Building a Higher Education Network for Community Engagement

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Abstract

The 2006 Wingspread Conference on Engagement in Higher Education convened twenty-eight formal and informal affiliate organizations, all of which focus on advancing the scholarship and impact of higher education's engagement with communities, to explore acting strategically as a "guild" with common interests and diverse capacities for the purpose of developing a blueprint for action to advance the engagement movement. One of the outcomes was a virtual confederation named HENCE (Higher Education Network for Community Engagement) that recognizes engagement as a core element of higher education's civic role. HENCE seeks to consolidate and advance research, practice, policy, and advocacy for engagement. Leaders can join national work groups, advance action plans, coordinate events, access data, and find new community engagement models.

Convening for Collaboration

Collaborative efforts in community engagement advanced to a new level on February 24, 2006, in Racine, Wisconsin. The aptly named Wingspread Conference on Engagement in Higher Education took flight virtually and in actuality as a group of academics, professionals, and publishing and association leaders signed a declaration pledging their support and enthusiasm to the creation of a virtual federation of organizations called HENCE (Higher Education Network for Community Engagement). National academic and organizational leaders from twenty-eight organizations gathered at the Wingspread Conference facility, representing entities that play a crucial role in catalyzing regional and national efforts to advance institutional and individual initiatives in higher education community engagement.

In a 1999 Wingspread Declaration on Civic Engagement *(Boyte and Hollander)*, a group of college and university presidents resolved to express civic engagement as a core mission within their institutions. Reflecting the commitments set forth in that document, this new Wingspread gathering met to confirm the best engagement concepts that have evolved thus far and advance them and other needed initiatives in a blueprint for systemic and transformational

change. Specifically, the goal was to move toward a practical and achievable set of strategies to propel the engagement movement to a higher level. Eugene Rice said, "Civic engagement has soared to rhetorical heights. The statements are impressive. But there are extraordinary things happening. Now is the time to bring together rhetoric, leadership, and hard work" *(Sandmann and Weerts 2006)*[1]. This 2006 Wingspread conference was such a bringing together across a broad spectrum of institutional types and practices to yield both synergy and expertise to help advance a proactive national agenda. The purpose of this article is to describe and disseminate the essential elements of the 2006 Wingspread conference as well as provide a descriptive summary of the discussion and the implications.

Context for Change—Wingspread 2006

The evolving national movement toward authentic engagement between higher education institutions and the communities they serve must acknowledge the foundation work done in the last two decades. Ernest Boyer *(1990, 1996)* issued his famous call for a larger purpose for higher education, and other scholars followed with their similar calls, theories, and models *(such as Duderstadt 2000; Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff 1997; Lynton 1995; Newman and Scurry 2001)*. The Kellogg Commission report *Returning to Our Roots (1999)* and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place (2002)* were just two of many reports that galvanized a national flurry of introspection, reflection, creative thinking, and conferences and communications about the role of engaged scholarship and community involvement. The Johnson Foundation, with its long-standing commitment to educational quality and innovation, has been a leading sponsor of improvement in higher education–community collaborations. More than a dozen Johnson Foundation–funded Wingspread Conferences over sixteen years have generated reports, calls to action, strategies for quality improvement, and documentation of principles of best practice that continue to be key resources to guide engagement efforts.

This concept of engagement and the number of engagement initiatives have grown rapidly. Such initiatives are as varied as the diverse institutional types and distinctive community contexts in which they operate. All types of colleges and universities now work intentionally to create campus-community partnerships that involve community-based learning, community-based research and evaluation, professional development training and continuing

education, public policy development, and other strategies for the mutual benefit of the institution and the community through joint action. More than half of America's community colleges and more than a third of all other colleges and universities are now engaging faculty and students in community partnership activities as a valued part of research and teaching activities *(Sandmann, Holland, and Bruns, in press)*. Recently, several important systems for classifying and accrediting higher education have added measures of community engagement, thus affirming its importance as a contemporary academic priority.

