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The Role of the University in the Community, delivered at the ASAP Conference on October 4, 1990

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Your conference planners for this American Society for Public Administration meeting have asked those of us on this panel to offer our perspectives on what the role of the university should be in the community. As we begin this four-day conference, it seems to me that your ASPA organization itself could well serve as the activated reality of the ideal merger we in the universities strive to achieve with the communities we serve. In fact, I understand that one of the primary reasons for creating ASPA in the first place was to provide a forum in which professors from the hallowed halls of academia who teach courses in public administration could brainstorm and break bread with the professional practitioners who are out there in the trenches actually administrating for the public's greater good.

And certainly there is a need on both sides for better communication and more cooperation between the worlds of public administration on a university campus and public administration in the market place. On behalf of the university world, I can assure you that we need to hear from those of you out there getting the job done what it is we have or have not done well in preparing you for your work.

It is precisely gatherings like this one that help keep us university types from getting too absorbed in our own brilliant theories. We need to be reminded by you public administrators that the
true proof of the intellectual puddings we cook up lies in whether or not they taste good in the real world. Researching and theorizing about public policy derives its meaning from what really works to improve the quality of life for our citizenry.

We university people need you public administrators to help keep us focused on reality—to prevent us from getting too caught up in counting strophes in Sophocles—a legitimate risk faced by holders of Ph.Ds. One university wit alluded to that danger, and voiced what some of you in this room have likely had occasion to believe about universities. I quote: "When a subject becomes totally obsolete, we make it a required course!"

But having said that, I also assert that it is these same intellectual and research resources of our country's universities that have the most to contribute to the communities in which they are located and where we serve. It seems to me from the university's side, that is the first principle of what we can and should offer the community in our interactive relationship.

A university by definition pulls together an intelligent, highly trained faculty, provides them with a totality of accumulated knowledge in print and on disc, and then sets them up with sophisticated laboratories where they can conduct original research. Neither the public nor the private sector can match this rich triad of intellectual possibilities. And yet if this country's cities are to survive and thrive in an increasingly complex world, they simply must keep up with ever increasing megabites of information and accelerating changes in technology. In short, that means our communities must have access to our university's resources.
In West Michigan where my school, Grand Valley State University, is located, one particular mechanism for providing this access is called The Research and Technology Institute of West Michigan. Grand Valley is part of a consortium with Michigan State, Western Michigan, Ferris State, and Grand Rapids Junior College that offers our community's manufacturers our combined pool of university specialists and advanced technology to help them solve some of the real-life problems of industry.

If the Fortune 500 companies in this country have their own Research and Development departments, most businesses in this country do not. In my state of Michigan where it's the Big Three auto makers who get the Wall Street Journal headlines, the fact is that 5,900 of the state's manufacturers employ between 20 and 500 people. In the West Michigan community Grand Valley serves directly, 97% of the 3,000 area manufacturers have 500 or fewer employees--75% of those companies have fewer than 50 workers. I don't need to tell you that those businesses do not have anything resembling an R and D department! Yet for these small businesses to survive in an ever more competitive global market, they must be able to tap into state-of-the-art research facilities. That's where the university must make itself available to the community.

One small company in Muskegon, Michigan, for instance, makes chemical solvents used in laboratory testing. For safety reasons, the glass bottles containing the volatile solvents must be encased in a second bottle made of plastic, on the order of the milk containers you buy in the grocery store and step on to recycle.
That plastic outer jacket is a protection in case the glass container breaks because the chemicals can be highly flammable. And the chemical solvents can’t be put directly into the plastic containers because the purity of the solvents would be contaminated by the plastic in the container.

The chemical company’s problem was that since the chemical solvents with their glass and plastic jackets are often stored in refrigerators, the outer plastic had to be tough enough to resist shattering if the bottle happened to get dropped at cold temperatures. The outer plastic jackets also had to be resistant to the variety of chemical compounds they might be exposed to.

The problem for the small Muskegon company was that while their plastic containers were both resistant to cracking when cold and impervious to other chemicals, they were also opaque. That meant the labels on the glass bottles inside the no-see-through plastic jackets could not be read. The danger was that a bottle of chemical solvent could be put in the wrong plastic jacket with no double check because the label on the glass could not be read through the dark plastic outer container.

By taking advantage of the university’s computerized access to all the latest advances in polymer materials, the Muskegon company had instant information sources it could not possibly have found alone. The RTI then located all the manufacturers of potential materials for the plastic containers, got samples, and began testing until they found a product at the the high end of the low-density polytheses with the properties—translucence plus chemical and impact resistance—that the Muskegon company needed.
Final testing was done in a steel-reinforced concrete pad in a laboratory at Michigan State University and the resulting improved plastic solved the chemical company's problem and even gave them a new marketable product they could sell by manufacturing the improved plastic containers.

