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# Harnessing Potential: The Role of Public and Land-Grant Universities' Commitment to Engagement

Sheila A. Martin and Douglas L. Steele

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## Abstract

While many articles have been written about land-grant universities (LGUs) and their tripartite mission, the objective of this article is to place that mission within a broad historical overview of the role of engagement within LGUs, to familiarize readers with the influence of engagement on higher education, and to discuss the important role of Cooperative Extension as the LGUs' key mode of connection with stakeholder communities. With the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862, Congress created a national system of LGUs that made public higher education available and affordable to the American working class, with a focus on agriculture, mechanical arts, and military science. Subsequent congressional legislation firmly established LGUs' tripartite mission of teaching, research, and extension. Later, Extension was included in the broader engagement missions of LGUs. However, the characterizations of this broader notion of university engagement were often obscure and lacked clarity, with no agreed-upon framework for assessment. Reports from the Kellogg Commission in 1999 and subsequently the Carnegie Foundation in 2005 helped to define, clarify, and socialize meaningful university engagement. With common criteria established, it became obvious that LGU leaders must align their engagement resources toward the common goal of deepening engagement to address important societal issues. It also became evident that for Cooperative Extension to be recognized as an engaged organization within the university mission, it must constantly evolve to stay current with the scholarship of engagement, embrace transdisciplinary practices, and focus on the public value created when universities and their community partners find common ground on what matters to academics, practitioners, administrators, elected officials, and community members. The benefits of an aligned set of engagement resources can only be realized if strategy, investment, and incentives reinforce a commitment to engagement.

In 1862, Congress passed the Morrill Act against a backdrop of monumental legislation and political upheaval that would prove to change the landscape of America. Additional legislation passed that historic year included the Pacific Railroad Act, which promoted the construction of a transcontinental railroad and provided a pathway for migration from East to West. The Homestead Act transitioned control of vast public lands from the Great Plains westward to private citizens—provided they live on it, improve it, and pay a small registration fee—and in so doing it promoted private land ownership and economic stability. President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that as of January 1, 1863, all enslaved people in Confederate states “shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.” Lincoln’s proclamation initiated a crusade for human freedom that culminated in the Thirteenth Amendment and the formal abolition of slavery in 1865. And in May 1862, President Lincoln signed legislation to establish the U.S.

Department of Agriculture (USDA), “The People’s Department,” which was intended to follow the interests of the farmers and farming communities that made up over half of the American population at the time.

Surrounded by many threats to the Union, Congress was still focused on making affordable higher education opportunities available to the working class and farmers. This truly surprising economic development and social welfare legislation enabled the current system of public higher education. The Land-Grant College Act of 1862—or the Morrill Act, after its sponsor, Vermont congressman Justin Smith Morrill—provided grants of land to states to finance the establishment of colleges specializing in “agriculture and the mechanic arts.” The law granted each state 30,000 acres for each of its congressional seats that could be managed or sold to support public higher education. The subsequent passage of additional acts (the Hatch Act of 1887 for the funding of agricultural research, the second Morrill Act of

1890 for historically Black institutions, the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 for Cooperative Extension, and the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994 for tribal colleges and universities) created a countrywide network of institutions of higher education focused on learning, discovery, and engagement. These institutions have awarded degrees to millions of students, resulted in research that has impacted the world, and demonstrated how universities can expand beyond their borders to become powerful problem solvers in complex realms such as agricultural profitability, economic viability, community vitality, health and nutrition, and families and youth.

The passage of the Morrill Act, though it benefited many, came at the expense of Indigenous people. In 2020, *High Country News* reporters Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone published “Land-Grab Universities,” the result of over 2 years of research. The authors were able to identify and reconstruct the vast majority (99%) of the land transferred through the original Morrill Act. As they did so, they identified the original Indigenous inhabitants and caretakers, estimated the principal raised from sale or management of the land, and estimated the economic value of those land grants in today’s dollars. Today, LGUs continue to benefit from the over 10.7 million acres that were taken from nearly 250 tribes, bands, and communities. Much of this land was taken through cessions—a legal term for giving up territory—that were backed by violence against Indigenous people. While this tarnished history is not a focal point of this article on engagement, each land-grant university must review, acknowledge, and address these past events as part of creating their future.

