University Retirees as University Resources--A Response to Challenges Facing Retiree Organizations in Higher Ed.

Good Evening--and welcome to Minneapolis and the University of Minnesota.

The theme of our meeting, and of the AROHE conference that follows this one, focuses on University retirees as university resources, and the synergies that we could be developing and exploiting.

But there are a few roadblocks that stand in our way.

Serious secular trends are challenging every kind of volunteer organization--including our retiree associations.

So we're not alone.

Many non-profit volunteer organizations are failing to attract new members--and are slowly going out of business--meanwhile, while others retain willing members, they are short of able and willing leaders.

Some organizations face financial challenges, while still others forget their mission and slowly lose their way.

Tonight I’d like to describe a triple collision of these trends; think about what they mean; and discuss how our organizations might respond?

Specifically I'll look:

>> first, at the general decline of volunteer organizations;

>> second, is the steady movement toward a market-based society, and

>> third, is the fallout of the Cultural Revolution and the Erosion of Hierarchies that accompanied it.

Each of these trends is playing a role in undermining traditional attitudes toward membership in organizations like ours.

And what we’re facing in membership is what I call a policy problem or policy challenge, and the question is: what might we do about it as we flesh out the idea of University retirees as University resources.

So let's step back for a minute and think about how we often approach policy problems inside and outside the university.

Here’s an example:

In my university outreach and community involvements over the years, I worked with our local Citizens League, which is 60-year old good-government study organization that tackles local, regional and statewide issues.
The work of our research committees usually proceeded in three stages.

>> First, at our weekly meetings we listened to testimony from citizens, good-government groups, public agency personnel, elected officials, and various policy experts.

Depending on the problem being tackled by our committee our visitors told us how bad things were, say, in K-12 education, or vocational-technical training, or sales-tax policy, or urban transportation, or brown-field cleanup and reuse, or affordable housing, or welfare policy—they quoted laws and rules and statistics to back up their observations and diagnoses.

Three years ago one committee I was on spent 18 months addressing higher education policy and performance in our state, and reviewing what the talking heads were blathering about it—

• "it costs to much; or
• legislative priorities shifted and less money is available for higher ed; or
• too many students enter college unprepared–academically, socially, psychologically; or
• too many drop out without degrees; or
• those who stick it out often taking 5 or 6 year to earn their degree; or
• kids graduate with too much debt; or
• graduates arrive at job interviews with bad attitudes, or without marketable skills, or
• once employed don’t earn enough to pay back their loans;” and so on, and so on.

You’ve heard the litany a hundred times.

And by the way, If we’re lucky, our own kids aren’t back home sitting in the basement listening to music, smoking something, and wondering what happened–and what’s next.

So in this first stage of policy analysis, we “admire the problem”.

The more we talk about it, the more the anecdotes and statistics pour forth.

In fact, we can go on admiring the problem for weeks, months, years . . .

But next, in a good policy study committee, we move to a second stage—which comprises explaining the origins of the problem we’re facing. Social scientists are good at this.

Again, you’ve heard it all.

Some of you—like me—have heard about or read books addressing the higher ed problem.

• For example, there’s Benjamin Ginsberg at Johns Hopkins who gave us The Fall of the Faculty and the Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters. (Oxford: 2011); or
• Robert Archibald and David Feldman—both at William and Mary—wrote *Why Does College Cost So Much* (Oxford: 2011); meanwhile

• Richard Arum (at NYU) and Josipa Roksa (at the University of Virginia) gave us *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); while

• Harvard’s Louis Menand’s published *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (W.W. Norton: 2010); and the

• Columbia’s Mark C. Taylor published *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming our Colleges and Universities* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

Each of these—and there are literally dozens more—begin with Step #1; they *admire the problem* with pages of statistics, but then they proceed to Step #2, and *supply their explanations* for why the problems of higher education developed.

**But the third step is doing something to alleviate or Solve the Problem . . .**

Some committees march boldly forward and propose solutions, but as we learned, over and over, in our Citizens League study committees, *to make changes in a complex system, it’s necessary to first understand how the interacting parts and incentives work within the system.*

The celebrated business guru, Peter Drucker pointed out years ago that “every complex organization is perfectly designed to give us the outcomes that it delivers.”

