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Town and Gown in America: Some Historical and Institutional Issues of the Engaged University¹

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ABSTRACT *The engaged university is a descriptive term for linking the different perspectives of university/community partnerships in higher education in the United States. While interest in this idea comes from recent events and processes, there is an historical background for university/community relations that offers important suggestions on the issue related to institutionalizing this concept. The history includes the original religious founding of US institutions, the establishment of the land-grant system of colleges, and the expansion of the mass education system in US universities. The development of community-based research disciplines, dating from the time of the settlement house movement in America, provides support for university/community collaboration. While some faculty and administrators support this idea, others are more critical and do not see it supporting the strategic interests of their institutions or disciplines. Comprehensively supporting the engaged university at an institutional level means changing the way the academy operates and including community concerns in research, teaching and administrative decisions. This article explores some of these issues and some possible solutions.*

KEYWORDS *Engaged university, university-community partnerships, higher education, collaboration.*

Introduction

The *engaged university* is a recent perspective on higher education in the United States (US) for urban universities. University engagement supports

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research and teaching to address specific needs of metropolitan areas and the community; integrates the teaching, research, and service functions of the university in an interdisciplinary manner; and promotes partnerships with public agencies and the community for broad public affairs and civic interests. It engages its faculty, students, and staff with interests outside the university as it develops new ways to pursue its functions. This engaged role for universities is often juxtaposed against the traditional concept of the modern university as a fortress of pure research, driven by the desire of autonomous faculty for knowledge in their individual disciplines. It is a new way for the academy to fulfill its functions in society, meeting the criticism that universities take public support but ignore the interests and concerns of the community.

The engaged university concept has a literature with a wide range of case studies. Work outlining principles for this appears in a variety of venues: books, peer reviewed journals, and professional journals and magazines (e.g. Nyden *et al.*, 1997; White & Ramaley, 1997; Feld, 1998; Edwards & Marullo 1999; Sandmann *et al.*, 2000; Cox, 2000). Much of this literature focuses on technical issues of how to do this kind of work, and on the specific issues related to working with community groups. This literature emerges from practitioners from a variety of disciplines and institutions supporting engagement, including health related schools, the social sciences, education, and service learning (see Mayfield, 2000, for a more extensive guide to engaged universities in the US).

This article focuses on issues affecting institutions and communities as they operate in the US urban political system. US cities generally have a substantial amount of independent authority to promote economic and community development. In the US urban political situation, cities are governed by ruling urban regimes of political and economic actors who shape public policy for economic and business development (Orum, 1995; Stone, 1989; Ferman, 1996; Mayfield, 1996). US cities also have community-based organizations operating as independent organizing and political advocacy groups, and/or as social service agencies. Internationally there are non-governmental organizations providing social services similar to the latter function for US groups.

Background

The history of these relationships suggests both caveats and opportunities to sustain and institutionalize future efforts. Examples also speak to issues affecting university administration in its conduct of planning and bureaucratic decision-making affecting the community (Mayfield, 2000).

Modern support for the engaged university dates from events and processes of recent decades. However, there are important precursors for this trend in North America. Some philosophical trends in education are discussed in

Harkavy and Benson (1998) and Bender (1998). Often the links for universities to communities were through religion, particularly as many institutions were originally founded with religious affiliation for the purpose of educating the ministry and the social elite.

A major orientation of higher education to public issues came with passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 and the establishment of land-grant colleges. The federal government donated land to states for public universities to promote research and professional development in agricultural and industry. Land-grant colleges were required to provide public service in return for federal aid.

This relationship was a much different type than the engaged university. It was on the basis of the “community as client,” as farmers and university experts did not meet on an equitable basis. Farmers identified specific problems or asked for certain improvements, and experts from the college solved the problem through scientific inquiry, the domain of the academy. The university retained the authority and the expertise.

The clients, however, recognized this function as providing a valuable service. The system became sustained through politics by delivering clear services. Political representatives of rural communities protect its public funding. In addition, this base of support was useful for instituting a major development, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) (Selznick, 1953; LeGates & Robinson, 1998; Cooper, 1999). The TVA was a major development in the US helping to reconstruct an entire region of the nation in the 1930s. It converted the Tennessee River and created new lakes and public parks in the upper southern states, providing electric power for underserved rural areas, help in agricultural sciences, and conservation of farmland through flood control and organizing production.

