

# Opening Address to the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement Workshop

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Good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining us for our Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement workshop. As I begin today, I must take a moment to express my gratitude to our Foundation visitors Cammie Jones and Amelia Ortiz and to the Carnegie Foundation for all the support making today possible.

Over the past many years, our relationship with the Foundation has provided nothing but blessings to our campus. We are honored to hold the elective classification, and thankful for the relationships and encouragement we have experienced in our work together. We are honored as well to have you, representing institutions from all over the United States, here with us for this workshop. Our shared vision for community engaged learning and scholarship is timely and frankly hopeful for the coming months and years.

As I look out over our group assembled here today, I see colleagues at various and different stages on the path of elective classification. Some of us are here to explore the possibilities while others are here to prepare for reaffirmation and yet others are here to take what they have recently begun and grow it for the future. So, mindful of our diverse experiences and perspectives, I would like to use my time to affirm our understanding of community engaged learning and to think about the reasons why we should embrace it.

## What is Engaged Learning?

As you begin or advance your conversation on community engaged learning on your campus, you might sometimes encounter this response: “Oh, yeah! Community Service!” When you do, let that be an opportunity to build consensus and awareness. In our everyday language, “community service” can easily conflate with a common judicial term which denotes a *punishment* or restorative action after causing a harm. The meaning of community engaged learning and scholarship lies in another direction which we can discern by considering “community engagement” and “academic community engagement”.

Sam Houston State University uses the Carnegie Foundation definition of community engagement: “[c]ommunity engagement describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global)

for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.”

Academic Community Engagement (ACE) is a formal designation for courses in which teaching combines traditional academic instruction with community engagement. Such a course requires students to use skills, knowledge, and dispositions learned in the classroom to collaborate with community partners in contribution to the public good.

So as a first step, whether for establishing community engagement on your campus or for inaugurating your reaffirmation, consider building a clear understanding of the engagement mission and its components. Work with your academic leadership and your marketing chief to adopt the language of community engagement as the language of official communications from your university. Getting the right words in play will go a long way to building and strengthening community engagement culture in your institution, with your stakeholders, and in the surrounding community.

## **Why Do It?**

### *The Faculty*

There are many reasons to build a practice of community engaged learning and scholarship. I have noticed, in many discussions in higher education, we often mention students first in conversations about growth, change, and choices. It is certain that students *are* the mission. That being said, I would like to turn to faculty as the first reason to pursue a community engaged university. Faculty endure all kinds of pressure: to produce in research and student credit hours taught, to demonstrate teaching effectiveness from one or more of many angles, to contribute to departmental community feeling and comradery, to serve the university on committees and panels. But over the years, one pressure I have noticed but not seen prioritized is that of curriculum.

It is just plain hard to have taught the same courses over the same basic content for years at a time. Yes, of course, we reference new literature and research, we study and improve pedagogical method, we learn new technologies. But, in the end, the experience of the faculty member is that of going into a room and leading a group of people through a body of knowledge the core of which stays the same over time...because it must. Students enter classes not knowing the content so the basic class description by necessity must rule the syllabus. Community engaged learning revives faculty and invigorates classes because it develops relationships and ever emerging opportunities for new iterations of executing that syllabus. It places at least part of knowledge acquisition in the frame of outward facing engagements with “the real world”. Thus, it invokes personality and personhood of the participating faculty, students, and community partners. In doing so, it completes the task of leading students through the necessary content of a course by providing opportunities for them to live that content in application. The faculty member enjoys the benefit of delivering content

in the context of relationships rather than in the abstract. Relationships change, grow, evolve and are living things. It is much easier to stay mentally and spiritually fresh in the context of living things than it is in the context of canonical knowledge.

When I attend new faculty workshops with Center for Community Engagement at Sam Houston State, I see colleagues talking, laughing, brainstorming, story swapping, and commiserating. I see activated relationships bringing meaning to the teaching task. Faculty invigoration is a prime reason to consider promoting community engaged learning and scholarship. At the same time, faculty collaboration and faculty allies are sine qua non for inaugurating engaged culture on your campus. They are principal beneficiaries but also chief constituents. Without faculty enthusiasm and interest, there is no community engaged teaching and learning. Thus, I have chosen and I suggest you begin with faculty.

