Engagement and Citizenship: A New Core for the University

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ABSTRACT

The author proposes that "societal renewal" and the engagement required to accomplish that renewal should be the core of the university. By focusing on the basic building blocks of good citizenship (civic knowledge and civic action) the university can weave, at relatively low cost, programs and classes into its core. Using Northwestern University as a case study, the author demonstrates how this can be done.

Keywords: engagement, citizenship, higher education reform

Ernest Boyer concludes his well-known *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990) with these words: "Even the best of our institutions must continuously evolve. And to sustain the vitality of higher education in our time, a new vision of scholarship is required, one dedicated not only to the renewal of the academy but, ultimately, to the renewal of society itself" (p. 81). How can universities achieve this renewal? That is the question I hope to answer in this essay. I focus on the tangible steps that can be taken by a university to engage in the process of renewal. Rather than take the usual hierarchical view of reform in the university, I offer what might be called a networking approach. The hierarchical approach assumes that change begins from the top of the organization and flows downward once the goals have been set. I begin with students, faculty, and alumni who actually do the renewing. Changes in technology, generations, and economics make the renewal achievable. The challenge is to introduce the courses, programs, and outreach activities that engage in renewing society.

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Universities are complicated organizations. They have surely become more complicated over time. They are also slow to change. But change they do. University administrators and faculty understand that the American democracy depends on them for leaders. Academic leaders recognize the responsibility to prepare their students to be informed and active citizens. Indeed, it is not controversial to suggest that our democracy needs its very brightest citizens to be involved in the democratic process. The question I pose in this essay is, "How do we prepare our students for this challenge?" Our current dilemma is not disagreement about goals. Our problem is a lack of strategies that get us to those goals.

University decision makers listen to faculty and funders as they chart the institution's course. Student interest also plays a role. Indeed, as the competition for the best students has increased over the last generation, student interest is playing a larger role in higher education. Civic engagement is something that many students and faculty want, but providing it in a cost-effective and academically rigorous way is no simple matter. A brief look at the history of engagement reforms is useful.

The first period of reform (1960–85) was shaped by an overtly political and confrontational approach to change. I call this the political period. Universities were challenged by those who wanted to see social and political change at the institution and have students and faculty more involved in the broader social movements that challenged the status quo. American cities were in upheaval, economic decline was a serious problem, and racial conflict seemed to be everywhere. The Vietnam War tore the society apart. Some universities made changes and added programs, but there was much resistance to both the critique and the reforms. One of my first jobs (1971–74) was as director of the Stanford Workshops on Political and Social Issues. A board with a student majority awarded academic credit to courses that not only studied issues but also tried to do something about those issues.

The second period (1986–2000) was in many ways a reaction to the first. Service was the focus. Many universities and high schools started programs in service learning. Nonpartisan, with a broad set of activities included, this approach focused on nonacademic activities in which students volunteered to improve the surrounding communities with supportive, often short-term activities. Student interest in social and political change was moved outside the classroom and made nonpartisan. These programs involved many more students and were acceptable to most constituencies at the cost of having limited impact. These programs were administered outside of the academic side of the university, and many continue to this day.

What has followed in the last decade or so is an interesting and powerful synthesis of these earlier trends into the engagement era. Driven by the earlier

experiences and an increasing demand from students for involvement in the world around them, universities are finding ways to create academic and non-academic opportunities for learning about how to make a difference. Academic entrepreneurs are developing high-impact, low-cost programs. These often provide either breadth or depth in the offerings of the institution and attract much faculty and student involvement.

The key in this period is offering programs that involve and invest traditional units of the university in the engagement. The previous two periods left a variety of programs that supported the development of engagement opportunities. This means that most research universities have courses and programs that place students in learning situations beyond the classroom (internships, practicums, off-campus venues, etc.). Creating "scaffolding" among the programs that already exist supports rationality and efficiency. The administration, faculty, and students can then determine what lacunae exist within the institution and what new programs need to be created. We thus expand university offerings along lines that fit the interests of students who seek structured experiences and knowledge that they did not have growing up isolated from much of the world by either technology or racial and income segregation.

That expansion also must build on the strengths of the faculty and the needs of the surrounding community. A modest, pragmatic approach to civic engagement can expand what universities offer and strengthen the experience of students as well as build bridges to surrounding communities. Both the report and the implementation strategy outlined here are pragmatic and substantive; that is, they both focus on what can be done and what should be learned in doing it.

Let me give an example of how this strategy works. Most universities have internship programs that are offered sometimes for credit and sometimes not. These are the result of the two periods I have discussed. Many of these programs give students the opportunity to "learn by doing," working at organizations in the community or with them on a research or service project. While quality may vary, these programs serve the needs of particular departments and programs and give students an alternative to the traditional academic setting. They also provide that connection to actual situations that the students want to understand and affect (homelessness, poverty, domestic abuse, etc.).

Building on these programs is key to a low-cost, high-impact strategy. Finding the lacunae in these offerings and coordinating efforts to reduce duplication and increase awareness strengthen the overall civic engagement offerings. The planning goal is to broaden across the school year and deepen the variety of options with rigorous academic requirements. These offerings should be linked to the professional goals of students. Internships in law and medicine

strengthen students' chances for admission to postbaccalaureate training and give the students a realistic understanding of what practice would be like.

