

Transforming Liberal Arts Education through Engaged Scholarship

*Gail Gunst Heffner, Janel M. Curry,
Claudia D. Beversluis*

Abstract

Public institutions of higher education have commonly accepted their responsibility to engage in community service in addition to research and teaching. Less attention, however, has been paid to the role of comprehensive liberal arts colleges in service to the community. This article describes how engaged scholarship has played a transformative role in the institutional life of Calvin College, a Christian, liberal arts college in Michigan. After a brief history of the development of the scholarship of engagement at Calvin College, we discuss how the conversation about engagement has shifted from “doing good” to questioning scholarly paradigms. Finally, we discuss our areas of ongoing growth and lessons learned. In the last decade the influx and involvement of scholars who are now practicing and writing about engagement in fresh and exciting new ways has led to a significant shift in the concept of institutional engagement.

A Brief History

The history of community engagement at Calvin College can be traced back to student activism in the 1960s and a formal program of student volunteerism in the 1970s and 1980s. The faculty integrated this energy for volunteerism into service-learning opportunities embedded in the curriculum in the 1990s. More recently, faculty scholarship linked to community-based research has become one of the current hallmarks of the college.

In 1964 the first organized program for student community involvement began as a tutoring program with college students going into nearby elementary schools. The KIDS program (Kindling Intellectual Desire in Students), created and run entirely by students, was less a response to new thinking in education than to a student desire for activism within the community. KIDS became the SVS (Student Volunteer Service) in the early 1980s, reflecting a broader scope and wider reach of student volunteer efforts. Further development came in 1992 when a group of Calvin faculty attended a national Campus

Compact meeting at Brown University, where they were challenged to rethink how service could be integrated with academic study. The SVS office was renamed as the SLC (Service-Learning Center) to reflect this change in emphasis. Service-learning built on the foundation of earlier programs and blossomed and grew as faculty developed ways to weave community service into academic courses. A decade and a half of creative community involvement, largely organized along academic lines and correlated with course learning goals, followed.

Faculty experienced the student interest in service-learning and the institutional support of community-based teaching as yet another demand on already busy scholarly lives. In response, the Service-Learning Center sponsored a series of faculty development workshops to help faculty transform service-learning pedagogy and community involvement into scholarship. Faculty were invited to turn their pedagogical experiences into writing, and the resulting book, *Commitment and Connection* (Heffner and Beversluis 2002), became one of the first manifestations of a scholarship of teaching and community engagement at Calvin College.

More significantly, faculty members began to see how community issues and strengths could not only shape learning goals and teaching activities but also transform scholarly questions and research methods. Alternative research traditions, including participatory action research, were recognized as tools for developing significant community partnerships. The strength of community-based research, for Calvin College, has been that it has bridged a gap between the academy and the community, providing a forum for building relationships, learning from one another, and working together for social change. Community-based research and epistemologies that honor local voices have provided the intellectual fuel for our increasing integration of curriculum and community involvement (Heffner, Zandee, and Schwander 2003). Thus liberal arts education at Calvin College has been transformed by the growth and deepening of engaged scholarship.

Shifts in the Conversation about Engaged Scholarship

The transformation of Calvin College from volunteerism to service-learning to engaged scholarship has taken place in the context of the larger national conversations about the scholarship

Table 1. Shifts in the Conversation about Engaged Scholarship Leading to Institutional Transformation at Calvin College

Shifts in Conceptualization	Concrete Outworking of Shifts	Institutional Transformation
Engagement as Scholarly Inquiry	Historical shift from volunteerism to academically based service-learning to faculty development for scholarly activity	KIDS program to Student Volunteer Services to Service-Learning Center Creation of the Office of Academic Community Engagement
From Teaching to Learning	Learning in the community shifts to learning from the community to learning with the community	Curricular planning increasingly integrated with community involvement—examples of Calvin Environmental Assessment Program (CEAP) and Calvin Nursing Department Community-based research
Increased Faculty-Community Discourse	Doing for shifts to understanding, learning, and planning together	Establishment of the Community Partnerships Team Longer-term partnerships Broadening our understanding of “campus” boundaries Slower and more deliberate planning and identification of strategic priorities
Epistemological Assumptions Critiqued	Increased intellectual discussions surrounding disciplinary epistemology, teaching and research methods	Increasing interdisciplinary conversations and collaborative research Reading groups lead to working groups
Reflexivity	Through the process of engaged scholarship, becoming more conscious of ourselves as scholar-practitioners More study of how our curriculum, scholarship, and pedagogy change through the process of engagement	Increased scholarship and grant writing about engagement Preparation of an interdisciplinary white paper on Strengthening Liberal Arts Education by Emphasizing Place and Particularity, involving research on faculty, students, alumni, and community members and developing case studies to share with other institutions

of engagement. The fundamental nature of the conversation about engagement has shifted both nationally and within our institution in at least five important ways because of the focus on a new understanding of scholarship (table 1). First, engagement is now being approached as a form of scholarly inquiry guided by driving intellectual questions (*Sandmann et al. 2000*). This significant perspectival shift moves considerably beyond just seeking “to do good for the community.” It places the starting point within a scholarly framework.

