Reflections on the Public Purposes of Higher Education

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Higher education in this country has always been expected to serve the public good. Sometimes, the emphasis is on preparing educated citizens or practitioners in especially critical fields. At other times, the discussion is about how public service can deepen and enrich learning and prepare students to lead purposeful, responsible and creative lives. Sometimes, the focus is upon institutions themselves as major intellectual and cultural assets and how those resources can be tapped to build healthy communities.

To follow the progression of the engagement agenda, one need only examine the list of conferences on community service and engagement held at Wingspread over the past 20 years. (See page 8.) One of the early ones, held in 1988, studied “Community Service and America’s University Students.” By 1991, the topic had shifted to “Improving Student Learning and Teacher Preparation through Community Service.” Shortly thereafter, in 1993, Wingspread began to address the critical question of how to measure and evaluate work conducted in a community-based mode. By 1998, conferees were talking about “Campus/Community Partnerships” and “Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University.” Most recently, people gathered to bring the whole thing together into a “Federation for Engagement.”

In April 2006, a Community Partnership Summit was called to explore university-community partnerships and to mobilize a network of experienced community partners. Following this most recent gathering, the community participants have been working on peer mentoring and policy changes that will support collaboration. In following the series of conferences, a path becomes clear from individual experiences to engaged learning to engaged institutions to an engaged network.

Individual Experiences

Twenty years ago, some critics of higher education thought that college students were pampered and selfish people who cared more about their trips to the beach during spring break than they did about learning. Out of such concerns, Campus Compact was born. Its initial focus was to ensure that students were offered many opportunities to engage in community and volunteer service and to learn the habits of active citizenship and social responsibility. It did not take long for us to realize that these experiences could become powerful occasions for learning, if examined thoughtfully. This led to the next phase of engagement, the drawing of real-life experiences into the curriculum and their use in accomplishing clear educational goals.

Engaged Learning

In 2002, the Greater Expectations panel issued a report calling for a fresh approach to liberal education that would produce graduates prepared for life and work in the 21st century who are “intentional about the process of acquiring learning, empowered by the mastery of intellectual and practical skills, informed by knowledge from various disciplines and responsible for their actions and those of society” (Foreword by Andrea Leskes in Huber and Hutchings 2004, p. iv). Integrated learning requires an environment in which students can bring together their formal studies and their life experiences, explore and understand the
worldviews of different fields, learn how to examine a complex issue from multiple perspectives, and bridge the often daunting gaps between theory and practice, contemplation and action.

As the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching have expressed in their joint statement on Integrative Learning (Huber and Hutchings 2004, p. 13):

Integrative learning comes in many varieties: connecting skills and knowledge from multiple sources and experiences; applying theory to practice in various settings utilizing diverse and even contradictory points of view; and, understanding issues and positions contextually.

This approach changes the working relationships of the disciplines within an institution. There also must be a significant change in how campuses interact with the communities around them and with other knowledge-based organizations like K-12, social service agencies, business alliances and other collections of knowledgeable people who depend upon accurate and timely information to do their work. A college or university that creates an environment in which this form of integration may occur can be called truly engaged. In such a setting, the gaps can be closed that limit new working relationships between the professions and the liberal arts, general education and the in-depth study of the major, formal study and daily life, academic affairs and student affairs, research and teaching. Engagement is a natural and powerful vehicle for doing this.

In keeping with the theme of this issue, I argue that all of our students must integrate the insights and perspectives of the disciplines in order to foster their growing understanding of the world, and then they must apply that growing understanding to a series of issues of increasing complexity and importance, some of which, at least, are posed by the challenges of daily life in the communities around them. A good place to work out these connections and to design the continuum of experiences that can draw our students towards greater sophistication, purpose and capability is in the kinds of community-based learning or service-learning that we have been exploring across this nation since the idea first surfaced on the Wingspread agenda in the late 1980s. Engaged learning can make the creation and application of knowledge both visible and compelling and, at the same time, these experiences can be put to good use as students make the challenging transition from the more intentional and predictable environment of a college campus to the complex and ever-changing world beyond.

