

Promoting Civically Engaged Scholarship Through a Study/Action Group

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Abstract

This article describes how a study/action group of faculty explored civically engaged scholarship during the course of an academic year. Participants learned about various forms of civically engaged scholarship such as service-learning and community-based research. Discussions included dialogue on issues relevant to retention, promotion, and tenure. Based on this information, participants developed their own civically engaged scholarship projects. Outcomes and future directions for the group are presented.

Recently, there has been a call for colleges and universities to become more civically engaged with the community. Checkoway (2001) proposed that civic engagement is an integral part of research universities' mission. Schneider (2001) argued that a greater emphasis on democratic principles and responsibilities can and must take higher education toward civic engagement through a new type of civically engaged scholarship and teaching. The interest and momentum of this topic is further reflected by the fact that reports, journals, books, and entire conferences are devoted to the discussion. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities issued a report urging that the mission of land-grant institutions be expanded from traditional outreach to deeper involvement in addressing critical issues and needs (Kellogg Commission 1999). Civic engagement was the theme of one issue (July-August 2000) of *Academe*, the bulletin of the American Association of University Professors. Thomas Ehrlich (2000) edited a book titled *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*. The theme of the American Association of Higher Education's Tenth Annual Conference on Faculty Roles and Rewards was "Knowledge for What?—The Engaged Scholar."

Many scholars recognize that despite the increased interest, motivating faculty to explore and consider civically engaged scholarship—let alone practice it—remains a challenge. Checkoway (2001) enumerated several obstacles to involving faculty, including the fact that many faculty members are shaped by a culture that eschews civic responsibility. Because of such factors, it is necessary

to make institutional changes at broad macro-levels such as revisiting tenure and promotion policies and other types of reform at the micro-level. This latter approach can be accomplished through dialogue and networking between and among faculty. Fear, Rosaen, Adamek, and Imig (2002) have described a faculty group at Michigan State University that explored the meaning of engaged scholarship

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within an epistemological shift. This shift reflects what Schon (1995) characterized as “knowing in action,” with a new set of norms that may conflict with academia’s tradition of technical rationality and knowledge for the sake of knowledge. The new epistemology emphasizes a reflective and applied approach whereby new knowledge is beneficial to policymakers, organizations, and members of society (Gratz & Percy 2002).

The surge of interest in and dialogue about civically engaged scholarship briefly described above reflects a desire to understand its importance, meaning, and role. A concomitant need is support for faculty as they attempt to turn understanding into practice and action. The University of Utah developed and implemented a study/action group of faculty as a means of understanding, practicing, and promoting civically engaged scholarship one scholar at a time. This article describes the process of creating the study/action group as well as general process, outcomes, and future directions of the effort.

The Study/Action Group

Sixteen faculty members from an array of disciplines attended an introductory meeting co-sponsored by the Bennion Center and the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE) outlining the purpose of the group discussions early in the fall semester of the 2001–2002 academic year. At the gathering, the senior vice president for academic affairs made opening remarks and urged faculty members to participate in the study/action group. Attendees received blank index cards on which they wrote what the term “civically engaged scholarship” meant to them. Initial discussion was based on sharing of these interpretations. Following the discussion, thirteen faculty members filled out a form indicating willingness to attend the first meeting.

Participants

Participation was voluntary and no remuneration or release time was provided to those who attended the group. Of those who signed the interest form after the initial overview meeting, one never attended the study/action group and two dropped out (one due to illness and one due to a family crisis). One other person later joined the group. The group met every two weeks from noon to 1:30 or 2:00 p.m. for a total of six meetings during the fifteen-week fall semester in a conference room in the student union. The average attendance size for the meetings was 8, with a range from 11 to 5. The group consisted of 6 tenure-track faculty (2 assistant professors, 3 associate professors, 1 full professor) and 7 clinical or adjunct faculty members. Disciplines that were represented included education (2 special education, 1 general education), social work (2), law, communications, political science, sociology, undergraduate studies, and the university public relations office. Three participants had taught at least one service-learning course in the past.

Fall Semester

The original intent of the group was to meet every two weeks for a two-hour brown bag lunch discussion during the fall semester for a total of six sessions. Each session was devoted to a broad topical area including: an introduction and overview of civically engaged scholarship; service-learning; community-based research; study/travel/service programs; and retention, promotion, and tenure issues. During these meetings, the group discussed readings on various topics or approaches (e.g., service-learning, community-based research) associated with civically engaged scholarship. Guest speakers were often invited to address the topic for part of the discussion time. For example, the dean of one college in the health sciences came to explore issues related to retention, promotion, and tenure. Two faculty members who were engaged in innovative service-learning courses also came to share with the group. One of these instructors teaches an international study/service course in Latin America; the other instructor discussed how she had integrated her service-learning into her scholarly activities and utilized Web-based technology for threaded discussions in reflection activities.