Second, this paradigm shift has moved the focus in higher education from a teaching paradigm to a learning paradigm. In other words, the focus is on producing learning rather than providing instruction (*Barr and Tagg 1995*). Putting learning first—learning for all—requires deep, careful analysis and reflection on how approaches differ. If engagement is understood within a learning paradigm, it provides a necessary corrective, preventing universities and colleges from setting themselves up as the saviors of the community. Rather, this paradigm brings community, scholars, and students together to learn collaboratively.

Third, this leads to an emphasis on the importance of discourse. “In an era where emphasis in outreach is placed on ‘delivering the goods,’ we contend that the academy has to invest more time in examining, debating, and explicitly deciding what goods to deliver (or not), and to whom and why. If that is to happen, we must vigorously re-embrace a fundamental feature of scholarly culture—discourse” (*Fear et al. 2001, 26*). Scholars need to examine and be self-conscious about how certain choices are made, why one avenue is being pursued rather than another.

Becoming more self-conscious about our assumptions and then being able to critique our scholarly work is the fourth way scholars have enlivened the national conversation about engagement. We need to question assumptions, our own as well as others’, and struggle to bring to consciousness that which is usually accepted as a given. “The new scholarship is fundamentally about critique. When scholars critique, they take a critical stance toward their work—engaging in dialogue and discourse—inquisitive not only about how others approach their work, but also about how *they* themselves approach their work” (*Fear and Sandmann 2002, 36*).

Fifth, this self-consciousness about assumptions highlights the importance of reflexivity—having the ability to study our

own work and ourselves in the process and context of doing the work. This moves us beyond just studying a problem “out there” and enables us to study ourselves as evolving scholar-practitioners. Engaged scholarship and practice is a richly dynamic enterprise and has the potential to transform higher education while making significant contributions to society at large. This will not happen automatically, just because more scholars become involved. Engagement needs to be situated within the context of a moral discourse on what constitutes real participation, and this highlights the need for more authentic embracing of diverse peoples.

Lessons Learned/Growing Edges

Engaged scholarship has played a significant role in transforming the institutional culture at Calvin College within the last decade. This transformation has affected faculty, administration, students, and the surrounding community. In this section we offer reflections on the lessons we have learned and are still learning.

Tying engaged scholarship to the particularities of place: At a recent “state of the community” breakfast, leaders from business, education, and the government discussed the present and future of the city of Grand Rapids. While all acknowledged we are going through tough economic times related to the loss of manufacturing jobs, many expressed a measured optimism. They asserted that Grand Rapids has the resources to maintain and rebuild the economy and life of the city, in particular the new biomedical corridor and the technological training offered by our community college. Nowhere in the discussion was there a suggestion of liberal arts colleges as assets for sustaining the city. This omission by civic leaders prompted us to ask: In a city with ten colleges and universities (including branches of state universities), why weren’t liberal arts colleges mentioned as a valuable resource for enhancing city life?

Big questions are the lifeblood of liberal arts education: Who am I? How do I relate to people and the earth around me? What is a good society? Are there standards for beauty or justice? How do good communities work? For much of the history of the liberal arts, these questions took on a placeless, timeless quality. The questions of great philosophers, artists, and humanists were and are the questions that apply to all people and all places alike.

The proper educational movement was assumed to be from the concrete to the abstract, from the local to the global, and from particularity to universality.

These assumptions of timelessness and placelessness have changed in recent years. We are embedded in a particular community with particular issues, strengths, and needs. We have learned over time that engaged scholarship must grow out of local resources and issues. The concerns of Grand Rapids (urban revitalization, literacy, education, racial tension, environmental sustainability) create the context from which our scholarship of engagement grows. This has led us to ask: How can the liberal arts tradition serve the common good in a particular place? How should this particular place influence and shape the liberal arts tradition at Calvin? How can we use our city as text to strengthen liberal arts education for our students? Seeking to answer these questions has transformed the way our institution approaches engagement. It no longer is driven by individual faculty members' interests (which can be varied and random) but rather by the mosaic of strengths and needs of the particular place and city where we live and work. The end result has been the development of a strategic plan for engagement and focused collaboration, which tie engaged scholarship to the particularities of place.

