Toward a Definition and Characterization of the Engaged Campus: Six Cases

By Barbara A. Holland

Abstract
At the USF conference on University as Citizen, teams from six institutions with different missions and community environments were invited to present the story of their campus' experiences with implementing and sustaining civic engagement programs. From these cases, a deeper understanding is gained regarding the characteristics of an engaged campus and the features of sustainable campus-community partnerships. Key challenges to the institutionalization of engagement are also identified.

The University as Citizen Conference, hosted by the University of South Florida in February 2001, provided an unusually rich and intensive learning experience for its participants. Most higher education conferences offer only a few sessions that touch on topics related to civic engagement. This was a rare opportunity for several hundred faculty and engagement scholars to focus completely on issues of institutional commitment to engagement, and the organizational changes and community partnerships necessary for success.

The quality of the conference was greatly enhanced by the diversity of institutions represented; diversity in mission and in experience with the practice of civic engagement. In particular, the conference planners framed the entire event by featuring six institutions of different types as case studies of efforts to enact a civic mission and to sustain university-community partnerships. Each of the six was invited to make a major presentation about their institution's approach to civic engagement programming, organizational strategies, partnership relationships, and key challenges. These six institutional case stories were interspersed across the conference program, complementing the plenary and concurrent sessions. My task at the conference was to look across the six cases, and convey some sense of the patterns of ideas and lessons from which the conference participants might learn for application in their own campus settings.

The Cases
The use of six institutional reports as an organizing thread along with thoughtful and specific concurrent sessions allowed conference participants to explore both specific and comprehensive views of the impacts of engagement on institutions and communities. While all six would modestly say they still face important challenges and do not

have all the answers, these are institutions seen by many as advanced cases of institu-tionalizing the work and culture of engagement and are a valuable repository of useful experience.

To their credit, the institutional teams strongly embraced their task and seemed to use this opportunity to reflect critically on their own history, including their strengths and weaknesses. Each clearly worked hard to prepare a story that was descriptive and analytical, reflective of successes and struggles, and often, inspiring. Their candor was impressive and invaluable in helping the audience discern lessons they might apply to the efforts of their own institutions and communities. In addition, conference planners wisely invited two international institutions to present case studies. This comparative look at the challenges of engagement greatly enriched the value of the case studies overall, especially in confirming and deepening our understanding of the shared and the distinctive elements of engaged institutions and their partnerships.

The stories of the six institutions that were highlighted at the conference on University as Citizen were:
Universidad de las Americas, Mexico (UDLA)
Portland State University (PSU)
University of Pennsylvania (Penn)
University of the Free State, SA (UFS)
The University of Illinois Chicago (UIC)
The University of California at San Diego (UCSD)
A book's worth of space would be needed to present each of the complete and unique case studies. Suffice to say that each of these has both deep and broad institutional experience with university-community partnerships. Each has involved the entirety of the campus in an exploration of the role of engagement in the institution's mission and wrestled with the impacts of engagement on the organization and culture. Each has made intentional and extensive efforts to build partnerships that link intellectual resources and tasks with public issues, assets and needs, and has sought to understand their impact on community capacity—for good and for bad.

Across the cases, faculty and students are involved in a variety of community-based learning endeavors such as housing development, home ownership, health care and nutrition programs, youth development, job training, small business development, public safety and legal services, tutoring and other K-12 projects, and many other areas of local importance to communities seeking to develop their opportunities for success. These activities are accomplished through service learning courses and other forms of community-based experiential learning, through applied research or action research, through instruction and training programs, joint development projects, and other program strategies that link campus and community in common purpose.
More detailed aspects of the individual cases will emerge from the following analysis of the patterns of issues that were observed across the six case studies. Each presents unique traits, but it is also possible to identify common features that help us understand

the meaning of an engaged campus and its partnerships.

Patterns Across the Cases

These six institutions represent an interesting spectrum of approaches to engagement, strategies for implementation, and approaches to creating the significant organizational changes necessary to sustain a commitment to engagement. They differ, sometimes in degrees and sometimes dramatically, in several ways. These differences begin to reveal the pattern of general characteristics and issues that are common to all engaged campuses, although local interpretation and application may vary because of important contextual differences.

1. They differ in motivation for beginning or emphasizing an engagement agenda – I submit to you that every institution must clearly articulate its motives and self-interest in pursuing the work of engagement and opening itself to partnership work.

