

# FOCUSING OUR AIM

## Strengthening Faculty Commitment to Community Engagement

BY DAN W. BUTIN

**W**hile community engagement has a long history—tracing its roots to the land-grant universities of the 19th century and made vivid in the “Wisconsin Idea” that the boundaries of the university are contiguous with the boundaries of the state—only in the last few years has such engagement become prominently positioned on institutional home pages and alumni-magazine covers.

Over a thousand college and university presidents are now members of Campus Compact, an organization committed to advancing campus-based community outreach, civic engagement, and service-learning. Such involvement with the larger community has been further legitimized by the Carnegie Foundation’s recent development of a voluntary “community engagement” classification that spotlights strong curricular engagement and partnerships with local communities.

Faculty seem to approve of such bridge-building to the world outside the walls of the classroom and the covers of the textbook. A 2005 survey of more than 40,000 faculty by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA found that more than 80 percent believed that their institutions have a responsibility to

work with their local communities and that students should be involved in community-service activities. These sentiments are consonant with Ernest Boyer’s call for a “scholarship of engagement,” the movement towards a more “public scholarship” in the humanities and social sciences, and a wide range of popular active-learning practices (e.g., community-based research, service-learning, and undergraduate research).

Yet all too often the rhetoric of community engagement outpaces the reality. Campus Compact’s own data show that service-learning offices, while more numerous than they once were, usually reside on the co-curricular side of an institution’s administrative structure (such as in the office of the dean of student affairs) and operate on a minimal budget of less than \$60,000 a year, with no dedicated full-time staff focused on linking service with academic work. Alexander Astin and others also have documented that it is the most marginalized faculty in the academy (e.g., contingent, female, minority, and those in “soft” fields such as education and social work) who are most committed to community engagement.

Thus while many speak strongly about community engagement, few are able or willing to develop sustained and consequential programs and practices that further it. Many faculty are, in fact, dubious about an educational reform that appears too a-theoretical, too co-curricular, too much like yet another under-financed fad. As Stanley Fish provocatively intoned several years ago in a *Chronicle of Higher Ed-*

*ucation* opinion piece, faculty should “aim low” and do nothing more than the already difficult job of trying to teach undergraduates the basics of their fields. “You might just make them into good researchers,” he opined. “You can’t make them into good people, and you shouldn’t try.”

What I want to suggest, though, is that community engagement is not just about reconnecting institutions of higher education to the real-world lives of their students and to the communities surrounding them. The goal—more humble and yet more radical—is to provide faculty with an additional set of tools by which to do their jobs effectively. This was my argument for many years when I led a semester-long faculty seminar on the theory and practice of service-learning, and it is now when I talk with faculty across the country about service learning and community engagement. I have found that faculty respond to the pragmatic goal of “focusing their aim” (rather than “aiming low”) through community-based models of teaching, learning, and research.

This is not to dismiss the reality that there are political and structural barriers to embedding community engagement within the academy. But such barriers are only inherent to community engagement as it has been traditionally envisioned and enacted.

### FACULTY WARINESS

There are legitimate reasons for faculty members’ wariness about community engagement. First, it takes an immense amount of time and energy to create

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courses and programs built around powerful community engagement—ones that foster respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection. Faculty need to develop local contacts, build trust with them, create collaborative relationships, listen carefully, learn about real community needs, and integrate students' engaged work into course content. And all of this must be "front-loaded" weeks or months before a course is offered.

Moreover, faculty may be wary of jumping into an existentially precarious pedagogy: They must move from the classroom, a controlled environment where they are the experts, to a messy, chaotic world in which they are not the only source of knowledge. Faculty may have to watch the theories in the textbook contradicted by the reality on the ground. They may have to face the fact that their lectures do not speak to the situation that students encounter in their community organizations. Or they may realize that their expertise, built up over many years of graduate school and teaching, may be next to useless in situations requiring different skills or more interdisciplinary knowledge than they have developed. Community engagement, in short, forces faculty members to confront the limits of their identity as productive and effective scholars.

