Review Essay

Academic Leadership for the Civic Engagement Movement
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Public Work and the Academy:
An Academic Administrator’s Guide to Civic Engagement and Service-Learning

Mark Langseth and William M. Plater (Eds.)

One hundred years after John Dewey walked the same ground as we do on the University of Michigan campus and 20 years after Ernest Boyer challenged us with a reconsideration of scholarship, we still debate whether or not there is genuine movement toward acceptance of civic engagement and service-learning as central aspects of higher education in the United States. One reason service-learning educators are unsure about the objective progress being made in this cause may be that there are so many places in which to inspect the evidence. If the goal is transformation, then clearly there are students whose lives have been deeply affected and individual faculty members whose teaching and research has been irrevocably changed. But shifting to an institutional or systems perspective, there is little to suggest that many (if any) colleges have been yet transformed by a commitment to service-learning, and no one would argue that the system of higher education has been significantly changed.

Yet that is the goal we hold for the potential of public work in the academy: that through service-learning and civic engagement we will change ourselves and our students, institutions, and society. We do not think this goal is fanciful or arrogant, but it is ambitious and requires many things to happen simultaneously. For the moment, service-learning educators seem to be most concerned about the transformation that needs to occur within institutions of higher education, and hence focus on the leadership necessary to enable that change. But the focus on roles and structures within the academy will be distorted and ultimately stymied unless attention also is paid to the changes needed throughout the entire system and in the environments in which higher education exists, and in the relationship between higher education and the society it serves.

There is the dilemma. For the service-learning movement to survive and prosper it will have to win a place in the structure and culture of institutions of higher education. Yet much of the resistance to that adoption can be attributed to the attitudes, demands, and expectations of those outside or historically marginal to institutional structures—namely the students, communities, legislators, and the general public. Academic leaders need help not only in changing their institutions to embrace service-learning and engagement, but also in influencing the many constituencies that must simultaneously be engaged if institutional change is to be effective and sustained.

Mark Langseth and William Plater have edited a helpful book that should make an important contribution to the ways that academic administrators approach their responsibilities for encouraging civic engagement and service-learning in higher education. The editors have made a special effort to provide guidance to academic colleagues in a wide range of institutions. The list of contributors is impressive, knowledgeable of the field and its history, and diverse in range of perspectives. The editors effectively elicit the voices of their associates and have combined them skillfully into a well-balanced and resounding chorus.

As a guide for academic administrators committed to engagement and service-learning and those eager to embed it within their own institutions, the book achieves its purpose. The volume begins with a series of topical essays that illuminate the intellectual, historical, and political roots of the service-learning movement and the current issues faced by administrators in securing its adoption within colleges and universities. Collectively, the essays challenge academic administrators to be leaders of their faculty colleagues who are increasingly committed to the new forms of teaching, research, and service that public work implies.

Plater’s call to leadership within the academy is fittingly placed first in the volume. He draws upon
extensive experience as provost and acting president of a major public university whose mission and history is deeply connected with service. In calling academic leaders to action, he identifies opportunities and tension points that are frequently encountered in promoting civic engagement and service-learning activities. Many of the “signposts” Plater notes are direct and useful lessons about organizational leadership that are applicable to many situations, including the important responsibility leaders bear to articulate a vision and organize resources for its accomplishment. Within his list are a few thoughts for leaders that are especially pertinent to the challenges addressed by this book, including the need to deal with particular roadblocks created by institutional tradition, structure, and incentives. Plater’s brief discussion of the phenomenon of “expectation and envy management” (p. 20) could be an essay in itself and clearly deserves greater exploration as a barrier to second-order change within schools, colleges, and departments.

Andrew Furco and Barbara Holland provide a well-conceived analysis of how civic engagement and service-learning activities are adopted in ways that are inherently related to institutional practice, and suggest it may be time to look at the process of “institutionalization” in a new way. Drawing on the ample literature that describes the process of innovation in educational settings, and the research and experiences of the authors, Furco and Holland posit two useful matrices: one dealing with the importance of the innovation’s purpose, the other with various dimensions of institutional adoption. From a conceptual standpoint, the authors make a helpful contribution by shifting service-learning educators’ thinking about engagement from an end in itself to a means for achieving desired mission-related objectives in preparing students and fulfilling an institutional charter with society. They also remind academic leaders that while the path to institutionalization is complex and probably long, it can be mastered by sticking to three basic objectives: intentionality, coherence, and commitment. Toward the close of their chapter, the authors stress that change within the academy must be accompanied by changes outside of it and changes in the relationships in which the academy is engaged. This is essential advice to which we must return.

