

*Engaging the Department: Community-based Approaches to
Support Academic Unit Coherence*

Kevin Kecskes, Director
Community-University Partnerships for Learning
Portland State University

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"I want to work at the migrant worker center so I can convince them to speak English," said a college student recently when discussing where she wanted to do her senior nursing practicum. "These people (in a homeless shelter) are here because they want to be," said another student during his senior capstone experience. In a recent departmental meeting, I and several members of the faculty discussed these statements and it was clear that something was missing. What was particularly distressing for several in the group was that the students were seniors. Statements like these from first-year students were understandable, but that coming from students at the end of their undergraduate years signaled that a more connected, cohesive approach to student learning was needed.

Investigating suppositions, uncovering biases, dispelling myths, and providing alternatives are important aspects of effective post-secondary curriculum. Service-learning, community-based learning, or other civic engagement strategies assist instructors to expose students to real-world situations so they have opportunities to learn a) about themselves, their strengths, concerns, and their public responsibilities as citizens, and b) about where and how course content intersects with the lives of people in our communities. Yet, in contemporary America, where community engagement strategies are being discussed and integrated in substantial ways in higher education (for example, the American Association of Colleges and Universities 2004 conference: "Pedagogies of Engagement: New Designs for Learning In and Across the Disciplines") and where, according to the 2001 UCLA Freshman Survey more than

82% of respondents reported frequent or occasional volunteer work in their senior year of high school, many students continue to have difficulty connecting key curricular concepts with the underlying sources of social concerns.

Committed faculty at my home institution, Portland State University (PSU), as well as many other faculty with whom I have worked at institutions in the Western region are energized by their professional experiences with community-based pedagogies. However, they are also concerned that many students, like those quoted above, will be exposed to community too late in the curriculum. Thus, we have learned that for students to more fully reap the benefits of these rich learning environments we need to intentionally sequence community activities. This coordination can happen effectively at the departmental level, especially within the requirements for the major.

Faculty Culture and Civic Education Disconnected?

So, why doesn't this coordination happen more frequently? In addition to general time constraints, the traditions of a largely individualistic faculty culture can also impede collective work. Service- or community-based civic learning techniques require collaboration among faculty, students, and community partners, yet traditional faculty cultural norms do not generally place a high value on these activities, nor recognize the need for faculty training and support. This inconsistency between collective strategies and an individualized faculty culture can limit the effectiveness of engaged pedagogies. Because individualism anchors most faculty work life, community-based civic education programs and students' community experiences often remain uncoordinated and disconnected (Sax, et al, 2000; Sigmon, 1998). Community-based learning experiences remain largely episodic, and lack coherence for students and continuity for community entities (Wallace, 2000). Nonetheless, research suggests that there is great potential power in community-connected pedagogical approaches on student learning and development

(Astin, et al, 2000; Vogelgesang and Astin, 2000). Also, there is widespread agreement that faculty development is a critical element for creating sustained community engagement (Holland, 1999; Zlotkowski, 1998). Unless this disconnection between the individualized norms of faculty and university culture and the collective needs of students and community members involved in community-based civic education and service settings is bridged with innovative approaches, these promising community-embedded techniques will continue to be of only modest benefit.

Envisioning an Engaged Department

Imagine a student who not only looks to individual faculty mentors within her or his major field of study for guidance, but to an entire departmental faculty. S/he sees coherence, a clear departmental mission that addresses both intellectual and civic development, faculty actively collaborating with each other and with community partners through community-based research and active teaching and learning endeavors. S/he sees a place where making a positive contribution to community-identified concerns is regularly modeled, expected, and supported. There are many opportunities to engage with people – inside and outside the university – in an attempt to explore and deepen knowledge, build community, and eventually find a place to make change. And, learning is facilitated through both intellectual and applied learning experiences.

Imagine members of a community organization in a long-term relationship with several, perhaps all, members of a department at a college or university. Together, over time, they have explored and acknowledge each other's assets and needs. They understand each other's mission, recognizing that both have much to give and receive from the other. The department chair, in association with other senior faculty, annually leads new faculty on a tour of community organizations, outlining past, current, and future research projects, highlighting teaching

collaborations, and hearing from senior students in the major as well as from associates from the community organization.