While the land-grant system and its institutions have generated numerous benefits for society, they have not yet realized the full potential of the Morrill Act. Realizing this value will require that these universities accelerate their evolution into fully engaged institutions that employ transdisciplinary scholarship and engagement. Similarly, many public research universities that are not land-grant institutions have stated missions of teaching, discovery, and engagement. For public and land-grant universities alike, fulfilling these missions will require better integration of engagement into their missions of learning and discovery; alignment of engagement efforts across and among campuses, including among land-grant and other public research

universities; and the cultivation and allocation of resources sufficient to ensure that efforts to deepen engagement and maximize its benefits are not sporadic but institutionalized, reflecting the importance of engagement to the institutions’ foundational missions. Cooperative Extension has a very special engagement role within the land-grant system, and this evolution will also require a rearticulation of Extension programs’ role in the context of the broader engagement mission of all public research universities.

One overarching objective of this article is to help readers situate university engagement, particularly Cooperative Extension, within the broader historical context of the land-grant university mission. We hope to illustrate new opportunities to more closely connect broad university themes of outreach with specific examples of the principles of scholarly engagement.

### **The Evolution of Engagement in Higher Education**

Community engagement is fundamentally built on reciprocal partnerships and collaboration between universities and colleges and the communities within which they exist. These partnerships and collaboration are based on a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources designed to create quantifiable outcomes that address critical societal issues and contribute to the public good.

#### *Scholarly Engagement*

The values of scholarly engagement—the creation, teaching, and translation of practical knowledge—were among the founding principles of the Morrill Act of 1862, but the terminology used to describe university engagement has evolved over time. This evolution reflects a desired and actual shift in the university’s relationship to its community stakeholders. At first, stakeholders of land-grant universities, such as state legislators, federal funders, and community members, believed that land-grant universities should translate their scientific discoveries so that they might be utilized by farmers, manufacturers, and the military. This perception began to shift, however, with the realization that the university has much to learn from the community and that the university can increase its overall effectiveness by strengthening two-way university-community relationships. Thus, while the traditional term was “outreach,” implying a one-way transfer of knowledge from the university to members of the community, a

number of leaders and scholars since the late 1990s have called for a shift in terminology and practice from “outreach” to “engagement.”

For example, in February 1999, what is now the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) released six reports produced by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities under the title *Returning to Our Roots*. These reports constituted a response by the leadership of public higher education institutions to the public’s perception that higher education at the turn of the 21st century was “out of touch and out of date” (Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 9). The commission called upon public and land-grant universities to become “engaged institutions,” specifically proposing that they adopt the term “engagement” as opposed to “outreach” or “service” (Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 9). One of the key recommendations deriving from this call was for institutions “to respond to the needs of today’s students and tomorrow’s, not yesterday’s” (Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 10). In addition, the commission observed that universities are organized around disciplines rather than around the needs of communities, and it recommended that universities organize instead around issues of importance to the communities they serve. Later, we will see how universities can and do respond to these recommendations through transdisciplinary engaged scholarship.

In another confirmation of the importance of engagement to the university’s mission, the Carnegie Foundation in 2005 announced a new elective Classification for Community Engagement. The foundation defines “community engagement” as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Commission on Public Purpose in Higher Education, n.d.). For the first time, a process was outlined that identified, defined, and certified what it means to be an “engaged” institution. In broad terms, the Four Areas of Practice ascertained that meaningful engagement includes data and assessment tracking, intentional practices, evidence of clear policies, and integration of design elements that explicitly link active community-based teaching and learning with the academic success of underrepresented students (Commission on Public Purpose in Higher Education, n.d.).

The Carnegie Classification is not an award. Rather, it is a road map to guide universities

in the process of institutionalizing community engagement, with the goal of improving universities’ educational effectiveness. It is similar to an accreditation process rather than a set of “checkbox” criteria. It requires universities to demonstrate continuous improvement, and universities must be certified by periodic reclassification.

The significance of engagement as central to the public and land-grant university mission was further reinforced in a publication sponsored by APLU’s Commission on Engagement and Outreach entitled *The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education*. In this document, the authors laid out an argument for engagement as an essential vehicle for the accomplishment of higher education’s most important goals. They note that “to thrive in the 21st century, higher education must move engagement from the margin to the mainstream of its research, teaching, and service work” (Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

The rhetorical shift from *outreach* to *engagement* understates the difficult work required to advance a university’s relationship with its community and to achieve the necessary shifts in mindset, practices, and institutional structures. When conducted with purpose and intentionality, community engagement is a collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, state, national, and sometimes global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources. Achieving this change is not as simple as substituting words in a mission statement or on a website. Reaching the overarching goal of engaged scholarship is dependent upon the creation of community-based *partnerships* nurturing two-way exchanges of expertise that address critical societal issues and contribute to the public good. These partnerships take advantage of the relationships between university knowledge and resources and public, private, nonprofit, and community actors to address mutual interests.

