PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning, **Vol.17, 2008, 1-17.**

Feature Article

Changing Times? Past, Present and Future Discussions of Community-University Partnerships

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Abstract

This article serves as both an introduction to newcomers and as an essay for experienced scholars and practitioners to consider new frames, questions, and issues relevant to community-university partnerships activity. The discussion of future issues suggests that we need to avoid Boyte's (2004) *tyranny of technique* by broadening and reframing the contextual dynamics surrounding the increase of the engagement movement; considering challenging issues of culture, diversity, and difference as important infrastructure aspects of engagement; and working toward a research base that is more specific and realistic.

Introduction

> "A unique phenomenon has emerged in contemporary American society. Scholars, policymakers, and practitioners are concurrently engaged in public discourse concerning the importance of community." (Silverman, 2004, p. 1)

Community-university partnerships are discussed across a range of settings, and are described with many different labels. The scholarship of engagement, civic engagement, community development, public service, public scholarship, service learning, outreach, community-university partnerships, university-community partnerships, and extension represent some of the highly visible and at times interchangeable terms used to describe partnership activity. While there are important distinctions among these terms, for the purposes of this article, I will be discussing

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central crosscutting issues using three terms synonymously: community-university partnerships, outreach, and engagement. Adapting Boyer's classic definition (1996), I define these terms as using community resources and university resources to collectively and responsibly solve social, political, or economic real-world problems.

There is an increased interest in understanding, encouraging and rewarding individuals and institutions that do this type of work, most recently evidenced by the addition of a new Carnegie classification for the "engaged institution" (2007). The increased effort has created a situation where there is an exponential increase in the dialogue about outreach activity, a positive development for communities and for universities. An overarching purpose of this article is to provide introductory overview information for those who are just beginning to learn about the movement for increased engagement, while at the same time offering a forward-looking discussion of the future for those scholars and practitioners who are already knowledgeable and conversant with community-university partnerships and the surrounding discourse. Therefore, the discussion in this article is focused primarily on two central themes, with a brief overview in the first section and a more substantial discussion within the second. First, I will provide a broad overview of what type of evolving research and knowledge base is available and appears to be valued regarding community-university partnerships. Second, I will discuss the engagement issues that I believe are currently missing or underdeveloped and have potential to broaden and deepen our practical knowledge base on community-university partnerships.

What Do We Know or Deem Important Regarding Community-University Partnerships?

There are a plethora of arenas where community-university partnership is centrally focused upon constructing and sharing knowledge about engagement activity. The Kellogg Commission 1999 report, *Returning to our Roots: The Engaged Institution,* serves as a classic document that articulates a vision and commitment for increased outreach activity. Overarching the Kellogg Commission, the National Association of State and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), also offers ongoing pivotal support for an Outreach and Technology Transfer (COTT) national commission, and a Council on Extension, Continuing Education, and Public Service (CECEPS), which actively fosters national discussion of engagement policy and practice. Currently approaching

its tenth anniversary, The Outreach Scholarship Conference, a national interdisciplinary conference, centrally focuses upon interdisciplinary university administrator, staff, faculty, student, and community member participation to collaboratively share information, best practices, and to network. The National Clearinghouse for the Scholarship of Engagement offers consultation, training and other types of assistance to any faculty members or administrators interested in engagement or documenting their engagement. Finally, engagement or outreach is featured as a regular theme within other professional associations such as the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA), the Association for Continuing and Higher Education (ACHE), and the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC), just to name a few select entry points for newcomers to the engagement community.

Along a parallel track, those interested in academic literature in this area can begin with the above-mentioned professional association resource and bibliography lists, the reference list from this article (as well as the bibliographies from the referenced works), and by seeking out journals in related disciplines of adult and continuing education, higher education, extension, and sociology.[1] What types of issues are discussed in these working groups and publication outlets? While there is room for many working frameworks, I have divided the contemporary discourse on community-university partnerships into discussions of: 1) Why do we and should we do outreach? 2) How do we and should we do outreach? And, as a major category within the discussion of how to do outreach, 3) What types of institutional rewards and barriers exist?

Why Do We, and Should We, Do Outreach?

