

FROM ENTERPRISE TO ECOSYSTEM: A DIVERSE PROSPECTIVE ON UNIVERSITY RESEARCH

By Maria Thompson

My perspective on the university research enterprise has changed over the years as I have changed jobs within the academy. From the time I was an idealistic assistant professor to a newly minted university president, there has been one thing that has remained clear—the most successful research does not take place in a vacuum. It is dependent on the integration of a number of diverse components working in cooperative relationship.

When I was a professor, the quality and quantity of my research was dependent on the coordinated of my research assistants. When I was vice president of research and sponsored programs, I was focused on creating a one-stop-shop that integrated pre-award and post award services. My focus shifted to the integration of faculty research productivity, optimal student learning, and financially sustainable academic programs when I held the position of provost and vice president for academic affairs. On July 1 of this year, I became a university president and my perspective shifted yet again. For the long-term strategic positioning of the research enterprise, we must begin to think of research as part of our institutions' ecosystem.

An ecosystem is characterized by the interrelationship of its diverse components. A lack of diversity among components and/or a lack of interrelationship can negatively impact some or all components of the system. If we think of research as part of the university ecosystem, we can expand the number of potential research topics and partners and become a little less vulnerable when budgets are tight.

If your campus is like most colleges and universities in the country, it is faced with a number of grand challenges that threaten the university's ecosystem. What are the issues on your campus that can weaken the its ecosystem? What role does your research enterprise play in supporting the university's ecosystem?

A few of the grand challenges in higher education are listed below.

- College readiness, student retention, and graduation rates
- Increase in student mobility and issues related to transfer students
- Demographic decrease in traditional college-age students
- Student loan debt and default rates
- Unsustainable business model
- Campus sexual assault and other crimes

Why should research administrators care about these issues? If you think these are exclusively the concerns of the president and the provost, not only are you overlooking rich research topics, you are not fully contributing to the health of your institution's ecosystem. No matter how

many external dollars we attract, it is not prudent to remain in the silo of research while other campus functions struggle. If a university fails to attract, retain, and graduate a sufficient number of students, even the most research extensive campus can fall on hard economic times. We must address the grand challenges of our campuses with the same commitment we show when addressing scientific challenges such as renewable energy, water quality, and human health.

When your colleagues in academic affairs struggle with shrinking student enrollments, retention problems, and financially unsustainable academic programs, it is tempting to look away and focus only on day-to-day pre-award and post award activities. Although these are your primary concerns, they should not be your only concerns. Below are a few suggestions for shifting your perspective from enterprise to ecosystem.

- Become knowledgeable about your campus's grand challenges and participate in campus-wide discussions of the threats to your institution's ecosystem.
- Communicate to your president, and other cabinet members, how the research administration function contributes to the overall health of the institution beyond the traditional contribution it makes to the research enterprise.
- Include some or all of your university's grand challenges in the strategic research plan for your campus.
- Request internal seed funds for research projects that address your university's grand challenges.
- Encourage faculty to diversify their research interests beyond their discipline to include the grand challenges of your university.
- Compose a one or two page summary on your university's grand challenges. Describe how the research enterprise addresses these challenges and supports the institution's ecosystem. When appropriate, include the key points of the summary in proposals submitted for external funding. ■



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