

*Land-Grant Universities and Extension into the 21st Century:
Renegotiating or Abandoning a Social Contract,*
by George R. McDowell

KEITH L. SMITH, Ohio State University Extension
JO M. JONES, Ohio State University Extension
JOHN S. MCCAULEY, Ohio State University Extension

Book Overview

George McDowell's book places land-grant universities at the center of the question, "How will the university of the future serve a public who has unlimited access to unlimited amounts of information?" Underscoring his probing in this area is his assertion that outreach functions of the land-grant universities have been postponed too long.

McDowell addresses this question with a fervor that if audible would certainly echo through the halls of academia. Though the major part of the book reflects the opinions, and even biases, of McDowell, he reinforces his thinking with excerpts, quotes or ideas from recent publications and interviews with current or former leaders of universities and extension services. A sampling of those included are the Kellogg Presidents' Commission, Earnest Boyer, John Byrne, Lyla Houghlum, Peter Magrath, Ed Schuh, Maria Tymoczko, and C. J. Weiser. He observes that despite the breakneck speed of change in both universities and society at large, extension is stuck at the mid-century point. "The problems of the society during the Golden Age of agricultural research and extension in the middle of the 20th century" (p. 10) still characterize the agenda of most extension programs today. Herein lies the author's "mundane and pragmatic" thesis: "Without greater engagement of the universities with the society, the public universities are in peril. Without that engagement, not only will the universities not be able to contribute to the pressing problems of the society, they will not be able to understand or renew the evolving culture, accurately or effectively interpret history, or significantly expand the understanding of the human condition" (pp. 26–27). McDowell is frustrated by the fact that land-grant institutions did not heed the calls for reform, thus setting the stage for his visualization of the future of land-grant universities and extension by providing a historical overview of their successful progression through the years but then painting a bleak picture of their status as they have entered the 21st Century. He offers a series of predictions, questions, recommendations, alternatives, and challenges that university leaders, extension leaders, and community leaders must jointly address, debate, examine, and experiment with if the 21st century land-grant university is to renew its social contract with the American people.

An overriding concern of McDowell's is that "extension staff and leadership have lost their way and have been taken hostage by farm and commodity groups" (p. 73), not to mention the negative effect of extension's connection with the USDA: "As one contemplates the future of the land-grant universities and the role of extension in their outreach activities, it is not difficult to argue that the partnership with the USDA is a significant liability to broadening the extension portfolio and engaging more parts of the universities under exten-

sion” (p. 124). Interestingly, he offers ideas on alternative federal partners that represent true “out of the box” creativity. He proposes three scenarios: (a) dividing formula funds by major programs and partner with the USDA, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, and the Department of Commerce; (b) administration of extension monies by the National Science Foundation; (c) establish a Corporation for Public University Outreach to provide overall coordination of program delivery (pp. 126–127). Thus, McDowell doesn’t simply stop at raising concerns and criticisms of the land-grant university and extension but goes the next step of making recommendations for re-engineering not only the federal partner but extension’s structure within the land-grant system, as well as the university’s social contract with the people of each state. Scenarios are included from universities and/or their extension services that have implemented new organizational or administrative structures or are experimenting with new programming or new types of partnerships.

The book is timely and provides a definite contribution to the knowledge base and practice of the land-grant university and extension. The real life scenarios (some successful, some not) serve as ideas, precautions, conversation starters, success stories, and lessons to others. This book should be required reading for leadership teams who are accepting the challenge of reinvention and restructuring. Lively and philosophical debates regarding the author’s ideas, recommendations, and predictions should take place prior to decision making that relates to reinvention.

The book makes reference to and in some cases provides overviews of recent publications that address similar and current issues of land-grant universities and extension. The book’s compilation of organizational statistics from both a national and historical perspective serves as an excellent resource for extension personnel conducting new personnel orientation and for graduate students who are conducting extension related research. It will serve as an excellent textbook or supplementary reading for graduate-level courses focusing on the history of land-grants, the history of extension, or issues in extension.

Who should read this book? The content, the challenges, and the “out-of-the-box” thinking makes it critical reading for administrators of land-grant universities, administrators and faculty of outreach and engagement, of extension, and colleges of agriculture or their equivalents, Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) administrators, state and federal legislators and policymakers. The National Science Foundation and Farm Bureau and other state and national agricultural organizations should also read this book. Following the reading by these various individuals and groups, dialogue must take place between and among them and action explored to address the issues presented.

In conclusion, readers with a passion for land-grant universities and cooperative extension services will experience various reactions as they read this book. Some may react with frustration, denial, disagreement, bitterness, and anger, while others may experience fear, guilt, hopelessness, and panic. Still others may react with agreement, hoping that the book will stimulate change, affirmation of their own thinking, excitement and motivation to address the issues of maintaining, or as some would see it, remaking the 21st century land-grant university once again the people’s university. As Paul A. Miller closed his

foreward to McDowell's book, we would like to conclude our review with a quotation from Ortega y Gasset's *Mission of the University* (1944), "The university must be open to the whole reality of its time. It must be in the midst of real life, and saturated with it [and] . . . must intervene, as the university, in current affairs, treating the great themes of the day from its own point of view: cultural, professional, and scientific."