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Rethinking the “Apprenticeship of Liberty”: The Case for Academic Programs in Community Engagement in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article articulates a model for the “engaged campus” through academic programs focused on community engagement, broadly construed. Such academic programs—usually coalesced in certificate programs, minors, and majors—provide a complementary vision for the deep institutionalization of civic and community engagement in the academy that can revitalize an “apprenticeship of liberty” for students, faculty, and academic staff.

Benjamin Barber (1985, 1992) has long argued for the critical place that individuals as engaged citizens hold in the democratic process. Picking up on de Tocqueville’s eloquent phrase that “the apprenticeship of liberty is never easy,” Barber (2004, 2012) has argued that, without a true citizenry, we are beholden to the vagaries of structural forces and political calculus. His is not an isolated voice; the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) has argued for many years now that it is imperative for our colleges and universities to provide the knowledge, skills and dispositions that reinforce what it means to be a critical thinker and engaged citizen (AAC&U, 2007; see also Dalton & Crosby, 2011; Hoy & Meisel, 2008).

Yet I want to suggest that our current practices, our dedicated and passionate attempts—embodied in such practices as community service, service-learning, and experiential education more broadly—are not enough. It is not that such initiatives are misguided or lacking substance or vision. Rather, they are not enough for two distinct reasons: They are not sustainable in their current form and practice and, by underplaying the difficulties of such an “apprenticeship of liberty,” they actually undermine the hard work—by faculty, students, administrators, and community partners—to truly fashion and create meaningful and long-lasting change both in our institutions and in our communities. The first reason is embodied by a shallow institutionalization that has reached what I call an “engagement ceiling.” The second reason is characterized by an ever-increasing gap between the rhetoric and reality of what civic and community engagement is meant to be and to do.

This article is thus an attempt to articulate a model for the “engaged campus” through academic programs focused on community engagement, broadly construed. Such academic programs—usually coalesced in certificate programs, minors, and majors—provide a complementary vision for the deep institutionalization of civic and community engagement in the academy; one that, I suggest, can—in parallel with ongoing practices, policies, and programs—revitalize this apprenticeship of liberty for our students, faculty, and academic staff.

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This is not a utopian daydream. There are over 60 such programs already scattered across colleges and universities in the United States and Canada, with dozens more in development (Center for Engaged Democracy, 2011). Moreover, this is not the routinization or ghettoization of service-learning into the hallways and byways of academia to the detriment of community practices and impact (Butin, 2010). As the articles in this theme issue demonstrate, there are powerful practices and thoughtful dialogues occurring in academic programs committed to developing an active citizenry through sustained, sequential, and scaffolded academic programs that provide coherent models for a true apprenticeship in the practices and theories of citizenry.

This article is thus an attempt to explicate the foundations for and vision of these existing programs and the many more under consideration or development. The first section of this article outlines the reality of the “engagement ceiling” in higher education; the second section offers a conceptual framework (“service-learning as social movement”) for understanding why engagement in higher education has been so limited and shallow in its impact and institutionalization. By explicating these two points, I want to offer a vision that academic programs in community engagement can play in higher education to foster a deeper, more sustained, and impactful model of engaged practice and scholarship around issues of civic and community engagement.

The “Engagement Ceiling” in Higher Education

Service-learning and community engagement have become an assumed and expected part of higher education. (I will interchangeably use “service-learning” and “community engagement” throughout and not dwell on terminological distinctions; Brabant & Braid, 2009; Butin, 2010). From HERI surveys to the prominence of Campus Compact to the Carnegie Foundation’s “Community Engagement” classification (Antonio, Astin, & Cress, 2011; Campus Compact, 2010; DeAngelo, Hurtado, Pryor, Kelly, & Santos, 2009), the linkage of academic coursework with community-based teaching, learning, and research offers a powerful and by now accepted model for an engaged pedagogy that draws on the best research and practices of experiential education (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1983; Kuh, 2008; Schon, 1987) with positive impacts across multiple social, cognitive, and cultural domains (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). Put simply, service-learning seems to work. The only real question for advocates is how to make it more prominent and widely used.

The community engagement movement is thus in the throes of attempting, yet again, to raise the profile of such practices and foster its spread across all aspects of higher education. The Lumina Foundation (2011), for example, recently has put forward a “degree qualifications profile” that attempts to describe what all associate, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees provide through “clear reference points that indicate the incremental and cumulative nature of learning” (p. 1). Importantly, while four of the “areas of learning” at all levels refer directly back to academic content—specialized and broad/integrative knowledge; intellectual skills; and applied learning—the final area of “civic learning” is clearly centered on “responsible citizenship” and “active engagement with others” (p. 9). It embodies the key, though contested, presumption that higher education is a fundamental site in the development of a knowledgeable, deliberative, and active citizenry (e.g., Benson & Harkavay, 2007; though see Dorn, 2011; Fish, 2008).

