

WT 125 White Paper

A Regional Research University – The Needs of the Panhandle

Abstract:

Simply put, the overall purpose of a regional research university is to serve regional students and regional needs first, believing that if the institution can't serve locally first, it will serve nowhere well. This focus does not limit a regional research university's world-wide reach; instead, it reaffirms through transferability, that by focusing first on the region, the needs of similar regions across the nation and world will benefit from its attention, research, and resolution of the challenges and opportunities that characterize the region. Thus, a regional research university is one that uses its institutional geographical context, not as a limitation or excuse, but as a driver of knowledge generation, scholarship, research, and unique experiences for students and faculty to pursue and expose new ideas that benefit society.

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Introduction:

My friend's parents lived in Manhattan. They would only get off that 24 square mile island once or twice a year. They saw no need to go anywhere as everything came to them. Regionalism is sometimes confused with parochialism, a confusion that benefits no one. Some of the most parochial people live in densely populated port cities that are gateways to the world. Yet, they seldom leave the places they live. The vast region of the United States that feeds, fuels, and manufactures for much of the nation is "fly over" country. This is parochialism or provincialism, but not regionalism. Being regional, and responding to the needs of a region, should never hold even a whiff of insular thinking.

A regionally responsive view of the world can simultaneously embrace a healthy universal perspective. Sensing people's aspirations and understanding their connection to place is of high purpose. Emily Dickenson achieved that from a perch on the second floor of her family home in Amherst, Massachusetts, not Boston. I am not sure she ever visited Boston more than a few days at a time, or many times in her life. She connected her "local" view of the world with the hearts and minds of the "global" community through a fertile mind and an appreciation of place.

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This seems a lofty point of departure for an attempt to define a regional research university (RRU) but it is the essential place to start. We must hold high the ambitions and aspirations of the Texas Panhandle if we at West Texas A&M University (WT) are to provide real value to the region, state, and the students we serve.

We have identified a number of characteristics that will mark WT in a way that profits all. We will contribute to a much larger state and national narrative through the lens that we call the Texas Panhandle.

Our Purpose:

From the Panhandle to the World

The “Panhandle,” a region that includes the northern most 26 counties of Texas, has a total population of 438,568 and covers 25,712 square miles. The Texas Panhandle consists of 62 school districts and two charter schools with 226 campuses in a 26,000 square mile area. Approximately 58 of these districts are rural¹ independent school districts with some of them having as few as 30 total students enrolled in the entire district (See <http://www.esc16.net/>). For the sake of comparison, the region served by WTAMU is 2,899 square miles larger than Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Delaware combined. Amarillo/Canyon, the population center of the Panhandle and geographically isolated from much of Texas, is actually closer to three neighboring state capitals (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma--260 miles; Santa Fe, New Mexico--280 miles; and Denver, Colorado--430 miles) than to Austin, Texas. A one-way trip to Austin, the state capital, is 505 miles (430 air miles). There are similar regions throughout the United States, including Western Kansas, Eastern New Mexico, Colorado, southern Illinois, upstate New York, many parts of Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, and countless other states. These thousands of small communities are where 50 million Americans occupy nearly 75% of the U.S. land area. The World Bank says that nearly half of the world’s population lives in rural settings (Wendler, 2017).

This unique context gives definition and purpose to the term *regional research university*. Simply put, the overall purpose of a regional research university is to serve regional students and regional needs first, believing that if the institution can’t serve

¹ The concept of ‘rural’ will broadly refer to the study of limited resource and access conditions in nonmetropolitan areas and will also be inclusive of areas with populations that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas).

