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Are We Ready to Commit to Civic Engagement?

Embedded in the WCU Mission and Aspirations statements (p. 4 of the WCU catalog) are references to service and citizenship. Most colleges and universities state similar commitments to civic engagement and the serving of community needs, but are these commitments often carried out? And do our campus structures, policies, and culture support this commitment?

Before we assess the readiness of our institutions to support teaching for civic engagement, we must first affirm that this kind of education should be a high priority. John Dewey is often cited as a fundamental thinker in this area. Dewey was critical of the separation of ideas and action; knowledge, he stressed, is to be tested, used, and shared. His approach to knowledge emphasized education as an essential tool of democracy, and his recognition of the organic link between education and democracy, between knowledge and action, has been an important influence on those advocating greater emphasis on teaching and practicing citizenship. Do we, as faculty, agree with this emphasis?

In most colleges and universities, there tends to be a small group of faculty who include service learning and a strong focus on civic engagement in their courses. There may also be offices of service learning and programs that reach out into the community. But do these faculty practices and service programs bring the culture of the university into alliance with the stated mission of engagement? Alexander Astin, a highly respected scholar of higher education, chastises our universities for their "obvious preoccupation with enhancing resources and reputations," for preaching a message of "materialism, competitiveness, and individualism" at odds with their professed goal of public good. While preaching the benefits of democracy and the practice of good citizenship, universities often do not model these goals in their structure and organization. Derek Bok, former President of Harvard University, is equally blunt in his criticisms, asserting that universities provide service opportunities but do not connect service to a larger program for civic engagement across the university. Surveys of students, he notes, indicate that many think they have fulfilled their obligation to be good citizens by volunteering at a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter. They often view voting and other forms of political action as unimportant or irrelevant. Obviously, we must conceptualize civic engagement in a larger framework involving the essential relationship between democracy and service.

Ira Harkavy, historian and director of Penn's Center for Community Partnerships, endorses Astin's and Bok's critiques and offers his explanation of why we fall short in our mission of civic engagement. Harkavy cites two factors: disciplinary boundaries and the commodification of the university. He notes that academic disciplines traditionally are the focus of scholarly teaching and research, whereas the goal of education for civic engagement requires interdisciplinary cooperation. And, while civic engagement research tackles community problems and advances community good, most traditional research focuses on contributing to

and advancing a discipline. Tenure and promotion guidelines and pressures to publish in disciplinary journals support this status quo. At the institutional level, Harkavy continues, too much of the mission and purpose of the university is driven by the university-corporate relationship, which steers colleges toward serving commercial needs and responding more to the interests of the advantaged than to community problems. Harkavy's solution calls for substantial, even radical, restructuring that removes disciplinary boundaries, focuses more research on community problems, and revises priorities and reward structures.

We can reject the analysis of Astin, Bok, and Harkavy and dismiss their calls for change but if we are serious about meeting the challenge of producing informed and active citizens, we need to look at what we are doing, what we are not doing, and why. We need to recognize that institutional structures and culture can limit what we accomplish in the classroom. What are the barriers here that preclude a real institutional commitment to civic engagement education and to community-based research? As the front line of teaching, faculty members need to ask what our organizational structure, research priorities, promotion and tenure guidelines, and resource allocation would look like if we did truly value citizenship and civic engagement as an institutional goal. And what can we do to make changes that would support our efforts to teach in accordance with this goal?

There is a political issue involved here that makes some people reluctant to embrace this goal. Different places along the continuum of political ideology have different conceptions of citizenship. Some view citizenship as voting and obeying laws, others as volunteering, others as fighting for social justice. Further, some see volunteerism as the essence of the American spirit and the protector of democracy while others see volunteerism as the smokescreen being used by neoconservatives to shrink government and place social service programs in private hands. Surely, as an institution, we don't want to teach one definition and one form of citizenship. But how do we ensure that students are exposed to multiple definitions, discussions, and activities that help them create a view and practice of citizenship that is well thought out?

Much more needs to be done if we are to honor our commitment to our public purpose. We need to ask serious questions about mission, structure, rewards, research, decision making, and resources. As a university for the mountains, with a Center for Regional Development, a Public Policy Institute, and a Millennial Initiative, we seem committed, in teaching and research, to our public purpose. But the critiques above suggest that we need to take a hard look at our "institutional structures." We need an academic culture that values community engagement as a core function of the institution and an institutional structure that supports it.

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