#### *Economic Engagement*

Another perspective on the evolution of university engagement is through the lens of economic development. Public universities, particularly land-grant universities, have always been an important part of the economic development of their communities. Because agriculture and manufacturing were two of the most important industries in the 18th century, improving agricultural productivity and the mechanical arts through research and

education was central to economic growth. The Morrill Act (1862) anticipated that land-grant universities would “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life”, and the act was based on the belief that an educated population was necessary for a democratic and prosperous society. The Hatch Act (1887) funded agricultural experiment stations “in order to aid in acquiring and diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects connected to agriculture.” Similarly, the Smith-Lever Act (1914) provided for the Cooperative Extension System (CES) “in order to aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same.” Thus, universities were harnessed to improve educational attainment and productivity toward the goal of building a prosperous nation.

Public and land-grant universities routinely engage with industry, state and local governments, and nonprofit organizations to align degree programs, research, and Extension programs around key areas of importance to local economies. To support these efforts, APLU created the Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) designation and award program, which recognizes, highlights, and documents superior examples of its member universities’ initiatives in support of community economic development (APLU, n.d.). The IEP designation recognizes universities that demonstrate an ongoing commitment to economic engagement with their communities. The designation defines economic engagement broadly in terms of talent and workforce development, innovation, entrepreneurship, technology-based economic development, and place development through public service, outreach, extension, and community engagement.

#### *Cooperative Extension and the Evolution of Engagement*

The CES has been a key component of land-grant universities’ engagement efforts. Since the passage of the Smith-Lever Act, the CES has operated through the nation’s land-grant universities in partnership with state and federal governments, with offices in virtually every county and parish in the nation. Its mission is to “[empower] farmers, ranchers, and communities of all sizes to meet the challenges they face, adapt to changing technology, improve nutrition and food

safety, prepare for and respond to emergencies, and protect our environment” (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d., para. 2).

As the evolution from outreach to engagement has advanced, so has the practice of engagement among Cooperative Extension professionals. Jorge Atilas, in a commentary on the APLU website (2017), provides a clear articulation of engagement in the context of extension:

In order to achieve the most impactful changes around critical issues, Extension educators and specialists must listen to community stakeholders, incorporate their feedback into the development of resources and evaluation tools, and pilot solutions with targeted audiences. County educators are critical to this process as they hold the credibility and trust of their local communities and ultimately will be the ones delivering the programs. An Extension program that does not follow this practice is not truly community engaged. Rather, it is a program created in isolation of the community, without its input and evaluation of effectiveness. (para. 7)

#### *The Potential of Engagement*

The mandates for full institutional engagement described above have not yet been fully met. But as the nation faces increasingly complex challenges—what some might call “wicked problems” such as climate change, economic inequality, public health emergencies, and disaster preparedness and resilience—public and land-grant universities must answer the call to become fully engaged with our communities and to become “boundary spanners” in a variety of contexts (Ramaley, 2014). The boundaries that public and land-grant universities must span include not only the boundaries between knowledge generated and held by the university and knowledge generated and held by the community but also boundaries between academic disciplines, between the different university units that engage with various communities, and between different universities that serve the same communities. This will require full institutional engagement that taps the talents of students, staff, and faculty as well as accelerated and coordinated contributions from multiple areas of academic and community expertise. The value of improving

the public understanding of science is a critical foundation, and an essential requirement, for successful engagement.

Land-grant universities have decades of experience and broad-ranging subject matter expertise in hundreds of disciplines, and they are uniquely equipped to help solve many of the grand challenges being addressed in our communities, states, nation, and world. Working alone is not a solution. Partnerships and collaborations with public and private entities in agriculture, public health, nutrition, health care, and beyond—as well as a substantial increase in resources—are imperative for success. These community-based solutions will emerge through research and technological innovation, engagement with local communities and outside partners, and training students to be the next generation of problem solvers. All relevant disciplines are present at public research universities, and with adequate resources and funding, universities should be able and willing to undertake this important work.

### **Engagement Enhances the Missions of Learning and Discovery**

The tripartite mission of public and land-grant universities is best served when all three factors are intertwined, with the community engagement arm of the mission enhancing both learning and discovery. Engaged learning and research practices can also deepen the university's relationships with its various communities, make these relationships more reciprocal, and confirm that the university is an open (rather than closed) system that generates mutual benefit with the community.

Ernest Boyer coined the term “engaged scholarship” to describe teaching and research that connect “the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems” (Boyer, 1996). Engaged scholarship denotes an orientation; engaged scholars direct their energies not solely toward an academic community or toward the life of the mind but also toward pressing public issues or shared problems. This orientation toward engagement can be applied to the teaching and research missions of the university to enhance their effectiveness and further their public purpose.

