Even in Hard Times, Colleges Should Help Their Communities

ECONOMIC NEWS TODAY is filled with discussion about whether the United States has entered a recession. For me and other presidents of public colleges and universities, however, whether the downturn can be labeled a recession is far less important than dealing with the effects of economic conditions on our institutions.

How do we set priorities among the variety of worthwhile demands on university resources and protect the long-term interests and quality of our institution?

During hard times, both public and private institutions may be tempted to become more insular and reduce investment in activities that are sometimes considered tangential to our core missions of teaching, research, and service. A prime example is engagement with local and regional communities. But that temptation should be resisted. The connections between universities and our communities are essential to our core functions and are increasingly vital to our continuing success as well as the long-term prosperity of the nation's cities, regions, and states.

When I arrived as president at Virginia Commonwealth University in 1990, Virginia was experiencing its worst recession in decades, and state support for the university had been reduced considerably. At the same time, I could sense that the people at the university and our supporters in the community believed that our stagnant population was substantial. We were optimistic that the university's basic assets would have more impact in the future than would a temporary decline in the state economy.

For example, our location in a metropolitan area with a state capital provided a remarkable laboratory for instruction and research, in addition to a variety of future employers. Our medical center offered state-of-the-art treatment for the most serious conditions while also providing the vast majority of uninsured care in the community. And a decade before Richard Florida documented the importance of "creative classes" in urban economic development, our School of the Arts was valued for its vibrancy it brought to the Richmond community.

To capitalize on these assets, we began to create mutually beneficial partnerships with a range of organizations across the region. The business leaders in the community understood the importance of a first-rate university to the city and region's progress, even if many of them had attended other institutions. In the midst of the recession, they endorsed and helped support the creation of a school of engineering. As part of a negotiation between Motorola and the Commonwealth of Virginia about an economic-incentive package that could bring the company to Richmond, the engineering school was equipped with a $10 million "clean room," a state-of-the-art facility for scientific research and development.

At the request of the business leaders, we began planning a research park in downtown Richmond, where we have grown into a major high-tech employer. We also began a Community Service Associates Program at the university in the 1990s that enabled community organizations to acquire a vital resource for a semester or a part-time basis. Faculty members worked with schools, nonprofit organizations, and state and local agencies on projects of mutual interest—improving child care, enhancing infant health, revitalizing neighborhoods—while the president's office paid their academic departments for their time.

Over these years, more than 300 community projects have been supported by the expertise of our faculty.

The partnerships that we established during a punishing economic period served as the foundation for enhancing our instructional, research, and public-service missions. They brought resources to the university that the state could not possibly provide. They energized our faculty members, students, and administrators at a time when it would have been easy to hide in the nearest academic bunker and wait for the good times to return. Perhaps more important than anything else, those partnerships helped to shape a sharpened sense of university identity, both internally and externally. Our university was viewed across disciplines to develop innovative approaches to important scientific and societal issues, we translated our research from basic findings to benefits for patient care or social justice, and we used our urban location as an opportunity for scholarly work and student instruction.

Since that time, we have constantly worked to create new partnerships that enhance our instructional, research, and public-service missions. Of the more than $200 million in annual grant and contract support for our College of Humanities and Sciences, almost half is for community-based research projects. With the help of a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, our psychology department now works with the Richmond public schools to reduce the level of youth violence in the community. In recent weeks, our education school and the department of psychiatry in our medical school have developed a collaboration with a local elementary school that specializes in educating children with autism. The elementary school benefits from the educational and treatment programs that our faculty members, graduate students, and medical-school residents provide, while they receive hands-on training that would be almost impossible to obtain otherwise.

At the same time, we have learned how to connect the physical growth of the campus to our interest in revitalizing the areas around the university, including a predominantly African-American neighborhood contiguous with our campus where we have worked with residents on their concerns about education and public safety. We have focused on enhancing Broad Street, a main thoroughfare of downtown Richmond that had seen far better times. We have invested $100 million in the Broad Street corridor—for a new recreation and convocation center, a fine-arts building, a bookstore, a parking deck, student residences, and the largest sports complex in central Virginia—which has spurred an additional $100 million in private investment. Developers have rehabilitated formerly underused and abandoned buildings for a variety of residential and commercial purposes.

A joint study by CEOs for Cities and Michael Porter's Initiative for a Competitive Inner City lauded the impact of those investments on the quality of life for the surrounding, predominantly minority neighborhoods. It noted that Lowe's was the first hardware and home-renovation retailer to locate in Richmond's central city and that Kroger was the first major supermarket to come to Richmond in over a decade.

As the knowledge economy becomes more sophisticated, the country's towns, cities, and regions need more of everything that universities have to offer; be it students who are well trained for jobs, scientific expertise, medical skills to provide trauma and other health care, vibrant arts events and performances, or the cultural and historical understandings that enable a community to negotiate its differences and potential tensions more productively. Put simply, universities are becoming indispensable partners in almost every major activity in which society is engaged.

Some commentators have wondered whether universities have too many constituencies, some of which divert attention from our core missions. But in recent years, it has become increasingly apparent that more community and regions and, in the United States and abroad, are coming to believe that developing stronger partnerships with their local universities is crucial to their capacity to flourish and provide their citizens with a worthwhile life. We can build the kind of partnerships that sustain our basic activities, help bring resources to us, and enable our faculty members and students to become engaged with a wonderful set of challenges.

Only a few decades ago, the impetus to create significant external partnerships was essentially limited to either traditional land-grant institutions or public institutions that had been created with a specific urban mission. But the evidence increasingly shows that universities of all kinds are seeing the value of collaborative endeavors in their communities.

I was intrigued by Evan S. Lieberman's recent list of the 25 colleges and universities that are "best neighbors" and "saviors of our cities." Dobbsie, a former president of the New England Board of Higher Education and promoter of higher-education investment in communities, included a number of the country's most prominent private universities in his top 10. Today Ivy League universities like Yale University and the University of Pennsylvania have received recognition for the way they perform in New Haven and West Philadelphia. At Penn, for example, the university's basic identity is embodied in Benjamin Franklin's belief that knowledge should be extended into the community to benefit society. On the other side of the country, the University of Southern California has been a leader in community engagement while simultaneously transforming its academic base.

That model of the university is drawing increasing attention around the world. At the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the links between major science programs and large companies have generated new resources for entire departments. At Virginia Commonwealth, we have established 16 major partnerships with universities around the world in which we exchange students, collaborate on research, and share best practices. In my conversations with the presidents, rectors, and boards of our partner institutions, they are usually most interested in how we have attempted to build partnerships that foster local and regional economic development.

Equally important, universities have become indispensable participants in the capacity of cities, regions, and states to shape their futures in a way that is beneficial to their citizens. That is a responsibility that we must assume and that cannot be casually discarded whenever economic conditions are less than desirable. One could easily make the case that it is in these very times that our expertise is most needed. In the contemporary university, collaborative relationships with external clients are not an add-on, but essential to the success of our core missions.

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