

Prison Arts and Faculty Engagement: A Recipe for Improving College Teaching

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Abstract

Auburn University has made considerable strides in faculty engagement in outreach initiatives. This progress is in part due to a revision of the faculty handbook that includes outreach as one criterion by which faculty can be assessed for promotion and tenure. This article examines one art professor's experiences engaged in the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project (APAEP). Her experiences suggest that departmental support and college leadership, in addition to policy changes, significantly influence the ability of faculty to remain engaged. Moreover, this professor's experience suggests that faculty engagement in outreach initiatives positively influenced the learning experience for APAEP students and Auburn University students, as well as the faculty member's pursuit of promotion and tenure.

Introduction

The scholarship of engagement means 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 1990)

Traditionally, faculty at research institutions have been evaluated based on their prowess in three areas: teaching, research, and service. Ironically, the very mission of land-grant colleges and universities imposes an expectation on faculty to make their professional expertise available to external constituencies in order to better the quality of life within states and beyond, or they are expected to engage in outreach. However, outreach or faculty engagement at land-grant institutions has been articulated as service, with outreach scholarship lumped under the category of research. Herein lies one of the greatest challenges facing land-grant colleges and universities: How do you promote research while remaining true to the land-grant mission? After all, state land-grant colleges and universities are public investments in solutions for the citizenry.

The purpose of this article is to examine the institutional challenges to faculty engagement in outreach. We do so by briefly

discussing Auburn University's restructuring of the promotion and tenure process to include outreach as one criterion. We will also describe the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project, which operates as a vehicle to engage faculty meaningfully in an outreach initiative that has the potential to improve the quality of faculty teaching on the college campus and increase faculty publication productivity.

Challenges to Faculty Engagement

“Outreach” refers to the function of applying academic expertise to the direct benefit of external audiences in support of university and unit missions. (*Auburn University 1997, chapter 3*)

Given this definition of outreach and the tendency of institutional discussions to collapse outreach with service, faculty remain at a clear disadvantage. The hierarchy of the criteria by which faculty are judged places service at the bottom. Yet, if the mission of a land-grant institution is for faculty to engage in meaningful initiatives to benefit external constituencies and this role is collapsed with service, then outreach is evaluated in a way that places it at the bottom of the hierarchy. What a paradox!

Only recently have colleges and universities attempted to reconcile this paradox. Doing so requires that institutional policies evaluate outreach separately from service. In addition, faculty engaged in outreach initiatives must focus on the production of outreach scholarship if they are to be successful in the promotion and tenure process.

Taking the University Inside the Prison

The Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project (APAEP), formerly housed in the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities (CMDCAH), is now located in the Department of Psychology in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University. The guiding vision of the program is that education, specifically the arts and humanities, can transform inmates into students through creating a culture of learning and creativity. APAEP is founded on the premise that educational and creative opportunities are important to all people, and that the prison population is one of many communities in the state of Alabama that does not have regular and meaningful access to the arts and humanities. The program was organized in 2002 with support from the National Endowment for

the Arts. To date, the program has facilitated the involvement of more than thirty writers, artists, and scholars, who participate by teaching in the prison system as instructors and visiting artists in twelve facilities across the state. In addition to the classes offered every semester, APAEP works with sixteen facilities to develop their general reading libraries. APAEP recognizes that 95 percent of the prison population in the state of Alabama will eventually be released into the general population and that education is an essential component to being a contributing and viable member of society and may contribute to the reduction of recidivism rates. In fact, most studies over the past twenty years that examine the relationship of education to rates of incarceration suggest the existence of an inverse relationship. More specifically, the more education

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someone has, the less likely he or she is to recidivate (Wilson, Gallagher, and MacKenzie 2000; Chappell 2004; Steurer and Smith 2003).

The initial programming plan of APAEP was heavily influenced by the California Arts-in-Corrections program, facilitated by the William James Association. This program provided exceptional sustained experiences in the arts for men and women incarcerated in California.¹ APAEP structured its plan of operation similarly in order to maximize the learning experiences

of participants and the benefit that faculty would garner from the teaching experience.

APAEP teaching faculty is primarily made up of Auburn University professors and graduate students. Since APAEP is housed at Auburn University, the program’s priority is to involve Auburn University faculty and students as instructors for the courses because of the positive impact it has pedagogically and creatively on those who teach in the program. Students and faculty from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, Huntington College, and the University of Alabama have also worked with the program. APAEP actively engages artists and writers from the state to participate in teaching, as well as bringing in nationally recognized visiting writers.² Typically, APAEP students are not individuals who have had a strong educational background. High dropout rates, functional illiteracy, and poverty are common among populations that are incarcerated. What this means is that

students interact in the classroom environment differently. Over the five years that the program has been in existence, teacher evaluations of classes have shown that APAEP students bring to the class a different level of energy and expectations. Overwhelmingly, students in the prisons exhibit a high level of commitment to the class. Additionally, instructors repeatedly remark on the lack of timidity among students from the prisons when compared to the typical college freshman. The instructors have found that APAEP students are eager to ask questions and to engage in discussion.