#### *Engaged Learning as a High-Impact Practice*

George Kuh (2008) identified community-based learning (CBL; also called community-engaged learning) as a high-impact practice for higher education. Qualitative and quantitative research has demonstrated the positive impacts of

CBL on a variety of learning and success metrics, including academic learning (Astin & Sax, 1998), effective writing (Feldman et al., 2006), cognitive development (Wang & Rodgers, 2006), knowledge application in a practical setting (Kendrick, 1996), and students' perceptions of their own learning—particularly among underrepresented groups (Finley & McNair, 2013). Engaged learning allows students to apply the knowledge and skills they learn in the classroom to meaningful service in the community. This application of knowledge—and student reflections on the value of their coursework—drives students to be more committed to civic engagement throughout their lives (Welch, 2009). Engaged learning opportunities can also give students important skills sought by employers, such as interpersonal skills (Celio et al., 2011) and leadership skills (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000).

Engaged scholarship can provide important benefits to faculty as well. Christina Marshall (2017) reported that faculty feel greater satisfaction when teaching CBL courses than when teaching other types of courses. This satisfaction flows from their observations of CBL's effects on students and the community and reflects their personal values (Marshall, 2017). Faculty also report being satisfied with CBL as a pedagogical approach due to its benefits to students and its potential to generate engaged scholarship. They gain insights from CBL that they don't get from other kinds of teaching (Gelmon et al., 2018). Faculty motivation increases if they feel that their institution is supportive of engaged learning and service-learning (Adkins, 2017). Thus, if the institution's mission and its reward structure reinforce the importance of engagement and engaged learning, faculty anticipate and perceive additional benefits.

#### *Engagement and the Broader Impacts of Research*

University engagement is also an important tool for improving the effectiveness of university research. Engaged research requires collaboration with community-based partners and “draw[ing] on multiple types of knowledge when defining research questions, developing research design, gathering and analyzing data and applying findings” (Swearer Center, n.d., para. 1). Engaged research is sometimes also referred to as community-based participatory research or participatory action research. It is designed to cocreate knowledge with community—in particular the community of users or beneficiaries of the research—and to integrate the knowledge of researchers with that of the community. This integration of community

and researcher knowledge reduces the “know-do gap” that can delay the implementation of effective practices. It can also reduce the risk of applying outdated science or approaches that simply will not work in particular contexts (Jull et al., 2017). Engaging with knowledgeable users and beneficiaries helps researchers gain a deeper understanding of the key issues facing communities, how results might be applied, and potential barriers to applying research findings. Overall, this increases the effectiveness of university research and speeds the translation of results into practice.

Effective engaged research can improve a university’s success in attracting federal funding. Federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health understand the importance of engaged research for research effectiveness and application. This is why they evaluate research proposals in part on their plans for generating what the agencies call “broader impacts.” According to the NSF Merit Review Criteria published in the NSF’s grant proposal guidelines, a variety of broader impacts goals are considered (ARIS, 2020). These goals—such as full participation of underrepresented minorities in STEM, increased public scientific literacy and engagement with science, improved well-being of individuals, and increased partnerships between universities and industrial and other sectors—can only be achieved when universities develop and implement plans for moving research results into society. That requires engagement with those who will use and those who will be affected by the results of that research.

Researchers, however, may not be familiar with the practices required for effective, ethical engaged research. Sarena Seifer and Cheryl Maurana (2000) offer principles that define the crucial elements of engaged scholarship, including measurable outcomes, mutual trust, asset identification, shared power, open communication, established roles, continuous feedback, shared accomplishments, and evolution of the partnership over time. Learning and practicing these principles effectively is a skill that university faculty and staff experienced in community engagement can offer to researchers who are new to engaged research (Commission on Public Purpose in Higher Education, n.d.).

A well-resourced and experienced research engagement office will have developed and nurtured community partnerships over years and can therefore broker positive research relationships by balancing their power dynamics, ensuring that community partners don’t feel

mistreated, and maintaining partnerships beyond participation in a particular project. By helping researchers demonstrate that a research project will generate broader impacts, and by assisting researchers with implementation of a broader impacts plan, engagement professionals contribute to the research mission of the university. They can improve a university’s proposal success rate and, more importantly, contribute to what APLU has called public impact research (APLU, 2019).

#### *Engagement as a Distinct Mission*

If a mission is a statement of why an organization exists, then engagement must be declared and embraced as a distinct mission of public and land-grant universities apart from its roles in learning and discovery. Achieving this vision requires considering engagement as part of strategic and resource allocation planning—just as resources are allocated to instructional faculty and laboratories.

