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University-Based Public Service

As the public universities have grown and matured, the triumvirate of their mission—teaching, research, and public service—has become generally accepted, at least in rhetoric. In this process, two clearly identifiable tendencies have occurred. First, teaching has become narrowly defined, referring only to that which occurs in a classroom or laboratory setting. Second, the research mission of the university has become omnipotent. In the academic life of public institutions today, research represents the ultimate exercise, with teaching, especially at the undergraduate level, seen as a mandated duty, and public service an obligation accepted with reluctance. Public universities, however, do perform several large categories of activities that are actually public service even though, up to now, few people may have thought of them under that rubric. Here are five examples of what I mean.

The first is the preservation of knowledge. This public service can stand alone as a prime function. To an encouraging degree, museums and libraries are coming to be seen as valuable teaching institutions in themselves. To whatever extent finances permit, universities can do the same thing. To accept this function as being coequal with research and teaching is to hark back to the ancient formulation that the three purposes of a university are to seek, to convey, and to preserve knowledge.

The second is the provision of aesthetic experience. On most campuses, appreciation of the various expressions of art and high culture are reinforced by the desire to learn or to teach. Beyond that, concert bureaus, radio, and television carry campus-based arts to statewide, even national, audiences.

A third cluster of university activities worth examining relates to the provision of direct consumer services to the community. This is exemplified by maintenance of hospitals, clinics, testing laboratories, publishing companies, hotels, restaurants, bookstores, and the like. These are usually created to fulfill needs related to teaching and research.

A fourth contribution of universities is the custodianship of young people of collegiate age. Although we no longer believe in completely open admission to college, we are prepared to admit most young people who want to enroll, so that they will have a chance to “find themselves” and so that their continued maturation will occur under relatively safe circumstances. The task would be reduced if students had more experience of life before they enrolled. However, short of war or some other vast campaign of national service (which we ought to seriously consider as part of the socialization process for future generations), we will probably continue to have students of about the same age as at present. If so, we must take the initiative to see that as many of them as possible are interested in learning and not simply spending critically formative years in our custodial care.

The fifth kind of activity is the university's role as entertainer for the masses, particularly the masses who watch intercollegiate athletic events. The most troubling consequence of big-time athleticism has to do not with its role as a public service but with its impact on campus instruction. The training of the body does not seem central to modern discussions of either athletics or the college curriculum. Today anybody who advocates education for the perfection of the body tends to be scorned as just another apologist for high-pressure athleticism. I hope that health and physical education departments will someday live up more fully to the literal promise of their name and that their professors will be central figures in discussions of liberal education.

When we examine these five clusters of activities, we discover that we are most comfortable with those that relate most closely to teaching or research. In fact, the level of quality of each of these five forms of public service is directly proportional to the extent to which each incorporates teaching or research.

After 75 years of full-scale experience, the major lesson we have learned about university-based public service is that it is best conceived as dynamic and creative teaching and research carried out in the full dimensions of the human life-span and the broad range of human association both on and off campus.*—RUSSELL G. MAWBY, *Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, Michigan 49017*

*Adapted from a talk, “Public Service,” presented as a plenary lecture on the occasion of the centennial celebration of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges on 10 November 1987.