



Does Community Engagement Matter?

by

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Over the past years, movement towards promoting community engagement in higher education has gained much traction. Many networks and institutions have made civic engagement as a core focus of their strategy. Several new publications have also emerged on this theme. In light of this trend, it is perhaps timely to ask the question “Does Community Engagement of Higher Education Matter”?

In order to address this question, it may be worthwhile to ask what is the current status of evaluation of impacts of community engagements? In order to assess the impacts of community engagement, a prior issue is what impact is being targeted through such engagement? It is this clarity that should drive evaluation of engagement. From the current discourse of evaluation of community engagement, it is clear that service-learning is the prime purpose of engagement; hence, most evaluation assesses impacts on students, their world-views and their civic-mindedness? A related part of the assessment focuses on any positive impacts on the local communities where students engaged. Much of the impact so assessed is in the realm of communities learning some new skills or practices from the students. What is rarely assessed is the impact on the higher education institution (HEI) as a whole. How does the engagement affect the teachers, the curriculum and the pedagogy of teaching in those HEIs? Does engagement affect research agenda, research methodology and accountability of its findings? Does engagement bring any new insights into the ways HEIs are structured, departments and disciplines created, research and teaching compartmentalized?

HEIs rarely evaluate themselves in the framework of social relevance; peer reviews are the norm in HEIs. Hence, the key audiences for reviewing HEIs are other HEIs and their leaders. Can community be empowered to assess HEIs? Should the HEIs be subjected to social audits? The current discourse on corporate governance is already promoting ‘triple bottom-line’—financial, social and ecological. Can a similar framework be evolved for assessing the performance of HEIs?

It appears to me that current evaluation of community engagement by HEIs is narrowly structured, and mostly internally driven. It does not ask the question about systemic changes, institution-wide impacts or re-tooling of core processes in HEIs as a result of community engagement. It does not look at issues of integration across the three missions of a university—teaching, research & service. It also does not examine how internal structures, including those of teacher assessments and incentives, enhance or obstruct institution-wide transformation of HEIs as a part of the process of community engagement.

Therefore, the simple answer to the question posed at the beginning of this note is—yes, community engagement matters. But, a more complex exploration of this question requires greater clarity about the larger, long-term and durable purposes of community engagement itself. If such clarity is not debated and sought, community engagement by HEIs will also fade away as another fad.

25.02.2013