Edward Zlotowski and his colleague John Saltmarsh provide a short chapter that posits service-learning as a fulcrum of educational reform, an idea that follows well upon those introduced in the previous chapter. More attention is paid to this concept in the case studies in the second part of the book and in the chapter that follows, written by Amy Driscoll and Lorilee Sandmann. The Driscoll and Sandmann analysis is quite thorough and offers several robust ideas for academic administrators interested in logical frameworks and in conceptual maps for understanding and interpreting engaged scholarship. There is quite enough here to feed a meaty campus discussion, perhaps even to satisfy a national conference agenda, with food for thought left over. Driscoll and Sandmann have the courage and field evidence to tackle one of the most difficult obstacles to faculty’s effective institutionalization of service-learning practice: the apparent lack of consensus regarding how it should be evaluated and rewarded. After reading this chapter, an academic leader should have the substantive basis to start a conversation on this topic on his or her campus. The graphic models seem perfectly suited for this purpose and reflect the authors’ considerable experience as consultants, working with campuses to develop evaluation processes that will fit their own institutional circumstances and local traditions of peer governance.

In the last essay in the first section of the book, Jim Ostrow argues that to convince faculty members of the value of service-learning, it is essential that this approach is not seen as a compromise but as an enhancement to good teaching and learning practice. Ostrow mines the concept of “depth” in the learning process and argues (his chapter depends on exemplary statements of philosophy and pedagogy by Whitehead, Dewey, and others) that in addition to the obvious benefits of social engagement, students simply learn more and better when they are socially engaged. Ostrow concludes his chapter with a welcome reminder that engagement is integral to the cultivation of vocation in students, that the very idea of professional formation is based on taking learning into active expression. Ostrow might have extended this reminder to the preparation of graduate students, especially in professional schools. One cannot help but recognize the extreme differences represented by how physicians and nurses are educated when compared with the professional development of graduate students in other disciplines where learning takes place far from the environments in which it will be applied.

To this point in the book, while the emphasis has clearly been on the challenges of institutionalization and the need for institutional leadership, the essays have been largely rendered without reference to specific institutional contexts. In the second part of the book, eleven case studies are introduced. These chapters further examine the opportunities and barriers to institutional adoption across a wide range of settings. They provide grounded circumstances for applying the comparatively theoretical and polemical insights in the essays which precede them, but they are not written with direct reference to those specific ideas. Interestingly, both the case studies and essays draw
upon a common literature base, a bibliography of less than 150 citations, many representing prior works by the authors themselves. This may be an unintended statement about the limitation of the extant literature, or reflect a community of scholars that has started to wind around itself. Pointedly, there are almost no pieces directly expressing the voice of community members.

The case studies introduce a number of different campus environments. The editors have taken obvious care to ensure that the broad expanse of American higher education is sampled. There are several liberal arts institutions, community colleges, a historically black college, and two large research universities. Collectively they provide insights into the different challenges faced by academic leaders across a spectrum of institutions. The reader is not treated to cross-institutional comparisons (one might have been helpful), but careful attention will allow some common themes to emerge, and some differences as well.

The goals of the case studies seem to be twofold. The primary goal is to share information between academic administrators across campuses to further useful knowledge and share best practices. To this point, the book fulfills the objective set forth in the title—it serves as “An academic administrator’s guide to [existing] civic engagement and service-learning [models and lessons-learned].” Second, the case studies seem to have served as a reflective tool for campus self-assessment. This reflective assessment aspect of the case studies resonates with the research on service-learning, which holds that those service-learning opportunities that incorporate reflection have the greatest impact and outcomes for undergraduates. Specifically, reflection that is continuous, connected, challenging, contextualized, and coached (Eyler & Giles, 1999) is most effective. Many of the case studies possess these “5 C’s.”

Most of the case studies take the form of observations and reflections by one individual administrator. A few, such as the one describing activities at the University of Minnesota, arise from a collaborative effort that combines the various narratives into a cohesive case study. The University of Southern Mississippi (USM) authors utilize interviews with key personnel to collectively write about the collaboration between student and academic affairs at USM. Recognizing the roles each author held at their respective institutions became paramount to understanding each differing approach to the case studies.

