Effective Engagement: Lessons from Faculty Roles in Community Involvement

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Abstract

The role of individual faculty in community service at institutions of higher education has been less studied due to its association with personal volunteer work. This paper suggests that such service should be viewed as an integral part of engagement, particularly when it contributes to positive change and problem resolution in urban communities. Three examples of such involvement are presented as modified case studies, highlighting work of faculty at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Introduction

In noting the tremendous increase in interest and support for faculty engagement over the past several years, critically reflected in part by the high level of funding support from government and private foundations, O'Meara et al. (2011, 85) make the observation that:

> "There is no doubt that this level of financial support has increased the amount of faculty engagement, and there is evidence to suggest some of the funding has improved the quality of the engagement process and its outcomes. However, the greatest advances made have been in understanding the impact of engagement for student learners, rather than for faculty members as professional learners and partners. . . .

> [It] is critical to examine the factors that influence faculty members' own civic commitments, practices of engagement, and outcomes rather than viewing them as a means through which to achieve student outcomes. Just as studies of student engagement in classrooms have benefited faculty by giving them tools to improve their practice . . . so, too, will this greater attention on the engaged faculty reap significant benefits for both the students and community partners."

One of the needs indicated here is for more research on faculty engagement at the level of community involvement that addresses the commitment of individual faculty to broader community needs, aims, and goals. The present paper seeks to add to this research by using a modified case study method to highlight examples of such faculty involvement from among faculty at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. They are representative of personal involvement with community issues as an important form of engagement to help reduce the sense of separation between "town and gown." Although the selection of the faculty was purposive, they are by no means unique.

They have counterparts in nearly all other institutions of higher education, but little research targets these largely "volunteer" engagement activities. Because their stories remain largely untold, the lessons from their engagement are often unnoted, resulting in less acknowledgement of their work and its capacity to inform a larger picture of what it means to be an engaged metropolitan university.

Community Service as Engagement in Higher Education

Community engagement has become an established part of both the mission and pedagogy of most large and mid-sized urban universities. Christopher Koliba (2007) points out early proponents of engagement, such as Ernest Boyer, laid the groundwork for the inclusion of partnership-based outreach and civic responsiveness by emphasizing the need for public universities in particular to return to their historical charge to be civic-minded and contribute to the betterment of local communities. Boyer, in particular, redefined academic scholarship to include applied research and engagement as important faculty roles (Boyer 1990). Over the past twenty years as outreach and engagement increasingly became part of the epistemological discourse in higher education, a number of scholars stressed the central role of faculty if engagement was to be a meaningful process. Much of the focus in colleges and universities also was on defining and organizing engagement. Several studies noted the challenges in categorizing engagement, and addressing recurrent concerns with how engagement should be structured, supported, and rewarded, thus recognizing the range of options within and across academic disciplines (O'Meara et al. 2011; Nicotera et al 2011; Lunsford and Omae 2011).

It, therefore, become generally acknowledged that engagement can and does take many different forms. Most of the research, however, has focused on university-community partnerships, and the connection between engagement and research, and engagement and teaching (with special emphasis on service-learning), and has included in some cases assessments of how these dimensions have developed over time (Foster 2010; Demb and Wade 2012). Engagement that may be expressed through volunteerism and personal service has been less recognized, researched, and chronicled, however, as a particular type and quality of involvement by faculty. The exception has been where this work was associated with schools of social work (Euster and Weinbach 1994; O'Meara 2002). At the same time, it is observationally apparent that many faculty from a range of disciplines regularly participate in community work in which they lend their expertise to effectuate community change and problem resolution. Although volunteerism is typically treated as a reflection of personal interests and roles within organizational affiliations (as board members), these roles reflect only one part of the picture. Further examination of faculty volunteer work reveals more diverse activities, which serve to create more livable communities and that frequently address critical social needs. The role individual faculty service has played in shaping community change impacting the Chattanooga community is explored in the following review of the work of selected faculty members.

Methodology

Three faculty members from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga were included in this study. In addition to the author, two faculty members with long-term involvement in the Chattanooga community were asked to participate by sharing their stories. Using an interview method for the two additional faculty members and relying on personal history and documentation for the author, modified case studies were developed to chronicle these faculty's community work and achievements. An interview questionnaire was developed to obtain information on their specific areas of community involvement, including 1) how they became involved, 2) what specific community issues or needs were addressed through their involvement, 3) what the outcomes resulted from their involvement, and 4) how their involvement related back to their faculty and teaching roles in the academy. Using content analysis methods, the data from the interviews and personal history were analyzed and common themes identified.