So in order to get different outcomes, you have to change the system.

And in order to change the system you need to find politically viable ways to put effective leverage on certain parts of the system—especially the incentives.

>> And figuring out what that lever might be—and how to apply it—*is really hard.*

Furthermore, in facing the higher ed problems confronting America, we’re not even through stage #2—that is, understanding and explaining the system and the origins of today’s headaches, and we’re a long way from Stage #3—creating and implementing effective solutions.

**So**—how does this little homily about higher ed – familiar to us all – relate to the future vitality of our retiree organizations–?

And the possibilities for our retiree organizations to partner with our universities in **carrying out their mission – while serving our members.** ??

Recall the three stages of policy analysis:

>> We can *admire* the problem.
We can try to explain the origins of the challenges we face.

But then we have to try to figure out what we as leaders in our organizations should do about it.

The main focus of our Big Ten meeting this year is on current and potential synergies between our universities and our retiree organizations.

The subtext of this theme is that it might lead to both a more robust membership, along with a more energetic and fruitful set of relationships with our universities.

But we’re up against some formidable counter-currents.

(I) The first Trend—is the general Decline of Volunteer Organizations,

The world surrounding non-profit volunteer organizations is changing.

As I said earlier, some fail to attract new members.

Others have members but lack able and willing leaders.

Some face financial challenges;

some overlook their mission and lose their way.

Meanwhile, some critics question whether tax-exempt, non-profit service organizations should exist all these days (StarTribune, 18 Aug 2013), even as the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits vigorously defends them (StarTribune 26 Aug 2013).

The last few decades have been tough for volunteer organizations in America --ever since the appearance of Robert Putnam's famous article--and the book that followed, titled: *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

It's happening all over in the U.S. -- in the Junior League, Rotary, Odd Fellows, Optimists, Lions Club, Masons, Shriners, VFW, American Legion, Junior Chamber of Commerce, and many more.

So membership challenges facing our retiree organizations are not unusual. The world has changed.

Political parties, churches, synagogues, subscriptions to the symphony orchestra, the local repertoire theater and other arts groups –

They all face similar challenges.

Many people are happy to participate here and there on occasion, but are reluctant to register, pay regular dues, or make ongoing commitments of support.

The generation following us shop around; dabble in this, and dabble in that.
They like visiting different restaurants, but seldom are a regular at any one. That’s partly why restaurants come and go, or are always remodeling their menus and their venues.

Here in our University of Minnesota Retiree Association monthly luncheons comprise pleasant (and cheap) interludes for many, but regular attendance implies little or no commitment.

For most who come, each luncheon and program is a one-shot deal.

Even if you come every month to meet with former colleagues and cronies, for many who attend there is virtually no serious effort or sense of reciprocal responsibility.

“You pay your dues – and you takes your benefits”.

Same with our University Campus Club, founded in 1911– where faculty and staff members formerly joined together each day at noon for lunch and social interaction.

And they ate what was offered that day.

For today’s “foodies” eating lunch or dinner has become a kind of fussy religion, and the Club for them is seen as just another campus restaurant.

Campus Club membership and use has run up against changing life styles and changing work styles, not to mention the erosion of a sense of team membership, team effort, and team work toward a shared mission in too many academic departments.

Dedication to a vocation has slowly been replaced by dedication to a career.

Possible exceptions to Putnam’s “bowling alone” thesis include ephemeral or one-shot sports events, e.g., walking for charity; running a marathon; hiking and cycling clubs that one joins for a season; or signing up for a tour group or a cruise.

One-shot deals. No commitments. Cash on the barrelhead.

I’m told that it’s increasingly difficult to get people to show up to class reunions.

What we’re seeing in these examples are expressions of larger and widespread national social forces, which play out in a variety of ways.

Much is being written about this phenomenon, but I doubt that we’ll be able to control or reverse these tides.

Our organization spent some time in the past year assessing what these trends mean for our Minnesota organization.

