

**Every Perspective Counts:
Understanding the True Meaning of Reciprocity in Partnerships**

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In considering the theme of this conference: “Activists, Intellectuals, and Servants Together: Engaging Campuses and Communities,” I had several conversations with the conference planning committee about their interpretation of the theme and their hope for its impact on conference discussion. Clearly, the terms “activist, intellectual, and servant,” remind us that we each come to engagement, service, and service-learning from different frames of reference; from different sources of motivation that call us to link knowledge to public purposes. While we may each see our fundamental identity more strongly associated with one or another of these roles, we also understand that effective service-learning requires us to be alert to the many different roles we play in different settings and different situations. Our awareness of the tensions among these roles shapes our interactions with others and thus the partnerships that are essential to sustainable engagement endeavors. We must also try to perceive the roles others see for themselves and the frameworks they use, so as to be alert to potential differences and conflicts in perspectives, and to seek paths to reconciliation and understanding. The roles we adopt, consciously or unconsciously, and our awareness of the roles other people bring to our collaborations, strongly influence our partnerships and their outcomes.

My intention in this presentation is to share with you some observations about patterns that have emerged from national-scale research on campus-community partnerships, especially about the motivations that affect faculty, student and community partner involvement in service-learning, and the roles we adopt as we interact and think of reciprocity. By reciprocity, I mean our respect for different sources of knowledge, different contributions of each participant, a fair exchange of value, and the assurance of benefits to all participants. Though much has been written and we speak often about the importance of reciprocity in our partnerships, I believe we still have far to go to truly grasp its meaning and the pathways to its achievement. We have not yet mastered the challenge of balancing the different perspectives that make up partnerships.

I have been very fortunate over recent years to have the opportunity to observe and analyze the civic engagement, service-learning and partnership efforts of dozens of institutions of every type and size. From that substantial body of experience in the field, I want to share some hypotheses and some predictions for the future.

First, I want to say that after more than a decade of rapid expansion of interest in civic engagement service-learning, I believe we in higher education are stuck on a plateau. The level of institutional commitment to service and service-learning is rather stable and highly dependent on the group most would say were the early adopters, many of whom are in danger of burnout.

I challenge you to consider the following questions:

- What would it take to make academic service-learning accessible to more students within our institutions and across the nation?

- What would it take to involve more faculty in the design and support of service and service-learning programs?
- In particular, should we be concerned about the fact that civic engagement and service-learning are much more prevalent at universities and colleges that are not research-intensive? That even at institutions we think of as advanced in their implementation of engagement and service-learning programs, the majority of faculty don't participate?
- Can we say with certainty that our partnerships are truly reciprocal – truly respectful of diverse sources of knowledge and of community expertise?
- Can we provide convincing evidence that engagement and SL have meaningful consequences for those who participate? Who do we need to convince?

Let me share with you some things research has revealed about why faculty and students and community partners adopt certain roles and become involved in engaged partnerships. These findings may suggest ways we can involve others who remain on the sidelines; what we might do to continue to expand and sustain community-based teaching, learning and research, and how we can expand reciprocity in our partnerships.

We have learned a great deal about faculty motivations regarding interest in all kinds of interaction with community, service-learning, participatory action research, community-based research, technical assistance and so on. The vast majority of faculty active in service today entered through the role of the activist in the sense that they are inspired by intrinsic motivations to make a difference, to use their education for the betterment of society, to fulfill their spiritual calling to live a life of service. These faculty often cite family traditions of service, or college service experiences as sources of their commitment to community-based learning and scholarship. In interviews, when asked why they became interested in service or service-learning, the vast majority say something like: “Well, I was a child of the 60s...I was an activist then, and this is a way for me to be an activist now.” This makes a lot of sense if we look at the impact of the

baby boomers on academia – more than half of today’s faculty were hired between 1965 and 1975. They were the leaders during the great transformation of student and academic culture during those years. This also is a danger to the future of service and service-learning, as that body of faculty is now preparing for retirement. In interviews, many faculty expressed the concern: “Who will follow us to carry on this work?”

