

Lessons from a College Promoting Civic Engagement

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Engaging students in learning has become the rallying cry of higher education during the past several decades, yet passive learning is still customary on many campuses. Trinity College, a small private liberal arts institution with high tuition, a low student-teacher ratio, and a primary commitment to teaching, has long promised to engage students in their learning. The efficacy of that engaged learning, however, suffered for many years because of an ivory tower separation of campus and community. Our urban location has created for us in the past decade a civic engagement imperative of “enlightened necessity” that has begun to transform both our neighborhood and our campus.

Trinity is located in Hartford, Connecticut, the state capital, celebrated as the insurance center of the United States and home to fine museums and theatres. But Hartford is also a stark example of an unequal America: It is almost the poorest city of its size in the country and is ringed by towns that together rank as among the ten richest in the country. Trinity itself is now surrounded by Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, where low education (almost half of adults without a high school degree) is accompanied by high unemployment (40 percent of residents unemployed in 2001), high residential mobility (more than half move in three years) and low owner occupancy (10 percent of housing units). What should be the role of a liberal arts college in such circumstances?

A Civic Engagement Imperative

Although Trinity had community liaison offices extending back to the mid-1960s, its community engagement

accelerated in the 1990s when gang violence and drug trafficking created neighborhood crises. This was when the College fully understood that its future depended on its surroundings. We were forced to ask whether the College should/could mount a massive redevelopment project, use its surroundings as a research laboratory, help its students engage in service to ameliorate poverty, or do something else. Trinity chose a path that is at once all and none of these: It started a combination of large and small development projects, created administrative offices to help faculty develop collaborative projects with community groups, and helped students encounter the city through existing courses and programs in addition to their own organizations.

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When Trinity first requested external foundation support in 1996 for its plans to build “an extended community of learning” linking campus and community, it asked whether a liberal arts college could transform its neighborhood. Since then, the College has played an instrumental role in building an adjoining complex called the Learning Corridor. No other public school

campus in the nation has the Learning Corridor's mix of educational institutions: a Montessori Magnet School, a Magnet Middle School, and Greater Hartford Academies of Art and of Math and Science, and support programs for youths, including a Boys & Girls Club, the Aetna Center for Families, and the Connecticut Valley Girl Scouts Council. Seven years later, we know that some parts of a neighborhood can be transformed, but we are even more certain that a college can transform itself in this process.

Not One Community

Like other academic institutions, our college has both corporate and academic sides to its operations. Our neighbors see one college but there are many. It is an employer and developer, a site of performances, and a producer of knowledge, populated by students, faculty, and staff with their own politics and programs. But the College has also tended to see one community where there are many. Neighbors, businesses, political groups, non-profits, and formal institutional alliances all call upon the college to partner with and dedicate its resources to them.

To deal with this multiplicity of interests, civic engagement now takes place at Trinity along three identifiable pathways: corporate, curricular, and co-curricular. The corporate pathway is at the level of Trinity as an employer and historical constant in the city for 180 years. The college has scholarship and tuition remission programs for Hartford residents, gives hiring preference to local residents, helped

develop a neighborhood job center, works with local neighborhood planning groups, and, together with other neighboring institutions in the Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance (SINA), helped build the Learning Corridor.

Not One Curriculum

A second pathway for civic engagement in Trinity is at the level of the curriculum, where courses offer both urban content (e.g., a course on urban architecture) and urban context (e.g., a sensory biology class that partners with a local school for the deaf). Our Community Learning Initiative (CLI), created by the faculty, is the primary vehicle for academic departments to promote civic engagement. CLI courses use community-based experiences, usually designed together with community partners, to further student learning within existing course objectives. Compared to universities doing what is more commonly called service-learning, Trinity's thirty CLI courses and 400-500 students a year are small numbers. But taking its size into account, this institution has 30 percent of its faculty teaching this way with more than 60 percent of students completing one or more CLI courses by the time they graduate. In addition, an academic internship program offers course credit to students who design semester-long projects combining academic work with community placements. Both faculty and community sponsors supervise this work, and both evaluate it. About half of Trinity students do at least one academic internship in the city and metropolitan region before they graduate,

To understand the many ways Trinity and its surrounding communities interact, you would need to meet the following people:

