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Three Questions for Community Engagement at the Crossroads

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Editorial

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Three Questions for Community Engagement at the Crossroads

Unfortunately, a decade of "calls to action," begun by the Kellogg Commission's report on university engagement and the 1999 Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University, has not produced a flowering of transformed institutions….This is not because engagement does not work….And it is not for lack of knowledge on how it can be implemented….Rather, engagement is difficult work. It gets to the heart of what higher education is about and as such, it requires institution-wide effort, deep commitment at all levels, and leadership by both campus and community.

> (Brukardt, Holland, Percy, & Zimpher, N., 2004, p. ii)

[T]he civic engagement movement seems to have hit a wall: [I]nnovative practices that shift epistemology, reshape the curriculum, alter pedagogy, and redefine scholarship are not being supported through academic norms and institutional reward policies that shape the academic cultures of the academy. There are limits to the degree of change that occurs institutionally, and the civic engagement work appears to have been accommodated to the dominant expert-centered framework.

> (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2008, p. 12)

Full participation incorporates the idea that higher education institutions are rooted in and accountable to multiple communities—both to those who live, work, and matriculate within higher education and those who physically or practically occupy physical or project spaces connected to higher education institutions. Campuses advancing full participation are engaged campuses that are both in and of the community, participating in reciprocal, mutually beneficial partnerships between campus and community….Yet, while higher education as a sector has publicly acknowledged that it has an important public mission, there remains a gap be-

tween intention and practice. The problem lies in the incongruity between institutions' stated mission and their cultural and institutional architecture, which is not currently set up to fulfill that mission.

(Sturm, Eatman, Saltmarsh, & Bush, 2011, p. 4)

Universities are not known for their flexibility. While many appropriate adjectives exist to describe the institution of higher education on a global scale, nimbleness is not one of them. One role of an institution is to embody tradition; another is to transform and be transformed by the larger community of values that comprise it (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Kecskes, 2013; Selznick, 1992). Higher education is much better at the former.

Indeed, as the authors above attest, significant progress toward reciprocal community-campus partnerships around teaching/learning, scholarship, and service has been achieved over the past three decades. However, persistent fundamental structural barriers and patterns of anachronistic thinking continue to impede true transformation. In this essay, we intend to accomplish three things: 1) offer a theoretical framework through which to view organizational/institutional transformation; 2) propose three key questions to inform analyses of campuses' community-engaged work; and 3) invite others to ask these key questions on their home campuses to help them (and all of us, by extension) determine how far their campus has advanced the community engagement agenda. Our motivation for writing is both to inspire campus-based dialogue and action as well as to join our colleagues (those cited above and many others) in taking a sober look at the extent to which institutions of higher education have, and have not, been transformed.

What is Transformation?

Here we offer a framework of contextual versus transformational action as initially conceived by black studies scholar and anthropologist Edmund T. Gordon, and further developed by Kraehe, Blakes, and Foster (2010). Gordon's structural change theory describes the incremental work that often precedes and may facilitate such a momentous change as transforming a campus into an engaged institution. This change process is conceived in terms of contextual interventions, structural interventions, and, finally, *structural transformation*.

Contextual Interventions → Structural Interventions → Structural Transformation
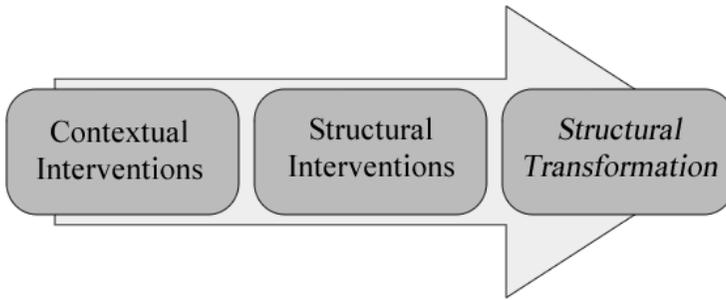
Contextual Intervention

The starting point of contextual intervention involves the observation that things are not as one might desire in a specific area. The observer attempts to bring about change only to find that s/he does not possess the individual power to fully transform the space. Thus, the work ends up being contextual: They intervene in a context, in a moment, to temporarily, haltingly – and in a limited way – alter the undesirable circumstance.

An example of contextual intervention associated with community-engaged scholarship (CES) or public scholarship might include negotiating an initial offer letter for faculty employment that states that engaged work will be rewarded, or conducting research in a way that accommodates the norms for traditional research even as it is designed with and includes applied dimensions. In these cases, a scholar may not be able to compel the university's recognition of the engaged work as routinely appropriate on its own terms, but there has been a negotiated acceptance that allows the work to proceed without potential harm to the faculty member. In such cases of contextual intervention, the faculty member has not changed dominant structures; indeed, in isolation, the contextual intervention may end up being complicit with, or even supportive of, the extant structures of power. Nonetheless, contextual interventions are necessary but insufficient aspects of eventual structural transformation.