Some of the military tanks that have since gone to the deserts of Saudi Arabia were found to have a design problem when the shock waves from firing the tank's guns impaired the accuracy of the tank's rate gyro. Since the gyro was made in Grand Rapids, the manufacturer came to RTI for help. Using engineers from the participating universities, RTI discovered that the shock absorbers used to mount the gyro were inadequate to the job.

University people—one a systems engineer, another an expert in materials and fluids, and still another a specialist in inertial reference—combined their knowledge and technical resources, including a scanning electron microscope, to study the problem. The result was a redesigned shock mount made of a new material and in a different size to protect the gyro from the impact of the gun's firing.

While no one in this room hopes the resulting improved firing accuracy on the Army's tanks will have to get tested on the Iraqis, the fact that they will work better if they must be used is a far-reaching global testimony to the importance of the interaction between the university and the manufacturing community.

A second principle of university-community cooperation, it seems to me, is determined by the simple geographical reality of a shared locale. The concept of neighborhood demands that both university and the greater community have common interests from roads to fire
protection to crime, and we need to pay attention to each other. One of the most obvious crossovers by proximity between university and community is the public school system because many of its graduates enroll on our campuses. That means universities have a vested interest in what kind of job the local schools are doing as well as a moral obligation to offer our resources to make them better.

Grand Valley State University has established a partnership with an inner-city grade school in Grand Rapids that we chose precisely because it had a constellation of the economic, social, health, and learning problems that typify the struggles of this country's urban public schools. This grade school gives us the chance to offer interdisciplinary support beginning with our students preparing to become teachers.

Our teacher-education students work one-on-one with children having learning disabilities providing the individual help needed and allowing the classroom teacher more time to help other students.

Our university's art and music departments are coming into this city grade school to do programs these youngsters would not otherwise have. We will try to piggy back any speakers coming to our campus who might also be helpful resources or positive role models for these children of diverse cultural and minority backgrounds.

We are working on establishing some programs for parents of this inner-city school based on a survey our students put together to find out what kind of educational programs the parents might like Grand Valley to provide. These inner-city parents, many of them single, responded with low interest to a check list suggestion of "establish sex roles" and "dealing with confrontation." But three out of four
parents said they would come to the school for a program on how to help their children learn.

The survey even established the length of the program—30-45 minutes, the best time of day—early evening, and what incentive would most encourage them to come—child care. Our university students are recognizing that it won’t do much good for them to put together a dyanmite parental education program if nobody shows up for it! They are acting on the reality principle of university-community interaction. We at the university can have all the theories and hypotheses we want, but until we go into the community to test them, we will never know what works.

A third, and increasingly significant, principle that makes it incumbent on the university to make use of its resources for the community is the fact those of us in the public university are supported by tax dollars. It seems to me that morally this commits us to returning something to the taxpayer for his financial investment in us. And pragmatically put, if we are to continue receiving support from the public treasury, then we better make sure we give the taxpayer something for his money.

Our community, like most of yours, has a nursing shortage. And many hospital trained nurses out there need and want a university nursing education to better care for their patients and to achieve their professional goals. GVSC now teaches interactive live nursing courses, such as biochemistry and critical care, by distant-learning satellite to nurses hundreds of miles away from our campus. Nurses working days can now go to a local tele-conference center and take a full-credit, two-hour class two eveninings a week. The nurses can interact with
the instructors as much as they could in the same classroom on campus by picking up the phone to ask a question or make a comment.

Through our satellite hookup, these nurses can continue their educations, improve their professional skills, and keep up with the rapid changes in medical care without leaving to leave their homes and families.

It seems to me that's a pretty good return on investment for Michigan's taxpayers who inevitably will one day need to depend on a nurse's competence.

Our university's Waters Resources institute is right now studying the genetics of salmon to find out why these Great Lakes fish are dying off prematurely. I can assure you there are many commercial and sports fishermen alike who think tax money spent supporting public universities who do that kind of research are tax dollars well spent!

That same Waters Institute is working with small businesses to reduce water pollutants in their operations before they enter the ground water. The university's water experts are right now consulting with local industries to find ways to reuse the oil waste from their plants instead of letting it wash down the floor drain into the ground water. These university experts can demonstrate how those small companies can save money by reusing the oil and even make money by selling that oil waste to other businesses.

