What is the Role of American Research Universities Following the Attacks of September 11?

Column by Jeff Vincent
November 9, 2001

The answer seems straightforward enough, at least in general terms: We are a major national resource in a host of important areas. These range from the development of anti-terrorist technology ... to the improved understanding of other cultures and religions ... to new ways of diagnosing and treating exposure to biotoxins. Less than two weeks after the attacks in New York and at the Pentagon, Maxine Singer hit the nail on the head with an opinion piece that appeared in the Washington Post. It said, in part:

The scholars, scientists and engineers who work in our great universities, industries and research institutions can, as they have done before, bring deep understanding and original ideas to bear on our new challenges. They can contribute much more than just novel ways of using technology. Many are trained and experienced problem solvers whose approach to difficult problems is to step "out of the box" because that is where scientific and technical questions are most likely to [lead]. Others are scholars with profound knowledge of fundamentalism of all kinds or with comprehensive insight into nations that harbor terrorists. Our fight against international terrorism will require their attention and ideas if it is to succeed.

Dr. Singer is the president of the Carnegie Institution, a Washington think-tank with many ties to academe. But it also seems logical that the research university community, itself, would step forward in the weeks following September 11th and offer a simple and direct statement about its important role in our nation. It might be a statement acknowledging the enormous tragedy of those events and offering our vast intellectual and technical resources - many of them made possible by the tax dollars of the American public - to our federal, state and local governments.

Countless other industries and institutions, both domestic and foreign, stood up and extended both sympathy and assistance. Most of them didn't have the breadth and depth of intellectual horsepower and problem-solving abilities of our research universities.

Scientists and engineers are often accused of being politically tone-deaf. But, early on, a group of their leading organizations "got it" and issued a widely cited, open letter to President Bush just nine days after the attacks. The presidents of the three National Academies - the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering and Institute of Medicine - told the President that "the tragic events of September 11th demand the attention of all Americans" and that their organizations "stand ready to provide advice and counsel in any way that the nation desires." They continued:

As in the 1940s, we have a new opportunity to mobilize many of the best of our scientists and engineers in a great common effort - one in which their knowledge and talents have been redeployed and tightly refocused on preventing the future attacks of terrorists. As part
of that effort, we must completely reassess all of the potential threats to our nation.... We will be convening small groups of senior national experts - both security specialists and scientists - for a series of private meetings. These non-governmental groups will begin to explore the new dimensions of terrorism, and they will be asked to propose ways to marshal the enormous intellectual capacity of the scientific and technological communities of the United States to respond to our new threats.

Unfortunately, the words "university" and "academia" did not appear in that letter. While the readers of this column know that the membership of the National Academies comes primarily from our ranks, most of the world probably read this as a letter from scientists.

For nearly two months, the research university community struggled with whether, and how, to make a collective statement. Many schools have taken unilateral actions, including communications with their state's congressional delegation to on-campus meetings and seminars about the implications of the terrorist attacks. But there was no collective voice. No national leadership.

Among those (like myself) who do the business of research universities in the nation's capital, there has been much anxiety about sounding "opportunistic." We did not want to be perceived as ambulance chasers, focused only on how we could turn a research buck from the misfortune of others. A near-obsession with finding the "right tone" turned into near-paralysis in terms of expressing concern or making a simple declaration of who and what we are. Some even suggested that, because of our esteemed reputations, our government officials would "know where to find us" when an appropriate task came to mind. Others expressed concern about taking too high a profile, lest our offers to provide expertise to the nation be read on campus as cause for student demonstrations.

Eventually, we became very much like those occasional poor souls you see after a funeral service ... the ones who slip away quietly, deciding not to extend sympathy and a helping hand to the bereaved family because it would only sound "hollow." And, despite second thoughts, it only got harder to do as the days and weeks passed.

Predictably, then, we fell into a strictly reactive mode. When legislative proposals started to surface concerning a moratorium on visas for foreign students, some of the national higher education associations - led by the American Council on Education and its new president, David Ward - were quick out of the box with effective, well-reasoned responses. When the congressional and executive branches started to focus on tighter regulation of biohazardous materials in university labs, the Association of American Universities, ACE and other national organizations came alive with information about the potential impact on our campuses.

As shoes continue to drop (e.g., proposals for greater government access to student records; closer monitoring of campus emails), we will be increasingly active and vocal. And we should be. These are important policy issues that require close monitoring. The irony, of course, is that our initial focus on not appearing self-serving has strengthened the appearance that we are.

Fortunately, others stepped forward, unabashedly, to talk about what research universities offer this nation in times of crisis. For example, Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, chairman of the House Science Committee, said in a speech on October 1st that:
...universities and colleges are inherently implicated in our response to September 11th. For while we say that the world changed on September 11th, it's really our knowledge of the world, our sense of the world, not the world itself, that changed on that fateful day. Academic institutions, as a leading generator, analyzer, repository and purveyor of human knowledge and insight, will necessarily have an impact on whether and how our world actually changes. [That task] may require some new undertakings, but mostly will simply require more intensive and better focused attention on existing efforts and greater engagement with the rest of American society. I don't believe, for instance, that last month's attacks signal a need for any fundamental change in the structure or nature of our academic institutions. I'm thinking here, particularly, of the openness of our colleges and universities... openness to both ideas and people.

For weeks, we were skittish about telling our own story, but relished the fact that others were telling it for us. As a group, America's research universities were failing Chairman Boehlert's test of greater engagement with the rest of American society.

Then, on Tuesday, November 6 - exactly 8 weeks after the terrorist attacks - the president of AAU wrote to Governor Tom Ridge, director of the new Office of Homeland Security. The members of AAU "stand ready to assist the federal government in this time of crisis," Nils Hasselmo wrote. "Our campuses have wide-ranging expertise in areas such as language and culture, engineering and technology, aerospace and terrorism, and political science.

"We want to take this opportunity to make you aware that we can serve as a conduit through which you and your staff would be able to seek out experts in a wide variety of fields. We understand that America faces an unprecedented threat, and that we all need to pull together to meet it," Hasselmo said.

There's no evidence this letter has been seen as opportunistic or hollow.

Now that this relatively simple step has been taken, the obvious question is "what next?" This step becomes much more complex, but here's an initial thought. Research universities - through the higher education associations or, perhaps, ad hoc representation by small groups of presidents and chancellors - need to elbow their way to a seat at the table when national policymakers are considering a roadmap for the future. Not just when we're threatened with tougher visa requirements or tighter controls on biohazardous materials, but when solutions are being sought to a new set of challenges.

Sure, our university leaders won't have instant answers to most of the problems discussed, but they surely will have some ideas. And they can always say: "Let us consult with our fellow institutions and see who might have some special expertise in this area. We will help you find an answer."

Don't forget, we are an industry that annually receives tens of billions of dollars in taxpayer-funded research grants and justifiably prides itself on its intellectual prowess and world leadership in countless disciplines. The American public has a right to expect no less from us.