

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2011

ENGAGED FACULTY

An Interview with KerryAnn O'Meara

David Brown, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, spoke with KerryAnn O'Meara, Associate Professor of Higher Education at the University of Maryland, who has done extensive research exploring faculty civic agency. Brown wanted to learn more about the implications of her research for both faculty and their institutions.

Brown: Sometimes we take for granted that those reading us understand the terms we use. “Engaged faculty” might be one such term. What faculty work is included when speaking of “engaged faculty”?

O'Meara: Yes, good point. Within the community engagement movement, scholars and leaders often use the term “engaged faculty” to mean “community-engaged faculty,” however it is important to clarify. This is important because not only is “community engagement” a big tent that includes service-learning, civic engagement, community-based research, extension, and many other forms of public service, but also because those involved in trying to transform teaching and learning to improve “student engagement” (meaning the involvement of students in learning) likewise use this term in national student and faculty surveys.

Brown: When you say faculty are trying to transform “teaching and learning to improve ‘student engagement,’” what specific things are they doing that have the potential of being transformative?

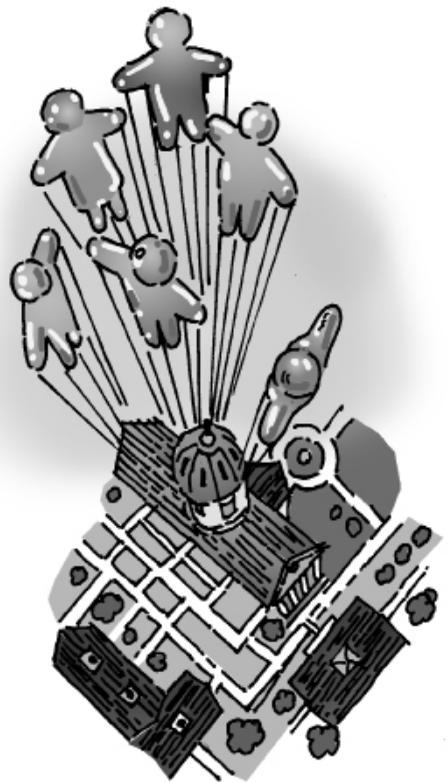
O'Meara: There are many ways in which faculty are integrating community engagement and teaching that are transformative to pedagogy. For example, many faculty are involving students in community-based research projects wherein they act as coproducers of knowledge with community partners and faculty. So, rather than being the passive recipient of knowledge from a book or lecture, these students help define research problems and participatory research methods, and consider potential dissemination and impacts. In this way they are seen as partners with faculty and community partners, with their own assets brought into the learning situation.

Brown: You have found, however, a number of existing “disabling conditions” that discourage “engagement.” If you were

to single out the most disabling condition, what would it be and why? And what is being done, or can be done, to overcome it?

O'Meara: In my research to date, I have found many very complex and layered barriers to faculty community engagement in higher education, even for the most committed. The one I have been thinking about the most lately relates to the ways in which the higher education market encourages faculty to withdraw from institutional life and from the life of a community around an institution. This kind of distancing of oneself from the priorities of the institution or community—from having local colleagues and commitments, and common deeply held goals and work—is really deleterious to all higher education missions, not just those related to community and civic engagement. The narrative is one in which faculty are encouraged to, and actively choose to spend more time researching and writing for their disciplines. Faculty are routinely told not to fall into the trap of entanglements that tie an individual to their institution or local concerns, such as committee service, sitting on boards, and so forth, because these will not further one's career or the institution's ratings in *US News & World Report*.

There is (ironically) research that shows that scholarship done in isolation from interdisciplinary colleagues and collaboration with peers suffers, so there is very little win-win in this trend toward isolation. I really believe that scholars should be touched by the institutions where they work, and institutions should be places that feed creativity and professional growth, not places to circumvent experiencing these things. Likewise, citizens of a community want to work with faculty in a particular place and space, and it matters that they know that the faculty member is at least somewhat "grounded" there as well. Rather than faculty operating like balloons placed 500 feet above an institution, who drop down every now and then to pick up books and messages, it is



important that more higher education institutions think more deeply about how to connect faculty to their places and not encourage them to act as if it doesn't matter what institution they work at or where it is located.

