The Public Purposes of Higher Education: What Does the Public Think?

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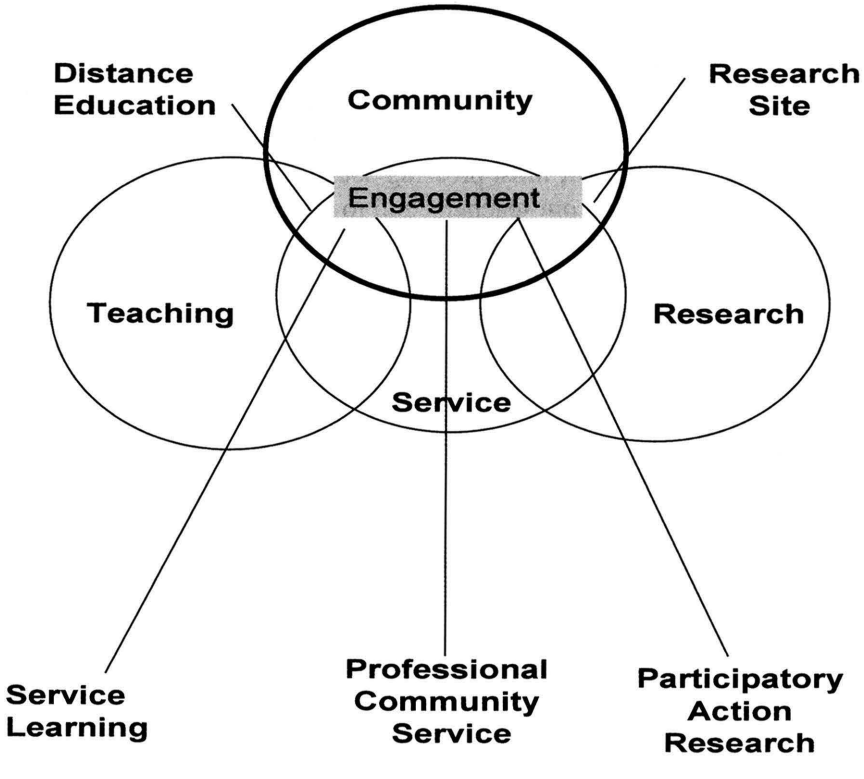
Abstract

A telephone interview of 821 residents of a Midwestern state found endorsement for higher education's role in career preparation, future leaders, and citizens. In addition, almost 80 percent of these residents supported community service as part of the curriculum (i.e., service learning). This suggests that higher education can improve the understanding of the general public for how service learning contributes to these three objectives which, in turn, can build greater support for civic engagement and community-based learning.

Higher education is developing renewed interest in rethinking and redefining its public purposes, a movement being led by metropolitan universities. Boyer (1994) promoted a new model for higher education that involves undergraduates in social issues, balances theory and practice, promotes an integrated view of knowledge, expands the nature of scholarly work, and extends classrooms into communities. Boyer (1994, A48) had a far-reaching vision, noting that, "What is needed is not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction." Boyer (1994, 1996) saw his new vision for civic engagement as "connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers, and to our cities" (Boyer 1996, 19). Although Boyer's view of civic engagement can be interpreted as a substitute for application, civic engagement can also be viewed as a new approach that reinterprets the nature of not only application but also discovery, integration, and teaching (Bringle, Games, and Malloy 1999b; Glassick 1999; Rice 2005). This broader view expands the civic agenda for higher education in remarkable ways, including mission, instruction, curriculum, infrastructure, and assessment of student outcomes and institutional performance (Bringle, Games, and Malloy 1999a; Brukardt et al. 2004; Colby et al. 2003). The general thrust of Boyer's vision has had an influence across all types of institutions in higher education (e.g., community colleges, large research universities, comprehensive universities, liberal arts, metropolitan universities). This research will evaluate the general public's familiarity with and endorsement of the public purposes of higher education. In addition, because of the growth of service learning and its centrality to civic engagement (Bringle et al. 2001), the research also examined the general publics' endorsement of integrating community service into the curriculum.