Nowhere is this linkage clearer than in the recent articulation of our nation’s “civic recession,” as notions of citizenship have disappeared from K–16 curricula (Knight Foundation, 2009; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2012). As the epigraph to the U.S. Department of Education’s just-released report *A Crucible Moment* vividly stated, “We can emerge from this civic recession, but to do so will require a full-scale national investment from every level of government and every sector of society” (Quigley, 2011, quoted in USDOE, 2012, p. 3). “With this report,”

which lays out a series of key policy steps towards reversing this civic recession, the authors call on “the higher education community—and *all* its stakeholders—to embrace civic learning and democratic engagement as an undisputed priority. . . . That will require constructing educational environments where education for democracy and civic responsibility is pervasive, not partial; central, not peripheral” (p. 6).

These are uplifting and worthy sentiments. But, unfortunately, the seeming predicament and policy prescriptions are tried and tired. Twenty years ago the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (1992) released a similar call for developing “stewards of place,” whereby higher education institutions should step forward to support and strengthen civic and public engagement. Their review of the literature and practices at the time found that “while the idea of public engagement is frequently embraced by college and university presidents, there is considerable evidence that deep engagement is rare—there is more smoke than fire, more rhetoric than reality” (p. 13). Indeed, we have been seeking, and arguing about, the civic function of higher education for a very long time now, whether one looks to Boyer’s (1990) clarion call a generation ago for a “scholarship of engagement,” the University of Wisconsin’s articulation of the “Wisconsin idea” at the turn of the 20th century that the “boundaries of the university should be the boundaries of the state,” or even further back to the Morrill Act of 1862, which formed land grant universities.

The problem is that the last 20 years has seen a sustained investment in actually embedding civic engagement in higher education, but it has not paid off. In fact, there appears to be a fairly low ceiling for such institutionalization. Campus Compact’s (2010) data, which are of a self-selected group of institutions, indicate that approximately 10 percent of all students and 7 percent of all faculty on any particular campus partake in service-learning activities. Although this is not an insubstantial number, when one enlarges the universe of institutions to include for-profits, community colleges, and the thousand or so other postsecondary institutions that do not participate in Campus Compact’s surveys, the percentage of implementation looks much more peripheral than central for the vast majority of institutions.

Campus Compact’s (2010) data are fairly closely mirrored by federal data of faculty practices (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002) of the predominant use of lectures and discussion (83 percent), with just 5 percent of all faculty using field work and apprenticeships of any type (pp. 39–41). On another front, a comprehensive review of applications to a philanthropic foundation focused on community-based research found that the vast majority of such applications (upwards of 80 percent) “emphasized neither participation nor action” (Stoecker, 2009, p. 385). AAC&U’s own data, on which the federal report *A Crucible Moment* is based, indicated that undergraduates’ perspectives of their institutions’ commitment to “contributing to the community” decreased over time, falling to just 34 percent (Dey, Barnhardt, Antonaros, Ott, & Hopsapple, 2009). This, too, is in line with national data that suggest that undergraduates view their service predominantly through an individual “charity” lens, with less than 6 percent seeing their actions as addressing social or political problems (Lopez et al., 2006).

What slowly becomes apparent is that the civic and community engagement movement has plateaued at a sizable but far from substantial level of implementation and institutionalization. One in 10 faculty members may indeed be deeply committed to and actively involved in linking their academic coursework to their local communities to positively impact student and community outcomes. And in institutions with 100 or 200 faculty (the size of many small liberal arts colleges), these 10 to 20 faculty may be visible and even prominent; and thus, simply on the basis of the students they teach and advise, in the projects they take on, and on the committees they sit on and chair, their ideas and impact may spread to 10 to 20 percent of the student population.

But if the community engagement movement is truly attempting to rethink and rework the prominence of service-learning across higher education, there is a fundamental disconnect between its vision and its implicit theory of organizational change. The problem can be simplified in the

predicament I have found myself in more than once: every time I speak with a Frenchman (or Spaniard or whomever) who doesn't understand me, I end up speaking louder and louder. Which, of course, doesn't help. I add gesticulations, articulate more, and increase my volume; all to no effect, for my actions miss the point that there is something fundamentally lost in translation. The man just doesn't understand English, or at least the English I am using. Similarly, what service-learning advocates do not grasp, or do not want to grasp, is that speaking louder and with more emphasis and with more rhetoric about the centrality of civic learning and democratic engagement in higher education will not make it so. Higher education cannot be taken over by a social movement.

