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Our Universities: Locality and Vitality

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Our Universities: Locality and Vitality

Fourth in a Series on Research

Research creates interest and value for a university and its locale.

"This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energizing as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes. Imagination is not to be divorced from the facts: it is a way of illuminating the facts." --- Alfred North Whitehead

Research funding in U.S. universities is losing ground in the world community of nations according to a May 2011 study by the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF). U.S. research efforts once led the world, but domestic investments - public and private - are lagging globally. Atkinson and Stuart, authors of the ITIF study, claim states are experiencing cuts in research funding; nearly 50% in Alaska and a drop in the 50-state average of 2% over the last ten years.

Fading commitment places the U.S. at number 22 in research funding as a share of the Gross Domestic Product -- behind Iceland and in front of Germany. That's right, Iceland. In industry funded research, the dynamics change little. A fresh look at why research is important and how it affects local, state, national, and world economies is worthwhile.

Research agendas that meet local needs but have international consequences are most commanding.

The idea of thinking globally and acting locally is a cliché. However, the forces making research valuable repeat themselves in manifold settings. For example, Louisiana State University exists atop one of the great deltas on the earth's surface. The power of delta focused research at LSU is categorical, as is its effect on Louisiana's economic, social, cultural, and political needs. Likewise, it is globally important. Tiger football has local economic value to be sure, but is a mere shadow of the snap that new ideas regarding delta life and opportunity create. The eye of the Tiger is overpowered by the mouth of the Mississippi.

Principles that affect south Louisiana have utility for other delta regions. For example, the Nile Delta is dominated by the forces of wave action on the region. The same forces impact the Mississippi River Delta. Likewise the Ganges Delta is especially affected by tidal movement, as is Louisiana. The Okanagan Delta in British Columbia is a coarse sediment delta and, while distinctive, holds similarities to the Mississippi Delta. The examples are as numerous as the major rivers of the world.

Social, cultural, anthropological, political, educational, and human and environmental health issues similarly replicate themselves world-wide driven by the geographic similarities of the world's deltas.

If the U.S. is to regain its leadership in research commensurate with historical expectations, support of study and inquiry is essential. Research focus must be created to respond to the conditions of the regions where the universities exist to provoke support at the national, state, and local levels.

Correctly approached, the knowledge and insight generated are valuable locally and globally simultaneously. The 21st century begs vertically integrated approaches i.e. with local and global value if the enterprise is to flourish. Innovation, insight, and creative activity propagate positive economic motion. It is not uncommon in growing economies in the developed world to have 40 to 50% of the economic growth hinged on university activity, according to the National Science Foundation. Developing countries show an even more robust impact from university research. Job growth is created by new ideas that attract capital.

Science and engineering research also spur creative expression and innovative work in literature, history, the arts, and other scholarly disciplines. This synergy of discovery locally makes the university simultaneously more powerful as an economic force in the regional, state, national and international realms. Local needs drive global agendas.

Knowledge, in all its forms, is seed corn for economic development.

The daunting challenge for the U.S. research enterprise, according to *The Atlantic Century*, is this: The U.S. ranks sixth in the world for changes in global competitiveness over the past decade. Slippage in the power of ideas: the crucial currency of a free society.

Declining research productivity in our universities leads to a lack of innovation and job creation. Whitehead would argue intellectual vitality is not far behind. Likewise this deficit creates challenges for universities as economic drivers in the regions where they exist.

Research is fuel for a well grounded economy. That's the cold truth and acknowledging that may allow us to overtake Iceland.