Brown: Are institutions running so scared or so eager to improve their rankings that faculty are actively discouraged from being “engaged”?

O'Meara: Certainly institutional type plays a key role so I'm not talking here about community colleges and less selective four-year colleges and universities. More of my interviews have been with faculty in research and doctoral universities—selective, comprehensive and liberal arts colleges—where I did talk to many engaged faculty who are concerned about the role of ranking systems on institutional priorities and reward systems. I actually teach a course on ranking systems and what we see is that this is also a global phenomenon. In one university for example, the president was so intent on improving in the Academic Ranking of World Universities conducted by Shanghai Jiao Tong University that he placed a large hot air balloon over the entrance to the campus noting their placement and changing the number each year to note their rise in the rankings. While a hot air balloon with *US News & World Report* rankings is not hanging over the entrance to most US colleges and universities, it is an interesting visual for the general sense that many faculty have that rankings are a central and important influence on decision-making—whether financial or for promotion, tenure, or admissions criteria. The criteria for some of the most popular rankings favor the counting of citations in traditional research outlets—not social relevance of work or local impact. While this may not cause faculty to run scared, it certainly creates a sense that faculty work that does not advance strategic objectives to improve in rankings will either be less valued, or must produce some other kind of currency to be deemed as worthy.

Brown: What kind of currency would that be?

O'Meara: Such currency might come from the strategic importance of local university partnerships, outstanding teaching evaluations, or external funding.

Brown: You have given considerable attention to exploring “faculty civic agency”—the feeling that faculty members can

accomplish their engagement goals—and what supports it. Does such “agency” depend on being part of a collective, institutional effort, or can it be realized by an individual alone?

O’Meara: It can be realized alone. That is, each individual can assume agency for an interest or set of goals that are specific to them, as well as being part of a collective in achieving a set of goals. Faculty who felt that they were part of a national or international network of engaged faculty members clearly took sustenance and even gained a sense of agency from that knowledge. However, being part of a national network did not help them very much at their own institution. In navigating institutional reward systems or obtaining resources, these collectives do not have as much voice in institutional decision-making. In these cases faculty had to find ways to assume agency in the absence of a collective of individuals wanting similar goals at their institution.

Brown: Does that reflect a current failure of institutions to “set the table,” as you put it, in helping their respective faculties realize a sense of “agency”?

O’Meara: In part, this may reflect my sample and in part, it is a failure on the part of many institutions to set the table. Most of my research has been done with individuals who are the most involved in community engagement of all faculty at their institution. Not unlike being the best teacher, or the Nobel Prize-winning scientist, being the most engaged can put them in a lonely place. They often did not have other colleagues around who understood their work. Faculty in my study noted a desire for more intellectual community at their institution in general and in particular with those involved in community engagement at a deeper level. I think these faculty were very good mentors, and very good at connecting to other engaged faculty on their campus who were working with the same community partners on other projects. They noted, however, that they wished there were more such faculty and that there were more spaces and time on their campus to create those dialogues and community.

There is a rich tradition, of course, in feminism, African American studies, labor unions, and many other civil rights traditions of collective effort to enhance a group’s sense of agency and to achieve group goals. What strikes me as different among many of the faculty

I interviewed is that they are often part of multiple collectives working on different issues, which is rich for their life and goals but can mean it is harder to gain that kind of collective support for specific initiatives in their respective universities.

This is where institutions could really set the table better. They could facilitate connections on campus and support linkages with engaged faculty at other institutions via learning-community types of programs, bring other engaged faculty to campus to give talks and do some time in residence, and create some connections using technology. These kinds of intentional efforts would go a long way toward signaling that the institution values community engagement and engaged scholars and wants to invest in their professional growth.

Brown: You have found that “intellectual community” is important but often lacking on a campus. Could you say more about how such “community” relates to a “culture of engagement,” and the importance you have found of “micro experiences,” as opposed to an institutional systems approach.

