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Embracing Civic Responsibility

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By Judith Ramaley

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How can a college integrate the needs of the community into its mission? University of Vermont
President Judith Ramaley shares her experience nurturing an "engaged university."

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Roles & Rewards.*

In the past year, there have been several calls for colleges and universities to take up their responsibilities
as members of society in order to model the civic virtues and to become instruments of a working
democracy. It is becoming clear that a genuine democracy is also a learning society and that good
citizenship requires the capacity to form a learning community with others.

As David Mathews argues in "Afterthoughts" in the Fall 1998 issue of *Kettering Review*, civic societies
become democratic when people have the ability to listen to all views, even those they dislike, and the
skill to work through conflicting approaches to solving a problem.

R. Dahl explains in his essay "Participation and the Problem of Civic Understanding" in Rights and the
Common Good that good citizens exhibit the qualities of moral reasoning. They are open-minded,
informed, and empathetic. They also have some understanding of the idea of the public good and a
sustained desire to work toward achieving the common good and a common ground. One of the best
places to practice these habits of mind and action is at a college or university. The qualities of good
citizenship are also the marks of a well-educated person.

For a college or university to accept its civic responsibilities and thus to play a role in generating a
renewal of democracy, we must consider three things: (1) the expectations we have of ourselves as
scholars and administrators; (2) our aspirations for our students; and (3) the nature and intentions of our
own institutional relationships with the broader society of which we seek to be an integral part. There are
many reasons why it is worth our while to undertake this reflective exercise.

- In the most recent University of California-Los Angeles Freshman Survey, more students than
  ever reported that they had participated in community service during high school, yet only about
  one-third of the students thought that their involvement would make a real difference. If we are to
  prepare civic-minded graduates, our students must acquire a sense of personal efficacy through
  seeing the consequences of their actions in community life.
- It has become clear that intellectual growth must be accompanied by the acquisition of social and
  emotional life skills in order for knowledge to have meaningful and constructive consequences,
  both in the lives of our students and in the communities of which they are a part. The demands of
  good citizenship and the demands of professional work life are very similar. Both require social
  and emotional maturity, the capacity to communicate well with others, and the ability to work
  with others towards a common purpose.
- Our institutions are being asked to address the complex social, economic, and cultural needs of
  our communities. Since most of our students learn best when given the opportunity to address
  problems that are meaningful to them, it makes sense to link their learning to issues of importance
  to the community. We can serve several goals at once by opening up the community as an

extended learning environment to encourage richer student learning.

- There is a growing expectation that colleges and universities will be good citizens in their communities and assist with economic and community development, and, in many instances, will become players in the revitalization of community and neighborhood life. University-community alliances and partnerships offer powerful learning opportunities for our students. Working together with faculty members, fellow students, and community members, our students can learn what it means to exercise their expertise in a professional, ethical, and responsible way.

During its examination of the future of this nation's state and land-grant institutions, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities reframed the classic triad of research, teaching, and service into a new framework of discovery, learning, and engagement. The reason for doing this was that the new terms describe shared activities, usually led by faculty, that have mutual consequences. The older terms tend to connote a one-way activity, generally conducted by experts. The new triad works well for describing the range of ways in which a college or university can incorporate good citizenship into its traditional work.

- Discovery can encompass community-based scholarship and the development of new knowledge through collaborations with community participants.
- Learning can be done in a way that links educational goals with the challenges of life. As John Dewey wrote, "Education is not preparation for life. Education is life itself." Common forms of engaged learning are service-learning and problem-based learning, both utilizing community issues as a starting point for accomplishing educational goals.
- Engagement can be achieved through community-university alliances and partnerships.

All three of these classic elements of campus life can be conducted in an "engaged mode." Whether it is discovery, learning, or engagement, the activity can be community-based. It can have shared goals that link the mission of a college or university with the goals of the community participants, as well as an agreed-upon definition of success that will be meaningful to the institution and the community. An engaged activity can also be supported by a pooling of resources across sectors of the campus as well as within the community. When these features are present, the resulting partnership is likely to be mutually beneficial and can build the capacity and competence of all parties.

Campus-Community Partnerships and Collaborations

In some cases, it is possible to blend all three forms of intellectual activity into a distinctive whole by combining professional education, research, and continuing professional development in a community site. Familiar examples of this are professional development schools in education, area health education centers in the health care professions, clinical practice sites in the social services, and university-industry partnerships. In Real Questions, Real Answers, John Clarke, a University of Vermont faculty member, describes such arrangements in campus-school partnerships. They "gather the energy and talent of a school faculty and focus it on specific and immediate problems that come up during a school reform effort. Conducted over several years, simultaneous team investigations or problems in teaching and learning constitute a method for linking school development to professional development and creating a professional community capable of sustaining long-term educational reform" Clarke writes.