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locally first, it will serve nowhere well². This focus does not limit a regional research university's world-wide reach; instead, it reaffirms through transferability, that by focusing first on the region, the needs of similar regions across the nation and world will benefit from its attention, research, and resolution of the challenges and opportunities that characterize the region. Focusing on the WT region (The Texas Panhandle) is paramount as smaller communities are often overlooked by schoolhouse and statehouse alike. Even in Texas, with its diligent and thoughtful legislature, public education policy is driven by five major metropolitan areas. Public higher education is guided by less than a handful of larger, more urban or suburban institutions. Thus, a regional research university is one that uses its institutional geographical context, not as a limitation or excuse, but as a driver of knowledge generation, scholarship, research, and unique experiences for students and faculty to pursue and expose new ideas that benefit society. If the geographical context provides the overall conception of a regional research university, what other characteristics differentiate it and explain its value and uniqueness among other classifications of university types?

The following characteristics, when knitted together, identify the strategic structure of a regional research university.

Characteristics of a Regional Research University:

Student Interaction Characteristics

Our goal with respect to students is to provide a strong and powerful alternative to universities outside of the Panhandle. Many high school graduates will serve our nation in the military, pursue a trade, or work on family farms or ranches, or in their business, all worthwhile and noble pursuits. We would like college-bound high school valedictorians and salutatorian's, from the 66 high schools in the top 26 counties of Texas, to thoughtfully consider WT. West Texas A&M University should be one of the remaining two colleges on their final selection list. In order to achieve such a result, we must attend diligently to the students we know, those close to us, those in our region. It is clear that a posture that demonstrates careful attention to local students will have great value and attraction to students from afar. This perspective holds in the highest regard the values of the students and the families of the Texas Panhandle. Further, it also suggests that our deep values share the DNA of a more widely held set of positive human values.

² Section reflects partial content of the Wendler, W. (September 15, 2017), Investiture Speech. West Texas A&M University.

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This view leads to a set of characteristics to which we will attend:

- A focus on quality defined by how students are nurtured.
- A focus on outcomes associated with the number of students effectively placed for workforce success or graduate/professional study, and the resulting performance of these activities.
- A freshman experience, along with a community and campus environment for all students that rivals the best institutions for their care and support.
- A prioritization of individualized interactions with students as partners not merely customers.

Employee Characteristics

The majority of people who work at WT call the Texas Panhandle home. A respect for others and the extended community permeates corporate life at WT. This includes workers of every stripe, faculty, as well as administrative and staff personnel. These attributes of social behavior, while not unique to the Texas Panhandle, are strongly pronounced, valued in family and public life, and resident in how people approach their jobs. WT will trumpet this regional trait in hiring, retention, and reward structures. This perspective will define WT's future and represent a prototype of a regional research university and include the following additional characteristics:

- A faculty who are wholeheartedly committed to helping students meet their aspirations.
- An institutional understanding that, without exception, faculty are and will continue to be the drivers of curriculum and research.
- A recognition of the need for highly qualified faculty, that match regional research needs, who are at the leading edge of their disciplinary areas.
- A competitive salary and benefits structure for faculty and staff.
- An institution that constantly seeks new paradigms for how we view and balance teaching, research, and service to support faculty who serve students.
- University employees that become regional stakeholders and participate in regional programs, community boards, social events and celebrations.

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Curricular and Program Characteristics

Leadership of WT cannot emanate solely from “Old Main.” Every aspect of every program we offer, and the curricula that supports study, are born from a simultaneous bottom-up and top-down perspective of leadership. Micromanagement of any aspect of curricula and program will reduce the power of WT. Effective organizations seek meaningful participation from every level to attain the highest and best results and achieve mission. This is true at McDonald’s, at General Motors, and on every ranch and farm in the Texas Panhandle. Teamwork enlivens organizations. This view of work and contribution to success values the intellect and sincere effort of all, no matter their position in the hierarchy. It is respectful of human potential and insight and is, universally, the way people want to be treated.

