

## **Stakeholder Perceptions of the Proper Role and Focus of a Flagship Land Grant University**

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### Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Many parents and students, buffeted by rising tuition and uncertain economic prospects, take a pragmatic approach and view a college education in terms of credits, degrees, and jobs (Sutton, 2001). Others, including many faculty and administrators, view a college education as having a “larger purpose and a more expansive set of outcomes,” than career preparation and believe a college education serves both graduates and the public good (Sutton, 2016, p.1). Stakeholder theory (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, and de Colle, 2010) posits that organizations are successful only when they deliver outcomes valued by all stakeholders. Thus, this study was conducted to determine the perceptions of stakeholders at one land grant university concerning the university’s proper societal role and educational mission.

### Methods

As part of a larger stakeholder survey, two forced-choice questions were included that asked stakeholders to select their perceptions of the role of universities in society and the proper focus of universities in student preparation (Figure 1).

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| <p>Q7. Which of the two statements below do you agree with most?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It’s better for society that universities continue their traditional role.</li> <li>• It’s better for society that universities evolve their traditional role.</li> </ul> | <p>Q8. Which of the two statements below do you agree with most?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universities should focus on providing strong academics, moral/social development, and exposure to new ideas.</li> <li>• Universities should focus on providing career-specific classes internships, career services, and network opportunities</li> </ul> |
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*Figure 1.* Forced-choice items related to stakeholders’ preferred university role and focus.

We pilot-test ( $n = 30$ ) the questionnaires and obtained test-retest reliabilities of .67 and .57 for Q7 and Q8, respectively. We sent questionnaires to a census of University of Arkansas alumni, staff, faculty, current students, and parents of current students ( $N = 131,389$ ), as well as to a random sample of Arkansas residents, whose email addresses were secured through a third party ( $n = 99,786$ ). We received usable responses from 10,683 university stakeholders and 1,019 Arkansas residents, for an overall response rate of 5.06%.

We used chi square tests of independence to determine if there were significant ( $p < .05$ ) associations between stakeholder group and perceptions of the role or purpose of a flagship land grant university. When significant overall chi square values were found, we calculated adjusted Pearson residuals *post hoc* to identify significant differences between stakeholder group(s) (Sharpe, 2015). After applying the Bonferroni correction for multiple *post hoc* tests (Naioti & Murdrak, 2018), we used the .005 alpha level to test the significance of the adjusted residuals to maintain an overall Type I error rate of .05.

### Results

The first chi square test indicated an overall significant association between stakeholder group

and perceptions of the role of a flagship land grant university,  $\chi^2(4) = 27.54, p < .001$ . The significant ( $p < .05$ ) contributors to this overall association were current students and alumni (Table 1). A significantly higher than expected percentage (72.2%) of current students indicating the role of the university should “evolve”, while alumni had a significantly higher than expected percentage (35.5%) indicating universities should maintain their “traditional” role. Despite this difference, a majority of respondents in each stakeholder group selected the “evolve” option. The *Cramer’s V* of .07 indicated the association between group and role perception was small (Cohen, 1988).

Table 1. *Stakeholder Perceptions of the Future Role of a Flagship Land Grant University*

Stakeholder	Traditional			Evolve			Adj. Residual
	Observed ( <i>f</i> )	Expected ( <i>f</i> )	%	Observed ( <i>f</i> )	Expected ( <i>f</i> )	%	
Students	432	495	27.8	1121	1058	72.2	4.00 *
Parents	474	469	32.2	998	1003	67.8	0.33
Alumni	818	745	35.0	1521	1594	65.0	4.21 *
Faculty	70	74	30.3	161	157	69.7	0.52
Non-Connected	27	39	22.3	94	82	77.7	2.27

\* $p < .05$ .

The second chi square test indicated an overall significant association between stakeholder group and perceptions of the purpose the university,  $\chi^2(4) = 187.21, p < .001$ . The significant ( $p < .05$ ) contributors to this overall association were students, parents, alumni, and faculty (Table 2). Higher than expected percentages of students (46.8%) and parents (55.2%) perceived the universities’ primary purpose as preparation for a career. Conversely, higher than expected percentages of alumni (61.3%) and faculty (84.0%) perceived the universities’ primary purpose as being traditional academics. The *Cramer’s V* of .18 indicated the association between group and perception of purpose was medium (Cohen, 1988).

Table 2. *Stakeholder Perceptions of the Primary Purpose of a Flagship Land Grant University*

Stakeholder	Academics			Career			Adj. Residual
	Observed ( <i>f</i> )	Expected ( <i>f</i> )	%	Observed ( <i>f</i> )	Expected ( <i>f</i> )	%	
Students	800	859	51.4	757	699	46.8	3.50 *
Parents	659	811	48.4	812	660	55.2	9.04 *
Alumni	1441	1296	61.3	909	1054	38.7	7.83 *
Faculty	195	128	84.0	37	104	16.0	9.25 *
Non-Connected	66	67	54.1	56	55	45.9	0.24

\* $p < .05$ .

### Implications and Recommendations

These results show potential conflict between students and parents, who largely pay for education and faculty who provide the education. Students and (especially) parents prefer a focus on career preparation while faculty overwhelmingly support a traditional academic focus. These results are consistent with Sutton (2016) and suggest the need for on-going and respectful dialog among stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2001), especially parents, students, and faculty.

## References

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