



Divide and Flourish: Nurturing the Nucleus of Faculty Change

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From Theory to Practice: Portland State University
Part Two

In this issue, Portland State University President Judith Ramaley describes the "...deep commitment of many colleges and universities to civility, community, and civic and social responsibility." What does it take to actualize that commitment in its multiple forms? What is actually required to increase a university's capacity for community/university partnerships? Since, as Kendall (1990) acknowledges, faculty are "the key to the long-term capacity of ... institutions to commit to public service and to meaningful learning in the community," it is essential to determine what is required to generate faculty time and talent for community engagement.

A Nucleus of Faculty

Above all else, it takes a nucleus of faculty who sustain a commitment to and curiosity about student learning (Kendall 1990). It takes faculty who are intellectually alert to and personally curious about questions and issues in their communities. And it requires faculty who take pride in stretching the parameters of their disciplines, willing to fly in the face of conventional wisdom about what constitutes scholarship.

Every college and university in the country has at least a few faculty members who match these descriptions, but they are the exception. The learning tradition in higher education is very classroom centered; except for faculty whose roles include oversight of internships or supervision of cooperative education, few faculty actually establish community connections or work with students to tie together classroom curricula with community content. Those faculty who are willing to venture out, either on their own initiative or in response to community requests, are vital to institutional capacity for community engagement. Change in faculty roles throughout the campus can flourish if this nucleus of innovators is nurtured.

Supportive Local Context

Clearly, as Ramaley (1997) and many observers writing about changes in higher education and their consequences for faculty roles have noted, there is a growing national focus on ways to engage institutions with their communities. In the Spring 1996 inaugural issue of this journal, for example, seven national leaders wrote on variations of this theme. But if we are to develop a campus culture which stimulates civic action and responsibility in students, we must have more than just a handful of these self-starting faculty innovators on our campuses. Equally, or even more important than the national focus is strong local reinforcement of individual faculty involvement. From these individual involvements come an array of expressions of the campus compact with its community: service learning or (as we have come to call it at Portland State) community-based learning, community-based research and special projects, broad partnerships of diverse purposes with community organizations, and constituency-driven continuing education.

The elements critical to a supportive local context are an *institutional mission* which includes an emphasis on connection to the community and institutional leadership. Portland State University has an unequivocally clear mission to "enhance the intellectual, social, cultural, and economic qualities of urban life . . ." and to conduct ". . . research and community service to support a high quality educational environment and reflect issues important to the metropolitan region" (Portland State University 1992). The clarity of mission and its implications for faculty roles have been reinforced by PSU's participation in the growing national conversations about the significant contributions urban institutions can make to addressing the complex problems of urban life.

Institutional leadership is a second crucial element of a supportive local context. In PSU's case, the presidential call for a renewed and intensified engagement with the community was issued in a difficult funding environment which heightened the importance of a distinctive mission. The provost's challenge to the faculty to build a meaningful general-education curriculum signaled that the changes would be more than simply administrative or structural.

However, even in such a dynamic local context, as Zlotkowski (1996) observes, faculty can still "float, as it were, in a kind of professional vacuum, unconnected by the defining constructs of academic life." In addition to the nucleus of committed faculty and a dynamic and supportive national and local context, there are three other dimensions to Portland State's development of capacity for community engagement and community-based learning—dimensions of action, reflection, and attitude.

• An Action Dimension

The action dimension provides a tangible visibility to change. Specific actions begin to give meaning to what some faculty see as the rhetoric of mission. The actions at Portland State were initiated by faculty and facilitated by the administration. For example, two

faculty members were awarded, by a faculty committee, a small development grant to explore ways to introduce service learning to the faculty and to begin implementing it. Concurrently, a faculty committee responded to the provost's charge to completely overhaul the general-education program. Ultimately, the revisions were dramatic, including interdisciplinary team teaching, organization of existing courses into theme clusters, and the requirement for a senior course centered around a community-based learning project. The provost appointed three task forces to examine what kind of support would be ideal to assist faculty in adapting to the changes in their roles suggested by the introduction of technology, the requirements of the new curriculum, the heightened attention nationally to teaching and learning excellence, and active, ongoing assessment.

Drawing directly from the recommendations of one of these groups, the task force on community/university partnerships, we sought funds from the Corporation for National Service to establish a faculty service and support center — what has become The Center for Academic Excellence. The establishment of the center evidenced the permanence of organizational commitment to faculty development. From this center have emerged faculty defined activities — for example, technology institutes, roundtable discussions on assessment and on technology, workshops on classroom-based research, mini-grants for integrating community-based learning into existing courses, information about community agencies interested in partnerships, consultation on classroom teaching, assistance in building portfolios, and assessment plans for general education. Most all of these activities have been taught or facilitated by faculty from our own campus.

Furthermore, the overarching principle of the center has been integration — for example, the integration of pedagogical considerations and assessment design into the construction of community-based learning courses. The effort has been to support faculty in seeding the campus with experiments in each of the three areas and making connections among the activities and among the faculty participants.

In addition, other actions throughout the campus related to building capacity for community involvement included the establishment of the Institute for Portland Metropolitan Studies, which focused on the mutual benefits of connecting regional, county, and city governments with the university. A new community-development major was approved, and an educational Institute for Community Development was created to work with community-based organizations on a curriculum that would serve their professional-development needs. As previously noted, a required senior-year, community-based capstone was initiated as part of the new general-education curriculum. Outside funds were sought for faculty development. A faculty committee undertook the revision of the promotion and tenure guidelines and sponsored dialogues about the definitions for and relative importance of teaching, research, and service, and about community engagement as a legitimate form of scholarship.