Three Stories

Highlighting the experience of faculty who have become involved in significant community issues and needs mainly through their personal decision to volunteer services and expertise illustrates the role of this level of engagement. It also demonstrates the potential impact on the local community, and suggests experiential avenues of growth for faculty. For many such involved faculty, an important byproduct is the enhancement of classroom teaching and student learning. This paper presents three faculty stories in brief; describing how each individual became involved in the community, what resulted from their involvement in terms of community structures and change, and how this work enriched their teaching. It suggests the usefulness of adding faculty volunteer community service to the engagement paradigm, and the need for greater formal research in this area.

Professor Roger Thompson, Criminal Justice: "Connecting with the Other Side of the Justice System"

As an engaged professor, Professor Thompson had an extensive history. He discussed several areas in which he had been closely involved with the Chattanooga community, which illustrated his approach to engagement, and two of those areas are recounted here. Thompson's story and involvement in the local community began in the early 1990s when he was asked to assist with several issues related to public housing and crime. Local law enforcement and the public were challenged with the emerging gang issues at that time, and the impact of high poverty rates in the public housing community helping to create an opening for gang growth. Thompson observed alienation and a sense of estrangement among the public housing residents who felt their concerns were being ignored or ineffectively addressed. His critical question at the time was "How do we help people going through a community transition deal with guns, drugs, and violent crime?" He decided to become involved in helping the community work through the gang issues by conducting a study on gangs and the causes underlying their appeal to local low-income youth.

Thompson met with community members, talked to gang members, and identified a number of problems contributing to the growth of gangs. He also began working with local law enforcement to build bridges into the affected community. Through dialogue, greater problem awareness, and sensitivity to the effects of poverty on the residents and particular areas of the community, it became possible to organize community leaders and residents to address some of the problems they faced. A proactive agenda was developed to obtain a federal grant to address the crime problem, and to increase the awareness of public officials regarding the impact of high unemployment, deterioration, and economic decline in the poorer communities. The main target area was later the site for the HOPE VI public housing renovation grant, and later the first recipient of a Department of Justice Weed and Seed crime prevention program. Thompson continued to work with the community and law enforcement as a member of various crime task forces and became widely recognized as an involved and knowledgeable expert on the local community and law enforcement issues.

In a second area of community involvement, Thompson noted his work with the homeless community who were often seen first as an issue for law enforcement. He said he became involved with this issue because he did not see "attention being given to the human side of this problem," noting the mental health factor prevalent among the homeless, and the number of homeless veterans and homeless families and children. Over a ten-year period, he advocated for better approaches to deal with homelessness, including de-emphasizing the deviance model, and focusing on the need for better services to meet the diverse needs of the homeless. Integral to his advocacy was the need for greater sensitivity to the human side of homelessness. He believes his involvement and advocacy have helped "move the conversation about the homeless beyond where we were," to a people and needs orientation rather than a criminal justice orientation. Currently Thompson continues his involvement by serving on a planning committee for emergency shelters in the city and working with a local veteran group to build a shelter for homeless veterans.

When asked what his involvement has meant for his teaching, Thompson noted that over the years he has involved his students by taking his classes and interested students along on interviews and to community events and meetings. He has stressed giving them an exposure to what was actually going on in the community. Following this long-term teaching approach, he recently took his class to the Community Kitchen—the main service center for the city's homeless. The students had an opportunity to help serve lunch to the people at the center, and were encouraged to sit and talk with them and hear their stories. Thompson felt this experience helped the students to view the homeless as people, and helped them overcome what he terms their "fear factor." Some of his students now want to volunteer at the Community Kitchen on their own time.

Thompson feels this is the test of engagement, and that his community service work has given him greater credibility and an experiential foundation upon which to build his teaching. It says to the student "here's what the world looks like . . . here's what

the police see, what others see, what they are faced with." It brings the real world into the classroom. He also observes that today "people see me as a resource." His work has helped to connect the university to the community and brings some of its resources to bear on community problems. He hopes the result also helps the community develop new ways of thinking about its problems.

Professor Michael Feeny, History and Religion: "Connecting with the Hispanic Community"

In the mid-1990s, Professor Feeny was first impressed with the immigrant Hispanic population coming into Tennessee as agricultural workers. His initial contact with these waves of immigration was during the summer of 1992 when over 3,000 people came to farm areas east of Chattanooga to pick tomatoes. As a young minister with a background in community outreach, he went to the farms to provide assistance, finding deplorable living conditions for most of the immigrants. Working with a small team that included a Catholic nun and individuals from an eclectic mix of Protestant denominations, Feeny began working to alleviate some of the distress they encountered, from food shortages to poor and overcrowded housing. He later channeled that effort into other similar efforts in other parts of Tennessee, gaining experience and improved language skills in Spanish, which helped him serve as a communication bridge for many immigrants.