Integrating pedagogy, research, and community engagement:

In higher education we work at challenging students to see issues in a framework that goes beyond the limitations of their parochial, or locally based, experiences. College is meant to be a broadening experience made up of the world of ideas rather than places (*Zencey 1996*). An alternative is to see education as the modeling of the full integration of everyday life, which is lived out in the context of local understanding. Abstract ideals need to be made concrete through loving, understanding, and caring for particular people and places. Learning the skills of negotiating the relationship between abstract and concrete and learning in an environment that integrates commitments, research, and pedagogy leads to better learning. It also models a vision for students of how to live in real places (*Curry, Heffner, and Warners 2002; Curry 2002*).

The Calvin Environmental Assessment Program (CEAP) is an example of the integration of pedagogy, research, and community engagement for the college. Calvin College is sur-

rounded by four municipalities, including the core city of Grand Rapids and multiple suburban neighborhoods and independent townships. Besides these social divides, the college also sits on an environmental divide—the drainage divide between the two major watersheds of the metropolitan region, both of which drain into the Grand River and Lake Michigan. CEAP uses the lenses of learning, research, and community engagement to understand Calvin’s place in both community and ecosystem.

“Individual faculty members develop projects, labs, or assignments that contribute to the overall data collection and understanding of the environment of Calvin College and its surrounding neighborhoods.”

In its ninth year, CEAP is a strong example of engaged scholarship. It integrates research into courses at all levels across many disciplines. At last count, CEAP had involved more than twenty courses over its history, from archaeology to botany to sociology. Individual faculty members develop projects, labs, or assignments that

contribute to the overall data collection and understanding of the environment of Calvin College and its surrounding neighborhoods. Often faculty are drawn to the study of a subject because of their personal commitments. Under the aegis of CEAP, faculty can integrate these commitments into their curriculum and research in a meaningful way, modeling for students both real-life learning and commitments to community.

Essential to meaningful community engagement is a sustainable structure. CEAP has flourished because it remains flexible in its structure, minimizing bureaucracy and maximizing creativity and collaboration. Projects arise out of interests and expertise of faculty in conjunction with learning-oriented approaches and defined needs. One contributor to the effectiveness of CEAP has been a yearly two-day workshop held early in the summer. This workshop brings together faculty, some students, staff, and the campus architect and provides the context for integrating campus planning, activism, and academic study into a whole. At the workshop, faculty share data from research carried out during the previous year, goals are set for the coming year, and areas of interest or need are identified. Faculty look forward to this

workshop because it affords them the time to form collaborative partnerships and to work on the next year's proposed projects. It also serves to orient new faculty into the project. Outcomes of CEAP's engaged scholarship are multifaceted. In addition to creating excitement in teaching and research, the program has fostered cross-disciplinary interaction among faculty within the science division as well as between science faculty and others.

One of the most striking outcomes has been the empowerment of students and faculty in impacting the college planning process. For example, several years ago, a CEAP project identified a particular woodlot on campus as having extremely high floristic quality. Last year the college proposed erecting a new building on this plot of land. Driven by the research findings of this CEAP project, a lively debate ensued that was characterized by strong civil discussion on all sides. The debate was not prematurely ended but continued until a compromise was reached. This and similar processes have increased cooperation among faculty, students, and administrators. When tensions arise, greater communication and understanding has led to open dialogue and campus discussion in the resolution of disagreements.

This models civic engagement and democracy for students as well as the college community. What began as environmental concern has become a lesson in civics.

The growth of engaged scholarship at Calvin has led to broadening our understanding of "campus" boundaries. Our engagement work has recently expanded to include the Plaster Creek Watershed, where the college is embedded. Fifty percent of Calvin College faculty and staff live within this watershed. Botany, geomorphology, and science-education courses are now beginning research and restoration work on aspects of the watershed in conjunction with the Metropolitan Council, local environmental groups, and local churches. This is evidence of institutional transformation. What began as a focus on assessing the environmental health of the college has expanded into

“What began as a focus on assessing the environmental health of the college has expanded into engaged scholarship within the watershed.”

engaged scholarship within the watershed. This work has led to a growing connection between word and deed that has allowed faculty to model for students a lifestyle that represents the wholeness of life—research, teaching, and personal commitments.