Am I saying that Grand Valley is doing all it can to adhere to the university-community interactive principles of shared resources, engagement by proximity, and payback for tax dollars? I think we need to do more...
But we are trying. Through meetings like this and organizations like yours, we get reminded about what the real needs of the community are. Certainly we in the university must never abandon our calling to academic research--counting strophes in Sophocles is a valid intellectual pursuit. But neither can we forget our mission to serve our communities. For it is those communities who provide us our students and it is back to those communities that we send our graduates. I don't know who needs whom more, the university or the community; I do know that we must work together because we need each other. Thank you.
I. Development of the City State

A. Article in *Atlantic*
   1. Cities are more important than states
      a) economy generated by cities and relationships in outerlying areas
      b) people move to same city from outerlying areas - family ties, labor base.

B. City states in the U.S. - their characteristics
   1. Metropolises more prominent than state in which it resides
   2. New city states - Charlotte, Nashville, Omaha, Des Moines, Grand Rapids
      a) like Renaissance City States or Provence
      b) varied economic base - a few large industries and many small enterprises (majority of jobs under 100 employees)
      c) significant home grown industries through in age of downsized buyouts some non locally owned
      d) usually an agricultural component still exists
      e) regional cultural base - music, art - often through not always in the same city
      f) people feel a loyalty that binds them - sometimes to the region, sometimes to family that is located in the region

II. Role of the University in the City State

B. Characteristics necessary for the Health of the City State
   A. Remain a source for entrepreneurs
   1. Must grow local industry & business - non-resident ownership does not relegate an area - thus work out, few multi-generation operations continue with same success & effectiveness often first two generations

B. Keep the core of the major city & other towns as well from dilutionary - need new strategies - taxes - combine public & private dollars
3. Good infrastructure - people don't like traffic jams, sewers that overflow, snow that is not removed from streets, rivers, ponds, streams that are maybe
4. Good government - avoid cynicism or people cannot be organized for the public good. Infrastructure + core city likely to be victims of bad government
5. Good public schools - we have a school for our business school in part because of weak school where he was located - cannot attract talent from outside
6. Pride in the City State - culture (art galleries, symphony, parks, athletic teams, restaurants, theatre, museums, places people can take + show their family + friends

III. Role of the University in the City State

Can the six characteristics be sustained in a City State without the involvement of a University or comprehensive College? Let's examine them.

1. Small businesses - enterprises - The University must supply R+D + technological consultation RTI
2. Core City - great place to locate parts if not all of the University if infrastructure supports it. Earlier attempts did not always use resources available at universities. Need to keep city planners + officials in continuing dialogue with University experts - direction center - united way, G.R. flu + VVSU
3. Infrastructure - The University can be the environmental resource for infrastructure decisions, can do the surveys, can provide examples of what works + does not work.
4. Good Government - two functions
   a) close relationship with selected officials
      if possible - worth the effort and
      in the city state + university's best interest
      influence for university's good + public good
   b) close relationship with government administers
      a real technology transfer - research meets
      reality. We know what the problem are
      so we can apply our research more effectively

5. Good Public Schools
   a) our own self interest
   b) minor solutions just as important as
      major ones - Boston Uni. experiment,
      GVSU in Grand Rapids
   c) crisis may effectively break down barriers
      between education levels - higher + K-12.

6. Pride in City State
   a) culture dimension - faculty emerges such
      institutions in many city states. They are
      essential for success or at least add an
      improved quality dimension.
   b) The university itself becomes an object of
      pride. It not only serves, but because its
      serves + the people quality of the people at the
      university. The cities of the region claim
      it and point with pride towards it.

B. Do we can we define the university in the
   city state?

1. Tend to understand higher education as two kinds
   of institutions - research university + liberal arts
   colleges - recently can add community college
2. City state universities often confused for community
   college. "Oh you're a community college" Natural?
3. City State Univ. goes beyond what most community colleges can provide. It offers the higher technologies and more advanced applied research capabilities required by a modern society. More research, not more col] 

col training.

4. "The Confusion"
   a) Liberal arts colleges exposed - Baccusman
   b) Basic Research Univ. as City State Univ. - applied research, function goes back to land grant.
   c) State teachers colleges turned Univ. often feel justified, but project image of newer basic research Univ.
   d) Colleges Univ. founded because of a vague idea that they had a City State Univ. function, usually played the basic saw themselves as basic research, Univ in Brooklyn or a new liberal arts college.

5. "The Reality"
   a) Their can legitimately be two missions for a City State Univ. Fulfill the applied research + local citizen education requirement of the City State - then upon can be whatever you and your constituents want you to become.

   b) A new function is creating a new kind of institution.

   c) The speed / degree of success of such an institution depends on the faculty, to some extent the academic leadership.