

Presented on the occasion of the Conference “University Education for the Twenty-First Century,” in conjunction with the 90th Anniversary of the founding of Yerevan State University

Yerevan, Armenia

October 2, 2009

“The Role of the University in the Community”

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The essential and important role of the University in the community at large is today an accepted fact in the broader understanding of the role of universities in North American education. While traditionally one may consider the role of the university to be only that as “an institution of higher learning providing facilities for teaching and research and authorized to grant academic degrees,” today the university has a more significant responsibility as a focus for the life of the community and the region in which it is located. There are a variety of reasons behind this shift in the focus of the university—a shift that has taken place more significantly in the last twenty to twenty-five years.

The reasons vary from intellectual, to financial, to simply a better understanding of the importance of university life in the community. I will use the California State University (CSU) in the United States to illustrate the points that I would like to make.

The CSU is a leader in high-quality, accessible, student-focused higher education. With 23 campuses, almost 450,000 students, and 48,000 faculty and staff, it is the largest, the most diverse, and one of the most affordable university systems in the United States. According to the mission statement of the CSU system, “We offer unlimited opportunities to help students achieve their goals. We prepare graduates who go on to make a difference in the workforce. We engage in research and creative activities leading

to scientific, technical, artistic and social advances. *And we play a vital role in the growth and development of California's communities and economy.*”

Fresno State, the university campus where I teach, is one of the most diverse universities in the CSU system. It is interesting to note the shift in emphasis in the strategic plan for the university, one that now addresses the community as well as the university itself. Since 1997, the university has developed and implemented three strategic plans, culminating with a fourth plan, in 2008. It is interesting to quote from the mission statement of the new strategic plan, “We will become New California’s premier engaged university, nationally recognized for our teaching, learning, transformational scholarship, [the traditional role of the university] and dynamic leadership which engages faculty, students, staff, and community in mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration benefiting the region and society as a whole [the newer role of the university].” This one statement comprises how the university now sees itself with relation to the community it resides in. Fresno State seeks to “engage effectively with community, government, business, education and nonprofit organizations.” Thus it is seeking a greater role in the community, one that is interactive, and can change with the transformation in the community.

According to the mission statement of the university, “The university assists in the transformation of the region through applied research, technical assistance, training, community service-learning, civic engagement, and other related public service activities.” The university becomes a center for citizens to participate in the transformation of the community through their relationship to the university. There are many concrete examples of this partnership at Fresno State: in business, students are involved with local business to train and place students in the business community; in the area of arts, students engage the community through dramatic presentations, musical concerts, and a variety of performances.

Community service is now encouraged and students are volunteering in great numbers in a variety of non-profit organizations, thereby transforming the community. The partnership between the university and the community benefits both students and the region.

The role of the university is now seen to include “enhancing the economic vitality and quality of life for all in rural and urban communities,” while the university develops partnerships with agriculture, business, education, industry, health services, human services, nonprofit organizations, and government.

This new view can be transformative for Yerevan State University, the premiere public university in Armenia, and in the region. University-public partnerships have already begun to transform the university, leading to opportunities for a broader role for the university.

Financial considerations are a major concern to public universities, especially now in California, but also in Armenia. While historically there was a government commitment to open access, that has now been threatened in California because of a budget deficit of more than 24 billion dollars, leading to a decline in public funding for the university. Today less than 70% of the Fresno State budget comes from the state, with the remainder coming through rising student fees, cuts in salaries, and public donations. It is now clear that the trend is not going to reverse itself. What is the solution that universities are now turning to? Developing stronger ties to the community, bringing community members to the university for a variety of activities, makes it more likely that community members will be engaged with the university and will help financially. A strong development division is now a key component of any university. Experience has shown that engaging the public leads directly to higher public support for higher education.

As an intellectual hub, the university must organize and sponsor activities that lead to broader community involvement. Lectures, opportunities for education for adults, special programs, all can attract the community and help the university.

It is worthwhile to repeat the kinds of goals that California State University, Fresno has in this new environment: Create a healthier New California; Advance world class agriculture; Transform the economy and create new businesses and jobs; Educate our children; and Honor the arts and culture of the region.

The role of the University in the community had changed leading to new opportunities and possibilities. We live in exciting times where the drive for innovation is now becoming apparent. Both the university and the community will gain from this mutual support and efforts to draw closer to each other.

