

The Heart of the Matter: Aligning Curriculum, Pedagogy and Engagement in Higher Education

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Abstract

This essay explores the themes of curriculum and pedagogy, as outlined by the editors of this special edition, in the context of Portland State University's institutional transformation. We elucidate select mechanisms that support curricular-community interactions, known at PSU as "community-based learning." In doing so we discuss how CBL and other civic engagement strategies relate to the disciplines, departments, and interdisciplinary work as well as how these various collaborative approaches affect pedagogy and epistemology at PSU.

"My vision is of a university so thoroughly engaged with its community ... that people throughout the region refer to it as 'our university.' PSU is recognized as a national leader in community-based learning and research strategies that provide meaningful opportunities for students and faculty to address complex issues in diverse communities locally and worldwide." – PSU President Daniel O. Bernstine

If you were to stroll along Portland's public "Park Blocks" which bisect Portland State University (PSU) and ask passing students what their university motto is—one that was coined by students ten years ago—most students will respond immediately with "let knowledge serve the city." PSU is frequently cited as an institution which has undertaken and institutionalized some of the most comprehensive community-university engagement reforms in the past decade (Holland 2001; Ramaley 2001; Zlotkowski 1998). If numbers point to a story, then the narrative is substantial: student enrollment in formal community-based learning *courses* for 2003-2004 was 7,789, involving several hundred faculty and even more community partners (<http://portfolio.pdx.edu/Portfolio>). This number does not include hundreds of additional students that independently volunteer or engage with communities through student service or social clubs or via other student affairs affiliated, non-credit bearing initiatives. Fully understanding how such a dynamic institutional transformation continues to take place is complex and beyond the scope of this present work. However, our past and current experiences at PSU confirm the journal editors' overarching supposition that civic engagement must be rooted in the core work of the university—in teaching and learning, linked directly to the curriculum—if it is to be effectively institutionalized. Today, it is nearly impossible to obtain an undergraduate

or graduate degree from PSU without formally interacting with at least one community-based organization; most students interact with multiple community partners.

Much of PSU's story of institutional transformation is directly tied to the genesis and on-going implementation of an innovative general education curriculum, known as University Studies. Today, the foundational tenets of that curriculum (programmatic goals and engaged pedagogies to achieve them) have become embedded in nearly every department on campus. To understand how and why PSU reinvented its general education curriculum ten years ago and how those curricular pillars spread to disciplinary units and remain strong today is to begin to understand how PSU has become an "engaged institution."

A Scholarly Approach

In the early nineties, Portland State University embarked on an adventure in undergraduate education reform that has expanded to involve all facets of university life and continues to this day. A major impetus for the choices the university made relate to its claiming an identity as an urban institution and the concurrent attempt to define what that meant. During the initial phase of the transformation, a Working Group on General Education was appointed. This faculty group began their project with the question, "Do you believe that our current general education requirements are meaningful?" They answered with a resounding "no." Because the group was not completely familiar with general education or with the most recent teaching and learning theory, they converted into a research group and investigated salient literature, including Boyer 1987; Chickering and Gamson 1987; Astin 1992; and later Eyler and Giles 1999. Their work was informed by several disciplines including psychology, higher education, student affairs, and women's studies, among many others. The resulting general education program that was crafted by the group, rigorously debated and eventually passed by faculty senate was a complete departure from the existing, more traditional, distribution model. The change in general education was part of an effort to (1) align university-wide curricular strategies with emerging research findings pertaining to effective adult education (Barr and Tagg 1995), (2) respond to Portland's critical needs in a time of economic crisis (Holland 2001) and to (3) become a more student-centered institution, known for the application of "active learning" pedagogies, in part to attract and retain new students. These initial efforts led to the blurring of many of the boundaries between the university and the community since applied learning most often takes place in community-based environments (Davidson, Kerrigan, and Agre-Kippenhan 1999). Thus, in the span of just a few years, community-based learning became one of the central pedagogies of University Studies. As early-adopter faculty returned to their home departments after a few terms of teaching in University Studies, many active teaching and learning methodologies—especially community-based learning—began to spread to courses in the majors across the institution.