The issue of why universities, colleges and communities partner together is a complicated one. A significant amount of the literature is dedicated to discussing university commitment to the public good as a natural extension of university mission and values, particularly public or land-grant institutions (Boyer, 1990; Boyte, 2004; Cantor & Lavine, 2006; Gibbons, 2001; Kellogg, 1999; Kiely, Sandmann, & Bracken, 2006; Maurrasse, 2001; McDowell, 2001; Peters, Jordan, Adamek, &

[1] A (partial) core journal list includes the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach & Engagement,* the *Journal of Public Service & Outreach, The Journal of Higher Education, Studies in Continuing Education*, and *The Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning.*

Alters, 2005; Prins, 2006; Ramaley, 2004; Sandmann, 2006; Silverman, 2004; Walstock, 1995; Zimpher, Percy, & Brukardt, 2002). Beyond the argument that university outreach is a part of a longstanding rich tradition and an activity that is vital to societal welfare, contemporary scholars (Breneman, 2005; Couturier, 2005; Pusser, 2005; Weertz & Ronca, 2006) also argue that the increase in university outreach activity stems from changes in the United States and global economy that have led to decreased U.S. government support for higher education and a need for universities to demonstrate accountability, practical societal value, and relevance as well as to generate income. The service learning literature is dedicated to promoting engagement as an integral and necessary part of student education and development for adults who will participate in their communities in thoughtful and responsible ways (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kiely 2004, 2005; Langseth & Troppe, 1997; Weigart, 1998). Related to conversations about the benefits to faculty (which will be discussed later in this article), increased funding for research, improved applicability and relevance to research, opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration, and advancement of cutting-edge research agendas are also part of the ongoing national and local rationales for continuing and increasing outreach activity. Proportionately, little of the mainstream engagement literature is focused upon asking, beyond the surface level assumption that communities need university resources, about why communities do, do not, or should or should not partner with universities.

How Do We, and Should We, Do Outreach?

A significant amount of the literature and conference or association information-sharing on the topic of community-university partnerships talks about "how to," case studies, or best practices. This type of scholarship tends to focus on the basic elements such as partnership formation, partnership structures, communication processes, and sustainability. For example, Prins (2005, 2006) writes about individual partnership roles and processes, tracking project initiation, flow, conflicts, and resolutions. Other scholars (Amey, Eddy, & Ozaki, 2007) write thematically about partnership development –identifying and building a working relationship among university and community groups who may not know each other and are faced with different ways of obtaining resources and knowledge, communicating, and working collaboratively. Jacoby & Associates (2003) discuss structures and models of sustainable service learning based upon nine collaborative principles—for example, mutuality, trust and responsibility—combined with three discrete phases

of planning, doing and evaluating partnership activity. In their moving story about the Milwaukee Idea, a late 1990s initiative of revitalizing the Milwaukee, Wisconsin region through mutual community development, Zimpher, Percy and Brukardt (2002) explain their approach to building and sustaining a large-scale, comprehensive effort. Sachs (2007) suggests that her home disciplines of rural sociology and women's studies both have contributions to make to the outreach discourse. She also argues that both disciplines' practical ability to do and to study outreach would be strengthened by understanding in detail the ways outreach can be thematically classified as professional, critical, policy, or public in orientation, as discussed in Burawoy's (2004, 2005) work on the value of public sociology. Other scholars (Anderson & McFarlane, 2006; Blanco, 1995; Dovey & Onyx, 2001; Tett, 2005; Tett, Crowther, & O'Hara, 2003; Soska & Butterfield, 2004; Silverman, 2004; Sork, 2000; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) focus upon nuances of community participation in partnerships.

What Types of Institutional Rewards and Barriers Exist?

A significant part of the engagement movement has been dedicated to establishing and encouraging faculty and university structures and cultures that will increase the amount of engagement activity. This scholarship tends to fall under general discussion headings of the scholarship of engagement, faculty roles or rewards, or institutional structures or models for increasing university outreach activities. Within this umbrella, the issue of promotion and tenure guidelines and implementation and university conceptualizations of "what constitutes real scholarship" has been a core emphasis. Cantor and Lavine (2006) wrote a brief point of view article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* discussing the gap between praise and tangible reward for those faculty members who make the choice to integrate or include more public service into their scholarship activities. They make an interesting observation in mentioning a contemporary crossroads that we have created. We have reached a point of maturity where a generation of students (undergraduates) have heightened experiences and expectations as potential graduate students, future faculty, or as community citizens based upon their increase in undergraduate service learning involvement. Ward (2003) is one of many higher education scholars who writes about the faculty promotion and tenure process, largely based upon Boyer's 1990 and 1996 framing of scholarship and knowledge creation. Penn State University's UniSCOPE Report (Hyman, et al, 2000) offers

