CHAPTER 2

Higher Education as a Force for Societal Change in the Twenty-First Century

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Introduction

We are living in a time of enormous change in our society. At one level, wherever we are, much of our life is dominated by the same forces: massive forces like the international financial crisis, climate change, pandemics like influenza and AIDS, yawning gulfs between the rich and the poor, war, shifting demographics, globalization, and many more besides. The point is that the issues cross the spectrum of political, economical, technological, and ecological affairs—and as Homer-Dixon (2000, 1) reminds us (in his book The Ingenuity Gap) they “converge, intertwine and often seem to be largely beyond our ken—incomprehensible even to our leaders and specialists.” Probably the only unifying factor in all this is the importance of education. Daniel Bell (1987) once remarked that the issues today are often such that the nation-state is too small for the big problems and too big for the small problems. One thing is clear: Yesterday’s solutions are not today’s solutions.

Universities, as institutions, are also immensely affected by these massive forces for change—probably more so. The internet and all the social networks it has spawned have created new modes of knowledge production, storage, and dissemination—the most fundamental functions attributed to universities. As more and more people demand and need higher education, it places an even higher burden on the public purse. Universities and what they do are no longer (if they ever were) regarded as automatically “a social good.” Calls for accountability and relevance give clear notice that universities can
no longer rely on public opinion being on their side. Still less, it is likely to be on their side where it has no understanding of what the university does, much less have any say in its affairs. And that, of course, is quite apart from its moral and social responsibilities.

We know that the values held by societies, institutions, and individuals are demonstrated most powerfully through their actions rather than their words. Similarly, although universities are said to metaphorically and philosophically stand on the three fundamental pillars of research, teaching, and service to the community, the vast majority of academic institutions lean far more heavily on the first two pillars than on the last. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, writing in 2008 in the *European Journal of Education*, draws attention to the task of education today. “In today’s globalised and interconnected world,” he says, “living together peacefully has become a moral, social, and political imperative on which depends, to a great extent, the survival of humankind. No wonder that education in its widest sense is called upon to play a major role in this worldwide shared task” (161).

He is not the only person to make this call. The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) has initiated a program of research, consultation, and debate over the past seven years to encourage university leaders, civic heads, and policymakers to reposition community engagement as a core value for universities in the twenty-first century. The word “core” should be emphasized because although many excellent activities are undertaken by university staff, they often operate at the margins of the enterprise. Moving them to the core is no trivial task. The ACU document titled “Engagement as a Core Value for the University,” makes the point that “Twenty-first century academic life is no longer pursued in seclusion (if it ever was) but rather must champion reason and imagination in engagement with the wider society and its concerns.” Engagement, they argue, implies “strenuous, thoughtful, argumentative interaction with the non-university world in at least four spheres: setting universities’ aims, purposes, and priorities; relating teaching and learning to the wider world; the back-and-forth dialogue between researchers and practitioners; and taking on wider responsibilities as neighbors and citizens”.

It is these four areas that must characterize mutually beneficial, enduring partnerships between universities and the societies in which they are situated—partnerships that will ensure change for all concerned.

**Setting Universities’ Aims, Purposes, and Priorities**

This increasingly networked world, frequently underpinned as it is by the gift economy of the internet’s multiple enterprises in cyberspace, has enormous