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Civic Engagement and Graduate Education

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Introduction

Connection with the public—civic engagement—is crucial to the future of higher education, including graduate education.

Graduate education and the advanced research that accompanies it depend on public support. As our scholarship has become more specialized, and our enterprise larger and more expensive, we are in danger of losing public understanding and support. Higher education is increasingly looked on as a private good, and our research—with the possible exception of biomedical research—is viewed by large segments of the population as either irrelevant or designed to enrich large corporations. With some laudable exceptions, our faculty and students do not make personal contact with the general public in ways that enable the public to understand what we're doing and allow them to feel that they have a stake in our success. Unless the public perceives that research and the graduate education that makes it possible contribute to the public good, and affect them personally, we will continue to lose support.

It's not just administrators and faculty interested in improving graduate education who think that students need to make more connections between their scholarship and the real world. Graduate students themselves indicate the same desire (Cherwitz and Sievers, 2003). A Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate survey asked more than 2000 graduate students in six disciplines what three things they would most like to see improved in their graduate experience. Learning more about the public issues addressed by the discipline ranked third of 21, after how to formulate and carry out teaching and research programs. Many students recognize that there are important and interesting issues in the world to which their discipline could and should make a contribution, but only if it looks outward as well as inward.

As Angelica M. Stacy, Professor of Chemistry at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote in *Carnegie Essays on the Doctorate: Chemistry*: "... students I have known have interests in biology, materials, environmental sciences, engineering, education, diversity, management, and public policy. They all identify themselves primarily as chemists, and this is where their main training lies. Yet, they seek projects and experiences outside the normal boundaries of the chemistry doctorate." And Cherwitz (2004; 2005) suggests that such a viewpoint may be a key to attracting more minority students into graduate education.

Sources of the civic engagement movement

The growing conversation in higher education about civic engagement derives from several sources. These include the influential writings of Ernest Boyer, especially "Scholarship Reconsidered" (1990) and his follow-up article "The Scholarship of Engagement" (1996); Richard Cherwitz's "Intellectual Entrepreneurship" (IE) initiative (2004) and development of a "citizen-scholars" model of graduate education (Cherwitz and Sullivan, 2002); the call by the Kellogg Commission (2000) for public universities to renew their commitment to society; rethinking by public research universities of the meaning of their land grant missions, as rural populations have declined, corporations have displaced family farms, and the needy groups in society have become increasingly urban; pressures from business and government for universities to serve as "economic engines"; demands from NSF and other granting agencies that broader impacts and public involvement be considered in research grants; concern of universities in large cities about how to work with and serve their urban neighbors; recognition of trends in society away from community toward fragmented private purposes; student interest in activities, such as service learning, that serve society while garnering academic credit; and recognition by state universities that if they don't clarify and publicize the ways in which they benefit their states and regions, their shrinking share of state support may shrink even further.

Studies of graduate education emphasize the need for more civic engagement

Greater civic engagement is needed at all levels of graduate education. However, perhaps the need has been articulated most forcefully—because the gap with current reality is greatest—in the numerous recent and ongoing projects examining doctoral education. A summary of Recommendations from National Studies on Doctoral Education (Nyquist and Wulff, 2000) has as the sixth of its major findings: "Produce scholar-citizens who see their special training connected more closely to the needs of society and the global economy. The Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (2004), which defines the purpose of doctoral education as "preparing stewards of the discipline", emphasizes communication with a wide variety of publics as one of three key capabilities of such a steward (Carnegie Foundation, 2004). And the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation Responsive Ph.D. Initiative (2004) urges that "... the goal of the doctorate [be] redefined as scholarly citizenship..."

Definition of civic engagement

Up to this point we have used the concept of civic engagement without defining it. The CIC Committee on Engagement has adopted the following definition: "Engagement is the partnership of university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good." (Civic Engagement Benchmarking Task Force, 2005).

Civic engagement and public scholarship

It is important to connect this definition of civic engagement to the concept of public scholarship: scholarship of value to the public and engaged with the public. Public scholarship falls into two main categories: "universal" and "local". The distinction between them is important for how universities do their business and for how they are perceived and supported by society.

Universal public scholarship is work that benefits humanity, but without a specific local context in mind: the Human Genome Project is a good example. There is little doubt that this project will lead to biomedical insights that will benefit people all over the world, but the benefits to people in any specific locality will be diffuse, long-term, and hard to identify. The values and reward systems associated with graduate education tend to favor research and scholarship of universal applicability.

Local public scholarship has four typical manifestations within universities: (1) applications of research such as traditional agricultural- and continuing education/extension-based work, and clinical applications of biomedical research in academic health centers; (2) teaching and research on social science and public policy issues such as housing, transportation, criminology, or the rural-urban interface; (3) K-12 and preschool projects; and (4) scholarship that is characterized by reciprocal engagement between researcher and community.

