Strengthening the Scholarship of Engagement in Higher Education

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Abstract

Should your college or university have a strategy for strengthening the scholarship of engagement? If so, what should it be? This question arises at a time when levels of civic engagement are inconsistent, when higher education and engaged scholarship have potential for addressing the situation, and when new civic engagement and community learning centers are arising on campuses and, in some cases, on a "road half traveled." This essay addresses this question and some of the issues it raises. It assumes that civic engagement is a core purpose of higher education, and that engaged scholarship can contribute to its answer. It places emphasis on student learning, faculty engagement, and institutional change. These are not the only elements of a larger strategy, but they are among the most important ones.

Perspectives on Engaged Scholarship

*C*ivic engagement is a process in which people join together and address issues of public concern. It can take many forms, such as organizing action groups, planning local programs, or developing community-based services. Civically engaged people may become active members of a neighborhood association, contact public officials, speak at public hearings, or participate in a protest demonstration. There is no single form that characterizes all approaches to practice: Whenever people are joining together and addressing issues of public concern, it is civic engagement *(Checkoway, Guarasci, & Levine, 2011; Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002)*.

As used in this essay, the term civic engagement refers to collective actions that people take to create changes in a community or society. The issues develop depending on the situation, as do the knowledge and skills needed to address them. Overall, however, civic engagement is public work that contributes to public life, not a narrow professional activity performed for its own sake by an individual who seeks to advance his or her own personal benefit *(Boyte, 2012).*

People are practicing the "scholarship of engagement" when they develop knowledge for a public purpose. The term origi-

nates in the work of Ernest Boyer *(1996, 1997)*, who distinguished among the scholarships of "discovery," pushing back the frontiers of knowledge; "integration" of knowledge across disciplines and fields; "application" of knowledge to address societal issues; and "teaching" to facilitate learning about the other scholarships. He later added the "scholarship of engagement" as "a means of connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems," a revision which itself has engendered substantial discussion *(Barker, 2004; Doberneck, Glass, & Schweitzer, 2010; Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2011a; Holland, Powell, Eng, & Drew, 2010)*.

Engaged scholarship is distinct from, but also relates to, positivism, constructivism, empiricism, and other epistemological forms. Each form can relate to engaged scholarship, just as engaged scholarship can influence the others. Understanding the relationships among scholarships requires recognition of multiple approaches, an ability to distinguish among them, and an attitude toward potential productive relationships among them *(Bechara & Van de Ven, 2007; Diener & Liese, 2009)*.

Engaged scholarship requires "engaged scholars" who think and act as members of society. Any scholar, whether a philosopher or a physicist, can be an engaged scholar when he or she develops knowledge with the well-being of society in mind rather than for its own sake. Such scholarship is about knowledge and action as a single process in which one informs the other in all of its stages *(Furco, 2002)*.

Many colleges and universities were established with a civic mission, such as "education for democracy" or "knowledge for society." Over time, however, these institutions have developed multiple purposes and, in so doing, de-emphasized their civic mission. They have not necessarily abandoned their civic purpose, but this purpose has become only one of many *(Axelroth & Dubb, 2010; Ehrlich, 2000; Kerr, 2001; National Task Force, 2012)*.

In recent years, however, a number of colleges and universities have established new centers for civic engagement and community learning. These centers can be found in small and large, private and public institutions, in liberal arts colleges and research universities nationwide—such as Duke, Northwestern, Princeton, Texas, Michigan State, and Tugaloo—and it has become possible to speak of "engaged institutions" as a formal classification *(Bjarnason & Coldstream, 2003; Bringle, Games, & Malloy, 1999; Colby, Beaumont,*

Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Peters, 2010; Sandmann, Thornton, & Jaeger, 2009; Van de Ven, 2007).

Each center has its own activities, but most of them focus on distinct practices, such as service-learning, community research, or campus-community partnerships. The pattern is one in which each center provides particular programs for particular constituencies, rather than comprehensive programs designed to engage all members of the institution. Some have grown to a scale that enables them to provide several services, but only a few strive to serve the whole institution *(Axelroth & Dubb, 2010).*

Strengthening Student Learning

How can colleges and universities prepare students for civic engagement in a democratic society? Democracy requires citizens who have competencies conducive to its practice which, in one or another version, include an ability to acquire knowledge of public issues, espouse civic values, think critically, communicate effectively, demonstrate cultural awareness, show responsibility toward society rather than primarily for themselves, and participate in some form of social action *(Musil, 2009).* Engagement might find its expression through various scholarships or particular activities, but the activities are not the competencies themselves *(Colby et al., 2003; Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2007).*