a faculty-driven report on the nature of scholarship, discovery, and knowledge within universities and faculty work. Amy Driscoll and Lorilee Sandmann (2001) have dedicated years of leadership and work towards assisting institutions and individuals in reforming promotion and tenure guidelines, and learning how to document and subsequently review promotion and tenure documentation based upon scholarship of engagement activities. In addition to faculty member support, there is a marked increase in university efforts to include graduate students (O'Meara & Jaeger, 2006) and to dedicate senior level university leadership positions and accompanying mechanisms and structures for supporting large-scale comprehensive outreach efforts. In previous research, I explored faculty perceptions of outreach and shared findings about how institutional language and culture that is seemingly positive can also serve as a potential negative force in the eyes of faculty members who are committed to the ideal of the public good but wary of how their engagement work will be interpreted and presented by universities to internal and external audiences (Bracken, 2005). Faculty who had experience with community-university partnerships or other forms of outreach activity reported that they believed it enhanced their scholarship and their enjoyment of their work. Often, universities try to encourage faculty participation through incentives such as seed grants for engagement activity or assistance with developing outreach components to external grant funding applications. Others are encouraged by learning that experienced outreach faculty have increased opportunities to apply their research or to reframe research problems based upon pressing societal needs. Some enjoy the opportunity to gain new forms of sharing their expertise or learning from constituents. In sum, the benefits of engagement are varied and can be experienced differentially based upon the situational or institutional context (Bracken, 2005).

Issues and Questions for the Future

While the level of community-university engagement and information about the engagement process is ever-increasing (a positive thing in my opinion), the dialogue on community-university partnerships has remained relatively narrow and needs to explore many new questions in order to move forward in a meaningful way. Boyte (2004) refers to this trend as a *tyranny of technique*, where higher education is unwittingly approaching community-university partnerships and relationships as characterized by expert decision-making and resource sharing,

rather than reclaiming problem-solving as a mutual activity that is a practical part of our daily lives. An alternative way to reflect upon the contemporary trends in engagement is to consider Lyotard's (Jarvis, 2006) concept of performativity, and modern society's movement towards judging knowledge and the value of knowledge based solely upon its instrumental value. This imbalance in approach to valuing knowledge creation elevates technical solutions above ethical, social, or other forms of knowing and being and ultimately, if unchecked, can be disastrous. Perhaps due to economic and political pressures, this movement or imbalance is reflected by the current trend and debates in scientifically based research (Dirkx, 2006; Feuer, 2006; St. Pierre, 2006) and also in the gradual shift in language in the university outreach world to include and prioritize economic development and business models as the predominant ways for understanding and succeeding in engagement work.

Taking a university-centered approach, Peters, Jordan, Adamek, and Alter (2005, p. 461) name four critical issues for the future: 1) creating institutional leadership, 2) developing a culture of scholarships or faculty rewards, 3) supporting related graduate education, and 4) creating more and better enabling structures. Reframing the discussion requires broadening its scope and asking some challenging questions about how we can more fully and thoughtfully approach community-university partnerships and engagement. What's missing? How can the conversation and future research and support structures be re-framed? In the remaining discussion, there are several ideas for consideration.

Broader (Re)framing of the Contextual Dynamics Surrounding Increased Engagement

Weertz and Ronca (2006) report that state support for higher education has decreased by an average of 40 percent since 1978. Their research elaborates on the influences and factors behind the changing economic climate for universities and schools such as increased entrepreneurship, fundraising, and pressures for intense accountability and tight resource allocations. This discussion is not new or surprising. However, it is accompanied by widespread international economic and political change, and the influence is not solely one of U.S. based higher education and society. Reframing it as an issue related to concepts of globalization and to lifelong learning may hold value. Engagement is a part of a larger international shift toward developing strategies and mechanisms of lifelong learning, social and economic development, and

