Interview with Rajesh Tandon
Global Engagement Speaker Series
October 21, 2016

By Carla Hills

CH: OK, Dr. Tandon. How has the landscape for higher education changed?

RT: I think in some parts of the world, if you look at sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, higher education institutions have to contend with increasing pressure for enrollment of a new generation of students. Expansion is happening but quality is suffering.

In Europe, and maybe some parts of North America, there is a stagnation in enrollment and in southern Europe in particular, we have come across a situation where college graduates are unemployed in very high numbers. Take Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, even southern France—so there is one set of questions arising out of that. If you go to university and you remain unemployed, what’s the big deal? You might as well remain unemployed after high school.

The second part of their stagnation is to find ways in which they can break even economically, so they are bringing in a lot of foreign and international students. Now that creates its own set of dynamics. The international students and new immigrants—those questions are haunting universities and higher education institutions.

I think the major challenge for our education institutions globally is to reaffirm their relevance to society. There was a time when a very limited group of students from reasonably well-endowed families used to come and get degrees and certifications and go on in life. At that time universities were encouraged to remain isolated from society because people would go to these campuses, they would be trained and nurtured, basically the purpose of university was to prepare the next generation of elites. But all that has changed in the last 20-30 years, and is changing rapidly. So the way universities functioned and defined themselves 30 years ago needs to change into this context.

And that’s where the difficulty is, because how do you make your curriculum locally relevant, how do you make your research locally responsive—And in some societies, universities have a relatively very high amount of human and physical infrastructure. Within the premises of the university you have quite a bit of capacity which the rest of the society doesn’t have.

So the question is, how is this human and physical infrastructure being deployed to the benefit of the rest of society? That is a big challenge. And it is not just in a few countries, it is quite widespread. Some years ago you may remember that students in Chile went on a massive protest throughout the country. And they were college students but they were joined by high school students and the protests spread. High school students joined because they said we are worried about what we will end up in, so we support college students who are basically demanding partly curriculum relevance and partly economics of higher education, the cost of education. The cost question got more attention by politicians than the curriculum.

CH: One of the things that you said yesterday in your lecture pertaining to this question is that engaged universities need to teach from real worlds. Is that another way that things have changed in the last 30 years then? If you’re not removed from society, talking about theoretical concepts, is education changing so that more demand is applicable to the real world challenges?

RT: Yah, yah. I was referring to sustainable development goals, for example. And there is a real question in front of universities. If you look at the debates leading up to formulation of sustainable development goals, and the United Nations and 180 countries of the world agreeing to them last year, universities had very little role to play in that process. And now many people are turning around and saying, so now what are you gonna do to support accomplishment of those goals? And sustainable development goals for the first time are universal goals. They apply as much to America as to Uganda. And in the course of the way our economies and societies have changed in the last 20-30 years—You know the traditional north-south divide doesn’t have much relevance. So there is a north in India and a south in America in that sense. There are pockets of deprivation and exclusion and hunger and marginalization in America and there’s pockets of veldt and richness in India. So sustainable development goals apply to all.

And the question is whether universities are stepping up to the plate or not. They will require teaching in a new way, they will require research in a new way, and there is no academic discipline which cannot be relevant and make a contribution, because there are questions of technology, there are questions of ecology, there are questions of demographics, health—Everything is in those goals. So I would imagine—I haven’t seen anyplace as yet—But I would imagine I would walk into a university someday somewhere, and they will say we embrace sustainable development goals at the front of their entrance. And there is a conversation between faculty and students in all departments to say how can we align our teaching and research to contribute to that. [The year] 2030 is a goal for achievement of sustainable development goals. We have a 15-year time frame.

CH: Are there countries who are doing this in a more advanced fashion, who are setting the tone, or is that your job at UNESCO?

RT: We are pushing, nudging a bit. This question is also a bit relevant to the next one. What we have seen is it’s not countries which are ahead or leaders. It is institutions, because national policy has very little to do with it. A lot more is institutional leadership, many a time provincial. So we have in India, for example, two relatively less endowed provinces which have completed their planning process for sustainable development growth. And relatively better endowed provinces have not paid attention. So if you look at a country like Brazil or South Africa, we can’t speak about South Africa being a leader, because there are examples within the country there which may not support that.

