Why do we Engage in Engagement?

By Judith A. Ramaley

Abstract

Universities have many reasons for seeking closer alliances and partnerships with the communities they serve. These partnerships constitute a set of mutually beneficial relationships that can challenge the traditional values of the academy. Direct involvement with community and societal issues is often considered less than scholarly by faculty and the changes necessary to promote meaningful community-campus interactions may be viewed with suspicion or anxiety by members of both the campus community and the broader community. There are many benefits associated with engagement that make the challenge of building the capacity for partnership worthwhile.

Why do so many of us in higher education care so much about civic responsibility and our institutional roles as citizens in our communities? There are many reasons for embracing an engagement agenda, some of them altruistic and some more self-serving. Among them are (1) our mutual desire to strengthen our democratic way of life, drawing upon the intellectual resources of our campuses to define and address community problems; (2) our hope to encourage our students to become involved in the public life of their communities and to be responsible citizens; (3) to practice what we would teach by modeling good civic responsibility in campus life and in our relationships with our neighbors; (4) to create a means to address serious public relations problems and town-gown tensions; or (5) to help revitalize the communities surrounding our campuses in order to make our campuses more attractive places to study.

Although the concept of engagement is still evolving, there are several common elements that are beginning to emerge from the analysis of the experiences of many colleges and universities with their communities. A fully realized university-community relationship has at the very least the following features: (1) a common agenda and sharing of both power and responsibility as well as risk and reward; (2) an ability to share power and resources equitably with the community; (3) the creation of extraordinary community-based/service-learning opportunities for students in ways that require faculty and administrators to be equally open and responsive to the interests and concerns of their students and of the community; and (4) the inclusion of community concerns as a legitimate set of expectations about what the legitimate goals and successful outcomes of a community-university partnership or engagement will be. In sum, engagement is reciprocal, requires the creation of a shared agenda, and must be mutually beneficial to all participants. It should, in short, generate something of real value in supporting community development along with the enrichment of the student experience and the deepening of scholarly interest in the problems presented by the community experience.

The civic engagement agenda is a challenging one, especially in colleges and universities where direct involvement with community and societal issues is considered less than scholarly and where the changes necessary to promote engagement may be viewed with suspicion or anxiety by members of both the campus community and the broader community. What motivates us to work so hard on an agenda that is still peripheral to the work of many institutions and often looked at askance from the perspective of the traditional disciplines?

The reasons for participating in community-based work, either through the curriculum, scholarly activities, or partnerships are complex and often interwoven. Some of us are alarmed by the fact that very few young people vote, take an interest in local issues, or show any inclination to volunteer for public responsibilities. Many students volunteer to do community service, but this does not seem to lead to an interest in public affairs and public responsibility. Other people who have embraced the civic engagement agenda are concerned about the growing diversity of the communities in which we live and the challenge that strong advocacy for diverse interests will pose for our traditional forms of government. Others are motivated by a concern that their universities should become more meaningfully involved; i.e. "engaged" in the important task of improving the quality of life in the communities they serve. Many of us have been convinced of the power of community involvement to transform the perspectives and lives of students and community people alike. Finally, some campuses embrace engagement because connections to the community can create powerful ways to deepen learning and to promote scholarly excellence.

What is Civic Virtue?

Civic virtue has classically been defined as both knowledge of the public good and the sustained desire to achieve it (Dahl 1995). Underlying this definition is the supposition that community leaders have "both the opportunity and incentives to acquire the necessary knowledge and the predisposition to act steadily on the basis of that knowledge." In this era of rapid information explosion in the absence of understanding and wisdom, where could a citizen acquire the knowledge required to exercise civic responsibility today? —in a learning alliance with a college or university! David Mathews (1998) lays out a picture of a true civic society for our era, "Civil societies become democratic when there are opportunities for people to learn the importance of listening to all views, even those they dislike, of 'working through' conflicting approaches to solving a problem, and of building common ground for action."

What Does it Mean to be a Responsible Citizen?

We do not all agree on what it means to be a responsible citizen or what the civic virtues are that we want to model and then instill in our students. We do, however, all agree that public life in this country is changing and that the very nature of the public realm itself, where all of us come together to contribute to the building of a just and peaceful community, is in need of repair. We also agree that colleges and universities must be significant players in creating such public spaces and in generating and model-

ing civic responsibility—both on and off campus.

