

Encouraging the Best Minds to Meet

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If men are from Mars and women are from Venus, I'll leave it to your imagination as to which of the other planets might be occupied by people in academia and business. As someone at least a little familiar with the perspectives of both, I can attest to the fact that their thinking and the internal processes necessary to reach executable decisions diverge markedly. But regardless of which piece of interplanetary real estate we hail from, it is a 21st-century imperative that the university and corporation build close, productive relationships for the sake of global prosperity.

There are three main reasons why business and our nation's colleges and universities should be committed to greater interaction on an increasing number of levels. One is self-interest. For business, a basic need is being able to hire people with the skills necessary for success in today's highly competitive, rapidly changing world economy. For educational institutions, it is to be as effective as possible in preparing students for work in that economy, so that they can get good jobs no matter where on the globe they may build their careers. Universities and potential employers must address this issue in a concerted manner to shape educational programs that best serve the interests of all concerned.

Second, broadening the relationship between business and the academic community is a way for individuals as well as companies to "give back" to society as a whole, over and above bottom-line considerations. By working in tandem, academia and business can be a powerful engine for social progress. They

may think differently about the best way to make decisions and meet social challenges, but it is such diversity that can spark the most spirited and fruitful dialog.

Third, research in cooperation with research universities such as NJIT deserves special attention with regard to expanding the interface between higher education and business. Corporate financial support and participation on governing boards have long linked business to academia. These links are as vital today as they have been in the past. Going forward, however, it is essential that we forge additional connections.

Supporting collaborative research focused on mutual immediate and longer-term needs differs a lot from monetary contributions traditionally offered by the private sector. Engagement in areas of vital potential economic importance compels greater personal contact among people from business and education. More importantly, the nature of this interaction is very different from conventional participation on advisory boards. The daily give-and-take of confronting complex research questions can foster mutual understanding at a deeper level and infuse the quest for answers with new creative energy.

Academia and the corporate world have a lot to learn from each other. The reasons for increased interaction are clear. We need to bring as many perspectives as we can to the table, including those of government. The more varied the voices in this on-going discussion, the more likely it is that we will choose the most effective paths to economic and social improvement. ■