

Poised  
between

# 2 Worlds

The University  
as Monastery  
**AND**  
Marketplace

By Nancy Cantor and  
Steven Schomberg



**A**t its very essence, the university is a center for vibrant exchange among people and ideas. For the public university, this exchange has always focused on engaging the critical issues of society. This public engagement is as concerned with bringing societal issues onto campus, that is, to the world within, as with engaging societal problems in the field, that is, in the world beyond. Stimulating vibrant exchange among people and ideas in these worlds is a critical university mission—one that, depending on the circumstances, information technology may be able to facilitate.

*Nancy Cantor is Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a professor of psychology. Steven Schomberg is Vice-Chancellor for Public Engagement and Institutional Relations at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.*

## Two Worlds

A starting point for answering questions about the role of technology in facilitating this vibrant exchange is to consider the kinds of places that universities are becoming and what they are trying to accomplish. Increasingly, universities are poised, literally and metaphorically, between two worlds. In the world within, the world of the monastery or cloister, with its dedication to a higher purpose, universities think and “play” on problems of great intrinsic interest; yet universities must also strive to be responsible in, and responsive to, the world beyond—the world of the public square, with its notions of exchange and negotiations, and of the marketplace, with its apparent chaos of buying and selling in everyday life.

The monastery/cloister has a great deal of appeal as a description of the university in that precisely because it is unfettered by real-world concerns and the immediacy of delivering on those concerns, it should, in principle, encourage an experimental attitude well suited to a thoughtful discourse, from many angles, about important issues. In doing so, the university should be a center of intellectual diversity. It should also permit a certain intellectual playfulness with ideas likely to encourage discovery.

Unfortunately, however, the university as monastery may be too quiet and orderly, too prone in its detachment to thinking more and more about less and less (of importance), and too narrow in the range of its explorations by virtue of viewing issues from fewer and fewer perspectives and looking inward rather than outward for stimulation. Ideally, of course, the scholar/researcher would pursue issues that are of great intrinsic interest and that also match the immediate public interest of society. But how often are these two interests at odds? And with respect to the encouragement of intellectual diversity, how often does the detachment from the pressures of the real world lead to a narrowing of the scope of interactions, such that discourse becomes stale and monochromatic?

Universities gain much of their vibrancy from engaging critical societal issues. The columnist Tom Friedman wrote several months ago about the flap over the

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s decision to assign incoming students to read the Koran. He said: “One is reminded of Harry Lime’s famous quip in the movie *The Third Man*—that 30 years of noisy, violent churning under the Borgias in Italy produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance, while 500 years of peace, quiet and harmony in Switzerland produced the cuckoo clock.”<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, universities may need to have a bit more of the noise of the marketplace and the public square, a closer connection to the issues and concerns of the day (and to the stakeholders who press them), if not to become dulled by insularity and ruled irrelevant by the public because of encompassing too few voices and points of view that lead to innovation and societal transformation.

If universities do need, then, the vibrancy and impulsive nature of the marketplace and the public square, is there an inherent downfall in that world? Yes. Somewhat ironically, the unregulated marketplace (or public square) has a tendency, with the demand for short-term gains and immediate needs, to give in to the loudest voice and the most forceful advocate; it shows an impatience with the hard work that is required to work through issues from many angles, to express differences, to experiment with plausible solutions. The marketplace needs answers, and it needs them now. One needs only to think of the exchange at a city council or school board meeting, where the many public voices seek immediate solutions, narrowly drawn to fit the values and views of only the shrillest voices. Another example is the chaos of the commodity trading pit, where a few emerge to control the exchange. In the context of the marketplace of exchanges, some rules of engagement are needed to prevent premature resolutions and takeovers.

As universities increasingly gain sustenance from being engaged with their communities, it is important for them to retain the character of a “place apart,” of an experimental proving ground—intellectually (as compared to the R&D of a company) and socially (as compared to the structured rules and norms of a school) and psychologically (as compared to the automatic fulfillment of traditional roles

and expectations). In other words, universities need the press of the critical issues and multiple voices of society in the context of a somewhat more regulated and vetted exchange that will ultimately allow for intellectual and social and psychological experimentation—for more vibrancy and less of a push toward closure. Universities need to be in a world that is between the world of the monastery and the world of the marketplace.

## A World In-Between

What kind of place is this world poised between worlds? What are its fundamental values and purposes? On the one hand, it needs to be a place in which universities are motivated by a desire to be responsive and useful and dynamically attuned to the world—that is, one in which universities provide access to opportunity (share the returns to higher education as widely as possible), are innovative and forward-looking, and responsibly address critical societal issues and serve the public interest. On the other hand, in the push-and-pull of the marketplace, ideas can go unvetted, voices can get drowned out, and exchange can prematurely unravel. So it needs to be a place in which exploration and playfulness can occur (even in the face of pressures to deliver immediate “profits” or to conform to the majority), in which multiple heritages and traditions can be preserved (even as we push forward), and in which community can be built upon a foundation of difference (even when forces work against creating a community that tolerates conflict if civilly expressed).

