

Higher Education Civic Engagement: Project Or Orientation

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Abstract

The question of how higher education institutions engage with society is gaining more prominence, and is highlighted as a future strategic direction in the 2011 Hunt Report. However, the term engagement is variously understood and interpreted, and raises ideological and political issues for institutions. This paper considers the conceptual issues around engagement, and looks at the varied definitions around the social/civic/community interpretation. It then moves to look at how both the practice and politics of civic engagement are influenced by institutional values and priorities. Consequently, civic engagement can be positioned along a spectrum from a project on the margins of institutional life to an informing purpose embedded across institutional policy and practice. The paper ends by examining how civic engagement can be moved from the periphery to the core of institutional life and activities.

Keywords: Civic engagement, institutional values, periphery or core.

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Introduction

The university is a site of fluidities, some merging and some in tension with each other. The 'civic' mission has to find its place in that liquid swirl of 'missions' (Barnett, 2007, p. 31).

Universities traditionally are understood to have three functions: teaching, research and service to society. The third 'service' mission is now under scrutiny as debates about mass higher education, knowledge economies, democracy and citizenship conflate to raise questions about the purpose and form of higher education in contemporary society. In recent years, the term service has given way to engagement, and has been adopted by the Hunt Report on the strategic direction of higher education, to refer to how 'higher education addresses the full range of its responsibilities towards society, including business, local communities, the wider education sector and the wider international world' (Government Publications, 2011, p. 5). Given this broad sweep of expectations, engagement is understood and interpreted differently, and is host to a range of ideologies and philosophies that impact on institutional policy and practice.

This paper, which is based on research for a doctoral thesis, examines the conceptual issues around engagement, before considering how the interpretation of what civic engagement is, or might be, can place it at the margins or core of institutional priorities.

University Engagement: Concepts and Confusion

The terminology around engagement is complex and causes particular difficulties in terms of conceptualisation. Over the past decade the term engagement has become prominent and is now 'a buzzword in many university circles' (Bruning et al., 2006, p. 128). In the UK, engagement is an 'insistent discourse' and 'the images and imperatives around the Engaged University are omnipresent' (Mc Lennan, 2008, p. 195). However, the term is not uniformly understood.

There are two general strands of discussion, one on service/engagement in the form of the entrepreneurial innovative university, the other focusing on service or engagement with the community and society, hence the enterprising third mission and the social third mission (Montesinos et al., 2008, p. 262). These strands are not mutually exclusive but are both dimensions of how institutions make themselves relevant and purposeful. The most common interpretation of engagement is couched in economic terms focusing on university entrepreneurship activities (Vorley and Nelles, 2008, p. 5) and is narrowly conceived as knowledge transfer (Gummett, 2009). This interpretation uses the language of patents, innovation, university spin-off companies, interface specialists, and royalty management (Etzkowitz et al., 2000). The alternative social interpretation orients the university towards engagement with civil society and includes terms such as university-community engagement (Winter et al., 2006) or universities as sites of citizenship and civic responsibility (Plantan, 2002). This paper will focus on the civic and social interpretation of engagement.

Engagement advocates, with a concern for the social and public good role of institutions, argue that research and knowledge should be made public and accessible, yet the engagement discourse is generating its own complex terminology, with multiple definitions and concepts. The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) in the United Kingdom, uses the broad term public engagement, while acknowledging that 'civic' or 'community' engagement are part of the same family.

Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.(National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2013).

In the United States, the Carnegie Classification of higher education institutions, which recognises and describes institutional diversity adopts the term 'Community Engagement', which it defines as:

The 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.

(The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2013)

Scholarly definitions on the civic/social/community dimension of engagement come from varied angles. Bond and Paterson describe civic engagement at an individual academic level as:

Those activities which individual academics undertake which in some way involve interaction or engagement with the non-academic community and are related to academic expertise (2005, p. 338).