However, too many of today's college students do not develop civic competencies and, as a result, show unprecedented levels of political nonparticipation. They are less likely than earlier generations to vote in elections, contact public officials, work on political campaigns, join civic associations, or attend community meetings *(Bennett, 1997; Keeter et al., 2002; Mindich, 2005; Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, & Santos, 2011).* There are exceptional young people whose participation is increasing, such as youth of color, but their activities are unnoticed by social scientists who are not trained to study them *(Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006).*

What are some strategies for strengthening civic competencies of college or university students? One approach is to involve them in curricula and courses that develop civic competencies. Every college or university course can be designed to incorporate civic engagement, if the instructor views learning and teaching in this way. The issue is not whether the course originates in natural sciences, social sciences, literature, arts, or humanities, but whether it develops civic competencies, which is possible in all areas.

For example, imagine a first-generation Latina student who comes to a college because of its reputation for engaged scholarship. She takes a first-semester course in English composition that enables her to examine educational problems of Latina and Latino children, formulate opinions based on her findings, write a term paper, and make a presentation to public officials. She also takes an introductory physics course that captures her imagination through its emphasis on public policy. She selects physics as a major because of its relevance to environmental justice and technological gaps between rich and poor communities.

Another approach is to involve students in co-curricular activities that develop civic competencies. Co-curricular activities are limitless in number, and all of them have potential for civic development. For example, sororities can incorporate community initiatives in their activities, and soccer teams can involve young people in sports events and neighborhood projects. There is evidence that participation in co-curricular activities is positively related to academic achievement, feelings of efficacy, leadership development, and participation in political activities. If co-curricular activities were constructed in terms of their civic competencies, and more students and faculty members approached them in this way, the effects would be extraordinary *(Eccles & Barber, 1999)*.

For example, our physics major participates in co-curricular activities that complement her social commitments. She writes for the school newspaper and creates a Spanish-language column for students. She joins a student association that enables Latina and Latino students to advocate for educational programs and organize community campaigns. She reaches out to students in secondary schools, recruiting them to the institution because of its opportunities for civic leadership.

Despite its advantages, there are obstacles to strengthening student learning for civic engagement. Many students believe that college will benefit them chiefly by providing a job, increasing their earnings, and enhancing their personal prestige. They view college as preparation for entering a line of work rather than for gaining civic competencies. When students attend college for personal gain rather than public good, this weakens any expectations of "education for democracy."

Once on campus, students find few courses with "civic" in the title, faculty members do not view civic competencies as part of their professional roles, class discussions do not address public issues, and assignments do not challenge civic imaginations. There

are exceptional institutions that promote civic engagement, but they are not typical *(Harward, 2011; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011)*.

Studies show that unprecedented numbers of students are entering college with community service experience that they expect to continue, and enrolling in service-learning courses that involve them in direct service, such as helping the homeless. In contrast, fewer students come with an orientation toward civic engagement, such as organizing the homeless or joining an advocacy group for affordable housing. Indeed, student interest in public participation or political leadership is at an all-time low, and actually decreases during the college years *(Pryor et al., 2011)*.

Involving the Faculty

How can colleges and universities involve faculty members in the scholarship of engagement? Faculty members are ideally positioned for engaged scholarship. They have expertise in academic disciplines and professional fields, conduct research projects that address pressing issues, and teach students whose potential for civic engagement is limitless. They operate in anchor institutions whose decisions affect society, with access to resources that are the envy of the world.

However, today's faculty members are lacking in civic orientation. Although some of them might comment on civic disengagement as a subject of study, they seldom suggest that they themselves have a role in creating the problem or finding its solution. They might be productive researchers and master teachers, but they do not necessarily view their work as civic, although on a deeper level they might be yearning for civic expression that has been frustrated by their conditioning *(Macfarlane, 2005)*.

What are some strategies for involving faculty members in engaged scholarship? One strategy is to sensitize faculty members to teaching that develops civic competencies. For example, imagine a physics professor who teaches about the laws of physics. He lectures on velocity, and relates velocity to the dangers of automobile accidents. He explores theories through a mock crash, summarizes what is known about impacts at varying speeds, and facilitates sessions on why velocity is an important issue. He prepares the students to contact safety officials, make public presentations, design a community campaign, and, as a final assignment, write a paper on "physics for change." He and his colleagues believe that all physics courses have civic potential and that they, as scholars, should develop civic competencies.

