

# The Faculty Role in Civic Engagement

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Recently, a group of Oklahoma college students submitted to their state legislature a “Civic Engagement Resolution” in which they addressed, among other things, “grievances regarding issues of the political agenda and process, public education’s priorities and [their] own civic ignorance . . .” They suggested that for their generation “politics” implied “words such as *greed, intimidation, complex, power, money, and authority,*” and that these implications help account for their widespread alienation from the political process. As future leaders, they demanded that their civic education be taken much more seriously than has recently been the case. Specifically, with regard to higher education, they noted that “the mission of [their state’s] higher education institutions should be to educate future citizens about their civic as well as their professional duties.” Hence, they urged Oklahoma higher education institutions to “prioritize and implement civic education in the classroom, in research, and in services to the community.”<sup>1</sup>

Few would consider Oklahoma and its students a bastion of radicalism. Rather, the students’ statement indicates the broad degree to which higher education is perceived as having failed to formulate and implement “an updated version of itself as a participant in the life of civil society, as a citizen of American democracy” (Sullivan 2000, 21). It is this failure that Russ Edgerton, former president of the American Association for Higher Education, had in mind when he noted that “all in all, there is a growing, daunting list of ‘new literacies’ that Americans need to learn to be effective citizens” (1997, 37). Such literacies, in turn, suggest that the very way in

which the academy has defined its responsibilities is dangerously incomplete. As the faculty advisory committee of the University of Utah’s Lowell Bennion Center points out, “foundational” and “professional” knowledge do not mark the limits of what the academy is obliged to teach. There exists a third category—“socially responsive” knowledge—that, especially of late, has become an issue of pressing concern.

Higher education is at a crossroads. At few moments in our country’s history have so many questioned the importance and relevance of higher education to contemporary society. . . . Why does the task of educating our students to be good citizens now require that we pay more attention to socially responsive knowledge? To begin with, the needs that now challenge society are significantly different than those that have faced us in the past . . . forc[ing] us *as academicians* to no longer assume we can perform our teaching role without paying close attention to the impact of that role on the communities that surround us. And these questions simply cannot be addressed only by instilling traditional and professional knowledge in our students . . . (University of Utah 1998, J-1-5, *original emphasis*).

In other words, contrary to what many faculty may believe, even foundational or traditional knowledge—the province of liberal learning as traditionally understood—will not, in and of itself, result in the kind of civic literacy the country now needs. In our time, we must reinvent liberal and professional education and make socially responsive

<sup>1</sup> The full text of the “Oklahoma Students’ Civic Engagement Resolution” is available online at [www.okhighered.org/campus-compact/civic%20engagement%20resolution.pdf](http://www.okhighered.org/campus-compact/civic%20engagement%20resolution.pdf).

knowledge a key component of every college student's education. Nor can we reserve such concern for our colleagues in student affairs.

## Faculty Attitudes

As the Utah faculty statement goes on to note, "simply providing opportunities for volunteer service will not enable universities to meet the social demands of the coming decades. The transmittal of socially responsive knowledge needs to be integrated broadly into the entire educational enterprise" (1998, J-5). But such a demand immediately runs up against a very disturbing finding. According to a recent survey of faculty attitudes conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (1999), faculty are indeed "increasingly likely to believe that American colleges and universities are committed to involving students in community service." However, "there has been essentially no change in faculty's own commitment to 'instill in students a commitment to community service' and to 'prepare students for responsible citizenship.'" Faculty attitudes, it would seem, are clearly implicated in the "grievance" raised by the Oklahoma students.

And yet, how are our students to prepare for "their civic as well as their professional duties" if faculty continue to refuse to be involved? Few faculty would support the marginalization of other competencies fundamental to their students' futures. One can well imagine what would happen if an institution suggested making writing skills a matter of individual student choice! As the writing across the curriculum movement has demonstrated, the achievement of real literacy skills requires not only effective compo-

sition courses but also substantive writing assignments in other disciplines. And yet, until quite recently, even political scientists shied away from civic engagement as a core faculty responsibility. As the American Political Science Association Task Force on Civic Engagement (1998, 636) confessed, "We believe political education in the United States is inadequate across the board. We believe that we who have chosen to teach politics as our profession bear major responsibility for addressing this problem."

