

The University as PUBLIC Square



By Elaine P. Maimon

Last May, as I led the academic procession at the hooding ceremony for our graduate students at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), I thought about the monastic tradition symbolized by academic regalia, gown and hood. Educated people everywhere owe a debt to medieval monks, who worked in drafty cloisters (hence the hoods) to preserve the knowledge of the classical world. Universities in Europe and the United States honor this preservation of knowledge, not only in traditional academic attire, but also in architecture, attitude, and elitism. The idea of the university as a place apart from the real world—an ivory tower, a college on a hill—reflects the dedication to quiet contemplation of medieval monks and scribes.

As I assisted in hooding each candidate for an advanced degree, I reflected on the 21st century meaning of this act of investiture. Rather than separating the scholar from the “real world,” the hood today should take on new meaning as a symbol of engagement.



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The events of September 11, 2001, affirmed that cloisters no longer exist. Think of Henry Adams' symbol of the medieval world, the monastery at Mont St. Michel, a citadel on the remote Normandy coast, which he saw as superseded by the dynamo in the 20th century. In the 21st century, the dynamo has given way to more complex and sometimes dangerous machines. After 9/11, there are no cloisters, no escape from the threat of terror. Our fears and, more important, our possibilities converge in the public square. As H. G. Wells said, "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."

Without denying the value to education of cloistered serenity, I would argue that public universities in the United States have their roots in a time before the Dark Ages. Our tradition at UAA, Alaska's public metropolitan university, goes back to the classical world itself, when Socrates walked in the *agora*—the public square—and taught students to be leaders in the life of the city—the *polis*. The agora is defined as a place of congregation. The Romans used the term *forum*, a public meeting place for open discussion. Cicero inspired young Romans to the duties of citizenship in the forum.

Similarly, we are not a cloister but an *agora*, a forum, a public square. We expect our graduates, as they process from our midst in their monks' gowns, to use their educational attainment, as Cicero described, for the public good.

UAA's strategic plan states: "The public university is the public square of 21st century America, the meeting ground for higher education and the society it serves. Nowhere in our society is there a greater opportunity to turn the diverse encoun-

ters between cultures, classes, interests, and ideas to the discovery of knowledge, to creative expression, to preparation for work and service, and to the social and economic support of our communities." Community engagement is an essential part of the mission of UAA, as it must be a primary commitment of all public universities. While public universities should be in the vanguard, private universities, too, must find a way to bring the values of the cloister into the public square and the imperatives of the public square into the university.

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Let me be clear about what "the university as public square" is *not*. It is not a catch phrase conveniently employed to promote campus social activities or the usual assortment of public events. One-way events that are merely open to (but do not actively involve) the community do not make a university a public

square. The university as public square is defined by mutuality. It is not *noblesse oblige*, university scholars coming down from the citadel to profess to the crowd below. One-way sharing of resources, either from the university or from the community, does not qualify. University policies and practices must be consistent and equitably applied, creating open forums for debate, carefully avoiding giving the university imprimatur to special-interest propaganda or one-sided partisan presentations. Likewise, teaching, research, or service that does not address a community-identified challenge or need demonstrates a unidirectional flow of energy, rather than the synergy that defines the public square. Ad hoc volunteer activities, contracts, and random fund-raising events may have their value, but they do not contribute to the paradigm change discussed here. Viewing the university as a public square is a major conceptual shift defining the relationship between the university and the real world. When a university is a public square, it is a part of (not apart from) the community.

The university as public square is characterized by:

- A sense of partnership.
- A sense of place.
- A sense of priority.
- A sense of citizenship.¹

A Sense of Partnership

A university is a public square when it is integrated and interdependent with the community. A university has much to learn, as well as much to teach. In 21st century America, the university has opportunities to learn from diverse communities, if we are willing to listen and engage in real dialogue. The only Alaskan to win a MacArthur Foundation "genius award" is not from the university. Katherine Gottlieb,

of Aleut descent, was a 2004 MacArthur winner because of her work as president and CEO of the Southcentral Foundation, an Alaska Native nonprofit health corporation that leads the way in patient-centered health care, with an emphasis on wellness. Values of family and community are perceptible in Southcentral's hospital, which shares Anchorage's U/Med District with UAA. In true partnership fashion, UAA listens and learns from Southcentral, finding organic connections between its accomplishments and our teaching and research.

