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Our Universities: Serving the Public Good

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Our Universities: Serving the Public Good

Service from universities to the extended community always has value. The best universities have codified a service imperative into their mission statements and are committed to providing insight and ideas to the community through individual students, faculty, and staff.

"The light of the university watch towers should flash from State to State until American democracy itself is illuminated with higher and broader ideals of what constitutes service to the State and to mankind."

Frederick Jackson Turner

The Morrill Act, authored by Senator Justin Smith Morrill, created a "*grant of land dedicated to the establishment of a university*" in each state. November marks the end of a year-long celebration praising the benefits of the Morrill Act, signed by Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1862, in the midst of the bloodiest war in American history. The sesquicentennial celebration heralds the best in American higher education.

The land granted was to be sold or administered to build a perpetual fund "*to remain forever undiminished,*" and the proceeds used for the "*maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.*"

A noble and worthy purpose to be sure.

The act profoundly affected universities and society. On September 28, 2012, four former secretaries of agriculture gathered at the University of Nebraska to discuss the impact of the land-grant institutions on agricultural productivity. They deemed it unparalleled.

At Penn State, Ambassador Kenneth M. Quinn of the World Food Prize Foundation presented the Norman E. Borlaug Medallion to the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. The medallion recognized the progress of U.S. agriculture through research conducted at the land-grants.

Likewise, much attention was paid to innovation in industry and manufacturing. The two-pronged "A&M" moniker comes from the idea of "Agricultural and Mechanical" colleges.

While many forces fueled the fires in the furnaces powering the Industrial Revolution, the land-grant universities were the hottest and brightest.

During the mid-20th century, the land-grant mission transformed itself into a more general public outreach: The principles used to promote the best in agriculture and industry flowed to diverse avenues of human endeavor, leading to the universally espoused, triangular university purposes of teaching, research, and service. Today, land-grant universities are 7 million students strong, and responsible for 60% of all federally funded research.

President Lincoln could scarcely imagine the land-grant mission manifested in the second decade of the 21st century. Yet, he would immediately recognize it.

Universities make the greatest contribution to the public good when individual faculty and student aspirations are pursued, personal intellect is sharpened, and insight is cherished for the benefit these bring to the individual and, not coincidentally, for breathing life into the greater social order. Not coincidence, but purpose.

The visionary plan produced eddies and swirls, and helped create electric light, mass production, the moon landing, television, cell phones, and iPods. The agricultural enterprise that in 1862 occupied 60% of the nation's workforce numbered less than 2% in 2012. Yet, the productivity of U. S. farmers is unmatched. Incalculable.

Colleges established under the act reached out to people who otherwise would have not had the opportunity for study. The central tenet of the act, *"to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life"* creates access to higher education. It is impossible to imagine a public institution without it. This focus caused land-grant universities to be referred to as "people's colleges," "farmer's colleges," and "democracies' colleges." So powerful is the purpose that private institutions emulate the principle: And, we all call it access.

Someone plucked from the current tide of *"industrial classes,"* secures the opportunity to sharpen his or her mind and benefit the greater community.

Twenty-first century universities serve people with diverse needs and desires. The *"several pursuits and professions in life"* should never be lost in the sea of headcounts, capitation, tuition income, or any of the confounding variables that legitimately affect modern institutions of higher learning.

Our universities must be forever attentive to this fundamental purpose and irrevocable responsibility: Individual growth leads to serving the public good. And, when well managed, universities need public support for the public treasure they represent.