In the fall of 1994, University Studies began with the implementation of Freshman Inquiry, the first course in a four-level program. The other levels of the program are the Upper Division Clusters, each introduced by a Sophomore Inquiry course, and the Senior Capstone. Today, there are twenty-seven clusters that provide a wide range of choices for students from a number of area studies groups such as Middle East Studies, European Studies, and Asian Studies to thematic focused courses such as Family Studies, Freedom, Privacy and Technology, or Global Environmental Change. The undergraduate requirements end with a Senior Capstone course that brings groups of students from different majors together with a faculty facilitator and a community partner. Each Capstone course must include a final product that directly responds to a community partner-identified issue or need. Today, PSU offers over 200 Capstone courses annually, involving over 2,500 students. Diverse community partners include K-12 schools, organizations focusing on environmental issues, immigrant population centers, neighborhood organizations, arts agencies, and small and large businesses, among others.

The faculty Working Group research results informed University Studies overarching goals development and curricular design. Each general education course at PSU is based on four goals: (1) Inquiry and Critical Thinking, (2) Communication (written, oral, visual, quantitative, group, technological), the (3) Diversity of Human Experience, and (4) Social Responsibility and Ethical Issues. Each program goal is realized through the application of a balanced combination of traditional and experiential learning strategies. Designed as a series of interdisciplinary, integrated learning communities, the program asks faculty to think *differently* about their role in the classroom, about students' and community partners' knowledge base, and about new teaching, learning, and research methodologies. The connection of classroom activities and content to community issues was a natural way to both engage and motivate students for improved learning and to make the University motto come alive.

One of the foundational beliefs of the general education program at PSU is that education should be relevant to students and their lives. Students should be able to see and apply the theories learned in the classroom to real issues present in the community. As a result, over 80% of PSU's Freshman Inquiry students are engaged in community-based learning during their first year. They are shown that expert knowledge resides in classical texts, in current texts, in community members, and in community organizations. Students are also taught in a constructivist environment where they participate in the creation of knowledge with peers, with their faculty, and with community members. Students are asked to learn about power and privilege through academic readings and interviews with community members, photo journalism assignments in the community, guest speakers from the community, direct service in the community, and intentionally-designed reflective activities based on the service experience. Students learn quickly that the "clients" being served by their community partners frequently hold the "answers" to the important questions raised in class about complex systemic reasons for poverty, homelessness, and hunger as well as the real impacts of clear cutting, urban sprawl, and uncontrolled gentrification.

Since the inception of community-based learning at PSU, the University has been deeply committed to valuing the many means by which academic content connects to the community while benefiting student learning and the common good. No rules were made at any point dictating a certain number of contact hours for students to accumulate in the community nor was a geographical boundary set to define “community” for PSU faculty. Faculty could envision direct or indirect service in the community and diverse forms of engagement emerged – community-based research of urban planning data, field work related to environmental issues, direct tutoring in the schools, services at local non-profits, development of business plans for new businesses in underserved parts of town, and utilization of laboratory skills to address citizens’ concerns related to water quality. Varied teaching strategies are valued including extensive lecturing, use of guest speakers, debating, active learning, collaborative learning, problem-based learning, scientific inquiry processes, field research practices, reflective practices, role play, and use of group work. To varying degrees all departments engage with communities because expertise in the disciplines and faculty pedagogical preferences are respected.

Although the topics for the Capstones vary, there is a thorough Capstone proposal process that ensures that each Capstone is a rigorous six credit, 400-level course that connects academic course content to a real issue in the community. Faculty must demonstrate how they have collaborated with a community organization to develop the focus of the course. Capstone faculty must also demonstrate how they will integrate reflection on each of the University Studies goals. The object of this process is to ensure the academic integrity of these courses which engage thousands of PSU students and to promote collaborative curriculum development with the community.