The distinctions between these two broad categories are not always neat. A new AIDS drug (universal), for example, might need adaptation to local conditions and attitudes before it can become an effective treatment. Conversely, the understanding of the factors influencing exposure of children to lead poisoning in a particular neighborhood (local) is likely to have broad consequences in many other communities.

Both universal and local public scholarship are important to civic life and community well-being, but only local public scholarship is generally recognized as such. Better understanding—by both the public and university faculty and students—of the engaged nature of universal public scholarship, and greater efforts to elucidate the local value of universal scholarship, are sorely needed.

Civic engagement can enrich research and teaching

In some specialties, civically engaged research is not just desirable, but it is also the best way to do research. For example, many clinicians and social scientists conduct research in communities, where cooperation of subjects and maintenance of long-term participation are often difficult to elicit. Such research is often most successful when engagement is reciprocal: participants suggest questions and approaches, and learn things from the results that are useful to their communities, rather than just being experimental subjects. (e.g., Jordan et al, 2004)

The same holds in teaching. "Learning through activities that contribute to meeting others' needs also helps students gain a greater awareness and a deeper sense of appreciation of how academic disciplines can contribute to solving real human problems. They not only learn the abstract theories on which those disciplines are based, but they also realize how that theory can be applied to improve the human condition." (Ribeau, 2002)

Civic engagement activities of national educational organizations

A move to a greater recognition of the importance and value of public scholarship will not occur without support from all parts of the scholarly system. As Boyer (1990, p. 78) has written, "Moving in this direction requires the support and engagement of university presidents, faculty, faculty governance, professional associations, and accrediting bodies."

This challenge has been taken up by the CIC. The CIC Committee on Engagement was established in 2002 to provide strategic advice to the CIC Members (chief academic officers) on issues of public engagement. Its charge was to: 1) frame what is meant by engagement; 2) benchmark strategies for public engagement across the CIC; 3) identify performance measures; and 4) advise CIC Members' Committee on collaborative opportunities that could be included in the CIC strategic plan.

In spring 2003, the CIC Committee on Engagement and the Council on Extension, Continuing Education, and Public Service of NASULGC agreed to work together. Their joint goal was to generate benchmarks that all universities can use to assess institutional effectiveness in meeting commitments to engagement in the service of society.

Further, the North Central Association's Higher Learning Commission (which accredits most CIC institutions) revised its "Criteria 5: Engagement and Service" accreditation standards by developing operational components and definitions of engagement, and by establishing engagement benchmarks.

Benchmarks of civic engagement

The CIC-NASULGC Committee developed seven engagement benchmarks that will "allow universities to assess fulfillment of their engagement/public service missions, as

well as serve as a basis for gathering economic development and technology information and building support for higher education among legislators, donors, and the public." These measures are also intended to "provide departments with criteria for including scholarly engagement activities for faculty and instructional academic staff as part of the tenure and promotion processes." The benchmarks ask for evidence of institutional commitment to engagement, institutional resource commitments to engagement, student involvement in engagement and outreach activities, faculty and staff engagement with external constituents, institutional engagement with their communities, assessing the impact and outcomes of engagement, and resource/revenue opportunities generated through engagement.

Further details about the definitions and ways to implement these benchmarks may be found on the CIC web site:

<http://www.cic.uiuc.edu/groups/CommitteeOnEngagement/index.html>.

What can graduate deans do?

If public scholarship and civic engagement are vital for universities and our contribution to society, then what can graduate deans do to foster them, while respecting resource constraints, faculty and departmental autonomy, and similar realities? Here are four ideas (adapted from Bloomfield, 2005).

First, encourage multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research and teaching. Significant social problems are rarely uni-disciplinary. Since the Graduate School is often at the center of interdisciplinary arrangements, we can have a particularly important role to play by providing seed resources and small grants, noting communities of interest, facilitating partnerships among academic units, and helping to overcome bureaucratic barriers.

Second, provide the "top-down" to complement the "bottom-up". Successful civic engagement requires both ideas and commitment from faculty and students, and support from key administrators. We can articulate the recognition that civic engagement and public scholarship are crucial to the continued support and success of research universities, and we can help faculty and other administrators recognize ways in which public scholarship should be acknowledged in tenure, promotion, and salary decisions.

Third, use the access that our position provides to open doors for faculty to talk with community and business leaders, politicians, policy makers, and foundation executives. We can invite community leaders to campus, where they can participate in discussions of research problems and priorities and become stake-holders in university work. Our physical presence at meetings and conferences, to express support and engage in sharing of ideas, can provide important encouragement to faculty who are trying to develop programs.

Fourth, work with university public relations offices to get our stories out. Using our broad familiarity with research across our institutions, we can pass along information

about research that exemplifies the personal aspects and civic consequences of academic work. Local public scholarship, with reciprocal engagement at its heart, is particularly suitable for such stories.

In these ways, we can give graduate education its proper role in achieving the more general purposes of the university as an engaged institution.

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