Imagine, finally, a university department where shared values are transparent, and where mutually supportive intellectual and civic goals are actively pursued. A place where community engagement is valued and expected; where senior faculty introduce new faculty to collaborative, community-based research projects that support rigorous, applied scholarly activities and public problem solving endeavors.

Are these scenarios a stretch for the imagination? There is recent evidence that departmental units are beginning to create organizational cultures that support high levels of collaboration; sustained partnerships that result in enhanced student learning and public problem solving. Increasingly, due to the groundbreaking work of the staff and associates at National Campus Compact through their “engaged department project” (Battistoni, et al, 2003), and to the hard work of scores of departments nationwide, several pieces of this emerging vision have indeed become reality.

Increasing Departmental Coherence – How and Where to Start?

Nearly three years ago, Portland State University (PSU) was the first institution in the nation (and, to date, remains one of only two, the other being Miami Dade Community College) to embark on a *campus-wide* initiative to create “engaged departments.” PSU embraced this strategy given our institutional commitment to continue to find effective ways to operationalize our university motto: *Let Knowledge Serve the City*.

Throughout this process, we have learned that an effective place to start with departments is to support the chair and loyal senior faculty in doing an organizational scan of current activities. We work with departments to help them develop a picture of their current and recent scholarly work, with a particular focus on community-based activities. This is relatively easy,

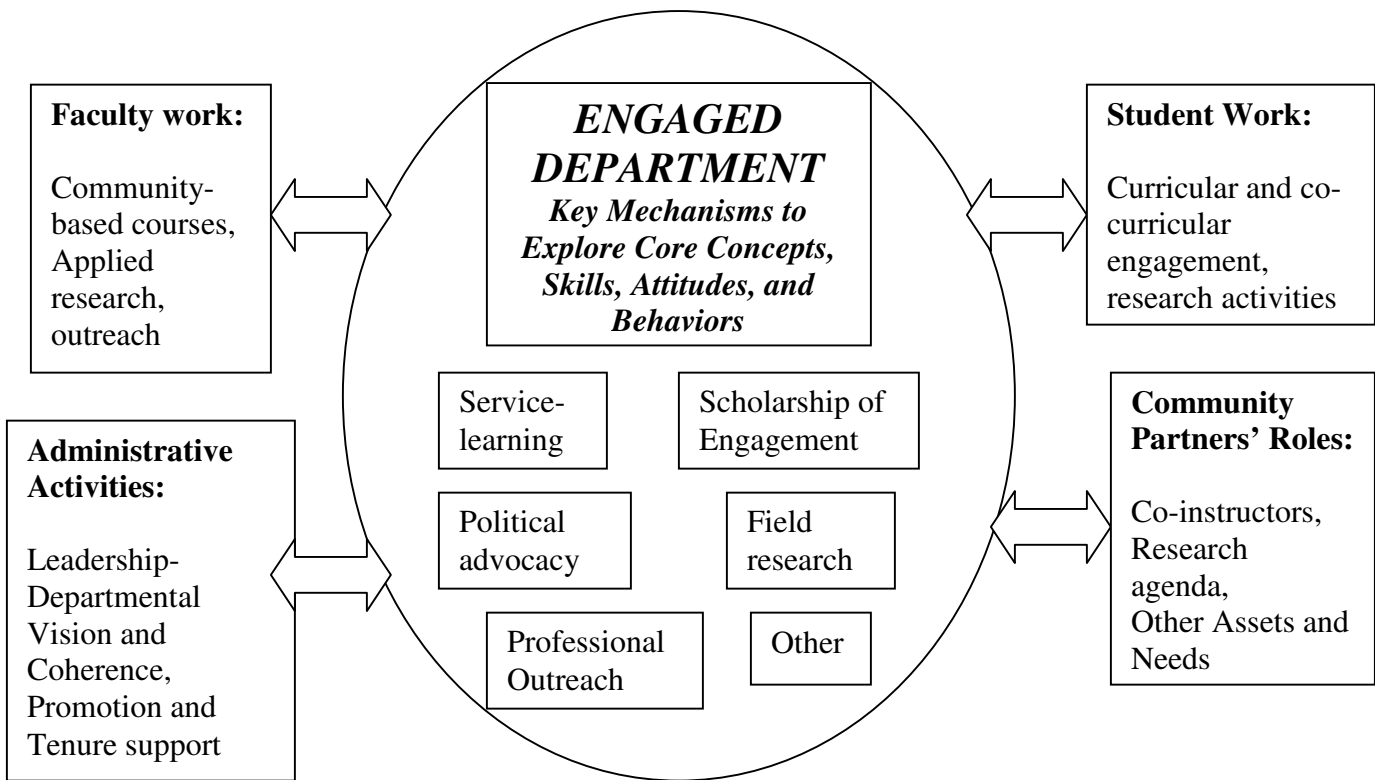
can be accomplished in a variety of ways over the course of a couple of months, and then brought to the attention of the full departmental faculty during one or two unit meetings. We have found that faculty appreciate this activity; indeed, in many cases, it energizes them. An easy and simple place to start is to identify all the courses taught by departmental faculty, highlighting the ones that are required for the major, and for various minors supported by the unit. Simultaneously, invite unit faculty to provide a list of all publications that are “works-in-progress” or that they have completed in the last three years. Finally, gather a list of the community partners (very broadly defined) that faculty are working with. These partners may include private enterprises, not-for-profit organizations, neighborhood, political, student and/or other advocacy groups both on and off of campus. As you might imagine, the simple gathering of this information can be quite powerful and illuminating for everyone involved. We have found—over and over again—that by keeping the definition of “community engagement” broad, inviting faculty to share their accomplishments and works in progress with colleagues, and aggregating the data in a low-tech, transparent manner can be very energizing for most, if not all members of the department. To learn more about the “Engaged Department Program” supported by the Center for Academic Excellence at Portland State University, see Kecskes and Spring, 2004.