The orientation of universities toward pure academic research began after the establishment of land-grant colleges (Kerr, 1991, pp. 27–44). At the same time, community interests coincided with some university concerns. In the US at the turn of the 19th century, the settlement house movement, primarily supported by religious institutions (including religious-based universities), supported community-based research and analysis to deal with urban social conditions. Settlement house staff members were primarily upper and middle class women, often with college degrees but with few places in society to use their education. Their immersion in the realities of working class life and their college education led many house workers (with cohorts from the university) to develop tools for social science analysis to investigate social conditions.

University academics, particularly in sociology, seized on the settlement house philosophy of attention and immersion in community life and took it back to their discipline for their own purposes. The community was their laboratory, and the residents were test subjects. Neither reform nor service was necessarily the desired outcome of their work, only the creation of new knowledge. As major universities organized as modern research institutions,

their role *vis-à-vis* the community was defined as either academic research or education. Town and gown were considered separate entities (Harkavy & Puckett, 1994; Harkavy & Benson, 1998; Mayfield *et al.*, 1999).

University Expansion

As the modern system of universities and research developed, higher education expanded in enrollment, staff, and public funding. In 1870, the student population reflected only 1.3% of youth aged 18–24. In 1945, this rose to 10%. By 1990, over 3500 institutions had nearly one million faculty and an enrollment of 13.5 million (51.1%). Public funding increased for both private and public institutions, to support tuition, teaching, and research. Government support jumped to nearly half of the revenue in the post-World War II period for all private and public schools (Snyder, 1993).

Larger enrollments and staffs meant more university people came from groups who previously had not participated in higher education. This demographic shift helped change the composition of the university from an elite upper class, almost uniformly white, to a more diverse university with a variety of interests. Members of white ethnic working class communities increased their college participation, as did racial minorities. By the 1970s, approximately a quarter of African Americans and Latinos aged 18–21 were in college (*American Almanac 1993–1994*, 1993, Table 263, p. 169). University faculty and staff also changed in composition, although at much slower rates than the student population. The increase in higher education meant there were more diverse university personnel from different experiences. Some of these supported a different perspective of the university than the model of pure academic research (Mayfield *et al.*, 1999).

There were some important results of this expansion for the engaged university: the development of new research models, new concepts of the role of higher education, and the need for more physical space. The community-based research area is also called “participatory action research” or “collaborative community research.” Social science disciplines developed this perspective, particularly academics interested in economic and community development (Whyte, 1991; Nyden & Wiewel, 1991, 1992; Nyden *et al.*, 1997; Murphy *et al.*, 1997; Reardon, 1998; Policy Research Action Group, 1999; Stoecker, 1999). A similar situation in the Netherlands formed in the 1970s with government support for community-based research in the “science shop” movement. This Dutch model was used to establish programs in Denmark, Germany, Northern Ireland, and Sweden (Sclove *et al.*, 1998; Farkas, 1999).

Concomitant with this was a new perspective on the role of higher education. Ernest L. Boyer called for US universities with different missions to forego following the same, academically driven research path to prominence.

He suggested colleges could fulfill their distinct roles and revel in their unique contributions to the academy. He identified four categories of scholarly work, which take the academy beyond the traditional view of pure research: the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching (Boyer, 1990; Rice, 1996; Tierney, 1998).

The final issue of expansion has negative implications. Growing universities needed more physical space, and a built-up environment already surrounded urban institutions. The community saw the university taking more land and believed that real estate, and the protection of real estate, was the urban university's only interest in the community. These administrative decisions are made by the corporate hierarchy of the institution (Mayfield, 2000).

Collaborative Decision-making: Issues and Barriers

Even though the field is developing a base of academic researchers and administrative supporters, the concept of collaboration has not yet developed a strong enough reputation to affect university policies or academic disciplines across the board. Traditional sectors of the university continue to look internally in developing their policies, research, and methods. Both the academic and administrative sectors can be changed to incorporate aspects of the principles of the engaged university.

In research, the dominant faction still uses the traditional academic model of autonomous faculty conducting pure research. Such researchers derive their questions and methods from their discipline, rather than including community interests. These researchers are not convinced that pursuing more inclusive community collaboration will benefit their efforts.

One way to gain support is to have a track record of getting outside money into the university for these efforts. Various private foundations and US federal government agencies support this work in various venues. Government awards in particular offer prestige to institutions and, while some have provisions for community input, they are the most oriented toward research (for more on programs supporting the engaged university, see Mayfield, 2000).