I consider the tax-exempt issue to be a sideshow, but another trend is even more serious–and that’s the emergence of the Market Society.
(II) A Market Society

Michael J. Sandel, in his book: *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2012) argues that at an earlier time we were a society containing a market economy, but we are becoming a market society.

His key question is: “How can we protect the moral and civic goods that markets don’t honor and that money can’t buy?”

Sandel's analysis sheds light on societal forces that are challenging the future of our retiree organizations. Increasingly we now put a money price on most things, which displaces other measures of value.

Most of us remember a time when the major service professions (i.e., health care, education, law, banking and finance, mutual insurance companies, governments at all levels, etc.) were mainly about providing service to the individual and the community—rather than about money.

Service professionals once enjoyed high levels of community esteem, foregoing market-level compensation in exchange for significant job security.

But today service professionals want both—but they’re not going to get both.

- After WWII the number of U.S. governments (over 90,000 of them today) proliferated, and government employees emerged as a political interest group.

- As money devoted to health-care professionals began expanding with Medicare (in 1965) it led inevitably to today’s fights over who gets the money, diverting attention away from improving national health.

- Meanwhile college graduates flooded law schools as careerism steadily displaced serving the community—as it did in banking.

- Even the U.S. military moved away from the draft as a national service model to a volunteer market-based recruiting model (1973).

- And we’ve lived this in higher education.

As Baby Boom children came to school beginning in 1950, they expanded market demand for teachers, for trainers of teachers, and for trainers of the trainers—that is, many of us UMRA members.

We who became professors in the 1960s discovered (unexpectedly) that we could do well (financially) by doing good (teaching; scholarship; outreach).

It wasn’t hard to relish our good fortune.
But as compensation kept rising and job security persisted we’ve become aware of the downside: higher education no longer enjoys the public esteem and support of earlier decades.

Like government, health care, law, elements of banking and finance, and other service sectors, higher education too often appears aloof, self-serving, unconcerned with efficiency, effectiveness, high tuition, student debt, maturity and employability of graduates, and community service.

But admiring the problem and explaining its origins are one thing; doing something about our problem is another.

(III) The third trend besides bowling alone and the rise of the “market society” has been – The Erosion of traditional Hierarchies

The slow decline of hierarchy probably started during the Protestant Reformation, but it gained real force throughout the 20th century.

When you’re young, you lack any context for understanding of what you’re experiencing day to day.

That’s one of the reasons we go to school.

But when we’re our age, we can see the decades and their events as linked–A led to B; B led to C, C led to D.

Early in the 20th century, the great empires run by kings and emperors began breaking up–first the Ottoman, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian;

later the Japanese, the British, and so forth.

We see today how the collapse of the 19th-century empires, the WWI armistice, the defective Versailles treaty and German reparations–despite Woodrow Wilson’s best efforts–set in motion the processes that led to WWII;

We see how the miscalculations and misunderstandings during the Cold War led to Korea and Viet Nam and so forth;

And today the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and other apparently intractable headaches in Syria, Israel, Gaza, Iraq, Iran, the West Bank and so on.

If we’ve paid attention, we easily see the sequences of cause and effect.

One observer said that 200 years from now historians will discuss the wars of the 20th century as a single 100-year event.
But besides the decline of the old political empires and the chaos that followed to this day, the cultural revolution of the 1960s brought to fruition many other examples—large and small—of the slow erosion of hierarchical and stratified modes of societal organization:

Remember:

- the Women Suffrage movement—where did those women ever get the idea that they should vote?
- and the Civil Rights movement—echoes of which we see today in the reactions to a black president;

Remember William H. Whyte’s 1956 book on The Organization Man describing the collectivist ethic and rationalized conformity that prevailed in corporate America in those days past – with their top-down management structure?

Remember when authoritative voices like Edward R. Murrow in WWII or Walter Cronkite and a handful of TV networks in the 1950s told us what we need to know about what was happening in the world.

Now we have hundreds of cable stations and millions of Facebook subscribers providing their versions of what they consider vitally important daily events, including pictures of their puppies.

- Remember dress codes;
- Remember when people promptly supplied an RSVP to a dinner or wedding invitation?
- Remember Emily Post—and the laughable old idea of “proper manners”? I understand that many business schools are teaching young people to eat with tableware during job interviews.