Centralized Faculty Development — One Key to Success

Not long after University Studies was adopted it became apparent that simply *stating the need* for new pedagogical approaches was *not* tantamount to employing them. The need for a robust faculty development strategy was apparent to senior administrators and faculty alike; therefore, PSU’s Center of Academic Excellence (CAE)—a well-supported faculty development center—was born. Sherwin Davidson, then-Vice Provost and Dean of the School of Extended Studies, was appointed to direct the Center. Almost immediately, the CAE became the location for the development of the Senior Capstone courses and the central support mechanism for faculty who wished to integrate community-based learning (CBL) into their courses. The CBL/Capstone effort was led by Amy Driscoll, while the integration of technology into innovative teaching strategies was developed under the leadership of Devorah Lieberman.

Although all teaching methods would be valued in community-based learning courses, the Center for Academic Excellence has dedicated the past ten years to promoting innovative pedagogy. Monthly seminars, workshops, and breakfast meetings engage

faculty in learning about best practices related to developing partnerships, active learning strategies, addressing topics of diversity, collaborative learning, deepening reflective practices, and dealing with difficult dialogue in the classroom. This focus on faculty development allowed PSU to welcome all faculty to teach community-based learning courses and to support faculty independent of their teaching style.

Driscoll became PSU's first director for community-university partnerships and began developing relationships with community agencies, organizations, and individuals who would be critical to creating the sizable CBL program that PSU would need as the Capstone and departmental courses came online. In 1995, Driscoll hired Seanna Kerrigan to be the lead person in the development of the Capstone program. In the spring of 1996, the first five Capstone courses were offered to pilot the effort. In 1997, Janelle Voegelé was hired and became the third person in CAE to work with Capstone logistics, course development, and faculty support. Voegelé and Kerrigan worked closely together to put a structure and process in place that would support the increasing need for Capstone courses as the program continued to grow. They were assisted by Capstone Faculty Coordinator, Susan Agre-Kippenhan, now chair of the PSU Art Department.

University Studies developed incrementally. Each discovery, issue, or success led to problem-solving and to wider program application and improvement. Assessment was built into the development process from the outset. Issues uncovered during the academic year guided faculty development activities and the course planning process. Successful "CBL faculty" helped deliver trainings for other faculty. Early on, Driscoll and Kerrigan understood that long-term community partnerships were needed to provide stability for the program. Those early insights helped establish a culture of reciprocity and commitment. Participants from the university and community recognized that students and faculty may change, yet the partnership could endure.

Community-Based Learning Across the Curriculum

PSU has been successful in embedding community-based learning across the curriculum and in every department through multiple processes. First, the Capstone community-based learning course became a *requirement* at the University. This was a controversial and potentially risky strategy. However, the decision gained almost immediate support since it demonstrated to national funding agencies that PSU had made community engagement a top priority. This visible commitment resulted in multi-year Corporation for National and Community Service/Learn and Serve America grants which were allocated to faculty interested in developing the initial community-based learning courses at PSU. Dozens of faculty were given mini-grants to develop CBL courses that connected the academic content of traditional disciplines to current issues in the Portland Metropolitan community. Faculty from psychology, art, urban planning, mathematics, education, history, English, and community health demonstrated early interest in developing CBL courses.

As mentioned previously, CAE implemented faculty development seminars to reinforce principles of good practice such as preparation, reflection, and assessment of the community-based experience. To date, over 300 PSU faculty have participated in formal training and/or mini-grant programs offered by CAE. Additionally, University Studies and CAE staff collaborate to host annual fall and spring retreats for scores of University Studies faculty. Unlike many universities across the country, CAE does *not* regularly arrange partnerships for faculty. Rather, the philosophy of the Center is to augment faculty capacity, and then initially support them as they directly identify, develop, and sustain their curricular-community connections. We have found that this empowerment model, although occasionally challenging in the short term, ultimately increases ownership of partnering activities and has served both institutional and community partners well in the medium and longer term. Sustained and well-supported faculty development and assessment efforts have clearly been critical components in PSU's institutional transformation (Kecskes, Spring, and Lieberman 2004; Gelmon et al. 2001).