As engagement initiatives have grown and the movement has advanced, many national and regional affiliate organizations have been formed to facilitate practice and promote dissemination of ideas. Some organizations grow out of a full or partial focus on a particular engagement method (service-learning, community partnerships, continuing education, extension, community-based research, etc.). Others are organized around an institutional type (land grant, community college, urban university, etc.). Some organizations focus on policy and practice issues at the presidential leadership level; others attract scholars/researchers or focus on specific subject areas. Some organizations hold their own annual conferences, publish their own journals or newsletters, commission task forces on special issues, or have created formal membership structures *(Sandmann, Holland, and Bruns, in press)*.

All of these organizations seek to provide opportunities and information that will help develop the field of campus-community engagement. However, it became increasingly clear that these organizations often operated so independently of each other that there was little or no collaboration on critical issues or sharing of expertise or limited resources. Evidence of duplication, overlap, and areas of unaddressed need has grown in recent years, creating confusion, wasted effort, and missed opportunities. This condition led several engagement organization leaders to explore the need for greater coordination and to partner with Wingspread to create the opportunity to design this next important phase of engagement's maturation.

Building a Federation

Discovering the building blocks to advance the engagement agenda requires an answer to a question that articulates known challenges: How do organizations develop unified themes and actions around engagement while respecting the diversity of organizational

missions and unique approaches to the work? A multipart strategy was used. A first goal of the conference was to get beyond the stumbling blocks of language, and instead focus on the core engagement themes represented by the diverse group of attendees in order to influence a larger national agenda. Therefore, the words "civic engagement" were used throughout as a placeholder to represent the entire range of activities associated with higher education engagement. The core engagement themes of the conference were identified by a pre-Wingspread survey of the attending organizations.

The conference was designed to frame issues, ascertain progress made, and map out areas for furthering the engagement agenda. This included laying groundwork for more in-depth analysis and more concrete plans for action. The conference itself was guided by four key concepts: purpose, power, process, and product. A unified *purpose* is key to successful collaborations. Advancing the engagement agenda required consensus in ideas such as: What can be achieved through interorganizational collaboration? What mechanisms are necessary to facilitate this collaboration? What will success look like? The *power* of collective actions was affirmed and used to mobilize and mature the growing movement and to deepen commitment to the greater good. Building a federation for action meant enriching, extending, and maximizing a promise to advance the work through collaboration. Therefore, the motto "bold but achievable" guided the *process* of the work of establishing mutual interests and maintaining standards of quality. Finally, the Wingspread Conference's primary *product* was a blueprint for action, including strategic and substantive goals. The future product was to reflect a "transformative sense of change," not merely an add-on to a growing list of institutional expectations.

A National Agenda: Key Issues

What are the primary mission and strategies organizations use to achieve engagement goals? What are the greatest needs those goals will fulfill? These questions were asked of the organizational representatives prior to the conference, and their survey responses launched the Wingspread discussion and served as starting points for the action agenda. Four broad themes emerged: assessment and documentation, policy and advocacy, faculty engaged scholarship, and professional development.

Assessment and documentation: How do we capture the impact of engagement? How do we communicate it to others? Documenting the quality and impact of engagement is crucial to generating support and ensuring quality. The survey revealed that twenty-four of the organizations are involved in assessing and documenting engagement, including measuring institutional impact, faculty scholarship, and student impact on engagement. Central to assessment is measuring the impact on the communities themselves. Barbara Holland emphasized the need for common data collection, including local, state, and national data. Holland said that data are especially important to promote change within institutions and to leverage campus reputations.

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Conference participants responded by addressing two issues: quality of the assessment tools and focus of the assessment. Attendees discussed developing a rubric to guide the development of survey instruments that measure impacts. David Cox highlighted the importance of making a correct distinction between tracking and assessment and moving from the language of "assessment" to "change." Amy Driscoll pointed out that "if you design assessment with purpose in mind, you design a different assessment than just a summary of 'what is happening.' Accreditation wants to know what is being done with it."

Policy and advocacy: The survey indicated that fourteen of the organizations are involved with advocacy and public policy formation, but both good news and bad news surround this finding. Elizabeth Hollander stated that the bad news is that higher education suffers in terms of public perception and has gone from being seen as a public good to a private right. The good news is that loss of local and state funding has shaken the higher education community out of its complacency.

A key step might be to start small by identifying who has undertaken advocacy and then convene dialogues about ways to build a cohesive policy agenda around engagement. A grassroots effort at the local level is a logical first step for advocacy. Hollander urged participants to "think boldly" about how students might serve as part of this advocacy effort.