Most faculty members want to engage their students, and if they were aware of pedagogies that combine substantive content and civic development, they might employ them. Currently, however, many institutions identify service-learning as a primary pedagogy for civic development and, in so doing, limit the involvement of faculty for whom this particular pedagogy is inappropriate. Each discipline has its own pedagogical culture, and overemphasis on service-learning—narrowly defined as a method of learning and teaching that combines classroom discussion with service in the neighboring community—runs the risk of disassociating faculty from teaching that is civic.

Furthermore, faculty members who select service-learning do not necessarily contribute to civic development. This pedagogy has benefits, but there is little evidence that it contributes to civic engagement, and reason to believe that service-learning might even dissuade students from civic engagement *(Perry & Katula, 2001)*.

A second strategy is to reconceive research as engaged scholarship. Boyer *(1996, 1997)* called for scholarship that recognizes the full range of scholarly activities rather than a narrow emphasis on scientific positivism. He argued that each stage of research—from defining the problem, to gathering information, to using the findings—can have civic potential, which also sparked substantial discussion *(Keshen, Moely, & Holly, 2010; Rice, 1996; Schweitzer, 2010a; Seifer, 2003; Simpson, 2000)*.

For example, another physics professor formulates a general theory of relativity, conducts research on particles and the properties of light, and applies the theory of relativity to the universe as a whole. He publishes scientific papers, teaches advanced students, and lectures to scientists who specialize in the topic. He also informs public officials about the dangers of atomic weapons, recommends that the nation begin uranium procurement, and signs a manifesto on the dangers of military involvement. He organizes workshops for laypersons on how to form policy groups and make persuasive presentations to public officials. He receives recognition for his scientific work and for his civic contributions as well.

A third strategy is to broaden the civic roles of faculty members. In these roles, which are potentially limitless, faculty members can create knowledge that contributes to civic development; teach and train people in areas of civic expertise; aggregate knowledge to make it more useful to civic agencies; disseminate knowledge to broad public and professional audiences; advocate on issues; and

become change agents in society. All of these roles are consistent with engaged scholarship *(Bringle, Hatcher, & Clayton, 2006)*.

However, faculty members are shaped by an academic culture that runs contrary to engaged scholarship. They are trained in graduate schools whose courses ignore civic content, and enter careers whose gatekeepers dissuade them from public work. They are socialized into a culture whose institutional structures shape their beliefs and cause behaviors that are consistent with their conditioning. They are led to believe that engaged scholarship is not central to their roles, that there are few rewards for this work, and that it might even jeopardize their careers in the university *(Bringle et al., 2006; Dienert & Liese, 2009; Driscoll & Sandmann, 1999; O'Meara, 2010, 2011a, 2011b)*.

The fourth strategy is to modify the reward structure. Faculty members should be rewarded for their work, including drawing upon their expertise for the benefit of society as an integral part of their role. Thus, any strategy of involving the faculty should have an appropriate reward structure, including promotion and tenure, time for professional priorities, salary increases, and other rewards. To do otherwise is dysfunctional for the individual and for the institution.

The present reward structure, however, places emphasis on research for its own sake and for its publication in scholarly journals, but not for its civic outcomes. Faculty members are expected to focus on problems defined by their departments and disciplines, and they perceive that engaged scholarship has few rewards. These perceptions are reinforced by promotion and tenure committees, professional peers, disciplinary associations, and editors of journals. Faculty members respond to the rewards they receive, and these rewards do not normally recognize civic performance *(Bringle et al., 2006; Lynton, 1995a, 1995b; O'Meara, 2010)*.

Researchers are now calling for new approaches to promotion and tenure, including rewarding multiple forms of scholarship *(Ellison & Eatman, 2008; O'Meara, 2010; O'Meara and Rice, 2005)*; reframing incentives and rewards *(O'Meara & Rice, 2005; Martinez-Brawley, 2003)*; preparing future faculty; reconsidering the roles of academic administrators *(Langseth, Plater, & Dillon, 2004)*; making the case for engaged scholarship *(Foster, 2010; Lynton, 1995a, 1995b)*; moving faculty culture from private to public *(Kecskes, 2006)*; and creating institutional change *(Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2011a, 2011b)*.