Connecting the Departments to General Education Development

Through an anonymous donation to the University, CAE offered \$ 10,000-15,000 internal grants to departments for the purpose of developing broad-based community partnerships. These partnerships were initially supported in order to develop exemplar Senior Capstone courses. Each grant submitted was required to provide evidence of the critical elements of course-based partnership sustainability: (a) departmental faculty commitment to teach the Capstone courses for multiple years, (b) the capacity of an individual agency or cohort of agencies to “house” multiple community-based learning courses, (c) a commitment from both the faculty and the community partner to engage in assessment and feedback processes to document lessons learned from the initial efforts, (d) evidence that the series of courses developed through this partnership would provide exemplar Capstone courses, and (e) a commitment to participate in faculty development seminars to continuously improve the pedagogy in these courses.

Through the grant process, the University became cognizant of faculty and departments willing to be “early adopters,” and gained a deeper appreciation for individuals who already had substantial community-university partnership experience. For example, the School of Engineering was deeply invested in applied learning but many of its projects had not included an interdisciplinary team of students actually engaged in the community. Thus, in order to support the department to address additional key University Studies course design parameters, a small grant was awarded so faculty could modify their curriculum to become significantly more community-oriented and interdisciplinary. The University also became aware of the broad-based partnerships that the Department of Black Studies had developed with the large refugee population in Portland, the long-term partnerships the School of Education had with Portland Public Schools, and the wide-reaching partnerships that the Women's

Studies Department had been nurturing with feminist health clinics, resource networks, domestic violence shelters, educational programs, and outreach centers in Portland. Overall, ten departmental grants were initially allocated; these resulted in the first steps to institutionalizing community-based learning at PSU. Subsequent years of Learn and Serve America grant funding allowed the University to continuously offer mini-grants to new departments, and within five years, most units had Capstones. As faculty returned to their departments, they incorporated community-based learning pedagogies into courses associated with the discipline and the major.

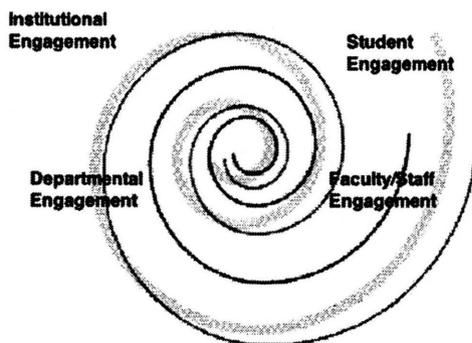
Overcoming Resistance and Deepening Engagement

Within five years of its inception, it was clear that community-based learning was present in almost every department at PSU. The next stage toward more complete integration of this active pedagogy and other civic engagement strategies campus-wide was to learn what prevented the “late adopters” from offering Senior Capstone courses. Therefore, the Capstone Coordinator and the Director for Community-University Partnerships visited each department that seemed reticent to integrate community-based learning into its discipline. Facilitated discussions at departmental faculty meetings investigated barriers to faculty participation. Faculty reported that the primary issues were lack of time and lack of resources to develop labor-intensive Capstone courses. Participants discussed possible funding solutions, co-teaching arrangements, use of graduate student assistance, and benefits to participating in the process of institutionalizing community-based learning. Frequently after the meetings, at least one faculty from each of the departments would step forward and express a willingness to try to develop a Capstone or other community-based learning course. Since every student at PSU is required to take a Senior Capstone, faculty were motivated to develop Capstones that would be relevant to majors in their departments (even though all Capstones must include students from multiple majors). Through this process of dialogue, PSU achieved the goal of integration of community-based learning into each of the Schools and Colleges across the University. As a result, students are regularly presented with opportunities to engage in community work in courses related to their major and within their general education curriculum. In the major, students participate in courses such as “Legislative Process,” “Concepts of Community Development—Building Civic Capacity,” “Ethical Leadership and Public Service,” “Community Psychology,” “The Immigrant Experience,” and “Civic Engagement: the Role of Social Institutions,” among others. Through these courses students learn how disciplinary expertise can directly address salient community issues. For example, in “Graphic Design,” a course in the Art Department, students learn how to support awareness campaigns by listening to community-based organizations’ needs in order to create near professional quality logos for marketing materials. Or, in the Music Department, faculty and students can help break the cycle of isolation sometimes experienced by the elderly by performing at senior centers and dialoguing about the performance afterward.

