

# CONNECTIONS

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“civic mission” or “engagement” may only be today’s attempt to countervail the longer-term reorientation of higher education to serving largely private, instrumental, and economic purposes. We must also be wary of concentrating more attention on higher education itself than on the public. The foundation’s focus must remain the public and its responsibilities for making democracy work.

Perhaps Kettering should concentrate on research that focuses on the institutions’ *relationship* with the public. This could have a wide impact, especially if trustees and other institutional leaders were

involved. Kettering is already a respected player in this arena. Our existing publications, especially the *Higher Education Exchange*, have positioned the foundation as an effective collaborator in this work.

Finally, the case to be made for Kettering’s continued pursuit of this work is that it will complement and inform the foundation’s research into the relationship of other professional organizations — foundations and the media, for example — with the public.

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## Revitalizing the University of Minnesota’s Civic Mission

*By Robert Bruininks*

As we enter this new and challenging century, it is encouraging to witness increased interest across the nation in connecting colleges and universities to issues of citizenship and engagement in the community. For instance, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities issued an important call to renew historic traditions and advance new commitments by higher education to improve society.

Practice lags behind vision. The typical approach frequently involves implementation of high-profile committees or projects. This approach can best be described as a state of “antergism” — a term coined by two University of Minnesota colleagues to describe a situation in which the whole is less than the sum of the parts!

The challenge is to move beyond rhetoric to build a culture that values and rewards civic engagement. This means sustained, institutional, and systematic engagements. As John Muir put it, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find that it is hitched to everything else in the universe.”

Revitalizing the University of Minnesota’s civic mission has been a principal area of focus during my five years as provost and my two years as president. In my view, a systematic approach to public engagement involves a number of elements:

- ◆ We need to implement a systemic institutional commitment that links the promises of research and education to the needs of communities.

*Robert Bruininks*

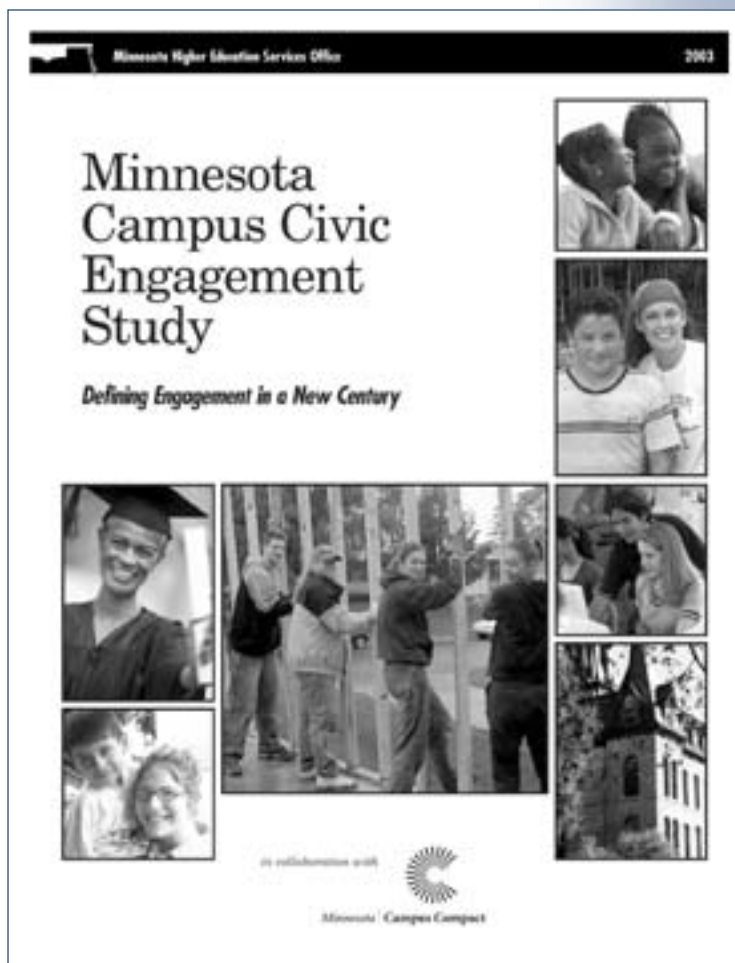
- ◆ We need to create a broad and deep understanding of critical philosophical principles and values involved in public engagement.
- ◆ We need cultural celebration and recognition.
- ◆ We need alignment of civic commitment with institutional planning and resources.
- ◆ We need new high-level initiatives that link the human resources of higher education to community issues such as the needs of children, youth, and families and support for arts and culture and sustainable development.
- ◆ We need to incorporate the commitment and strategies of civic engagement into institutional systems of governance and accountability.

