"Absolutely part of what we should be doing": Kevin Curry, Water Filters and the International Mission of the Modern University

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“When you’re in the muck you can only see muck. If you somehow manage to float above it, you still see the muck but you see it from a different perspective. And you see other things too.”

—Filmmaker David Cronenberg

Kevin Curry knows muck. Bridgewater State College’s prominent biologist has spent much of the last 15 years of his career in mucky places, in his hipwaders, thigh-deep in the region’s rivers and streams, taking water samples and teaching students how to test for water quality. Indeed, Curry’s hipwaders have become, in a way, an odd symbol of his presence and record at the College and the prospects for what it can do. The winner of the 2001 V. James DiNardo Prize for Excellence in Teaching, there is Curry in his Boyden Hall portrait stationed alongside his more formally clad colleagues in the pantheon of teaching excellence, hipwaders strapped, snug and ready for work. Kevin Curry knows muck. And, lately, that knowledge has propelled him to a new perspective; to see other things too.

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A few years ago, the dawn of the new millennium prompted many Americans to consider the notion that we are and must be at the beginning a new age of existence. Americans welcome new beginnings. If one is to believe their novelists and historians, they have a cultural predisposition, even a penchant, for rebirth. But the idea of the 21st century as a new era seems to be really confirmed by the new challenges and prospects that all Americans now face: global warming, the energy crunch, the credit crisis, post 9/11 terrorism and the bugbear of security, and the historic election of the first-ever African-American president. In a recent Boston Globe editorial about the meaning of Barack Obama’s landslide victory over John McCain, one prominent historian declared that the election symbolized “the end of the ’60s.” For good or ill, the idea of change is in the air.

Of course, periodization is tricky business; change of any sort must always be cast in relief against the evidence of continuity. Even as some things change, other things remain the same. Nowhere is this more evident than with recent musings about the shape and purpose of the modern university in the new millennium. The dominant condition of American colleges, former University of Michigan President James Duderstadt argues in his book A University for the 21st Century (2000), is change. “The question is not whether the university must change, but how…and by whom.” And a host of other millennial students of higher education have agreed. The turn of the century provides a convenient hook for those of this opinion, those who can benefit—in policy-making, in career-building and in book sales—from the impression that the university is newly, even urgently, at risk.

The truth, however, is that the mission of the American university has been remarkably stable in the past fifty years, even as it has grown quantitatively at a mercurial pace. And it probably will remain so for some time. The modern American university remains an institution born of the centripetal energy and the turmoil that came with the baby boom generation, the civil rights and feminist movements, Cold War-inspired research and development, the computer (now digital age), critiques of the “multiversity,” and the growth of the university as a service institution that has responsibilities beyond the ivied walls. In the final third of the 20th century, the American university expanded along the definitive lines of its new raisons d’être. Alongside its more traditional function, the incubation of a technically and morally knowledgeable citizenry, came others things: research and development for government and industry, the relocation of policy think tanks, the broadening of admissions and the university’s “reach”, the expansion of professional schools and career training and an emphasis on public service. For the modern university, the ’60s aren’t over at all.

The modern university has become a rather dynamic place, an institution whose modern identity comes from pushing its late 20th-century missions to their logical extremes. In this way, some of our most celebrated millennial innovations—service
learning, action research and international cooperation, for example—are not really departures but extensions of core functions articulated decades ago. For some, the danger is that this centripetal impetus has gone too far. “Today’s university has no acknowledged center,” former Cornell University President Frank Rhodes asserted in his millennial reckoning, The Creation of the Future (2001). “It is all periphery.” But many others are quite comfortable with the shape and scope of the university’s expanding purview.

A child of the ‘60s, the modern university has become a multi-functioned complex that serves in two ways: first, traditionally and indirectly, by educating its society’s selected and sending them out into the world to lead; and second, directly, by feeding, shaping, and engaging industry, government and, especially, ordinary people in their communities in “hands-on” ways. And the province of the university has become a global one.