The Problem of "Service Learning as a Social Movement"

Although there is no single definition of a social movement, and as Occupy Wall Street continues to challenge and redefine our notions of our public role and capacity to speak and make a difference, it is fairly clear that a social movement is an organized attempt at, in Tilly's (2004) words, "contentious politics." Tilly summarized a social movement as including a sustained and organized public effort, a repertoire of public and political actions, and the visible demonstrations of the individuals' worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment to the movement.

Thus a workers' strike with a picket line of hundreds standing in the rain or cold for days on end qualifies as a prototypical example. But so does a concerted public push for "democratic engagement," with its attendant academic conferences, prominent signatories to "founding principles," and investments in a range of philanthropic endeavors to fund greater awareness, outreach, and buy-in by faculty across the country. This strategy is neither good nor bad, per se, except for the fact that this movement is targeting the faculty and culture of higher education. And it is here that the social movement breaks down in the face of a Frenchman (in this case, higher education faculty and administrators) who does not understand (or, in this case, accept) the terminology being used.

In this case, I suggest, it is not that faculty and administrators in higher education do not understand why communities are important; it is not that they do not care about "the public" or "the other" or in "making a difference"; it is not that faculty have no interest in seeing their scholarship translated into public benefit or that they do not pursue more engaged modes of pedagogy. Rather, they do not accept (whether implicitly or explicitly) the terms of the debate as relevant to the academic enterprise of the production and dissemination of knowledge (see Butin, 2006, 2011 for a fuller explication of this).

Instead, if the service-learning movement is to become a more sustained and embedded aspect of higher education, I suggest that we need to begin to view service-learning as an intellectual movement (Frickel & Gross, 2005), akin to Women's Studies, Black Studies, Peace Studies, and a wide range of other interdisciplinary programs that have developed in higher education in the last generation around a cross-disciplinary and rigorous perspective of an oftentimes complementary and contemporaneous social movement. For if in fact, as Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton (2009) argued, "the dominant epistemology of the academy runs counter to the civic engagement agenda" (p. 5), then it is just as legitimate (and maybe even more effective) to embrace this epistemology.

I want to make clear that an affirmation of this epistemology does not mean that one abdicates the visions, aspirations, and activism of the service-learning movement; one simply "academizes" them. As Rojas (2007) has argued of Black Studies,

Black studies' institutionalization shows that movements test cultural boundaries; they do not mimic them, but expand them through hybridization. Social movements expand the "institutional vocabulary" of a field such as higher education by questioning what

is acceptable and extracting compromises between current behavioral norms and the movement's demands. Thus, the construction of black studies was not guided only by "institutional logics" that enforce conformity within higher education. Rather, the black studies movement generated a range of alternatives, some of which were modified so they could be deemed acceptable to at least a few university leaders. The cultural imperatives of higher education were used to discard proposals that were too radical, but that left many proposals that subtly changed the criteria of acceptable academic work. Thus, if movement activists can gain a sufficiently strong understanding of bureaucratic processes and outcomes, they can alter the organization's logic. (pp. 214–215)

It is from such a perspective that Rojas termed Black Studies as the "counter center" to the status quo of the academy; and, in fact, no less a seeming "enemy" of the civic engagement movement than Stanley Fish has suggested that this is indeed exactly the way to go. Speaking about the impact of Women's Studies in the academy, Fish (1994) opined that

The questions raised by feminism, because they were questions raised not in the academy but in the larger world and that then made their way into the academy, have energized more thought and social action than any other 'ism' in the past twenty or thirty years . . . [and] marks the true power of a form of inquiry or thought: when the assumptions encoded in the vocabulary of a form of thought become inescapable in the larger society. (p. 294)

It is this "encoding," I suggest, that offers a truly powerful model for institutionalizing a sustainable and impactful model of community engagement. Just as, for example, environmental studies scholars apply their theories and practices across fields as diverse as biology, public health, sociology, history, and philosophy, these fields in turn become influenced by, appreciative of, and engaged with the discussions and ideas and perspectives formed within the environmental studies field. The theoretical perspective of organizational change here is that knowledge construction, legitimization, and transmission in higher education occur in the academic discipline through highly disciplinary means.