When young men began burning draft cards we knew things were changing.

But although changes come slowly; just this week Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg described the relentless paternalism on the Supreme Court that has moved faster on rights for men and more slowly on expanding rights for women –

But the changes continue coming, relentlessly, and our organizations feel their consequences.

At wider scales, the same erosion of hierarchy is occurring.

For example, in countries that we thought were settled for all time, independence movements continue to stir:

In Scotland, Czechoslovakia already split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia,

Meanwhile the Basques, Catalonia, Quebec – continue talking about independence.

Last week I saw an editorial cartoon showing a map of the United States carved up with each person with their own individual state. It’s easy to laugh, but the trend is serious.
When we got rid of hierarchy, we got rid of certain problems of top-down management, with bosses dictating how to think, to act, and to believe, but we also let loose ever-lower standards of individualistic behavior—flowing from the 1960s;

If it feels good, do it.


Is any wonder that our politics are screwed up? And government is immobilized?

When you reach—shall we say—a certain age, time is no longer a concept; it’s an experience.

Decades flow through our memory and imagination.

Things that you once thought were just the way they were because that’s the way they ought to be … After all, if they should have been different, they would have been different.

But no—it’s a different world today, much different from the one we grew up in.

We can resent it, or laugh about it.

We can join Facebook to see what our grandkids are up to, or join LinkedIn to help our former advisees.

But what about lessons for our retiree organizations,

In the face of

>> The emerging market society

>> The languishing of many volunteer organizations

>> The decline of hierarchy and the emergence of a nobody-in-charge world

And a cultural revolution that left behind the old ways while is trying to craft a new and functioning world,

>> what can we do to keep our retiree organizations vital and sustainable.

Well here’s a thought, At a recent board meeting of our Minnesota retiree organization, we reviewed our mission,

assessed the past year,

examined programs and alignment with mission,

identified ways to attract and retain the next generation of University retires in light of trends outlined above,

discussed our status as an independent non-profit organization,

and debated potential partnership arrangements with our University.
Following that meeting, I wrote an annual report to our president and provost, explaining what we’ve been doing for our members, for the University, and for the community.

I pointed out what we’d like to do in partnership with the University, and then listed a few items that I hoped would put some leverage on the system to accomplish some new goals in partnership with the University.

I concluded by drawing attention to several obstacles that stand in the way of retirees becoming more valuable resources for the University.

Here’s what I said:

“For UMRA to help the University better serve our retirees, and for University retirees to become more active and valuable resources for the University on many fronts, several things need to happen:

>>> “First, Work with University HR. UMRA is eager to help with pre-retirement planning, and post-retirement follow-through for retirees, but to do so will require a closer relationship with University HR, whose current regulations make such cooperation difficult.

>>> “Second, Work with the Alumni Association. At some private colleges and universities, the retiree organization, the alumni association, and the foundation work as a team on behalf of their schools. There is no reason why that can’t be the case at the University of Minnesota. It just hasn’t been our tradition to do so. The fact that so many University alumni are not only University staff and faculty members, but are also generous benefactors of the University, is a foundation that we can build on.

>>> “Third, Work with the Colleges and especially Departments. Department heads (as I noted earlier in my memo) often fail to see retirees as resources and end up ignoring them. That’s a mistake. It can and should be corrected.

>>> Fourth, Work with the U of M Foundation. The retired faculty and staff of our University represent an enormous development potential, as the Foundation recognizes. Doing a better job linking the University with its retirees through the departments where they worked will strengthen the development base to be used in the next capital campaign. It’s not too soon to work on this front. UMRA can help.

>>> Finally, A Proposal. We suggest that the president appoint a small task force to address this set of opportunities, issues, and obstacles, and to recommend ways of improving the University’s linkages with its retirees.

UMRA stands ready to help in any way we can—for the benefit of our retirees, our University and the State of Minnesota, which we are committed to serve.

Best wishes—and please let us know how we can help.

So this is what we’ve been doing. I hope that you all can discuss and react to these ideas during dinner.
Thank you.

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