We will respond to local forces to help us effectively shape our means of service to the students and families of the top 26 counties in attaining their educational aspirations. If we do so correctly, the science that emulates from our laboratories, the scholarship from authors in offices and libraries, and the creative activity resident in studios and performance halls will continue to have great value locally and lead to high-impact nationally. All of this has its genesis in WT being true to itself. This is an expression of institutional self-confidence and it is earned, not given: through work not entitlement. And, it espouses the following curricular and program characteristics:

- An institution with the autonomy to build curricular offerings that meet the changing needs of rural communities and students. This will require changes in the approval processes at local, system and state levels. It will also require support and collaboration with accrediting entities.
- An engaging and rigorous educational environment for learners of all levels whereby each academic program provides distinctive, excellent core experiences for students and also provides something to the greater university and region.
- A curricular enterprise where deep interdependence between academic programs exist to avoid inappropriate redundancies in capabilities.
- An educational environment that includes a fully integrated approach to learning and requires, in all academic programs, a unique learning experience so that students are prepared to learn for life, inclusive of competency based learning, internships, apprenticeships, cultural study, and experiential learning that will affect every student.

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- An institution whereby academic programs have unique delivery combinations of both face-to-face and electronic, and continuously seek to utilize newly developing delivery systems that are being advanced through technology. Lifelong learning is recognized to require this hybridization.
- A sharply focused post bachelor's study, including a Carnegie R3 Doctoral Classification status, with moderate research activity (at least 20 research/scholarship doctoral degrees produced annually).
- A core of professional doctorate programs that respond specifically to regional needs but are transferable/have application to other similar regions of the world; meet unmet regional and State needs; are able to successfully compete for market share, have utility in the marketplace and meet high demand areas for employment.
- Graduate programs that focus on career professionals; but, provide inclusiveness of other market segments.
- Research conducted in graduate programs is tied to resolving regional workforce need and devising pedagogical approaches to resolving regional industry/organizational issues.
- Pipeline programs are created that provide enhanced access to extended graduate studies at our system flagship institution Texas A&M University.

Research and Economic Characteristics

West Texas A&M University will be a regional research university because it will value the benefits of research to regional economies. We will support activities that engage student's creative energies in concert with faculty leadership, fueled by a desire to help regional enterprise meet their goals. In academic circles, this approach is known as applied research.

The land-grant tradition of public education in the United States valued the contribution that universities could make to individuals. The [Morrill Act \(1862\)](#) states, in part, the university should,

"without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactic, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the

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States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life."

Many institutions have departed from this formative commitment. WT, as a member of the Texas A&M University System, located in this distinctive region, will run to, rather than away from, the Morrill ideal. Knowledge, insight, and creative pursuits of every type, can fuel local communities with a passion for progress. Such will be the foundation for WT as a regional research university and will include:

- A belief that research training and experiences are the right of all students, from undergraduate to doctoral.
- Research that is utilized as an economic actor in developing, supporting, and sustaining the economic success of the region. Regional research universities have the opportunity to partner with communities, and through research, to understand the supply and demand realities, and help create and support economic pipelines and collaborations that strengthen the regional economy.
- Produce research trained students that will move into the regional labor market and provide needed research and development resources as well as provide a transfer of knowledge and technology through highly reputable faculty who provide seminars, research articles, commissioned research, and regional conversations with regional partners, often in the feedlot, conference room, or the local coffee house.
- Understand that we must prepare for a future where there will be new areas of research, which are still unknown.
- Understand that *"the world's challenges do not fit neatly under a single subject area; rather, they are interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, and require diverse thinking to develop solutions. . ."* (DeNisco, 2016, para. 6.)
- The institution is recognized as employing experts in various specific fields based on the regional context and environment. For example, the WT Feedlot provides novel data collection capability and provides a platform of trial/error and insight for commercial feedlots considering adoption of new technologies. The WT/UL Wind Turbine Testing Facility, located on the WTAMU campus, resides in the middle of the Great Plains Wind Corridor and provides testing capacity for turbine manufacturers seeking certification to international standards, conducts

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research and design testing, as well as long term energy production and component lifetime testing.