The Kellogg Commission’s report *Returning to Our Roots* (1999) made a definitive declaration supporting the elevation of engagement as a core mission:

In the end, the clear evidence is that, with the resources and superbly qualified professors and staff on our campuses, we can organize our institutions to serve both local and national needs in a more coherent and effective way. We can and must do better. (p. 3)

The report went on to describe engagement as “redesigned teaching, research, and extension and service functions that are sympathetically and productively involved with the communities universities serve, however community is defined” (p. 9).

Engagement that is central to the university’s mission requires a variety of financing tools amid general constraints on resources. And yet, some of the most potent and traditional tools for engagement—Cooperative Extension and university engagement offices—routinely are treated as discretionary items whose funding rises and falls as the priorities of federal and state funders shift.

Beginning perhaps with Boyer’s work in the 1980s (Boyer & Hechinger, 1981), the emergence of a broad academic literature on the scholarship of engagement has sharpened our understanding of the land-grant mission itself, the role of Cooperative

Extension, and that part of the mission focused on meeting the needs of community stakeholders. Extension operations have experienced significant defunding, however, calling into question their continued public support, which until the 21st century had been considerable. It could be determinedly argued that most of the present-day fiscal challenges facing land-grant and other public institutions of higher learning are the result of their inability to demonstrate the return on investment to citizens, whose tax dollars are directed toward state-supported colleges and universities.

This inability to demonstrate the return on investment—and the skepticism of higher education that it creates among the public—has arrived alongside rising expectations related to the engagement mission. One of the most compelling and telling observations about the commitment to university-wide engagement was made by Stephen Gavazzi and Gordon Gee in their book *Land-Grant Universities for the Future* (2018). Drawing on interviews with 27 college presidents and chancellors, they explored the strengths and weaknesses of land-grant universities while examining the changing threats they face. Without a doubt, the anticipations of a broad range of constituencies and the additional scrutiny of the state legislative bodies that provide funding add expectations beyond just the education of students. In the end, the authors suggest that university leaders and supporters should become more fiercely “land-grant” in their orientation; that is, they should work more vigorously to uphold their community-focused missions through teaching, research, and service-oriented activities.

These comments illustrate the opportunity that university leaders have—but often miss—to treat engagement not just as an institutional priority but also as a means for reinforcing the civic value of higher education in society and thereby building institutional sustainability (Furco, 2010). Criticisms of higher education and doubt about the value of public investments typically focus on the relevance of research to the contemporary problems of society or the value of degrees to graduates and the economy. In response to that criticism, universities and their advocates must demonstrate the extent to which a university is part of the broader civic infrastructure of a community—infrastructure that improves return on investment not only in higher education but also in key areas such as K–12 education, workforce training, social services, and transportation. Virtually every area of public investment is affected in some way by

the involvement of higher education. Universities contribute to their communities not only by graduating students and conducting research but also by creating quality places, contributing to a community’s civic capacity, and promoting social equity (Martin, 2010).

Public university leaders must clearly communicate a three-part case for investment in community engagement: Engagement (a) increases student success and commits students to civic engagement, (b) focuses research on issues of importance to communities and magnifies and accelerates the impacts of research, and (c) creates value by building stronger communities—both through extension and, more importantly, through the alignment of engagement activities across the institution.

### **The Role of Extension in University-Wide Engagement**

The public and its representatives have raised expectations for the role of public research universities to not only graduate students but also lead the world in research and serve as economic engines for state and regional economies. Land-grant institutions can meet these expectations, in part, by harnessing Cooperative Extension to achieve university-wide engagement and thereby expand the presence of the main campus across the state. As this expectation is continually being defined and refined, the role of Cooperative Extension becomes part of the greater mission of the university.

While many have urged universities to embrace their engagement mission, the expansion of engagement via Cooperative Extension has sometimes been criticized. Extension has certainly come a long way since its inception in 1914 with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act, and some have expressed concern over its greater role. This was the focus of a General Accounting Office (GAO) report released in 1981 titled *Cooperative Extension Service’s Mission and Federal Role Need Congressional Clarification*. Scott Peters (2014) chronicles this event in an article titled “Extension Reconsidered,” which appeared in the Agriculture & Applied Economics Association’s *Choices* publication. Peters wrote that the GAO had two main motivations for drafting the 1981 report: (a) ideological views about the “proper” role and size of the federal government and (b) complaints from agricultural interest groups that Cooperative Extension had drifted away from its original mission and purpose.