Other early adopter faculty may come from something of a servant perspective, especially those who come to academia as a second career after working in community-based organizations, schools, faith-based organizations, government or non-profits. Many people with these diverse backgrounds are also attracted to the new career paths developing throughout the K-16 system – career paths as academic professionals, center directors, and program managers with expertise in building, directing, and sustaining civic engagement and service-learning programs.

There are other strong motivating factors that influence faculty interest in engagement and service-learning. Many entered through a more intellectual framework based on their disciplines that have a strong natural and intellectual tradition of connecting teaching, learning and research to community partners and issues. These are largely the so-called professional disciplines who are by nature more comfortable with the link of their field to public purposes – the health professions, education, social work, justice programs, public health and public administration, and often sociology and psychology, etc. However, even faculty in these disciplines face challenges in developing truly reciprocal partnerships. Those traditions that see the community as essential to the scholarly agenda

also tend to see the community as laboratory, as a set of needs and problems to be studied or addressed. The integration of service-learning, other engagement activities, and true partnerships has been a challenging agenda for these disciplines whose members must learn new skills of reciprocity, mutual benefit, and partnership.

The next most common factor seen to influence faculty interest is the availability of incentives such as time release or other resources to support planning and implementation, infrastructure support or part-time help, or faculty development programming which assists faculty in acquiring new skills related to engagement activities. These faculty may be favorably inclined toward community-based scholarship, but they perceive obstacles – they respond to support and encouragement.

From this state on, attracting faculty to engagement and service-learning gets much more difficult. For these faculty, who have a deeper skepticism about the intellectual rigor of engagement and service-learning, persuasion with facts is key. They want to see evidence that this kind of scholarly work makes a difference. They want proof that service-learning makes a difference in student learning and in their civic development, that faculty will be rewarded for community-based scholarship, and/or they want to see evidence that a commitment to engagement will build the reputation of the institution or their department, or that it will attract new resources.

Thus we see that after the early adopter group, who primarily enter through an activist or servant framework, almost all those who come after are entering through various

intellectual frameworks that link engagement activities with their scholarly agenda or with strategies that strengthen their institution or department. These may be individuals who see service-learning as a new tool for good teaching, or a method that enhances content acquisition, or as an enhanced direction for a critical line of research, more than as a tool for building citizenship and a democratic society.

As one who spends a lot of time with different institutions and different academic leaders and scholars, let me say we have some cultural tension among our own ranks of service-learning proponents. There is a gap between those who see service-learning as a tool for democracy-building and those who may be more interested in the impact on student learning, development, and on community capacity through research. Growing higher education's commitment to service and service-learning will require us to close that gap and to welcome diverse individual roles and diverse views of the value of this work for the academy and for the community. As long as these divergent views continue to rival each other, rather than complement each other, policymakers and funders will not see the full power of our partnerships, and their impact on communities and students. I would argue that we must work together and respect diverse roles and objectives that others have for engagement, community-based scholarship, and service-learning.

Students follow a similar pathway to service-learning. Many arrive on our campuses already experienced in service-learning and volunteerism, and more will all the time, as America's schools become more and more committed to service-learning. These students tend to blend activist/intellectual/servant roles, and are often agents of change as they

press the institution's leaders to provide them the kind of learning environment they crave -- one that connects learning to community-building and to practical experience. For other students, volunteer service and service-learning are still new ideas, and like faculty they need incentives, evidence, persuasion, and exposure. Many students report that they wouldn't have discovered a love of service without being pushed. Again, and again, we see that integrating service into first-year programs, or into general education, and/or into the major, can provide deep and meaningful experiences for students who would otherwise not elect to engage in service-learning. We know these strategies lead to individual transformation and the development of civic responsibility.

I have heard many of the arguments for and against requiring service-learning, and my own view is a reflection of what I have heard from students themselves.

