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## **Embedding Engagement into the University: Lessons Learned From a Case Study of One Public Research University**

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In recent years, practitioners, faculty, administrators and students have called for institutions of higher education to undergo change in order to more fully embrace their civic roles. However, little research on this topic has examined how universities might undertake institutional change efforts for these purposes. In particular, scant attention has been given to understanding the rationale for developing university centers for community partnerships and how they might begin to stimulate public research universities to embed engagement into the institution. Therefore, the focus of this paper is the presentation of findings from a case study at one public research university. In particular, the early operation of a new center for community partnerships is explored to understand how perceptions of campus discourse and practice around community engagement were influenced in order to embed institutional engagement.

Given this focus, the findings from this case study offer some valuable insights for practice around embedding engagement within research universities: in particular three stages of early change are explored to improve our understanding of how a centralized center for community partnerships can serve this purpose.

Engaging in more substantive thinking about how to embed engagement within higher education institutions necessitates the consideration of how change occurs within large loosely coupled organizations. The organizational concept of boundary spanning (or bridging the gap between sub-units within a larger organization) can play a critical role in fostering horizontal integration that can cut across the many departmental and administrative units on a campus; and can propel a strong institutional vision of how engagement can be embedded within the organization.

Based upon the findings from my case study, in this paper I draw some conclusions as to how a center for community partnerships can uniquely affect early change processes in order to further embed institutional engagement. Three phases of change are offered; reflected in these phases are the influence of learning and cultural lenses as well as what has been learned in this particular study about sense-making. Three stages of change are proposed: conceptualizing, positioning, and implementing. These stages are described in the section that follows.

*Conceptualizing.* At the time that the idea of a new university initiative arose at the university in this study, the institution was clearly responding to external versus internal pressures for more substantive community involvement. Thus, as the campus was tasked with producing a response that would satisfy the community, it also had to consider how to make the internal change culturally viable. Executive leadership rationalized that internal change to promote community engagement would actually serve to strengthen

the quality of scholarly work undertaken on campus. This strategic framing of community engagement positioned it in a culturally relevant context. Subsequent consultation explored faculty perceptions of the institution's espoused theories and how community engagement was theoretically supported by the service aspect of the mission, but in practice received little tangible affirmation from the institution. During this initial stage of change the planners of the initiative worked to conceptualize an internal strategy that would resonate with faculty and benefit the institution's academic work. Faculty offered insight as to how the University's new efforts could support and influence individuals' behavior by affecting their theories-of-action (or the internal cognitive frameworks guiding their actions). This initial stage is marked by the gathering of information from key constituencies to conceptualize the initiative in such a way as to further a new vision and influence individuals' theories-in-use, within the broader academic context. Such actions emphasized institutional efforts to propel a vision of engagement that could influence how individuals' made sense of the relevancy of engagement within the institution.

*Positioning.* The center's subsequent creation as a centralized campus entity was indeed reflective of an identified need for change in the institution's community engagement efforts and a desire to influence theories-in-use about engagement. The center was also intended to coordinate the tracking and facilitation of campus-wide engagement. Such a large and diverse institution required that the center utilize its position to cast a wide net in order to connect with individuals from various constituent groups. These connections were critical mechanisms to help the center initially take in information and also promoted more intentional systems thinking about University engagement. From this platform greater community engagement was affirmed and made more visible.

In this stage, the center continued to reflect the need to establish its cultural relevance within the academic environment. Its initial programs served to help the center navigate the culture and thus bring greater academic legitimacy to its efforts. They also reached out to existing "believers" in and "doers" of community engagement. Establishing relationships with these individuals assisted in developing a foundation of knowledge of engagement in the community, especially among faculty. The fact that the center director was a faculty member helped communicate the academic focus of the center — thus working to promote the academic nature of the new office. Finally, much of the center's work during this period could be described as "affirming" existing engagement versus "stimulating" new engagement. However, the center's programs provided new university support for community-based work and thus produced clearer illustrations of the type of engagement the center sought to foster. Such effects illustrate how the center incorporated notions of institutional excellence, academic relevancy, and evidence of institutional prioritization to effect change in individuals' sense-making. Affecting the sense-making process helped spur greater systems thinking about engagement as a scholarly endeavor. Thus at the positioning stage, the center worked to implement programs that navigated the academic culture in order to legitimate its academic identity and promote systems thinking.