O’Meara: I think an important future area for research and practice is to consider the kinds of ingredients that go into a work environment that grows civic and community engagement in a faculty member’s life. There is one example from an interview I did where the junior faculty member’s department gets together for a sort of mini-retreat at the beginning of each school year. Faculty then lay out some of their chief community engagement, teaching, and research goals for each other and receive feedback. This environment creates a constructive form of feedback in a nurturing environment where there is also accountability to an intellectual community for achieving those goals. Campus Compact has long supported engaged departments, where entire departments participate in curricular reform and take on partners collectively. These are the kinds of rich cases we want to study, because it is likely that community engagement grows more quickly and deeply in such places, attracts more external funding, and in general has higher impact.

Brown: The mini-retreat and an entire department engaged in curricular reform are interesting examples of a “micro experience.” Are there others?

O’Meara: I think interdisciplinary applied centers can accomplish similar ends. Cathy Burack and colleagues wrote some time

ago about the power of enclaves in universities to accomplish significant projects together. By enclaves, they meant centers, institutes, and small departments wherein a group of like-minded faculty can sponsor common courses, research projects, and outreach projects that meet community needs.

The mutual support and learning available to faculty within such groups can be extensive and valuable.

Brown: How does the faculty work of engaged faculty differ depending on an academic's discipline or institutional affiliation?

O'Meara: What we know so far from national surveys of higher education faculty, as well as from hundreds of interviews and case studies, is that community engagement exists in every possible discipline and institutional type. At the same time, it is more prevalent in some disciplines (such as the social sciences and professional schools) than others (such as the natural sciences). Likewise, it is more common in some institutional types than others and in certain forms in those places. For example, service-learning, as a form of community engagement, is more common in liberal arts colleges and community colleges than community-based research, and participatory action research is more common in graduate programs in doctoral comprehensives.

Two of the major reasons faculty give for the "why" of their motivation for community engagement are teaching goals and their identity as members of a discipline with a public purpose. For example, many faculty whose teaching uses thicker forms of service-learning do so because they want their students to develop a greater appreciation for diversity, or develop specific professional skills employed in diverse community settings. Likewise, I have often heard faculty explain their community engagement work by prefacing it with, "as a biologist" or "as an engineer" or "as an urban planner." The faculty member then goes on to explain that their academic identity is part of their role to engage with the public—whether through teaching, research, or outreach.

Brown: Would you say from your research that the disciplinary centeredness of faculty members' community engagement is more common than any other grounds for their engagement?

O'Meara: You know, that is actually a complicated question. I have had the privilege in much of my work to interview faculty

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exemplars in this work, who received, or were the one person from their institution nominated for, a national community engagement award. One of the things that has struck me about these faculty exemplars is their thick use of theory and/or thick use of research methods alongside community partners and students to accomplish goals. Professionally, I worked as a director of service-learning and community engagement for some time, helping individual faculty create projects. In many of these cases, where faculty were just getting started or getting involved in service-learning projects as an “add-on,” the projects were not designed with great forethought about what the tradition of a discipline or field like sociology, public health, human development, engineering, or education had to offer a particular social problem. In my research here I found exemplary faculty who were very much employing the tools of their disciplines in their public and engaged work. For example, a faculty member who studied urban planning and community development was clearly using this socialization and training to inform her part of a joint project. Also, she had been attracted to urban planning and community development as a field because of the potential it offered to help solve public problems. Therefore, she graduated from her doctoral program with a sense that to be an urban planner or a scholar in this field meant to be involved in community work, not separated from it.

The projects of these faculty exemplars seemed so much richer when informed by their disciplines and fields. By richer I mean they were extremely intentional about what short term and long term outcomes they were seeking, and the plan to get there. They had working theories about process and product from the beginning to the end that were in play, and consequently the results had high impact.

Brown: Please go on.