The following distinction is made between community involvement, a more encompassing term, and civic engagement, which refers to a particular way of conducting community involvement: (a) community involvement is defined solely by the location of the activity (e.g., teaching, research, and service in the community), and (b) civic engagement is defined as teaching, research, and service that is both in and with the community (Bringle, Hatcher, and Clayton 2006). Community involvement has no geographic boundaries and includes university work in all sectors of society (e.g., nonprofits, government, business). In contrast, civic engagement is "civic" in the sense that it expects relationships and methods of participation among parties to be fair and democratic and to honor different ways of knowing and different knowledge bases. At Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), civic engagement, which is part of the mission statement, is defined as "active collaboration that builds on the resources, skills, expertise, and knowledge of the campus and community to improve the quality of life in communities in a manner that is consistent with the campus mission" (Hatcher and Bringle 2004, 5). This definition states that civic engagement is not merely a substitute for professional service. Instead, the definition incorporates teaching, research, and service (including patient and client services) in and with the community (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Civic Engagement as Faculty Work in and With the Community
(Bringle, Games, Malloy 1999b



Public Opinion about Higher Education

A national poll of public opinion of higher education, conducted for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, shows that the public was more than satisfied with the quality of education that American colleges and universities provide (Selingo 2003). When asked about particular issues, the general public had more mixed opinions about quality, necessity, access, diversity, and cost. When respondents from the general population were asked their opinion about the two dominant activities in higher education, they thought that higher education devotes too many resources to research and too few to educating students (Hebel 2003). Specifically,

> Given a list of twenty-one possible roles that colleges should play, respondents placed in the bottom half such things as conducting research to make American businesses more competitive and helping local businesses be successful. Those tasks tend to top the agendas of many state officials (and, therefore, of many public college presidents), leading states across the country to propose new university research centers and programs aimed at developing new technologies even as they cut operating funds for public institutions and financial aid for students. The poll's respondents, however, favor a strikingly different set of priorities: offering a general education to undergraduate students, preparing adults for jobs, and helping elementary and high schools teach children better (Hebel 2003, A11).

What about the public purposes of higher education? The same poll of public opinion found that, in addition to strong endorsement for career preparation (92 percent identifying this as "very important" or "important"), the general public also endorsed preparing future leaders (88 percent) and preparing students to be responsible citizens (85 percent).

Current Research on Public Opinion of Civic Engagement

Traditional research and teaching are well developed areas of academic work. Although there is more to civic engagement than service learning (Figure 1), the development of service learning during the past fifteen years is an important source of information about the less familiar territories of academic work in communities as campuses diversify their work through civic engagement (Campus Compact 2004-2005). Thus, the values, theories, and practice of service learning (Zlotkowski 1999) become a basis for informing and honoring professional service and participatory action research (Figure 1). As such, service learning becomes the impetus for higher education to examine both the methods and goals of a broad range of activities in higher education (Bringle, Games, and Malloy 1999a; Boyer 1994, 1996; Colby et al. 2003; Eggerton 1994; Harkavy and Puckett 1994; Langseth and Plater 2004; O'Meara and Rice 2005; Rice 1996).

There are two primary ways in which campuses involve students in community service: co-curricular service and academically-based service learning. Typically the former is the purview of student affairs and the latter, academic affairs. Co-curricular service by students occurs through a variety of campus activities and programs: student organizations, faith-based activities, alternative spring-break service trips, and campus-wide service projects. Co-curricular service activities have the merits that they allow for student-initiated activities, provide excellent opportunities for developing student leadership, involve collaboration among students and with the community, and fit into the students' schedules. As important as these co-curricular community service activities are, they typically have no formal learning objectives that are specified and assessed. Furthermore, co-curricular service activities are seldom represented to external audiences in any formal manner (e.g., recorded on a college transcript), nor do they take full advantage of faculty and other educational resources on campus. Finally, co-curricular activities may not be consistent with the mission of the institution (Bringle 1996).

