

Negotiating Institutional Performance and Change: Strategies for Engaged Universities

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Abstract

This essay describes how University of Alaska Anchorage (a) mapped academic-based engagement activities into its institutional context and mission and (b) explored academic and administrative leadership strategies to reflect its commitment to engagement. Higher education governing bodies, legislators, administrators, and faculty increasingly request key performance indicators for documentation, decision-making, and accountability. This essay will explore indicators of engagement for negotiating institutional change toward a more civically-engaged university using mission clarification and leadership strategies.

When Boyer (1996) argued that the scholarship of engagement involved reaffirming a campus-community commitment, he meant that colleges and universities would realign their institutional cultures to connect “the rich resources of their campuses to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems.” Engaged universities, in this view, are a vital part of communities, and they explore issues such as community building, civic engagement, diversity, and social justice with a larger purpose and sense of mission for the nation’s life. Within an academic domain, engaged universities use active, experiential pedagogies, apply disciplinary and professional modes of inquiry to community-defined concerns, and include students and community partners in processes of inquiry (Colby et al. 2003; Rice 2003).

Campus Compact extended this characterization of engaged universities by identifying ten indicators of engagement, later expanded to the current 13 indicators (Hollander, Saltmarsh, and Zlotkowski 2002). In negotiating institutional change toward a more engaged university, these empirical indicators represent key institutional activities, policies, and structures and exemplify important attributes for institutional engagement. Gathering evidence and making decisions about these attributes and their effectiveness for change can serve to democratize institutional processes, integrate competing interests, and legitimize community engagement activities.

The University of Alaska Anchorage recently began reframing its public service and community-oriented research and teaching toward distinguishing itself as Alaska’s engaged university. The meaning and importance of becoming a more engaged university revolves around UAA’s unique institutional history. About 18 years ago, Anchorage Community College and the University of Alaska Anchorage merged into a

single, comprehensive, metropolitan university. Drawing on its historical mission to serve its surrounding communities, UAA increased its commitment to community engagement by recognizing faculty priorities in teaching and research, promoting thematically coherent projects, developing institution-wide priorities, and revising its mission and academic plan.

Institutional Context and Mission

The University of Alaska Anchorage is a relatively new comprehensive university created from the merging of community colleges with a senior college. Anchorage Community College was founded in 1954, offering workforce development, lower-division undergraduate courses, technical and associate degrees. The University of Alaska Anchorage, founded in 1971, was designed as a senior college offering upper-division undergraduate courses and baccalaureate degrees. In 1987, a statewide reorganization of higher education combined the community and senior colleges in Anchorage with five community colleges in south central Alaska. This administrative unit is now called the University of Alaska Anchorage with approximately 15,000 undergraduates in certificate, associate, and bachelor's degree programs and 800 graduate students in several master's degree programs located in cities ranging in population size from 265,000 in Anchorage to 4,000 in Valdez, Alaska.

This institutional history presents conditions and challenges important to UAA and its interactions within the state. With its founding ethos in community colleges, many UAA faculty and senior administrators desire to remain responsive to community needs and maintain open access to educational opportunities *in situ*. With the merging of faculty with bi-partite workloads in teaching and service and tri-partite workloads adding research, UAA has continually engaged in conversations about the meaning, scope, and purposes of academic divisions of labor. With a strong faculty voice expressed through academic governance and collective bargaining, UAA faculty have a broad range of experiences for dialogue and trust. In addition, UAA, as most other universities, has grappled with developing new policies and implementations for program assessment, technology, distance education, attrition, and general education reform. A generally committed faculty combined with a sense of responsibility to the community serves as UAA's institutional context for re-conceptualizing its form of engagement.

A university's mission statement articulates its orientation toward public service and community engagement through its vision for the public uses of scholarship and their impact on the region's population and its development. UAA's mission affirms that "...UAA is committed and uniquely situated to serve the needs of its communities, the state, and its diverse peoples." The University carries out a general service mission through large and varied networks of associations and partnerships that provide the communities in which it operates with training, education, personnel support, and expertise. University programs are expected to connect with communities and industry, provide open educational access to all, and offer courses and conduct research for the betterment of the state. Faculty, staff, and academic administrators are in broad

agreement that service capacity should be among the highest priorities of the institution. Yet ten years ago, the University's activities were fragmented and dependent on individual commitments with few organized resources and public recognition.

Over the past decade, UAA re-conceptualized public service to identify explicitly, manifest concretely, and value explicitly scholarly engagement and university-community partnerships. The mission attained further depth and expansion through discussions and decision-making afforded by accreditation, Board of Regents strategic planning, state-wide performance measurements, and local academic planning. These institutional experiences enabled UAA to identify, define, and refine its vision for public service and community engagement. The University's service mission ultimately became more nuanced through these institutional development activities.

