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Land Grants: Back to the Future

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The three branches of the Land Grant Colleges and Universities family all share a common legacy, common mission and common challenges. The Morrill Act of 1862, the original legislation which served as the framework for land grant institution expansion beginning in the 1880s and continuing to 1994, was first inspired by Jonathan Baldwin Turner. Turner authored his “Granville Plan” in 1851 and much of what became the Morrill Act was contained in Turner’s early writing.

Turner foresaw a system of “peoples” colleges charged with closing the educational gap between the haves and the have-nots, which in turn would lead to greater income equality, economic development, and social justice. The original mission of the Land Grant system identified in the Morrill Act and every related act thereafter was to teach agriculture and the mechanic arts as well as classical studies so that the “working class” or “common person”—that is non-wealthy—could obtain a liberal arts and practical education. At the time of its passage, agricultural and mechanical/technical workers were largely unable to attend institutions of higher education.

Ironically, the Morrill Act and all subsequent Acts that support what is the present-day Land Grant research and extension system across the country were originally built upon a “grant of federal lands” within each state. These original federal lands were, of course, Indian lands that were appropriated under a series of treaties, Acts of Congress, and other means—such as war, conflict, theft, tax sale, and a dizzying array of systematic actions—that led to the loss of the original indigenous land base that became what is now known as the United States. Certainly, the 1994 Tribal Land Grant Colleges have taken up this mission first outlined in the Morrill Act, as have the 1890 Historically Black Colleges and Universities. After decades of uneven progress, but progress nonetheless, in lessening the gap between rich and poor, it actually began to widen again beginning in the mid-1970s. A case could be made that many of the 1862 land grants have systematically lost focus from the 1970s to the present on their most basic challenge as they have sought to cope with budget issues and as they have pursued other institutional objectives. On the challenge of funding, it is worth noting that the 1890 and 1994 land grants have been dealing with underfunding for years, as well.

In any case, it’s time—actually past time—for all land grants to individually and collectively return to the purposes and missions originally envisioned by Turner and adopted by Morrill, Wade, and Lincoln. It is time to recommit to addressing the growing educational, income, and in Robert Putnam’s terms, “opportunity gap” which threatens the nation’s future. Most assuredly the 1862 land grants, as the institutional entities that have the most significant resources of all land grants, have a fundamental obligation to provide leadership in this regard. The 1862 institutions should periodically be reminded of the central charge contained in the original legislation. They are to “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” (Section 4, Chapter CXXX). In order to promote, the institutions must know their audience, the needs of their audience, and reacquaint themselves with the fundamental jobs they did so well in the early years of their existence.

In our view, the 1862 land grants must start “promoting” by building new, proactive, student-centric relationships with their sister 1890, 1994, and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) institutions. And these relationships should include four major ideas.

First, to offer high quality educational programs in an era of shrinking public funding, joint ventures are required.

The 1862 land grants should develop partnership degrees on the campuses of 1994—and 1890—land grants through blended on-site and online jointly developed coursework. For Indian Country, and for building and promoting relationships with 1994s, these degrees should be designed around the specific needs of Indian people and Indian communities, not the needs of individual faculty or 1862 institutions. For example, degrees related to agricultural and natural resource management seem well attuned for an 1862 land grant partnership with an institution such as Diné College. Construction management, rural health care and nutrition, nursing, and hospitality management could be a useful joint degree between several 1862s and several Tribal partners, and so on. And, the idea of joint undergraduate degree programs between the 1862 land grants should be expanded to include joint graduate and professional degree programs with the 1890 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and HSIs. The 1862 institutions must take the lead in making these joint programs a priority and in finding the resources to make them successful. Importantly, that does not mean engaging in these relationships with much smaller institutions with an eye only towards what is in the best interest of the 1862.

Second, the larger 1862 land grants should explore with their sister land grants the pursuit of consolidated, cost-reduced, non-academic services such as purchasing, payroll, accounting and so on. The objective of sharing “back-office” functions should be to create efficiencies that will allow every available dollar at every institution to be allocated to directly serving students. In a sense, the consolidation of non-academic services would likewise stay true to another principle that is a bedrock of agriculture development—that of “cooperatives” and cooperative behavior as a means of achieving success more efficiently. Agriculture lending, agriculture business, and farmers and ranchers determined decades ago that we could grow strength and stability much more readily by cooperative approaches to our related work than spending our time competing for precious markets or dollars or assembling repetitive functions across multiple organizations. The fact that land grants already exist within a “family” of public institutions could actually realize the promise of these institutions in a new era if we return to our roots, not only in mission but also in administrative function and day-to-day practice. While it would not necessarily be an easy thing to do, it is possible and could allow 1890, 1994, and HSI institutions to reach their full potential.

Third, 1862 land grants should offer corridors of special access to graduate and professional programs for students from HBCUs, HSIs, and Tribal Colleges. The rural medicine program targeting American Indian students at the University of Minnesota-Duluth serves as a very good model. There are others and the creation of such corridors of special access is nothing new. Many 1862s already engage in corridors among other 1862s in order to improve access to veterinary colleges and to ensure that lead institutions within regions have the ability to focus on programs of excellence while ensuring that students within regions or fields of study have a level playing field in accessing such programs. Broadening those corridors of special access to ensure that students attending HBCUs, HSIs, and Tribal Colleges are afforded these opportunities is the logical next step.

Finally, all 110 land grants should unify in seeking renewed public funding for public higher education from Congress and state legislatures. The time for fighting among the family members is over. It is time to speak up together and demand sufficient funding to relieve the onerous financial burden on students attending public land grant institutions and thus ensure a productive future for all land grant universities during the challenging times ahead. Together this family of institutions is much stronger; alone or fragmented, this family of institutions is letting the country down and letting our students down. And it is certainly not meeting the original mission for which the system was created, which is unique among all institutions of higher education.

The growing gulf between rich and poor in the United States, threatens the future of all our citizens. The rising and future demands of feeding a growing population with finite resources are the bread and butter of the land grant mission. The ability to adjust to climate change and food security concerns is best approached from the land grant lens. All land grants have much to offer in solving these and other interrelated crises. But we must approach them as a collaborative and tightly knit family. It is now time to evolve a true system of land grant institutions, each with its respective role, and the 1862s should, as the most heavily resourced of the institutions, provide leadership and service for meeting this goal from a position of humility and support.

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