The present reward structure is based on a belief that faculty members will be more productive when they focus on research and teaching that are "normal" rather than "civic." However, there is no empirical evidence to substantiate this belief. On the contrary, studies show that faculty members who consult with community agencies have more funded research projects, more publications in peer-reviewed journals, and higher ratings in student evaluations of their teaching than those who do not *(Doberneck, Glass, & Schweitzer, 2010; Patton & Marver, 1979).*

Modifying the reward structure would require a systematic strategy for reintegration of research and teaching for a larger civic purpose. It would provide guidelines for preparation of promotion packages, documentation and assessment of activities, and broadening the criteria for evaluation of excellence in scholarship *(Ahmed & Palermo, 2010; Bringle et al., 2006; Driscoll & Lynton, 1999; Ellison & Eatman, 2008; Lynton 1995a; Moore & Ward, 2008).*

The reward structure needs modification, but the limitations of the present structure should not keep faculty from practicing engaged scholarship. Faculty members do many things for which there are few rewards, and there are substantial rewards for work that lies outside present structures. The reward structure is an important instrument, but faculty should be expected to play civic roles with or without its support.

Building Institutional Capacity

How can colleges and universities build institutional capacity for the scholarship of engagement? Engaged scholarship is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that requires institutional capacity, including individual leaders, leadership cadres, and an institutional unit that enables people to exchange information, learn from one another, and build mutual support. There is no single organizational location for engaged scholarship that fits all institutions; the key is to fit its location to the particular situation. This is especially important in institutions that operate as a loose confederation of distinct villages rather than a comprehensive whole, and whose members are sensitive to the power or prestige of the unit with which they identify *(Alpert, 1985; Bringle, Hatcher, & Holland, 2007; Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2011a; Harkavy, Benson, & Puckett, 2007).*

Engaged scholarship requires mechanisms that facilitate collaboration across academic units, and between campus and community partners. These might include contact and entry points for

potential users and procedures to refer users to resources; interdisciplinary arrangements that increase interaction among knowledge producers in order to foster interdisciplinarity on issues transcending the expertise of each one; brokering mechanisms that handle administrative arrangements and contractual details; and dissemination programs that reach potential audiences in language understandable to them *(Walshok, 1995, 1999).*

Leadership is a core component for building capacity, but who are the leaders? For example, the university president has a formal position with a platform on which to campaign and an appearance of greater power than is usually available in a decentralized institution. Vice presidents can formulate policies and provide funding support; however, they also depend on deans and department heads who implement initiatives but who also are more absorbed in boosting their own academic units rather than the entire institution.

Faculty leaders can strengthen support for initiatives, but because they often derive their influence from outside the institution, they might or might not have time for this work. Student leaders have been responsible for many changes in higher education, but today's students often are unaware of their potential power.

Imagine a new center for engaged scholarship with responsibility for involving students in curricular and co-curricular activities, faculty in research and teaching, and institutional structures that reach the whole campus. It offers a vibrant center for discussion of epistemological, methodological, pedagogical, and institutional issues that arise in scholarship of this type.

Imagine the benefits of this center for a physics scholar who wants to strengthen her scholarship. It provides opportunities to exchange information and ideas, learn from others, and build mutual support for her work. Through the center, she learns about best practices in physics and other fields, especially those with which she is unfamiliar. Here she attends a series of distinguished lectures that raise questions at the highest level of discourse; seminars on how to publish papers on subjects outside her normal areas of expertise; workshops on research and teaching methods that integrate civic content into class discussions. She learns about Scientists for Social Responsibility, an association that supports scholars like her, and Physics Teachers for Social Justice, which provides information about the work of her peers.

Toward a Strategy?

Should your college or university have a strategy for strengthening the scholarship of engagement? If so, what should it be? Civic engagement is a process in which people participate in public work; engaged scholarship is an approach to knowledge development that has a public purpose. Colleges and universities are positioned for work of this type, and the new centers for civic engagement and community learning might play a role as part of an overall institutional strategy.

Such a strategy would include efforts to strengthen student learning, involve faculty members, build institutional capacity, and face institutional obstacles. Indeed, civic renewal is especially difficult when students enroll with uneven levels of interest in public participation caused by forces in society, when faculty members are conditioned to perceive that engaged scholarship is not central to their work, or when institutions have developed so that civic purposes compete with other powerful purposes. However, obstacles to change are a normal part of the change process, and the issue is not that there are obstacles to change, but rather that there are efforts to address them.

It is possible to imagine institutions whose students take courses with a strong civic purpose in a campus culture rich in dialogue about pressing problems in society. It is possible for faculty members to employ engaged scholarship in accordance with the highest standards of their disciplines. It also is possible to imagine a unit with central responsibility for civic renewal of the whole institution.

New centers for civic engagement and community learning are arising on campus, and might or might not take up this torch. Currently, however, most of them are absorbed with "service-learning," "community research," "campus-community partnerships," or other particular programs that reflect their stage of development but also limit their potential, in the absence of overall institutional strategy to the contrary.

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