Moving to an institutional definition, Weis et al. note that:

A civically engaged university and its scholarship seek to broaden the scope of conversation, not only about the public but also with the variety of publics that now occupy the diverse social landscape (2007, p. 428).

The discourse in Ireland encompasses something of each of these definitions. Campus Engage, the network to support civic engagement activities in Irish higher education aims:

To strengthen the relationship between higher education and the wider society, through promoting civic engagement activities in higher education in Ireland and facilitating the sharing of knowledge and resources between academic and civic communities (Campus Engage, 2013).

As civic engagement is the term used by Campus Engage it is the term used in this paper.

Campus Engage and NCCPE are just two networks that have emerged in recent years to advocate for increased engagement. Campus Compact, an American coalition of nearly 1,100 college and university presidents, is part of this movement as are Engagement Australia, the Latin American Centre for Service-Learning (CLAYSS), the Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning (CACSL), and the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF). The Talloires Network is an 'international association of institutions committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education' (Talloires Network, 2014). As well as macro-level networks, engagement work is underway in many countries at institutional level, where units or centres have been established to co-ordinate university community partnerships and/or to develop service, or community-based, learning. Civic engagement also occurs in ad hoc ways across institutions which may not have formal structures. Consequently, there is considerable momentum and debate around the social and civic dimension of higher education engagement.

Politics and Ideology

Civic engagement is a mix of politics and ideology, with competing readings for what it means for the university, staff and students. From a social justice perspective, civic engagement relates to concerns for inclusion and participation, and the democratic role of higher education. Alternatively, the 'Engagement Agenda' is criticised for being part of a brand management exercise (McLennan, 2008, p. 197), and a form of institutional self-interest which attempts to create a new moral authority and sense of legitimacy masked in an altruistic façade (Boyle and Silver, 2005, p. 249). Winter et al. note this complex politics when they recognise that

on the one hand engagement demonstrates a commitment to social justice and equity, while on another it may be read as an enterprising marketing technique to secure funding and students (2006, p. 224).

Values and beliefs permeate all aspects of university life, with some values in conflict, from what is taught, how, why, where, and to whom, through to what is researched, how it is funded, by whom, and how the results are disseminated. Value choices can be seen in who is admitted, staff recruitment and promotion, student grading and feedback, and in which disciplines are privileged. Institutional values, both explicit and implicit, can be seen in institutional documentation and on websites, in recruitment or pre-enrolment information, and by way of the language, visuals and imagery used. In this way institutional values are woven into the university culture and permeate the messages emanating into the public domain. Thus, values play a part in determining the role an institution envisages for its students as both graduates and citizens.

Consequently, values underpin each and every area of university engagement, from how a university defines its community, to how a 'good' citizen is perceived when developing pedagogical, curricular and non-curricular strategies. Civic engagement advocates argue that public scholarship means that the 'goods' produced by the scholarship should be public in benefits (inclusive), public in decision making (participatory) and public in consumption (fair and just) (Ming Khoo, 2009). Such conceptions shift understandings of the university, and by extension the academic, from expert creator and transmitter of knowledge, to a co-creator of knowledge with knowledge production a negotiated process. This immediately has implications for how knowledge is generated and disseminated and for who is involved in this process. It suggests a shift from thinking of the community in deficit terms to conceiving of the community as a site of expertise. In this way, community partners then become integral to the knowledge production process. Such competing understandings underscore why engagement is fraught with challenges, and can be internally divisive in institutions. Thus, institutional values will play a part in determining whether civic engagement is a marginal activity or more prominent. A spectrum of engagement is now examined.

