



HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



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FORGING TIES THAT BIND: The Engagement Challenge in Higher Education

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What would it take to achieve Dr. Mathews' vision? Despite the existence of a national movement designed to transform the way higher education approaches its public mission, there are lingering questions and unmet aspirations—a gap between rhetoric and reality. Closing the gap requires something more and different from outcomes associated with change routines used frequently in higher education. With *reformative change*, the goal is to address issues and problems, to fix what is perceived to be broken. With *innovative change*, the intent is to introduce new ideas to the system, ideas that often come in the form of fresh approaches, practices, and programs.

While each change form is useful and often necessary, neither form is capable of addressing Dr. Mathews' elevated image of change—a game-changing image of higher education. Game changes in fields and institutions take place when *new* rules are put in place, rules that replace prevailing understandings and practices. When these new rules hold persistently and pervasively over time, changes occur in two rule-sets. The first set of rules pertains to *what* work is to be done. The second rule set addresses *how* the work is to be done. When rule changes are sustained over time, *transformative change* results, changing the essence of how individuals (and institutions) think about, and then go about, their work.

As measured in academic time, a generation has passed since the national conversation began about transforming the way higher education interprets and undertakes its public mission. Back then, bold ideas were expressed provocatively about what needed to happen and how. The calls for change continue to this day; Dr. Mathews' paper is a good example. That tells us that transformative change is difficult to achieve, elusive in outcome.

It was twenty years ago, in 1992 to be specific, when I became actively involved in this work. I believed the engagement movement would be game changing in nature—changing the way we teach,

the way we research, and the way we view “public” and interact with the public. I imagined that higher education would change organizationally, too; we would engage on campus similarly to the way we engage with the public—collaboratively, and with less emphasis on status and the exercise of authority.

It was exciting to be in the vanguard of change—to be part of a new and different way of engaging with students, academic colleagues, and community partners. I participated institutionally, chairing a university-wide task force at Michigan State that reconceived the way that we think about and approach “outreach,” the university’s public mission as it was commonly referenced in those days. Rather than viewing outreach as a tertiary activity, the third (and independent) leg of the academic mission, we envisioned outreach as a form of scholarship that cross cut the academic mission; there were outreach forms of teaching and outreach forms of research, we declared.

I also reconfigured my own program of scholarship, which led to a completely different way of approaching all aspects of my academic work. With colleagues, we coined the term “engaged learning” to signal a fresh way of working with students, academic, and community colleagues on joint efforts designed to cogenerate knowledge and improve organizational and community conditions. We created a new program on campus with that in mind, enabling undergraduate students to be exposed to this kind of thinking and, through fieldwork, helping them apply campus learning in community settings. My academic colleagues and I (including students in many cases) made presentations about our work at conferences. We also published academic papers and wrote a book together. The work was transformative for my colleagues and me.

It was clear that colleagues around the country were having similar experiences; they shared with us stories about how they had reconfigured their public work. They talked about new programs, centers, and institutes, all grounded in new ways of thinking—including a new vocabulary—and an associated way of doing work, which was in every way “engaged.” Most importantly, we discovered a common way of thinking and practicing:

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- learning with community partners *in situ* was a valid, important, and necessary means of understanding and knowing
- collaboration and partnership (with joint decision making) was the primary means of working together, and
- the norms of engagement with community partners included openness, respectfulness, sharing of power, and the resolution of difficulties through dialogue and joint deliberation.



These were profoundly new ways for us, ways that ran counter to previously held beliefs and habits. This new way of thinking “took us to a new place,” a new way of *being* as much as a new way of *doing*. I became an “engaged scholar,” an identity that superseded my disciplinary identity (sociology).

We learned quickly that our new orientation and practices were far ahead of institutional change, which we generally found to be slow and episodic, and less than transformative in nature. Change, when it did occur, was often framed in reformatory and innovative terms. For sure, there was targeted funding for engagement, change in selected institutional policies and protocols, and there were new engagement programs and initiatives. However, we found that higher education was not always changing in fundamental ways. Furthermore, many of us discovered that transformative change was neither the intent nor the outcome. We were living an old adage: the more things change, the more they stay the same.

As an organizational sociologist I should have known better. Transformative change means changing the heart of an enterprise, and that type of change happens neither frequently nor easily. For one thing, it requires large-scale acceptance of change in traditionally accepted, often historic, routines—changes that are as much political as they are substantive. Take, for example, the concept that the

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public is knowledgeable—that academics should acknowledge and respect that knowledge, working actively to help the public take greater control of its own affairs. Acting on that belief cuts against the grain of the superiority of expert knowledge—capacity that comes from years of education, training, and the exercise of professional roles. Likewise, institutions will protect domains they believe are rightfully theirs. A strong case can be made—the “what if” as Dr. Mathews describes in his article—of rethinking the entire university as “the college of education,” including viewing the community as a locus of educative activity. However, the conventional view is to lodge responsibility *in the field* of education: “education” is the province of certain professionals—those who work in colleges or departments of education—who have achieved the credentials to do this work, credentials that higher education provides.