Community engagement is also a political hot potato that many faculty would rather not touch. By "political" I mean both the hallway politics of academia and the larger culture wars of red state/blue state America. With regard to the former, the pedagogies of community engagement may affront more traditional colleagues who have been teaching the same course in the same way for a long time. Senior faculty also may view the investment of time and energy required to teach this way as an escape from the more important task of publishing, which is so crucial to gaining tenure and promotion.

And indeed, an institution may not have any means by which to evaluate and reward faculty who have pursued such innovative pedagogical and curricular strategies. As Amy Driscoll, the leader of the Carnegie Foundation's pilot project on its community-engagement classification, says about the first-round of college and university applicants for the project, "Even among the most compelling applications, few institutions described promotion and tenure policies that recognize and reward the scholarship associated

with community engagement." I have heard all too many stories of faculty who were advised to postpone such projects until after they received tenure.

In the larger political context, community engagement is all too often and easily associated with liberal and even radical social activism. Many faculty are drawn to community engagement exactly because of its socially ameliorative possibilities and its seeming connections to the civil-rights movement. But other participating faculty keep any such activism at arm's length, seeing this as undermining the academy's claim to neutrality and objectivity. This was crystallized for me

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in my first semester of leading the service-learning seminar, when a math professor declared that she was participating in order to learn how to teach math better to her students in mathematics education—not to engage in partisan politics. A philosophy professor immediately challenged her right to be there, given that *he* was there to learn how to be a better instructor in his ethics and justice course, where students were required to volunteer in local organizations committed to eradicating poverty and mobilizing the homeless.

We spent the rest of the semester working out the multiple and often-con-

tradictory rationales for these perspectives. I have seen this tension manifested in one form or another ever since.

Finally, the least visible, but probably the most pernicious, impediments to the long-term viability of community engagement are structural. Effective partnerships with community groups begin with a commitment in the institution's mission to work beyond the campus boundaries and require a host of interconnected structures, policies, and practices that need to be deeply embedded within the campus. But few institutions have these hard-wired into their operations. Instead, most rely on "soft money" from external grants to support community-engagement projects, which lead to highly publicized but short-lived initiatives.

Yet these barriers are not intrinsic to community engagement but rather are a product of the way that engagement has been mis-framed. Pedagogically, community engagement has been defined as something to do above and beyond one's job as an instructor, as an add-on to the standard ways of being a "good teacher." Politically, community engagement is presumed to be synonymous with a liberal and activist worldview. And institutionally, community engagement is seen as an overarching reform model that should be adopted by departments across the entire institution, which in the academy is to have no home at all.

All of these assumptions come of seeing community engagement as an *external* reform effort. I suggest, instead, that we reconceptualize and refocus it as inherent to faculty members' work as teachers and scholars. Community engagement offers a range of curricular and instructional strategies to engage students in the issues deemed most valuable by each faculty member in each course, as well as new strategies for tackling scholarly problems.

## **FOUR MODELS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

There are four distinctive typologies by which we can fruitfully understand community engagement. I view the four typologies—technical, cultural, political, and anti-foundational—as Weberian "ideal types," in that they allow us to make sense of the varied goals we have for community engagement and the multiple means by which we attempt to reach them. In reality, such typologies overlap and intermix. But each is also distinctive

and has its own limits and possibilities.

A *technical* conceptualization of community engagement is focused on its pedagogical effectiveness. An excellent way to study the impact of poverty on families, for example, is to work with particular poor families within the context of an academic course that uses texts, reflections, and assignments to make sense of the experience. Here, community engagement is one among a number of pedagogical strategies; it serves the function of better teaching for better learning.

A *cultural* conceptualization is focused on the meanings of the practice for the individuals and institutions involved. For example, in this conception community engagement is seen as a means to help students increase their tolerance and respect for diversity, to help academic institutions promote engaged citizenship, and to help communities and colleges overcome persistent town/gown divisions.

A *political* conceptualization of community engagement is focused on the empowerment of historically disempowered groups in society. Community engagement here is viewed as the enactment of a worldview emphasizing social justice, where the personal and the political meet in a substantive praxis and where higher education is viewed as an agent of progress towards a more equitable society.