- WT, as a regional research university, has a unique functional role to play in the development of more regionally applicable intellectual property (e.g. licenses and patents) and provision of internal support structures to stimulate spin-off and start-up companies among students, staff and researchers that bring solutions to regional issues (Lindqvist, 2012).
- A focus on how generated knowledge is applied to rural research settings is valued and endorsed. As is often the case, a focus on applied research brings a new set of interesting basic research problems that are integrated.
- A research perspective that measures research activity not solely on external research dollars received, research expenditures, patents, nor numbers of grants and sponsored research; but, is distinctively focused on partnering with regional business, industry and communities in solving the complex and demanding problems and challenges.
- An understanding that WT must interface with technology, including artificial intelligence (AI), internet-of-things (IoT), cyber security and big data to engage the future of research and economics. Michael Conroy (2017), a simulation technology manager at NASA's Kennedy Space Center states,

"The lab-of-the-future interface will certainly resemble Stark's artificial-intelligence platform, Just A Rather Very Intelligent System (JARVIS), the enabler that Iron Man introduced to the world. An archetype, JARVIS represents an environment of amazing efficiency and effectiveness in research, one in which the researcher is freed from all the old-fashioned "lab stuff," which is taken care of in network." (para.16)

Financial Characteristics

A college education costs too much for too many Americans. Our goal as a regional research university will be to respond to the work ethic of the people of the Texas Panhandle. We will discourage a student from accruing debt that exceeds 60% of the anticipated first-year salary. In addition, when students are over indebted, based on our rational determination, we will encourage them to leave school and take a job to reduce

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debt before continuing their education. Our concern for student well-being extends beyond the classroom and the immediate college experience. Our intention, without being paternalistic, is to assure students a clearheaded, flat-footed, fiscal approach to a university education and a lifelong career. This is our debt to a region of hard-working people – to provide a cost-effective education determined within a regional context. As such, our main financial characteristics are:

- A refusal to invoke education indebtedness for students that chokes the life out of higher education opportunity.
- A commitment to counseling students towards debt levels that do not exceed 60% of the anticipated first year salary upon graduation.
- A structured advising system regarding costs and benefits that places the student first in the equation.
- A thoughtful integration of community college and dual credit experiences into our degree programs.
- A continued commitment to fiscal conservatism that values a tightfisted approach to spending.

Partnership Characteristics

In order to effectively serve the top 26 counties of Texas, WT will collaborate with business, commerce, agricultural industries, and the cultural environments in which we live. We must purposefully engage local partners. What is deemed valuable by WT must be seen as valuable to the extended community and *vice versa*. Anything else leaves both university and community shortchanged. One especially important aspect of this regionally held partnership will occur between WT and our local community colleges. Our goal is a “marriage like” relationship – what benefits one member must benefit the other. We so strongly hold this to be important to our future that our aspiration is to become the most transferred to four-year university in Texas measured by the number of WT graduates who also hold an associate’s degree. In addition, this partnership, growing from a regionally driven pragmatism, will serve as a national model in cost-effective higher education and include:

- A respectful partnership with community colleges, encouraging a lower cost and indebtedness for students while our faculty and leadership build a pipeline of quality instruction.

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- While serving a rural mission first, WT, as a regional research institution, resides within the Texas A&M University System (TAMUS), a statewide network of 11 universities and seven state agencies. TAMUS research and development expenditures exceeded \$972 million in FY 2016 and helped drive the state's economy. This inter-system collaboration provides unique positioning and resources for integration into WT and its service area.
- The Panhandle Plains Historical Museum (PPHM) occupies a special place at WT. No other university in the state has a similar historical and cultural resource joined to it. The full benefit of the PPHM will only be realized when its influence and value extends beyond the Texas Panhandle. Our job, in concert with the museum, is to generate a sense of "ownership" that extends to every corner of the state of Texas.

