

As we enter the new millennium, there is an increasing sense that the social contract between the university and American society, perhaps best represented by today's government-university research partnership may need to be reconsidered and perhaps even renegotiated. While this partnership has had great impact in making the American research university the world leader in both the quality of scholarship and the production of scholars, it has also had its downside. Pressures on individual faculty for success and recognition have led to major changes in the culture and governance of universities. The peer-reviewed grant system has fostered fierce competitiveness, imposed intractable work schedules, and contributed to a loss of collegiality and community. It has shifted faculty loyalties from the campus to their disciplinary communities. Publication and grantsmanship have become a one-dimensional criterion for academic performance and prestige, to the neglect of other important faculty activities such as teaching and service. Furthermore, while the government-university partnership has responded well to the particular interests of academic researchers, one might well question whether the needs of other stakeholders, including the tax-paying public, have been adequately addressed.

Perhaps it is time to reconsider the social contract between the university and American society. But rather than create an entirely new model, perhaps it is more appropriate to first consider the relationship that characterized the early half of the twentieth century: *the land-grant university model*. Recall that a century and a half ago, America was facing a period of similar change, evolving from an agrarian, frontier society into an industrial nation. At that time, a social contract was developed between the federal government, the states, and public colleges and universities designed to assist our young nation in making this transition. The land-grant acts were based upon several commitments: First, the federal government provided federal lands for the support of higher education. Next, the states agreed to create public universities designed to serve both regional and national interests. As the final element, these public or land-grant universities accepted new responsibilities to broaden educational opportunities for the working class while launching new programs in applied areas such as agriculture, engineering, and medicine aimed at serving an industrial society, while committing themselves to public service, engagement, and extension.

Today our society is undergoing a similarly profound transition, this time from an industrial to a knowledge-based society. Hence it may be time for a new social contract aimed at providing the knowledge and the educated citizens necessary for prosperity, security, and social well-being in this new age. Perhaps it is time for a new federal act, similar to the land grant acts of the nineteenth century, that will help the higher education enterprise address the needs of the 21st Century.

The land-grant paradigm of the 19th and 20th Century was focused on developing the vast natural resources of our nation. Today, however, we have come to realize that our most important national resource for the future will be our people. At the dawn of the age of knowledge, one could well make the argument that education itself will replace natural resources or national defense as the priority for the twenty-first century. We might even conjecture that a social contract based on developing and maintaining the abilities and talents of our people to their fullest extent could well transform our schools, colleges, and universities into new forms that would rival the research university in importance. In a sense, the 21st Century analog to the land-grant university might be termed a *learn-grant university*.

A learn-grant university for the 21st Century might be designed to develop our most important resource, our human resources, as its top priority, along with the infrastructure necessary to sustain a knowledge-driven society. The field stations and cooperative extension programs—perhaps now as much in cyberspace as in a physical location—could be directed to the needs and the development of the people in the region. Participating universities would go beyond this to build the capacity to provide more universal educational opportunities, perhaps through network-based learning or virtual universities. Universities would work together to form alliances, both with other elements of the education enterprise such as K-12 education and with private sector business and industry. Other national priorities such as health care, the environment, global change, and economic competitiveness might be part of an expanded national service mission for universities

Clearly higher education will flourish in the decades ahead. In a knowledge-intensive society, the need for advanced education will become ever more pressing, both for individuals and society more broadly. Yet it is also likely that the university as we know it today—rather, the current constellation of diverse institutions comprising the higher education enterprise—will change in profound ways to serve a changing world. Rather than allowing market forces alone to shape these evolutionary changes, it may be time to consider a new social contract, linking together federal and state investment with higher education and business to serve national and regional needs, much in the spirit of the land-grant acts of the 19th Century. A 21st Learn-Grant Act focused on developing the nation's human resources could well be a critical element in building the society of learning necessary to thrive in the age of knowledge that is our future.