According to the report, Extension's original purpose was "[to provide] farmers with information from agricultural research and to encourage them to adopt improved farming methods [that contribute] to the growth in productivity and efficiency of U.S. agriculture" (GAO, 1981, p. i-ii). In their conclusion, the authors implied that the federal government should not provide funding for anything that ranged beyond a narrow view of Extension's original focus. They wrote:

In contrast to its original focus on agriculture and home economics programs in primarily rural areas, the Cooperative Extension Service has expanded and is now active in rural, urban, and suburban communities and offers programs in social and economic problems and cultural, recreational, and leisure-time activities. Program changes, many of which have come about in the last 20 years, have resulted in differing opinions among the Extension Service's clientele, and even within the Extension Service itself, about the scope of the Extension Service's mission. GAO believes the Cooperative Extension Service's mission needs to be reviewed and clarified, particularly in the current atmosphere of budget tightening. (GAO, 1981, p. IV)

Partly in response to the GAO report, Paul Warner and James Christenson (1984/2019), two rural sociologists who were then based at the University of Kentucky, conducted a comprehensive national assessment of Cooperative Extension. Their study centered on the question of what Extension's role should be in the "information society of the 21st century." In their concluding chapter, the authors asked the following question: "Can an organization conceived in 1914 as a way to get farmers to adopt improved agricultural practices continue to be relevant when it celebrates its 100th birthday?" Responding to critics who were calling for Extension "to return to its original purpose of serving farmers" and to people who disapproved of the expanded mission and clientele described in the GAO report, Warner and Christenson (1984/2019) wrote:

Society, including agriculture, has changed, and one cannot merely "turn back the clock" to the agency's early days.

Furthermore, it could be argued that Extension's early history was not at all as it is now being portrayed. Extension played a key role in improving agricultural production, but it also stressed improved utilization of resources within the family, personal development, improved quality of life, and the improvement of the total community. (p. 126)

Despite these battles, Cooperative Extension's commitment to engagement has continued to advance. In early 1991, Myron Johnsrud, administrator for the CES at the USDA, and Richard Fowler, chair of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, released a report outlining the commitment of the CES of the 1990s to evolve into an organization that promotes partnerships and emphasizes efficiency, accountability, and clarity of their public message while working to meet the critical economic, social, environmental, and technological needs of people and communities (CES Strategic Planning Council, 1991). Extension's commitment to increased collaboration and cooperation with business and industry, with other agencies and organizations, and with other faculty/educators within and beyond the land-grant university system is multiplying program demand, delivery, and impact.

By all accounts, the role of Cooperative Extension must be a critical element within the greater mission of university engagement. Gavazzi and Gee's (2018) book *Land-Grant Universities for the Future* clearly outlined the idea that a covenant exists between the public and its institutions of higher learning, paying special attention to the private versus public good that accrues from activities undertaken by colleges and universities. They also noted that land-grant institutions' emphasis on the public good helped spur recognition for more sustained and coordinated engagement efforts between institutions and various community stakeholders, which in turn created a need for ways of organizing and recognizing these community engagement activities. They also closely examined how previous studies and reports on the role of land-grant university engagement contributed to the codification of relationships with community stakeholders. A broader role for Extension within the engagement infrastructure of the university is a fitting and necessary development if land-grant universities are to make good on their rhetoric of prioritizing the engagement mission.

Embracing this commitment, universities are beginning to respond by aligning their incentive structures with their engagement missions. Many universities have developed criteria for the promotion and tenure process that include performance metrics related directly to community engagement position responsibilities. The University of Minnesota's Review Committee on Community-Engaged Scholarship, for example, provides a model for incorporating engagement and publicly engaged scholarship within the promotion and tenure process (University of Minnesota, n.d.). Engagement-related criteria include products published in both traditional disciplinary outlets and nontraditional venues; multidisciplinary projects; products with multiple coauthors (including community partners who contribute to the work in significant ways); work that integrates research, teaching, and service in such a way that it is difficult to compartmentalize into a single category (e.g., only teaching, research, or service); and work that requires significant relationship building with external partners to maximize its quality and impact.

In the end, it should be Extension personnel, working closely with university leadership, who identify, define, and support the concept of the scholarship of engagement. While many universities have already elevated Extension to a new role within their greater commitment to engagement, there is still a limited, and antiquated, view of how Extension can be a valuable contributor to the tripartite land-grant mission.

### **Engagement Making a Real-World Difference**

In its 1999 *Returning to Our Roots* publication, the Kellogg Commission called on universities to deepen engagement with their communities. Among the seven guiding characteristics that the commission used to define an engaged institution, it discussed the integration of service into the teaching and research missions of the university. We have addressed the benefits of that integration above. The commission also called for *coordination* of engagement activities to ensure that these efforts lead to productive outcomes for students and communities.

