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Involving Urban Planning, Social Work, and Public Health Faculty Members in the Civic Renewal of the Research University

Barry Checkoway

What are some strategies for involving the faculty—especially social work, urban planning, and public health faculty—in the civic renewal of the research university?

This question is important, because civic renewal is needed, and because without the faculty, nothing lasting is likely to happen. After all, faculty lead academic units, manage curricula, teach courses, and work with students. Things happen in universities without faculty, but nothing lasting will happen without them, including civic renewal.

However, today's faculty are not very civic. They might be resourceful researchers and master teachers, but they do not normally view themselves as civic, although they actually might yearn for civic expression that has been frustrated by their conditioning (Kezar, Chambers, and Burkhardt 2005; Percy, Zinpher, and Brukardt 2006; Soska and Johnson 2005).

Social work, urban planning, and public health faculty members are strategically situated for joining together in common cause, for a number of them travel similar roads within research universities, which have disproportionate influence in the higher education system, and which is my focus here.

▶ **Perspectives on Civic Renewal**

Democracy requires citizens who have civic competencies to participate in public decisions, but too many of these citizens have reduced their involvement in public life. Social scientists document a "disengagement from democracy," which, although arguable—depending on the group studied, questions asked, and evidence employed—is a problem for democratic society (Levine 2007).

Higher education can contribute to civic engagement, but most research universities do not perceive themselves as part of the problem or of its solution (Checkoway 2005). Whereas these universities often originated as civic institutions, they have changed into powerful research engines and, in so doing, have deemphasized their civic mission (Calvert 2006; Colby et al. 2007). At the same time, too few of today's students aspire to public participation or civic leadership, and studies show that this actually declines during the college years (Astin and Sax 1998; Astin, Sax, Avalos 1999).

Abstract

What are some strategies for involving urban planning, social work, and public health faculty members in the civic renewal of the research university? At a time when citizens have "disengaged from democracy," and universities have deemphasized their civic mission, this article examines ways in which these faculty members might join together and formulate strategies which complement their shared professional and public purposes on campus and in the community.

Keywords: urban planning; civic renewal; research universities

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507

Faculty members are situated for civic renewal, but view themselves primarily as researchers and teachers, and do not normally consider the civic competencies of students as a primary professional responsibility. Although some faculty members comment on civic disengagement as a subject of study, they seldom suggest that they themselves have a key role in creating the problem or finding its solution (MacFarlane 2005).

Social work, urban planning, and public health faculty members are ideally positioned for civic renewal. Each field modernized in the nineteenth century when its practitioners joined with the others to address problems and improve conditions in the neighborhoods of large industrial cities. For example, they collaborated to address urban social conditions, such as inadequate light and ventilation, running water, toilet facilities, and fire escapes in tenement houses. When they located their professional schools in universities, their faculty had many parallels in their patterns of scholarship, teaching and training, and service.

Although the modern research university has become more of a loose confederation of villages whose academic disciplines and professional fields have become more and more distinct, there is nothing a priori to keep colleagues like these from joining together and taking initiative on a common cause. Collective action is not necessarily normal on the campus, but sometimes it happens. Urban planning, social work, and public health faculty members have similarities in their professional purposes, their knowledge construction, and their educational content, such as community planning, nonprofit management, public policy, and program evaluation. They face similar institutional issues, such as the status of professional education, and the roles and rewards of faculty members. I assume that if only a few faculty leaders were to join together for a shared purpose, such as civic renewal, the results could be impressive.

▶ **Elements of Strategy**

Because most faculty members lack strategy for civic renewal, they might begin with consideration of some of the following elements:

Reaffirming the Mission

Faculty members do not normally formulate the university's mission, but its discussion might move them to action (Chaffee 1998; Holland 1999). The civic renewal element of the mission might be framed in terms of various faculty constituencies, such as civic renewal which "strengthens student learning," "enhances educational excellence," "strengthens scholarship," or "fulfills the public purpose." Each expression might have salience for a faculty constituency as part of an overall strategy for involving them in universities which differ in their campus culture (Dill 1997).

