

# From the Editor

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During the last decade, new conceptions of “teaching as learning” and “service as civic engagement” have fostered the creation of more distinctive campus missions and academic environments for students and faculty. Perhaps this change is, at least in part, because long-term pressure on issues of institutional accountability and performance have inspired campuses to adopt more specific interpretations of faculty roles, student learning goals, and organizational values and priorities. After all, if one is to be held accountable, there is a great incentive to be clear about expectations and commitments.

This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* journal features a set of articles that focus on the “scholarship of engagement” as a distinctive element of institutional missions, and explores the different approaches being used to promote greater faculty interest in scholarly work that serves both an intellectual and a public purpose. The articles were originally presented at the “University as Citizen Conference” held in February 2001 at the University of South Florida. These manuscripts were selected through a refereed process as among the best papers focusing on the challenges of introducing, expanding and validating the scholarship of engagement. I wish to thank Marcie Finkelstein and her USF colleagues for creating both a great conference and this useful and informative set of papers for our readers.

Of course, readers of this journal know well that the idea of linking academic work to public purposes as a distinctive element of an institution’s mission is not new or recent. Urban and metropolitan universities have long held that while they have many basic traits in common with other universities of their classification type, their mission and priorities also are shaped strongly by their deep intellectual interaction with and attention to the characteristics of their region. The learning environments of their students and the academic work of their faculty are shaped in conspicuous ways by the issues and traits of the metropolis, and the future of campus and city are seen as intertwined.

Now, many other institutions are feeling enormous pressures to demonstrate they are contributing not only to the economic development of a region, but also to the enhancement of social fabric and community capacity through campus-community partnerships. Today, public service, engaged scholarship, community service, or outreach programs are strategies of growing interest to institutions of all types. Rising levels of national discourse, grant program participation, and affiliate membership groups (e.g. Campus Compact which has grown to more than 750 institutional members of all types) suggest an expanding interest in civic engagement as legitimate academic work, and as a tool for creating a more distinctive institutional mission.

There’s a lot of institutional experimentation going on, and the federal government, a few states, and many foundations are funding engagement projects to promote university involvement in communities. This does not mean that urban and metropolitan universities have lost their claim to engagement in civic matters as a distinctive aspect of their mission. In fact, the urban and metropolitan institutions may yet find they are entering an era where they are seen as advanced examples of engaged scholarship. Achievement of new levels of prestige and recognition as institutional leaders in engagement efforts will depend on the creation of new methods for documenting levels of activity and commitment in order that institutional differences can be described accurately.

The historic problem with engagement and the urban or metropolitan mission is that the scholarship of engagement has not been valued or legitimized by inclusion in ranking systems. However, as more institutions become involved, it becomes more obvious that engagement is not equally central to the mission of every institution, and there are important differences in the levels of institutional commitment to the scholarship of engagement as a core element of the academic culture of the campus. In addition, when funding is available there is also the probability that some institutions will give lip service to engagement in order to garner funds. How would a funder judge the level of an institution's commitment to the scholarship of engagement? There is clearly an urgent need to devise methods for articulating the core principles and qualities of this work in order to be able to distinguish among institutions regarding their level of commitment and the quality of their approach to civic engagement and partnerships.

Urban and metropolitan institutions have long understood that our existing systems for classifications and rankings are incapable of capturing and describing these important differences. Too simply said, this is because current classification and ranking systems draw on measures that reflect the acquisition of assets, along with a few inputs and outputs in some formats. Using mostly asset-based measures, the Carnegie Classification system, for example, was created with the intent that it be a tool to guide research and facilitate data analysis by grouping institutions with similar characteristics. What is needed instead is a multi-dimensional system that describes what institutions actually DO with their assets. How do they use their assets, and what do those choices reveal about the institution's mission and academic priorities?