Organizational Priorities and Planning

Repositioning mission and purpose toward increasing community engagement requires organizational planning to establish priorities. In *Good to Great*, (Collins 2001) notes that organizations achieve higher levels of performance by aligning activities to reinforce its mission and stimulate continued progress toward its aspirations. In higher education, mission alignment is commonly uncovered and articulated through accreditation. In addition, strategic planning and assessment feedbacks integral to accreditation allow for open accounting, review, and deliberation.

In establishing organizational priorities, a 2000 accreditation review identified an implicit strength in UAA's attention to the needs and ambitions of its communities. UAA explicitly established a goal calling for expanded partnerships with the community. The Committee Evaluation Report commended UAA for "vigorously pursuing this aspect of its mission, and for its success in creating viable partnerships with local community services, education, industry and the arts" (Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges 2000, 48). This recognition manifested the University's early intentions to be more actively and intentionally involved in the community.

A second example illustrates how comprehensive strategic planning highlights UAA core institutional priorities. In 2003, the University of Alaska Board of Regents completed a strategic plan applicable to all campuses in the system. This strategic plan recognized UAA as a statewide center of excellence in public service, service-learning, and community-based research. Moreover, to underscore the importance of community engagement across all University of Alaska campuses, the Regents defined community engagement as one of seven strategic planning principles asking all campuses to design strategies to encourage faculty, student, and staff involvement in service to Alaska's diverse communities; to integrate community service with research and instructional programs; and to increase partnerships with Alaska Native corporations and social service agencies to foster stronger communities.

A final way that mission can inform priorities is through an academic planning process. UAA designed its strategic academic plan to address the continuing development of the University's academic programs in teaching, research, and service. Its intent was to mark out major themes and identify emphases that will receive the greatest attention. In implementing its academic plan during 2005-2009, UAA proposes to focus on four core priorities; community engagement is one of those four priorities. Currently undergoing review and comment, this academic plan is intended to serve as a dynamic document that will be reviewed on a regular basis as UAA considers new programs. Recommendations for program support will be judged based on their consistency with the Board of Regents' mission and goals for the statewide system, UAA specific goals, and appropriate assessment of costs and benefits.

Academic and Administrative Leadership

As the developers of the indicators note, academic and administrative leadership is key to implementing or redefining institutional mission for community engagement (Hollander, Saltmarsh, and Zlotkowski 2002). The president, provost, and trustees have a role in supporting campus civic engagement. Their active endorsement and support aligns the mission with institutional decision-making and governance. Establishing an expectation for the institution's public purposes—symbolized within the mission statement—which are aligned with its instrumental processes and activities results in coherent planning and actions. This alignment is best evoked through democratic processes among academic and administrative leadership within the traditions contained in academic and institutional governance.

In the late 1990's, UAA's Office of Academic Affairs began exploring the relevance of community engagement by sponsoring faculty teams to travel to peer institutions (including Portland State University; California State University, Monterey Bay; and San Francisco State University) and creating a Faculty Fellow position in Community Engagement. The faculty and Academic Affairs explored the following questions: What current courses and research explicitly link faculty and student work into communities? What other universities can be models, and how did change occur at these institutions? What strategies build on UAA's diverse student body and faculty's strengths?

As Faculty Fellow I convened a working group consisting of faculty, an administrator, and a community partner to explore the need for and feasibility of supporting engagement at UAA. This group expanded and later became known as the Dream Team because its primary role was to imagine and visualize how the university and community could become more engaged. It consisted of well-respected individuals within the community and tenured professors at the university. The Dream Team's composition was initially selected deliberately to ensure representation across colleges and faculty's primary roles in teaching and research. The group also served as an important mechanism for deliberation and communication within faculty and administrative governance structures because several members were Faculty Senate presidents and departmental chairs. Establishing a working group so that individuals

can represent and advocate within their departments, colleges, and communities has been an effective strategy for success. These networks express democratic practice within the University as well.

In order to institutionalize the faculty's interest in community-based learning and research, the Office of Academic Affairs signaled its willingness to review a proposal to establish a Center with funding, staffing, and faculty development resources. After drafting the proposal, I asked for review and comment from the faculty at large, the Faculty Senate, Deans, and Directors prior to submitting the proposal for formal approval. In order to establish sufficient familiarity with the purposes of community engagement, the Provost, Faculty Senate President, and other academic and administrative leaders had earlier discussed community-based learning and research with the upper administration, including the Chancellor, Statewide President, and members of the Board of Regents. Since University policy requires the Board of Regents' approval for the creation of a Center, both academic and administrative leadership laid the groundwork hierarchally above, parallel to, and below their own positions, providing substantive and authoritative legitimacy to the proposal. It also broadened knowledge about community engagement across the University and made discussions more transparent within the institutional decision-making process.