But two characteristics of leadership that we have come across—One is that there is at the very top of the academic leadership, in the office of the president and the vice chancellor, the registrar, the provost and all, there is a genuine commitment for engagement. Some people used to say that if a physicist becomes the president of your university he may not have interest—It has nothing to do with discipline. It’s personalities. If you believe in it, if you grew up in a context where you learned the value of it, it doesn’t matter what discipline you come from.

The second variable which makes a difference is there are some systems and incentives in place, some resources for engagement research, funds, a small fund, there is credit to students for engagement, it is not an activity outside the credit system, and there are some visible milestones for faculty to achieve in terms of engagement.

CH: What are the implications for those differences for an institution like Michigan State University? For example, when we talk about it’s not countries but institutional leadership that seems to be advancing engagement, how can we bring about change in the United States on a peer to peer level?

RT: I had heard and read about MSU’s engagement work before I came this week, but what I have learned here is far more exciting and advanced than what I knew. Being an early land grant university, being a university which focused on various regions of Michigan province—agriculture, forestry, fisheries, veterinarian services, and having an outreach system which is all over the state—I learned that your training of medical doctors happens in community centers and not just in fancy centralized hospitals. So I think there is a lot that MSU is doing. I feel that its reputation and infrastructure is in place.

But I think it can do a bit more in a couple of ways that will be useful to MSU but also to universities not only in the United States but globally. One is, which you have been willing to do but not many people do, but I think there is more happening than is being heard about. In the course of three days I discovered a dozen graduate students who are asking the question, how can I use this methodology of engagement in my thesis? Even if they are not fully using the methodology at this stage, the fact that they are asking the question is a step forward. They’re curious about it. They seem to be interested and motivated. So if more is talked about in various forms of communication, then I think more will be done and more people will feel encouraged and supported.

I think in your engagement and outreach unit you have enormous expertise in facilitating community partnerships. You look at the Center for Community and Economic Development, it’s all about partnerships. I heard about the work that is going on with indigenous communities, it’s all about nurturing partnerships. There is a graduate certificate course also, which is one of the best. Only a few universities in the world offer that kind of thing and I have picked up a lot of curriculum material which I will share with others.

What I am worried about is that new, younger faculty come in or a new student who comes in with a two-year master’s timeframe. How do they tap this expertise? So that’s what I mean by more is silent than talked about.

The other point that I mentioned in my talk yesterday, and I don’t know how much it is applicable to MSU—Some universities carry their rankings on their sleeves and some don’t give a damn. And my worry is that MSU may lose this distinctive core competence I see in engagement and partnerships and service to community if it chases those rankings too much. You have a global reputation for expertise, you have knowledge systems, you have infrastructure which is best in class. Why are you chasing a mirage? It’s a question. I’m not saying it’s happening, but—You know. Because the first things that get dropped off are things which take time and effort.

CH: One of the most interesting things I thought you said yesterday is something that we’ve discussed here in our unit, is about when we work with communities we have a mutual, reciprocal exchange of information, knowledge, and research. I loved when you said that you have to figure out what community members already know and then go from there. So the question is, is it more important to be respected at the disciplinary level for the research that you’re doing or is it more important to be respected for the way that you are doing the research and working with community partners? Maybe that question is not put in an equalized sort of a manner, but there is that tension to produce ground-breaking research, and yet when you’re working with communities there’s a tension to get it right for that community.

RT: I think the tension is superficial. I think the tension is also experienced by an individual and need not be a tension for MSU as a whole. As I mentioned yesterday, increasingly research funding bodies are asking for impact. If you look at the theory of discovery or innovation or new knowledge production, it is increasingly a combination of practical insights and further research. And given the history of MSU and its strong work in forestry and agriculture [within these specialty?] areas, none of that knowledge by any top notch agricultural scientist ever was produced without reference to community knowledge. They may not acknowledge it in their papers or in their Nobel prizes, but that’s what happens. Because in order to create a new seed, you need to know what the current seed does, and who knows that best than farmers? They know under what circumstances the crop yield is high and what circumstances the crop yield is low and what kind of water it requires. They have a body of knowledge. They change cropping patterns based on that knowledge. So you build on that, and therefore I think there is a bigger myth about publish and perish than in reality it happens. Your papers on engaged research could be path-breaking as well.

You look at the people who are developing WhatsApp today. They’re not the ones who are sitting in Stanford or whatever. They’re street guys who are developing WhatsApp.

CH: It’s true!

RT: And where is it coming from? They identify a need, a gap, largely from their personal experience and from—Look at the history of Facebook. All a bunch of college kids sitting around saying how do we share information with each other? That’s the basis of innovation. That’s learning from real world.

