

Higher Education as a Catalyst for Regional Transformation

By Michael Harris

The evolution of American higher education is a complicated romance with many dimensions. Higher education is a central element in the emergence and well-being of the nation. A close analysis of the evolution of higher education in the U.S. reveals strategic junctions and times of significant challenges. In each era, academic institutions were responsive, action was taken, and both higher education and the nation's well-being were strengthened. The time has come for a new paradigm for higher education as a catalyst for regional transformation. The goal of regional transformation is to achieve ongoing regional economic growth and prosperity. This is done through enhancing a sense of identity and forming a collaborative framework.

Our nation and the communities we serve are facing an almost perfect storm. We are experiencing a rapid shift from an economy of traditional industrial manufacturing, based on natural resources and labor, to an economy of knowledge, driven by innovation and entrepreneurship, further complicated by intense global competitiveness and uncertainty. In light of the many economic challenges, it is our mission and obligation to offer hope, be forward looking, optimistic and work toward a future in abundance. A necessary condition is that higher education must embrace a leadership role in regional transformation.

We will achieve competitiveness through a high concentration of knowledge, skills, innovation and entrepreneurship capacity. Academic leadership, courage, humility and willingness to maximize opportunities are vital to the paradigm shift.

This shift requires a new model of leadership, one which is entrepreneurial. A key element in accomplishing this task and assuring a positive outcome, is reevaluating the role of regional campuses. We need to reaffirm our commitment to being 'stewards of place' and not only fulfill a responsibility to graduate world-class students. We have a clear and emerging role in serving as a leader and partner in regional transformation. A recent AASCU survey of presidents and chancellors found fewer than half are closely linked to their

communities; regional transformation is simply not a strategic priority. This has to change.

Academic leaders have the opportunity to shape discourse around the importance of being 'stewards of place.' Indiana University Kokomo has committed itself to regional transformation and has been very successful in developing a collaborative framework that has achieved national attention. We have initiated a variety of joint activities bringing regional partners, faculty, staff, students and alumni together to cultivate a regional focus, collaboration and action. We are building on our role as 'stewards of place' to facilitate and expedite a complex and non-traditional framework for partnership and joint responsibility.

We embrace a Triple Helix framework, which includes a university/campus, businesses and governments collaborating together to assure economic development. Our experience at IU Kokomo with the Triple Helix has already resulted in significant enrollment growth, enhanced private funding and new degree programs, along with regional growth and transformation.

We assemble and enable a regional dialogue and foster a culture of partnership, despite what at first is seen as questionable. This process results in a better understanding of regional assets; exploring mutual interests; conducting and sharing vital analysis; and implementing specific joint economic development activities. We are gaining momentum. It is evident by an increased support for our initiatives, broad participation, and an ongoing dialogue between government, non-profit, business/industry and educational leaders in our region. Of special interest are specific economic development initiatives.

Time is of the essence; our challenge is to be a forward looking explorer and visionary assuring the American dream in an ever evolving world. We in higher education are facing a once in a lifetime opportunity to transform our role, so we continue to play a key role in the well-being and prosperity of the nation. **P**

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