In interviews, students who participated in required programs eagerly supported the notion of requirement because they had seen and experienced first-hand the transformative power of service-learning. Students who participated in non-required programs talked much like the early-adopter faculty, they had a long-standing existing commitment to service and saw service-learning as a way to fulfill their own need to be engaged. These students tended to oppose required service because they were worried that students not yet committed to service would not take it seriously and would not perform well. Because they were surrounded by like-minded peers they had not seen the transformative potential of service-learning. Looking across many institutions, the best strategy is to integrate service-learning into key elements of the curriculum so that

students are directed by design toward service-learning opportunities. In this way, while it may not be required, which raises certain questions for some, most students will inevitably experience at least one service-learning course. Obviously, the real force for transformation of the student is program quality – meaning clarity of program intention, reality of experience, and full engagement of emotional and intellectual perspectives. Successful institutions invest in the quality of programming that ensures excellent experiences for students that fulfill both learning and service objectives.

Unlike faculty, students are often less constrained or cautious. They are more adaptive in trying out the different roles of activist, intellectual, and servant. They seem more open to others and to serendipity, which is consistent with the finding that students use service-learning as career exploration and self-discovery. Perhaps students get more out of the experience because we work hard to integrate reflection into the student experience, and only rarely do we truly promote reflection among faculty. In particular, students quickly embrace the power of service-learning as a way of developing multi-cultural skills, as they discover the diversity of knowledge resources in society. They are also more inclined to push the envelope of service-learning toward activism and advocacy which challenges our institutions to consider openly their commitments to partnerships. In my more optimistic moments, I see a vision where our undergraduates of today go forward to press for reforms in graduate education, and perhaps become the next generation of engaged faculty who will insist that civic engagement take its place as a legitimate element of scholarly careers. I look forward to long-term research studies that track the impact of service-learning on student life choices – not just their continuing civic service

activities. We need to look at how many choose education or non-profit careers, run for office, or create new civic organizations, and so on.

For students, faculty, and service-learning professionals, working with communities requires us to look beyond familiar and safe roles. This includes understanding why community partners work with our institutions and how they understand the relationship and its potential. When we consider the rather arrogant and self-serving history of most higher education institutions -- especially in urban areas where our campuses consume huge amounts of land and housing, or in smaller communities where our institutions raise housing values and take property off small tax rolls -- it's amazing any community would have any interest in working with us. Town-gown relations in this country have not been good, and continue to be difficult, especially during the "festive celebrations" of students after sporting events. Given such a checkered history, have you ever wondered why your community partners cooperate with you? What's their motivation?

From interviews in the field, I've observed that community partners reveal a surprising state of awareness and realism about the pitfalls and possibilities of working with a college or university. Almost invariably, their interest is inspired by a trusted relationship with one faculty member or academic professional. Truthfully, few community partners see themselves as collaborating with the university, they see themselves as working with Prof. Smith and her students. The very personal level is the only one where most community partners feel some confidence there will be reciprocity, trust, and respect for their perspectives.

Community partners often express a motivation to make a difference in the education of the students – to try and inspire an interest in a career of service in the field related to their organization’s work, or at least to continue to be a volunteer. These community partners see themselves as teachers, and as colleagues to the faculty in working with students. They are contributing expertise to the design of the project, and they eagerly want to contribute to evaluation and analysis of project outcomes, though they are not always asked to do so. Community members come to the partnership that is essential to service-learning through a largely activist or intellectual framework – they want to have an impact on students, on the faculty member, and perhaps on other members of the campus community. They want to share their expertise and to acquire access to new ideas and intellectual resources to enhance their organization and its programs. Their interest in partnering is much more intentional and well-thought out than you might imagine.