CH: Those are good examples.

RT: There are many like that. I was reading somewhere how hydraulic valves were designed in 19th century England. We learned to regulate the flow of liquid by observing horses and cows, how they shit and crap!

CH [laughs]

RT: It is a one-way valve, come to think of it. It closes after the flow takes place and you can’t [shupp?] it back.

LJ: A value chain creation! [laughs]

RT: I’m just giving an outrageous example, but somebody sat there who was working with horses and cows obviously, he was not sitting in a library, saying this is a very interesting function.

CH: It is.

RT: But look at how many things have been learned by looking at the behavior of butterflies or bees. We lose sight of that fact. Those are real-world phenomena.

CH: I think that you’ve already answered questions 7 and 8 when you referred to what MSU is doing in their engagement work about preparing the next generation of community engaged scholars. So I’d like to sort of turn that question and say what is UNESCO or GUNI doing to prepare the next generation of community engaged scholars?

RT: As UNESCO chair, as I said yesterday, five years ago we started looking at community-university research partnerships. In that study we found several conclusions by looking at 10-12 countries around the world, and one of those conclusions is still relevant for MSU, which is a system-wide structure which could be—The crude word is matchmaking, but which is facilitating—Some trade union in Detroit wants a study done on labor patterns or whatever. It can phone in to that structure and say help us talk to somebody. Likewise some young faculty comes in, joins MSU and says I want to work with indigenous communities in western Michigan. Who do I ask? This model has worked in many countries, and one of our conclusions was that this kind of—So I think the makings of that are there in UOE but you just need to get out of the basement for it, metaphorically. Because how does anybody in the community know?

So I very much like the idea of the Center for Community and Economic Development, which went into the community. Most of the time what universities do, they build an incubation park on the university campus. Now most people have never entered a university campus. They are afraid to enter. So the incubation park becomes a space for multinationals. It doesn’t become a space for a small businessman nearby because it doesn’t feel like you can get any help there. This is something that we have discovered and we are promoting that.

In the second study we discovered that the training of the next generation of community based participatory researchers is currently somewhat inadequate. There is a group of people who are learning by doing, fumbling like many of us did. Some continue to learn, some give up [?] and say no, it’s too complicated, let me finish my thesis and then I’ll see. That kind of stuff. Other people are learning in classrooms but their pedagogical arrangement is not such that they can also learn in real world. As UNESCO chair we are trying to promote a program whereby in different cultural contexts and linguistic contexts, academic institutions in partnership with community organizations could offer learning about community based participatory research.

We hope that MSU would also be an active partner in this, particularly because you have created a model of engagement which cuts across all functions of the university. I learned from Diane the course that you are doing for students here but I think MSU can play a slightly more leadership role, not just for North America but the rest of the world. There may be a way by which we could jointly organize schools, for example. Because now what has happened is that the last 10-12 years there is no president or vice-chancellor who doesn’t think of it. The problem is, after thinking what do you do? You need some action. Some have even created—In countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, you have a pro-vice chancellor for engagement. You look at what they are doing, for a variety of reasons they are engaging more with industry than with community. They would like to balance it but they don’t know how. They are worried about all these questions, what will faculty say, students—the usual—the community may raise some hassles, of course. Everybody raises hassles so what’s the problem?

There could be sort of a summer camp, summer institute or winter institute or whatever institute, because you have so much going on here. Even the agricultural or natural-resource-related universities do not have the kind of outreach that MSU has. So how you use your outreach, how you use your experimental field centers, how students and faculty participate in that—If I had known about it I would have visited one or two of them. I’m going back with my learning and then come back and spend 4-5 days in 2-3 of those centers to see what’s going on. It’s not outreach from East Lansing, it is reach-out from *there*, which makes a difference. People understand you/there as a university, and given the history of course—It’s not overnight. So I think MSU can play that role a bit more energetically than an occasional presentation in a conference.

CH: This has been a very terrific interview. I have one final question and that is if you had a wish list of what you wanted to do next, is there anything—

RT: I want to see in the next five years to train 5,000 young generation community based participatory researchers in 10-12 different countries and regions, and have 25 shining lights of such partnerships in sub-Saharan Africa, in eastern southern Asia, in Latin America, in the Arab world, southern Europe. Folks who are working with indigenous communities like MSU and others.

CH: Thank you so much for your time.