Building a common understanding of community and learning to work within the community: In addition to paying attention to the particularities of place and to the integration of pedagogy, research, and community engagement, we have learned that building a common understanding of “community” is critical to the growth of engaged scholarship. Many higher education institutions use the term “the community” rather loosely to include anyone or anything outside the university or college. We have found that it is crucial to clarify how this term is being used among various stakeholders. “The community” can mean community individuals to some; it can mean community groups or organizations to others. The perspectives of both are needed.

In our community engagement work we have learned that community *residents* often focus on different concerns, perspectives, and issues than do community *organizations*. We have had to guard against letting community organizations speak for the whole community. Ensuring that space is made for community individuals to speak has been crucial to our learning (Heffner, Zandee, and Schwander 2003).

Academics must earn the right to contribute when working as scholars on community issues. Community organizations and community members often view colleges and universities with suspicion or skepticism. Building trust takes time, and learning to communicate clearly and honestly is always a challenge. Academics must always be careful in their approach, joining the community as partners in learning rather than as experts. The latter attitude often does damage rather than promoting the common good (Himmelman 1996; Schon 1987; Schon 1995).

A difference exists between working *with* the community and working *in* the community or *for* the community. Working *with* the community requires continuous dialogue and conversation. Community members are the experts on both defining needs and framing approaches to problem solving. Recognizing this has led us to a new understanding of how to approach our community engagement work. Being community-based is not enough; it must also be community-driven. This approach makes

engagement more difficult, but results in change that is more lasting and sustainable.

The Calvin Nursing Department has spearheaded an initiative in community-based teaching and research that has become a model for other departments to follow. Their work has involved community-based research in three urban neighborhoods where the voice of residents and health providers has been sought. Priorities for residents' health needs have emerged and collaborative strategic planning has been undertaken to address these needs. Residents from each of the three neighborhoods have been hired to serve as community health workers to partner with nursing faculty and students to connect residents to needed resources. Working with active community partners has proven vital to the growth and success of this community-driven initiative.

Developing an institutional structure and shared ownership within the college: Institutional ownership is an important priority for our community-based efforts. One of the challenges of our engaged scholarship initiatives has been to develop an institutional structure that is both sustainable and shared. One of the key lessons from our nursing program is that sustained community-based work takes time and personnel. The nursing department has hired a former faculty member to serve as a community partnerships coordinator. Her work focuses on developing best practices in community nursing, maintaining strategic contact with community residents and local health providers, and supporting faculty and community health workers in their educational efforts.

We became aware that if we wanted to expand a collaborative model for engaged scholarship across other academic departments, leadership from within the academic division would be required. In 2004 the college created a new position within the Provost's Office to help faculty pursue strategic, intentional, and collaborative academic work within the community. Our new director of community engagement has a disciplinary background in urban studies and experience with both community-based research and community organizations. A vital task of this position is communication within all divisions and departments of the college regarding our priorities for engagement. Central to these priorities is a focus on learning and scholarship: What community issues invite scholarly work? How can we make a difference through engaged learning? Collaboration between

faculty interested in particular issues (e.g., literacy, environmental restoration) happens through targeted faculty development efforts, through grant applications, and through curricular coordination. The director of community engagement thus serves as both a convener and a facilitator for institutional strategic planning in regard to community engagement. Faculty with similar interests gather around the table, are invited to collaborate with community partners, and jointly conceptualize possible academic projects that will contribute to new learning. This has led to a growing commitment and shared ownership of engaged scholarship within the institution and across disciplines.

When the college hired the first director of community engagement, the most difficult question was not about funding but rather about how this position would work with our existing Service-Learning Center (Student Life Division) and with the director of community relations (External Relations Division). Careful internal communication has been crucial in negotiating the various roles within the college. Strategic communication allows us to create synergistic partnerships between faculty members who are interested in similar issues and reminds other offices and divisions how our purposes are related to the *educational mission* of the college.

Conclusion: Embrace Your Place

Transforming the institutional culture of a liberal arts college is no small task. It begins when the institution decides to embrace the particular place where it is embedded and take seriously the issues and strengths of that particular city or region. It blossoms when faculty members develop relationships beyond the college or university and partner to explore new ways of learning and working together. Transformation deepens and grows when scholar-practitioners become reflexive and study themselves in the process of change.

One challenge in maintaining the energy for this transformation is to keep veteran faculty fresh and focused while finding ways to welcome and integrate new faculty into this vision. We have recently developed an annual bus tour of the city for new and veteran faculty to explore the issues and strengths of our city and to help them delve into the possibilities for collaborative engaged scholarship. Another challenge we face is navigating constant community change. Staff turnover, funding crises, and miscommunication can reverse achieved progress. Relationship

building remains one of the most important and critical aspects of engaged scholarship.