A college or university is, in many ways, a public space, designed to help us develop shared purposes and pursue shared goals. One element we all share is our commitment to undergraduate education and the outcomes of the student experience. Where we differ is in the extent to which we view research and public service as essential means to accomplish our mission. An institution that wishes to be engaged and responsible must rethink some fundamental issues, such as how knowledge will be created in the future, what the role of faculty will be, what the goals of the curriculum ought to be, how the curriculum should be designed to foster civic responsibility, and how to form and then sustain meaningful, long-term alliances and partnerships that can promote community capacity to work in democratic ways. The answers to these questions at a research university may differ from the responses of a private liberal arts college, a regional university, or a community college, but we all need to find answers that authentically reflect our mission and purposes. Some of the questions that higher education institutions may want to consider include:

- What does it mean to honor our avowed mission to prepare our students to lead creative, productive, and responsible lives?
- What does it mean to renew our democratic way of life and reassert our role of social stewardship as "vital agents and architects of a flourishing democracy?"
- How will a commitment to civic engagement and civic responsibility manifest itself in the daily life, structure, and decisions that we make on our campuses?

What Does it Mean for a College or University to Embrace its Civic Responsibility?

An institution that embraces its civic responsibilities sets for itself the goal of playing a role in generating a renewal of democracy through the expectations we have of ourselves as scholars and administrators, our aspirations for our students and the nature and intentions of our own institutional relationships with the broader society of which we are an integral part.

The most fundamental means by which any educational institution can enhance civic responsibility is (1) to find a means to link learning and community life through the design of the curriculum, and (2) to serve as a center and resource for community building on the community's terms. Beyond these fundamental means, each institution can use its distinctive strengths based on its traditions, institutional history, and resource base to contribute through scholarship and outreach or engagement to the strengthening of community life and community capacity to identify and solve problems. In all cases, what the institution is doing is helping its students, its faculty and staff, and the citizens of the communities it serves learn how to make informed choices together, an essential skill of civic responsibility and a core competence of a civil society (Mathews 1998; Kingston 1998).

The University as Citizen Conference at the University of South Florida has confirmed our readiness to mobilize energies and resources around the issue of civic engagement. There is, however, still disagreement within the academic community and on many of our own campuses about the extent to which this work is central to our institutional missions and legitimate work for both faculty and students. There are a number of challenges we must address if we are to embrace civic engagement as a meaningful and central purpose of our mission:

- Making community-based learning a significant and meaningful part of the educational experience of our students;
- Making community-based scholarship and civic engagement a legitimate activity in the intellectual life of the institution;
- Recognizing the importance of encouraging interested faculty to engage in personally meaningful scholarship;
- Connecting scholarly efforts to consequences, including addressing honestly the question of whether true scholarship is always dispassionate and unengaged or whether it is possible to care intensely about an issue or topic and still be a legitimate scholar. One aspect of this problem is the question of the "expert" in public discourse, sometimes defined as one who "knows-but-does-not-care";
- Finding opportunities to bring campus and community resources together in ways that do not require people to remain in their traditional roles of "expert" and "client," but that build trust and equality through reciprocal learning and empowerment.
- Learning to listen. Key to a sharing of power and responsibility is the ability to listen for meaning and intention rather than to find weaknesses in the other person's arguments; i.e., "Are you listening for meaning or to dismantle the other's argument?" Active listening of this kind can open up the possibility of genuine dialogue between community members and academics and bridge the gulf that often separates the two perspectives and limits the extent to which community members can and will contribute in a substantive way to the setting of an agenda, the defining of goals, and the exploration of ways to accomplish those goals;
- Identifying the best ways to engage students meaningfully in issues of public interest and in the pursuit of the public good, and to encourage them to become productive and involved citizens;
- Addressing students' desire for a voice and a meaningful and influential role in the engagement agenda as a way to model the successful involvement of students in exercising their civic responsibility;
- Beginning to practice on a daily basis what we are now learning about what it means to work with the community in a truly reciprocal and mutually beneficial way. We should expect to be changed by the experience. The new agenda requires bringing all of ourselves to the table; to be open to our vulnerabilities, and to be real with others. The greatest challenge of the civic agenda is to move beyond our expertise. We need to ask what each player is bringing to the table and why are they there. In this way everyone grows professionally and personally. This is difficult work because it touches on our very identity as experts and scholars;

- Learning to share risk, reward, and control. Genuine campus-community collaboration requires academia to review how it approaches the allocation of resources, to seek support for public service from donors, and to model democracy on our own campuses in our decision-making and in our interactions with each other. It also requires that we practice thoughtful, engaging, and inclusive dialogues, being careful to cultivate broad-based leadership;
- Finding ways to recruit new participants so the usual suspects who always can be counted on to participate do not burn out;
- Defining engagement as: (1) creating a common agenda and sharing both power and responsibility as well as risk and reward; (2) understanding that to build community, power must be shared but that some consistency of leadership is necessary; (3) creating extraordinary learning opportunities for students in ways that require faculty and administrators to be open-minded and empathic; and (4) including community consequences as a legitimate set of expectations about what a successful outcome will mean; revitalizing neighborhoods, for example;
- Viewing "civic mission" as a frame of mind. That is, we need to "work in a borderland," a place where "collaborative work is legitimate but does not replace the role of the traditional scholar";
- Accepting social change as a legitimate aim and outcome of instruction.