A number of general themes cut across the case studies. These include discussions of the civic mission, the creation of a center, institutionalization, assessment and accountability, student involvement, partnerships, faculty roles and rewards, and dilemmas. Each will be briefly explored here to identify and elaborate on themes throughout the book. Most of the authors write about service-learning and civic engagement as vital to re-connecting with their civic mission, albeit from very different perspectives. Specifically, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) shared lessons learned from focusing on the broadest statements of the institutional mission. LeMoyne-Owen College addressed service-learning through its teaching mission, while Miami-Dade Community College shared an experience where college leaders collaborated to further connect its civic and academic mission. The chapter on DePaul University cites the institution’s religious roots and how the spiritual mission is being continued through service-learning. Each differing approach echoes the importance for colleges and universities to connect civic engagement to their specific academic mission.

A number of institutions have established centers for service-learning and civic engagement. Institutional size, structure, and politics are extremely different at each of the institutions, yet the nuances of how the centers were created were not fully explored in the case studies. The brief descriptions provided in this book will help administrators quickly determine if the model utilized at each institution would be helpful at the readers’ home institution. San Jose City College (SJCC) had a unique and interesting model of sharing service-learning opportunities with students through the job placement center that in particular should be noted for its distinctive concepts and design.

Miami-Dade Community College, DePaul University, IUPUI, and the University of Michigan each talked about the issue of sustainability, some through a specific strategic plan. The IUPUI chapter offers a thorough description of what has been implemented in accordance with Holland’s (1997, 2000) seven key organizational factors that support developing service-learning and civic engagement in higher education. This chapter is a good model for administrators who wish to take the same approach to assess how service-learning is becoming institutionalized at their own college or university.

The University of San Diego, SJCC, DePaul University, and the University of Minnesota talked specifically about the significance of assessment and accountability. The Universities of San Diego and Minnesota each described the importance of connecting institutional commitment to civic engagement with strategic planning efforts and funding. A strong example is given by the Office of Research and Planning at SJCC that prepares an annual accountability report on civic engagement for the
board of trustees, faculty, staff, and community partners. In addition, SJCC regularly provides assessments of student grades and persistence in relation to engagement.

Curricular and co-curricular student involvement was another significant theme that a number of the case studies addressed. For example, the University of San Diego talked about how student leadership is key to the success of the curricular program. The University of Minnesota shares information about their cross-disciplinary undergraduate leadership minor that assists students “to develop the leadership and social change skills requisite for their roles as engaged citizens on the campus and in their larger, global community” (p. 236). Johnson C. Smith University articulates their long-standing tradition of service to help students become better citizens through service-learning, where student and community engagement is the key to their success.

No author talked of creating culture change alone or out of a single office. There were different types of partnerships described, some in detail, including partnerships with community organizations, faculty, administrators, trustees, government officials, and national associations. The most common partnership that was addressed was through faculty participation. University of Michigan faculty member Barry Checkoway mentioned that faculty often are engaged in service-learning work, yet need orchestrated, institutional support. A number of initiatives shared in this book are solid examples of how faculty support within their college or university has been instituted.

Among these strategies: presidential rewards for faculty who write successful grants, monetary incentives, administrative support through deans and service-learning coordinators, faculty coordinators of service-learning, visible institutional priority through campus deans and leaders, participation in university-wide committee work, inclusion in decision-making, faculty participation in curricular development, administrative and financial support for research initiatives, opportunities to build cross-campus collaborative relationships, participation from faculty senate committees, clear articulation of educational goals, accessibility to learning effective pedagogy, and release time for faculty to audit service-learning courses at other institutions.

Another major focus of some case studies was faculty roles and rewards. The campuses are in agreement that faculty ought to be connected to this work, but many institutions have struggled with rewards and recognition. SJCC provides institutional support for professional development around issues of service-learning teaching and learning. The University of Minnesota has established a faculty and staff recognition process, which uniquely encompasses permanent salary augmentation. Vice president for academic affairs and provost of the University of San Diego, Francis M. Lazarus, challenged faculty peers to address the issue of including service-learning in tenure and promotion expectations.

Finally, another emergent theme in the case studies was posed as a dilemma about civic engagement that administrators need to address to propel the movement forward. It was mentioned that faculty participation in service-learning was still “on the side” (p. 244) and that tenure and promotion committees need to address the intersections of service-learning and faculty rewards. The importance of sustained leadership was also mentioned, yet institutions often have a high presidential and administrative turnover rate. Turnover can impede a campus-wide civic engagement initiative, and institutions must find a way to sustain the work. Finally, the importance of matching institutional support with financial support was articulated, and this remains a dilemma facing many campuses.