Structural Intervention

If contextual interventions are limited responses with immediate and fleeting impact, and structural interventions are those that begin to alter the circumstances in a more lasting way, then structural transformation occurs in that moment when an institutional structure has been fundamentally altered, or a challenge wholly addressed. Such cases are the product of the accumulation of structural interventions.

In our CES example, if the department fully rewards the CES, lauds publishing with community partners, and provides equal merit to rig-

orously research and produced articles disseminated in publications intended for audiences beyond academia, then we have what may appear to be the beginnings of a structural transformation. Examples could include the revision of the promotion and tenure guidelines at Portland State University (PSU) in the mid-1990s. PSU was one of the first universities in the country to formally adopt what was then called the "scholarship of outreach" (Kecskes, Collier, & Balshem, 2006). Other examples hail from universities that have received federal funding from the Directorate for Education and Human Resource at National Science Foundation (Foster, 2010). The National Science Foundation (NSF) Math and Science Partnerships program funds university-school partnerships that improve K-12 public school outcomes in math and science. Other NSF funding programs support initiatives carried out with the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) to facilitate the institutional acceptance of partnerships between universities and schools. In these cases, support from the NSF constituted a structural intervention enabled by years of engagement work by teams of scholars. The NSF brought credibility and support to CES projects, propelling structural change. Scholars bringing funds and status to their institutions were able to work with their administrative leadership to influence policy. Other examples of structural transformation include the University of Texas at El-Paso and the University System of Georgia's revision of their faculty reward structures to acknowledge and give affirmative weight to work in school settings beyond the university (UTEP, 2010; Kettlewell & Henry, 2009).

Visions of Engagement: Co-Optation or Transformation, or Both?

Many universities today have embraced community engagement and public scholarship and service as an institution-wide mantra; for example, National Campus Compact now has over 1000 signatories to its Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education; likewise, the number of institutions seeking the Elective Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement increases annually. As we ponder what motivates institutions to embrace engagement, we see at least three viable approaches, each with its own logic and implications: *a public relations approach, a neoliberal approach, and a transformational approach*. We favor one of these approaches, but will begin by briefly discussing all three. Our aim is to help universities avoid making unproductive and self-serving claims regarding transformative practices that are actually motivated by a desire for good public relations or to generate operating revenue.

Public Relations	Neoliberal	Transformational
• generates good will	• generates good will	• generates good will
• gives funds, resources to communities seeking support	• generates operating revenue	• addresses challenges faced by communities
• delivers positive message to target audiences	• builds infrastructure	• collaborative
• measured in terms of positive or negative public perception of university	• measured in terms of efficiency	• measured in terms of community challenges successfully addressed

Within a *public relations approach*, an important outcome of the engagement is to generate positive relations with those beyond the university. Examples of such engagement include: purchasing tables at fund raising events for local organizations; giving civic awards to local leaders; lending technical resources to community service efforts; gathering student, staff or faculty volunteers to assist civic efforts; etc. These activities can generate good will locally and nationally, and can help counter historically rooted feelings of ill will toward the university. They provide support for communities – support that is often short-term, but in some instances may have long-term influence. In cases where the work includes support to systematically think through, study, and create plans to sustainably address local challenges, the motivation and impact may fit within the category that we call "transformative."

Neoliberal approaches to engagement reflect universities' responses to the fiscal crisis attendant with the decades-long and nation-wide disinvestment in public higher education. In the context of academia as elsewhere, neoliberalism reflects aspects of the 19th century understanding of economic liberalism. It is grounded in an appreciation of individual initiative, market and business-based approaches to institutional operations, and privatization of public services. It results in heightened attention to ideas of efficiency, the quantification of impact, the generation of revenue, and the leveraged use of research funds to support infrastructural enhancement or maintenance. It prominently includes encouraging faculty to seek grants, and partners to provide cash or in-kind support for their research.

The goal is not only to see faculty members act as self-sufficient research-ers, it repositions them as resource generators who will thrive on the basis of their ability to raise revenue, and who, in the process, will help under-write the operations of the university as a whole.