- the neighborhood resident who learned to type at a Trinity-run neighborhood technology center and now regularly comes to campus to e-mail her legislators
- the faculty member who also teaches in local Hartford schools
- the student who did independent research on pharmaceutical price differentials for an elderly citizens lobbying group
- the class that researched ownership of derelict or abandoned buildings and helped neighborhood groups take control
- the college administrator who teaches budget skills to rising leaders of local community groups
- the faculty member who, together with her first year students and community residents, helped plant a community garden
- the students who formed their own organization to tutor local middle school students
- the local residents playing at the Boys & Girls Club, a formal collaboration with the college
- the members of the local neighborhood planning group that use crime statistics which a Trinity course transformed from raw police data into usable reports

and more than half of the faculty have supervised them.

Residence halls, student clubs, and service projects are a third track for civic engagement at Trinity. These co-curricular initiatives are almost entirely student-controlled, so they give students experience in running their own organizations as well as experiences in the city. More than twenty-five student organizations now offer services to local groups, ranging from a chapter of Habitat for Humanity to various clubs that offer mentoring and tutoring to local public school students.

The Advantage of Size

Size matters in the scale of community work at Trinity, and it might even be called an example of the economist E.F. Schumacher's "appropriate technology." Faculty at Trinity, as at many liberal arts colleges, are committed to working on their courses more than on national policies—the outcomes of their teaching are designed for their students and community collaborators rather than for some national research or policy audience. This means course-based projects are smaller, simpler, easier to understand, possible to complete in one semester, and scaled for students to do themselves. It often means that class-based research projects are undertaken to satisfy the operational needs of community collaborators more than to satisfy the research interests of faculty. But it also ensures that many community-learning projects are locally relevant. We are beginning to explore how faculty can use these types of pedagogical innovations to benefit

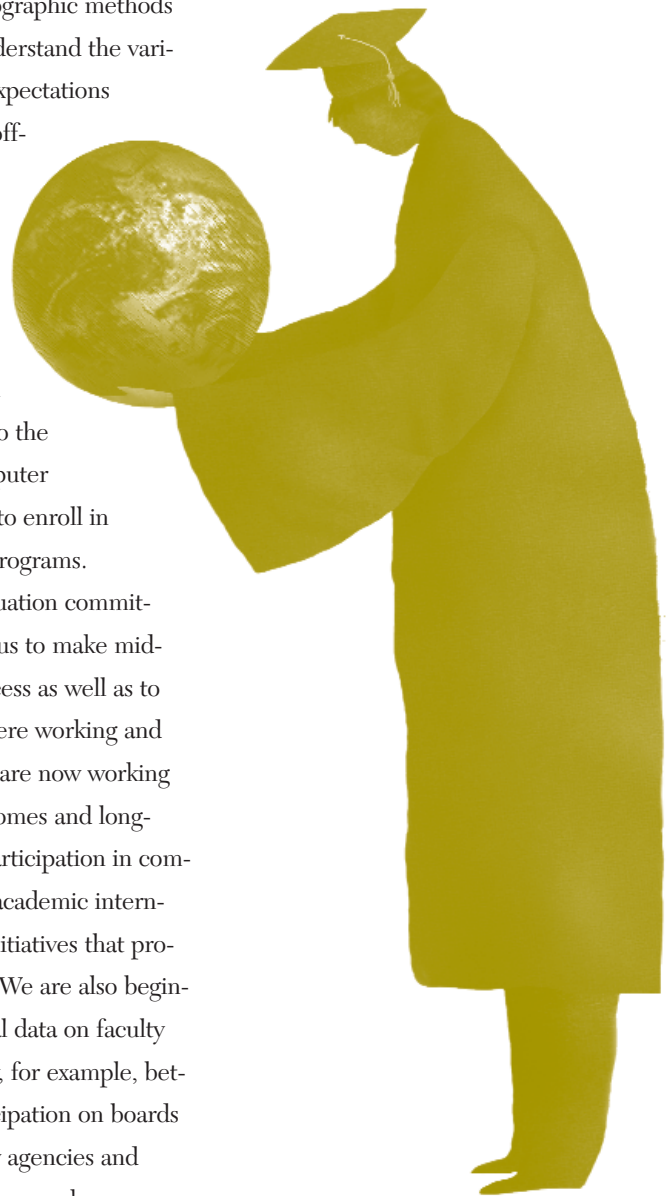
their own scholarly disciplines, how to help extend projects over time and across disciplines, and how better to disseminate what works and what doesn't.