proactive rather than reactive policy-oriented changes in response to the current economic and politic climates (Elliott, Francis, Humphreys, & Istanace, 1996; Jarvis, 2006; Pusser, 2005). Open discussion with university constituents and communities about how this situation directly influences the engagement process and our perceptions of it is vital to future sustainability and success. It provides a platform for asking for continued and even increased public support and funding of community-university resource collaboration and sharing (Bragg & Russman, 2007) and also provides a way to create dialogue surrounding internal and external criticism of universities' trend towards hardnosed formulas that prioritize cost recovery, revenue generation, and decreased willingness to take program development risks in working with those communities and populations most in need. When the reasons for our societal emphasis on instrumental knowledge as being most valuable are exposed and debated, it changes the essence of discussions on defining and rewarding varying types of scholarship. Jarvis (2006) makes the point that we often confused information (data) with knowledge (constructed) and the art and craft of constructing knowledge occurs ideally through collaborative engagement with one another. Silverman (2004) makes a similar argument, positing that societal attention is skewed towards the development of economic forms of social capital as a reflection of our economic pressures, and in the zeal to address very real survival issues we have set aside other critical forms of measuring, improving, and enjoying social revitalization. This can be done by explicitly acknowledging and studying the overlap, integration, and distinctions among social, financial, human, and cultural capital(s). Generally speaking, these are not new topics of academic discussion. However, at the current time, these discussions are taking place in separate arenas and the debates are not being used to analyze and consider how community-university partnerships could or should take shape.

Taking a different approach in considering how to broaden our contextual lens, the literature in adult and higher education has focused on new and more substantive ways of understanding how higher education faculty and staff members experience their work environments and make meaning from their work activities (Bracken, Allen, & Dean, 2006). If a part of the engagement agenda is to encourage a fundamental shift in how we work and how we are rewarded (or penalized) for that work, we need to more fully research and discuss these kinds of questions and not allow a blanket assumption of "outreach makes you feel good"

and "learning to do outreach can be challenging" to substitute for more serious treatment of workplace issues.

Dealing with the Hard Stuff: Culture, Diversity, Local Context, and Issues of Difference

There are a few scholars asking interesting questions specifically about university culture and its influence on outreach or engagement activities and processes. A normative presentation of the topic of faculty roles and rewards focuses upon promotion and tenure and rewarding engagement activity. When partnership difficulties arise, the conflicts or bumps in the road are often conceptualized in a generic way. Prins (2006) argues that we need to be more mindful of individual and cultural differences and the role they play in partnerships. She demonstrates that university faculty members, students or staff, and community members are not one-dimensional and we must look more deeply into partnership situations. At a recent conference, issues of diversity relative to engagement were discussed on a broad sweeping scale by defining terms such as oppression, racism, ethnic or racial relations, and so on. As valuable as that type of awareness is, we need to remember to also include culture, diversity and other issues of difference as serious categories for analysis. Issues of culture and identity and our ability to understand and work responsibly with them are as critical to engagement success as having strong budget, organizational or planning and assessment skill sets. For instance, Maurrasse (2001) investigates faculty backgrounds in activism or community participation and the relationship between these backgrounds and enhanced outreach activity. Cherry and Shefner (2004) raise important points for consideration in asserting that university faculty members, by virtue of their job duties and working culture as teachers who supervise students and research, and who participate in a system of self-governance, become unconsciously accustomed to being "dominant actors" in their working environments. The consequence of this working style when carried over into university faculty-staff joint outreach projects or projects with community partners is often unquestioned or viewed as unchangeable. Silverman (2004) focuses on advocating for learning how to be more fully aware of power dynamics and to institutionalize community control of local public policy making, while still finding ways for universities to be active problem-solving partners.

There are numerous community-based and university-based studies on how our gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation,

or other parts of our identities are inseparable from our ways of being, learning, communicating, and interacting with one another. Yet there are relatively few academic or practice-based studies that seriously examine these issues specifically within the outreach and engagement arenas beyond labeling community populations as representative of attention to diversity. We need to ask questions more often and more seriously about issues of cultural commonality and difference. To illustrate, what do we know about the ways that gender may influence our approaches, strategies, understandings, and experience of community-university partnerships? Sachs (2007) and Ropers-Heilman and Palmer (2008) each connect ideas of feminist scholarship and public scholarship, and offer insights into how current practices can be improved.

