Preface

At the risk of offending some of my colleagues, I begin this essay with a decision to use my own voice as I review Engaging Departments. For most of my professional life in higher education and until recently, I was pressured to write in formal academic language—language that masked my identity, quelled my passions, and distilled my reflective inquiry. It is a time in my life, formally retired from a university role, when I am able to prioritize direction and focus on issues and developments about which I care deeply. The book I am about to review is related to one of my long-term commitments, one for which I have devoted almost 20 years. I’ve facilitated, designed, written, coordinated, collaborated, mentored, pleaded for resources, cooked, marched, advocated, and taught to promote community engagement in higher education, so I look forward to this book.

We live and work in a time when we urgently search both society and higher education for hope in the context and activities that surround us. Community or civic engagement has provided a hope for many of us for years, but there is a restlessness and, from my perspective, a need for accelerated momentum at this particular time. Many of us feel assured that community engagement will not be abandoned by higher education, but want to know it will not fade into an invisible dusty tradition in our colleges and universities.

The new Carnegie classification has recognized the accomplishments of community engagement at institutional levels and has indirectly acknowledged the contributions of both its pioneers and its field laborers. Other current recognitions, such as the service-learning programs named in the U. S. News and World Report rankings and the Princeton Review’s Colleges with a Conscience have heightened the applause and recognitions, keeping the movement vital and visible. However, in the midst of the accolades, there is a gnawing concern over less-than-note-worthy progress in two essential supports for community engagement: (a) promotion and tenure specification of and reward for the scholarship of engagement, and (b) department-wide approaches to community engagement. Kevin Kecskes and his colleagues have addressed the latter support in Engaging Departments: Moving Faculty Culture from Private to Public, Individual to Collective Focus for the Common Good.

As a faculty development professional, I often urged faculty to introduce course texts and other reading materials with an interactive pedagogy that drew their students into the writings with heightened curiosity and interest. With this method, students begin to interact with the text with inquiry, reflection, prediction, and expectation before they begin to read it. This method has become my own personal reading strategy, consistently adding depth to my often hurried browsing of new material. I begin by reflecting on the title and author and from there move to the table of contents. I anticipate possible content with excitement and questions. Not only do I know the editor Kevin Kecskes, but I worked in his position years before him at Portland State University. I perceive this as an advantage because I can be authentically empathic when I reflect on his perspectives.

Before opening the cover, I have high hopes for a blend of scholarly descriptions of “state of the art” engaged departments along with practical strategies for achieving such cultures. I muse the varied departments with which I have been a faculty member but come up “empty handed” when it comes to visualizing the kind of culture that would enable department-wide approaches to community engagement. That paucity of personal experiences expands my eagerness for the descriptions ahead and the stories I hope to enter.

As for the editor, I am charged with the possibilities. Knowing Kevin, I am enticed by the wisdom his broad experiences, strength of commitment,
and current professional responsibilities will bring to this book. I become impatient, open to the Table of Contents, and with the same delight that I experience when browsing a conference program, I find the list of authors includes many of our long-standing and respected leaders in community engagement. I browse the names of new colleagues and their institutions—campuses and colleagues with whom I have not had the privilege or pleasure of working and I am grateful for their presence. I further am encouraged by the range of disciplines. There are those I immediately expect, such as nursing, sociology, and communication, and those less often described in the literature, such as art, geology, and Chicana/Chicano Studies. I also note chapters on multiple departments in a single university, a system-wide approach to community engagement, and a national disciplinary model. Those latter foci offer the potential for that momentum I have sensed as lagging.