Finally, an *anti-foundational* conceptualization is focused on what John Dewey termed a “forked-road” situation, one that fosters a state of doubt as a

prerequisite for thoughtful deliberation. Community engagement’s experiential components open up questions about basic, seemingly “natural” norms, behaviors, and assumptions.

These typologies do not presuppose some teleological great chain of being. It is just as legitimate to incorporate a community-engagement component to teach mathematical principles or biology as it is to develop cultural competency in future teachers. [Editor’s note: See *Change*, November/December 2006, for Heidi Elmendorf’s article on service-learning in biology.] Additionally, any practice can have aspects from each typology. The semester-long tutoring of under-performing high-school students in math can help college students understand how youths make systematic conceptual errors (a technical perspective). The students can also gain insight into young people who come from a different socioeconomic and/or ethnic background (a cultural perspective). They can explicitly link the tutoring with preparing underrepresented youth for college (a political perspective). And they can be “pulled up short” in realizing that some youths don’t share their basic assumptions and values—for example not caring at all about earning good grades to get into college or “getting ahead” in general (an anti-foundational perspective). It all depends on the instructor, the course, and the curricular goals. What the typology does is establish that there are multiple ways by which, and reasons for which, the community may be brought into courses.

## POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS

But even more important is that such a typology makes visible not just the possibilities but also the limits of each mode of engagement.

To believe that community engagement in its various forms has no conceptual and practical limits is akin to declaring that a particular statistical method has no weaknesses. Articulating those limits assures faculty that the theoretical and practical boundaries of community engagement have been examined and can be prepared for and accepted. Faculty skepticism is more likely to be allayed when those boundaries have been marked.

Instructors working from a technical perspective should be aware that the experiential component of community engagement will raise a host of issues that seem irrelevant to the course content. Students engaged in math tutoring may begin to ask about the sexist behavior of another student or teacher, or they may question why so many underperforming youth are non-white. Instructors must then make difficult decisions about whether to delve into issues that may be far from their expertise, to ignore or minimize such discussions, or to develop new readings that cut into the carefully planned curriculum. Because it focuses on content, a technical perspective leaves itself open to being undermined by the culturally saturated experiences of community engagement.

Instructors working from a cultural perspective face an analogous dilemma. What is intended to be a process of engaging

**TABLE I. FOUR MODELS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

	Key focus	Possibilities	Limits
Technical	Content knowledge	Cognitive progress through real-world links	Experiential components may overwhelm the content focus
Cultural	Civic engagement and cultural competency	Expanded understanding of the self as embedded in a local and global community	Complexity of social and cultural realities may be undermined by a “charity” orientation
Political	Social & political activism	Fostering a more equitable and socially just environment for individuals and groups	Ideology may appear partisan, thereby undercutting course content, student buy-in, and achievement of goals
Anti-foundational	Cognitive dissonance	Expanded epistemological possibilities through questioning of a priori truths	Lack of formal or conclusive solutions may discourage committed students

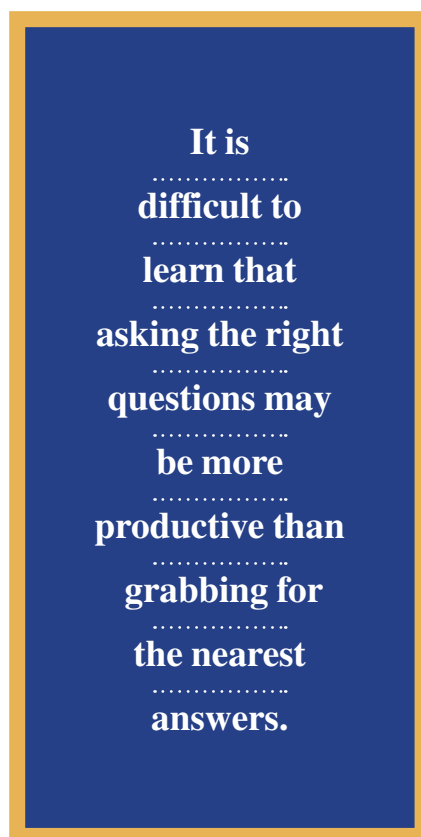
(and, one hopes, welcoming) the diversity and plurality of local and global communities may in fact reinforce students' views of the "other" as being deficient. Students volunteering in a homeless shelter may see their worst stereotypes reinforced by violent, sexist, or demeaning behavior. They may now have "data," however anecdotal, that support their predetermined convictions. The "border-crossing" aspect of a cultural perspective also tempts students to assume the implicitly privileged position of observer, which can subvert the aim of experiencing other ways of being as equal to one's own.