The Bates College case study provides particular insight. Bates integrated community partnerships and civic learning with a commitment to liberal arts education. In addition to providing the reader with many examples of student and faculty engagement in courts, schools, public housing, museums, and neighborhood projects, the College has taken the lead in developing a community-wide learning strategy. Bates has also been a leader in the formation of the Maine Campus Compact. Additionally, there is considerable emphasis at Bates on how learning occurs, and how learners and communities see one another. Bates is a model for how an institution can bring service-learning and engagement into the core of its work and make it more central to student experiences. At Bates, learning through different modalities inside and outside the traditional institutional boundaries is integrated and deeply connected. This, of course, is how it occurs in the mind of the learner, and Bates’ approach predictably would lead to powerful learning outcomes for teachers, students, and communities.

If service-learning educators can merely anticipate such a relationship for the best of our examples without being able to demonstrate it with conscientious research, we lose something of value to the process of widespread emulation and adoption. This book is strong on examples and somewhat weak on evidence. This continues to plague the field.

The resources at the end of the book are a good first step for any university president or administrator who is considering embarking upon institutional change focused on civic engagement, service-learning, and/or university-community partnerships. The reference list may also serve as a starting point for
any research initiative or graduate-student course on service-learning. The references are an invariable “who’s who” list of authors and articles connected to this work, even if several of the authors chose to cite their own previous publications. Arguably, these constituted the best available sources, in addition to the most familiar.

Overall, the case studies provide strategies and lessons learned from various different colleges and universities across the country. This information will be useful for administrators initiating service-learning opportunities or to challenge existing programs to move to the next level. The information also may prove useful to the institutions incorporated in this book, in that it will enable the authors to reflect on existing programs. Our hope is that through engaging in the reflection necessary to write these chapters, administrators will be able to follow through on the goals they set for themselves and engage in problem-solving strategies to initiate the actions needed to address dilemmas identified. We recommend that the work does not stop here, but that it is “continuous” (Eyler & Giles, 1999). A conference is needed that brings authors together to reflect upon where their institution has been and identify any progress since the time of publication. This book could serve as a benchmark for articulating future success in relation to service-learning and civic engagement.

For a period of eight years in the 1990s one of us traveled on behalf of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to fund and evaluate innovative practices within higher education institutions across the country. After several years of observing such promising efforts as these in the fields of service-learning and civic engagement, it seems we are still wrestling with many of the same dilemmas we faced in this work over ten years ago. As this book attests, the service-learning “movement” is created out of increasingly good examples, promising starts, and heroic promises. We still could use better evidence to guide our processes and attempts at institutional adoption. We could still benefit from a way to “crack” the challenge of faculty rewards and incentives. Slowly, we are inching service-learning and civic engagement into accreditation and governance discussions. This journal has contributed significantly to the knowledge base that has brought us to this point. But what will it take to achieve a cascade of change, a real shift in the landscape?

This is a challenge of academic leadership that is neither well understood nor addressed by the Langseth and Plater book. We need more senior academic leaders to challenge one another to advance the movement not only within, but between institutions and across the system at large. While the success of Campus Compact and other inter-institutional coalitions provide vehicles for this cross-institutional engagement, books such as this one should begin to tell us how we will make the leap from innovation to system change, which is still a long ways off. That next bold step will not be accomplished entirely through more institutional examples, even good ones like those reported in this book. It will not be much furthered by more well-written essays. We believe that the vulnerability of great examples such as those described in the Langseth and Plater book, and the repeating lamentations of those who view the field as rich with promise but stifled in its development by challenges of validation and adoption, suggest we have graduated to a new stage in our task. In addition to knowing what can be done to transact service-learning and civic engagement into our institutions one by one, academic leaders must attend to the environments shaping higher educational practice, especially those created by the expectations held by students, their families, legislatures, and governing boards.

The next book that is written for academic administrators should help them to speak persuasively to the publics served by the institutions they lead. Perhaps some part of this advocacy might take the form of passionate entreaties. These are always welcome, even necessary, but insufficient. They would be far more effective if bolstered by better research to demonstrate the claims of the practices we advocate. We still must take on the task of demonstrating to students that we propose this movement because it makes sense for them in terms of their own aspirations, not just because we think it virtuous that they move beyond their comfort zones.

Sometimes it is hard to know, when standing at a distance, if the landscape is shifting or if it is merely the swaying of the grass. But when we are stuck in place, who among us is not eager to see a movement?

Note

Both authors contributed equally to this review.

References


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