Spectrum of engagement: Project - Mission- Orientation

Understanding how and where civic engagement fits is a matter practitioners wrestle with as they position their work. Before becoming embedded in policy and practice, civic engagement may take the form of micro-strategies, or projects, often small-scale and run on minimal budgets. Staffing may be on a contract basis, or projects may be taken on by people with a personal conviction or commitment. Such strategies might include volunteer initiatives, service learning modules, and campus events for the public. This enclave civic engagement tends to happen at the margins of a campus (Bringle, 2009) and becomes associated with particular disciplines or schools, leading to 'public service ghettos' (Hollister et al., 2006, p. 40). Rather than seeing engagement as a focus for all work, it is perceived as an activity suitable for those disciplines which may have a more obvious fit. As a project, civic engagement is likely to be a peripheral function, which is not uniformly recognised or understood within the institution at large. Consequently, there is a jostling for legitimacy in order to create a space for the work.

Civic engagement can be conceptualised as the social third mission, running parallel to teaching and learning, but as a complementary activity. Identifying civic engagement as the third mission places it upfront in institutional documentation thus giving it an enhanced profile. If publicly acknowledged as a mission, practitioners can use mission statements and strategic plans for leverage as a way to name, map and profile their work.

However, questions may arise about a mission hierarchy: where does civic engagement fit in terms of institutional mission hierarchy? While there may be a perceived commitment to civic engagement as a mission, the reality may be that other activities take precedence. A circus analogy illustrates the concept of mission hierarchy. Toews and Yazedjian suggest the three-ring circus of academia is made up of research, teaching and service, with research similar to the high wire acts and acrobats, as it is the main draw, teaching is analogous to the work of the animal tamers, necessary but overshadowed unless the animals are out of control, while service is akin to the clowns, a form of distraction between the main acts (2007, p. 113-114).

If the engagement mission is perceived as of less importance than other missions, there is a danger that it might be seen as a diversion, or a nice feel-good aside, rather than the real work. This can lead to charges that engagement is just a cynical tick-box exercise and risks compelling staff to comply with a requirement that they may treat, at best, with indifference. As a mission, responsibility may be assigned to an individual or unit, so that the work gets hived off, or is seen as someone else's responsibility rather than everyone's role.

Fisher argues that higher education needs to conceptualise its public good role as more than the implementation of initiatives for disadvantaged students, and look to the role that graduates have as citizens in society (2006, p. 170). Ostrander concurs that university civic engagement must go beyond just social/ethical or educational/developmental motives, or else it risks becoming marginalised.

To fully integrate, normalise, institutionalise, and thus sustain university civic engagement, it must build on a solid intellectual rationale that addresses and defines the intellectual project of university civic engagement. (2004, p. 84)

Thus, rather than understanding engagement as a third mission, there are calls to understand engagement as an informing purpose (Duke, 2009), or as an orientation, where engagement is integral and infused into the teaching and research mission. Thus, it is contended that engagement is not a third strand or complementary activity, but a critical approach (Younger, 2009). Alperovitz and Howard seek 'not a 'programme' of engagement but to help infuse the university's culture, practices and structures with a new spirit' (2005, p. 148). As an evolving attitude, engagement is an idea that can be stretched to fit most situations (Charles, 2009).

Universities that aspire to be civically engaged have a particular understanding of the public good role of higher education. They aspire to move away from perceptions of the 'ivory tower' and have a sense that the institution belongs to the community rather than seeing the

community as a physical location. As socially embedded institutions, they encourage greater connections with society. Emphasis is placed on public scholarship, on sharing the expertise of the university more broadly, and on learning from communities, both local and further afield, to contribute to public problem solving. Civically engaged universities are mindful of the contribution they make to the economy, but also to the social and cultural fabric of society, and so look to the civic as well as work life of graduates.

Moving from the margins

Moving civic engagement work to the core is a non-trivial task (Gourley, 2009). Barnett distinguishes the civic university as:

one in which it is understood that the idea of the civic requires: continual refreshment, an abiding sense of its problematicity, emotional effort, a care for persons, a vision of the almost impossible, a sense of delicacy, as the university steers amid sensitivities (2007, p. 32).

Any attempt at engagement presents challenges on two fronts: in the day-to-day order of how a university conducts its work, and in higher order considerations around values, identity and purpose. At every level, practical matters have higher order considerations. Both statements and actions can be highly symbolic in projecting messages and images about what and who is valued within the world of higher education.

