easier to articulate.

Are public service interests represented in the administration and faculty? Do they participate effectively in the policy planning process of the university? Do they represent the public service viewpoint in the curricular program structure of the academic units and in the promotion and tenure of the faculty?

WHAT METHODS SHOULD BE USED TO EVALUATE SERVICE?

Standard methods are used to document and evaluate faculty efforts in research projects in terms of their scope and quality, but what methods are used to evaluate them in terms of their service? There are methods to document and evaluate funded and nonfunded research projects, publications in print and in progress, courses taught, and students advised. But what methods differentiate routine membership on campus committees from work that creates community change, or rewards service for its scholarly significance and its contribution to social welfare? There are peer reviews of research, and student evaluations of teaching, but what indicators are used to evaluate service (Florestano and Hambrick 1984)?

Does the work require expertise in one's academic discipline? Does it create new knowledge, train others in the discipline or areas of expertise, make knowledge

more understandable and useful, or disseminate knowledge to the user or audience? Does it produce an article for a scholarly journal, a technical report for professional readers, or a popular book for the general public? Does it receive recognition from a national or international association, or appreciation from a local community organization? Does it appear relatively routine, or on the cutting edge?

What methods should be used to determine if the service is worthy of reward? What criteria are most appropriate to the university? Elman and Smock (1985, 15) continue that

work which draws upon and is the outgrowth of one's academic discipline and professional expertise is legitimately a part of the academic enterprise. When academicians engage in this work, they should be rewarded. To do otherwise is dysfunctional for the individual and for higher education. Whether specific activities are categorized as research, teaching, or some other label (i.e., service) is irrelevant. If the activity is appropriate and important, it should be rewarded. Hence, if it is appropriate and important for physicians in the medical school or clinicians in social work to conduct clinical work, they should be rewarded. If it is important for faculty in the drama school to produce and act in plays, they should also be rewarded. In short, the performance of work, often categorized as service, should not put the faculty member at risk.

"What was the quantity and quality of your research and teaching in terms of its service?" "To whom did you provide service and in what form?" "How did service inform your academic work?" If a president or dean asked faculty to answer these questions in this year's performance review, it might gather useful information and stimulate overdue discussion on campus.

WHAT ARE THE SERVICE STRENGTHS OF THE UNIVERSITY?

Elman and Smock (1985) report that more than 150,000 faculty work in public institutions of higher education in the United States. What is the scope and quality of their service? No single source inventories service activities in most universities, but the image is that service is widespread despite perceptions that the institutions provide little support and few rewards for this function. Faculty on many campuses conduct research and publish results relevant to natural resources and the environment, employment and economic productivity, education and welfare, health and human services, housing and urban development, government leadership and business management, transportation and engineering, and other topics important to society. Is it research or service to develop knowledge on such topics, or does it depend on the dissemination or utilization of such knowledge?

The university has personnel whose knowledge and skills could contribute more significantly to society, but they tend not to think of themselves in this way. In my own academic unit, for example, faculty conduct research on major problems facing underserved populations, strategies and structures for social change, and specific actions that could help organizations and communities rebuild their social infrastructure. We offer graduate courses and field placements consistent with these objectives, outreach education to strengthen leadership and management, and annual symposia for practitioners to learn about new developments in theory and practice. Yet few faculty discuss their service to society, and the reward system of the unit counts service as half of research in annual performance and salary reviews. What institutional forces in the university would cause a school of social work to count service as half of research? Is it functional for the individual and the institution?

How effective is the faculty member's work in terms of its utilization? What is the impact of the intellectual resources of the university on society? Most universities collect data on research and teaching, but few systematic studies have been done on the utilization of knowledge, or on the impact of the university on the community of which it is part. Efforts by some universities to develop a "public service data base," with partial information for purposes of public relations or legislative lobbying, are no substitute for systematic studies of the dissemination and utilization of knowledge.

