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## Teaching Excellence: The Core of the Land-Grant Mission

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## Teaching Excellence: The Core of the Land-Grant Mission

### Cover Page Footnote

This article is derived from the keynote address of the same name made by the author at the Empowering Teaching Excellence conference held on August 14, 2019 on the campus of Utah State University.

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# Teaching Excellence: The Core of the Land-Grant Mission

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## Abstract

The tripartite mission of the land-grant university – teaching, research, and community engagement – has evolved over the course of the past 150 years. The intensified concentration on empirical activities in the last half century, however, is thought to have created a mission-related imbalance that often has relegated teaching and community engagement activities to second-tier status within the academy. In tandem, there have been several unforced errors on the part of universities that have diminished the public’s belief in the return on investment associated with a college degree. The argument is made for an increased emphasis on teaching and learning activities in order to properly align the land-grant mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs of our nation.

Keywords: land-grant, teaching, university, mission

## Introduction

Through three separate acts of the U.S. Congress – the Morrill Act of 1862, the Hatch Act of 1877, and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 – land-grant universities were assigned a tripartite mission: to teach, to conduct research, and to provide service to communities (Abramson, Damron, Dicks, & Sherwood, 2014). From 1862 onward, America’s first public universities have modified their efforts in each of these three domains in order to respond to a variety of internal and external pressures. As we look to begin the third decade of the twenty-first century, it seems reasonable to ask the question: How well-balanced is the land-grant mission at this moment in time?

## The Intensified Focus on Research

One thing seems abundantly clear: land-grant institutions have become ever more focused on empirical activities. The Hatch Act of 1877 mentioned above provided the expectation and (to some modest extent) the financial support for land-grant universities to engage in research. At first, research activities were almost exclusively aimed at agricultural issues, but after several decades these efforts became focused on a variety of mechanical, manufacturing, medical, and social concerns as well. From the post-WWII years onward, however, the federal government began to make a great deal of money available in the form of grants that would provide support for university-centered research activities. As a result, scholars from land-grant universities started to compete for these grant dollars with faculty members from other public and private institutions (Duderstadt, 2012).

It is my contention that, while these scholarly endeavors have resulted in countless inventions and discoveries that have benefited society, this intensified concentration on research also has served to destabilize the land-grant mission. So much so, in fact, that there is a real danger that teaching efforts and community engagement activities have been relegated to second-tier status in comparison to research efforts. As a direct response to this turn of events, the present paper calls for a determined effort to rebalance efforts within the three primary components of the land-grant mission.

## The Land-Grant Study

The foundation of thinking on this topic comes from the interviews contained in the 2018 book *Land-Grant Universities for the Future: Higher Education for the Public Good* that I co-wrote with West Virginia University President E. Gordon Gee (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018). A total of 27 land-grant presidents and chancellors were asked to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing their institutions as they worked to meet the needs of those communities they were designed to serve. A thematic analysis of the resulting qualitative data generated seven central themes, posed in dialectical fashion to account for the dynamic tensions facing these senior leaders. In no specified order of importance, these themes included the following:

1. Concerns about funding declines versus the need to create efficiencies
2. Research prowess versus teaching and service excellence
3. Knowledge for knowledge's sake versus a more applied focus
4. The focus on rankings versus an emphasis on access and affordability

5. Meeting the needs of rural communities versus the needs of a more urbanized America
6. Global reach versus closer-to-home impact
7. The benefits of higher education versus the devaluation of a college diploma

The second theme—research prowess versus teaching and service excellence – rather neatly captures the central issue advanced in the present paper. Here, university presidents and chancellors voiced the enormous pride they felt in the scholarly accomplishments of land-grant institutions alongside their clear concerns about the lagging emphasis on excellence in teaching and community engagement. These senior leaders clearly wished for a greater balance between the three components of the land-grant mission, yet saw formidable obstacles getting in the way. Not the least of these stumbling blocks was the relative ease by which research excellence could be determined—number of publications, impact factors, citation indices, grant dollars received, etc.—in comparison to certain challenges that were associated with measuring excellence in teaching and community engagement activities (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018).

Of course, this situation is changing rapidly. We are witnessing centers of teaching excellence being developed all over the country (and world) in parallel with various actions being taken by university researchers to standardize the assessment of high-quality teaching methods and their impact. The efforts of the Empowering Teaching Excellence (ETE) program at Utah State University and the concurrent development of this journal serve stellar examples in this regard. The ETE program provides conferences, workshops, seminars, and other activities that showcase and encourage evidence-based teaching practices, while the *Journal on Empowering Teaching Excellence* allows for the dissemination of ideas and best practices.

On the community engagement front, similar efforts are being undertaken to measure and otherwise classify best practices. Perhaps most noteworthy along these latter lines is the Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) designation that has been developed by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU, 2017), a mechanism that allows universities to document their economic impact through the development of meaningful partnerships. As well, the Engaged Scholarship Consortium is perhaps the most well-known professional organization dedicated to the strengthening of campus-community relationships while providing outlets for engaged scholarship through the maintenance of two peer-reviewed journals: the *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* and the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*.