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There are two events that, perhaps more than any others, have shaped the recent trajectory of Kevin Curry’s work as a professor of biology at Bridgewater State College. The first preceded not only his arrival on campus, but his decision to become a biologist in the first place. In his senior year at tiny Central College in Pella, Iowa in 1973, he joined Professor John Bowles and a group of student volunteers who traveled to the Yucatan for a trimester of study at the college’s branch in Merida. For a 20-year-old New Yorker, the sight of thousands of people living in cardboard houses and children playing near open sewers was alarming. “That’s how it started …I saw what some in rest of the world had to contend with to live life. It changed me forever.” The second event was more fleeting but equally consequential. In 2003, Dr. Fran Jeffries, then Director of Grants and Sponsored Projects at BSC, put Curry in contact with members of the Middletown, Rhode Island Rotary Club, a service institution that had adopted as one of its causes the prevention of child mortality from water-borne illnesses. The organization had already established a health, pure-water and literacy program in Cambodia. “What they needed was a laboratory to test the long-term performance of bio-sand water filters,” Curry recalled. Fran Jeffries knew of Curry’s leadership in the BSC RiverNet Watershed Access Lab, and suspected that she had found a good match. She had.

The water filters in question were developed by a University of Calgary scientist named David Manz. Called Bio-Sand Filters, they are made of simple, local materials: concrete boxes that contain layers of gravel and sand and a diffuser plate to displace water. Use for one month develops a biological layer of bacteria, or microbes, that, put simply, “eat” or break down most water-borne viruses. Their use of simple science and basic materials makes them potentially broadly effective, especially in developing countries. And testing revealed that they have at least 90% rates of bacteria removal.

The prospect of combining his scientific research with international service captivated Curry. Funding from the college’s Faculty and Librarian Research Grant program in spring 2007 enabled him to take the first steps, including two trips to Cambodia, in July 2007 and March 2008. Funding from the Canadian Studies
Program enabled him to travel to the University of Victoria, British Columbia, where he met William Duke, an emergency-room physician and dedicated public health crusader, who had already done clean-water infrastructure work in Haiti and Bangladesh. In the ensuing months, equipped with funds from Rotary, Curry and Duke worked long distance with Mieko Morgan to construct a water-quality lab in Siem Reap, Cambodia, in an 800-square-foot building that was the servants’ quarters of a former military officer’s household. They both traveled to Siem Reap in July 2007 to install the lab equipment and begin training the laboratory staff.

That lab has become the locus for a significant community water-quality project in the region. Staffed by two fulltime employees (paid by Rotary funds), it is home to an ongoing community-health survey, and a distribution center for Bio-Sand filters to households near Siem Reap. By November 2008, more than 1,500 filters had been distributed and installed and the regimen of testing continues. The project is having real results; it is saving Cambodian lives and they clearly recognize the difference. “They are truly open to what will help improve the quality of life for their families,” Curry noted. And it is a gift that gives back. “I was overwhelmed by their personal warmth and interest in the project. When I would visit them with the Siem Reap Laboratory staff, they would talk to me in Khmer as if I had lived there all my life.”

This enterprise relies upon what Curry calls a “triangle of international cooperation,” but in truth, it is even more complex than that—a hexagon of people and institutions. In addition to Rotary’s humanitarianism and funding are Manz’s technology, Duke’s commitment and know-how and the critical institutional backing of the University and Victoria and Bridgewater State College. And centrally involved is Curry himself. It is difficult to imagine how this project could have come about otherwise.

As much as this collaborative effort has already accomplished, Curry sees in it even greater potential. He plans to travel to Calgary in fall 2009, where there is a nexus of people involved in water projects in developing nations, including the members of the Centre for Affordable Water and Sanitation Technology (CAWST), a charitable organization that offers education, training and consulting in the field, and academics at the University of Calgary.
But his most ambitious goal involves his own institution: to establish an international community-service program for BSC students focusing on water quality in the developing world. Curry envisions an annual student study tour in Cambodia focusing on the mission of the water-quality project at Siem Reap. Students would combine their own research with public education and outreach: testing water samples, helping distribute and install Bio-Sand filters and engaging in the work of community education. Curry suspects that the reward of living and working in Cambodia for a few weeks would be much greater than any course outcome assessment could measure. “It would expose our students to the plight of those in our world who have considerably less. It will change the way that our students look at the world.” Curry predicts these things with confidence, but he should know all about them; it was a similar change in him that Professor Bowles helped engineer many years ago.

Kevin Curry’s vision is a bold one and no small undertaking for a regional state college. The real, applied work of international cooperation—in infrastructure building, abatement of poverty, conflict resolution and many other endeavors—has only just begun to be embraced by American schools. New York University and Stanford University among those in the vanguard. Perhaps they understand, like Curry, that addressing the needs and problems of foreign others is well within the university’s modern mission. In the words of Kevin Curry, BSC muckmeister: “this is absolutely part of what we should be doing.”

—Andrew Holman is Professor of History and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review.