There are a number of lessons to keep in mind when developing sustainable partnerships that can support discovery, learning, and engagement in community settings.

- Each partnership has unique elements shaped by the history, capacity, cultures, missions, expectations, and challenges faced by each participating group or organization. It is not easy to work across multiple organizational cultures and communication patterns.
- Any partnership must be based on the academic strengths and philosophy of the campus. An ideal partnership will match up institutional strengths with the assets and interests of the community.
- To ease the problem of multiple organizational cultures, the needs and capacities of the community must

define the approach that the university should take to forming a partnership, rather than the prerogatives and assumptions of higher education.

- There is no such thing as a universal "community" nor are there usually agreed-upon spokespersons for any community you choose to embrace. Often partnerships are fragmented by competing interests within the community, or on campus, or both.
- It takes time to understand what elements make up a particular community and how people experience their membership in the community.
- A good collaboration will evolve over time as a result of mutual learning. To be successful, a collaboration should be built on new patterns of information gathering, communication, and reflection that allow all parties, including students, to be participants in decision making and learning. This takes time and face-to-face interactions and an ability to learn from both conflict and mistakes as well as from successes.
- Some communities are being "partnered" to the point of exhaustion. It is often necessary to identify ways to help community organizations and smaller agencies create the capacity to be an effective partner.
- In some smaller communities, there may not be enough volunteer or not-for-profit activities to absorb the energies and interests of a college or university interested in full engagement. In such cases, the campus may need, in cooperation with its neighbors, to create the infrastructure necessary to sustain community-based work.
- The early rush of enthusiasm can be replaced by fatigue and burnout unless the collaboration begins early to identify and recruit additional talent, both on and off campus, for the project.
- It is important to establish a strong commitment to a "culture of evidence" tracing the progress of a project or a collaboration as it develops, not just at the end. The lessons learned from continuous evaluation can sustain the work and allow it to grow to a scale that can make a genuine difference in the community. Involve students in the integral part of the work of collaboration so that they learn skills of communication, problem solving, and shared learning early.

As many of us have discovered, it is not easy to work in a collaborative way, but the rewards are well worth the effort. No other model affords the same rich context for exercising the habits of good citizenship or for exposing our students to the realities of the complexity of a democratic way of life. It is also true, however, that unless the institution as a whole embraces the value as well as the validity of engagement as legitimate scholarly work and provides both moral support and concrete financial resources to sustain this work, engagement will remain individually defined by the interests of committed faculty and sporadic in nature. Such limited interventions cannot influence larger systems on a scale necessary to address significant community issues. They also will not offer the stimulation and scope necessary to involve a significant proportion of the student body in meaningful public work.

Barriers to Change

In many ways, the approaches that can promote an opening up of a campus to meaningful community involvement are no different from any other kind of campuswide change process. Anyone undertaking such a project must first equip himself or herself with a basic knowledge of what can initiate and then sustain change on your own campus. It is worth taking time to study the lessons learned from institutions that have designed and then undertaken an ambitious change agenda. Over the past year, the American Council on Education's Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation, for example, has published an occasional paper series outlining the lessons learned from the interaction of a number of institutions that were undertaking large-scale change.

Although my emphasis here will be on how to enlist the interests of a critical mass of faculty in activities that promote civic responsibility and sustain campus-community engagement, the framework will work equally well in thinking through the challenge of involving faculty in any mission-related work of an institution.

It has been my experience that 10 to 15 percent of the faculty or staff on campus already have a broad repertoire of interests and modes of scholarly and creative work consistent with the full realization of engagement (see Figure). These are the committed faculty.

Another 30 percent or so have a genuine interest in new ways of doing things but want clear signals that the institution and their colleagues will support them if they venture into new territory, in this case, literally, into the community. These are the cautious faculty.

A comparable number of faculty will take a "wait and see" attitude, certain that the new agenda or way of doing things

will disappear when the new president/ provost/dean moves on to greener pastures. These are the skeptics.

Finally, a small number (maybe 10 percent) of the faculty or staff are certain that the new agenda or the new modes are not legitimate faculty work. Some of this group fear that if they buy into this idea they will be unable to leave the institution and find a "better job" elsewhere. A small number of people simply believe that all change is bad. For purposes of strategy, all of these views can be lumped into the category of resistant faculty.