Faculty engaged scholarship: The survey revealed that 17 organizations were involved in research and engaged scholarship, and 27 of the 28 were involved in promoting organization change or the institutionalization of engagement. The following models have been developed:

1. faculty development models (18)

2. engagement/service-learning infrastructure models (17)

3. faculty role/reward models (13)

4. partnership management models (10)

Hiram Fitzgerald led this discussion and stated he found that transforming middle management was a necessary first step: changing deans and directors, then anchoring the engagement projects in scholarship, which is what the faculty understand best. He referenced *Points of Distinction (Michigan State University 1996)*, written as a tool to advise chairpersons about a broader interpretation of scholarship and to move and motivate change in the solidly rooted arena of tenure and promotion. A tool called Outreach and Engagement Measurement Instrument, developed at MSU in 2004, allows faculty to enter their engaged scholarship directly into a university-wide database. Fitzgerald noted that ongoing peer review throughout the research design, data collection, and analysis phases occurs when true collaboration with stakeholders exists. At large research institutions, aligning engagement in a way that helps faculty earn promotion and tenure remains an issue.

Marv Van Kekerix spoke of the importance of extending the term *peers* to embrace individuals who are not experts in the field, but he also observed, "We have great difficulty with this. It is critical to get feedback from the community." James Applegate pointed out that this "shift" in the definition of *peers* constitutes radical change for faculty. "Peer review is very private in academic circles, but it is very public for this type of engagement work. Peer review that becomes public puts faculty in a more vulnerable position."

Professional development: Survey responses regarding professional development primarily showed support for faculty involvement, with twenty-three organizations offering training or resources. Only eleven provided training resources for their community partners. Philip Nyden stated that faculty who take on engaged scholarship face challenges because traditional scholars

believe that community-based scholarship may taint research results. The traditional view holds that critique of scholarship is more likely to be reliable and value-neutral if conducted by faculty rather than colleagues outside the university.

However, for "making the walls of higher education institutions more permeable" *(Dwight Giles)*, Nyden suggested Loyola University's approach of "adding chairs at the research table" or expanding the teams to include faculty, graduate students, staff, and community partners. Nyden stated that this plan moves away from a model of isolation and can result in what he described as "messy research, neat results."

Creating the Blueprint: Framing Issues and Devising Action Strategies

To further the tasks initiated at the Wingspread conference, a separate work group was created to delve into each of the four key themes. Two questions guide the debate:

1. What dimensions of this issue can we move forward?

2. What are some strategic mechanisms that can be employed to accomplish this?

Although the groups' work at the conference was devoted largely to framing their issues, each group was also charged with translating findings into practical action strategies. Further questions to serve as guidelines included: Who should be involved? What is the timeline for these activities? What does success look like? and What structure supports this activity?

Assessment and documentation: *Framing the issue.* This group focused on similarities of data being collected by diverse organizations. Groups must understand processes and protocols of data collection and establish common measurement tools. The first step in achieving this goal will be reviewing logic models and accreditation guidelines. Andrew Furco led this group, and he emphasized that assessment and documentation must be useful to both internal and external audiences. He suggested that organizations share information on Web sites and create definitions of common measures.

Action plan. The group will contact academic journals about sponsoring an issue devoted to assessment and documentation. This issue could feature institutional stories and engagement impacts from a wide range of stakeholders. The major work will

be creating definitions of common measures and creating quality and practical assessment tools; specifically, this means developing a rubric to guide the development of standard survey instruments that measure impact, institutionalization, and program outcomes in ways that are useful to internal and external audiences.

Policy and advocacy: *Framing the issue.* A key step is to build a cohesive policy agenda around community partnerships and engagement. A grassroots effort at the local level is a logical first step for advocacy, followed by mapping current engagement activities by state and federal legislative districts. This agenda would not focus on what institutions could provide, but on the concerns that are important to government officials. "It has to be about them, not about us" *(Applegate)*. Conducting a national policy audit to identify barriers to institutions becoming more engaged was proposed. Such an audit might answer this question: "What does a policy framework look like in a state that supports engagement?" Applegate stated that powerful advocacy comes from students and their compelling engagement stories. "Data are good, good stories are better."