The Lives of Students and Community Members Today

As I think about civic responsibility, I see the faces of the students and community people I have met over the years. First the students, the people who come to us and under our tutelage flower into adulthood or, if they are already adults, expand their horizons and their skills. Then the community people I have known come to mind, who care so much about making their communities places of economic and social opportunity.

Something wondrous happens to our younger students sometime during the sophomore year or, at the latest, in the junior year. Students move away from wanting to know what they have to learn and how to learn it. They learn how to think, how to place their experiences and observations in a broader context and, most importantly, how to live a creative, productive, and responsible life. What happens in that first year or so that works such a transformative influence on our students? The answer, according to our students, is quite simple. Either a student accepts some form of responsibility and takes it seriously or he or she is acknowledged in a meaningful way by others who play respected roles in our society: a member of the faculty, for example, or a community leader. For our adult students, the point of transformation may be the realization that they are competent and can make a difference, using the knowledge they have acquired as well as the life experiences and wisdom they have brought to their education.

I have grown increasingly convinced that the best way to teach is to listen with respect and with intensity to our students, to offer them the opportunity to express themselves in their modes, rather than in ours, and to give them a chance to take responsibility and make a difference in a way that has personal significance for them. What better avenue is there than community involvement to prepare our students to lead productive, responsible, and creative lives?

When we do this, however, we must approach our students and our community partners on their terms, not ours. A faculty member in our School of Business brought me a little packet of material generated by one of the best students in his electronically-augmented leadership class. The professor, who is middle-aged, had prepared a number of case studies of leadership in military affairs, government and statesmanship, and business and corporate life. He had the students read about great leaders in history. One exercise in this class was to do a report on a leader of your choice. As he was asking students to talk about how they saw the tasks of leadership and how they learned about leadership, he was surprised to discover that many of them thought of leadership as inspiration and found that certain music groups were especially good models of leadership in both their music and their lyrics. The students continued this exploration electronically after class and compared notes on which groups meant the most to each of them. It became clear that the lives of leaders may have instructional value, but lyrics of contemporary songs offered more to many of these students. With more grace than some of us might have shown, our professor invited the students to do the leadership exercise however they wished, in whatever media they wished, so long as they explored the dimensions of leadership.

For these contemporary students, the lives of great leaders were less important sources of inspiration and understanding than the messages being delivered in songs. The packet the business faculty member brought me was a CD cut by one of his students and an annotated diary and reflection on what these songs meant to her about leadership. The cultural and social gulf had been bridged. Using the power of chat rooms, on-going reflection, and communication before and after class as well as the intensity of interaction in the class, our professor had discovered the key to reaching students across the gap of experience and culture. From his own students, he learned how to bring the joys of the search for truth and the exploration of the big questions of human life and experience into a context that was meaningful for his students and authentically linked to their lives and yet true to the fundamental and universal challenges he wanted to explore in his course.

How can we set the process of transformation in motion in a community setting? We must offer a variety of opportunities that engage students in genuine problem-solving whether it is creating a work of art, conducting research in the laboratory or in the field, or addressing a community problem that will have real consequences for others. In all of these activities, students carry responsibility for a good outcome and work closely with faculty who can engage them in stimulating and gratifying work. Another way is to provide leadership and service opportunities that challenge students to discover the importance of responsibility. As one of our summer orientation leaders said to me once,

"If we can get our freshmen involved in even one group or activity in their first semester, one thing will lead to another and their real education will begin."

I thought of those conversations the last time I addressed our graduates at Commencement. I said, "Watch for the early shining light of curiosity and a desire for knowledge in others and learn to share what you love and care about so that you may kindle in others what has been kindled in you. This is what I would wish for you all, that your own thoughts would be enriched by the people you know, the authors you have read and have yet to read, the ideas that humankind has always struggled with and reflected upon, the words of great poets and great philosophers, the puzzles of nature, the examples of lives well and truly led in leadership and service. And most of all that you will share freely of yourselves with others; that the pleasures of the search after truth and the thoughtful application of knowledge will be yours for a lifetime."

That is why I care so much about the civic agenda and the importance of institutional engagement. It is to see the light dawn in the minds of our students, to see that light shine warmly over those who care deeply about life in their community. It is also to see our colleges and universities gain strength and knowledge and nourishment from alliances and partnerships that bring together the assets of a community and the knowledge and insights of an academic community to work on problems of mutual interest and concern.

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