Service learning is defined as a "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle and Hatcher 1995, 112; Zlotkowski 1999). Not all community-based instruction is service learning or civic engagement. This definition helps differentiate service learning from other types of educational experiences that take place in the community (e.g., internship, practica, field-based instruction, cooperative education) and also differentiates service learning from volunteering (Furco 1996). Unlike many practica and internships, which focus on pre-professional skill development, service learning is linked to a course and has the intentional goal of developing civic skills and dispositions in students. Unlike volunteering, service learning represents academic work in which the community service activities are used as a "text" that is interpreted, analyzed, and related to the content of a course in a way that permits a formal evaluation of the academic learning. Thus, in service learning, academic credit is not given for engaging in community service; rather, academic credit is based on the academic learning that occurs as a result of the community service. Furthermore, not just any community service activity is appropriate for service learning; the service activities are intentionally selected to align with the educational objectives of the course and they are selected with community partners so that the community service is meaningful to agencies, their clients, and community residents. Thus, high quality service learning classes demonstrate mutual benefits and reciprocity between the campus and the community, with each giving and receiving, and each teaching and learning.

In addition, unlike most co-curricular service, service learning incorporates reflection activities designed to provide "intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives" (Hatcher and Bringle 1997, 153). These reflection activities can take a variety of forms including journals, written assignments, group

discussion, multimedia presentations, and reports to the community agency (Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede 1996; Hatcher and Bringle 1997). At least some of the reflection activities should be assessed as evidence for learning that results from the community service and how well it is connected to the course content (Hatcher and Bringle 1997).

Research Questions

This research focused on the perceptions of the general public toward civic engagement activities that involve community service and service learning by addressing the following questions:

- How does the general public of Indiana assess the role of colleges and universities in terms of community involvement?
- To what degree is the general public of Indiana aware of community service and service learning activities by higher education?
- In what types of community service and service learning activities does the general public of Indiana feel colleges and universities should be involved?

Methods

Sample

Telephone interviews were conducted with 821 residents of Indiana. Quotas based on county, age, and gender were used to ensure a representative sample of all Indiana residents. Forty-eight percent of the respondents were male and 52 percent were female. The sample had the following age distribution: 18-34 (n = 273; 33.3%), 35-54 (n = 314; 38.2%), and 55+ (n = 234, 28.5%). Approximately three quarters of the sample reported educational attainment as less than a bachelor's degree; 88 percent reported their race as white; 60 percent reported being married; about 55 percent reported an income of $60,000 or less; and 73 percent reported owning their home.

Survey Methods

The state-wide interviews were conducted by professional interviewers. Calls were made between the hours of 4:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m., Monday through Friday; between 11:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. on Saturday; and from 4:00 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. on Sunday. Interviewers used random-digit dial procedures to collect the interviews. There were 2,049 refusals to participate in the survey.

The survey instrument was designed by a university-based Public Opinion Laboratory and was part of a larger project on "Strengthening the Public Purposes of Higher Education." Survey questions pertinent to this research focused on:

- The roles of higher education related to civic engagement.
- Awareness and ratings of civic engagement activities by Indiana schools.
- Endorsement of community service as a part of undergraduate education.

Results

Respondents were asked to indicate whether colleges and universities in Indiana play "a significant role" in the following areas: contributing to economic growth in your community; developing students to be responsible citizens; improving the quality of life in your community; preparing the community's future leaders; and involving students in community service. Respondents indicated their opinion on a five-point scale, with 1 = no role at all, and 5 = significant role; Table 1 summarizes the percentage of respondents for each rating. Preparing future leaders had the highest rating, and community service had the lowest rating of familiarity. A second set of questions asked respondents to rate how the colleges and universities in Indiana were doing using the following choices: excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor (Table 2). The institutions were viewed as doing the best job of providing students with marketable skills; providing citizenship skills and community service opportunities were rated least favorably.

Table 1
Role of Colleges and Universities

Role	1 No role at all	2	3	4	5 Significant Role	Don't know/ No answer
Contributing to economic growth in community	33 4.0%	72 8.8%	192 23.4%	223 27.2%	242 29.5%	59 7.2%
Developing students to be responsible citizens	37 4.5%	63 7.7%	202 24.6%	241 29.4%	245 29.8%	33 4.0%
Improving the quality of life in your community	32 3.9%	65 7.9%	208 25.3%	234 28.5%	253 30.8%	29 3.5%
Preparing the community's future leaders	27 3.3%	50 6.1%	165 20.1%	249 30.3%	296 36.1%	34 4.1%
Involving students in community service	57 6.9%	111 13.5%	228 27.8%	192 23.4%	172 21.0%	61 7.4%

