

The Changing Roles of Land-Grant Universities and Colleges

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The roles land-grant universities and colleges play are changing, but the strong commitment to serve society remains the same.

Before I elaborate, a look at history is in order. Land-grant institutions are part of a national system created in the midst of the Civil War, as part of the country's reexamination of its commitment to equality for all its citizens. The system has developed a unique, tripartite mission as the result of federal legislation. First, by the Morrill Act of 1862, these institutions were charged with offering practical and liberal education.

Second, by the 1887 Hatch Experiment Station Act, these universities and colleges were charged with conducting research. Third, by the 1914 Smith-Lever Act, these higher education institutions were further charged with the extension of education to the citizens of their areas.

The creation of what were then farmer's high schools or colleges assured that educational opportunities so necessary for the social and economic development of our country would be available to all without regard to social class or economic status. This revolutionary concept established that educated individuals, regardless of their social and economic origins, would be the primary contributors, the common symbol of our country's development. What was once revolutionary is now widely accepted and commonly claimed.

In the late 1950s, Edward Danforth Eddy, Jr., said in his book *Colleges for Our Land and Time: The Land-Grant Idea in America* that it was partially through the efforts of land-grant institutions that "higher education came to be regarded as not so much a luxury as a national necessity." What was true then is true now. Higher education is a necessary part of our lives as a contributor to social and economic development.

With this historical context in mind, let us look at the changes occurring in land-grant higher education. Because of their heritage, land-grant higher education institutions are often thought of as contributing mainly to agriculture. This commitment to agriculture will never be forsaken. For example, more plentiful and less expensive food is possible today thanks to the knowledge about plants and animals gained through research at land-grant institutions. Another example is

land-grant research in agricultural marketing. It has meant the difference between crops remaining unsold or being "tailored" to meet the needs of other nations.

We first saw land-grant institutions making a significant impact in an economy moving from an agricultural to an industrial base. And this impact continues today and will continue into the 21st century, as society moves from an industrial to an information economy.

"Land-grants" are leaders in helping quench society's thirst for knowledge as it prepares and, in some cases, retools itself for life in an information economy. One example is educating society in places other than the traditional "halls of ivy" on a main campus. Through satellites and microwave systems, telecommunication networks are making interactive "electronic classrooms" possible. In such classrooms, a professor in one location teaches students in many different "away from the main campus" locations, including plant sites.

And "land-grants" have taken the concept they pioneered with extension offices serving agriculture and natural resource needs and applied it to assist small businesses. The results are small-business development centers. More and more land-grant professors are becoming consultants to industry. Their expertise in everything from robotics and employee relations to computer programs and quality circles is sought by business.

We are at a significant point in the development of the relationship between land-grant higher education and the business community. Higher education used to stay aloof from direct involvement with business. I believe "land-grants" helped change this relationship. Today, professor-consultants to business are common. Also, businesses are using land-grant university and college research findings for commercial application. Why has this happened? For one reason, land-grant universities and colleges must increasingly support themselves from nonpublic sources. For another, we are seeing a stronger interaction between business and higher education in funding of research and teaching programs.

Truly, the roles of land-grant universities and colleges are changing. Not to change would be to stagnate. Because of their flexibility, "land-grants" have been at the forefront of making higher education a "national necessity."

In my mind, the ability to stay in touch with the needs of society is a cornerstone of land-grant higher education. Important characteristics of the land-grant system and its members as educational institutions are the abilities to assess their environment, design constructive change, and confidently initiate those changes.

I am confident that whatever society's needs, land-grant universities and colleges will serve them with their own special kind of education, keeping alive the aim and spirit of land-grant higher education when it was created over 100 years ago.