### *The Public Trust*

I live and work in Texas. A cursory scan of headlines emanating from Texas will inform a reader that here we currently enjoy quite the lively discussion about the value and public good of higher education. Not all that discussion is flattering or appreciative of the role that universities and colleges play in Texas. Those of us who are convinced of the tremendous value inherent in higher education are obliged to help move the public debate back to a focus on the undisputed goods of it. In doing so, we must be mindful that currently about 21% of Texans have attained a bachelor's degree. About 60% of Texans range from some college with no degree to less than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education. That is most of our citizens for whom the benefits are not or not yet clear. These 60% are our neighbors, community residents, business leaders, officials, and citizens in the counties where our campuses reside. We must respect their experience and (re)earn their trust.

Some ten year ago, the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* published "The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education". The authors wrote in part:

*"The centrality of engagement is critical to the success of higher education in the future...Today's engagement is scholarly, is an aspect of learning and discovery, and enhances society...By recommitting [through engagement] to their societal contract, public and land-grant universities can fulfill their promise as institutions that produce knowledge that benefits society and prepares students for productive citizenship in a democratic society."*<sup>1</sup>

That is wisdom for the present day. The future the authors mention is now. In Texas and other places around the nation, the public needs to see impact of learning more than they need to receive assurances about the value of scholarly products they never

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald, H.E., Bruns, K., Furco, A., & Swanson, L. (2012). The centrality of engagement in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 16(3), 7-28.

otherwise encounter. A community engaged university will specialize in bringing the classroom to the community, of demonstrating the impact of the curriculum, and of forging the relationships that foster constituency and advocacy. We ought not count only on our alumni to hold dear their alma mater. We should instead also work such that our host community unequivocally sees our presence as a blessing.

Woven into that objective are the numberless relationships that will form around community engaged learning and scholarship. And note, these are not the sort of relationships created when university presidents make appearances, or sign formal agreement documents, or host university advancement events. All of those are necessary and good in their sphere. However, the relationships formed by and through community engagement are organic instead of transactional, multi-nodal instead of unipolar, grassroots instead of top down. In the end, no one campus person will oversee all these relationships because they will constitute an entire web of interaction between the community and campus. They will have the strength of authenticity and durability. They will be healthy. Healthy relationships are serendipitously creative and attract more relationships. The university will enhance connections with citizens, businesses, and institutions locally, regionally, and around the state.

### *The Students*

Finally, I come to the students. Students are indeed, as the saying goes, Job #1. Yet, I placed them at this point of the list not because I disagree with that maxim but because building a community engaged university teaches us a new path to putting students first. We put them first by ensuring we have a robust, vibrant culture promoting enthusiasm for the learning mission. We put them first by empowering faculty to build for themselves opportunities for creative teaching, self-expression, and enhanced belonging. Happier, more satisfied faculty make for happier, more satisfied students. We put students first by ensuring we operate in a community that feels our respect and gratitude and is itself excited to have us present. And we put students first when we nurture an atmosphere that prioritizes meaning and impact as keys to the educational experience.

I also put students here because they relate integrally with one other constituency: our administrators. Administrators, like faculty, endure a suite of pressures all their own. They suffer scrutiny, having assumed positions of high visibility. They are accountable for the operational realities of the university in a way that faculty are not. Administrators think in terms of numbers, rankings, and trends, in short, they think in metrics. The key metric they consider is enrollments, usually as expressed in student credit hour generation because that is the unit that determines funding. Headcount at any given moment is of less concern than total student credit hours generated and retention of students semester by semester. Yes, lots of students need to come to the university. But those students must enroll in and finish sufficient classes to sustain

operational costs; and those students must come back again next term. Here is where the community engagement vision and the needs of administrators align.

In some administrative (and some faculty) minds, embrace of a community engaged campus vision can seem esoteric. It portends new kinds of work and new vehicles and modes of learning; it seems qualitative instead of quantitative; and it produces a web of interactions not easily defined or controlled by administrative oversight. Frankly, it can seem like a leap with an unclear purpose. A deeper review of impact will show us something different. In an era of declining college age populations and significant shifts of population densities, institutions must confront the reality that traditional marketing schemes to drum up freshman enrollment will no longer guarantee desirable numbers. Moreover, of those students who are available for recruitment, the choices open to them have wildly multiplied in the last 10-20 years. The customer base has declined even as competition and supply have increased. When that happens, the market adjusts by thinning out supply. That means not all institutions will stay open. Administrators do not like such prospects.