Next, any one of several things may be take place, depending on the climate and context of the department. Some units have intentionally chosen short articles to read and discuss together – focusing on core disciplinary values, or on the integration of civic learning into core curricula, for example. Other units have chosen to re-visit their departmental mission, or in some cases, to rewrite it completely. Many advanced departments have found it useful to specifically re-analyze their overall curriculum to identify where (in which specific courses, for example) key civic or other applied learning outcomes emerge. Once collective thinking amid the faculty takes

place, a developmental approach to student learning within the major emerges; and in many cases, erstwhile individualistic faculty orientations can give way to a sense of collectivity.

Where the community is involved, commitments by one faculty member to a key community partner may transform into a deep departmental commitment. Students from a variety of classes, over the course of years within the major, may engage in community placements that connect to and build upon each other. Relationships between faculty, students, and community members become durable; learning can deepen, and applied disciplinary research can have greater impact.

The following model is one way to delineate some of the relationships in an engaged department.



Our emerging research at Portland State University suggests several key learnings about the departmental engagement process.

Summary of Findings

- Curricular changes takes time
- Institutional support is critical

- Identifying one or more required community-based courses for the major that intentionally integrate key civic engagement concepts—independent of the instructor—will facilitate the institutionalization of departmental engagement
- Utilizing a developmental framework to sequence community engagement aspects within a range of courses for the major can be very powerful
- Central Office support is critical
- Leadership involvement is critical
- Recognition of efforts is important
- Like people and institutions, departments each operate in their own climate and contexts. Recognizing, affirming, and building from that foundation is ESSENTIAL; therefore,
- Flexibility, adaptability, and creativity are more important than proposing a “template” approach
- Even if all faculty are not adopters of service-learning, this effort enhances individual and departmental familiarity with service-learning, and other civic engagement strategies
- Promotion of institutional vision and mission can increase commitment and broaden understanding.
- After nearly three years of institution-wide implementation, we now see emerging a *continuum of departmental level engagement*, from a barely aggregated set of individual faculty efforts, on the one end of the scale, to...
- The emergence of groundbreaking collective thinking, planning, and action on the other end of the continuum

Conclusion

When the faculty member heard his student mention that she “...wanted to work at the migrant worker center so she could convince them to speak English,” he knew something was missing. That faculty member has since become a champion of curricular revision and civic engagement; slowly his department has begun to re-conceptualize and re-articulate their work within the department as being engaged. Seniors from the major now work alongside first-year students at the migrant center, and students’ community-based learning continues to deepen.

This article is adapted from Kecskes, K., and Spring, A. (2004). “Creating Engaged Departments: Moving Faculty Culture from Private to Public, Individual to Collective Focus for the Common Good” in Sixth Annual Continuums of Service Conference Proceedings, Edited by Daynes, G. and Weaver, H.: <http://www.wacampuscompact.org/publications.html>.

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