

Universities Must Embrace Changes

By Bill Hobby

We are looking into the future and the view is enlightening.

One of the interesting enterprises we have under way at the University of Houston System is a Vision Commission. We have asked 19 national and local leaders in education, business and the community to tell us what higher education will look like in 20 years.

After two meetings, we don't have the answer, but the fog is lifting.

At a recent session we listened to three men whose job it is to be on the cutting edge of higher education: Peter Magrath, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges; Aimes McGuinness, senior associate at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems; and Frank Newman, president of the Education Commission of the States.

These are concerns about universities in the last years of the 20th century:

- I. The outlook for public financing is gloomy.
- II. As the cost of a degree escalates so do questions about cost and quality.
- III. Demographic trends and the needs of an information society are placing new demands on universities.
- IV. There is a growing disconnect between the internal priorities of universities and the external demands of employers, students and political leaders.

If we don't watch it, we're going to have an Edsel, Magrath said. A nice, very expensive antique. Magrath and the others warned that higher education, one of the most successful American enterprises, may be too slow in recognizing the change that has shaken corporations, government and many other institutions in society.

Too often, universities have been resistant to technology and slow to forge bonds with their communities, they said.

Too often, they have been unfriendly to part-time and non-traditional students. Research has been keenly interesting to academics but not readily useful or transferable to the community.

We're selling the ticket of admission to success in our society and that ticket is valuable, said Frank Newman. But there are more questions about the cost.

Those of us in urban education have seen the future coming for a long time. Fewer and fewer of our students are the traditional 18-to-22-year-old full-time variety. Many are older -- the average age of students at the University of Houston-Clear Lake is 32. Many transfer from community colleges -- the UH spring headcount showed 6,942 freshmen and sophomores compared to 15,423 juniors and seniors.

With an average of five careers and 10 to 12 jobs projected for the average Texan, many of our students are seeking another skill or earning a master's degree, retooling for their next career. Our experts told us that the successful universities will be those that connect best to the community. That means that research must be readily useful and transferable to the community. Research in education may be the most important because the failures in public education are a major urban dilemma.

Education is the central avenue to upward mobility, Newman said. We know better ways to teach different kinds of people.

The University of Houston institutions, like most Texas universities, have successful public school partnerships. But many of these programs, which bring the fruits of research to the elementary schools, are privately funded and done as an add-on to faculty duties.

That highlights another problem our experts noted: the route to success for an academician lies through published research, not community service.

Our policies, processes and leadership skills do not match today's rhetoric of connection, teamwork, partnerships and collaboration, McGuinness said.

What does all this mean to those of us in higher education? It means we need to focus more on meeting the needs of the future.

It's ironic that while many state and land grant universities are trying to be more like Harvard, Harvard is trying to be more like them, Magrath said, explaining that Harvard is working at creating the community links that other universities already have.

It means that changes are necessary, but they're not impossible, not even too difficult. In other words, I have seen the future, and we can get there from here.

Originally published May 23 , 1996, in the Austin American-Statesman.