Action plan. The group asked, "What federal programs do we have now? How do we share strategies for meeting with these people?" They proposed that every federal department should eventually have a community partnership center based on the Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) model. This would support funding lines and new policies to encourage engagement. Discovering who might serve as "champions" in Washington and then working with lobbyists to meet with them might open

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discussions on programs currently at risk for funding loss. The group said that a necessary first step is to compile a list of federal programs supportive of engagement and their beneficiaries and champions. Additionally, the group discussed the importance of discovering regional approaches to engagement, concluding that stories of such approaches should be told in journals and at conferences, perhaps in specialized editions or conference sessions.

Faculty engaged scholarship: *Framing the issue.* Sustainability of engagement relies on embedding it in the core of academic

values. Group leader Giles cautioned that the main concern with embedding engagement in the core of academic values is not about promotion and tenure but about quality. He advised examining engagement as it contributes to student learning and community development, especially in light of the diminishing role of traditional institutions and the growing number of knowledge-based organizations. It will be important to forge alliances with these newer kinds of institutions as part of an engagement agenda. Organizational and cultural values are quite diverse across institutional types and, in engagement, there must be a voice for community as well, given its role as a cogenerator of knowledge and learning.

Action plan. The group proposed that the network act as a clearinghouse to provide information about promising practices related to faculty engaged scholarship. This might include successful campus models and faculty cases. It would also provide links to the Carnegie classification system, develop criteria for national review boards, and disseminate information about grant-making agencies that fund engagement projects. The group further outlined plans for a successful campus models initiative that would feature vignettes describing the context, culture, and challenges associated with university-community partnerships. This initiative would solicit models from networks of organizations, develop a protocol of themes and keywords, select campuses and vignettes, and disseminate information.

Professional development: *Framing the issue.* This group recognized that community engagement requires new methods and strategies that affect faculty work, institutional leadership, and student experiences. Engagement exists on a foundation of campus-community partnerships that seek to generate mutual benefit through knowledge exchange. This requires training and skill building for campus and community. Group leader Stephen Percy stated that it is essential to create entry points and helpful resources for faculty to pursue engagement-related scholarship. The group suggested a plan to develop career guides for the engaged scholar and a companion piece to help communities work more successfully with universities.

Action plan. Five guides were suggested to serve as professional development to build capacity for engagement: academic, community, institutional, student (particularly graduate students), and international collaborations, with editor and author teams for

each guide. Another proposal was the creation and development of an "academy of engaged scholars" to deepen knowledge, share methods, and improve practices. A training academy for mid- and executive-level higher education administrators was also suggested. Potential academy members would include those from service-learning organizations, extension, partnership and membership organizations, and higher education–based centers. Rachel Vaughn reminded the group that the title "institutes of engaged scholarship" might be off-putting to constituencies who are not faculty.

Connecting with Levers of Change

Several organization representatives offered their perspectives on how to accomplish the action plans. Nancy Belck, representing the Coalition for Urban and Metropolitan Universities, urged a national and a local perspective: "Think globally and act locally." Engagement leaders should help build the capacity to ask questions that matter to society, apply multidisciplinary approaches to address societal problems, and commit to entering long-term relationships with communities. Amy Cohen from the Corporation for National and Community Service spoke about building coalitions to support engagement and observed that colleges and universities must be able to demonstrate their unique contributions to their communities to earn support for engagement endeavors. American Association of Community Colleges' Gail Robinson discussed dissemination efforts and the urgent need to collect information about engagement activities and outcomes. She suggested that community is not a *place* to be defined, but a *climate* to be created. Elizabeth Hollander from Campus Compact pointed out that boards of trustees at private institutions should be cultivated to support engagement. Another speaker suggested that campus fund-raising efforts could include money for engagement from local communities well as sponsorship from corporate America.

Two other presenters discussed how changes envisioned by the work groups might move forward in the action agenda. Amy Driscoll talked about the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's optional community engagement classification that evaluates achievement in attaining the following goals:

- affirming and documenting good engagement work
- encouraging inquiry and learning at the institutional level
- providing useful information

- documenting the full scope of engagement from institution to institution

- building on current national work

- designing a process that is practical and uses existing data

The documentation framework for the community engagement classification includes foundational indictors of institutionalization such as institutional identity and culture as well as institutional commitment. It will also recognize two categories of community engagement: (a) curricular engagement and (b) outreach and part-nerships. Institutions can apply to be classified in either or both of these categories of community engagement. Participation in such a category could add status, visibility, and prestige to institutions that build their identity around public engagement.