Academic libraries provide a concrete prototypical example of this image of the world poised in-between. They emerged out of the great cloisters and monasteries—with guarded collections of the most holy materials—into the democratization of modern society, replete with all of the marketplace forces for accessibility. They provide access to information that is readily marketable while being centers of quiet, systematic exploration and discovery; they are cultural reservoirs while being meeting and mixing places; they are sanctuaries for scholars while providing vital connections to communities/publics. Libraries, even academic research libraries, can no longer avoid the

noise and turmoil and unvetted free-for-all of the marketplace, yet they exist at least in large part to remind us of our many pasts, including all of the ideas and discoveries that never flourished in the marketplace. Libraries are poised between a desire to facilitate the vibrant exchange of ideas and information, connecting all kinds of people across time and space, and a desire to vet and systematize and evaluate that information, those exchanges, so as to provide as full and nuanced a rendering of the issue as possible.

How can libraries—and, similarly, universities—remain poised between these desires, between two worlds? One possible facilitator is information technology.

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### **Technology and Vibrant Vetted Exchange**

Information technology is a collaborative medium, built to facilitate the vibrant exchange that crosses the globe, that moves back and forth in time and space, and that opens doors to many voices and many generations. But it also has the potential to become either the monastic domain of the fully vetted or the free-for-all of the marketplace in which the loudest voice prevails and in which shortcuts replace reflection. Therefore, it is important to ask when technology can help universities maintain a vibrant vetted exchange, when it can help them collaborate with each other and with their many publics, and

when it can help them remain appropriately poised between the monastery and the marketplace.

Let us consider three examples of when technology might serve as a medium for a vibrant vetted exchange:

1. The exchange between university faculty and K–12 teachers pointed toward improving schools
2. The exchange between cultures and points of view on a university campus—and between campus and community—as universities try to prepare students to live and work together across differences in a diverse world

3. The exchange between campuses and communities in which “cultural advocates”—in museums and libraries and in neighborhoods and schools—work together to preserve and interpret and share cultural heritages

In each of these cases, success will depend on the vibrancy of the exchange—that is, on the extent to which real-world concerns are brought into dialogue with the expertise and systematic experimentation of the academy. However, different things are required to sustain the vibrancy of the exchange in each case. And, accordingly, it is more or less easy to build



collaborations based on exchange using technology as the connecting medium.

#### *Retaining New Teachers in the Classroom*

Consider first the following example of collaboration between higher education and K-12 schools. The Novice Teacher Support Project in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of Education is aimed at reversing the trend of teachers dropping out of teaching. The Illinois statistics indicate that about 50 percent of teachers leave the classroom within five years of graduating from universities and colleges. They leave for many reasons, but one is the absence of a community of support to help with classroom challenges. The project is pioneering an e-mentoring program that lets new teachers post questions and get help from experienced teachers in their fields and from university faculty.<sup>2</sup>

E-mentoring is connecting the academy and the real world of classrooms across our region in Illinois. Here, the exchange of information is very much em-

bedded in the real-world marketplace of the schools. To be successful, the exchange needs to remain close to the dynamics and immediacy of the evolving classroom situation, since problems arise and the novice teacher needs help immediately; he or she can't afford to wait for a face-to-face meeting. At the same time, the novice teacher needs a "place apart," and the e-mentoring network provides such a space, one that is removed from the work environment of the classroom just enough to enable some reflection on the issues, even as they emerge in real time. In this context, Internet technologies facilitate bringing all forms of expertise to the table quickly, connecting the novice to the master teacher, in classrooms across the region and between the classroom and the campus laboratory.

Why does technology work to facilitate a vibrant exchange in this collaborative context? It works well because of two critical features of the collaboration. First, it is a collaboration between individuals who already know one another and who

share similar experiences, goals, and even knowledge bases. Their work settings are similar, and much of their actual work is similar. In other words, this is a context in which the common bonds are already strongly established. In fact, the novice teachers have met face-to-face and practiced the intergroup skills that lead to fruitful exchange.