Participants understood that they would select some type of civically engaged activity to develop over the course of the spring semester through individual consultation with the group facilitator and implement the activity the following academic year. An e-mail discussion list was created to facilitate communication between

participants. Reminders, information, announcements, and discussion guides for readings were posted on the list.

Readings and Discussion Guide: Approximately thirty readings from articles, chapters, and Web pages on various topics were compiled into a two-inch-thick, three-ring binder that was distributed to each participant at the first session. A complete bibliography is available upon request or can be accessed on the group's new Web site that was developed after the completion of the academic year (see discussion below). The group facilitator generated a list of pre-reading questions to be used for guided discussions during the meetings. The questions were e-mailed to the participants via the group discussion list.

Evaluation: At the end of the six fall semester discussions, participants were asked to rate the overall quality of the group using a five-point Likert-type response for seven dimensions of the group (readings, topics, speakers, discussions, guided reflection discussion questions, communication to participants, and overall organization and implementation) with 5 as excellent and 1 as poor. The mean responses ranged from a low of 4.5 (topics) to a high of 5.0 (overall organization/implementation) with an overall response rating average of 4.67. All participants responded "yes" when asked if they would participate in such a group again, if they would recommend such a group to a colleague, and if they felt they had learned new things. All participants except one indicated that they intended to apply at least one of the new skills they had learned. A final unexpected outcome was the suggestion that the group as a whole continue to meet. Group discussion led to the decision to meet every two weeks during the following (spring) semester.

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Spring Semester

Due to their impromptu nature, the spring semester meetings were less structured in terms of allocating specific topics and readings to sessions. The relationships that had been established the previous semester led to much more collaborative overall structure

and process. The group collectively determined the topical discussions. One significant outcome of these discussions was recognizing the importance of instilling an ethos of civically engaged scholarship in doctoral students—future academicians. Consequently, each member of the group agreed to invite a doctoral student to participate. Two doctoral students accepted the invitation and made a significant contribution to the discussions.

An important new component of the group during the spring semester was the development of individual projects. Each participant met with the group facilitator individually to explore project ideas. During the consultation, specific objectives and an action plan were developed for implementation in the summer or subsequent academic year. Part of each session was typically allocated for discussion of participants' projects. This allowed each individual an opportunity to share their project idea and tentative plan while receiving input and suggestions from colleagues. The sharing of projects was quite stimulating and synergetic, resulting in "cross-pollination" of ideas and the exploration of possible collaboration between members on their projects. The group collectively created an outline for a three-page abstract to describe each participant's project. The abstracts would be collected and compiled into a document.

The projects included a dissemination plan for reporting outcomes in refereed journals and refereed professional conferences. Projects that focused on service-learning courses included a community-based service-learning course using documentary arts and a short-term service-learning course involving a school for children with disabilities in Mexico. Another project was designed to conduct focus groups in the community to identify unmet legal needs to help create a community-based legal clinic. One participant created a proposal for establishing a graduate-level program of civically engaged scholarship in the school of social work. Two participants are working with a community agency to develop, implement, and field-test a leadership program/curriculum for Latino teens to promote self-esteem and anti-gang/violent behavior.

A community liaison serving as special assistant to the president of the university met with the group to discuss community issues and explore ways participants might respond to those issues through service-learning or community-based research. Two significant discussions ensued as a result of this dialogue.

First, the group explored the idea of inviting the president of the university to come and discuss issues related to civically engaged

scholarship. Specifically, the group wanted to share with the president their interest in and commitment to civically engaged scholarship. Likewise the group wanted to ask the president how he viewed its role in promoting this type of scholarship across the campus, and how this type of work met the institution's mission and the president's initiatives. In the course of this discussion, the group recognized the value and necessity of creating its own understanding of civically engaged scholarship.

The second significant outcome, then, was the collective articulation of a definition of civically engaged scholarship that could be presented to the president and serve the group as guiding principles for their own scholarly endeavors. The group debated inviting community partners to join them for the discussion, weighing the pros and cons of such an approach. After much discussion, participants determined it was first necessary to come to a consensus about a definition within the context of higher education; they agreed that at a later time they would seek input from community representatives that might result in a revised definition. Based on the readings and discussions, each participant wrote down a personal working definition of civically engaged scholarship and basic tenets that would serve as guiding principles. Each definition was presented and discussed. Consistent and overarching themes were identified and listed on a whiteboard. The group facilitator compiled the definitions and themes to create a tentative draft that was distributed to each participant via the e-mail discussion list for review prior to the next meeting. At the subsequent meeting, the group reached a consensus on the following definition:

Civically engaged scholarship is a dynamic and collaborative participatory process in which the rich resources of the university and community are combined to integrate research, learning, and service in identifying and addressing community-based issues and needs while promoting socially responsible knowledge. Faculty, staff, students, and members of the community forge relationships as meaningful partners in exploring those practices that produce tangible outcomes to benefit the partners and their communities and that disseminate new knowledge in a variety of ways.