It is almost unnerving to pause any longer but I stop for one final reflection. I expect that Kevin edited this timely book with some of the same concern I have expressed and with the same hopes for what engaged departments could provide to keep community engagement vital, energizing, and integral force in universities and colleges today and tomorrow. I am hoping he and the authors go beyond stories and anecdotes to strategies and resources that could nurture an ever-expanding number of engaged departments. I want inspiration for myself and my colleagues, but beyond that temporary glimmer of inspiration, I want a case for such departments that is so compelling that faculty and administrators cannot resist. The optimist in me, and I expect in Kevin, foresees campuses of engaged departments. I envision a national academic community in which faculty who teach service-learning courses do not experience the isolation I continue to hear expressed whenever I meet with such a group. I envision a national academic community in which faculty who conduct community-based research studies always have a colleague with whom to reflect on their data and results. I envision a national academic community in which faculty engaged with community are able to document the scholarship of that work with a certainty that their scholarship will be understood and rewarded within their discipline. The enormity of my expectations is not unusual, and I am not alone in my hope.

I have a quote from Emily Dickinson that describes how I feel at this time. She describes hope as the “thing with feathers that perches in the soul” and as I open this book, I await the flurry and flight of those feathers, the potential of movement, and soaring possibilities.

Several coast-to-coast plane trips later, I’m savoring the ideas of Engaging Departments, ready both to summarize and reminisce “high points” of the narratives. I also am intent on assessing whether the book responded to my hopes and inquiries.

Foundational Wisdom

The early chapters begin with a foundational lens describing the dismal history of isolated faculty well documented by Jon Wergin (1995, 2003) and others (Battistoni, Gelmon, Saltmarsh, Wergin, & Zlotkowski, 2003). Those first chapters also promised examples of the “healthy departments” in chapters to follow. My optimism was contained with the comprehensive overview of the challenges. Furthering my sense of those difficulties was the landscape of challenges or realistically, obstacles that Battistoni reviews in Chapter 2. I agreed completely with his identification of the lack of definition, the lack of agreement about purpose, the criticisms from outside the academy, and the “controversial and contested” (p. 13) concept of good citizenship. Those same obstacles recently challenged my work on the development of the Carnegie classification and the efforts of many colleagues in their work in community engagement.

Chapter 3’s title, “Characteristics of An Engaged Department,” was immediately promising because I have found such analyses of characteristics typically full of direction and guidance for becoming what the characteristics describe. Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) qualities of good practice for undergraduate education come to mind. Or I reflect often on Barr and Tagg’s (1995) descriptions of the characteristics of the teaching and learning paradigms with their explicit direction for higher education. I still rely on insights from those sets of characteristics when making curricular or programmatic recommendations to institutions. Kezar’s (2005) recent articulation of characteristics of contexts in which institutional change can occur has provided reassurance and a framework of context for engaged departments. This chapter’s authors, Saltmarsh and Gelmon, do not disappoint with their characteristics. Some are absolute and unquestionable, and others leave me with questions and new ideas.

It is no surprise that the authors also provide thoughtful encouragement for systematic and well-designed assessment for engaged departments to prosper. Most of the cases that follow affirm that importance and specify approaches. Beyond assessment, there are themes that consistently stand out as if they are described in large bold type.
Dominant Themes

Triggering Opportunities

I find a number of prominent recurring themes across the stories in Engaged Departments. The first is that most of the departments were catalyzed by “triggering opportunities” (Ewell, 1997)—push or jumpstarting factors that cause movement or change.

Often the triggering came from departmental needs, as in the case of the Center for Social Work Education at Widener University. The faculty, students, and curriculum requirements of social work needed community practicum sites. The ethics and mission of their profession insisted that they go beyond placing students in sites to a more complex and collaborative community engagement. I said to myself, “They had no choice but to engage with community.” But they did have a choice about how to engage. Their story, like those of other departments in the book, recounted their patient efforts to build trust and instill an absolute certainty in their community partners that they were there to stay.

Another triggering opportunity was the emergence of a new department on campus. When Samford University’s traditional department of Speech Communication and Theatre suddenly became the Department of Communication Studies with the exit of their theatre faculty to another department, there was a brief period of floundering. Soon, the faculty began to discuss identity, set purpose, and meet with their various publics to “create a dynamic, growing, and engaged department” (p. 64).