In the summer of 2001, PSU attended one of the first “engaged department institutes” offered by National Campus Compact in order to explore the concepts of the department as a unit of engagement and change. The following fall, seven departments participated in a year-long program that encouraged community-university engagement *department-wide*. The focus of this initiative was to shift the focus of support from *individual* faculty members to *collective teams* in departments where they are located in order to increase the collaborative integration of community-based learning (CBL) into their respective units. In the 2002-2003 academic year, 12 units participated in the “engaged department” initiative. Currently 12 departments (many of the same and some new units) are participating in an extended, three-year iteration of the program. Departmental engagement is diverse at PSU, including the departments of English, history, psychology and physics, to name a few. Some units have collectively re-envisioned their mission statements, while others have used the initiative to more fully scan, document, and connect the range of community engagement present in the unit (Kecskes 2004). In the University Studies program, faculty and staff have utilized this programmatic support to intentionally explore curricular *sequencing* explicitly through community-based learning. Students in the Freshman Seminar courses partner with Senior Capstone students to learn collaboratively about community issues. In the best cases, Senior Capstone students act as community-based learning coaches for first-year students in the context of the community learning environment. For example, seniors from an environmental justice Capstone recently led first-year students through the Mt. Hood National Forest to assist in tree counts on a plot of land slated for clear cutting. In the process of performing this important forest monitoring project, senior students taught their younger colleagues about legislative processes and environmental advocacy strategies. Intentionally connecting and sequencing courses can enhance academic coherence for students, expand and invigorate faculty teaching and learning strategies, and value community partners by ensuring a steady stream of department-based students over time.

Today, PSU offers over 400 community-based learning courses that engage over 7,500 students in formal community-learning environments each year. One of PSU’s core values is to create socially responsible, engaged students. We recognize they are trained and taught by engaged faculty and staff who are supported by engaged departments housed in an engaged university.

An Integrated Approach



In this integrated approach, students are provided community-based learning opportunities early and often in their careers. Experiential learning is valued by both faculty and administrators as an academically credible method for creating meaning and understanding; faculty combine community-based teaching and research and can be promoted and tenured based in part on rigorous scholarship of engagement efforts. Finally, community partners' opinions are valued as evidenced by their inclusion on substantial search committees (a most recent example is formal community partner inclusion on PSU's provost search committee, winter 2005).

Conclusions—Curriculum, Pedagogy and Today's Work for Tomorrow

From the outset, Portland State University's institutional transformation placed engaged student learning at its *center*. PSU linked community-based learning and other civic engagement strategies directly to the curriculum—first through the theme-based, interdisciplinary University Studies program and later in nearly all of the departments and undergraduate and graduate majors offered at the university. A few key curricular integration strategies in support of institutional transformation outlined in this article are:

- Assume a scholarly approach when working with faculty;
- Use internal and external recourses to incentivize the work;
- Recognize that substantial commitment to faculty development is essential;
- Value diverse disciplinary and pedagogical approaches;
- Consider having faculty—not staff—identify, develop, and sustain curricular partnerships;
- Explore the implementation of a Senior Capstone or other community-based learning requirement;
- Assess from the outset and use the formative findings to improve pedagogy;
- Think systematically and work incrementally;
- Tie work directly to the institutional mission; and
- Ensure that efforts are well-communicated and integrated.

Finally, innovation needs to be an on-going process. Portland State University continues to transform itself, both by deepening successful community engagement practices locally and extending its reach internationally. Locally, PSU has recently developed an interdisciplinary civic leadership minor, formally involving three Colleges and 11 departments. We have also begun to use web-based geographic information systems (GIS) technology to “map” our community-university partnerships. Globally, PSU has begun a campus-wide discussion about internationalizing the curriculum. Central to this work is the utilization of community-based learning strategies to help develop global citizens. This multi-faceted work, once again, is curricular work. Some innovative faculty explore how to more intentionally integrate connections with local international communities into their courses, while others develop new curricula that includes short-term community engagement experiences beyond the border. Reflecting on the challenges and successes of the past decade, it is clear that much of PSU's story of institutional transformation is directly

tied to the implementation of innovative curricula. A sharp focus on student learning has guided PSU for much of the past and will surely continue to inform PSU's future.

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