Major, perhaps, but not exclusive. The task force went on to identify ways in which its members could respond, and its bottom-line recommendation would seem to speak to the academy as a whole: "Teach the motivation and the competence to engage actively in public problem solving." All of these—motivation, public issues, and problem solving—are areas many faculty ignore in favor of the traditional delivery of conceptual maps and disciple-based information. And yet, as Battistoni (2002) has demonstrated in *Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines*, teaching students "the motivation and the competence to engage actively in public problem solving" need not be foreign to any area of the curriculum. While the terminology that captures such engagement may differ widely from one academic area to the next, each area does have its own nomenclature and its own traditions. Terms such as "social responsibility," "social justice," "connected knowing," "public scholarship," "public science," and "healthy communities" all speak naturally to different academic constituencies. Hence, they can use them to integrate civic engagement in an effective, non-obtrusive way.

## Faculty Initiatives at Portland State University

Portland State University (PSU) is among a growing number of institutions where the intention to address civic responsibility and engagement is made explicit in its academic endeavors. Almost a decade ago, PSU launched a significant initiative of comprehensive institutional transformation by aligning its curriculum, undergraduate and graduate academic programs, promotion and tenure guidelines, and collaborative community outreach to reflect its commitment to a newly defined "urban" mission. Each academic quarter, hundreds of students and dozens of faculty across a wide range of disciplines (from Freshman Inquiry to Senior-Level Capstones) participate in the Portland metropolitan communities to address real-life community problems. Larger numbers of community partners also co-teach with faculty. The university and the community appear to be well connected in engaging one another.

And yet, in 1999, a number of faculty indicated that they also wanted to develop a campus culture that critically examined its work of engagement. Of course, individual course assessments provide student data on the impact of such work. But for these faculty, a campus-wide discussion of the intellectual and theoretical underpinnings of civic engagement—especially as it relates to democracy—was also needed. To this end, the office of community-university partnerships, which reports to Academic Affairs, organized two initiatives: *Study Circles and a Monthly Breakfast Series*.<sup>2</sup> Each study circle drew six to eight faculty members from different disciplines to discuss books on topics

related to higher education's civic responsibilities. Various faculty participants offered to facilitate these discussions, and the experience of bringing multiple disciplinary perspectives to bear on a single topic of concern was among the most beneficial outcomes.

The *Monthly Breakfast Series*, which is still going strong, attracts fifty to one hundred people per session. These events are designed to bring together faculty, administrators, community partners, and staff from Student Services to discuss and celebrate the work of civic engagement across disciplines, programs, and communities. Each participant who signs up for a breakfast is given a reading that serves to focus that month's discussion. The series began with broad questions such as: "How can higher education foster democracy?" and "In what ways do our teaching and learning practices on this campus cultivate a sense of civic responsibility among students?" In some instances, guest speakers have helped kickoff the discussions. In other instances, panels of community partners have brought to bear perspectives that provoked faculty to reexamine long-held assumptions and understandings.

As was mentioned above, the university has also sought to integrate civic engagement and community-based activities into its promotion and tenure guidelines. For example, the traditional tripartite set of faculty responsibilities is described as "research," "teaching," and "community outreach," thus making explicit the university's commitment to professional public service. Following Boyer, it also defines the term "scholar" in a way that recog-

nizes the "application" of knowledge as an activity as valuable as its "discovery." Indeed, even PSU's understanding of teaching deliberately invites innovations such as community-based work, and "encourages publishing in pedagogical journals or making educationally focused presentations at disciplinary and interdisciplinary meetings that advance the scholarship of teaching and curricular innovations or practice."

### Self-efficacy

In *Faculty at Work: Motivation, Expectation, Satisfaction*, Blackburn and Lawrence (1995, 281) report that, in their study of factors that affect faculty motivation, "self-efficacy . . . mattered more than any other variable in any category. It was significant in 26 instances at one time or another in every institutional type and academic discipline." Initiatives such as those described above are important because they encourage faculty to come together across their disciplinary and community boundaries to read and share their work, to discuss ideas, and to ground that work in new theoretical and conceptual contexts. In this way, they promote professional development opportunities that both supplement and complement the faculty's more traditional discipline-specific training. By helping faculty gain a new, collective understanding of their university's mission and its relationship to academically-based civic engagement, they enhance the faculty's sense of self-efficacy while also inculcating a new appreciation of the importance of reciprocity and inclusivity.

It is, ultimately, just this kind of experience that will have to become normative if our students' demand that they be prepared for "their civic as well as their professional duties" is to be addressed seriously. If our colleagues from the American Political Science Association (1998, 636) are correct and the current level of political engagement is "so low as to threaten the vitality and stability of democratic politics in the United States," we cannot begin too soon. ■

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed version of these undertakings, see: Dilafruz R. Williams and Daniel O. Bernstine. 2002. *Building capacity for civic engagement at Portland State University: A comprehensive approach*. In Maureen E. Kenney et al., eds. *Learning to serve: Promoting civil society through service learning*. Norwell, Massachusetts: Kluwer Press, 257-276.