Evaluation as Pedagogy

Evaluation has been a key component of Trinity's recent urban programs. CLI courses are evaluated by students, faculty, and community partners. An in-house evaluator has used both ethnographic methods and sample surveys to understand the variability and frequency of expectations and perceptions on- and off-campus. A baseline community survey of 650 residences helped establish residents' perceptions of their neighborhood and of the college, and helped disseminate information to the neighborhood about computer classes and opportunities to enroll in high school equivalency programs. Supplemented by an evaluation committee, the evaluator helped us to make mid-course corrections of process as well as to recognize where things were working and where they were not. We are now working toward assessing the outcomes and long-term impact of student participation in community learning courses, academic internships, and co-curricular initiatives that promote urban engagement. We are also beginning to collect institutional data on faculty engagement in the city by, for example, better assessing faculty participation on boards of directors of community agencies and other political and volunteer work.

The Need to Institutionalize

Trinity has constantly trimmed and adjusted its community projects, seeking the right scale and mix of endowment-funded and grant-funded initiatives. For example, Trinity's information technology project originally offered free Internet connections to nearby residents and community groups. As Internet connections became more available and inexpensive,



the college has finally decided to get out of the Internet provider business, which cost approximately \$90,000 per year. Most, but not all, community organizations have chosen to continue their connections at their own expense. The college-sponsored neighborhood technology center, now heavily staffed by students, continues to offer free typing and computer classes, and has worked with community groups to create additional community computer labs.

The college has begun to change its institutional incentives and administrative programs to support civic engagement. CLI work used to be counted as service work during promotion and tenure reviews; now it is counted as part of teaching, and the category of service continues to be refined. The dean of faculty now collects information about faculty connections to the city as part of their annual performance reviews. And a number of programs have been reorganized and coordinated under a new director of urban initiatives position, which reports both to the president and the dean of the faculty.

These types of changes, along with concurrent faculty discussions of curricular reform, are allowing new and more coherent attention to be paid to the many forms of civic engagement at Trinity. Recent changes include enhanced attention to our urban location as a part of admissions outreach, more attention to urban opportunities in our First Year Program, and better orientation for new students as well as student mentors and residence hall advisors. Proposals have been submitted to national

and local foundations at the same time that fundraising is taking place among trustees and alumni. Over time, our challenge is to raise the endowment funds required to sustain these programs from internal funds for the foreseeable future.

In summary, here are some of the lessons we have learned in this process of transforming some parts of our college and our city:

- Community and college appear monolithic and constant to each other, though each is multivocal and evolving. A college needs multiple points of entry and exit to allow appropriately complex articulations to develop among its many clients and partners.
- Deferred maintenance of neighborhoods can be as dangerous and costly as deferred maintenance of campus buildings.
- A curriculum is not the sole agent of change within a college. Civic engagement is supported by, but does not depend on, curricular change.
- Smaller can be better.
- Evaluation matters.
- More engagement creates greater expectations and more pressure to sustain projects over time.

The imperative of civic engagement has become part of Trinity's urban liberal arts mission. Because both the community and campus are constantly changing, this commitment continues to evolve. We are working to create the institutional processes to help us recognize what to do next, and the institutional and community-based resources to allow us to sustain what we all choose. ■

Network for Academic Renewal Meetings

October 30-November 1, 2003

Technology, Learning, and Intellectual Development
Cambridge, Massachusetts

November 13-15, 2003

Achieving Greater Expectations
Washington, DC

March 3-7, 2004

Valuing General Education and Assessment: Campus-Wide Collaboration for Engaged Liberal Education
Long Beach, California

April 2004

Pedagogies of Engagement: Disciplines and the Intersections for Learning
Chicago, Illinois

90th Annual Meeting

January 21-24, 2004

Practicing Liberal Education: Deepening Knowledge, Pursuing Justice, Taking Action
Washington, DC

Additional information about upcoming meetings is available online at www.aacu.org/meetings.