Engaged Institutions

At the beginning, engagement referred primarily to individual experiences – how students learn and how faculty choose the questions they wish to pursue in their research. As engagement spreads from individual experiences to shared experiences within departments and across disciplines, scholarship itself begins to change. The traditional distinctions of teaching, research and service begin to blur and research ceases to be the exclusive purview of faculty and their most advanced students. As engagement progresses, the distinctions articulated by Boyer (1990) – discovery, integration, application and the scholarship of teaching – cease to matter as much. Discovery and application can occur together in what Donald Stokes (1997) calls “Pasteur’s Quadrant,” where theoretical advances and practical utility combine. The scholarship of teaching blends with discovery, and all forms of scholarship can occur in a complex cycle of innovation that draws upon observation and experience to challenge theory and that applies theory to the understanding of experience (Rameley et al., 2005).

Universities and colleges are in an especially good position to be the foundation for work of this kind and can, by doing so, accomplish their public responsibilities as stewards of public resources and contributors to community development.

As the different forms of scholarly activity come together in an engagement model, we must find a new vocabulary to describe what we are doing. There is no need to retain the term service in our lexicon. Now research is often engaged research, and teaching and learning are becoming engaged learning. More commonly, engaged research takes place as an integration of theory and practice, with utility being one intended outcome and advancement of our fundamental knowledge being the other outcome. Active or hands-on learning can take
place in a campus setting or off campus. In either environment, learning has meaningful consequences that can influence the thinking and the lives of others. Recent research shows clearly that this kind of learning fosters deeper, more lasting insights and promotes greater confidence and competence (summarized in Bransford et al., 1999, Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

The engaged institution, which today takes many forms ranging from state and land-grant universities to regional comprehensive institutions, urban universities, community colleges and liberal arts colleges, is committed to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through 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 institution is responsive to (and respectful of) community-identified needs, opportunities and goals in ways that are appropriate to the campus’ mission and academic strengths.

An Engaged Network

The concept of engagement has spread into an international community. Explorations of the role of engagement in nation-building flourish from Europe to the Pacific Rim and Australia. The universities of the world are gathering themselves to help stabilize the world order, preserve the peace and act as stewards of an endangered environment while continuing to offer a pathway to opportunity and accomplishment for increasing numbers of the world’s people.

To see these movements in perspective, we need only read the “Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education,” prepared in 1999 or the “Talloires Declaration on the Civic Roles and Social Responsibilities of Higher Education,” prepared in 2005 by an international group of chancellors, presidents and rectors. The “Campus Compact Declaration” articulates the commitment of all sectors of post-secondary education in this country to the re-examination of our public purposes and our commitment to the democratic ideal. In the Talloires Declaration, an international community embraced the idea that higher education institutions exist to serve and strengthen the society of which we are a part. In a global community, that statement increasingly calls us to work together since we now share the world in new and powerful ways and the actions of one of us can alter the choices of the rest.

The Future

In my opinion, the experience of engagement will become the pathway to a fresh interpretation of the role of higher education in the 21st century. This conception rests on a rethinking of the core of the academy – namely, the nature of scholarship itself and our expectations for the undergraduate experience. The goal of engaged scholarship is not to define and serve the public good directly on behalf of society, but to create conditions for the public good to be interpreted and pursued in a collaborative mode with the community. In contemporary society, the exercise of citizenship requires constant learning and the thoughtful and ethical application of knowledge. By including our students in engaged scholarship, we introduce them to basic concepts and, at the same time, offer them a chance to explore the application and consequences of ideas in the company of mature scholars and practitioners. By drawing inspiration from our community connections, we enrich our own lives as scholars and teachers and together ensure that society will have the knowledge and insights that it will need to remain healthy and competitive in a changing world order. By joining with other engaged colleges and universities around the world, we enrich our own lives and help to shape the emerging world order.

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