This has meant a systemic approach to building a deeply rooted culture of engagement. In the fall of 2000 — on the eve of the university's 150th anniversary — I appointed a high-level Civic Engagement Task Force, charged with clarifying the meaning of civic engagement in a new century and recommending practical ways of incorporating the values of civic engagement across the university. The task force, along with parallel groups among the Board of Regents and the deans, recommended a high-level Council on Public Engagement, which carries on its mission.

Three new examples demonstrate what public engagement means in institutional terms: catalyzing new initiatives, highlighting outstanding examples, and creating new institutional structures.

### New Initiatives

Each fall there is a universitywide Request for Proposals for innovative projects that will strengthen civic engagement, especially projects that are multidisciplinary, sustainable, combine different aspects of engagement, and include students and community partners. In the first year alone, the task force received 134 proposals and funded 17 of them, with awards ranging up to \$7,500 each. These came from a wide range of departments and dis-



ciplines. They also involved a wide range of new and creative ideas. For instance, the history department at the University of Minnesota Duluth developed a project called “Students as Citizens, Not Merely Residents.” The Center for Spirituality and Healing in the Academic Health Center created a project entitled “Hmong Medicinal Plants in Minnesota,” an initiative to enhance the care of Hmong patients. The Bell Museum designed a research project called “Under the Fig Leaf: Revealing University Research Through Community Interpreters.”

New universitywide President’s Interdisciplinary Initiatives and the President’s 21st Century Interdisciplinary Conference Series are being developed with civic engagement on the agenda

## CIVIC MISSION AND ENGAGEMENT



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from the early planning stages. Through the President's Initiative on Children, Youth, and Families, for example, the university is convening and connecting its considerable intellectual resources with the work being done with youth and families in the community. Last year, the university held a children's summit to bring child advocates and academics together. We have also launched a commission on out-of-school time to examine how Minnesota's children spend their time and how they are supervised during the many hours they spend outside of school. We have begun a Center for Excellence in Children's Mental Health. Finally, we are planning a second children's summit this year.

The President's 21st Century Interdisciplinary Conference Series also provides resources for promising areas in which the university's dynamic base of knowledge can be applied to enrich our society. Planned conference topics include Design of Medical Devices; Environmental Threats to Children's Health: Legal and Policy Challenges; Healthy Foods, Healthy Lives; an Annual Symposium on Small Towns; and Intellectual Property Rights for the Public Good.

#### **Outstanding Examples**

Culture change efforts have also included the creation of an annual award that recognizes five or six outstanding examples of faculty, staff, and community members who have made substantial contributions to the community. Recent winners include a public historian who has taken history into the community to relate it to current events and the real world; an English professor who established the Minnesota Writing Project to improve the writing of all students; the founder of CitySongs, a youth development program that promotes competence, respect, and self-esteem in inner-city youth; the cofounder of the Jane Addams School for Democracy, a learning and public work network that works with new immigrant communities of Hmong, East African, and Latino residents on St. Paul's West Side; and the translator and interpreter in the

Richfield Public Schools and Hennepin County Libraries. For university personnel, we back up the celebration with a more tangible reward: salary augmentation each year the recipients remain at the university.

#### **New Institutional Structures**

Finally, in institutional terms, the university has moved to align priorities with deeper levels of public commitment. Noteworthy is a system of public agreements, or compacts, between the administration and each of the campuses and colleges, as well as many of the university's support units. Compacts delineate directions and actions, respective responsibilities, investments, outcomes, and mutual expectations for accountability within the university's and the unit's long-range plan. The compacts contain specific measures and indicators of progress linked to the university's critical measures and emphasize specific outcomes (e.g., quality, impact, efficiency, effectiveness, and service). The agreements are developed and written annually and jointly by the unit and the administration. The process governs the flow of new resources through an all-university investment pool.

During the past several years, the compact planning and budget process has emphasized the integration and alignment of important public engagement initiatives with the university's research and education priorities. This process has led to an academic audit of the public engagement initiatives of all colleges and campuses.

Overall, these civic engagement efforts amount to the beginnings of sustained, long-term, deep, and comprehensive conversations and action strategies to renew the land-grant tradition of public purpose and public work. No one imagines that the process of culture change and public engagement will be easy or quick. But there is once again emerging the vision of a university, in the words of former president Lotus Coffman, "of the commonwealth, by the commonwealth, and for the commonwealth."

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*The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is an operating foundation — not a grant-giving foundation — rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.” The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now — the study of what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required for strengthening public life. Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a \$250 million endowment.*

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