   These institutions articulated motivations such as:
   a. Pressing social, economic, political and cultural challenges created by a nation in transition—as is certainly the case of the two international institutions who are being called upon to help their regions adapt to an emerging democratic society and new economic environment.
   b. Significant pressures on the institution generated by a crisis such as enrollment shifts, budgetary problems, or public criticism—clearly the cases suggest that a crisis helps make organizational change possible because it creates a sense of urgency. Most of the six case studies have felt a strong sense of public pressure to be more responsive to regional issues. In PSU's case, the campus was faced by the crisis of an extraordinarily large cut in their state budget. The campus response was to link itself more strongly with its city.
   c. Difficulties created for the institution by a decaying neighborhood surrounding the campus—as private institutions, Penn and UDLA are especially articulate in expressing the genuine and appropriate self-interest inherent in their campus involvement in neighborhoods.
   d. Opportunities to enhance and strengthen mission and performance in research—certainly the main goals of UIC and UCSD in pursuing an engagement agenda that has strong links to research success as well as community enhancement.

2. The cases reveal several different organizational directions in their individual choice of a focal point for initial engagement efforts and selection of key strategies for transformational change on a large scale:
   a. Curricular reform to enhance the civic learning of students were reported by all to some degree, but was an especially important strategy for changes at Penn and PSU.
   b. The desire to increase the regional relevance of the institution was especially emphasized by UIC and UCSD as most compatible with their intense research culture, but was a benefit to every one of the institutional cases.

c. Urgent economic and community development challenges and the need to change fundamental quality of life in the communities they serve was the compelling and ambitious starting point for programmatic efforts of the two international cases and of Penn.
   d. A commitment to engagement as a tool for total campus transformation—PSU offers an example of a comprehensive approach to organizational change that was accomplished by making engagement integral to all aspects of the institution, and Free State offers us a breath-taking example of a comprehensive, holistic approach to community improvement as a way of building a new campus culture.

3. As institutions with advanced experience, these cases still feel that their work to institutionalize engagement is not yet done. Each case offers different and useful insights on effective strategies or lessons learned on the later-stage issues that each campus faces in expanding and institutionalizing an engagement agenda.
   a. Sustaining the programs and strategic efforts through major leadership transitions was of special importance at PSU and UIC. The transition strategy depended largely on informal faculty leadership and leadership among deans and chairs.
   b. Moving beyond the early adopter faculty, which involves a number of dimensions including encouraging other faculty to embrace an engagement agenda and recruiting new faculty as the founding faculty retire or lose their zeal and energy was important to all our cases. Curricular and faculty development strategies existed in all cases though their content and approach varied.
   c. Creating a coherent, sustainable program instead of a series of episodic programs supported by a succession of grants promoted sustainability and validity within the organization. UIC used a great cities strategy, UCSD uses a model of community-campus dialogue, Penn participates in an external planning group to guide its partnerships. These and the other cases created and funded permanent organizing campus units and structures to support engagement endeavors and partnership relationships.
   d. Sustaining authentic dialogue with diverse communities – Free State is a model for us all given the comprehensive and sustained level of community inclusion and influence they have achieved through their partnerships. They are an extraordinarily advanced example of shared power and shared planning between campus and community.
   e. Managing rising expectations – as communities and campuses gain experience working together, their ambitions must be tempered by a realistic grasp of each other's assets and limitations. PSU's assessment strategy and UCSD's conversational model offer two approaches for creating mutual campus-community understanding through effective communications; UDLA offers an example of a relationship model influenced by political realities that must be balanced with partnership ambitions.

Defining an Engaged Institution

As a way of organizing some of the lessons from these campus stories, it is helpful to draw from them key features that suggest a pattern of characteristics common to engaged institutions. This seeks to answer the question: what is an engaged campus and how would you know one if you saw one? This is a work in progress, drawn from my own research, and enhanced by my analysis of the HUD's Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) program's grantee experiences, and is meant to summarize our current best understandings of the most general characteristics and traits related to the engaged campus. This analysis is written primarily from the institutional perspective in that our greatest challenge in this work of expanding campus-community partnerships is changing our own academic cultures and organizations to promote institutionalization and sustainability of engagement as legitimate and valued academic work. This is what the six institutional case studies focused on, and therefore, so goes this attempt to summarize.

Looking across hundreds of institutional experiences with engagement, this proposed definition and these characteristics seem to be those factors and traits that appear again and again, in some mix, as a reflection of commitment to engagement. The cases behind this analysis include community colleges, private liberal arts colleges, and a mix of research and comprehensive institutions.

Here is a proposed definition of the engaged campus: The engaged institution is committed to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through the mutually-beneficial exchange, exploration, and application of knowledge, expertise, resources, and information. These interactions enrich and expand the learning and discovery functions of the academic institution while also enhancing community capacity. The work of the engaged campus is responsive to (and respectful of) community-identified needs, opportunities, and goals in ways that are appropriate to the campus' mission and academic strengths. The interaction also builds greater public understanding of the role of the campus as a knowledge asset and resource.