There is a symbiotic relationship between higher education (as credentialing institutions) and the professions (as fields of practice), whether it be in education, law, medicine, urban planning, or any field or discipline. Higher education and professions work together to preserve and protect the power, control, and benefits that accrue from a joint relationship. Fierce resistance should be expected from attempts designed to render fundamental changes to that relationship. Doing so can redefine higher education’s function and reconfigure the norms that guide professional practice.

So, many of us experienced a gap between what it meant to be “engaged scholars” and what it meant to experience academic life in our institutions. It meant finding ways to fit our beliefs and approach *into* historically prevailing and sanctioned ways of functioning. I was reminded of all of this, again, on the very day I was finishing the edits of this manuscript. At a public meeting a colleague reminded me (and those assembled) that this sort of work (if done by faculty at all) needs to be done “after tenure, not before.” “Engagement after 40” was the answer.

There is really nothing new in this genre of thinking. We know from the literature on paradigmatic shifts that fields and institutions often borrow selected ideas in the name of change; but it is change that comes at the fringe—not in the core. It is the “both-and” of change as it often unfolds—things changing and also fundamentally staying the same, simultaneously. It is a way

for fields and institutions to adapt to pressures to change, but in ways that preserve the essential character of the system.

When faced with this reality, at issue for me was what to do about it. It led me to the conclusion that there is a difference between the work that faculty members do and how that work is viewed institutionally. With that understanding, I am now less inclined to pursue institutional-level structural and systems change and more inclined to simply work with colleagues—on-campus and off- —on public engagement. I have found there to be an endless array of like-minded colleagues who are inclined to work on joint projects. We just do it.

The most advantaged circumstance is when the work proceeds without the burden of institutional constraints, the product of pure imagination. In fact, the inspiration for this approach came one day from listening to lyrics that I had heard many times before without effect: the lyrics that Anthony Newley wrote for the acclaimed film, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. In the song *Pure Imagination*, Willy Wonka implores us to recognize that

*If you want to view paradise,
simply look around and view it
Anything you want to, do it.*

*Wanta change the world?
There's nothing to it.*

*There is no life I know to compare with pure imagination
Living there you'll be free,
If you truly wish to be.*

People coming together and just doing it: I have found this to be a useful way to put into practice ideas that would otherwise threaten people and systems. It is a soft-systems approach, lessening the prospect of resistance and expression of concern. The power of approaching change this way is magnified when multiple and compatible efforts are underway simultaneously, representing an opportunity to seed the system for change, akin to sowing a fertile field with



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seeds in the spring. However, diverse efforts do not always happen intentionally or even take place through concerted, collective efforts. Quite the contrary, this type of change takes place here, then there, often recognized only later as compatible changes taking place in multiple locations.

This happened recently at my institution. The executive director of the university's study abroad program recognized that over thirty study abroad programs included a civic engagement component. These programs were envisioned and organized independently, by faculty across the university working with community partners around the world. With the recognition that "something important," albeit unplanned, was happening at Michigan State—and with the intent to build on this work—the study abroad director invited those involved to come together and share what they were doing and learning. After a few sessions together, the group decided to organize in a book-writing project to document what they are doing, and to describe various approaches taken and lessons learned.

With this example in mind, I have learned just how powerful it is to adapt for use in higher education practices that community organizers use in community settings. Community organizers bring together people to work on projects of common interest. They do this because they understand the power of networks and networking. This work, at its best, strengthens the ties that bind people and sustains common efforts over time. Leadership, then, is not something that is exercised only by administrators who (with "bold ideas") organize change programs with goals, outcomes, structural protocols, and strategic plans. In network-based forms of change, leadership comes as a shared expression as together colleagues decide what they want to do, and then do it.

At my institution I have found endless possibilities to put into play new, often radical, ideas. Rarely, though, is success achieved when change is introduced as hard-systems change—through the administrative structure, up and down the system, in a way that I call "vertical change." To the contrary, by using a community organizing approach it is possible to move nimbly across conventional boundaries—to bring together like-minded colleagues to work on projects. It is "horizontal change," as I see

it—spanning the university and beyond. Intrinsic motivation means that people come to the table because they are interested; the work is something they *want* to do.

The assumption I bring to this work is that hard-systems change often represents a frontal assault to the system, likely to take hold only in times of crisis. By the same token, doing the same work in a soft-systems fashion is less threatening, a potentially more viable way to put things in motion and keep them moving. A tipping point of change may result if, over time, multiple experiments are undertaken successfully.

The important thing is to keep transformative ideas at stage center: focus on ideas—not on systems or institutions—as the primary unit of analysis. Imagine how to put ideas into practice. Then, do it.

Anthony Newley had it right.