These accomplishments in defining and acting on our unique mission enabled us to negotiate a stronger funding position within the State System of Higher Education.

In the aggregate, all of these actions constituted a powerful message on the importance of knowing, understanding, and working with the community. The multiple forms of the message translated both faculty and administrative intentions into an action agenda. The agenda attracted different faculty for different reasons, and gradually enlarged that nucleus of faculty so essential to increasing university capacity for community/university partnerships.

• A Reflective Dimension

The second dimension of building community/university interactive capacity is one that is fundamental to service learning itself — reflection. Liu (1996) writes that "Critical reflection deliberately integrated into the program structure is essential to ensure that service experiences foster real learning, instead of reinforcing stereotypes or perpetuating ignorance." Critical reflection also fosters faculty learning about their own academic community. Reardon (1995) discusses the importance of serious study to institutional transformation, making a case for defining any action "that requires faculty action as a scholarly issue." The resultant knowledge of "foundational issues will enhance the possibility of moving more of the faculty to look at specific issues..." and of enabling "the faculty (to) see our institutions and our culture from the outside." Getting faculty who would normally attend only conferences associated with their disciplines to such conferences as those sponsored by AAHE on faculty roles and rewards, assessment, or the engaged campus, or to NASULGC is one means of stimulating that reflection. Establishing campus groups to learn about contemplated change, to study and consider it based on a growing body of scholarship, is another route for sponsoring reflection. Our campus has participated in the Pew roundtables; we are participating in the ACE/Kellogg-sponsored discussions on faculty roles in the twenty-first century; and we have campus groups studying the issue of graduate education and liberal education. At Portland State this grounded scholarship approach led to changes in the general-education curriculum and to the creation of the Center for Academic Excellence.

• An Attitudinal Dimension

Finally, there is a third dimension of building capacity that is perhaps the most difficult to describe. It is a general dynamic rather than specific actions or changes in structure. It is connected to a belief perhaps most succinctly expressed by Portland State Provost Michael Reardon, when he said pointedly, "I don't want to hear the term 'the academic side of the university' ever again."

This statement reflects the dynamic of pulling it all together — all those pieces of a university which historically have evolved unto themselves: research as separate from

teaching, student affairs as separate from academic affairs, finance and administration as operations disconnected from the curriculum, and university relations independent of vital curricular change. Increasing university capacity for community/university partnerships requires blurring all these distinctions and exploring their connections to one another. While collective and harmonious agreement on the importance of pulling together may be too much to hope for, PSU has indeed had its moments in the process: facilities personnel included faculty in the design of new classrooms for the general-education curriculum; faculty have worked with student affairs to design and implement student orientation programs; university relations has worked with faculty to obtain grants and create partnership agreements; finance and administration have not only supported but advocated the allocation of dollars to faculty development.

Back to the Nucleus

Finally, I return to that most critical element with which I began: that nucleus of faculty with deep convictions about what community/university partnerships can mean. The power of organizational structures to symbolize and sustain a university's commitment to a purpose cannot be overstated, neither can the highly visible actions that are part of the Portland State record. But it is really the faculty, who exemplify community involvement, who are most essential to building the culture that supports it.

We all know, as Yarmolinsky and Martello (1996) remind us, that "When an activity cuts across departmental lines, it raises hackles among entrenched academic leadership." To achieve a substantial momentum for community engagement, there must be some faculty determined to ignore those hackles and others willing to address the issues that underlie them. There are many faculty who have not experienced administrative support, and indeed, may be suspicious of its offer. Time is required for faculty to understand the purposes of that support, and in the whole scheme of change, there must be individuals who are patient with the length of time such attitudinal changes take.

Ultimately it is the creativity of faculty demonstrating unique and varied forms of community/university partnerships that really matters. It is the creativity shown by faculty who transform a geography class into a city-wide tree census; of faculty who develop an experience where college students realize their own learning by teaching it to an elementary-school class; of faculty who teach students to use autobiographical interviews with older adults to learn about the zeitgeist of the years following World War II. It is these faculty who reflect with others, who enlist and extend faculty involvement, who actively promote and insist on support for their efforts who enlarge the university's capacity. It is these faculty who devote energy to seeing the connections throughout the institutions, to being inclusive, to going out on departmental limbs, to posing constructive responses when community projects stall, who so

energize the nucleus that it can divide and, within a supportive context, flourish.

A Notable Parallel

In many ways, building university capacity for community engagement parallels the characteristics of service learning itself. Community-based learning is defined by the integration of disciplinary content with community-based experience; building university capacity for community engagement involves integrating disciplinary and departmental focus with the urban mission. Community-based learning includes structured discussion and reflection that assists students in distilling their learning; strengthening community/university connections involves discussion and reflection among faculty breaking ground in "the scholarship of engagement" (Boyer 1996). Community-based learning fosters civic and social responsibility and career readiness in students; building institutional capacity for community engagement fosters awareness among the faculty of their community's most salient issues, and engages them in defining and acting on them. The parallels between the activities of community-based learning and the activities involved in building university capacity for community engagement create a very positive dynamic. What can evolve is a sustaining, expanding cycle of developing the campus community along with developing our capacity for community engagement.

The lively national conversation about the importance of community/university connections, the inclusion of these connections in our Portland State University mission, and strong messages from our university leadership have fostered a strong local context. Within that context a committed core of faculty have provided an essential momentum fostered through a variety of actions throughout the university. Reflection has been another important dimension of nurturing faculty change, as has the exploration of connections among many previously distinct university elements. This blurring of distinctions is both a factor in and an indication of attitudinal change in our own campus community. These are the dimensions of positively dividing the nucleus of faculty committed to community engagement so that they and others throughout the campus can flourish.

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