Whereas the limits of the technical and cultural approaches to community engagement come from interactions with the community, instructors committed to a political perspective may find their limits already embedded within their own practices. That is to say, faculty members working from a political perspective face the danger of sliding into a dogmatism that discounts alternative explanations or political worldviews. It is this dilemma that is at the heart of contemporary academic-freedom debates and David Horowitz's claims concerning the need for an "academic bill of rights." Conservatives believe that college students are only being exposed to one side of the political story, and students may come to see community engagement as just such a partisan experience. Moreover, the political form of community engagement, with its strongly ameliorative perspective, may lead to disappointment when the limits of what can be accomplished within a 14-week semester become clear.

Similarly, instructors working from an anti-foundational perspective may find that the limits of that approach are generally experienced by students who are committed to making a difference. It is difficult to learn that asking the right questions may be more productive than grabbing for the nearest answers. An anti-foundational perspective struggles to work without grounding foundations. This is much like the story (told by Clifford Geertz) of the boy who asks his father, upon being told that the world rests on the back of a turtle, What does that turtle rest on? Another turtle, comes the answer. And that turtle? Well, it's turtles all the way down. It is hard to have passion and be committed to activism when one's truths are always in question.

## STRENGTHENING BUY-IN BY FACULTY MEMBERS

As Derek Bok argued in *Our Underachieving Colleges*, undergraduate education is a hodgepodge of unproductive practices that need to be fundamentally altered to become relevant. Community engagement has immense potential to improve that situation, but today's faculty are not trained, prepared, or rewarded for linking their courses to their communi-



ties; grounding their research in real-life community dilemmas; or disseminating their research to non-academic audiences.

But this is why they will buy into community engagement when it is defined as an integral component of their repertoire as effective teachers and productive scholars. If I have been searching for new methods to teach microeconomics (or gender theory or language acquisition, etc.) and have tried PowerPoint demonstrations and teaching through films and project-based learning and wiki-based textbook construction, I may find community engagement to be another useful tool in my pedagogical toolbox. A technical perspective allows me to determine which ideas are best taught through community engagement and which are not. If

I find that my students continue to insist, no matter how many texts I assign them or how many different ways I lecture, that gender is "obviously" binary, community engagement with a local lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual (LGBT) organization may be a necessary component of my pedagogical strategy. Such an anti-foundational tack allows me to tailor my classroom practices to my academic goals.

In so doing, I must of course be sure that the collaboration with the community organization is characterized by respect, that I am not perpetuating the "community-as-laboratory" phenomenon. This is extremely difficult. But so is setting up a study that adequately controls for extraneous variables or constructing a logical argument that both accounts for and improves upon alternative possibilities. That, simply put, is our job as academics.

Such a reconceptualization and refocusing neatly answers Fish's critique in the *Chronicle* article I mentioned earlier by demonstrating that community engagement serves our goal of being good academicians who search for and develop ever-better tools to teach, conduct research, and disseminate knowledge. Economics faculty may employ community engagement in a drastically different way from women's-studies faculty, who in turn may have fundamentally different goals and methods than music-education faculty. Yet so long as each discipline meets its own academic standards for legitimate teaching and scholarship, a thousand types of community engagement can bloom.

I have found that explicating the limits and possibilities of each mode of doing community engagement is a powerful means of de-escalating the all-too-prevalent faculty tensions. Both the mathematics and philosophy professor in my first seminar class realized that their distinctive goals were legitimate. They could each pursue their passions—teaching math or understanding justice—as long as they did it in ways that followed legitimate pedagogical practices, were aligned with their academic goals, and were respectful of their community partners. Faculty buy-in thus was predicated on realizing that community engagement was not a pedagogical add-on, a political bellwether, or an amorphous reform but rather a part of who they were as faculty. ☐