As I have visited many campuses, I observe that no matter how we academics (including students) try to incorporate community perspective into project design and partnerships, we have tremendous difficulty shedding our expert mantle, which we are so conditioned to emphasize. Some faculty have challenged my call to develop more authentic reciprocity because they believe it requires them to shed too much of their sense of expertise, and they truly see themselves as having superior knowledge which the community should respect. Yes, obviously, we do bring a particular type of expertise to any partnership, but we lack sufficient humility to see the wisdom of others, in most

cases. Each of the partners brings different kinds of expertise and knowledge. Even faculty who see themselves as activists or servants in their engagement work often have difficulty shedding their view of the community as less able, and less prepared to contribute to the partnerships endeavor. Mary Walshok of the University of California San Diego tells wonderful stories of world-class research scholars having an “aha” experience when they are placed in a situation where they realize they have something new to learn from community partners.

Too often, we still assume that in a campus-community partnership faculty teach, students learn, and the community partner is offering us a laboratory or set of needs that we are prepared to address or explore. Academics come to the community from a large seemingly stable and wealthy context, and the power relationship in partnerships is not equal. Our vocabularies and priorities are different, our assumptions and goals for the partnership are different. This makes it difficult to ensure a free exchange across the partnership and to ensure mutual benefits to all parties. Human nature being what it is, we all act out of some degree of self-interest – faculty want to help their students achieve learning objectives and to develop a sense of civic and social responsibility; they want to develop lines of research that enrich their intellectual work. They also want to see their work or their institution’s work contribute to community well-being. Students want to survive class, get a good grade, learn more about themselves and others, and feel they are making a difference. The community wants to make headway in improving conditions and outcomes related to the focus of their work. They want to serve more clients, design more effective programs, raise more funds, generate more support. Community partners

also report they enjoy the intellectual stimulation of working with faculty and students, and the new ideas that come from these interactions.

These are all different goals, as well as different roles. How can we build a truly reciprocal partnership with such divergent goals?

The answer is that effective partnerships operate as true learning communities. In a learning community and a campus-community partnership that works, every member is learning, teaching, contributing and discovering. All forms of expertise are valued, and we recognize that we have divergent goals, but by combining our different strengths, each of our needs will be met.

I want to offer six characteristics of effective partnerships that I commend to you as guides for enhancing the level of reciprocity and shared learning. It is not enough to just say we are partners and strike out to do some activity together. We must make the investment in articulating expectations and concerns.

First, we must jointly explore our separate and common goals and interests. We do want different things from the partnership, but we can only get them by cooperating. These exchange relationships must be explicit and lead to the development of a formal, mutually rewarding agenda that identifies where our separate interests are met through shared action.

Second, each partner must understand the capacity, resources, and expected contribution of effort for every other partner, up front. This builds a more realistic sense of expectations as well as a map of the different forms of expertise each partner will bring to the relationship. Part of being a good partner is being clear about your own limitations, and respecting the assets and limitations expressed by others. You are working together because each brings unique skills to an endeavor.

Third, effective partnerships identify opportunities for early success through careful planning of project activities and components, and they use these successes as occasions to celebrate and recognize their collective effort. And, success is defined and measured in both institutional and community terms.

Fourth, the focus of the project activity and partnership interaction is not a set of tasks, but the relationship itself. The core work is to promote ongoing knowledge exchange, shared learning and capacity-building. Beyond the first project effort, partner organizations may also want to contribute to a research study design, or share data, or write a grant proposal with the campus, or seek technical assistance with issues such as staff development or financial management. The partnership is not one discrete task, it is a relationship that encompasses many potential issues.

Fifth, the partnership design must ensure shared control of partnership directions. Intentional and formal construction of the project team and/or an advisory group can ensure that all voices are involved in planning and decision-making, and that

communications channels remain open. Shared control can also help keep the entire partnership alert to the need to bring in new members as work evolves.