Institutions that cluster logically around one dimension shift to a very different group of peers when measured by another dimension. For example, although currently measured traits place them in the same Carnegie category, the University of Alabama campuses at Tuscaloosa and at Birmingham are dramatically different institutions along core organizational dimensions, such as their different interpretations of engagement and public service as elements of their campus mission and the associated impact on faculty roles. They also serve different student markets and accordingly have thought differently about learning environments, facilities, and services. Research studies that fail to consider these kinds of in-rank differences must be considered oversimplified at best.

In past editorial columns, I have reported on the Carnegie Foundation's interest in revising the classification system to make it more representative of the multiple dimensions of an institutional mission. The Foundation envisions changing from the current single scale to a series of scales and indicators that will characterize instructional and service activities as well as research. In this approach, a particular institution will have several classification indicators, rather than the current single classification. Through its grant to Victor Borden at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities has been supporting some exploratory statistical work that will be helpful in the quest to develop indicators in areas that reflect unique aspects of the urban and metropolitan mission.

The challenges we face in creating a method for documenting civic engagement activities and levels of mission commitment are many, but there is widespread commitment to doing the research necessary to overcome those challenges. There is no question that inclusion of scholarly engagement in Carnegie, and any other system for clustering institutions, is long overdue and of urgent importance. Certainly, this change will enhance the academic legitimacy of this work for some faculty who continue to hold reservations about the scholarly value of engagement. What is measured is what is valued. This need for greater legitimacy for the scholarship of engagement is a recurring theme in the articles in this issue of the journal.

What we must do to document civic engagement is to develop indicators for the levels of activity, types of activities, and degrees of centrality of engagement to the mission of the institution. A core challenge is that civic engagement is currently implemented in many different forms and interpretations. Although interest in the scholarship of engagement is obviously expanding, it remains a reform movement that lacks standard intellectual constructs and cultural traditions similar to those used to describe faculty research and teaching tasks. There is no standard vocabulary – public service, service, outreach, engagement and many other terms get used interchangeably in some settings and are defined with great specificity in other settings. Service is a term that, in particular, has had many meanings and applications, few of which have carried much weight in traditional academic culture. In addition, engagement is by its very nature, a collaborative activity that is dependent on partnerships with individuals and groups external to the institution. Institutional and community issues, histories, cultures, and capacities inspire different forms and approaches to engagement programming, and different forms of interactions. Unlike research and teaching which are often individual endeavors, engagement calls for faculty to share project design and implementation with internal and external partners; thus attribution for project outcomes is rarely clear.

Case studies show that this diversity of approaches across engagement activities and institutions is not unimportant; it is strongly related to the effectiveness and sustainability of engagement activities. This core trait of variability must be considered in developing any approach to documentation. If a measurement strategy is to be useful for describing institutional effort with respect for local contexts, it must create general standards for comparability purposes while also acknowledging the legitimacy of diverse approaches. In this way, we will be able to understand and describe the differences in levels of institutional commitment without destroying the innovative elements that are essential to this work.

A design for describing institutional commitment to engagement challenges our traditions of one-size-fits-all measures, and will not be an easy task. Engagement is a powerful force for diversifying institutional missions and cultures, making it more difficult than ever to imagine accurate ways to cluster institutions into groups with common traits. However, we must persist because the era of institutional diversity is upon us; the age of imitation is over. Some institutions have embraced this agenda; others have little interest or do not see engagement as valuable scholarly work for their faculty and students. Other institutions say they are interested in engagement, but they are more interested in winning grants than sustaining a commitment to community partnerships. These differences are probably intellectually and culturally appropriate, based on mission differences, but without documentation there is no way to explain those differences, especially to those who would fund or otherwise recognize engagement programs. This variability is both a challenge to the development of measures, and proof that measures are urgently needed to create objective indications of effort and sustained commitment. Promising directions for the next stages of research on the scholarship of engagement are evident in the articles found in this issue. Such research will finally lead to recognition of a core element of the mission of urban and metropolitan universities.

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