This definition affirms that the core value behind engagement efforts and partnerships is that both campus and community contribute to and draw benefit from their interactions through partnerships. The definition also allows for individual institutional responses to the role of engagement in their specific mission. External pressures for high performance and accountability are increasing the importance of greater differentiation and specificity of institutional missions. If there ever was a monolithic academic culture, it has clearly faded in recent years as public and private institutions have become more and more accountable to their communities and regions, regardless of the scope of mission any particular institution imagines for itself.

As we consider the challenges of an engagement agenda, institutional changes are inevitable as engagement inspires an institution to become more clear and intentional in its decisions to create community partnerships. How those changes occur, and what

forces facilitate or inhibit change will be a reflection of an institution's mission. Simply stated, I believe missions matter! Given our observations of institutional experiences such as these six cases, it is clear that engagement is not equally important to every institution's sense of mission or purposes, nor is it equally the work of every faculty member. We are academic organizations, and every engagement endeavor must be demonstrably connected to the enhancement of our core academic purposes of learning and knowledge management, or we should not become involved. If our engagement programs do not enhance the learning experiences of our students and the scholarly activities of our faculty as well as contribute to civic capacity, then there is no mutually-beneficial partnership.

The Characteristics of an "Engaged Campus"

The organizational factors described below are relevant to all types of institutions, but to varying degrees and with varying levels of urgency depending on campus vision, history, and level or stage of experience with engagement. Despite the differences and similarities across our six cases, all have had to address these factors at some point in their development, and all are still wrestling with one or more of these issues, depending on the campus' core mission.

1. Articulates civic engagement in the campus mission and strategic plans, conspicuously linking public issues to academic strengths and goals—symbolism matters IF you use messages as a touchstone.

2. Involves communities in continuous, purposeful, and authentic ways, with a deliberate approach to partnerships—this involves our learning to listen and learning to foster real dialogue.

3. Demonstrates a core commitment to learning through engagement—a curricular connection is one of the most essential and powerful tools for implementing and sustaining engagement programs and partnerships.

4. Links engagement to every dimension of campus life and decisions—partnerships to promote a shared future for campus and community are not likely to have much impact or success if other campus units send contradictory signals by, for example, continuing to tear down housing without community input. Engagement means we attend to all the economic and physical impacts of our campuses as well as the intellectual.

5. Develops and sustains necessary policies and infrastructure to promote, support, and reward engagement—including not only the faculty reward structure, but creating and funding strategies and units to support the labor-intensive nature of this work and to give the community a window into the campus.

6. Demonstrates leadership for engagement at all organizational levels—this is not just the work of the president or provost but requires leadership at all levels, especially if engagement is to endure leadership transitions.

7. Supports interdisciplinary work—community issues do not arrive in departmental packages, and the community's capacity to absorb overlapping activities is finite. Projects involving multiple disciplines must work as coordinated efforts.

8. Makes engagement visible internally and externally—honoring this work and those who contribute to it through the simple means of awards and publications and the more complex strategies of fund raising and grant making.

9. Assesses engagement with respect for the distinctive contexts and different expectations of faculty, students, and community. Systematic assessment is key to quality and sustainability, but few campuses have yet developed comprehensive models.

Applying the Factors to Institutional Practice

Looking across the six case studies shows how these factors played out for the various institutions, and all institutions were affected by these forces. The anecdotes shared in the case stories will no doubt seem familiar to some institutions and probably foreshadow issues others will face in the future. As institutions with multi-year experience with extensive engagement programs, these cases reveal innovations and observations that suggest new directions and good strategies for all of us as we pursue this work. Here are a few anecdotes, quotes, and highlights from these six models:

1. All six institutions struggle with the form and meaning of experiential learning—service learning—etc. All are consistent in their belief that academically-connected, community-based learning is an essential component of engagement, partnership, reciprocity, and sustainability. Some are inventing their own language, but the quality, content, and power of the curricular efforts are quite similar. Penn offers us a model that especially emphasizes purposeful attention to the cumulative effect of students in the community over time.

2. All have been affected to one degree or another by leadership changes. PSU and UIC offer especially graphic examples of the lesson that leadership for engagement must be both top-down and bottom-up because when committed and vocal top leaders change, it is the committed faculty leaders (and curricular connections) that sustain engagement. Once engagement is integral to curricula, learning environments, faculty work – then the impact of administrative changes is lessened, in part because a wise campus will select new leaders that support these goals and programs as elements of the basic campus mission.

