

This article will appear as a case study in:

Williams, J.E. Abrams, E. & Shea, C. Building a Sustainable Community of Engaged Scholars: The University of New Hampshire's Outreach Scholars Academy. J. Aber, T. Kelly & B. Mallory (Eds.) *Building a Sustainable Learning Community: One University's Journey to the Future*, University Press of New England. (Forthcoming Summer 2009) **Do not reprint without permission.**

The University of New Hampshire's Outreach Scholars Academy: Faculty Development to Enhance Community Engagement. Presented at the 18<sup>th</sup> annual CCNCCE national conference, Thursday, May 21, 2009

Building a Sustainable Community of Engaged Scholars: The University of New Hampshire's Outreach Scholars Academy

In 2001, the University of New Hampshire (UNH) began a series of university-wide conversations about the institution's engagement mission. National reports from the Kellogg Commission and others had exposed a critical national need for higher education to renew its commitment to its public purposes. Cohen and Eberly, writing in 2006, captured this need in an essay entitled *Higher Education, Democratic Capacity and Public Scholarship* that described the centrality of public scholarship and engagement to the nation's democratic values. They stressed that public scholarship must be centrally connected to, not set aside from, teaching and learning – describing what they termed a “curriculum of consequence.” As new or redefined terms, both engagement (or engaged scholarship) and public scholarship were not clearly defined for most academics.

Led by the first author and a team of faculty and staff, the discussions that began in 2001 were designed to provide clear definitions of this new form of scholarly work, and to connect this endeavor with two critically important institutional priorities – developing the university's first Academic Strategic Plan (2002) and providing leadership for engagement in the 10-year accreditation review.

This effort built on earlier work by smaller groups of UNH faculty and staff, and, in particular, a process undertaken in 2000 by UNH Cooperative Extension (UNHCE). The

Strategic Plan that emerged became a model for others at the University. However, the 2001 conversation about engagement was the first systematic, university-wide endeavor undertaken with a range of faculty, extension educators, staff and administrators to strategically link engagement to the institution's overall mission, goals and future priorities. This significantly elevated engagement, and the scholarship of engagement, and for the first time explicitly articulated the critical role of the UNH faculty.

As a consequence of these university-wide dialogues, engagement and outreach became one of five goals in the University's academic strategic plan, and "engagement through research and scholarship" became one of only three priorities highlighted for advancement in the accreditation review. The hope was to further link engagement to the work of the faculty and to the core institutional missions – research and scholarship.

Perhaps most importantly, the term engagement, which had held varied meaning for different people and in different settings across UNH, was for the first time defined institution-wide. In the 2003 NEASC report, engagement was defined as:

*"a mutually beneficial collaboration between the University of New Hampshire and external partners for the purpose of generating and applying relevant knowledge to directly benefit the public"*

With the plans written, engagement defined, and broader goals and strategic priorities articulated, the leadership team began to ask several critical questions, including:

- How do we move from rhetoric and lofty goals to practical reality and specific actions?
- What specific actions and strategies might be best utilized to help advance the engagement mission within the University of New Hampshire culture?
- How do we attract greater numbers of faculty and develop their capacity to lead the engagement mission?
- What enabling mechanism might begin to demonstrate to faculty the critical link between engaged scholarship, research and teaching to build a sustainable community of engaged scholars?

## **The Outreach Scholars Academy**

The UNH Outreach Scholars Academy was developed in response to these critical questions. The initial purpose was for the Academy, initiated in 2003, was to serve as both an enabling and recruiting mechanism to help faculty learn about engaged scholarship and a structure to lead a range of engagement efforts. More specifically, the Academy is a faculty professional development program designed to enhance, support and advance the work of tenure-track, research, extension and clinical faculty. Faculty members participate in a semester-long series of workshops based on a curriculum led by external and internal experts. They participate in interdisciplinary discourse, interact with peers, receive feedback from coaches, meet with federal agency program officers and develop a collaborative project. Although the specific curriculum and time commitment have been modified over time, face-to-face workshops typically occur once or twice a month for four to six hours and there are typically team and individual assignments.

Participation in the Academy is an honor and faculty must be nominated by their dean, department chair or an academy alumni. Nominations are followed by a formal application process, letters of support and a review process to determine the appropriate class composition. To date, more than 70 UNH faculty members from a range of academic disciplines have participated in the Academy and participants hold varied academic ranks.

Over the last four years the specific goals of the Academy have been modified based on evaluation data and the inclusion of new curriculum areas. The goals are to:

- Enhance individual faculty members' ability to move from a focus primarily on outreach and service to peer-reviewed engaged scholarship;
- Enhance knowledge about how to effectively engage with external partners in mutually beneficial partnerships;
- Contextualize the national conversations about engagement and outreach scholarship to the UNH context and develop a common understanding of engagement as a form of scholarship;

- Implement the engagement and outreach goal in the UNH academic strategic plan;
- Build a sustainability community of scholars that possess the knowledge and commitment to advance engagement as a form of scholarship.

### **Building a Sustainable Community of Scholars**

The Outreach Scholars Academy has resulted in the development of a community of engaged scholars – about 70 UNH faculty members – that have a renewed understanding of engagement, support and assist colleagues, advance institutional engagement goals, and help support broader goals of the administration. Success has resulted from the work of a few dedicated faculty members and administrative leaders who were committed to engagement, and understood the necessity of building a sustainability community of scholars.

The Academy has been an interesting challenge and a balancing act. At times, its very existence was challenged and it was unclear whether and how the Academy might continue. In the initial two years, sustaining the Academy required consistently advocating for and gaining the commitment of both mid and top level administrators who agreed to help challenge the status quo, and who were willing to risk challenging others. In the most recent two years the Academy has thrived. It now connects a large and growing number of faculty members committed to engagement with the strategic vision, future plans and priorities of mid-level leadership – and to senior administrative goals, priorities and financial commitments. The Academy model has also recently garnered significant national attention and interest, after several presentations at national conferences, a journal publication and the development of an interactive website.

In 2007, at the request of several members from three prior Academy classes, a new alumni program was developed “the Outreach Scholars Academy Lunch and Learn” series. This series will meet three - four times each year and alumni will have ongoing opportunities to learn about the work of their colleagues. In the first 2007 meetings, dozens of alumni participated in the lunch and learn discussions. New intellectual and social connections have already begun to occur across cohorts. Further,

the zeitgeist among a number of Academy alumni is that “giving back” and helping new faculty join this community of scholars is important. Requests for assistance by Academy administrative leadership and requests for participation in new initiatives typically result in positive responses from alumni members. This positive approach further supports this relatively new community of scholars.

When it was initially designed in 2003, the Academy was thought to be a specific implementation step to help realize the promise of engagement and engaged scholarship at UNH. At present the Academy has become an enabling mechanism through its alumni and its symbolic position, to energize and support a growing community of engaged scholars that are committed to advancing engagement and engaged scholarship locally, nationally, and internationally.