When universities adopt a *transformational approach*, the goal is to partner with community members, organizations, and institutions to substantively address pressing challenges of the day. The name "transfor-mational" is warranted because it is descriptive of intent, but also so as to distinguish it from engaged university work that may chiefly serve the other institutional prerogatives mentioned above. An engaged university focused on transformative engaged work would be a university where faculty with specific disciplinary and topical expertise are encouraged *and supported* to partner with community entities to collaboratively identify and study challenges, then to develop sustainable solutions. The transformational ap-proach may indeed generate good will toward the institution as well as help build needed infrastructure through external funding; however, the *guiding motivation* for community-campus engagement within this approach is to deeply address community-situated challenges that affect us all.

A Path Forward: Three Foundational Questions

We believe that asking, and then dialoguing at various campus and community levels about, *three key questions* will bare insights that can inform the next action steps toward deeper community-campus engagement within campus, national, and global institutional arenas.

1. What motivates the campus to embrace community engagement?
2. Is there a "sense of urgency" (Kotter, 1996, 2008) present for community engagement?
3. How does the campus support faculty?

Motivation

Embedded within the heuristic questions above is another: Are the key decision makers on a campus (or at the national disciplinary or fund-ing associations) primarily motivated by a public relations, neoliberal, or transformational approach?

Urgency

Kotter (1996, 2008), an internationally respected scholar on orga-nizational leadership and change, recommends that leaders who wish to create change must first and foremost establish a "sense of urgency" for

change organization-wide. Surely, each campus senses urgency – crisis even – for action. However, is this urgency centered on developing a sustainable and transformational community engagement strategy and action? Or, perhaps more likely, is that urgency focused on decreased state funding, the explosion of online learning, the proliferation of for-profit institutions of higher learning, or other topical concern?

Faculty Support

A university focused on transformational community engagement work would also significantly *support* its faculty toward that end. How does your campus support its community-engaged faculty?

Many universities have adopted CES as legitimate scholarly work, yet a larger issue remains systemically unrecognized: this work is still not supported well, if at all across the landscape of higher education institutions. In some cases, scholars may put their tenure or other advancement at risk by embracing CES. While the proliferation of support offices with various names (community-based learning (CBL), service-learning, community engagement office, etc.) continues and these offices are, in many cases, populated by highly dedicated and competent faculty and staff, the bulk of the work around community-engaged teaching and scholarship needs to be borne by the faculty member her/himself. In the same way that we cannot effectively "contract out" our primary family or friend relations (i.e., we need to be the father or brother who is "relating"), we cannot contract out the work of community partnering. To effectively work with community partners in both teaching and research settings takes enormous time, sustained effort, and care. To co-construct and engage "transformative" relationships like those discussed earlier takes even more time and attention. This work of establishing, nurturing, and sustaining community-campus relationships must be done by faculty members and the community partners themselves. Regrettably, rarely does the academy formally acknowledge this added time burden. Informally, at an engaged institution, a faculty member might be encouraged, recognized, or even rewarded for this work. However, formally, almost never is a teaching, research, or institutional service workload reduced due to faculty commitment to community partnering, especially in public institutions that have suffered from the ongoing public divestment in higher education.

Indeed, faculty members are often simply encouraged to do the work without resources that acknowledge its time or rigor. Establishing and maintaining partnered learning environments or con-joined, negotiated research endeavors is often difficult and complex in ways that are not typically acknowledged or accounted for within the academy. Given the national trends of increased teaching loads, decreased numbers of tenured

faculty and lower salaries, why would faculty even do engaged work? This work is done largely because faculty recognize that these strategies lead to better teaching and research outcomes and, if executed well, may also help build stronger communities. But banking on long-term faculty generosity and commitment to community-level engagement and change is not sustainable, strategic, or fair, and it is certainly not *transformative* at the institutional level.

Conclusion

Nearly a decade ago, the Wingspread statement calling into question the role of higher education (Brukardt, 2004, p. iii) suggested the following six action steps for campuses to take to increase community engagement:

1. Integrate engagement into mission.
2. Forge partnerships as the overarching framework for engagement.
3. Renew and redefine discovery and scholarship.
4. Integrate engagement into teaching and learning.
5. Recruit and support new champions.
6. Create radical institutional change.

While much work remains to be accomplished at the national and global level, even on campuses that have achieved the Carnegie classification for community engagement or ones that substantively claim to be "community-engaged," it is not unreasonable to suggest that, as a movement, great progress has been made on actions one through five. Number six, however, remains elusive. Notwithstanding a few isolated cases, "radical institutional change" is missing. This lacuna needs to be filled if higher education is to be truly transformed in favor of the common good. Asking and dialoguing about the three foundational questions we suggest above, we hope, will set the stage for more sober and intentional change to occur. Such change is requisite to building the common future that community-engaged scholars and their community partners worldwide envision.

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