APAEP instructors must have experience teaching in classrooms, as well as being accomplished in their given fields. From the university setting, tenure-track and tenured faculty, nontenure earning positions, and graduate students are eligible to serve as lead teachers. Undergraduate students are able to gain invaluable teaching experience by serving as undergraduate teaching assistants. When participants are untenured tenure-track faculty, APAEP works to help the instructor establish an evaluative protocol that will result in the dissemination of their work in the program. Given campus expectations for promotion and tenure, this is vital.

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Building on the research that shows that arts experiences generate the highest benefit when the experience is of high quality and over a sustained period of time, APAEP uses a class structure similar to that of a freshman college course. There are, of course, obvious differences in environment and expectations of students, but the foundation is similar.

Most courses are offered for twelve weeks, with two hours of class time each week.³ Since the fall of 2006, APAEP has been able to offer Continuing Education Units (C.E.U.) through Auburn University’s Office of Outreach Information and Program Certification, a unit housed in the Office of the Vice President for University Outreach. These credits are based on contact hours, so a twelve-week course, with two hours of class, is equivalent to twenty-four contact hours. The awarding of Continuing Education Units represents an endorsement by the university regarding the level of quality programming offered by APAEP, and the program’s efforts to reach a specific community in Alabama.⁴ To demonstrate the quality of the program, instructors submit syllabi to APAEP for

review. The challenge facing instructors is to design a course that is both challenging for students and considerate of students' varied levels of experience with the topic. State-level mandates preclude students' Internet access, and library facilities are not comparable to the resources available to the traditional Auburn University student. Consequently, all materials associated with course instruction must be provided at the expense of APAEP. Once instructors finalize the syllabus, it is cleared with the director of the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Program, then submitted to the Office of Outreach Information and Program Certification for review to determine the awarding of C.E.U.s.

Instructors have tremendous latitude to develop courses based on their areas of academic or artistic expertise because APAEP does not have a set curriculum. For example, one doctoral candidate in the Department of English taught two semesters of Southern Literature. This is a course offered to traditional Auburn University students. However, based on APAEP students' reactions to writers such as Harry Crews and Flannery O'Connor, the doctoral candidate has developed a Grit Lit class scheduled for spring 2008. Consequently, Auburn University's doctoral candidate had the opportunity to develop and will teach a specialized course based on individual expertise. This experience provided the doctoral candidate with a skill set that many newly minted PhD students don't have. Typically they are forced to teach already established courses catering to freshmen and sophomores. In the end, the doctoral candidate is more marketable because of APAEP. In fact, the only limitations that exist in terms of course planning and implementation are the costs associated with providing the learning materials to the APAEP students.

Teaching with APAEP also provides university professors, instructors, and graduate students with experiences that help them develop as teachers, scholars, and/or artists. Teaching within a prison presents certain challenges that help teachers develop their instructional skills. In any given APAEP class, students range in age from nineteen to seventy with reported educational completion rates ranging from third grade to postgraduate. Thus, the instructor must be prepared to deliver information in a way that meets the needs of all of those students, requiring preparation unlike that for a college class where the instructor can assume all students have achieved certain learning milestones. In addition to the challenges associated with such diverse learners, instructors must deal with the constant distractions associated with conducting class in a prison: horns blaring, officers coming in and out of the classroom

space, excessive heat or cold, and the resulting fallout when violence occurs in the prison. Consistently, correctional officers from various institutions comment on their appreciation for APAEP personnel because of a perception that APAEP students who take the classes do not cause trouble in the facility: “Art is saving them.” Concurrently, we believe that APAEP instructors find the experience beneficial to their teaching and scholarship.

Profile of Meaningful Faculty Engagement: The Journey of an Art Professor

In 2003, “Christine” joined Auburn University’s faculty as assistant professor of art and exhibitions and lectures coordinator. All faculty at Auburn University have their time allocated to the areas of teaching, research, outreach, or service. Christine’s initial appointment did not allocate any time under the category of outreach. When she began teaching in the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project in 2005 as a drawing teacher, the time was categorized as service. So for the past two years, Christine has taught basic and advanced-level drawing classes for men and women in

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Alabama maximum and minimum security prisons under the guise of service.

Teaching in APAEP significantly informs Christine’s teaching and scholarship. The experiences have caused her to critically reflect on the nature of teaching and scholarship as a result of the contrasting experiences of teaching in Alabama prisons while concurrently teaching foundations-level art majors at Auburn University. In particular, teaching in APAEP has inspired her to research drawing’s productive role, effectiveness, and value within the prison environment contrasted with how drawing is taught in a foundations-level art curriculum. Course objectives for her APAEP and Auburn University courses overlap in some areas and separate in others, and yet the similarities are surprising. Over the past two years, she has learned to merge the two populations of students into one meaningful collaborative learning group to the benefit of both groups.