Table 2
Ratings of Colleges and Universities

Characteristic	Don't Know/ No Answer	Fair/Poor	Good	Excellent/ Very Good
Giving students marketable skills	41 5.0%	80 9.7%	252 30.7%	448 54.6%
Exposing students to other cultures	56 6.8%	153 18.6%	279 34.0%	333 40.6%
Giving students problem-solving skills	56 6.8%	139 17.0%	308 37.5%	318 38.7%
Helping students to develop leadership skills	40 4.9%	138 16.8%	326 38.7%	317 38.6%
Giving people from lower-income backgrounds opportunities to succeed	71 8.6%	200 24.4%	248 30.2%	302 36.8%
Helping students to develop habits of good citizenship	49 6.0%	179 21.8%	346 42.1%	247 30.1%
Providing programs for students to serve the community	88 10.7%	197 24.0%	313 38.1%	223 27.2%

The survey assessed the public's awareness of community engagement programs with the following questions:

- Are you aware of any college or university's involvement in community activities such as college students tutoring kindergarten through high school students, involvement in local service agencies or projects, service in neighborhoods in homes for older adults or with persons with disabilities? Yes = 33%, no = 62.7%, don't know = 4%.
- For those who attended college: Were you engaged in community service or service learning as a college student? By service learning we mean taking a course that requires or provides students with the opportunity to participate in community service activities and receive college credit for assignments based on the service such as through journal writing, papers, or creative projects. Yes = 32.1%, no = 67.3%, and don't know = .5%.

- 3For those who never attended college: Are you familiar with any community service or service learning programs offered by colleges and universities in Indiana? [Definition of service learning was given.] Yes = 22.1%, no = 71.1%, and don't know = 6.3%.
- Respondents were asked, "Do you believe that undergraduate college education would be improved if community service was a part of every student's course of study?" The vast majority (78.3%) responded "yes," 13.4% indicated "no," and 7.9% provided no answer.

Discussion

Boyer (1994, 1996) challenged higher education to find a new purpose. That challenge has resulted in numerous discussions and analyses (Bringle, Games, and Malloy 1999a; Colby et al. 2003; Eggerton 1994; Harkavy and Puckett 1994; Langseth and Plater 2004; London 2003; O'Meara and Rice 2005; Rice 1996) with mixed assessments of the extent to which actions have produced sustainable programs and institutional changes with significant results (Brukardt et al. 2004; O'Meara 2005). This uneven success is evident for institutions, faculty, and students. By the end of 2007, over one thousand college and university presidents had endorsed the importance of community service by joining Campus Compact (Campus Compact 2007), but only about five hundred had signed the Campus Compact Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University (Boyte and Hollander 1999; Brukardt et al. 2004). Two out of three of the 729 chief academic officers surveyed reported that during the past ten years their institutions had changed mission and planning documents, amended faculty evaluation criteria, provided incentive grants, or developed flexible workload programs as incentives for a broader definition of scholarly work (O'Meara 2005). Nevertheless, only about one-third of the chief academic officers observed increases in the scholarship of integration, student contact by faculty, and scholarship focused on civic engagement and professional service (O'Meara 2005).

Faculty members are increasingly adopting service learning as a pedagogy (Campus Compact 2007). Nevertheless, in spite of these gains in faculty participation, most faculty were largely unfamiliar with service learning as a pedagogy (Abes, Jackson, and Jones 2002), having not typically been a student in a service learning class nor learned about the pedagogy. Furthermore, in addition to lack of knowledge and concrete experience, many failed to see how service learning is relevant to their courses and they failed to appreciate how community service can enrich the learning of their students (Abes, Jackson, and Jones 2002).

Bringle and others (2006) asked 550 entering students about their interest in the following types of community service activities: occasional one-time projects (such as one Saturday per semester); short-term projects (such as three hours per week for less than ten weeks); immersion projects which are full-time volunteer experiences (such as service projects during spring break); international volunteer projects; enrolling in a service learning class (community service is part of course requirements); and

contracting with an instructor to do community service for additional academic credit. They found that 86.6% of respondents indicated that they would be "somewhat interested" or "very interested" in one-time service projects, followed by contracting with an instructor for a fourth credit (80.8%), paid community service (76.2%), short-term service projects (65.3%), international projects (54.9%), service learning classes (52.5%), and immersion projects (31.1%). These results show that students are interested in community service, but are divided in their interest in service learning.

