

SPECIAL REPORT
of the
ACADEMIC PRIORITIES COUNCIL
concerning
PROPOSED POLICY ON CENTRALITY

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Proposed Policy on Centrality

The issue of “centrality” is an interesting matter because of the response it evokes. Most frequently, departments or programs are mentioned as “central,” and we hear such phrases as “you would not have a university without . . .” There is frequently an element of self-serving in the selection of words to end the previous phrase. It must be noted that the composition of universities is constantly changing and many of the departments now thought to be central were not part of universities of the past and may not be in the future.

The matter of centrality must not turn on departments or schools but should reach to a higher level of mission and understanding. The following is a description of the factors that should form the basis for a centrality policy.

The University’s Land Grant Mission

The University of Massachusetts is a Land-Grant institution which was endowed by the Morrill Act in 1863. Land-Grant institutions were established at a time when there was a great debate over the direction of higher education. One faction advocated the model of the liberal arts college in which learning centered about a collection of writings. Another group advocated the development of universities on the German model in which the faculty was the center and that faculty engaged in finding new knowledge and applying that knowledge to both teaching and to society’s needs. The university system in Germany* was credited with its rapid rise in many industries. The liberal arts model lost the debate and the Land-Grant universities were established to generate, conserve and transmit knowledge based on the faculty and their research. The original act mentions agriculture, mechanical arts and military science specifically but it should be appreciated that those were the areas of greatest national importance at the time the act was passed (we were in the middle of the Civil War). A modern interpretation of the Land-Grant Act would be that Land-Grant Universities are to be centers of learning based on research and experience and to provide education in those area. The pursuit of knowledge and the generation of new knowledge are primary to the land-grant university just as they are to any major university.

In terms of debate on centrality there are several points that should form the basis of policy:

- The faculty and the quality of the faculty are central to the university.
- Faculty research and scholarship are central because they form the basis of teaching which is a primary function of the university.
- Application of the products of research to society’s needs is central.
- Education based on faculty research is central.
- Graduate education which proceeds from the faculty and their research is central to the mission of the land-grant university. Indeed, the integrity of the undergraduate effort depends on a sound graduate program. The role of graduate education is two-fold; it educates those who are the future teachers and scholars and it provides the environment of intellectual activity that supports excellence in undergraduate education.

*Modern Germany did not exist in 1863. The term used here refers to the geographic area.

- Undergraduate education is part of the central calling of a land-grant university. The faculty and their experience is central to the quality of the undergraduate education. The Land-Grant Act clearly states that land-grant universities are places “where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific or classical studies, to teach such branches of learning related to agriculture and the mechanical arts.” Central to the modern interpretation of this intent of the act was that land-grant university should provide education that was of a professional nature as distinct from but not to the exclusion of a liberal education. However, the latter is not to be ignored. One could summarize the Morrill Act as “public education for public purpose.” Specific policy points related to undergraduate education are:
 - Undergraduate education is central to the mission of the land-grant university.
 - Undergraduate education in practical or professional areas is central to the university and must be strengthened.
 - The concept of public education for public purpose is central to the university.

Finally, there are considerations which apply equally to undergraduate and graduate education and which are central to the university mission:

- The quality of the library is central to the education mission of the university at all levels. The same must be said of the physical plant which supports the teaching and research efforts. Proper maintenance of these is essential if the mission of the university is to be accomplished.
- The quality of life and morale of students, staff and faculty is central to the functioning of the university.

Conclusion

The debate about centrality should not be framed in terms of “you cannot have a university without XYZ department.” The debate is in terms of those policies that are central to the function of the university irrespective of departments present or absent. Central to the debate is a renewed understanding of the mission of a land-grant university in the late 20th century which sets that university apart for the simple liberal arts college. When the matter of centrality is weighed in either recession or expansion, careful attention must be paid to the role of faculty and their research as well as the excellence of undergraduate education. Broader questions must be asked than a simple litany of departments thought to be necessary. The preceding asks some of the questions that should be considered. The answers, like the land-grant mission, will differ with time, but the questions are eternal.

MOVED: That the Faculty Senate approve the proposed policy on centrality as stated in
12-93 Document No. 93-021.