O’Meara: I do want to clarify that I don’t think these faculty exemplar were involved in their community engagement primarily because of their discipline. They were each highly agentic people who, I believe, would have found other ways to become engaged, using other tools and methods, if they had not become scholars in universities. Also, they were not engaging in what Harry Boyte and others have referred to as a technocracy wherein they marched into

communities and suggested they had expertise in engineering or education and thus should lead all public projects. Rather, they considered their expertise, as Boyte has noted, as more of an ingredient in a collective effort. So in the mix might be a citizen with local knowledge of city council and political savvy. That would be one key ingredient. There might be great passion about a river clean-up among children who play near a stream—that passion becomes another ingredient. And there might be knowledge of the kinds of materials needed for a proper clean-up by the environmental sciences professor as yet another ingredient.

In this way, discipline and field are tools that exemplary engaged faculty are using in the service of a problem, much like a doctor might use her training to diagnose, but which might be only one piece of how the patient gets better.

Brown: One of your findings has been the importance of “autonomy” to faculty members. Of course, this can be important whether or not a faculty member is also “engaged.” How does the importance of autonomy relate specifically to an academic seeking to be engaged?

O’Meara: I think the best way to think of autonomy is as fertilizer, or one of the conditions of a good incubator. There are many aspects of what has traditionally been the tenure track faculty career that do not fuel or generate a good work environment for creative engagement. However, in my interviews, community-engaged faculty found that the autonomy, which they had in deciding how to design their classes, research agenda, and general sense of commitments at the institution, really fueled their community engagement. Autonomy is one of the key aspects of the job that most faculty report satisfaction with. It is also perhaps a general job characteristic that creates a foundation from which to then be creative.

Brown: Can the sense of autonomy be nourished as much by the indifference of administrators as by their active support of engaged faculty?

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O'Meara: I think there is a career stage element to it. I heard mostly from younger scholars about a generative kind of freedom given to them in early career to design teaching and research agendas toward community engagement. So individuals they respected and who held some power over their careers intentionally mentored them and gave them this autonomy, which they needed and wanted and were grateful for. Whereas the full professors, who did not really need the administrators or colleagues as much for career confirmation, often said things like “they leave us alone, and that is fine.” So, here there was indifference with which they were satisfied. While indifference is not the same as support, I am also not sure they needed or desired the same kind of affirmation the younger scholars looked for.

Brown: In your work you have noted that doctoral training still emphasizes “traditional disciplinary scholarship.” Does that have to change, and in what ways, if we expect more young scholars to become “engaged”?

O'Meara: I would love to see reform of graduate education that places engaged scholarship at the center of how scholars are shaped and formed. This seems the most systemic way to increase faculty capacity and interest in this work. Scholars and policymakers who study graduate education have observed that the American system in particular faces a crisis of sorts in terms of recruitment of women and minorities in many fields. Retention, time to degree, satisfaction, and job placement remain problematic. Integrating community engagement into doctoral programs could simultaneously prepare future faculty to make concrete linkages between their teaching, research, and public work, and improve the American graduate system. For example, women and minorities self-report on surveys being disproportionately interested in areas of study with direct social relevance, which is why NSF has encouraged the disciplines in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics to integrate community engagement into their undergraduate and graduate programs to attract these groups.

On the other end of the doctoral career, there are many more Ph.Ds graduating than there are academic jobs. Yet, it could be argued that we have even greater need for scholars trained to be innovative in “social and human relations” and in the design of

solutions to complex problems than we did when the Truman Commission called for such graduates over a half century ago. Graduates who left doctoral programs dually trained in traditional and applied and engaged research methods could become social entrepreneurs.

They could become a part of or create organizations that serve environmental, educational, and democratic purposes. While this may sound idealistic, I think graduate education will need to be reformed significantly in the next 10-15 years anyway. Decreasing public support for higher education and time-to-degrees of 8-12 years are not sustainable, especially given the job market at the other end.

Community engagement could become a key ingredient in the re-envisioning of the purposes and processes of doctoral education.

Brown: Thank you, KerryAnn. We look forward to learning more as you continue your ambitious and important research.

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