Recently, higher education celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act, the visionary legislation of the 19th century that set the nation on the path to the American Century. Through Morrill, it was our land-grant universities that provided broad access to needed higher education for people of all backgrounds, playing a significant role in advancing the state of agriculture and industry in the United States. By the end of the 20th century, the mission of the land grant institutions rested firmly on the three strong pillars of teaching, research and outreach.

Today, many land-grant universities like the University of Missouri have added economic development as a fourth pillar under their missions. This phenomenon is the result of several economic factors seen in the past few decades, including the irreversible loss of jobs after the economic crises of 2000 and 2008; global competition causing many of the largest American companies to cut back on their own research budgets; the pace of innovation in the U.S. slowing to a crawl due to decreased investment in research, and a greater expectation for research universities to play a larger role in economic development.

With total research expenditures well over $270 million annually at the University of Missouri, we are committed to being included among the very best Midwestern land-grant institutions when it comes to converting the products of our research and scholarship into innovations that will improve life. By growing new businesses, supporting and improving existing businesses and growing jobs, we are ready to play a significant role in raising prosperity.

So if we accept the idea that land-grant universities are to be engines of innovation and economic lift, the question becomes how best do we do this? Consider these five themes we have implemented at our university that are prompting a significant culture change:

Cooperate and collaborate rather than compete. To be successful, universities need the “community,” those engaged day-in and day-out in the economy, to be partners in their endeavors. Through partnerships, the state benefits much more than if we are competitors. By recognizing strengths of peer institutions, we can capitalize on opportunities for real success rather than duplicate efforts.

Grow our entrepreneurs and innovators. Geographically, Missouri isn’t as alluring to entrepreneurs as are the East and West coasts. For that reason, we must create an ecosystem to nurture and support the growth of new young entrepreneurs that graduate from the university and who want to stay in our region. At the same time, we must put
resources and funding into new programs that foster entrepreneurial learning and make it more likely that graduates stay in the state.

**Be smart with intellectual property.** Given the controlling position the university has over its intellectual property, universities must re-evaluate our stances on IP and how we handle it in the future. To be “smart,” faculty must be included in the decision-making processes from the outset. There should be a clear rubric to make decisions on the management of disclosures and patent filing. And, of course, flexibility is imperative for this entire process as each situation will never be the same.

Which takes me back to cooperating and collaborating. There has been a lot of research not done simply because academia and industry haven’t been working more closely together. These partnerships must be fostered in order to bring cutting-edge approaches to difficult problems encountered in practice. This will lead to breakthroughs and more innovation.

**Unleash the power of the willing.** Perhaps the most important change we need to embrace is a change in our culture. We need to move from a culture that has been, at best, ambivalent to faculty starting new ventures to one that is more supportive and that values such activities.

Views on faculty innovation and entrepreneurship will continue to evolve as they have in the last decade, and for that, we must rethink the current policies to be able to foster innovation, grow entrepreneurs and create the new culture we know we need to have.

**Don’t be jealous; shamelessly borrow the best ideas of others.** We all know the saying, “Don’t reinvent the wheel.” This should be true for universities, especially when resources are limited. While giving credit where credit is due, learning from the experiences of our peers is invaluable. For sharing to happen, university leaders need to be more willing to divulge information and to embrace ideas from other schools. This will shift the culture to being more cooperative and collaborative, rather than merely competitive and that in itself will be an innovation!

The time to make the changes represented by these themes is now. The old business model for the public land-grant university has run its course, and we must find new approaches. By doing so, our universities will indeed drive innovation to help the country achieve renewed prosperity through sustainable economic growth and, perhaps, help spur the next American Century.

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