Finding new ways to form vital partnerships with local communities is essential to the concept of the university as public square. UAA's partnership with Alaska Natives, who represent 20 percent of the state's population, is an important example of mutuality. We have established the Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Alaska Native Student Success, chaired by Professor Herb Schroeder, winner of one of the White House's 2004 Presidential Awards for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring. The committee includes leaders of the First Alaskans Institute, various Alaska Native corporations, and the Alaska commissioner of education. It convenes monthly listening forums designed to gather information from business leaders, students, faculty members, and other stakeholders for ways to transform the university into an inclusive public square for the descendants of the state's first peoples.

Partnership also means open cooperation with neighboring institutions, with the goal of, literally, finding common ground. In addition to sharing geographic space with the Southcentral Foundation, UAA shares a campus with Alaska Pacific

University, a private, residential liberal arts college; Providence Hospital; the Anchorage radio and television headquarters for PBS and NPR; and East High, one of the public high schools in the Anchorage School District. The university has convened meetings for leaders of all these organizations to plan—together—everything from biomedical programming to parking. We have all shared our master plans, overlaying one on the other, with the goal of establishing a vital partnership, intellectually, psychologically, and geographically. We have developed a set of shared principles for development of a U/Med Town Center, encompassing ideas of the "new urbanism," university and community buildings designed for integrated use. Whatever the long-term result of this planning, the dialectic process itself builds trust, and the ongoing conversation identifies the entire U/Med District as a public square.

A Sense of Place

The phrase *town/gown* refers to the traditional relationship between the gowned, cloistered academics and the "townees," separated from the life of the academy. Embracing the idea of the university as public square leads us to envision architectural space that encourages interaction and the exchange of ideas among students, faculty, staff, and "townees." The "Starbucks factor" (in Alaska, it would be the "Kaladi Bros. factor"), the creation of a comfortable environment that draws people together for coffee and lively conversation, is an essential element in bringing town and gown together. Such welcoming intellectual places, dependent on a university presence, draw new businesses and economic growth to areas that create them.

In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Carla Yanni recently wrote: "Universities require communal spaces that encourage people to spend time together. Otherwise academic life devolves into disparate, meaningless episodes—a lecture, a walk from class to class, a retreat into dorm or car. . . . Loitering should be encouraged. Linger should be a positive value."² Of the 15,000 students on UAA's Anchorage campus, 14,000 are commuters. Universities must create a sense of home for resident students and become a second home for those who have work and family obligations off campus. It is also imperative, even in this age of anxiety over security, that campuses remain open and welcoming to the public, creating easy transitions to the heart of the campus.

At UAA, the Consortium Library (itself a partnership between UAA and Alaska Pacific University) has its main doors oriented toward the street, the public thoroughfare, inviting Anchorage and visitors to enter the inner sanctum. The library's architecture is itself a model for northern universities: windows framed by stylized references to oil derricks, designed to reflect the rapidly expanding and contracting Anchorage sunlight; interior walkways that connect the library to parking structures and other buildings; and a central atrium that features the most northern presence of a Foucault's pendulum. The Consortium Library, as a Knowledge Commons, merging library collections with digital library services in partnership with community libraries and other information providers, exemplifies the public square.

The university as public square is also a place for lingering, for informal gathering,

and for walking. Pedestrian walkways, bicycle paths, hiking, and, in Anchorage, snowshoe and Nordic ski trails, organically connect campuses, hospitals, high schools, and the city. The public square must be an accessible and sustainable environment. When a university is a public square, it works with the municipality on public transportation, protective bus shelters designed to encourage conversation, and plans for traffic and parking on a human scale. Signage is also important. Cloisters are labyrinths. Public squares have clear pathways to assist members of the public in finding their way.

A Sense of Priority

The university as public square gives priority to applying expertise in research, scholarship, and creative activity to finding solutions to real-world problems. This priority goes beyond traditional definitions of applied research. Again, the key is mutuality. The university listens to the community and works in partnership to define research issues. That research is then integrated into the teaching and community service mission of the institution. At UAA, for example, faculty biologists work with community leaders on solving pollution problems in a local creek. The Chester Creek Watershed Project is a unique collaboration of 23 courses (predominately in the natural sciences) that give students an opportunity to provide community service while learning hands-on applications for promoting environmental sustainability. Each semester, undergraduates work in teams with faculty mentors and community members. Research, teaching, and community service are integrated in the public square.