One key US government agency supporting a broad view of community development for university partnership centers is the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). In 1992, Congress created the Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) program to facilitate partnerships between higher education and communities to solve urban problems through research, outreach, and information exchange. In 1994, the Office of University Partnerships was established to administer this and other HUD programs related to the collaborative work (Rubin *et al.*, 1998; LeGates & Robinson, 1998; US HUD, 1998, 1999).

To counter internal university issues on the role of collaborative partnerships in shaping the academy, university/community partnerships need to become more established and accepted by the academy. Faculty will have to show the utility of their practices by producing scholarship that, like any other academic research, withstands the rigorous criticisms of their disciplines. This means publishing in peer reviewed journals and books.

Even if these efforts are productive, they will not necessarily have any immediate effect. Academic critics can still dismiss it as applied work and irrelevant to what typical practitioners consider the only important work worth doing, i.e. dealing with questions and issues derived internally from their disciplines, without public or community input to taint its presumed objectivity. It will also take a long time for a large enough body of literature to affect a discipline. In the meantime, it is just as likely that the field could move in the opposite direction. Some disciplines with strong applied principles, such as physical education (kinesiology), are working toward having a stronger hard science research basis. Kinesiology programs are foregoing the production of teachers, for example, for pure research (for an example of a program in kinesiology that operates in teaching, research, and service aspects of the engaged university, see Hellison & Cutforth, 1997; Cutforth & Puckett, 1999).

Administrative leadership for the engaged university is key, and it will be important to affect the traditional bureaucratic methods of university administration. Administrators and boards of trustees often make corporate-style, strategic decisions for their institutions. The administrators narrowly focus on the immediate interests of their institutions. While these decisions are usually made with little input from the community, they often have an eye toward broader political concerns. Including the concerns of the outside community might, at worst, hurt the university in pursuing what it internally decides are its best goals, and at a minimum cause delays in fulfilling those strategic plans. Administrative personnel pursuing strategic policies of the university mainly look to the administrative hierarchy and university policy to pursue the strategic issues of the institution. Decisions affecting the community can range from expansion, with the university-as-real-estate-developer, to day-to-day operations, such as hiring and purchasing practices (Mayfield *et al.*, 1999; Mayfield & Lucas, 2000). Even as university-community partnership vehicles may have little influence over these decisions, the administrative actions can greatly impact the way partnerships are viewed by the community.

Administration of individual campuses can become more inclusive of the collaborative model if administrators are shown, through research or practice, that including outside groups can help make a better policy or help fulfill a strategic goal. The likelihood of this is problematic, however, given that in any decision adversely affecting the community plans would have to be modified at the expense of specific university interests. Another way to promote

collaboration in university administration is for faculty interested in collaboration to infiltrate administrative positions through career advancement and pursue their duties in a collaborative manner. At the worst, this can cause friction with administrative personnel used to working in the traditional, corporate mode and undercut the position of those desiring collaboration. At best, this is a long-term process to affect change within the administration, and dependent on the style and interests of the top leadership.

One way of supporting the principles of the engaged university is to affect the reward system within the university. Nearly all universities pay lip service, on paper, to three attributes for faculty tenure and promotion—research, teaching, and service. Most, however, do not weigh service in promotion and tenure decisions.

Some leading universities have increased the value of service for faculty advancement. Portland State University (PSU) in Portland, Oregon incorporated new guidelines, for example, and recognized Boyer's categories of "scholarship of teaching" and "scholarship of outreach." While some have included evidence of these categories in their portfolios and gained promotion or tenure, it is not consistent. PSU decisions are made at the departmental level without a university wide committee, with some resistance according to department (Davidson *et al*, 1999).

This brief discussion of issues related to the engaged university indicates how far it has come and how far it still has to go. As new as it seems to its supporters, it is important to remember its historical antecedents for the lessons we can learn in shaping its future. Its relationship to both academic disciplines and administration needs attention in order to institutionalize itself. These are as important as other aspects of this work, such as the technical questions of operation and issues related to public forces or the community.

Note

1. "Town and gown" is a term dating from medieval Europe identifying distinct spheres for the university (gown) and for lay people in the communities (town). It refers to the distinction of the two spheres and often implies conflict between the two.

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