Thus, higher education has responded to Boyer's (1994) call for change, but the results have fallen short of being transformational (Rice 2005) or even pervasive in depth and across the breadth of a campus (Eckel and Kezar 2003). At this time, the accumulating evidence that higher education has added to the traditional views of faculty work and evaluations of scholarship shows strong inertia for the old models and some progress with regard to teaching and learning; however, so far, very little sustained institutional development for integration, application, and infrastructure for civic engagement has yet occurred (O'Meara and Rice 2005). Nevertheless, the vision for transformation and the trajectory for change are promising and may yet produce important, long-lasting change (e.g., peer review of teaching; assessment of student outcomes; a more balanced view of faculty scholarship; assessment of community impact of civic engagement).

It is within this context that the current research offers its results on how the adult residents in a Midwestern state perceived the calls for change in higher education toward increased civic engagement. As higher education searches for internal resources, motives, incentives, rewards, and principles of good practice to inform the development of civic engagement and service learning, it must also consider the external forces that shape and can support this agenda. Government and community leaders, legislators, funders, and those in business and the nonprofit sector all have a stake in the development of civic engagement activities by higher education, as do residents of the immediate communities in which these activities most typically take place. The current research probed the general public's familiarity with and endorsement of civic engagement and service learning. Based on a sample of adults in Indiana, the results indicate that there was limited familiarity with campus programs focused on community service and, not surprisingly, correspondingly lower ratings of these programs, relative to ratings of performance on other educational goals. Nevertheless, three-quarters of respondents thought that this is a role that higher education should play (rating of three or higher on a five-point scale) and a similar percentage endorsed the use of community service as enriching an undergraduate student's educational experience.

Selingo (2003) found that respondents urged universities to focus less on economic development and research and more on the basics: general education, adult education, leadership and responsibility, and teacher training. According to that poll, and consistent with the current findings, the general public thinks that the most important role for a college is preparing students for a career. Although the percentages were not comparable (which could be due to when the survey was taken, the sampling procedures, or how the items were worded), career preparation was ranked highest in

both polls and higher than preparing future leaders and preparing students as citizens. Nevertheless, both studies converged on the conclusion that the majority of respondents endorsed higher education's role in meeting all of these goals.

How should higher education achieve the goals of career preparation, leadership, and citizenship? Although not addressed in that manner, and though not very familiar with community service programs and particularly academically-based community service (i.e., service learning), almost 80 percent of the sample endorsed community service as part of the curriculum as being good for college students. These findings raise an issue about community service, whether curricular or co-curricular, as an end in itself versus as a means to other ends. The general public may be endorsing community service for its own sake, rather than because they have an appreciation for how it can contribute to other educational goals. This would not be surprising since service learning has a rather new presence in higher education and most of the general population would not be familiar with how community service can contribute to learning outcomes. Thus, what may not be well understood both by the general public as well as most faculty in higher education (Abes, Jackson, and Jones 2002) is the role that curricular and co-curricular service can play in achieving educational goals that are endorsed by the public and educational goals that are central to the academy.

Sullivan (2005, 98) argues that education, and particularly professional education, has increasingly emphasized technical competence and knowledge expertise and has lost sight of the ethical and civic dimensions of professional life. He calls for the cultivation of "civic professionalism." From the perspective of civic professionalism, he argues:

> To become a professional is not only to join an occupation; it is to assume a civic identity. The core of professionalism is that by functioning as lawyer, engineer, doctor, accountant, architect, teacher, or nurse, an individual carries on a public understanding and affirms public values. With this identity comes a certain public status and authority ...but professionalism also means duties to the public. Chief among these duties is the demand that a professional work in such a way that the outcome of the work contributes to the public value for which the profession stands (2005, 23).

Interestingly, professors are professionals who unevenly reflect the call to have their professional activities manifest a strong public purpose in proximal ways (i.e., direct impact on communities rather than indirectly through their students' lives and careers, or their research) (Lindholm et al. 2005).