A University or college needs a stand-out component that will help attract and retain students. Though this is a complex question and I hesitate to promote single solution thinking, I know by research and data that a robust culture of community engaged learning and scholarship will attract and retain students. Students are seeking experience (in the broadest sense of the word) and they are seeking experience (in the sense of job readiness). Beyond that, they seek meaningful experience (in the sense that their time in college be something other and something more than a mere credentialing transaction and rote information transfer exercise). They still wonder “what is it all about?”. Well-executed community engaged learning supplies these various forms of experience and opens meaning. Community engaged learning experiences connect peers, give students experiences working with and for the same types of people who will employ them, teach students how to identify problems and produce solutions (a key to the marketplace is the ability to meet a demand), and provide clear motivations to identify and acquire transferrable work skills. By the way, that list is as congenial to the legislative ear as it is to the administrative one.

All of this promotes student retention. Data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) supports the idea that universities with community engaged learning retain students at a higher rate than those without. At Sam Houston State, more than a decade of NSSE data has taught us that students who reported community engaged learning experiences also demonstrated higher rates of retention, graduation, and satisfaction than their peers who did not have a community engaged learning episode. This general finding held true even more markedly for first generation students and students from traditionally underserved groups. In short, community engaged learning and scholarship are cost effective means to enhance the university enrollment retention plan. This is the sort of thing that helps administrators understand the value proposition of community engagement and brings them in as supporters and advocates. It is the sort of thing that can influence budgeting decisions.

Administrators are also responsible for knowing and responding to market trends even beyond the demographics of enrollment. They must think ahead about trends affecting the product. Last fall, OpenAI released ChatGPT for public subscription. Our talk today is not the place to dive deeply into this topic. Let me just say for now: I have spent the last several months researching the workings and likely impact of Large Language Model AI programs like ChatGPT. As a mere historian, I do not understand the mechanics. Yet, I can see the enormous impact these technologies will have on society and already have on education. To sum, AI technology like ChatGPT just smashed a good deal of what we once thought was the basis of learning and learning assessment, especially in the core curriculum. We in higher education must adapt quickly.

In my reading and by attending webinars, I find one thing clear. With the advent of accessible AI, the problem of student experience becomes more urgent. Since we can no longer lead students through reflective thinking based on out-of-class essays, or research papers, or even creation of presentation posters, etc., we must find ways to link their learning to their experience and their demonstration of applied mastery. That is exactly what we can achieve through community engaged learning and scholarship. Thinking back over the points I have presented here today about faculty-based and student-based reasons to embrace a community engaged campus, you will likely see my point. In a world with accessible AI, students will all the more have to live their education and faculty will have to assess their learning by the same means. Mere reporting will not suffice any longer because AI can generate plausible knowledge reports undetectably. Administrators can be brought to appreciate the point that an institution that quickly responds and adapts to learning and assessment methods not replicated by artificial intelligence will be an institution that retains its relevance. Students do not enroll in (and governments do not like to fund) irrelevant institutions; they demand and seek out relevant ones.

There is a learnable art of converting the case for a community engaged campus into the language that administrators need to hear. I hope in the future to work with you and your colleagues to help you acquire that art and to create the means necessary to win not the grudging acceptance of your community engagement projects but zealous support (and funding) as your campus leadership comes to understand them as mission critical.

In the end, I leave you with this. Today we have considered the rationale of building a community engaged campus from several angles and from the viewpoints of different constituents. For ourselves there remains one last question, that of the joy. I have had the good fortune to spend my entire career in higher education as faculty and in administration. As an administrator, I have taken pride in things like increased enrollments, increased degree production, efficient budget management and the rest. But none of those professional satisfactions has ever matched much less exceeded the joy that comes when the community, on campus and off, is vibrant. Nothing beats the joy of students discovering and articulating their own transformation. Nothing beats the joy of a faculty member suddenly rediscovering the energy that brought them into their discipline in the first place. When engagement works, yes, we benefit the institution in

many practical ways. More than that we reconnect with purpose that is bigger than ourselves.