For many campuses, even those with a strong culture of engagement, coordination may be one of the most difficult recommendations to fulfill. Faculty may have a strong interest in maintaining their own relationships with community partners for the purpose of developing community-based classes, research faculty may protect their research

partnerships with businesses, and university government and public affairs offices may cultivate relationships with alumni and community partners to provide advocacy and bolster financial and rhetorical support for the university. Extension may be focused on serving specific stakeholders in local communities without strong connections to the main campus.

Despite these disincentives for coordination, many universities are intentionally fostering coordination, resulting in benefits for campuses, students, and communities. Outreach and engagement programs can take on many different structures as they attempt to align efforts for maximum impact (Welch and Saltmarsh, 2013). As institutional leadership changes, these efforts are often reorganized to fit the strategic vision of the new leader. Reporting lines and organizational charts thus aren't as important as the strategic goals that are used to align assets around a common set of objectives (Oaks et al., 2009).

Institutions use a variety of methods to accomplish this coordination. North Carolina State University (NC State), for instance, employs an engagement operations council (EOC), a campus-wide working group of administrators and faculty with engagement or extension responsibilities. The EOC also includes a representative from one strategic community stakeholder to provide a partner voice in deliberations. The EOC gives all departments that participate in outreach and engagement the opportunity to share information, develop joint programming, and coordinate university and systemwide engagement activity.

NC State's Rural Works! program demonstrates the potential of this collaborative system. Rural Works! places NC State undergraduate students in internships with employers in rural communities throughout North Carolina. These internships are paid positions for students and include an orientation, career coaching, and opportunities to participate in civic life in rural communities. The program has placed 107 students in 30 counties across North Carolina, offering employers access to talented students, assistance with projects, support in creating and sustaining the internship position, and an opportunity to showcase their rural communities as a good place for talented students to build careers.

Rural Works! only works because of strong collaboration and constant sharing of information among partners. The program was intentionally created as a partnership between NC State's Division of Academic and Student Affairs, NC

State's Office of Outreach and Engagement, and NC State Extension. All NC State partners assist by sharing information about community partners throughout the state that may be interested in hosting an intern. The Rural Works! program manager cultivates these partnerships and communicates back to the campus partners about the status of the internships to ensure that everyone is informed and that NC State presents a united front. Rural Works! forcefully answers the calls from the Kellogg Commission as well as Gavazzi and Gee to elevate extension to more sustained and coordinated engagement efforts that are connected more closely with campus-based engagement.

The University of Missouri System (UM System) offers another example of a successful, coordinated approach to extension. Beyond building partnerships across campuses, the University of Missouri has positioned extension as a systemwide resource and has aligned extension and outreach activities across the UM System. Marshall Stewart, vice chancellor for Extension and engagement at the University of Missouri, also serves as the chief engagement officer for the UM System. This dual role functions as a single point of accountability for the system's engagement activities throughout the state. Engagement is one of the five Missouri compacts, or unifying principles, that guide the four universities in the system and their strategic plans.

Engagement leaders on each campus convene to discuss priority areas, share information, and advance important projects. These leaders provide a connection to the faculty and staff on their respective campuses, and these faculty and staff, in turn, can offer expertise that addresses the system's priorities. A platform called All Things Missouri provides data, maps, and tools in service of the university's engagement mission, with a particular focus on the UM System's three "grand challenges" of economy, education, and health. The All Things Missouri platform currently supports projects in three areas of system engagement activity: workforce development, health engagement, and expansion of broadband access.

The UM System Broadband Initiative demonstrates the power of this model. By bringing together the University of Missouri Extension with expert faculty from the fields of rural economic development, data analysis, communications infrastructure, technology, business models, public administration, and grant writing, the system has been able to help communities assess their needs, identify available financing, and educate the public

on how to use broadband-based applications. The Missouri Broadband Resource Rail shares this information with local communities, and the University of Missouri Extension helps communities develop plans for expanding broadband access in their communities. Lessons from a pilot project in one poorly connected county will be folded into a Digitally Connected Community Guide. The initiative is also monitoring the results of \$290 million in broadband expansion projects that were funded in 2020.