Governance Characteristics

Shared governance is an often-misunderstood concept in higher education. We believe that in a vital shared governance setting, input from every part of the organization will be valued and impactful. This perspective does not diminish the importance of leadership, but rather, accentuates it. Thoughtful leadership will listen and attentively seek what all in the university has to offer. Decisions will follow and supported characteristics include:

- An environment where university faculty and staff, at every level, are engaged in servant leadership and inverted hierarchies where they are empowered to make effective decisions and are expected to do so, and are wholeheartedly committed to helping students meet their aspirations while engaged in constant reflection to improve.
- An organization that is efficient and responsive to change, is adaptable, and agile. And, where necessary bureaucratic procedures are transparent and easy to negotiate, not an obstacle to success.
- An organization that encourages informed risk-taking and understands that taking risks may produce failure, but from failure comes discovery.

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Brick and Mortar Characteristics

Our campus must be distinctive and tied to the Panhandle region. We believe that being responsive to the geography, values, beliefs and passions of the people of the Panhandle will accomplish our goal of distinctiveness as a regional research university.

The buildings we build, the outdoor places of the campus, and the functionality of our facilities are in response to aspirations, ethics, morals, and the nature of our students, their families, our faculty and staff. Our responsiveness to our local community, our host and partner, creates vitality and value for both. The *University Economic Development Association* (<http://universityeda.org/>) suggests that institutional engagement with partners and stakeholders creates sustainable growth and extends the value of both the campus and the community. T.S. Eliot (1943) wrote, *"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time (part V, para 3)."* This is Texas. This is WT, and we should powerfully reinforce a sense of place. WT needs to be a place of ideas and reinforce the following characteristics:

- While technology will continue to drive opportunities for cyber courses, conferences, labs, meetings, and conversations - regional research universities will continue to provide a viable and engaging brick and mortar campus that reinforces the importance of a campus environment that serves people.
- This brick and mortar environment must be technologically advanced, provide quality research, study and supporting environments, and serve the needs of the entire university community and region.
- All facilities are welcoming environments and are aesthetically pleasing as well as appropriate to their purpose and efficiency.
- The campus supports 'open' spaces to support team based work and collaborative, interdisciplinary problem solving rather than a 'siloes' departmental structure. As explained by Modern Lab Trends for the Present and Future (2017, para. 2):

"Modern science is becoming more social, and the most productive and successful researchers are familiar with the substance and the style of each other's work. This collaborative approach fosters individual's capacity to adopt new research methods as they become available."

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Extracurricular Characteristics

National studies indicate that students who live on campus, and participate in campus life, perform better academically. Campus engagement networks increase the opportunity for students to participate positively with others. Campus life is important to students and alumni. Five or six times a year, a university lights a campfire, referred to as a football game, and it draws people from near and far. We have been involved in university life for seven decades and it is difficult to describe the power and importance of the "homecomings" that occur on university campuses around football games. In addition, the cultural outreach provided by music and art programs simultaneously define, and are defined, by the Panhandle. Likewise, many other activities draw life from student participation outside of the classroom. The clubs, organizations, intramural activities and other additions to university life engage students and frequently draw the community into campus life. They are a source of pride for all, and at WT such activities must respond to the heartbeat of the top 26 counties of Texas and confirm to:

- Engage the internal and external university community through successful academic and research events, cultural programs, intercollegiate athletics and other outreach activities, held within facilities focused on academic success and community social interaction.

Conclusion:

These observations, and our discussions of them, work to define what a regional research university might look like. We believe it must be different from a national research university and a comprehensive master's university. In short, if a university is successful in attending to the needs of the region that hosts it, it will be different. However, the traits and characteristics we identified are resident in many universities.

We have not forgotten or overlooked two key components in contemporary places of study. Diversity and technology are interwoven and choreographed through all the aforementioned characteristics. David Timony, in the article *What's the Future of Universities?* (in Hastreiter, 2017) explains, "*Agile institutions, responsive to the needs of a greater diversity of students and the industries who seek them, will be viable over the next decade*" (para. 1). Both diversity and technology are needed to transform organizations into competitive enterprises that derive optimal results. To neglect either diminishes the power of the contemporary university in its service to students.

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Lastly, any discussion related to the individual characteristics listed above, must recognize the choreographed context of all the combined characteristics in order to successfully define and guide a regional research university.

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