Understanding civic engagement as a meta institutional-wide approach is an acceptance of an attitude and orientation, of a way of doing things: it is a way of operationalising core civic values as integral to the day to day business of the university. There is a 'Gown In the Town' culture, rather than the conventional 'Town and Gown' variety (Jayasuriya, 2006, p. 3). When engagement is accepted as the way things are done engagement just happens (Cochrane and Williams, 2009). As orientation or attitude, civic engagement is not an add-on but part of the intellectual project and informing purpose of the university. Democratic values are to the fore,

with a focus on dialogue and conversation, on making connections and finding ways to match needs and expertise. Matters such as widening participation, equality, diversity, equity and fairness, and a commitment to the common good are paramount. Barnett contends that the civic university 'is conscious of its responsibilities towards society and fulfilling a 'public service' role is a way of acting out those responsibilities' (2007, p. 33). Fallis argues that for contemporary times, and to reflect the universities commitment to mass higher education, professional development, research and meritocracy, universities need to be conceptualised as institutions of democracy (2007, p. 42-47).

While the language of public service suggests what the university could do to and for the community, the language of engagement is more inclusive. Civic values underpin the way the university works, in collaborative modes. Education and research is done *with* rather than *on* others. A common basis to definitions and debates on civic engagement is the inclusion of language about mutuality and reciprocity. Practitioners in university community partnerships are attuned to what happens when institutional mores and culture meet community mores and culture. McNall et al. argue that within the literature on community-university partnerships, there is substantial agreement on four general characteristics of effective partnerships: cooperative goal setting and planning; shared power, resources and decision making; group cohesion; and partnership management (2009, p. 322). From both practitioners and scholars, the single most important message is including the community voice. To this end, the Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP) at the University of Brighton advocates that community partners are involved in all discussions, a 'nothing about us without us' approach (Hart and Aumann, 2009).

For civic engagement to evolve within institutions there is unanimous recognition of the need for commitment from senior management. The Watson et al study of twenty institutions making civic engagement a strategic priority notes 'the powerful positive impact that can be achieved by creating and supporting a high-level position and office to lead and coordinate the institution's civic engagement and social responsibility'(2011, p. 253). Buy-in across the

institution is essential, but the message must not be seen to be one way as 'there is an almost knee-jerk negative response on the part of many faculty to top-down initiatives of any kind' (Gamson, 2000, p. 364). Hence, a co-ordinating and fostering approach is recommended (Boland, 2009; Younger, 2009).

A clear language and unambiguous terminology is necessary to define concrete concepts and goals, and acknowledge and reward successful outcomes. Without a uniform understanding, or engagement literacy, it is more difficult to develop a forum for discussing activities, or to devise a mechanism for reporting on initiatives and practices. Likewise, other discourses within universities, some of which are taken as normative, impact on civic engagement activities. There is a need for an awareness of how these discourses take shape and how they can be challenged as 'discourse determines the types of argument that are viewed as fair game in discussions about policy' (Lee, 2009, p. 159).

For example, accountability is a dominant theme in higher education. But accountability begs the question for what and to whom? A consistent focus on the economic and utilitarian relevance of education, or an emphasis on quantitative deliverables, establishes a culture where it becomes more difficult to argue for alternative conceptions. Return on investment formulae tend to be narrowly conceived and do not consider the full range of returns from investment. Mechanisms for accounting for civic and less direct or immediately obvious social outcomes of higher education are complex to develop as there are myriad factors intermeshed in determining cause and effect. Watson et al argue that to avoid being 'long on rhetoric, yet short on evidence' there is a need to 'develop a much stronger factual foundation of information about results and alternative strategies' (2011, p. 255). Work is now emerging on ways to measure and articulate the social and public contribution of institutions (Kelly and McNicoll, 2011; Hart et al., 2009.). Campus Engage has formed a working group on metrics and evaluation to consider indicators for reporting on civic engagement initiatives.

