In a Market-Driven High-Tech World, Is the Land-Grant Model Still Viable?

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Introduction: The land-grant public university system in the United States was established to serve multi-functional and utilitarian goals by combining research, teaching, and outreach for the purpose of educating the common man and serving the economic interests of a growing nation. Originally the focus was on farming and the mechanical arts, later on the basic physical and social sciences were included, and later still the broader educational needs of a diverse population. The success of the land-grant public university in the U.S. has made it a model for developing nations to follow in building similar systems of higher education. One particular case was the partnership that established six state agricultural universities in India. However, increasingly the original intentions of the land-grant public university system toward equity of access, multi-purpose curricula, research and training for public needs, and public financing are being challenged by the driving interests and demands of globalization, high technology, and the private sector. As public universities face serious budget shortfalls precipitated by waning state support, will the tradition of bringing education and the results of research to the people be lost in the search for funding and prestige? How does the traditional land-grant public university fit into today’s world? These are some of the questions to be raised in this proposed roundtable discussion.

Method: Drawing from both the agricultural education and higher education literature, this presentation will begin with a brief history of the land-grant public university system and a discussion of its contributions to the development of the U.S. and to other country’s systems of higher education, particularly India. This will be followed by a review of the external pressures influencing current public university decision-making which are causing them to operate more on a business rather than public service model. Examples will be given of university systems that are “moving toward the market” (U.S., Australia, China), and at least one that is trying to renew the integration of teaching, research, and community service (South Africa). The purpose is to set the stage for discussing pros and cons, as well as sharing examples of both market-driven and service-oriented models.

Major Points: To present the historical context for public land-grant universities in the U.S. and elsewhere, the pressures these institutions face in today’s changing world, and the possibility of their providing a viable alternative to market-driven models.

Conclusions: The presentation will conclude with a series of open-ended questions for purposes of discussing ideas on the role of public universities in a global society. In addition, participants will be asked to share their own experiences and knowledge of new teaching, research, and outreach models. (Results to be compiled for publication).

Educational Importance: In an increasingly interdependent world characterized by a growing divide between the haves and the have nots, it is important for those in higher education and extension to be aware of the causes and consequences of external forces on their professional decision-making and community involvement.