John Taylor from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association spoke on how the job of the accrediting body is evaluating the whole organization. Aspects examined include mission and integrity, preparing for the future, student learning, acquisition and application of knowledge, and its newest category, engagement and service. The ten-year cycle involves self-study and peer review of campus operations; this is supplemented with a more frequent cycling of annual updates on the progress of the institution.

Further, Taylor said that accrediting teams seek to understand whether institutions both learn from constituencies they serve and have the capacity to serve community needs and expectations. In the future, institutions will be held to the standard of "walking the talk" and showing the relevance of engagement. Applegate said that accreditation is "an enormous lever for us" and suggested using this process to align all accountability processes inside and outside the institution.

HENCE Takes Flight

To put this blueprint into action, participants quickly converged around the idea of a Higher Education Network for Community Engagement, or HENCE, with the emphasis on the word "net-work." It is a network devoted to deepening, consolidating, and advancing factors critical in supporting community engagement as a core element of higher education's role in society. Specifically, it recognizes the importance of furthering the literature, research, practice, policy, and advocacy for the field. HENCE is not intended to add another association or institutional membership organization

to the mix. Rather, as a network of representatives of formal and informal entities and leaders in the field of community engagement, it serves to foster communications across existing organizations. It is organized as a loose collaborative with shared leadership from a steering committee representing different perspectives.

Participants who signed the formal Wingspread 2006 HENCE declaration created this national network committed to the general goals of HENCE: taking a coordinated approach to providing resources and data; encouraging local and national meetings; and implementing a coordinated agenda for advocacy. Further, they committed to an agenda for professional development and to celebrating institutional differences. In addition to these general goals, participants left with a working plan around the four main themes.

Progress has been made on all fronts. Wingspread participants have been joined by other organizational representatives to move this work forward. A Web site has been launched to describe the HENCE agenda. Professional development academies for emerging engaged scholars as well as potential institutional leaders of engagement are under development. Other areas of work that are progressing quickly include coordinating conference calendars; evaluating the need for additional convenings; building an inventory of assessment instruments and tools to encourage more consistent data collection; creating connections among researchers of engagement; and developing an agenda to generate public policy and investments that support engagement projects, among others. The steering committee has been teleconferencing monthly to guide the HENCE development and is about to systematically change its membership to rotate representation. The HENCE Web site (http://www.henceonline.org) provides information and updates on progress of the action agendas. Organizations can join a work group, share thoughts, get involved, obtain assistance, follow progress toward the action plans, and learn how other organizations are responding to the challenge of the Wingspread declaration.

Henceforth . . .

Wingspread was an essential and special opportunity to work in person, to build trust, to organize in ways that are already producing important results. HENCE, a result of this convening, is a timely innovation as a cooperative clearinghouse or facilitator to promote communications and action across the many different resources that have been developed to encourage engagement's quality and impact. It recognizes campus-community engagement

as a critical strategy for addressing contemporary public issues and thus seeks to ensure greater consistency of practice, more efficient opportunities for dissemination, greater visibility, and enhanced policy support for such engagement in all its forms.

It is well known that maintaining attention and collaboration across a diverse array of organizations, however admirable as a goal, is particularly challenging. Collaboratives have the potential for competition and territoriality (real or perceived) or simply diversion by the next critical issue. HENCE participants are aware that, as a virtual network of organizational representatives, they will have to make a special effort to remain actively involved, to reach out to include others, and to be particularly vigilant about working together across differences.

Several months ago, the Wingspread 2006 attendees adjourned with a newfound sense of the future awaiting their collaboration. They went armed with an understanding of multifaceted action plans and the zeal to advance collaborative work in the field of higher education community engagement. They witnessed the "birth" of HENCE, an obvious acronym, but also a call to the future, *henceforth*, to advocates and workers in the cause of engagement—a movement that is transforming higher education and communities across the United States and around the world.

Acknowledgments

Endnote

1. The 2006 Wingspread report (listed below as Sandmann and Weerts 2006) is the source for all quoted and paraphrased contributions by conference participants.

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