*Implementing.* Once the center was established, and had its initial programs underway, it entered what can be termed an *implementation* phase. In this phase, network development was a continuing area of focus. The center had started to position itself in the second phase in such a way as to develop programs with an academic focus. It also developed relations with engaged faculty and relied upon its growing knowledge of community partnership projects to inform its work. Changes in its programs reflected this learning.

In the implementation phase, which the center was theorized to be in at the conclusion of this study, affirming existing campus engagement is coupled with the development of greater institutional incentives for new participation. This encompasses the development of formal mechanisms to further spread knowledge of the center's work. Systems thinking requires the greater dissemination of knowledge and networks to build upon and learn from existing practices. Efforts such as the center's future plans to provide more faculty development and training are examples of ways in which they are working to strengthen the institution's vision of engagement.

Programs and formal mechanisms for internal communication (such as an advisory committee) also served as conduits for internal feedback, although a lack of focus on these mechanisms reveal that a dearth of such horizontal functions likely hindered information from coming in and going out of the center. At this point in the Center's evolution there was still a strong effort to articulate its academic identity. This model for change in the University attempts to draw upon the distinctive cultural characteristics that were evident in this case as well as learning processes that appeared to be at play in affecting individuals' sense-making to stimulate change. Through this synthesis of how change processes have unfolded at UCLA, a model of how early stages of change processes aimed at embedding civic engagement are stimulated by a center within the research university is offered. While these stages are presented for clarity in a fairly linear manner, it should be noted that the stages can be overlapping and are not meant to be exclusive. Rather each stage characterizes defining actions and processes, especially the important role that sense-making plays in spurring early change processes.

This case study suggests that initially, centralized centers for community partnerships may focus efforts on shaping and propelling a new campus vision of engagement. In so doing greater attention is given to connecting with faculty who are already engaged. Providing new institutional affirmation for those who often were previously engaged, but who received little or no campus support can be a powerful contribution of a centralized center. During these early periods of change greater investment thus appears to be made in reshaping the vision that institutional members have of engagement. In part, this is accomplished by influencing their sense-making processes: providing institutional resources to support and recognize faculty who are already engaged in the community illustrates the academic value of the work undertaken and the campus' increasing affirmation of this work — both of which can help foster a new vision of engagement by affecting individuals' sense-making. As a centralized center moves forward in its work a key challenge will be to leverage this groundwork to stimulate new involvement of previously unengaged faculty. Thus, developing new relationships with previously engaged faculty, although not without its challenges (such as some faculty concerns

about a center "taking credit" for their independent work); the greater challenge will likely be crossing new boundaries with those who were not "doers" or "believers" in community engagement efforts.

However, one tool that campuses may need to better utilize for these purposes is influencing individuals' sense-making processes. A potential strength of a centralized center for community partnerships is the opportunity to craft and propel a new institutional vision of engagement. In fact, the powerful role that sense-making plays in promoting change is also evidenced in other disciplinary literature. Gilliam and Bales (2004) note that strategic frame analysis is a means to understanding, anticipating, and responding to individuals' reactions to changes in public policy.

Benford and Snow (2000) explain that in recent years there has been a proliferation of literature on the role of framing processes in social movements. They explain that the influence of meaning-making is powerful because, "...it involves the generation of interpretive frames that not only differ from existing ones but that may also challenge them" (p. 614). Thus, the idea that sense-making or reframing is a powerful mechanism for change is not a new concept. However, within the field of higher education, a greater focus on sense-making in early change processes could, therefore, hold great promise for stimulating change not only in individual meaning-making, but change that will further embed engagement within these institutions.

Benford, R. & Snow, D. (2000). Framing Processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 611-639.

Gilliam, F. & Bales, S. (2004). Framing early childhood development: Strategic communications and public preferences. In N. Halfon, T. Rice, & M. Inkelas (Eds.), *Building state early childhood comprehensive systems series: No. 7*. Washington, DC: National Center for Infant and Early Childhood Health Policy.