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Growing Pains

By Gary A. Olson

I have joined a number of universities over the years just as they were beginning to ramp up their research profiles. Inevitably, when a university decides to expand its mission, many faculty and staff members experience a certain amount of anxiety. Productivity expectations rise, annual evaluations become more rigorous, tenure and promotion requirements are more demanding, and the institution stops measuring itself against "peer" universities and begins judging itself in comparison with "aspirational" institutions.

Here is a typical scenario: Your university might have begun as a teaching institution. While scholarship was not discouraged, it was not promoted much, either. Faculty members might have been hired, evaluated, and promoted explicitly for their teaching. Some might even have been advised not to worry about producing creative or scholarly work. For as long as anyone can remember, the institution's promotional literature had touted its reputation as one of the finest teaching colleges in the region.

Over time, the institution develops in size and sophistication. Pockets of the faculty begin to produce substantive research and, consequently, forge a reputation for themselves and their university. Imperceptibly, the institution's mission begins to expand, and it starts to see itself as committed both to high-quality instruction and to research. (Critics refer to that phenomenon as "mission creep.")

Eventually, the institution boasts a critical mass of active researchers and reaches a point at which it self-consciously commits to its new mission and goals.

Some faculty members find the transition difficult, and even painful. They feel, and rightly so, that the rules have changed in the middle of the game. They might have been hired decades ago under one set of expectations, and now a whole new set of expectations is in play. Some professors become dispirited, or even bitter, and consider retiring. Others adjust to the changes—some begrudgingly,

others enthusiastically.

What you often find at that crucial moment in an institution's evolution is that a minority of faculty members, who have not adjusted well to the change, will remain disheartened and negative. But elsewhere throughout the institution is an almost palpable energy and sense of excitement. Many people on the campus seem to acquire a renewed sense of purpose. Many recommit to their first intellectual love—their disciplines. There seems to be, perhaps for the first time in decades, a sense of common purpose permeating the campus.

As more and more faculty members win grants, publish their papers in top-tier journals, and attract national awards for their work, the institution seems suddenly to experience a renewed sense of self-respect. And more faculty members, staff employees, and students feel a newfound pride in the university.

Not every institution goes through this process or experiences it in quite the same manner, but the pattern is familiar enough for us to draw some useful generalizations.

At first, some faculty members will interpret any change in the mission as a renunciation of the university's past, or a disavowal of those who came before. But that reaction is unwarranted. Universities evolve over time and quite naturally undergo periods of rapid change, punctuated by slower growth or even stasis. In fact, the reason the university has arrived at a stage at which it is poised to move forward is the hard work of those faculty members and administrators who prepared the way.

Perhaps inevitably, some professors will complain that the university no longer values good teaching or that increased attention to research will degrade the quality of education students receive. Nothing can be further from the truth. Teaching and research have a symbiotic relationship. Students learn best when they work alongside professors on their latest research projects and gain firsthand knowledge of how scholars work.

Despite the typical complaints that researchers are only interested in their careers and not in students, I will go so far as to say that the very best teachers—at any level, but especially at the graduate and upper undergraduate levels—are those who remain active in their fields and are most familiar with the cutting-edge knowledge of their disciplines.

Another anxiety that some faculty members experience is their

belief that increased research means only externally financed research—projects supported by grants that bring dollars into the university. Certainly, grants not only support specific projects but also contribute to the larger research enterprise. The more external grants brought in, the more resources a university has to fuel its many projects and programs. In addition, successful researchers are able to pay for part or all of their salaries from their grants, further freeing up money for other institutional priorities.

But "research" is a broad term and refers to much more than externally financed projects. Clearly, not every discipline can attract the same level of grant support. Historically, there is substantially less money available to the humanities than to other disciplines (although that fact has caused too many humanists to fail to apply for the grant money that does exist, thereby ensuring that they never receive a dime).

Faculty in disciplines with limited grant opportunities often become very nervous when they hear that their university plans to give high priority to research, because they erroneously assume that that refers only to external grant projects.

The real point behind most drives to ratchet up research is not simply to generate additional dollars but to achieve ever-greater levels of national prominence. Garnering high levels of external funding is one way to increase prominence, but there are many others, and they are all tied to the specific kinds of intellectual work we do.

If you were to imagine a utopian university, all of your faculty members would be leaders in their fields. Many would be Guggenheim fellows, Rhodes scholars, MacArthur fellows, and inductees into the National Academies. Your humanists would be Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winners; your mathematicians would be Fields Medal recipients; your actuarial students would be Woody scholarship winners; your music professors would regularly debut new compositions at such venues as Carnegie Hall. Such achievements come true when your creative and scholarly work has become so influential that it catapults you (and your institution) to prominence.

A university's reputation skyrockets as a result of individual accomplishments, and that, in turn, engenders increased confidence in the university on the part of donors and grants agencies, causing them to invest even more in what they perceive to

be a winning enterprise, and on and on.

In short, the message an institution is sending when it sets out to raise its research profile is simply for you as a faculty member to do what you can do best: Engage actively in your discipline. Become a player in your field. That's not the "careerist" (i.e., selfish) act that some portray it to be, because the greater your success, the more your students and institution will benefit. Your success contributes directly to your institution's success, and vice versa.

Like actual growing pains, institutional growing pains are not easy. You may experience awkwardness and discomfort in the short term, but the end result is well worth it: greater institutional maturity and a general feeling of satisfaction about being part of an institution with higher standards and aspirations, and increased respect nationwide.

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