Established in 2000 by the University of Alaska Board of Regents, the Center for Community Engagement & Learning builds upon the University's community service mission. This Center serves as a clearinghouse for faculty interested in community-based learning and research; a front door to the University for community leaders with project ideas, proposals, and needs; a catalyst for students seeking academic engagement beyond the traditional classroom; and a promoter and generator of participatory action research to help meet applied research needs of the community. The Center provides consulting services, faculty awards, and student tuition waivers to connect academic programs with community engagement. The Dream Team continues to advise Center staff and advocates for new initiatives to expand UAA as an engaged university.

In the early 2000s, the Center's academic and community leadership met regularly to map a strategy to generate broad support within the university and the community. Faculty, community partner, and student teams attended the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) Summer Institutes and drafted a strategic plan for the Center. This plan established goals for UAA as an engaged university with practical objectives for the Center. The first goal, *institutionalize leadership support*, sought to secure active and public leadership from UAA's Chancellor and Provost, financial support for the Center for Community Engagement & Learning, and establish roles and responsibilities for the Center, its staff, and the Dream Team. The second goal, *align community engagement with UAA's mission*, sought to define community-based learning and engagement, conform with and align to UAA 2005 goals, and integrate engagement as a core value for UAA and its strategic planning. The third goal sought to *develop and sustain involvement by faculty, community partners, and students*.

For its initial implementation, faculty and academic leadership established priorities for supporting faculty in their community-based learning courses and research. The Center's activities focused on faculty workshops, symposia, and mini-grants. These faculty development resources were made possible, in part, through a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service Learn-and-Serve Higher Education. To provide guidance and inspiration for articulating community engagement into the university's mission, UAA brought consultants from Campus Compact, the American Association for Higher Education, the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, and the Berkana Institute to campus.

Subsequent implementation phases of the Center's strategic plan addressed community partnerships and students. Although not directly tied to this strategic plan, last year the Chancellor reorganized UAA's administration, creating a division of Community Partnerships. This year the Center for Community Engagement & Learning instituted a Bonner Leaders Program, coordinating co-curricular and curricular activities for student leadership in public service. With the recent receipt of a Bonner/FIPSE award, UAA's future includes a civic engagement certificate program, preparing undergraduates to become engaged, effective citizens in their professional and personal lives.

As a result of implementation of the Center's strategic plan, UAA faculty offer between forty and forty-five regular academic courses with community-based projects each year. These courses appear in all schools and colleges and link with over 150 community partners. UAA was recently recognized for its engagement by being selected to appear in *Colleges with a Conscience: 81 Great Schools with Outstanding Community Involvement* (Campus Compact and The Princeton Review 2005).

A promising course-based development addresses community-identified problems using a thematic project-based approach. These projects highlight a substantive theme and address a practical problem by bringing several disciplines together with multiple community partners to research and resolve the problem. A successful example is the Chester Creek Watershed Project focusing on sustainability within an urban environment. In twenty-three courses and applied research projects, students and faculty have monitored an urban watershed and engaged the community in making connections between water quality, habitat, watershed health, and human health.

These types of thematic community-based projects require a new form of academic leadership—leadership that can generate pedagogical innovations and logistical collaborations. These multi-disciplinary, multi-partnered thematic projects encourage an epistemological shift toward co-generation of knowledge among students, community partners, and faculty. Rather than expertise-driven service, these projects afford the greatest opportunity for connected learning by integrating disciplinary knowledge, orientations, and methodologies with community partner knowledge and interests to produce change and improvement in the community.

Recommendations for Improving Institutional Indicators of Civic Engagement

While no single indicator, historical chronology, or strategy emerges as a critical element evoking institutional change, documenting community engagement indicators encourages faculty, departments, and administration to use this information. Purposes can range from understanding the extent to which the initiatives are meeting intended goals, identifying successful and unsuccessful strategies, identifying consequences of efforts, justifying shifts in resource allocation, and legitimizing realignment of the mission (Eckel, Hill, and Mallon et al. 1999). By knowing the faculty's intentions and activities, results in student learning, and impacts in communities, academic and administrative leaders can tailor strategies to align the intents of civic engagement missions with actual outcomes.

Academic and administrative leadership play a key role in enacting institutional change particularly around mission and goals. Plater (2004, 15) defines three levels of academic leadership: the department; the division, college or school; and the campus. To be successful, change agents must package their practices in ways that enhance legitimacy but will not generate resistance by core institutional actors (Lounsbury and Pollack 2001). Mission clarification and priority planning can serve to integrate competing interests and legitimize civic engagement activities among campus leaders and within institutional governance structures.

