
Book Review

The indispensable university: Higher education, economic development and the knowledge economy

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Trani and Holsworth begin the book with the basic premise that colleges and universities are in the midst of a major transformation that will redefine relationships to the broader community.

Traditional ‘town gown’ relationships and tensions are being reconfigured around mutually beneficial partnerships where universities assist community development through the efforts of faculty and students, and the contribution colleges make as an employer and real estate developer.

The authors note that higher education is a ‘key actor’ in the revitalization of urban communities and rural areas, and serve prominent roles in competitive strategies of regions, states and nations. Three points are highlighted: first, the number of external relationships

developed by colleges and universities is growing. Industry groups, government agencies and not-for-profits are actively seeking partnerships with higher education. Second, deeper relationships with the community are becoming more prevalent, primarily through neighborhood revitalization. Third, partnerships are being formed using university resources to address significant societal challenges.

Colleges and universities are serving as developers of social capital, providers of health care and as partners of regional development to engage their communities. This affiliation, coupled with the global movement toward a knowledge economy, formulates the indispensable university.

The changing landscape of higher education should be noted by key administrators; particularly presidents



should be aware of the opportunity for institutions to nurture entrepreneurial growth and establish partnerships with various organizations to address community needs.

The Indispensable University uses a series of case studies to highlight successful partnerships with community and industry in the United States, as well as in the United Kingdom, the Middle East and in emerging markets of China, Russia and India. These partnerships span the spectrum of higher education, from community colleges (primarily US) to research-intensive doctoral universities.

The core issue in this volume addresses several perspectives on how to reposition higher education institutions to realize the maximum potential by catalyzing economic development for both the institution and the surrounding community and region. The authors presented a clear and easy-to-follow methodology, primarily focusing on public institutions. In chapter three, the focus was on large urban institutions and the practical and comprehensive approach taken to engage their communities. Although the literature purports the benefits of community engagement (Bacdayan, 2008), the primary sources cited were historical perspectives of the institutions and these sources proved effective in this context. One of the authors had a first-hand experience navigating an engagement of an urban community as president of Virginia Commonwealth University.

Chapter four noted how land grant institutions, established by the 1862 Morrill Act, transformed from 'ag schools' to become comprehensive universities, shaping more contemporary missions. The primary factors outlined

were the ability of the schools to conduct research and translate theory into practice, as well as the efforts exerted to become players in the development of state economic policies.

The opening chapters of the book (one through four) focused on large universities; the following chapter transitions to the impact of community colleges and the opportunities for economic development by these institutions in their respective local communities. Initially, this appeared to be a stark departure from the dominant thesis of the book, but after a brief history of the development of community colleges, the authors returned to the chief premise of economic development and training to remain competitive in the knowledge-based economy centered on community needs. Further, the overwhelming treatise is toward very large institutions, even the points on community colleges were focused on three of the largest systems in the United States. Although larger higher education systems drive more substantial development opportunities, presidents of smaller colleges and universities could adapt these techniques to build better relationships in their communities as well.

The authors provide some focus on the increased measure of administrative roles in higher education to perform many of these community and economic development partnerships, but purists would submit that faculty are the lynchpin of any college or university and they too should play an integral role in college operations. This mindset is embodied by the system of collegiality used to govern British universities. However, while systems of



higher education have been evolving in accord with particular economic, organizational and constitutional framework, a new agenda is emerging. This mindset is supported by the literature (Evans, 2009; Robertson, 2010), and even faculty of staunch British universities have loosened the reigns of control toward a more administrative model to align with explicit policy goals, overall accountability and increased specialization. The stalwarts of British higher education have moved to build administrative capacity in order to develop university–business collaborations. This is a key development for overall change in the global higher education, the implications of practice for other institutions is enormous.

Chapter seven highlights some of the transformation noted in the United Kingdom and European colleges and universities and the impact on other parts of the world. A small Middle Eastern country has developed a unique system of higher education, not to build stronger economic ties, but instead to build a knowledge economy. Generating knowledge is essentially a back-up plan to maintain the economic momentum gained from a large cache of natural resources. The overarching theme of the knowledge economy has led to the development of an ‘educational city’ where entire programs have been imported from western universities. This is certainly a novel approach and the long-term results have not been measured, but credit must be given to the head of state for establishing such an innovative model. He is looking

beyond the benefits of exhaustible natural resources and generating a long-term, sustainable plan for the people of his country. The drawbacks for practice are clear, not every government can afford to support education for an entire, albeit small, country.

Many higher education institutions in emerging nations have begun to evaluate and implement new methods of addressing domestic needs through their systems in hope of developing mutually beneficial relationships for the institutions and the communities they serve.

The authors presented a well-written and clearly organized model on the value of colleges and universities to their communities. Higher educational institutions should appraise involvement in strategic and regional economic development. Although an outline was developed for large, public institutions, the practical implications are not as clearly defined for smaller, private colleges and universities. This may be a direct result of the experience of the authors. Both held senior administrative positions in large public institutions. In fact, the text was somewhat slanted to the partnerships developed while serving in their most recent roles, but not to the detriment of the overall message of the manuscript.

In the end, the readers most likely to benefit from *The Indispensable University* are senior level administrators searching for methods to build regional economic strategies and promote distinctiveness for the institutions. In fact, this book should be recommended reading.



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