Hence, land-grant universities are rapidly finding themselves in a place where the lack of concrete measures of excellence in teaching and community engagement is no longer an excuse for devaluing efforts in these domains. The challenge in rebalancing the mission of the land-grant university will be to change the culture of the institution itself, one that has fallen

into the habit of placing the highest value on research methods. Ironically, the current imbalance runs counter to what the average citizen expects of its public universities. For example, one study asked participants what they would do if they were responsible for making decisions about how public money is spent on higher education. On average, respondents gave 45% of the funds to teaching, 30% to off-campus educational and technical help (associated with the community engagement work of Cooperative Extension Services), and only 25% to research (Warner, Christenson, Dillman, & Salant, 1996).

## Unforced Errors

The fourth theme discussed in the Gavazzi and Gee (2018) book – the focus on rankings versus an emphasis on access and affordability – spotlights one of several “unforced errors” made by land-grant universities that have had a deleterious impact on the public’s evaluation of the return on investment associated with funding these institutions of higher learning. Efforts to chase reputation-based national rankings of colleges and universities such as U.S. News and World Report have had an adverse effect on the land-grant university’s ability to serve those working-class students – originally termed the “industrial classes” – who were named as the primary beneficiaries of the original Morrill Act of 1862. This is due in large part to the fact that one of the most powerful ways to move up in these rankings is to increase the average standardized test scores of your incoming freshmen class, and these educational attainment measures are skewed toward higher-income students (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018).

The changing demographics of students served by land-grant universities have coincided with a shift in citizens’ perceptions that a college degree is more of a “private good” than a “public good” (Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2005). Why, the thinking goes, should tax dollars be put toward the support of college students whose parents can afford to pay the tuition? Further exacerbating this issue is the fact that the competition to recruit students with stellar entrance exam scores costs a great deal of money. As a result, the need to offer merit-based aid to attract these high-performance students takes away from funds that could be put toward more needs-based aid for those students coming from families who do not have the resources to send their sons and daughters to college.

In addition to the 27 presidents and chancellors interviewed for our book, my colleague and I also talked to 35 thought leaders in the higher education realm, including state lawmakers, accrediting body officials, policymakers, think tank affiliates, and so on. To a person, *not one individual* believed that any university – private or public, land-grant or otherwise – should be concerned with their ranking in U.S. News and World Report. Thus, I maintain that there is a great need for land-grant universities to return to their historical roots in terms

of the students who should be served by their teaching efforts. Such efforts necessarily will involve further cultural change, including those governing board members (typically called boards of trustees, boards of regents, and the like) who often as not have been the driving forces (and certainly the supportive cast) behind the chasing of national rankings.

Another unforced error is occurring within the academy itself, and this one is centered directly on how research efforts are described to the public at large. Universities have shown a tendency to brag about the amount of research dollars that are awarded and expended to their institutions. There is more than a bit of irony here, and the absurdity surrounding this type of boastfulness cannot be understated. First and foremost, the average citizen who hears that a university has been awarded \$500 million in grant money rather quickly will conclude that the institution now needs even less money from the public coffers. Second, and tragically, the intake of that amount of funding will end up costing that university, on average, about \$600 million. This means that an institution with a half a billion dollars in research funding will have to find an additional \$100 million from other sources (tuition, development dollars, etc.) to cover the 20% shortfall that typically occurs when all true costs associated with the research efforts are accounted for (Newfield, 2016).

## **A Return to the Land-Grant Roots**

What if, instead of bragging about total research dollars, universities alternatively boasted about the number of scientists that were trained as a direct result of the studies being supported by that grant funding? This would underscore the direct connection back to the teaching mission of the university, in this case, the development of graduate students who will finish their studies and take their place as part of the next generation of professionals working in our businesses and industries. And internally, what if we similarly evaluated (and thus rewarded) research efforts not on the total amount of funding awarded and publications arising from those grant dollars (the coin of the realm right now) but rather on the number of students who were trained by the faculty member, as well as the number of students who were co-authors on their scientific papers?

Again, we likely are talking about a culture change of epic proportions. And yet, if the trend lines of funding from state governments are any indication of what is to come, what do we have to lose? On the contrary, then, it seems to be the case that we might have everything to gain from this sort of return to our historical roots as a land-grant university. The thought leaders interviewed for the Gavazzi and Gee (2018) study were very clear about the “formula for success” regarding land-grant universities. Become more efficient with the public funding you receive at present. Err on the side of emphasizing teaching excellence and community

engagement. If you are going to conduct research, make certain you can discuss the applied (practical) significance of your efforts. Forget about national rankings and instead focus on access and affordability. Stop talking about rural versus urban issues and instead focus on what all communities need right now. And pay attention to closer to home impact, even when you are interested in doing something internationally.

Together, these are sorts of steps that can return the land-grant university to its historical roots and mission. At the very center of this call to action is the essential role of our faculty members, those individuals who can extend their instructional efforts to include both research activities and community engagement as appropriate to the students and situations in which they are conducting their work. And, as they work within this sort of framework, their efforts inevitably will meet community stakeholders where they are located, thus encouraging citizens to once again think about our land-grant institutions as the “people’s universities.”

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