For Orange Coast College, their community need came in the form of low scores on state tests for local schools with the lowest socioeconomic status. The need was dramatic and visible to science faculty when science content was added to the tests. Local schools approached the College and a member of the Geology Department responded. The resulting family science nights became so successful that one faculty member and one course could not satisfy the need. It became clear that managing the explosion of service-learning projects that expanded from the science nights was essential at the departmental level.

When a 20 hour service-learning requirement was integrated into almost all English 102 sections, typically a requirement for all students, the Chandler Gilbert Community College English Department undertook community engagement to survive the challenges. Their trigger included the challenges of placing hundreds of students, revising curriculum, coordinating logistics, and contacting and communicating with agencies. They went beyond survival to implement an innovative student service-learning assistant cadre, an agency database, faculty orienta-

tion and development workshops, and an extension of service-learning to the English 101 sections. Before long, the English Department team was reaching out to all departments on campus.

Reward Systems

An expected and prominent theme was the power of reward systems for supporting faculty in engaged departments. I found myself devastated when reading about cases lacking such support and how, without it, maintaining engagement was an uphill battle. Other cases, such as that of the Social Justice Concentration in Sociology at Georgetown University, assured faculty of rewards. They described how their internal merit guidelines (for merit pay raises) were redefined and promotion and tenure guidelines altered to include the scholarship of engagement. They painstakingly assured faculty by articulating their changes to external reviewers as well as internal committees. I silently cheered as I read their story.

Student and Faculty Impact

My experience of coordinating community-based learning prompted me to search for another prominent theme. I had often witnessed the motivation prompted by student and faculty impact on decisions to pursue community partnerships for both curricular engagement and community-based research. Most prominent of the examples in which such impact encouraged entire departments was the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The kind of careful assessment recommended by Gelmon and Saltmarsh was integral to the department’s service-learning program and enabled the documentation of service-learning’s added value. The resulting data promoted positive shifts in financial and administrative support, and attracted experienced and new faculty to the engagement efforts. At the time of writing their chapter, this engaged department envisioned expansion to capstone courses, stronger bridges between teaching, research, and outreach in their partnerships, and long-term commitment among even more colleagues.

Activism

A thread of activism characterizes numerous cases and stories in this book. Most prominent of the activist engaged departments is the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, with its commitment to service, social change, and civic activism. As noted in their story, service in the local communities has been integrated in the major since beginning in 1974. That beginning was not unlike requirements in many major programs of study—a field studies
component satisfied by varied learning experiences. In Chicana and Chicano Studies, the coursework and service evolved over time, catalyzed by a comprehensive program and curriculum review, ongoing discussions about the service requirement, a new chair with interest in clarification of the requirement, and a serious and scholarly study of service-learning and related research. The department faculty are to be commended for their inquiry approach to integrating service-learning. Their study processes led to a definition of civic engagement for the department, the articulation of goals for an “engaged (collaborative) department” (p. 199), and a plan for carefully monitoring impact on students, faculty, community partners, and the institution. Today, the Department provides leadership as an engaged department, sharing insights, data, and stories with campus colleagues and local community, and at state and national meetings.

Some of the same activist tradition characterizes the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Spelman College, an institution that “seeks to empower the total person, who appreciates the many cultures of the world and commits to positive social change” (Spelman College Mission Statement). Inspired by the belief of W. E. B. Du Bois that one must engage in community issues “personally not by proxy” (Lewis, 1993, p. 202), the Department began with a commitment to active learning supported by community collaboration. Similar to the UCLA Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies, faculty discussion and study at Spelman moved the departmental approach to one that facilitated social problem solving and policy analysis with community issues as a way to teach sociological and anthropological concepts, theory, and methodology. As with their California colleagues, the faculty engaged in strategic planning, goal setting, and planning for assessment. A rotation of teaching responsibilities, collaborative responsibility for students’ theses, and departmental review (with all faculty participating) of new courses has led to a collective sense within the departmental culture. The chapter’s authors, Spence and White, describe that collective sense—“the curriculum belongs to the department collectively rather than to individuals” (p. 132)—a contrast to the usual faculty focus on and ownership of just the respective courses they teach. The Department attributes the changes of recent years to that collective responsibility while acknowledging that challenges continue.

