

Going Beyond Merely Providing Expertise and Services

Reviewed by Timothy J. Shaffer

Beere, C.A., Votruba, J.C., & Wells, G.W. (2011). *Becoming an Engaged Campus: A Practical Guide to Institutionalizing Public Engagement*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. ISBN: 978-0470532263.

In *Becoming an Engaged Campus* the authors contribute to an increasingly expansive literature that seeks to articulate what it means for higher education to be engaged with communities beyond campus in ways that transcend traditional paradigms of providing expertise to solve problems to provide services (for example, see Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). The authors note this reality at the onset: “Many books and articles have been written about public engagement: defining it, framing it, and extolling its benefits” (p. 1). The literature is replete with nuanced arguments as to why higher education can and should become more engaged, both for institutional and community-oriented purposes. To varying degrees on campuses across the United States, individuals, departments, colleges, and universities have embraced notions of being engaged. Yet this has often been more episodic than coherent. Engagement has emerged from pockets within institutions, but often it has not been at the center of institutional mission and practice.

Some faculty members have integrated service-learning fully into their teaching and embraced community-based research as an approach to do rigorous and meaningful scholarship with tangible benefits to real people and communities. Similarly, scores of deans, provosts, and presidents have championed this work—frequently in rhetoric but less so through action by committing resources, monetary and otherwise, to establishing centers and other infrastructure to support such efforts. And while such efforts have been made, “little has been written on how to effect the necessary changes on the campus” (p. x). It is this void that the authors seek to fill with what they refer to as “essentially a ‘how-to’ book, showing the reader, step by step, how to institutionalize public engagement by aligning each of its organizational dimensions to promote and support public engagement” (p. 1). They offer specific strategies on “what one can do, how one should act, and what will make a difference” (p. 2) applicable to all types of postsecondary institutions: community colleges, liberal arts colleges, comprehensive

universities, and research universities.

Acknowledging that their intended audience is administrators and others responsible for or interested in cultivating a campus culture that takes seriously public engagement, the authors use an “alignment process” borrowed from the popular business book *Building to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, where authors Jerry I. Poras and James C. Collins (1994) contend that “companies successful over a prolonged period of time were fully aligned to support their vision” (p. 2)—that is, all of the elements within the company were functioning in a way that promoted the company’s goals. For a college or university to become an engaged campus requires alignment of every aspect of the institution.

Chapter 1 offers a brief background to issues related to American higher education, namely familiar signposts for those who know some of higher education’s more important moments: colonial colleges and liberal arts, the establishment of land-grant colleges through the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 and the associated Hatch Act of 1887 and Smith-Lever Act of 1914, the explosion of higher education because of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (better known as the GI Bill), and the federal government’s investment in research following World War II, particularly after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957. And while research had dominated much of the discussion about higher education, others called attention to the role colleges and universities could and should play in their local communities. Specifically, Ernest Boyer’s (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, helped to initiate conversations on campuses about different forms of scholarship and how scholarship was much more than traditional research that kept a certain distance from involving or engaging individuals or communities. It is within this first chapter that the authors spend some time defining terms related to public engagement and explain why they chose certain terms at their home institution of Northern Kentucky University. They also, briefly, define the ways that institutions, faculty, professional

staff, and students engage communities and what some of the forces have been behind increased interest in “engagement,” led by associations such as Campus Compact and organizations like the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. A section that could have been expanded on in this chapter concerns contemporary forms of knowledge and scholarship. While a “how-to book,” greater treatment of these two topics could have provided a more helpful background when thinking about the public engagement movement and its place within higher education, especially when thinking about engaged scholarship as more than volunteering or even service-learning in the curriculum.

Chapter 2 moves squarely in the direction of providing help to those interested in embedding engagement within their institutions. The alignment process begins by considering 16 organizational dimensions across four organizational levels and by determining the extent to which each is already aligned with or supportive of public engagement, and identifies where each of these dimensions can be improved upon to become fully aligned. (For the alignment grid, see page 34). The chapter offers guidance about creating an alignment committee to conduct this work, analyze findings, and report such findings to a campus (and broader) community in an accessible and useful way. While each institution will adapt the alignment process differently, a fundamental question must be asked: Is the campus ready to accept public engagement as an important property? The authors argue that presidents and chief academic officers must have a good read of their campus culture, understanding whether the entire institution is ready to make public engagement a campus-wide goal, or if it is to remain primarily the efforts of select faculty and administrators, in other words, to make it a “siloed” effort.

Chapter 3 focuses on the foundational elements of higher education institutions and the importance of having mission, vision, and values align with a supportive infrastructure for public engagement. But more than visionary statements, this chapter explores two central issues involved in making public engagement a recognized priority on campuses: funding and infrastructure. The authors go through the various options for thinking about funding—ranging from internal funding to the various external options that can help support specific projects rather than the general infrastructure for engagement. Demonstrating their commitment to physical

spaces for public engagement work, the authors stress that, “Although funding is most critical for public engagement, other resources are important to the success of the work. *Space must be allocated for offices directly related to public engagement*” (p. 65, emphasis added). They make the point that space is not only important, but that it must be prominently located on campus and not in an annex building removed from the central life of a campus. In addition to traditional office space, there should be “comfortable space” for those involved in public engagement to “interact and learn from each other” (p. 65; Walshok, 1999). Such investments require a commitment to making engagement more than a glossy photo in advertizing materials.

Chapters 4–12 continue the theme of alignment in areas such as leadership, organizational structure, faculty, tenure and promotion, student engagement, accountability, communication, and then, finally, with the broader community and through public policy. A comment from the chapter of aligning faculty and staff highlights some of the challenges administrators and directors face with respect to public engagement: “Some individuals and even some entire departments view public engagement negatively” (p. 99). The challenge, regardless of whether one is talking about tenured faculty or staff members who help communicate the work of the institution, is that people need to understand what public engagement is and how it can shape and impact their role within an engaged institution before they can see themselves as contributors to such efforts.

While higher education is known for its commitment to academic freedom, the authors argue that there are opportunities for chief academic officers and others to fill positions with individuals who are committed to public engagement, and that their responsibilities should reflect explicit commitments to public engagement. Specifically for faculty, institutions must make efforts to align public engagement with professional expectations. This includes expectations for how faculty teach, conduct research, and how their engaged scholarship is recognized through tenure and promotion (a helpful resource is Ellison & Eatman, 2008).

In the final chapter, the authors offer both helpful advice and words of caution for colleges and universities as they move forward with an alignment process that takes seriously the opportunities for public engagement to positively shape institutions during a time of

transformation in higher education. Rather than simply being reactionary or victims of change., public engagement is a proactive approach to defining what higher education means for both those on and off campus. However, with a “how-to” book there are limitations because of an oversimplification of complex issues for the sake of generalization. Administrators and scholars would do well to use this as a resource for thinking about public engagement at their institutions with the acknowledgement that it can help start campus conversations about creating and/or cultivating a more explicitly engaged institution.

References

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