Christine has learned to facilitate collaborative projects that enable the two groups to engage in dialogue with each other through a common ground of art. The course objectives overlap with a focus on the development of the following skills: problem solving, ideation, critical thinking, and working collaboratively, as well as developing observation and drawing skills. In the process of skills development and in the midst of the dialogue between students who live in a confined space in living conditions that are the antithesis of fostering a creative spirit and Auburn University students who oftentimes have access to tremendous resources, emancipation of the human spirit is possible for some while a commitment to social justice emerges in others.

Both groups of students report the positive impact the course structure has on learning. Not surprisingly, this has resulted in unusually and consistently high attendance on the part of the Auburn University and APAEP students. The course structure makes one group the audience of the other, thereby increasing motivation and providing all students with an opportunity for response to their work. APAEP students report a feeling of success from completing assignments that are equivalent to those assigned to Auburn University students and express appreciation for having their artwork displayed alongside the work of Auburn University students on the Auburn University campus.

Discussion

Christine's experience reflects two institutional practices that are necessary in order for any outreach initiative to significantly engage faculty. First, she was able to participate in APAEP only because of the support of her department head. The department head's permission was required because the assignment was in addition to Christine's departmental assignments. Second, Christine's on-campus courses underwent reconstruction in order to align assignments with APAEP courses. Without the overall support of the department and college, Christine would have been unable to develop the instructional approach that emerged from the contradictory environments in which she taught.

As Christine became eligible to apply for tenure and promotion to associate professor, her time allocation in the initial appointment letter became problematic. Fortunately for her, the new leadership in the College of Liberal Arts both recognized and supported outreach and civic engagement as a significant component of faculty activities. As a result, the outreach initiatives in which Christine

was engaged emerged as more significant than the category of service would imply. It was too late to redistribute the time allocations across the categories of teaching, research, service, and outreach. However, by recognizing the centrality of outreach and outreach scholarship, Christine was able to make a stronger case for promotion and tenure by emphasizing engagement through her work with APAEP. As she prepared her dossier for promotion and tenure, Christine's teaching activities were inextricably tied to and influenced by her outreach activities with APAEP. A significant portion of her documented scholarship resulted from her experiences teaching in the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Program.

Christine represents the myriad of ways that outreach can positively influence the traditional research and teaching responsibilities of faculty members. With support at the departmental and college level coupled with institutional policies establishing the role of outreach in the faculty review process, outreach has the potential to significantly impact the quality of teaching and scholarly productivity. In the end, the part of the land-grant mission whose focus is faculty expertise meeting societal needs is fulfilled.

Conclusion

The Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project is working to build a community of educators and creative activists that take the rich resources of Auburn University to a very specific community that lacks meaningful access to art and humanities experiences. The program now seeks to offer experiences benefiting not only class participants but also Auburn University itself in its goal to foster significant research involved in its outreach opportunities. All the individuals who teach with APAEP report that the experience has made them more informed and effective teachers, so that the experiences in Alabama prisons in turn benefit Auburn University students.

Endnotes

1. The prison arts programming of the William James Association was created by Eloise Smith. A pilot project was set up in 1977 in California. "Smith's vision was based simply on the value of providing all individuals with the most meaningful art experience possible; in her words, 'that mysterious life-enhancing process we call the arts, a realm in which patient application and vivid imagination so often produce magic.'" The success of this initial program led to the formation of Arts-in-Corrections, an administrative office

within the California Department of Correction (http://william-jamesassociation.org/prison_arts.html).

2. APAEP often collaborates with other programs in the area to bring in visiting writers to classes. In the past, through the Alabama Writers' Forum, Alabama Voices, and programming for the Alabama Center for the Book, APAEP has brought in at least one visiting writer to a writing class per semester. The program also works with poet Thomas Lux, who directs the Poetry at Tech series (at Georgia Institute of Technology) to make connections to give artists the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience, as well as benefit APAEP students.

3. Ultimately, each class schedule is determined by the schedule of APAEP instructors and the schedule and needs of each facility. Shift changes, mealtimes, and other programming influence the best time to offer courses. APAEP works to find the time at each facility that allows for a relatively quiet classroom space.

4. APAEP does not offer classes for college credit. Other programs do include this option, such as the program at Bedford Hills Women's Prison, which offers degrees in sociology.

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- Kyes Stevens is the founder and director of the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project. She has been teaching poetry in Alabama prisons since 2001 when she received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Department of Justice to teach at the Talladega Federal Prison. Stevens earned her MA and MFA in women's history and poetry from Sarah Lawrence College.

- Barb Bondy, CLA engaged scholar and associate professor of art and exhibitions and lectures coordinator, earned an MFA in fine art at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale; a BFA in fine art from the School of Visual Art at University of Windsor, Ontario; and a diploma in photography at Sheridan College, Ontario. Her studio practice focuses primarily on drawing and photography. She is an Alabama State Council on the Arts Fellowship recipient (2007) and has been awarded a Summer Studio Residency at Columbus State University, Columbus, Georgia, at the Corn Center for the Arts (2008) and at the Lillian E. Smith Center for the Creative Arts, Clayton, Georgia (2008). She has exhibited her work throughout the United States and Canada and teaches drawing for the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project (2005 to present).