The university president did, in fact, meet with the group and encouraged the participants to take their definition and conceptualization of civically engaged scholarship back to their respective

departments for dialogue. Specifically, the president suggested that the discussion include examination of retention, promotion, and tenure criteria at the departmental level. Similarly, the president acknowledged the difficulty of obtaining funding for this type of research and entertained the idea of allocating resources for mini-grants. Finally, the president entertained the idea of sponsoring campus-wide dialogue and keynote presentations by nationally recognized experts.

The overall cost of the year-long study/action group was approximately \$450. This covered printing, three-ring binders, copies of one book, and drinks. Our experience suggests that such a forum can be sponsored at a relatively low cost.

Outcomes and Future Directions

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the study/action group's efforts is the fact that a small grassroots group of faculty voluntarily took the time to engage in this important dialogue with colleagues from a variety of disciplines. This commitment did not require large amounts of money nor release time for faculty. One participant articulated his feelings about the group by saying, "I didn't view this as just another meeting I had to attend. I chose to look at this as an opportunity to share and engage in a dialogue with my colleagues. It was stimulating and I looked forward to our time together."

Another important outcome is the translation of this dialogue into the practice of civically engaged scholarship by developing various projects. Of course, how successfully the projects will be implemented remains to be seen. However, the dialogue and development of these activities are an important first step and catalyst for engaging in this type of scholarly activity. A brief description of participants' projects can be found at the group's Web site. Validation of the inherent value of their efforts is the fact that the

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study/action group intends to continue its discussions into the next year. The participants recognized the need for beginning the dialogue internally and within the culture of academia. However, the group agrees with the strategy Edward Zlotkowski (2002) made in his opening keynote presentation at the AAHE conference: it is also necessary to make room for the community itself in the discussion. Consequently, the group plans on identifying appropriate representatives from the community and inviting them to join the dialogue next year.

As a result of the discussions with the president, the group facilitator is currently in dialogue with associate vice president for research in the social sciences to allocate small amounts of seed money to sponsor mini-grants for community-based research. Consequently, the group intends to begin their dialogue in the coming year by creating guiding principles, tenets, and guidelines for what constitutes both civically engaged scholarship and community-based research to be used as criteria for awarding the mini-grants.

Similarly, the study/action group hopes to expand by inviting both colleagues and doctoral students to participate in continued dialogue next year. As a result, the group facilitator met with the dean of the Graduate School to explore ways of promoting civically engaged scholarship with doctoral students. They agreed to add a new strand focusing on civically engaged scholarship, and service-learning in particular, to an existing program that mentors teaching assistants.

In addition to the continued study/action meetings, the group also plans on taking its grassroots synergy into an active role by sponsoring and promoting a campus-wide dialogue through keynote presentations by nationally recognized experts, followed by smaller, action-oriented breakout workshop sessions. The discussions and workshops will include exploration of issues surrounding retention, promotion, and tenure review and broadening traditional definitions of scholarship to include the scholarship of engagement (Gratz and Percy 2002).

Over the summer, a Web site for the group was created so current and new participants can readily access readings and other information. Colleagues who would like to learn more about or replicate the study/action group are invited to visit the site at <http://www.sa.utah.edu/bennion>.

Surprisingly, there were very few challenges or difficulties encountered during the year. As would be expected, finding time to meet as a group was an ongoing battle. Similarly, individuals

grappled with internal and external conflicts of cultural norms and expectations of what scholarly productivity is. While philosophically embracing the concept of civically engaged scholarship, many participants (especially non-tenured faculty) struggled to balance doing this type of work with efforts to attain promotion and tenure. Many discussions included ways to integrate teaching, research, and service as ways to attain tenure. Because funding this kind of research was also viewed as a challenge, the group exchanged ideas, strategies, and resources that could be considered for seeking funds. One existing resource was the University Research Committee, a means of obtaining modest seed grants of up to \$5,000. Finally, actual implementation of the participants' projects remains to be seen. The realization of this is dependent upon a host of factors such as time, other teaching and research responsibilities, and co-operation from community agencies.

Summary

Promoting civically engaged scholarship requires a major epistemological shift and change in academia's culture. While administrative top-down support is paramount, it is equally important to have a bottom-up grassroots context to allow faculty an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue. This is an arduous yet critical process. Providing psychological and technical support through a study/action group appears to be a viable approach for promoting civically engaged scholarship.

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