In a similar effort to span boundaries between institutions, Oregon State University (OSU), the University of Oregon (U of O), and Portland State University (PSU) embarked on a partnership called Toward One Oregon. The objectives of this effort were to explore the interdependencies among different populations in Oregon and to promote dialogue and problem-solving that would reap benefits for both rural and urban communities. This effort combined the assets of OSU Extension, OSU's Rural Studies Center, PSU's School of Urban Studies and Planning, and U of O's School of Planning, Public Policy, and Management. The collaboration netted a conference and a book (Hibbard et al., 2011) that described how the state's population and economy evolved throughout history to their present state as well as the resource flows and issues that connect them. For example, the book described how natural resources, energy, and taxes flow between urban and rural areas and how urban and rural economies are linked through supply chains. The editors, representing all three institutions, also led a series of conversations funded by Oregon Humanities about connecting rural and urban parts of the state. These efforts led to a group of collaborative projects between OSU and PSU that also engaged community organizations in addressing issues such as regional food systems (Martin et al. 2008) and access to land for aspiring farmers (Brekken et al., 2016).

The success of any campus-wide engagement effort begins with university leadership. When Montana State University (MSU) in Bozeman, Montana, first began to develop an application for recognition from the Carnegie Foundation's Classification for Community Engagement, the process was a journey in self-study and critical evaluation of community partnerships. The true purpose of community engagement is not simply to chronicle events, activities, and relations that occur off-campus but rather to demonstrate how the university expands. The nomination procedure required careful consideration of how the

knowledge and resources of colleges, departments, and associated units working with public and private sectors actually enriched scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhanced teaching and learning; prepared educated, engaged citizens; strengthened democratic values and civic responsibility; addressed critical societal issues; and contributed to the public good.

MSU's application highlighted 15 university-community partnerships as examples of community engagement. Those partnerships ranged from one program that works to improve the health and well-being of members of the Apsáalooke Nation, to another that conducts long-term research trials to select suitable pulse crop varieties that meet the needs of growers in northeastern Montana, to a third that studies the effectiveness of support services for children with disabilities and their families. According to MSU president Waded Cruzado:

It's important to recognize that MSU would not have been able to achieve this classification without the dedication of our faculty. In almost every case, these projects were the brainchildren of faculty who deeply believe in working with communities to improve Montana and the world. (Cantrell, 2020)

In a final example, Illinois Extension promotes an Extension Public Engagement Connection Center that is designed to fund collaborative work among University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign researchers and Extension personnel. Grants will support discovery and translation of university research into applied information and education that will be disseminated through Extension's statewide network, with the goal of applied use by the target audience. The programs listed above, and many others, are thus devoting resources to the promotion of collaboration between the university, Extension, and community partners.

## Conclusions

Land-grant university leaders must align all engagement resources toward the common goal of deepening engagement to address important societal issues. To do otherwise risks missing an opportunity to offer and articulate greater value to the public. University engagement is most effective when it aligns the university's assets toward a set of institution-wide priorities that are determined in partnership with community. These assets include

not only campus-based engagement offices that promote engaged learning but also research offices that build long-term partnerships to promote engaged research. Cooperative Extension offices that develop and nurture two-way communication channels between the university and the many communities it serves are also critical as they implement on-the-ground programs to address community needs.

To be an engaged organization, Cooperative Extension must constantly evolve to stay current with the scholarship of engagement, embrace transdisciplinary practices, and focus on the public value created when universities and their community partners find common ground on what matters to academics, practitioners, administrators, elected officials, and community members. This is a natural next step for Cooperative Extension. Since its inception in 1914, Cooperative Extension has been a world leader in extending the presence of land-grant universities across all corners of a state, and Extension programs are recognized as the largest informal educational agencies for excellence in agricultural production, human sciences, nutrition, and youth development.

It must be noted that not all programmatic activities and initiatives led by Extension programs can be classified as "engagement." However, to be relevant in the greater university mission of engagement, keeping in mind the core principles outlined by the 1999 Kellogg Commission report, Extension cannot afford to remain on the sidelines waiting to be asked to participate. Rather, it must become a proactive player in the engagement mission of the greater university.

Cooperative Extension faculty, staff, and community partners must be brought to the conversation on engagement in a thoughtful and deliberate approach. They can enhance the significance of university engagement by designing programs that include all partners and by determining up front the mutually intended values of their engagement work. New techniques and practices that highlight the collective impact of this alignment and the community return on investment will be necessary to better communicate the value of engagement.

The benefits of an aligned set of engagement resources can only be realized if strategy, investment, and incentives reinforce a commitment to engagement. Bold pronouncements of an engaged institution don't reap benefits—and they can backfire in the absence of real commitment. Each engagement asset must understand and

participate in the engagement strategy. The connection that Cooperative Extension provides to each community offers the potential to amplify and communicate the university's impact to the broadest base of university stakeholders and to highlight the value of Extension to the three missions of the land-grant university: learning, discovery, and engagement.

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