Russell Mawby (1987) of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation observes that public universities perform many public service activities, but few people think of them under that rubric. He gives examples of public universities that provide knowledge through museums and libraries; aesthetic experiences through art and culture to non-campus audiences; consumer services through hospitals and hotels, publishers and bookstores; custodial care to people of collegiate age; and entertainment for the masses through various media. He concludes that the quality of these forms of public service is related to the extent to which they incorporate research or teaching. He concludes that "the major lesson we have learned about university-based public service is that it is best conceived as dynamic and creative teaching and research carried out in the full dimensions of the human life-span and the broad range of human association both on and off campus" (Mawby 1987, 1491).

WHAT FORCES LIMIT SERVICE IN THE UNIVERSITY?

Although some university administrators discuss service as central to the institutional mission, many faculty note that there are few institutional rewards and little support for this function. They perceive that service does

not weigh heavily in promotion, tenure, salary, or other components of the reward structure. They may even become conditioned to regard service as a waste of time, distraction from work, or threat to their careers in the university. The pressure for externally funded research may exacerbate this situation and further weaken the legitimacy of service in some fields, although external funding may be instrumental to service in others.

Other faculty may have a commitment to service but lack resources for quality work. They may have the academic knowledge or professional expertise that could provide service but lack the resources to communicate their work or translate knowledge into action. It is ironic that some private universities may invest more resources into societal learning than do public universities. For example, why does Harvard University publish journals that appear on newsstands, circulate its medical newsletter to millions of subscribers, or praise publications that rise on the best-seller list, while some public universities disregard materials prepared for practitioners or lay audiences and want faculty to publish primarily in specialized scholarly journals read by a handful of experts?

The University of Michigan Faculty Senate Assembly appointed a task force to survey faculty on issues of service. Faculty reported many more service activities than were expected but also noted several factors as limiting their service, including the university reward structure, funded research emphasis, academic fragmentation or disciplinization, and inadequate communication mechanisms between the university and society. They discussed the need for new initiatives designed to strengthen information and exchange between the university and the community of which it is a part (University of Michigan 1986).

WHAT STRATEGY WOULD STRENGTHEN SERVICE?

Strategy is a process that includes steps to set goals, develop plans, and mobilize resources for implementation. It involves choice and sequence, staging and timing, and a combination of roles and responsibilities. It shows commitment to think ahead and anticipate the results of current decisions. What is the service strategy of the university? What should the organization look like in the future and how will it get there? What are the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats (Checkoway 1986)?

Should the university formulate strategy to strengthen service? Some would warn against applying strategy to an institution that pursues multiple goals, that provides personnel with autonomy in selecting appropriate assignments, and that presumes to serve the "general community" or to safeguard "academic freedom" of the faculty. While public universities ponder these issues, however, an implicit strategy develops. Many private universities and private corporations do formulate strategy,

even in the face of multiple goals and a pluralist environment. The issue is not whether to formulate strategy, but how? Or what kind?

WHAT STRUCTURE WOULD STRENGTHEN SERVICE?

The university is only one of several institutions that develops knowledge to serve society. Government and industry also invest in research and education, often on a scale that dwarfs the university. But what is the university counterpart of the government or industry "research and development" structure?

Which structure best fits the university? Some universities create bureaucratic structures and special staff for outreach and extension, continuing education, and community development. Such structures can create a division of labor between "researchers" and the "extenders" or "translators" of knowledge. Other universities incorporate service into the existing infrastructure through facilities that increase interdisciplinary collaboration and strengthen the research and educational mission of the institution. The latter include the Institute for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, and the Joint Center for Urban Studies of Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, although efforts to establish urban affairs represent only one episode in this history (Feld 1986; Hackney 1986; Hambrick and Swanson 1980; Klotsche 1966; Murphy 1975; Nash 1973; Rudnick 1983). Public commissions and study panels have analyzed alternative approaches to translate knowledge into action and assessed several organizational structures, but have universities learned their lessons?