In encouraging faculty to consider participating in community-based scholarly work, teaching activities, and community partnerships, it is helpful to approach the task as though you were recruiting volunteers. Each group can be thought of as lying beyond an energy barrier. The boundary between the committed and the cautious is defined by a disciplinary barrier and discipline-based definitions of research and scholarship (line 3 on Figure). The border between the cautious and the skeptical is maintained by the lack of convincing evidence that the new ways or the new agenda works better than the old one. This is the culture of evidence barrier (line 2 on Figure). The resisters are protected by a fear of the risk of change itself, either to themselves or to their programs. This is depicted as a risk management barrier on the Figure. Different strategies are needed to overcome each barrier.

While beginning the process of scaling the various energy barriers to involvement in engaged work, it is important to take care of the needs of the already committed faculty and to make sure that they do not exhaust themselves in conducting the pilot work and initial programs that reflect an engaged agenda. This can be done by identifying and celebrating exemplary work and by providing rewards and support for the work. It is helpful to make sure that the definitions of faculty work incorporated into faculty promotion and tenure guidelines reflect sufficient breadth to recognize work that is community-based, interdisciplinary, and collaborative. Broadening the concepts of scholarly work will be extremely difficult unless a campus devises credible and effective ways to document and evaluate all forms of scholarship and a broad range of pedagogies.

To attract cautious faculty to forms of scholarship and teaching that support civic responsibility, it is important to find ways to bridge the traditional barriers of disciplinary values, modes of inquiry, and standards of scholarly legitimacy. This first requires understanding the importance of faculty culture and peer pressure and the habits and values of each discipline. To demonstrate that the institution places importance on the new work, concrete financial resources must be invested to create an infrastructure that supports and assesses the range of activities that are associated with engaged and community-based scholarly work. It also helps to recognize and reward the accomplishments of faculty who exemplify the full range of scholarly work that the institution values and wishes to support.

It is especially helpful to create or expand faculty development funds for proposals in areas of special interest such as curricular innovation, community-based research, interdisciplinary work, and responsiveness to community and regional needs. Funds for this investment can be obtained through grants and awards from federal agencies and private foundations or donors, through reallocation from less-productive projects or programs, and through the use of effective strategic budgeting. Above all, be consistent in recognizing and hiring faculty with a broad repertoire of interests.

The energy barrier between the skeptics and the cautious is maintained by a curious double standard of proof. Skeptics offer little or no evidence to support their approval of the status quo but hold advocates of change to a very high standard of proof indeed. The only strategies that seem to work in this situation are to engage in a continuous documentation of the consequences and impact of changes being introduced by the committed and the cautious, and to distribute resources on the basis of actual performance as well as contributions to the institutional mission. Many skeptics can be won over by rigorous documentation of the actual outcomes of the newer modes and a convincing demonstration of the effectiveness and impact of the work. A clear investment strategy that places resources behind the infrastructure that will support engagement can also be convincing.

To overcome the risk management barrier, it is helpful to connect the institution with other campuses that are undergoing similar changes. This will help demonstrate to those who are concerned about mobility or legitimacy that colleagues at other institutions consider the work valuable and worth doing. It is not necessary to enlist these resistant faculty in your efforts. All that is needed is to convince them that the work is legitimate for others to engage in. Meanwhile, reassure them that their work is valued and will be judged on its own merits, and show them that new standards of performance matched to the institutional mission still include traditional standards of scholarship and teaching, as well as standards and forms of documentation of faculty work that are new to the institution.

As change progresses, it is important to remember that it is not necessary to convince everyone in order to make substantive changes in the intellectual environment and values of an institution. In fact, there is some indication that a

turning point is reached when even one-third of the faculty have accepted engaged work as legitimate. By that time, a campus will have established a comprehensive environment that supports engagement. This environment will include the following:

- The possibility of reward or benefit for faculty and staff
- The creation of capacity at all levels of the organization to support and encourage change
- Structural openness to external influence through the research agenda and through the curriculum
- Educational planning and a strategic budgeting model that recognizes the value of active and responsible engagement that has a real community impact
- A willingness to adopt a shared agenda and mutually beneficial collaborations and partnerships with community members
- Rigorous evaluation of the quality and impact of community-based work

Taken together, these strategies should make it possible for an institution to become a good citizen and sustain meaningful relationships with the members of the communities it serves.

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