The next step is to build up and out current programming that could be strengthened as engagement experiences. Many universities have a One Book program, which is often aimed at incoming freshmen. Have that book focus on engagement every other year and build out the programming beyond just reading the book and having the author give a talk. Books that focus on the city in which the university is located can also help. Visits to neighborhoods and civic leaders that are linked to the book build common experiences. We did this at Northwestern with a book by Alex Kotlowitz (2004) on the communities and people of Chicago. We wove programming around the book that ranged from foreign-language opportunities to having leading urban community scholars come to campus to engage with our faculty and graduate students on how best to understand and study these issues.

Universities have an obligation to register students to vote. Few take this responsibility very seriously. How about making a serious effort to register all incoming freshmen to vote in whatever state they choose? Northwestern has done this across a dozen universities in the last three years. It is easy and builds a culture that requires basic citizenship as part of being a student at the university. These kinds of activities operate across the university to create a floor for more serious scholarly engagement. These programs are low cost and high impact. They build engagement norms with a high payoff in terms of student and faculty expectations.

Building an engagement culture also requires some new programming within particular departments and academic programs. The key to success is choosing innovations that will contribute to the academic side over the long term. Students have lots of ideas about how to improve their learning opportunities. We looked closely at where the best opportunities lay. We focused on doctoral education at Northwestern, a segment of higher education that is under stress and ripe for innovation. Building an academic program for doctoral students across departments and disciplines is relatively low cost and adds a dimension to the training for the doctorate that advances both the employability and the scholarly competence of the students. It builds the strength of the individual training programs and enhances the reputation of the institution. It adds a dimension to graduate programs with minimal costs. There are obviously other options, but the key is to ask, "What are the low-cost, high-impact options for a particular situation?"

Most calls for engagement begin with a litany of the problems our current democracy faces. The premise is that the scholar must show that a problem exists before a solution can be offered. The problem is often displayed with a

few simple statistics that show a decline in knowledge of, and involvement in, American democracy. Trust in government is at historic lows. Voter turnout among the young has been declining until recently, and there is little involvement in traditional politics. This literature has found the younger generation lacking in citizenship values and behaviors (Macedo, 2005; Putnam, 2000), especially in contradistinction to their parents and grandparents. While couched in historical analysis and driven by survey samples, the pessimistic tone is clear. The current generation of "millennials" is not up to the participation of their parents, much less their grandparents.

Screeds of this nature spend very little time describing how young adults engage. The notion is that we (older adults) must educate the young to be better citizens and if we don't, our form of government is in trouble. I would like to submit that this approach has had little impact on our universities. Partly it is because these general calls to arm do not require a response by anybody in particular. A trustee or two might raise a question, but that is often dismissed with a litany of programs that already exist or a request for a contribution. Universities are complicated places and have many obligations. Saving democracy does not seem to be enough of an urgent problem. The "sky is falling" strategy does not work. At least it has not in the last generation. Most high schools have dropped their civics classes. Few universities are serious about teaching the skills that are needed for democratic engagement.

Running counter to this body of literature, there is an alternative perspective that focuses on how citizenship norms are changing rather than eroding (Boyte & Farr, 1997; Dalton, 2009; Long, 2002). The question here is less "How do the young compare with their elders?" and more "What are the new forms of citizenship that are emerging?" Technology and globalization shape this second perspective. At Northwestern, we take this second perspective. For a variety of social and economic reasons, we are moving from citizenship norms that focus on duty to what Dalton (2009) calls "engaged citizenship" norms, which are more assertive and independent.

The millennials are shaped by these new norms and are striving to find their way as citizens driven by a new set of values. We are just beginning to understand and document what these new forms are and how they facilitate citizenship that goes beyond duty and focuses more on concern for others. This generation is looking for ways to express and refine what citizenship means throughout their twenties and thirties. Students themselves report that they do not consider themselves "disengaged" (Long, 2002). This trend is important for higher education because millennials do not park their commitment to engagement at the door before they enter college or graduate school (O'Meara, 2007; Stanton, 2008; Stanton & Wagner, 2010). Indeed,

many have experienced service learning and are expecting to continue that commitment.

Technology is another part of the millennial equation. The average student has spent as much time playing computer games as he or she has spent in the classroom. Social media and games expand their worlds and increase both their optimism and their cooperative tendencies. Online and off-line activities have a complex and still poorly understood interaction. Millennials have an active engaged life online that is built upon social media and online gaming as well as traditional citizenship activities. There are online communities for the young that are very poorly understood by their elders.

I am impressed not so much by the way the university engages the student as by the way the student engages the university. Putnam and others have been looking under the streetlamp for the lost keys because the light is better there (meaning our literatures and methods are better suited for looking there), not because that is where the keys are likely to be. The students who are entering our colleges and universities are looking for an identity and a way to make a difference, as Erikson (1950) pointed out more than sixty years ago. Today's students, however, are coming with a new set of values about who they are and what they want. As Dalton has suggested in his important work, the days of duty and obedience are long gone when it comes to what citizenship means to young adults.

If we began our inquiry and discussion with the interface between the young and their multiple communities around the world and on- and off-line, might we see a very different picture than the one that comes from comparing them along old, tired dimensions with previous generations? And might that "backward mapping" (Elmore, 1979) show us the points at which this new kind of engagement is emerging and how universities might share in shaping that engagement in a positive way. That is how we approach the issue of civic engagement at universities. There is a pattern of engagement that students are involved in. How can that pattern be enhanced and improved given the scarcity of resources and the intense competition for those scarce resources in higher education? And how can universities work with their students to achieve a more powerful set of engagement experiences both within the curriculum and outside of it? That is our task.

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