Getting More Specific and Realistic

bell hooks took a risk in her writing by exposing her vulnerability and need to refresh in order to continue doing good work. In *Teaching Community* (2003), she describes her feelings of burnout and how academics who are teaching or working within communities are in a dynamic that requires intense energy, dedication, and continual reflection that cannot be sustained over the long-term without breaks. Yet the idea that community-university engagement has an intensity or potential emotional toll is something that is rarely publicly acknowledged. I have not found much literature outside of service learning that openly explores experiential aspects of the engagement experience—the fear most people feel when entering a new environment, the trepidation or daunting exhilaration of BHAGs (big hairy audacious goals) that, at least initially, appear insurmountable (or sometimes actually turn out to be insurmountable) (Zimpher, Percy, & Burkardt, 2002). How can we better understand, channel, and learn from our emotional ups and downs? Is it considered unprofessional or tangential to acknowledge that these are a part of our outreach experiences? Why or why not?

Further, the power dimensions that are often a source of conflict or challenge within community-university partnerships or that can lurk beneath the surface and disrupt good intentions are not often discussed with the same depth and analytical approach that appears in the broader academic literature addressing the social and political dimensions of learning, collaboration, communication, or real-world working situations (Baum, 2000; Boyte, 2004; Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 2006; Kasper & Batt, 2003; Prins, 2005). The issue of ethics is central to all human endeavors, yet there is not a burgeoning cry for more information on

how to navigate ethical dilemmas and situations that are present in all levels and types of outreach activity. Are faculty who are encouraged to consider incorporating engagement into their research and teaching agendas prepared for thinking through their individual and institutional responses to serious ethical questions? What about questions of job risk if faculty pursue engagement agendas at the urging of a perceived university mandate and then find these agendas not valued by promotion, tenure or other evaluative processes? What are the implications of industry-sponsored research and increasing levels of private industry support for university work in general? Do community members also have opportunities and avenues for working through the ethical issues that they may face? How do we find ways to responsibly work with disenfranchised groups who typically are not a part of the outreach process? Overall, what kinds of ethical issues are readily surfaced and which ones are submerged...and why?

Kecskes' (2006) study of engagement advocates for more studies that focus upon the departmental level as the crux for faculty members' decisions to do or not to do outreach activity. O'Meara and Jaeger (2006) focus on graduate student development as the future faculty members who will benefit from early socialization and education regarding the inclusion and nature of engagement in faculty life. Maurrasse's (2001) work, examining institutional type, its relationship to public responsibility, and how history influences partnerships is a wonderful example of engagement scholarship that narrows on specifics, moving the literature and knowledge base to a more meaningful level. Universities and national councils or commissions, such as the Council on Extension, Continuing Education, and Public Service (CECEPS), are wrestling with challenging aspects of how to demonstrate the value of outreach activity to universities and communities that may have a general idea of what engagement is, but may not attach real value to it during tight economic times. Work such as the recent article by Weertz and Ronca (2006), which carefully examines perceived financial, political and social returns on investment is an important start but there is not a substantial amount of solid information available at this time. The new Carnegie classification for an engaged institution appears to be prompting more in-depth conversations about what community-university partnerships are, and how we can assess their quality, duration, and value (Carnegie Foundation, 2007). This echoes, at least partially, Peters, Jordan, Adamek, and Alter's (2005) argument that culture, graduate education, and enabling structures are crucial to the future of outreach. We do

not have a counterbalanced, parallel thread to the literature calling for increased specific knowledge that focuses narrowly on community perspectives on similar issues of infrastructure, community rewards, community barriers, and the nature of their experiences with community-university partnerships.

Discussion

We are in the midst of major societal change and there are many global, national, and local forces which are converging as an impetus for more visible and comprehensive community-university partnerships. Some of the strategies for institutional change have been successful as evidenced by the increase in activity, scholarship, dialogue, and public recognition of the value of engagement. During times of rapid change and intense pressure, it is understandable and easy to rely on the established knowledge base and discourse and to resist reframing and expanding our vision. There are some key issues that I would argue are essential for the future of meaningful and ethical community-university partnerships. First, the university-based outreach community needs to be more candid and forthright about what we know and what we need to know about outreach activity. As we expand the substance and range of scholarship and practice-based knowledge available to draw upon, it is essential to question our own assumptions and the issues of practice we deem most important. Strategically, there are many disciplines which actively research under-researched components of engagement and that research is available to be read, discussed, and applied to community-university partnership practice. It is through better understanding and acknowledgement of the larger forces which are driving our approaches, mindsets, behavioral habits, and blind-spots that we can truly, collectively, and responsibly continue and increase the momentum for community-university collaboration and engagement.

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