The inclusion of a community engagement category within the Carnegie classification, albeit as an elective option, has given greater visibility and prominence to this strand of higher education activity. Likewise, the inclusion of social/civic learning objectives within the National Framework of Qualifications is noted as being potentially significant (Boland and McIlrath, 2007, p.88). Such initiatives have been welcomed by civic and community engagement scholars and advocates, who report on the importance of naming and recognising an activity as an enabling factor in advancing their work. Recognition can happen in subtle and not so subtle ways. Where the activity is located within an institution, whether it is located in peripheral units or attached to central functions, can be a substantial indication of how it is valued and perceived. Similarly, the contractual status of civic engagement personnel, whether academic, administrative, part-time, or temporary, can play a role in determining how activities are perceived and supported.

Recognition is also evident in recruitment and promotion processes. Engagement work is time-consuming and intensive, and if such efforts are overlooked, or considered less valuable than research outputs, it will be difficult to sustain motivation. Thus, to recognise the civic, there is a need to establish appropriate reward systems in universities (Barnett, 2007, p. 32), and to value 'contributions to public debate and policy formation, and to favour not just creators of saleable intellectual property but socially communicative faculty' (Marginson, 2006, p. 53).

Collaboration across systems and countries assists in creating a movement or critical mass to raise the profile and substance of civic engagement. In addition to participation in civic engagement networks, connections outside universities are imperative in order for institutions to contribute to major policy debates as collaboration, with NGOs and others, enhances strategic conversations (Gourley, 2009). To combat a ghetto or project approach to engagement within an institution, a suggested step is the creation of Campus Maps 'as a means of identifying potential allies on campus, available resources, organisational structures, and areas where gaps exist' (Raill and Hollander, 2006, p. 5).

Alignment may be necessary at procedural level so that budgets are aligned with priorities for engagement. Aligning personnel, structures and processes is a way of building a critical mass involved in engagement work. Such alignment also creates a cumulative effect where the message becomes a consistent theme and thread across all functions. Boland argues that for civic engagement to flourish as a core sustainable activity it needs to be aligned with other strategic and policy imperatives, e.g., the social and civic competencies outlined in national and European qualifications frameworks, and with widening participation and social inclusion goals (2012).

However, alignment is also important in terms of identity and values. A consistent message is that education for democratic citizenship needs to model democracy (Banks, 2008; Sears and Hyslop-Margison, 2007). Thus, students need to live and experience democratic processes, so that civic engagement activities should not be confined to one dimension of the institution. Neither curricular nor extra-curricular activities alone suffice, but rather a blending of the two, with one reinforcing the other, is recommended. Writing about citizenship education, McCowan proposes the concept of 'seamless enactment' where there is consonance and harmonisation of both underlying principles and practices as a response to the potential disjunctures which occur between the ideal and the real (2009, p. 85-86). This idea of seamless enactment also pertains to civic engagement, where there are many questions asked about the disjuncture between rhetoric and action. The question of hypocrisy is pertinent. How commercial decisions undermine institutional ethics, and with it notions of moral example is just one illustration (Deford, 2005; Giroux, 2002; Giroux, 2003; Kirp, 2003; Shapiro, 2005). When the institution says one thing but does another, students can see this very quickly thus undermining attempts for the institution to stand over values of objectivity and impartiality.

Conclusion

Engagement is now part of the language of higher education, but as an umbrella term it covers a range of strategies and activities which potentially come from different ideological standpoints. National and international networks, pedagogical initiatives and research in the civic and community engagement sphere are giving more visibility to and, by extension, more focus on this work. However, given the multiple missions and competing imperatives at play in institutions, civic engagement activities can be overlooked on the margins. Moving engagement to an informing purpose of the institution, rather than a project in the wings, requires commitment from leaders and an orientation towards the public good role of higher education.

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