March 15, 2011

Dear alumni, faculty, staff and friends,

I hope everyone’s new year has gotten off to a good start. As I write this, New Orleans has recently put the finishing touches on another safe and festive Carnival. If you are living away from all the madness of that season, I hope this letter rekindles fond memories for you.

As someone who was not born in New Orleans, it has taken some time for me to develop a true sense of the richness of the Carnival tradition and how it is so thoroughly integrated into the culture and identity of the city. It’s just come to my attention, in fact, that the first organized Mardi Gras celebration was held in 1833—just one year before the founding of the medical school that would eventually grow into Tulane University. Now that’s an interesting bit of trivia, but I think it also points to something that is not at all trivial: like Carnival, Tulane has been and is an integral part of this city.

Scott Cowen serves as moderator at a recent CASE (Council for the Advancement and Support of Education) conference where the featured speakers were Mary Matalin and James Carville.
DROP-IN CENTER OFFERS SAFE PLACE FOR AREA YOUTH

“It’s fabulous to come to work every day because I don’t know what amazing person I’m going to meet next,” says Isabella Christodoulou, a 1989 graduate of Tulane School of Social Work. Christodoulou works with homeless and at-risk youth who flock to the Drop-In Center operated on the edge of the French Quarter by the Department of Pediatrics in the School of Medicine. Established in 1991, the Drop-In Center provides youth from 13 to 24 years of age a chance to get off the street and receive health and mental health services.

HELPING IMPROVE THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF HAITI

“We’ve got explicit goals that are not political goals,” says Carl Kendall, director of the Tulane Center for Global Health Equity. He and other researchers are on the ground in Haiti, determined to improve the infrastructure of the struggling country, despite disputed elections, civil unrest, cholera outbreaks and the lingering effects of last year’s tragic earthquake. Assistance is focused on three key areas: psychosocial support, health systems management and environmental health. Faculty from both the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and the School of Social Work have worked with a senior member of the Haitian Ministry of Health to develop a plan to train Haitian staff in psychosocial assistance. Beginning this year, Kendall and his colleagues are conducting a program to train a new cadre of nurses for the country.

I mention all this because it relates to something that I’ve given a lot of thought to lately, and that is the civic role of what are called “anchor institutions.” These are universities, hospitals, nonprofits, performing arts groups or any other organization that play an ongoing and substantial role in strengthening the fabric of a community.

By any definition, Tulane is just such an anchor institution. Not only are we richly involved with the traditions and culture of community, but we also are one of the city’s largest employers and most powerful economic engines.

Now, in my view, part and parcel of being an anchor institution is having the responsibility to see where we can engage in activity that will have a positive impact on the community in which we exist. And honestly, I have to admit that identifying these areas of engagement has become one of my passions. It’s something I am wholeheartedly committed to. “Civic engagement” and “community empowerment” are to me not buzzwords to be glibly thrown around, but concepts central to the mission of Tulane and any institution devoted to the public good.

So Scott, you may ask, how does this all work? How does Tulane become a leader working for the public good? I can answer that in this way: when you commit to doing the right thing, good things just start to happen.

I’ll give you one example.

Back in 2009, Tulane developed a number of social entrepreneurship initiatives that would allow the university to better support innovative solutions to address pressing social problems. In fact, I wrote about these initiatives in a letter I sent you in the fall...
of that year. Just in case that letter isn’t presently at your fingertips (smile), this is part of what I wrote:

“Social entrepreneurship is an innovative blend of social action and entrepreneurial strategies. Social entrepreneurs identify problems that plague communities and then seek out fresh approaches to address those problems.”

Now, among the initiatives that we implemented that year was the NewDay Social Entrepreneurship Speaker Series. The intent was to bring to campus people who are absolutely out front and leading the way in social entrepreneurship. The series has been a fabulous success and has introduced our students, faculty, staff and community members to a host of remarkable innovators, the most recent being Deborah Bial, who spoke on campus in January.

In 1989, Deborah founded the Posse Foundation, a nonprofit organization that identifies inner-city high school students with extraordinary academic and leadership potential, teams them with similar students in their communities, and provides these small groups (posses) with the opportunity to attend top colleges and universities around the country.

In 2008, Tulane became a partner of the Posse Foundation when we admitted, on scholarship, a group of students from the Los Angeles area. There are currently six other cities in the country that are working with the foundation to round up posses of highly qualified and deserving students.
So when I was having lunch with Deborah on the day after her campus presentation, my question to her was this: why shouldn’t New Orleans be the next posse city and how can Tulane be a catalyst to make that happen? It is my aspiration to make New Orleans a posse city so many of our students in public education here will have the opportunity to go to highly selective schools around the country. I expect the next time I write you to be able to report that New Orleans is a participant in the program.

You may ask, how does this benefit Tulane?

In doing the right thing we assume on a national stage a leadership role in civic engagement and in defining what it means to be an anchor institution—and we become a model for other institutions to follow. In embracing social entrepreneurship and integrating it into our curricular and extracurricular activities we dismantle the image of the remote and irrelevant “ivory tower” and replace it with that of an engaged and dynamic community of learners and doers. In introducing service learning into their classrooms, our faculty members connect the dots between their scholarship and research and the needs of the community. In applying their studies to the real world, our students learn how to solve problems, think innovatively and act with compassion.

As I mentioned earlier, this has become my passion, perhaps my obsession. With every situation that is before me I now think in two dimensions: Is there a role for Tulane and if so, how might our role impact what goes on in our community while further strengthening the university?

And I invite you to join me. Look around your own community and ask, is there a role for me to play? How might that role positively impact my community?

In doing the right things we enable other good things to happen. I see it every day.

All the best,

Scott S. Cowen