Second, in this collaboration, the free flow of ideas that characterizes the marketplace exchange on the Internet can take place without one side dominating or taking over. Even the novice teacher has some "standing" in the exchange because he or she has the command of the specifics of the actual situation and this on-the-ground expertise can hold its own against the years of experience of a master teacher or the knowledge of the literature of a faculty mentor. Although the master teacher or faculty mentor may ultimately hold sway, he or she has to listen carefully to the novice's rendition of the problem. In such a collaborative context, the free-flowing online exchange can be

very helpful to both the novice teacher and the more experienced teachers and mentors.

#### *Enabling Intergroup Relations Dialogues*

Next consider a very different kind of exchange, one that occurs, often with an unspoken agreement, between campuses and their publics, to address the gap in knowledge that students have about living and working together in a diverse world. This is the collaboration that occurs when society counts on higher education as a proving ground for intergroup relations, for living with and learning from differences. This is what happens when higher education serves as a training ground for corporations eager to recruit future employees who are comfortable with and appreciative of diversity.

In this case, the exchange won't occur naturally, and interaction must be deliberately structured and facilitated by experienced group leaders and must be carefully designed to encourage differences of viewpoints and experiences to emerge in as nonthreatening a way as possible. Even the setting is often chosen explicitly to be a safe haven for all involved (e.g., a residence hall). In these safe contexts, intergroup dialogues can address topics that would be incendiary over the Internet. At the University of Michigan, for example, in the Intergroup Relations, Conflict, and Community Program, social science faculty train teams of residence hall counselors to lead intergroup dialogues on topics such as "People of Color and White People," "Blacks and Jews," "Blacks and Latinos," "Black Women and Black Men." Similarly, the intergroup dialogue program at Illinois has used this model to address the implications of world crises for students on campus, for example by discussing the Middle East crisis in a dialogue on "Arabs and Jews in America." In each of these examples, the exchange has to work its way through each person's preconceptions, emotions, opinions, and experiences, experimenting with the clash of ideas and people—with conflicts that need to be carefully negotiated.

Contrast this exchange with a report a couple of years ago, entitled "School Time, Minus the Face Time," about online education.<sup>3</sup> Parents complimented sev-

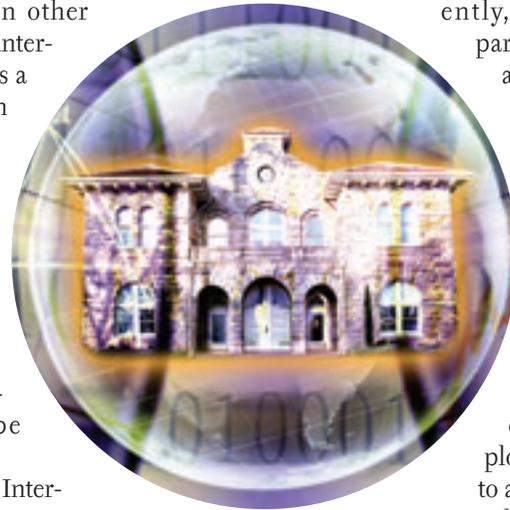
eral online high school programs in which their children were allowed to learn while avoiding hanging out with peers different from themselves, thus permitting them to "opt out of community norms that they don't like." This description is rather chilling—forcing us to question whether Internet-facilitated programs are the kinds of educational experiences most likely to challenge stereo-

types, build trust, and secure a sense of common fate among future citizens.

Even when the Internet is used to foster an exchange rather than to opt out of one, the need to manage the civility of the exchange seems to preclude the freedom of the Internet marketplace; passwords and controlled access don't substitute for body language and face-to-face contact to ease the strain of these communications.

The constructive airing of differences and conflicts—the kind of airing that leads to respect and community—works when the intergroup dialogue is highly vetted and structured. If and when differences are aired in Internet chat-rooms, for example, the risks of “flaming” and insults might well exceed the benefits of easy interpersonal communication access. In other words, enabling intergroup relations is a context in which the highly structured and reflective characteristics of the monastery help ensure that the voices of the real-world marketplace can all be heard.

Why does the Internet marketplace seem like the wrong context for this particular kind of collaborative exchange? First of all, in this case, there is very little real-world experience on which to build this exchange. That is, the marketplace of intergroup relations in our society is a very weak one at best, and so the university needs to create an exchange virtually from scratch (e.g., most students—and even faculty—come to universities with very little direct experience crossing boundaries of race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and so forth). In a sense, this is a case of bringing the world, represented here through the differences between people in their life experiences, to the protected space of the academy.



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Second, the exchange is more often than not built on a framework of difference and perhaps even mistrust, not similarity and trust (as in the case of the e-mentoring project), and so it may well require the comfort of rules of engagement that quell the dominant voices in the service of hearing from more corners of the room. Or to say it differently, since all of the participants (students and teachers alike) will be relative novices at this exchange, and relative strangers to each other, the marketplace exchange is more likely to lead to explosions than to civil exchanges—and explosions will do little to address the needs of either campus or community in this collaboration.