3. Time and logistics continue to be the major obstacles to faculty involvement, and each case offers a unique approach to organizing infrastructure that provides needed support. A unit, a place, an organizing strategy or mechanism is essential for every engaged institution. The design and placement in the organization must be intentional and appropriate to your culture, but there must be infrastructure. No one has written more compellingly and helpfully on this subject than Mary Walshok.

4. A constant challenge is the creation of a climate of trust and respect that allows us to open up and sustain authentic dialogue with community voices. Our South African colleagues at UFS can teach us much about creating dialogue that builds community power by giving them a role that goes beyond articulating needs into shaping the actual work and design of partnership strategies. The level of campus responsiveness and openness to community influence at UFS is the most dramatic I have ever seen. They have made their institution's research and education a responsive reflection of public interest, rather than the U.S. approach of using research and education to reform or influence public interest.

5. Involving a university in public issues is in part an act of courage. Many of the objectives and issues tackled by the six institutions seem daunting, if not intractable. Why not set ambitious goals? When we pursue big questions in research—a cure for a disease, for example—we in the academy are not shy in setting a lofty goal of complete success or in acknowledging that it will take a lot of time and resources. To see an example of an ambitious and lofty goal in engagement, consider the courage of our colleagues at UDLA who have set a goal and created a plan for achieving 100 percent literacy in their community by 2006.

6. One of the most commonly cited obstacles to engagement, especially for larger public universities, is that faculty culture is dominated by research as the primary measure of performance. At liberal arts colleges, the primary measure may be teaching, which can also be an obstacle. We see in our cases examples of strategies for demonstrating the relevance of community-based scholarship to the tasks of teaching and research.

   Mary Walshok of UCSD offers us a simple and elegant strategy for having an impact on research-minded faculty: "We must create opportunities for faculty to discover for themselves the new sources of knowledge and expertise that exist in the community…to discover that big issues in the region have compelling intellectual interest. Engagement adds to research and teaching capacity by leveraging current capabilities through new organizing mechanisms that facilitate faculty-community dialogue. Smart people (i.e. faculty) WANT to put knowledge to work—our challenge is to remove the obstacles."

Key Challenges to Institutionalizing Engagement

Looking again at the nine characteristics of an engaged campus, and if we think of these six cases as advanced examples, we can see some key challenges remain for all of them and for all of us on this path of expanding institutional commitment to engagement.

1. Involvement of a critical mass of faculty—most institutions are going forward with those faculty who resonate to this form of scholarship. Expanding that pool depends in part on further changes in faculty culture and creating a value system that legitimizes community-based scholarship.

2. The re-design of academic work and institutional planning to include community expertise and participation, and to share power and control. Higher education is continually tempted to lapse into a controlling, expert role that displaces community knowledge and expertise.

3. The commitment of institutional financial resources to sustain the work and create necessary infrastructure is essential. Too much of the engagement work being done today is dependent on soft money. Commitment is hindered by a "grant-to-grant" mentality that makes engagement projects vulnerable.

4. The lack of a sufficiently common language that helps us describe this work summatively, both within and across institutions makes it easier for opponents of engagement as academic work to question its rigor and legitimacy. Without a language, we cannot establish measures of quality and standards of performance or comparability.

5. Tools and strategies for assessing the quality of this work, its impact on campus and community capacity, and for improving effectiveness will also be necessary to creating standards that will not only legitimize the work of engagement, but will ensure good performance and allow for pathways to prestige through the recognition of excellence.

These last points—a core language, models for assessment, and strategies for recognition—are critical steps toward what may be the most critical strategy to ensure the sustainability of engagement as a core component of institutional missions—the creation of a valid method for making engagement an integral element of schemes for ranking and describing the characteristics and priorities of institutions.

Conclusion

The terms **civic responsibility** and **engagement** are fairly new to our vocabulary in higher education, but the ideas behind these terms often go back into the history of our institutions in a variety of forms and under a number of different names. This is not a

redirection of academic resources, but a renewal of the link between education and society, between learning and democracy. All of these six cases offer compelling evidence that the integration of public issues into academic work blends and strengthens the quality and depth of research and teaching. Each offers us examples where it is impossible to distinguish between what is teaching, what is research, what is specific to the interaction of campus and community. They are interwoven.

Engagement is giving new meaning, new energy to the nature and personal reward of academic life—enhancing the exploration of the theoretical or the abstract by creating the opportunity to see real impacts and real change in our students and in our communities. Each campus will have its own reasons and its own struggles with defining, supporting, and sustaining a degree of commitment to this work that fits with their mission, history, vision, and capacity that matches with the opportunities and traits of their surrounding community. As we see in these six cases, the language and nuances of approaches may differ, but at their roots are some critical lessons from which we will all learn.

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