Monetary sustainability is also key to the long-term transformation of institutions. To ensure that our engagement efforts are sustainable, we rely on a combination of internal budgets and external grant support. As community-based work has become increasingly central to our curriculum and to our scholarly lives, we have been able to shift funding from external grants to our internal general budget. This is an important lesson for all higher education institutions. Institutional ownership of engaged scholarship among faculty and administrators helps to create an ethos of engagement and contributes to greater sustainability within the *mission* of the institution. However, we have found that external grants play an important role in conceiving new projects and fostering communication among all parties. New grant possibilities are valuable to our resource-limited institution not only because of the funding that they provide, but also because of the way they enable groups of faculty and community members to gather around a table to dream of learning possibilities.

At our institution we have faced pitfalls and obstacles along the way, but engaged scholarship has led to exciting initiatives for faculty and students. Rich community partnerships have changed the way our institution understands its educational mission. When we reflect on the transformation that has occurred within our institution, we are struck by how this remains a continuous, evolving process. We do not claim to have reached a “transformed state”; rather, we are in the process of an exciting institutional transformation that will be ongoing.

References

- Barr, R. B., and J. Tagg. 1995. From teaching to learning—a new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change* 29 (Nov./Dec.): 13–24.
- Curry, Janel M. 2002. The development of an ethic of service to place. In *Commitment and connection: Service-learning and Christian higher education*, edited by Gail Gunst Heffner and Claudia DeVries Beversluis, 167–81. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.
- Curry, Janel M., Gail Gunst Heffner, and David Warners. 2002. Environmental service-learning: Social transformation through caring for a particular place. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 9(1): 58–66.
- Fear, F., C. Rosaen, P. Foster-Fishman, and R. Bawden. 2001. Outreach as scholarly expression: A faculty perspective. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 6(2): 21–34.

- Fear, F., and L. Sandmann. 2002. The “new” scholarship: Implications for engagement and extension. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 7(1&2): 29–39.
- Heffner, Gail Gunst, and Claudia DeVries Beversluis, eds. 2002. *Commitment and connection: Service-learning and Christian higher education*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.
- Heffner, Gail Gunst, Gail Landheer Zandee, and Lissa Schwander. 2003. Listening to community voices: Community-based research, a first step in partnership and outreach. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 8(1): 127–39.
- Himmelman, A. 1996. On the theory and practice of transformational collaboration: From social service to social justice. In *Creating collaborative advantage*, edited by C. Huxham, 19–43. London: Sage Publications.
- Lelle, Mark A., F. Fear, and L. Sandmann. 1998. A legacy rediscovered: Public service at private colleges. *Journal of Public Service and Outreach* 3(2): 48–53.
- Sandmann, Lorilee R., Pennie G. Foster-Fishman, James Lloyd, Warren Rauhe, and Cheryl Rosaen. 2000. Managing critical tension: How to strengthen the scholarship component of outreach. *Change* 30: 45–52.
- Schon, Donald A. 1987. *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schon, Donald A. 1995. Knowing-in-action: The new scholarship requires a new epistemology. *Change* 27: 27–34.
- Zencey, E. 1996. The rootless professors. In *Rooted in the land: Essays on community and place*, edited by W. Vitek and W. Jackson, 15–19. New Haven: Yale University Press.

About the Authors

- Gail Gunst Heffner currently serves as the director of academic community engagement in the Office of the Provost at Calvin College. Prior to this appointment Gail was the associate director of the Calvin Center for Social Research 2001–2004 and the director of academically based service-learning 1994–2001. Her Ph.D. is in urban studies and resource development from Michigan State University and she holds a master’s degree in economic and social development from the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. She has published articles on community-based research, community partnerships, and social capital and community development. She is a coauthor of *Commitment and Connection: Service-Learning and Christian Higher Education*.
- Janel Curry has a Ph.D. in geography from the University of Minnesota. She is dean for research and scholarship and professor of geography and environmental studies at Calvin College. Her area of research is on the role of the community in natural resource management. She has published in major

geography journals and has a recent book coauthored with Steve McGuire, *Community on Land: Community, Ecology, and the Public Interest*.

- Claudia DeVries Beversluis has a Ph.D. in psychology from Loyola University Chicago. She is dean for instruction and professor of psychology at Calvin College and has used service-learning in her teaching. She is a coauthor of *Commitment and Connection: Service-Learning and Christian Higher Education*. In July 2006, she assumed the role of provost at Calvin College.