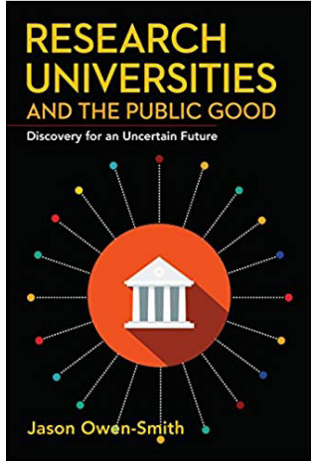


BOOK REVIEW

Research Universities and the Public Good

Discovery for an Uncertain Future



by Jason Owen-Smith

Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, CA 2018

213 pages

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Reviewed by Karen E. Hinton

This book offers a good look inside the way research faculty view their role in the university. The perspectives shared are broadly applicable for all planners at post-secondary institutions, especially in their considering complex organizations that have both unlimited potential and finite resources.

For those engaged in the various types of planning required in higher education (academic, administrative, budget, facilities, and strategic/institutional), reading *Research Universities and the Public Good* will feel very like sitting down to a pre-planning interview with a member of the research faculty. While Jason Owen-Smith's book is focused exclusively on research universities and the societal impact of their research, the value of the author's work is more broadly applicable for planners at any post-secondary institution. The benefit is in knowing how to incorporate such information into the planning process.

The premise of the book is that publicly funded research is the cornerstone of the valuable social contributions of research universities. The content of the book is similar to a number of earlier papers issued on a regular basis at

many institutions.¹ Those papers examined the impact of research on graduate education, local economic development, and knowledge networks. In some cases, universities have developed a multiplier they use to quantify the contributions of the campus in its community or state. In his own study, Owen-Smith believes "explaining the public value of academic research requires a new framework" (9). His new framework comprises three roles universities play. They serve as network sources, community anchors, and connecting hubs. Those functions are defined as follows:

Network sources: Those engaged in research form teams and collaborative networks within the institution and among institutions.

1 An example of one such paper is from Arizona State University (Hill and Seidman 2006) titled "University Research and Local Economic Development."

Community anchors: Universities are fixed in the community, spending research dollars in that community, drawing people and resources to it, and forming partnerships with business and industry in the area.

Connecting hubs: Campuses create shortcut networks that move people and ideas to other settings, such as industry and government agencies.

The book limits discussion to research universities defined as the 141 universities generating 89 percent of all academic R&D in 2015. Each chapter is replete with examples of networking, innovation, and community engagement from a number of those universities. Whether one agrees with the author's view or not, the experience he provides is easily transferrable for planning purposes. His concepts are relevant to post-secondary institutions in general, including community colleges, which during the past two decades have been incorporating research projects into their curricula. Therefore, it behooves planners for all types of institutions to understand the application of Owen-Smith's work.

For administrative and strategic/institutional planners, there is always the struggle to integrate the disparate functions of a university into a plan for the institution as a whole. In the same way pre-planning interviews introduce us to key issues on campus, this book presents well-developed views of one segment of a university's total scope.

Owen-Smith believes that calls for efficiency and measurable outcomes are antithetical to the research role of those elite universities. He acknowledges the "fundamental tension" between organizational structure and the more fluid dynamic of the institution's research function. He also recognizes the "complex competing missions" inherent within the institution. His acknowledgements are appropriate. When the budget office or human resources is given an opportunity to provide its own perspective, the need for efficiencies and measurable results is supported with an equal fervor.

An example of an issue often bringing research faculty and administrative functions into the arena of competing missions concerns policies governing personnel management. A common practice with faculty awarded research funding is "release time." A full-time faculty member's instructional course load may be three or four classes during the fall and spring semesters. With release time, the university grants the faculty member leave from some or all of those teaching duties to conduct research. However, the institution is then required to hire someone (usually an adjunct instructor or graduate student, at a lower rate of pay and without benefits) to cover the courses of full-time faculty members.² The practice not only costs the university in terms of pay for two faculty members, it also can be abused.³

Graduate students can work on more than one research project at a time but not be identified, because they are paid from different project accounts. In those circumstances, they can be eligible for benefits, or in violation of restricted work hours depending on campus policy. Lab assistants and technicians who are used by multiple projects and counted separately for each can inflate departmental FTE (full-time equivalent). Those are cases where flexibility and fluidity are not in the institution's best interests. Strategic/institutional planners encounter those divergent perspectives often, and the integration of them into some sort of cohesive whole is one of the most difficult parts of developing an institutional plan that supports each.

For facilities planning, much of what Owen-Smith describes has been a critical part of campus planning for years. Certain segments of the university face outward into the community rather than inward to the academy, blurring the boundaries between campus and community in ways described in the book. Buildings containing meeting and conference facilities, supported with technology-enabling unlimited virtual collaboration, are in high demand. Lab facilities flexible

2 This practice has been the focus of concern in some quarters with regard to its impact on the quality of classroom instruction.

3 I once worked at an institution where a full-time grant-funded faculty member was receiving 125 percent release time.

enough to host different research projects with minimal reconfiguration are also regularly required.

Another component of the facilities side of that particular type of campus planning is the allocation of office space. Frequently, faculty members will have an office in their home department and another within the lab. The allocation of lab and office space can be hotly contested when space is at a premium, especially if a faculty member does not vacate the lab offices once funding has ended. An inventory of how many offices are assigned to each research faculty member often produces surprising results.

The facilities or campus planner recognizes that the request by research faculty for a certain number of new labs and conference rooms (or even a new building) will be met by an equally legitimate demand elsewhere on campus for resources to be created for other purposes. Again, the role of planner requires a balanced approach to campus needs and capacities.

Owen-Smith offers us a very good look inside the way research faculty view their role in the university. As planners, it is up to us to understand his perspective and incorporate his thoughts into a large and complex organizational structure with unlimited potential and finite resources.

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Science IV Building

Ashley McGraw Architects

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