Can community service programs, either co-curricular or curricular, contribute to career preparation, leadership, and citizenship of students? Although developing good citizens is not a new role for higher education, and there are numerous pedagogical approaches for civic learning (e.g., classroom instruction on civics, moderated discussions of current events, student governance and community activities, and simulations (Levine 2003), the emergence of service learning has heightened attention to the nuances of the civic domain and social responsibility as a set of intentional

educational objectives to be addressed seriously in higher education (Astin and Sax 1998; Zlotkowski 1999). Even though, as Dionne and Drogosz (2003, 25) note, "citizenship cannot be reduced to service," service learning needs to be better understood as a means for teaching toward civic education objectives by both the general public and "professional" professors.

The case for service learning can be strengthened, then, by understanding its capacity to prepare students for civic-minded careers, develop leadership skills, and acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be active citizens. However, as Cunningham (2006) notes:

> One of [the] goals is the broad-based education of students to be effective engaged citizens in our democratic society, and to be good citizens in our increasingly international world. Civic learning outcomes from higher education are difficult to document, but they are one of the most important social and civic contributions our colleges and universities provide to our society (Cunningham 2006, 4).

There is evidence that well-designed service learning courses contribute to each of these educational goals (Astin and Sax 1998; Eyler and Giles 1999; Eyler et al. 2001; Vogelgesang and Astin 2000). For example, Vogelgesang and Astin (2005) conclude—after controlling for student characteristics when entering college, institutional characteristics, and student participation in general community service—that experiences with service learning resulted in more favorable outcomes on values and beliefs (e.g., commitment to activism, promoting racial understanding, self-efficacy), academic outcomes (e.g., critical thinking skills, writing skills, college GPA), and leadership (e.g., leadership abilities, leadership activities, interpersonal skills). Furthermore, service learning had a direct effect on students choosing a service-oriented career. Nevertheless, much more research is warranted to develop the case, triangulate the evidence, understand the boundary conditions, and specify the key curricular design elements that are responsible for each of these outcomes (Bringle 2003; Bringle and Hatcher 2000; Eyler and Giles 1999); then practitioners will command a better understanding for how to design both curricular (Zlotkowski 1999) and co-curricular (Weinberg 2004) programs that meet civically-enriched and civically-oriented educational goals. However, even if additional evidence were available, the case for the value of community service as a meaningful academic activity for promoting the development of well-prepared and active citizens needs to be better understood by internal and external audiences.

The community's lack of familiarity with community service programs in higher education, while not surprising, points to a critical issue as campuses enhance civic education programs: informing external stakeholders about the nature and benefits of civic engagement to the students (i.e., educational goals) and to communities (i.e., impact on social issues). Although institutions have developed the capacity to monitor traditional teaching as a process (e.g., student census, credit hours taught) and research activities (e.g., publications, external grants), they have yet to develop the capacity to monitor, inventory, and evaluate civic engagement activities (Driscoll 2008) with some

notable exceptions (e.g., extension services, continuing education programs). A compelling agenda for higher education, then, is to develop the capacity to measure student learning outcomes for key learning objectives (e.g., general education, major), including those associated with civic engagement.

If community leaders and residents do not have good information about civic engagement activities in their communities, then consistent with the results of this survey, these activities will be undervalued in spite of a bias on the part of the general public to value and recognize them as educationally meaningful and worthwhile. This presents a challenge to higher education to consider the ways in which civic engagement activities can not only be valued and honored internally (e.g., promotion and tenure), but also by external constituencies (London 2003). This need is consistent with the intention of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to develop, as part of restructuring its classification framework, an elective classification that recognizes those campuses which identify community engagement as a central part of their mission and work (Driscoll 2008). Similarly, the publication by The Princeton Review of "Colleges with a Conscience" (2005, 4) provides the public with information about campuses that have distinguished themselves by demonstrating that they have both an administration committed to social responsibility and a student body actively engaged in serving society. However, additional means will need to be developed to inform the general public and various special interest groups, including faculty, about the academic and community benefits of civic engagement across teaching, research, and service. London (2003) identifies increasing public understanding, public support, and public policy as an important piece of the agenda to strengthen the covenant between higher education and society. The best evidence is likely to be documenting both student learning and faculty scholarship through civic engagement.

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