Should the university create new bureaucratic units and special staff, or should leadership be taken by academic units with experienced faculty who have a commitment to developing knowledge through collaboration on campus and in the community? Should initiatives draw on academic units with demonstrated service interests and experience and foster a process of scholarly exchange among researchers and practitioners?

How should initiatives reflect the research interests and instructional units of the university? How should initiatives apply underutilized intellectual resources to the welfare of society in ways that benefit diverse campus and community groups? No single structure fits all situations; the key is to fit the structure to the situation.

WHAT IS THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY?

The university was created by the state, designed to receive resources from public taxation, and mandated to account to the public through elected officials. Over time the university has adapted this mandate to help meet some of the challenges of a changing society. Today, the university is more than an educational institu-

tion. It is also a major employer, a provider and purchaser of goods and services, and a powerful social and economic unit whose decisions affect the area of which it is a part. Hardly a day passes when the media fail to report the impacts of a university decision on the area. What is the responsibility of the university to the society with whose destiny it is inextricably entwined (Bok 1982; Boyer and Hechinger 1981; Hackney 1986; Kerr 1982)?

What is the social role and responsibility of the person with knowledge? Almost fifty years have passed since Florian Znaniecki (1940) provided a taxonomy of these persons as explorers of facts, technicians and technological advisers, and sages and scholars such as discoverers of truth, contributors of findings, fighters for truth, disseminators and popularizers of knowledge. However, Znaniecki was not sanguine about the ability or willingness of these persons to play a more social role. On the contrary, he and his colleagues recognized many obstacles to social responsibility by persons who wish to appear detached from society, who emphasize broad impersonal causal forces and high levels of generalization, or who are more accountable to their professional colleagues than to people in the community (Boulding 1971; Gans 1971).

UNIVERSITY FOR WHAT?

Robert Merton (1973) once wrote of his colleagues:

Social scientists have been so busy examining the behavior of others that they have largely neglected the study of their own situation, problems and behavior. . . . The hobo and the saleslady have been singled out for close study, but not the social science expert. Sociological monographs document the problems and performance of the professional thief and the professional beggar but not the problems and performance of the professional social scientist. Yet it would seem that clarity might well begin at home.

Something similar might be said about public service in the public research university. What do we really know about this topic? Who is conducting a systematic study of universities to inventory the strategies and structures, limiting and facilitating factors influencing service? Who is documenting innovative methods and drawing lessons for adaptation from one area to another? Who is formulating the mission statement and service strategy for the university of the future? There are mimeographed papers and conference presentations by a few administrators and faculty, but these tend to be restricted in circulation. Public service requires more clarity to strengthen its scope and quality, but who is asking the questions already raised in this article?

Historically, the most important contributions of the university have come through the creation of new knowledge and the education of students. But new models are evolving in which public research universities develop knowledge and provide education in ways that also serve

society. Quality research, teaching, and service are emerging as complementary activities in many professions and fields. The new vision is one in which excellence in one activity is increasingly inseparable from other activities in accordance with the best traditions and highest standards of the academic community. The vision is overdue, but how widespread is its awareness on the campus and in the community?

The public research university has not emphasized discussion of public service in recent years. It is ironic that this is the case, for public service was an original objective of the university and the future of the institution may depend in part on its service. But the university sometimes seems singular in research for its own sake. The result is a neglect of the principle that excellence in research is good, but not good enough without discussion of the question once posed by Robert Lynd (1939): "Knowledge for what?" Or the question: "University for what?"

NOTES

1. This article was originally prepared for discussion by the University of Michigan Research Policies Committee. The title builds on that of an unpublished paper by James Duderstadt.

2. This article draws on the work of two of these committees reported in University of Michigan Research Policies Committee (1988) and University of Michigan Senate Assembly Task Force on the University's Influence (1986).

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