*Preserving, Interpreting, and Sharing Cultural Heritages*

Lastly, as an illustration of an exchange that lies somewhere between the protectionism of the intergroup dialogue and the brainstorming of the e-mentoring of novice teachers, we return to the ways in which libraries often collaborate with communities in preserving, interpreting, and sharing cultural heritages. For this purpose we use the example of the Digital Cultural Heritage Program at Illinois, although most universities have similar programs that connect archivists, collections, and cultural experts



from campus with citizens, community resources, and neighborhood schools. In this particular project, there is an ongoing collaboration in which the university special collections archivists work with local museum curators in East Central Illinois and with elementary school teachers from three local schools to create an electronic database of historical/cultural materials, along with descriptive data, to acquaint schoolchildren with the variety and richness of the cultural legacies of communities in this region.

Though the impetus for this project was to find a way to meet public marketplace

proper to include. In other words, it is an exchange built on a mix of choices and voices. Moreover, this project is physically located between worlds, residing neither in the protected space of the rare book collection or the local museum nor in the random Web surfing of the elementary schoolchild.

What is perhaps most interesting about this last example is that the Internet can be very helpful here in encouraging the mix of choices and voices in this project, although deliberate attention to the mix is required on an ongoing basis. Electronic collaborative communication is used throughout the project to link local museum curators, librarians/archivists, and teachers in threaded discussions. This is complemented by

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demands—that is, Illinois State Board of Education learning goals regarding third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade social studies curriculum—this is an exchange occupying some “middle ground.” It clearly involves a fair amount of vetting of the information in the exchange but with the direct intent of meeting public needs by engaging as wide a variety of the public’s attention as possible with the richness and breadth of source material. It requires the expertise of the archivist or curator to find and vet the works, but it also draws on the input of the public (teachers, students, citizens) as to what is important, necessary, and

in-person meetings both at the university and at school sites. Unlike the intergroup dialogue participants, who come to the table with very little feel for difference, the participants in this community—the voices—have grounding in their own culture and so can contribute profitably to the choices. Their grounding is from lived experience and, as such, is more like that of the novice teacher’s. On the other hand, unlike the novice teacher, who shares a tutored perspective with his or her mentor, the participant in this exchange might well overplay current interests as compared with the experts’ choices, which will favor preservation. The trick, then, is whether the Internet—

with its expansive reach over time and space—can serve as a medium in which cultural stories can be preserved in a dynamic way that plays to the newly evolving interests of the current cultural marketplace. That is, the question, once again, is whether the Internet technology will help maintain the project as a collaboration poised between two worlds.

### Conclusion

Traditionally, the university has reflected two worlds: the monastery world of careful reflection and exploration; and the marketplace world of dynamic give-and-take, push-and-pull. The modern university, however, needs to inhabit a third world, the world poised in-between, attempting to be inclusive of immediate concerns and the different voices expressing them and yet trying to respond thoughtfully and fully with a longer view in mind.

Can technology help universities stay in the world poised in-between? We gave two examples in which technology works

well in facilitating the exchange between people and ideas because it is supplemented by face-to-face interaction and because the participants share common goals and values. And we gave one example in which technology does not initially facilitate the exchange and in which face-to-face interaction is necessary because no trust or common values exist.

Informed by these examples, we argue that universities can best achieve the desired vibrancy of exchange if they work on the balance of monastic and marketplace characteristics included in the world in-between. Sometimes, as in the Novice Teacher Support Project, the press of the immediate marketplace needs to take center stage, albeit still in a place somewhat apart from the to-and-fro of the classroom. Sometimes, as in the attempt to build a community reflective of differences, there is a strong pull to the monastery so that a safe and careful exchange is ensured. Other times, as in the building of a cultural heritage database, there needs to be a con-

stant back and forth between monastery and marketplace to encompass many voices and yet make some choices about the focal point of the exchange. Regardless of whether marketplace or monastic characteristics dominate, the exchange will remain vibrant if both are included. Technology can often help us to do this, but there are other times that simply require more face-to-face adjudication if we are to avoid prematurely narrowing the exchange by preventing too forceful an emergence of one voice or one perspective or one time frame. Discovering the optimal role for technology in the vibrant exchange is part of the transformation from simply having access to technology to using technology as needed for a critical university mission. *e*

### Notes

1. Tom Friedman, *New York Times*, August 28, 2002.
2. See Rhea R. Borja, "E-Mentors Offer Online Support, Information for Novice Instructors," *Education Week*, April 3, 2002.
3. "School Time, Minus the Face Time," *New York Times*, February 15, 2001.