Reconceiving Research as Civic Scholarship

Civic scholarship is work which draws on one's academic discipline or professional expertise for the welfare of civil society, and any strategy must recognize the reconceptualization that is required, especially in institutions whose faculty have been conditioned by paradigms that emphasize the quest for new knowledge in accordance with scientific positivism, rather than the welfare of civil society. Such scholarship can be framed in terms of its benefits for faculty members, for whom this approach might provide new life experiences, interactions with people who are different from themselves, and a basis for new thinking about research and teaching (Ward 2003; Weis 2007). Like any belief system which is embedded in a social structure, positivism can be deconstructed, and deprogramming is possible.

Education for Democracy

Faculty members can advance civic renewal through their educational work. For example, they can involve students as partners in research projects that address important issues in society and in for-credit courses in which they participate in the community and learn from the experience (Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett 2007); and collaborate with them in cocurricular activities with a strong civic purpose (Guarasci and Cornwell, 1998). But even if more faculty involve more students as partners in research projects, or enroll more students in community learning and civic education, or advise more students in cocurricular activities, would it address the root causes of their current disengagement (Levine 2007)?

Redefining Faculty Roles

Faculty members can have a wide range of civic roles, if they think of themselves in this way. For example, they can conduct research on real-world civic problems, provide training for civic practice, or consult with civic agencies. They can integrate civic information or ideas so as to make them more understandable, or they can articulate their own positions and become reformers in society (Boyer 1987).

Such roles were normal among earlier social work, urban planning, and public health faculty members who worked with community collaborators in cities. They conducted research for civic problem-solving, published articles with recommendations for civic improvement, and collaborated in civic change (Benson, Harkavy, and J. Puckett 2007; Campbell and Hamerlinck 2007). Many faculty have forgotten their predecessors, and history lessons might remind them that role redefinition is conceivable, and that civic scholarship has intellectual integrity (Bloomingarden and O'Meara, 2007; Hiley 1997; Rice 1996). What is the public work of the professorate?

Modifying the Reward Structure

When faculty members draw on their academic discipline or professional expertise for the benefit of society in accordance with the university's civic mission, they should be rewarded. Indeed, any strategy of involving the faculty will require an appropriate reward structure, which includes promotion and tenure, time for professional priorities, financial reimbursement, and prestigious recognition (Florestano and Hambrick 1984).

However, tenure today rewards individual initiative and personal performance, not collective action or civic behavior, although this was not always the case. Tenure was established as an expression of moral responsibility, and characterized by commitment to an institutional mission serving a greater good. But today's tenure has become an "individual reward" which emphasizes research for its own sake, recognizes faculty for its publication in scholarly journals, and rewards them for the creation of new knowledge, not for its civic outcomes (Plater 1998). There are sympathetic deans and department heads that care about faculty and caution them that civic involvement might actually divert them from "real work" and jeopardize their career in the academy (Ward 2003).

Thus it is no surprise that faculty often conduct research on problems defined by their departments and disciplines, teach courses in their proscribed curricula, and perceive that civic work has low regard or few rewards. These perceptions are reinforced by their professional peers, by their disciplinary associations, and by the editors of the journals in which they are expected to publish. They tend to respond to the rewards they receive, and these rewards do not recognize their civic performance.

Reward structures require evaluation systems and, like other faculty work, civic scholarship should be documented and evaluated in systematic ways according to appropriate criteria, including judgments of its impacts on knowledge development, teaching and training, and service to society. Excellent guidelines are available for evaluation of civic scholarship, but most university officials are unaware of them (Driscol and Lynton 1997).

The reward structure needs modification, but the limitations of the present structure should not justify inaction in the interim. Faculty do many things for which there are few rewards, and there are substantial rewards for work that lies outside the formal structure. The reward structure is an important instrument, but it is not necessarily enough to alter behavior, and some individuals do civic work without its support.

Faculty should be rewarded for work which draws on their academic discipline as a normal expectation of their role in an institution. Work which draws on their discipline should be rewarded, but participation in a democratic society is still a civic responsibility regardless of its monetary reward (Lynton 1995; Plater 1998; O'Meara and Rice 2005; Ostander and Portney 2007).

Building Internal Support

Strategy operates in a field of forces that facilitates or limits its progress. Even excellent ideas still require support from people that can influence implementation, establish relationships with them, and sensitizing them to the issues. These are not random relationships, but benefit from strategy (Checkoway 2005; Langseth and Plater 2004). Each institution is distinct, but some of these people are everywhere.