Sixth, the partners must make a commitment to continuous assessment of the partnership relationships itself, in addition to outcomes. Assessment that involves all partners is the glue that creates trust, generates new lines of work and funding, and keeps shared goals and expectations visible to all. Let me illustrate this graphically with this chart originally conceptualized by Bill Becker here at Portland State. The diagram begins with the joint exploration of shared goals, assets, and needs to identify common areas where collaboration will create mutual benefits through an exchange relationship. Assessment, thus, is integrated into the project from the beginning, and is used as a constant monitor of the interactions and exchanges among the partners. The actual selection of specific project activities and/or grant proposals is an episodic process that occurs as opportunities surface and the group is ready. The actual core work of the partnership is building the learning relationship that endures beyond individual projects or grants. In this way, we build sustained relationships that respect the needs and interests of all partners, and we use assessment as a constant tool for reflecting on our contributions and benefits – thus building deeper and more authentic reciprocity.

Let us then return to our conference theme. Thinking of this model I have suggested for effective partnerships, it is easy to see how at different times we (faculty, academic professionals and students) must understand how the different roles of activist, intellectual, and servant shape our relationships and affect our capacity to fulfill the

diverse responsibilities of the partnership. I propose to you that the community partners you work with also assume such diverse roles in their own reflection on their relationship with you. Developing the trust and reciprocity essential for sustainable partnerships requires us to articulate these roles openly, even to the point of acknowledging that we each do have legitimate, and perhaps sometimes competing, self-interests for working together.

A key to balancing the tensions among these roles is assessment, evaluation, and documentation. The key to engaging more of our faculty and student colleagues is to recognize they identify with more intellectually-driven roles. We must build a body of evidence that demonstrates the intellectual power of engagement and service-learning, and press full integration into the roles of teaching and research. Done well, engagement and service-learning are not extra activities, they are not add-ons to faculty work or the curricula...done well, engagement is scholarly work that requires an intentional integration of teaching and research roles. If we grasp this understanding, and build a body of evidence that documents that integration, then more and more of our faculty and student colleagues will see the fit with their own intellectual framework.

I believe the next great wave of change in civic engagement and service-learning will be documenting and measuring our relationships and the impact of our partnership endeavors. This is important not just to grow and sustain this work within the academy, but given current events, documentation, evaluation and assessment have important public policy implications as well. The most powerful tool our nation has for building

capacity for civic action is to link the expression of a commitment to service to learning and to work through service-learning and education. The most powerful tools we have for building understanding across cultures and nations are education and service-learning. Our educational system, through every level, must assert its leadership role in building social and civic capacity in future generations. To assert this we must also do three things which, to date, we have found difficult:

1. Again, we must assess and document our work. Our values of service often seem to make us shy to state boldly the impact of partnerships on students and on communities. We must assertively tell others about the power of this work, and seek ways to integrate it into accreditation, ranking, and funding strategies. We must hold ourselves accountable for the quality of engaged scholarship and teaching, and let others know of its impact on building a lifelong commitment to service.
2. We must embrace our colleagues who enter the world of engaged scholarship and teaching through a more intellectual framework than one that is more shaped by the activist/servant perspective. To sustain institutional commitments, engagement must be fully integrated into the roles of teaching and research and across the disciplines.
3. Finally, we in higher education must more aggressively link our views of engagement and service-learning to that of public and private K-12 schools, and to public policy. We must make a commitment to improving teacher preparation and professional development with an eye to building a continuum of service for students throughout their learning experiences.

We know this work is making a difference for students and for communities. You know this work has made a difference in the relationships between your campus and community. Yet, public stereotypes of higher education as an enclave for intellectuals and disaffected students persist. We must tell our story more powerfully if we are to sustain this work, to grow a new generation of teachers and faculty who will expand the scholarship of engagement and service-learning, to ensure a place for the educational system in public policy. I close by thanking you for the work you have done to create and sustain powerful service-learning and engagement programs. You are the leaders, the pioneers, the core of this work. I challenge you at this conference, as you reflect on the diverse roles of activist, intellectual and servant, to consider:

- What will you do to bring more faculty colleagues and students into this work?
- What are you learning about how your own role in this field is evolving from where you began?
- What new strategies can you design to create more reciprocal partnerships characterized by shared power?
- How will you ensure that the impacts of your program are documented and made known to others?

This work is urgent, and I know your participation in this conference will give you new energy and inspiration for these new challenges and next steps.