A Public University's Response to Community Needs

by

Thomas F. George
UMSL Chancellor

Introduction

I want to thank you for inviting me to join you today. Since I am relatively new to St. Louis, when I was asked to speak to the Ethical Society of St. Louis, I went to the Internet to find out more about the Society, and let me tell you, I was impressed and delighted. I found out that you are seeking members who embrace:

- Bringing out the best in the human spirit,
- Appreciating the uniqueness and worth of every person,
- Treating all with dignity and respect,
- Cultivating a community of people who support each other through the stages of life,
- Raising the quality of all our relationships,
- Acting with reverence and commitment toward the natural world,
- And working to create a more just, loving and sustainable world for all.

These are wonderful ideals – ones which relate to my personal and professional life and to the community at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL). I also see that your largest and most active group is the Ethical Action Committee – a group dedicated to putting ETHICS IN ACTION to solve community issues. And that's when I decided what I would speak about today.

In some ways, the University of Missouri-St. Louis is like your Ethical Action Committee. Our faculty, staff and students are involved in finding ways to improve this community. I want to share with you some of the ways in which UMSL is responding ethically to community issues. I will touch on several activities, where I provide what I will call the **Issue**, followed by the **Response** and several **Goals**. Under each goal, I will indicate the **Situation** and some **Action** steps.

Old North St. Louis Project

Issue: Several of St. Louis's oldest neighborhoods are in dire need of revitalization.

Response: Three years ago a team of UMSL faculty and students began working with residents of the historic Old North St. Louis neighborhood to rebuild their community.

Goal 1: Use History to Help Stabilize the Community.

Situation: There are numerous examples nationally of using history to create a formula for present-day community revitalization, by creating a sense of common identify among current residents who may not be aware of their historic surrounding, and thereby stressing the importance of stabilizing housing and commercial structures.

Actions:
1. Faculty, students and residents have conducted several archaeological digs to help interpret the history of the community.
2. Faculty and students are interviewing current and past residents and collecting documents to create a video documentary that will tell the story of the neighborhood.
3. Faculty, students and residents are creating a bicycle tour that will link the neighborhood to the North Riverfront Trail that runs along the nearby Mississippi River.
4. Faculty, students and residents are planning a centrally located neighborhood museum that will be a meeting place for residents and visitors.

Goal 2: Home Maintenance and Financial Literacy

Situation: The Old North St. Louis neighborhood has endured 40 years of population decline and increased poverty rates. Therefore, it was important to the success of the neighborhood to help current residents with limited resources understand how they could make improvements in their residences and lives without an infusion of new capital.

Actions:
1. University of Missouri Outreach and Extension offers residents training on ways to maintain and improve their homes and innovative approaches to stretch their limited resources.
2. Faculty and students are assisting local business owners prepare business and marketing plans to ensure that local businesses remain viable.

Goal 3: Improving the Living Environment

Situation: The Old North St. Louis neighborhood area has exhibited the poorest health status in the city of St. Louis. Environmental factors have led to high levels of lead poisoning and asthma among residents.

Actions:
1. Faculty and students have been surveying properties to identify potential environmental hazards.
2. Faculty and students are developing screening programs, health education programs and prevention programs.
3. Faculty, students and residents have cleared debris from numerous abandoned homes and empty lots.

Children's Advocacy Services

Issue: 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men have been sexually abused in some form by age 18. Additionally, individuals often are unintentionally re-traumatized during investigations of abuse.

Response: UMSL created Children's Advocacy Services of Greater St. Louis to allow law enforcement and medical officials to conduct their investigations in a single location, either on our campus or in a building on West Pine towards to downtown.

Goal 1: Provide a One-Stop Investigation, Treatment Center

Situation: Victims of abuse would often have to be transported to multiple sites to be interviewed by law enforcements officials, examined by medical investigators and treated by counselors. The recounting of the incident often re-traumatized the victims.

Actions:.
1. UMSL has built a facility on campus where the investigation and treatment of abuse all happen in one child-friendly environment.
2. Within the facility on campus the innovative Center for Trauma Recovery provides victims with the latest methods of treatment.
3. More than 500 children and their families are treated annually at UMSL.