In evoking change for community engagement, academic and administrative leadership can improve the likelihood of success by applying the following strategies. First, foster dialogue to reframe understandings of engagement. Although service-learning has had prominence for nearly fifteen years within higher education, its meanings and attributes have evolved over time. These new conceptualizations of faculty and organizational involvement in community-based work involve the following basic principles: genuine collaboration between the university and community; multi-directional learning and teaching with shared expertise; work in new ways across disciplines and organizational sectors; share results with the community as well as academic colleagues; and involve representatives of the community in planning and discussions from the beginning of the project.

R. Eugene Rice (2003), former Senior Scholar at the American Association for Higher Education and current Senior Fellow at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), and Tom Ehrlich and his colleagues (Colby et al. 2004) at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, define this broader conception of civic engagement as an umbrella category encompassing different forms of scholarly activities done by faculty within the university. They include:

1. engaged pedagogy encompassing engaged approaches to teaching such as service-learning and the development of learning communities where teaching methods are experiential, contextual, and social. The learning involves experiencing and

reflecting on what it means to be a community, how to make a difference in the civic life of our communities, and promoting the quality of life in a community;

2. community-based research rooted in a particular time and setting and calling for shared expertise. It values the participation of local community members and brings their perspectives into the research process. Related methodologies include applied research, technical assistance, and policy research, though these do not necessarily maintain a reciprocal relationship with community members during the research process; and
3. collaborative practice where faculty and students are engaged in service in the community in a way that enhances both their experience and the community's well-being. This kind of public work is best linked to community-identified problems in a process of democratic community change and development.

The most fruitful combinations for university involvement in civic engagement will be different across courses, departments, or colleges. Academic and administrative leaders will recognize the value of peer-to-peer, interdepartmental, and project- or thematic-based dialogues. Emphasis on relevant scholarship of engagement will direct engagement activities and contribute to their adoption. Finding the mixture of engaged pedagogy, community-based research, and collaborative practice within and across disciplines and communities will ensure scholarly and coherent community engagement activities adhering, reflecting, and refracting the institution's mission.

The second recommendation for improving institutional indicators of civic engagement is to create many loose networks and ties among administrative and academic leadership. These connections result in strong networks for communication, resource-, and trust-building during decision-making. Through their knowledge of academic and community connections, academic and administrative leaders can manage intersections of resources with their proper use, of people with duties, of public statements of institutional priority with their legitimacy (Plater 2004). Using their symbolic status and practical authority, academic and administrative leaders can negotiate institutional change. Most leaders know the strategically placed, well-respected, and trusted people and can identify them vertically as well as horizontally within the organization (Rosean, Foster-Fishman, and Fear 2001). Building academic and administrative leadership networks to negotiate extant interests within a generally accepted academic culture of peer review, pursuit of truth, and democratic practice will encourage institutional change toward increased community engagement.

Thirdly, improve understandings of the institution's community engagement by documenting coherence of programs and directions of impact. As universities reconsider their responsibilities vis-à-vis the overall well-being of communities, a number of audit and benchmarking frameworks have emerged. Recent audit and benchmarking strategies have defined institutional characteristics for an engaged campus (Campus Compact 1999; W. K. Kellogg Foundation 1999), assessed current

activities (Bowley 2003; Community-Campus Partnerships for Health n.d.; Furco 2002), identified strategies to embed engagement practices into the institution's work (Holland 1997), and established benchmarks to define the university's contributions to society (Campus Compact 2000; Committee on Institutional Cooperation 2005). National organizations have characterized civic engagement and outreach initiatives as essential in assessing the contributions of higher education (American Association of State Colleges and Universities 2002; Higher Education for the Public Good 2002; National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges 2000). Although purposes and intent vary, academic and administrative leaders can evaluate the quality of civic engagement by using many of the same criteria applicable in other scholarly work: clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, effective presentation, significant results, and reflective critique (Driscoll and Lynton 1999; Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff 1997).

Conclusion

Our purposes are to describe how the University of Alaska Anchorage characterized and strategically mapped its academic-based activities into a community engagement mission within the campus and broader community. With increasing challenges in documenting performance and rationalizing public expenditures, comprehensive universities can draw from their historical missions and commitments to student learning, public service, applied research, and economic development. This example shows how a university negotiates change in complex higher education and metropolitan environments. As the experience of the University of Alaska Anchorage demonstrates, using institutional indicators and developing strategic networks, academic and administrative leaders can advance transformational change toward more civically- engaged universities.

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