A "discipline" is itself made up of faculty and administrators and conferences and journals and academic programs doing the daily work of writing and teaching and theorizing and developing ideas, programs, and policies around their academic area of concern (Abbott, 2001). All of these daily practices and rituals (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) build up to structure, solidify, and maintain a field's relevance and legitimacy. These "academic homes" for community engagement, I should note, do not replace or displace existing service-learning efforts across an institution so much as provide the academic foundation—the "thought leadership" if you will—for an institution's commitment to public engagement.

This is not an either/or proposition. The academy can embrace both the social movement and the critical academic spaces. To have engagement without the criticality is to succumb ultimately to a cheerleading mentality of a social movement with thin skin unable to withstand the critique of the academy. To have disciplined academic inquiry without a deep and sustained experiential community-based component is to succumb to an ineffectual model of "hallway activists" where theory and practice are disjoined and disjointed and where the thick skin of academic debate cannot feel or see the needs of the community all around it.

One can look at multiple examples across the country where this alignment of scholarship and activism is occurring, from Providence College's major in public and community service studies to Portland State's minor in community leadership or Alleghany College's VESA Program. In these cases, and many others, these programs complement and help sustain an institution-wide focus on community engagement by providing academics and administrators the space within which to develop deep practices, experiment with new models of teaching and learning, and concretize a

space for academic freedom to flourish around the complex and often controversial issues that community engagement inevitably brings up.

What I find fascinating about each of these cases is that there are dedicated faculty members attached to each of these programs doing the deliberate, careful, and critical work that is necessary for any successful academic program: advising students; creating introductory courses; questioning the quality of the capstone experience; reaching out to colleagues across the institution and community members outside of it for perspective, feedback, and collaboration; advocating for additional tenure-track lines; and questioning whether what they do is ultimately of value and relevance to its critical stakeholders. In other words, there are key individuals doing critical work in seemingly mundane yet ultimately deeply significant and sustained fashion.

This is a key point, for it makes vivid and visible the actual academics doing actual practices toward fostering and sustaining the conditions and moments for this “apprenticeship of liberty” for our students. This contrasts starkly with the standard positioning of a social movement, where all of us (and thus perhaps none of us?) are seemingly responsible. To return to the *A Crucible Moment* report (USDOE, 2012), the authors argued that

higher education has a particular contribution to make in terms of understanding the depth, complexity, and competing versions of what “civic” actually entails—and means. As such it has an obligation to build a broader theory of knowledge about democracy and democratic principles in this contemporary age. (p. 36)

Amen. Amen. But when we stop cheering, a key question is who exactly is going to do this hard work? With what funding? For what length of time? With what consequences? To what ends? The implicit and explicit presumption is that all of us in higher education are called upon to do so. But although this presumption may work for a social movement in the public commons—for, indeed, all of us can go and picket in a workers’ strike—the notion of an egalitarian, horizontal, and equally legitimate model of knowledge construction is missing in higher education. It is missing exactly because academic knowledge and its development, critique, and expansion are understood to be the purview of highly specialized researchers within highly delimited disciplinary fields with highly refined notions of what constitutes legitimate truth claims, methodologies, and modes of engaging with particular complex questions.

To presume that all of us are responsible for understanding the “civic” is thus to deeply shortchange and, in fact, undermine what we do in the academy. This does not suggest that we ignore it; it simply suggests that we acknowledge that these issues are complex and we need disciplinary models for working through this complexity. If, for example, we had substituted the word “atoms” (or “social mobility”) for “civic” in the quote above, very few of us would suggest that all of us in the academy have the ability or legitimacy to have a voice in deciding the theory of knowledge about atoms or social mobility.

Instead, what programs focused on community engagement demonstrate is that it is critical to create academic spaces—certificates, minors, and majors—where we can work through what it means to engage in community-based models of teaching, learning, and research in sustained, thoughtful, and meaningful ways. It is the critical work that cannot take for granted the practice and philosophy of community engagement. For community engagement is a complex and contested practice that claims to engage in “border crossing” and as such engages issues of power, race, and class. It is a practice that has real-world ethical, legal, and political implications as to what our undergraduates actually do out in the world. And it is a philosophy of practice that is seemingly at the heart of a liberal arts education. As such, what we do with, for, and in the community must be open to the same type of scrutiny as any other legitimate academic practice. It needs to be done in academic spaces that foster and strengthen the very qualities we are looking for in the community

partnerships we espouse: deep, sustained, and impactful reflection, engagement, and action. This, for me, is the face of the next generation of the engaged campus.

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