Returning to Chattanooga in 2000, he committed himself to continuing to build bridges into the immigrant Hispanic community, beginning first as a volunteer with the local school system. Learning that one particular elementary school was the main growth location for Hispanic students, he worked with another local advocate to begin an outreach effort to help incoming families with the wide range of problems they experienced due in large part to the language barrier, but extending to survival needs, such as housing, work, child needs, and health-care access. His work with the families' varied.—it might be to work with their children on reading skills, finding and delivering furniture, or helping with social services. As this work grew alongside the growing Hispanic population in the area, Feeny with his community partners decided to establish a formal nonprofit to work with the area's Hispanic community. When they learned of a local school being vacated, they successfully petitioned to gain occupancy of the building, obtained funding, and established a full-service center for primarily the Hispanic community, but available to anyone in need of its services. Today, the services center has continued to grow and provides a wide range of programs and forms of assistance to members of the community.

In the meantime, Feeny has moved on to other projects. He sees his engagement as part of a personal as well as academic philosophy—service and learning through service. He encourages his students to participate in internships that bring them in direct contact with the problems people face on a daily basis, and to use their education as a way to create a better community and world.

Professor Barbara Medley, Sociology:
"Connecting Power, Race and Change at the Local Level"

In 2005, the four African American members on the Chattanooga City Council came together with other leaders from the Black community to call attention to persistent disparities they saw in health, education, employment, crime, housing, and economic development. They asked Medley to join this group and help develop a community response to these problems that would enable them to effectively use their own political power and the power of community consensus to bring about change.

To help accomplish this, Medley worked with this leadership group to develop a community summit process through which the issues named previously could be discussed by residents and stakeholders. The summit process led to the establishment of seven task forces on the key issues, comprised of a diversity of individuals from the community, agencies, organizations, and even the local governments. The year-long work of the task forces, and second summit to report its results to the Black community, resulted in a call for a permanent organization in city government that could continue the summit' work and push for greater inclusion and action against disparities. The final result of this work, guided by the leadership team and direction of Medley, was the agreement by the mayor and city council to establish an Office of Multicultural Affairs, a formally funded part of the Chattanooga City Government. This office was established in 2007, and continues to be a vital part of city government today.

As a professor of social inequality, Medley uses this experience to demonstrate to her classes the importance of local leadership and community action in bringing about positive change. While the office has not accomplished all that was envisioned, it has enabled greater attention and sensitivity to the issues affecting marginalized populations in Chattanooga, including those with disabilities and newcomers to Chattanooga from many different cultures, and thus bringing greater attention to disparities in outcomes for disadvantaged groups.

Conclusion

Some common themes emerge from the previous stories of faculty volunteer community service. First, in each case it was necessary to "step outside the box" of normal academic work and activity, to take on issues affecting the community. Working as volunteers, these faculty members found themselves responding to specific calls for help that were not structured through a formal partnership. Nonetheless, their work helped to build community awareness and likely enhanced the environment in which partnerships could grow and be effective. Second, their involvement was a response to a community need that called for a particular knowledge and understanding of the targeted issues and relied on the expertise they brought based on their respective disciplines. This requisite knowledge and training became a vital resource to those seeking answers and creative approaches to solving problems. Third, some risks were clearly involved. The work in each case proved time-consuming, was often complex and convoluted in terms of bringing together people and resources, and required in some cases "stepping out on a limb" to move solutions forward. Political

and economic obstacles were present in each case that could have derailed specific efforts. Additionally, as volunteer work, the time and energy expended was not a priority in their evaluation as faculty, and hence was less likely to be rewarded in terms of tenure and promotion.

Finally, the "reward" acknowledged and valued by each of these individuals was expressed as the rare opportunity to build community consensus around a problem that could result in positive change for those they hoped to serve. Being able to be part of "making a difference," helping to solve critical problems and gaining resources for community needs were important outcomes for each. While a high level of support and recognition at the university would be advantageous, it could not be the prime motivator. This did not mean such service should be left as the domain of a "personal satisfaction" model, but rather recognizes the intrinsic value to the individual. Its valuation by institutions as a significant dimension of engagement also is needed, along with recognition of its complementary role in building bridges and connecting institutions of higher education to their communities along with formal engagement strategies.

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