The university as public square is also the first place the



community turns for help in meeting its needs. The university becomes an indispensable catalyst for the economic and social development and revitalization of its communities and the state. It is an active partner in addressing economic and social challenges. UAA's Institute for Social and Economic Research partners with community study groups sponsored by Commonwealth North (a prestigious membership group, founded by former Governor Walter Hickel, which explores public policy issues) and with other community institutions to address the key issues in Alaska: health care, a proposed natural gas pipeline, education, and Anchorage demographics.

Making the public square a priority means making changes in organizational structure and, more important, in the deep culture of the university. At UAA, grassroots faculty efforts, under

Professor Nancy Andes and her "Dream Team" (an outstanding group of interdisciplinary faculty members who meet regularly to plan courses, projects, and conferences) have created the Center for Community Engagement and Learning. In my first year as chancellor, in order to send a clear message that university partnership was a top priority in my administration, I appointed Renee Carter-Chapman, a senior administrator, well-known and respected throughout Alaska, as vice chancellor for community partnerships.

More remains to be done. Incorporating the values of the public square into promotion and tenure processes is a challenge, requiring continued broad-based faculty support, as well as a leadership commitment to cultural transformation.

A sense of priority for the public square should be expressed in the definitive documents of the institution: mission statement, strategic plan, home page, and catalogue. UAA is one of the first institutions to participate in the Carnegie Foundation's new elective classification in community engagement. This classification is an excellent vehicle for universities across the nation to give priority to the university as public square.

A Sense of Citizenship

When a university is a public square, it is highly intentional in the education of citizens. The universities in the American Democracy Project give priority to the role of the university in helping students think like citizens. One activity of this project brings the editors of student newspapers from around the nation together at *The New York Times* for a daylong discussion of the role of newspapers, including campus papers, in a free society. In addition to

enlightening future journalists, activities of this kind exemplify the application of classroom knowledge and skills to the duties of active citizenship.

Most universities encourage voter registration by including the appropriate forms with course registration material. But when a university is a public square, elections become opportunities for students to apply classroom knowledge to the participatory decision making that defines a democracy. In a strictly non-partisan way, faculty members encourage students to inform themselves about the key issues in an election. Voter registration and “getting out the vote” are embraced as major activities of student government and faculty and staff organizations. In 2004, UAA volunteers trained 98 students, faculty, and staff members to be voter registrars. They registered 1,000 new voters

who voted, exerting political impact in the public square.

The university as public square also provides the setting for public discourse on the significant issues of the day. That means more than welcoming the public to attend lectures and panels. It means providing opportunities for significant interaction during the process of generating ideas. UAA’s Community Enrichment program conducts a series of salons each year. Community members open their homes to their friends and acquaintances, many of whom have no affiliation with the university. UAA faculty members involve participants in structured conversations and case studies on such topics as “What is the good life?” “What role should teachers in remote parts of Alaska play in the social problems of the region?” and “How does Thomas Friedman’s

The World Is Flat apply to Alaska?”

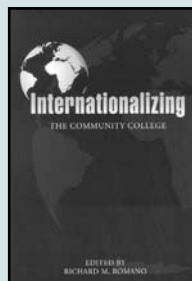
The concept of the university as public square asserts higher education as a public good. Medieval clerics and scholars, dressed in the gowns that we don ceremonially today, followed their consciences to a cloistered environment. The mandate for the 21st century university is to lead in bringing conscience and citizenship into the public square. ■

Notes:

1. I wish to express appreciation to UAA Vice Chancellor for Community Partnerships Renee Carter-Chapman, for listing these components of the university as public square.
2. Yanni, C. (2006, April 28). Why all campuses need public places. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, B21.

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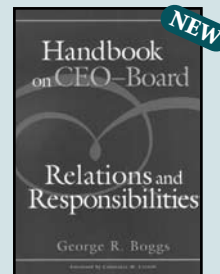
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