For example, the president is ideally positioned for influencing the faculty. He or she communicates with vice presidents, deans, department heads, faculty members, students, alumni, regents, and other stakeholders—and a presidential pronouncement can have influence.

Any vice president can step forward on civic renewal, although they vary in their authority. When the provost or chief academic officer makes a pronouncement, faculty members usually listen. When the vice president for student affairs makes a pronouncement, students usually listen, but if this person is not a faculty peer, they might not.

Even the most supportive presidents and provosts depend on deans and department heads who work directly with faculty members, and they too have roles to play. But when they are absorbed in advancing their individual units, defending their budgets, and raising external funds, they have too little time for other work. If only a few of them made a serious commitment to civic renewal, their efforts could be significant (Langseth and Plater 2004).

Students have more potential than they realize for involving the faculty in civic renewal. They are serving in more communities than ever, and have potential to increase demand for educational experiences that have civic relevance. History shows that when students unite in solidarity, educational institutions often respond. If students were to meet with key stakeholders and express their wishes for civic content, it might build the base for civic renewal, and this might affect faculty behavior. However, this is not likely to happen in an environment whose students serve communities in large numbers, but whose interest in civic engagement is lower than ever.

Involving External Institutions

Numerous institutions which are external to universities influence faculty members within them, and these too are part of strategy. For example, faculty notice when a foundation announces a funding initiative, or a donor makes an endowment gift, or a public official establishes a blue-ribbon commission, or a national association—such as the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, Council of Social Work Education, or Society for Public Health Education—announces an annual meeting devoted to civic renewal. If faculty leaders were to mobilize their colleagues to influence institutions of this type, it would affect attitudes and behavior at the local level.

Using Faculty Tactics

Strategy can involve a series of activities, each of which might appeal to faculty members in ways which are already familiar to them. For example, faculty leaders can organize lectures which address important issues; hold meetings which enable colleagues to learn from one another; and conduct seminars and workshops on research and teaching methods. They also can provide them with release time for curricular development; advise them on research and teaching plans; and advocate for a reward structure that promotes faculty involvement.

Restructuring the Institution

Civic renewal requires structural mechanisms to support civic scholarship, or strengthen student learning, or promote community partnerships, and these raise questions on the campus. Should the university centralize its civic function into an administrative structure? Or decentralize this function to existing academic units? Or build on the present activities of the faculty without creating new bureaucratic structures? No single structure fits all universities; the key is to fit structure to situation (Walshok 1995).

Changing the Culture

Basic to involving the faculty in civic renewal is a belief that it is desirable, but this runs contrary to the dominant academic culture (Damrosch 1995). Most faculty are trained in graduate schools whose required courses ignore civic content, and socialized into a culture whose gatekeepers dissuade them from civic work. This is their culture, despite studies that show that faculty members who consult with community agencies are more likely to have more funded research projects, more publications in peer-reviewed journals, and higher student evaluations of their teaching, than those who do not (Patton and Marver 1979).

Cultural change takes senior leaders who express strong values, challenge current beliefs, and praise new accomplishments. It requires policies and structures, leadership development, change agents, awareness campaigns, continuous education, campuswide coalitions, and recognitions and rewards. Cultural change is a slow process, but it happens all the time.

▶ Can You Imagine?

At a time when civic engagement is deemphasized in the research university and the larger society, I can imagine a few faculty members from social work, urban planning, and public health joining together and formulating a strategy to renew the civic mission, reconceptualize research and teaching as civic scholarship, redefine faculty roles and rewards, and modify the academic culture.

I also can imagine a few social work, urban planning, and public health faculty members who share common cause; who convene their allies in business, engineering, medicine, and other university units; and who create change on campus.

However, I also can easily imagine institutions whose present participants have deep investments in the status quo, and who hold beliefs deeply rooted in their professionalization. Yet if the world can experience the paradigm shifts attributable to Ptolemy and Copernicus, then it must also be possible to create changes at places like Berkeley and Harvard.

When I discuss these things with my own faculty colleagues, however, some of them think that I am seeing things that are not there, for which they usually humor me before returning to their roles as researchers and teachers. If only a few of them gave expression to their yearning, however, and took action, the effects could be extraordinary.

Author's Note: This is one of a series of articles addressing institutional changes in research universities, including Checkoway (1991, 1997, 2005). An earlier version of the present article appears in Checkoway (2003).

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