Goal 2: Provide Training to Professionals and the Community

Situation: Many professionals in the field are not aware of the latest techniques designed to recognize and respond to sexual abuse.

Actions:
1. UMSL provides training programs to professional and community groups locally – reaching more than 1,600 individuals to date.
2. UMSL is delivering a training program for professionals and community groups statewide.

East St. Louis Eye Clinic

Issue: Access to adequate health-care services is becoming increasingly limited for residents of America's poorest communities, as hospitals and private practices located in those regions are closing at an increasingly alarming rate.

Response: UMSL's College of Optometry has opened a clinic in downtown East St. Louis in cooperation with SIU-Edwardsville – which operates an educational center there.

Situation: Access to adequate eye-care treatment was severely limited for residents of East St. Louis, Illinois, when the city's last practicing optometry practice closed in the late 1990s.

Actions:
1. Faculty and students perform free or discounted eye exams.
2. We provide corrective prescriptions for glasses or contacts and often work with limited income individuals to receive free glasses through the Lion's Club.

Supplementing High School Programs

Issue: Budget cuts and other factors have limited the ability of some school districts to provide students with strong programming in all academic fields.

Response: UMSL has developed a number of pre-collegiate programs to help supplement the education of area high school students.

Situation: Students are graduating from U.S. high schools with inferior math and science skills – a particular problem for those entering college.

Actions:
1. UMSL has hired five endowed professors who are providing outreach programs to more than 50 high schools in Missouri and Iowa.
2. Science outreach partners include the St. Louis Science Center, Missouri Botanical Garden and St. Louis Zoo.

Situation: Budget cuts at school districts often affect art and music programs first.

Actions:
1. UMSL has hired five art and music professors who supplement educational programs in 12 local school districts, including nearly 100 actual schools, and at partner sites.
2. Partners include the St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis Symphony and St. Louis County government.

Kids Voting Missouri

Issue: Voter participation has declined steadily over the past 40 years – with barely half of the voting-age population participating in the 2000 presidential election.

Response: UMSL formed Kids Voting Missouri in 1996 as part of a national effort to teach children the responsibilities of effective, informed citizenship and helps them acquire a habit for voting.

Actions:
1. UMSL faculty work with K-12 teachers to implement a special curriculum called Civics Alive.
2. Students cast ballots on Election Day for president and other contested offices.
3. More than 280,000 students are participating this fall in Kids Voting Missouri.

Access to College

Issue: Access to college for moderate- and low-income students is becoming increasingly troublesome as the cost of higher education is rising faster than the rate of inflation or income.

Response: UMSL this month invested $1 million in student scholarships. We are also working to endow 50 additional scholarships by matching donor contribution with state funds dollar-for-dollar.

Situation: UMSL enrolls the largest percentage of students with financial needs in the UM System, but has the smallest allotment of state funds available for financial aid.

Actions:
1. Missouri legislators approved a $2.7 million appropriation to begin fixing the UMSL funding gap situation. We committed $1 million immediately to scholarships.

2. The Board of Curators has set aside state funds this year to encourage the campuses to raise private funds to endow scholarships. For each $15,000 raised, the curators will use state funds to match dollar for dollar. Our goal is to create at least 50 of these $30,000 endowed scholarships.

Let me now briefly touch base on some aspects of ethics specifically in the educational environment. Ethics is stressed at every facet at UMSL. Faculty, staff and students abide by a Code of Ethics as delineated in the Student Handbook and the university's Collected Rules and Regulations.

UMSL teaches numerous courses in ethics in the following areas:
- Archeology
- Business
- Computer Science
- Criminology
- Education
- Environment
- Media
- Medicine
- Philosophy
- Political Science
- Psychology

The Internet has posed new challenges for academe:
- Using university equipment for private gain.
- Plagerism, such as lifting materials from Web sites and downloading entire papers or other materials.

I want to end my remarks by commenting on life sciences. In the last legislative session, the public higher education institutions in the state proposed a bonding package for $350 million of capital construction on our campuses in the life sciences. Without offering a specific personal point of view, let me say that one of the reasons given for this package failing to gain approval was the controversy surround stem cell research. The state of Missouri continues to grapple with this issue, which has ethical as well as health implications.