**Systems Approach**

The final theme is a systems approach to “formal and durable commitments to service-learning” (p. 205) at the Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling at California State University (CSU), Northridge. Systems thinking was subtly present in several of the book’s cases, but the CSU Northridge story is explicit in attributing their engagement success to systems thinking, already an integral component of the disciplinary curricular content. The Department followed Senge’s (1990) encouragement to address the whole, see relationships, and envision “patterns of change rather than static snapshots” (p. 211) as they reviewed community placements and partnerships, course requirements, and the existing fieldwork model.

The CSU case story also described a trigger common to other departments. A faculty team attended the CSU Engaged Department Institute and returned to campus with strategies, momentum, and energy to move their departmental colleagues to a broadened departmental engagement. While colleagues lacked enthusiasm for engagement, strong programmatic components—cohort design, service-learning prerequisite courses, graduation requirements for service, and the hiring of a part-time service-learning coordinator—enabled a smooth process to a “developmental service-learning model” (p. 210) for the Department. That transition was followed by the development of community partner contracts and a guide, design of other curricular options for community collaboration, and a mentoring component directed to first- and second-year students. The chapter authors, Laurent, McIntosh, and Mitchell, believe their relationship with community partners goes beyond engagement, saying “we believe our marriage has a promising future” (p. 217).

**Final Chapters**

The final chapters are both inspirational and full of the hope I sought when I began to examine the contents of this book. Descriptions of an institution with multiple engaged departments and a system-wide approach to community engagement extend the engaged departments model. The description of how disciplinary societies can support the scholarship of engagement addresses an essential element for accelerating momentum across higher education.

Even before reading Chapter 18, “The Engaged Department in the Context of Academic Change,” I was very encouraged by the realization that engaged departments, as described by the authors of this book, offered a stunning new academic organization paradigm. With engaged departments, there were collegial conversations (not limited to email), collaborative course and program development, a lessening of traditional competition, agreed-upon group intentions, a new kind of group identity and pride, and more. This chapter’s authors, Zlotkowski and Saltmarsh, take hopeful descriptions to a higher level with the promise of significant academic reform,
complete with professional communities within and amongst colleges and universities. They describe those communities as willing to be “ventilated by new interests, forces and collaborations,” leading to “more internally coherent, psychologically and intellectually satisfying forms of community” (p. 281).

Recommendations to the Authors and Engaged Departments

This book could have had another title—one that describes its potential for guidance and strategies for campus-community partnerships. The book is replete with wisdom and “how to’s” for developing and nurturing such partnerships. It is not surprising that faculty in engaged departments would have such wisdom; their experiences have taught them well, and their lessons are powerful and potentially contagious.

The difficulty and complexity of partnerships probably needs greater highlighting in this book. Few faculty have been prepared for the major responsibilities of their professional role, other than that of researcher, and with the expansion of that role to one of collaborator with community partners, there is, only recently, a gradual understanding of and attention to the skills and knowledge needed for this role.

Not only is there a lack of preparation for such skills and knowledge. There is little reward and recognition for those individuals who have such expertise within our academic cultures. This takes me back to the other force that needs attention in our universities and colleges—reward for the scholarship of engagement. This text contributes to that with its attention to engaged departments, their characteristics, and inclinations to change. It is my hope that we build upon the wisdom in Engaged Departments to create and expand academic communities characterized by the same qualities of professional life and structured to support multiple roles, responsibilities, and rewards.

References


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