

Bridges to the Future, the Public Good, and Institutional Identity

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This year's Bridges to the Future project is an opening salvo in the University's effort to advance its new vision of creating "A Great Private University Dedicated to the Public Good". Gala events with high profile speakers will attract the general public to campus throughout the academic year to discuss American values and commitments after September 11. At the same time, individual faculty have been invited to open their classrooms to our fellow citizens, and to offer more formal short-courses free of charge within the initiative's "Public Curriculum" aspect. Individual units of the University are free to piggy-back on the Bridges initiative in whatever ways they feel are appropriate.

The university community committed itself to serving the Public Good during last year's University Planning Advisory Council (UPAC) deliberations. UPAC is a group of faculty, staff, students, and administrators who serve at the pleasure of the Provost to keep the University on track in realizing its mission and goals. UPAC established a Public Good Task Force, co-chaired by myself, Carol Farnsworth, and Tilden Lemelle, to brainstorm about what serving the Public Good means, and about the kinds of institutional and individual activities that could be supported under the rubric of Public Good work. Several Task Force members have been actively involved in planning and coordinating Bridges to the Future events, and delivery of the public curriculum.

Thus, with Bridges to the Future the central ambition of the University's re-designed Mission and Goals is being aggressively pursued. The approach is experimental. Bridges to the Future represents just one kind of institutional commitment to serving the Public Good. It remains to be seen whether projects like Bridges will be a regular part of our future. It also remains to be seen how the University will further define its commitment to the Public Good, and what faculty and staff rewards for doing Public Good work will look like.

Our task force is engaged in a continuing discussion about these issues. What is the Public Good? What "Public" are we talking about? Is the scale local, regional, national, international, or some combination? How many, and what kinds, of discrete outreach initiatives should we pursue at the institutional level? Should we focus on broad transcendent issues, or the problems of particular places? How do we bring community consensus to the definition of Public Good, so as to avoid the risks of a scattershot approach?

Concerned to avoid rigid norm-setting, we are sympathetic to a very general and open-ended definition that allows individuals to interpret the Public Good in their own way. But some of us are also keen on a more activist definition that makes an explicit commitment to the cause of social justice, and to structural change that can remedy the various social inequalities that bedevil our communities. All of us are concerned to avoid paternalism, and to emphasize the importance of community partnership. Thus, we are

currently defining Public Good work as *work that builds a community's capacity for cooperative action and transformative change*. This definition can accommodate a broad spectrum of activities, from service learning to social justice work. These activities can result in structural change, or simply a variety of personal epiphanies and life enrichments that often come with an individual's engagement in meaningful civic work. Both have value.

There is no new requirement for faculty and staff to engage in public outreach of any particular sort. Many of us already engage in public outreach as a labor of love. We want to find out who those people are, and whether there is a unifying theme that organizes their work. Our interest is in legitimizing activities that up to now have not been explicitly acknowledged or rewarded at tenure, promotion, and merit raise time. Such legitimation may be especially important for younger faculty and staff, as these colleagues are often the most enthusiastic about turning their scholarship and pedagogy toward public outreach. As part of our legitimizing effort we hope to create new outreach opportunities and new forms of support for the publicly-engaged scholar and staff person.

This concern to link what we do in the Academy to the Public Good seems uniquely compatible with, and indeed a perfect match for, the character of our University. The Public Good ambition may, in fact, contain a solution to DU's chronic identity crisis. There continue to be many lamentations around campus about what we are not rather than affirmations of what we are, or can be. "Ivy Envy" is still routinely expressed at faculty meetings where institutional direction and resource allocation are at issue. Having spent my undergraduate and graduate years at institutions that wanted to either be Harvard (Wake Forest University) or that labored in the shadow of Harvard (University of Massachusetts), I find the comparisons uninteresting and potentially debilitating—*unless* they are employed to show the current strategic advantages that an institution like DU has over *both* the Publics and the Ivies (e.g., political autonomy, minimal historical inertia, maximal flexibility to experiment). This is something I believe the Chancellor successfully accomplished at a recent meeting of Social Sciences faculty.

UPAC has spent considerable time discussing DU's identity and niche. The University's revised Vision, Values, Mission, and Goals reflect a new consensus about the combination of features that make us unique. We have a relatively small liberal arts center surrounded by a constellation of professional schools. We have a desirable location in both geographical (the nexus of Mountain, Plain, and Plateau) and public policy (Urbanizing/Suburbanizing West) space. As our new Mission statement indicates, we are uniquely equipped to engage "diverse local and global communities" and foster "productive synergies between...theoretical knowledge and professional practice". With the new focus on funding programming through the Marsico and Cherrington Global Scholars initiatives, and with grass roots faculty efforts to establish new programs that integrate liberal and professional learning (such as the Urban Studies undergraduate minor connecting faculty in the Arts, Sciences, and College of Education) there are new opportunities to strengthen the liberal arts center, its linkages with the professional schools, and the connection of both to wider publics and issues of public concern. I

doubt that there are many other colleges and universities as well positioned as us to realize this particular institutional vision.

New calls at the national level for development of a “pragmatic liberal education” suggest that DU is already poised to be a national leader on the next wave of higher education reform. While this may not be the best reason for going down that road, there’s certainly something here upon which to trade if we’re genuinely interested in answering the lingering questions about institutional direction and identity. For some unknown number of us, the direction feels good and promises new opportunities to give voice to the dormant public intellectual that lies within. We hope that others will realize that there are many ways to participate in this trajectory. They require neither the abandonment of academic first principles, nor the mortgaging of psyche or soul. The Public Good Task Force is working on a plan to host, in the months ahead, campus-wide conversations about the issues at stake.