

Public Work and the Academy: An Academic Administrator's Guide to Civic Engagement and Service-Learning

Edited by Langseth, M. & Plater, M. (2004). Bolton: Massachusetts:
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Public Work and The Academy: An Academic Administrator's Guide to Civic Engagement and Service-Learning (2004), edited by Langseth and Plater, is an extraordinary text on service learning. This engaging and compelling book is rich in information that focuses on the role of administrators in fostering institutional cultures of service. Though this 300-page text is broad in scope, the authors manage to cover topics in ample detail. In addition to the book's exceptional content, another significant strength is the varied authorship of the text's 16 chapters which are written by civically engaged scholars from a wide range of colleges and organizations. The book presents a strong case for the role of academic leadership, which can provide any educational leader who is committed to service pause for thought. The text is relevant to all higher education institutions, but particularly to community colleges, which are often characterized by their purposeful and unique relationships with their surrounding communities and citizenries, making them appropriate vehicles for promoting civic engagement.

Although acknowledging that there are numerous definitions of service learning, the text uses the definition of service learning from Campus Compact and states that:

Service-learning means a method under which students learn and develop through thoughtfully-organized service that: is conducted in and meets the needs of a community and is coordinated with an institution of higher education, and with the community; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students enrolled; and includes structured time for students to reflect on the service-experience (p. 5).

The text begins with a compelling dialogue on why and how civic engagement is and should be an integral component of every institution of higher learning and should be infused within and throughout the organization. The text presents specific ideas about service learning that are worthy of consideration of academic leadership at schools that are serious about civic engagement, including the notion that "promotion, tenure, and salary procedures, policies, and rewards for service are commensurate with institutional rhetoric about the value of service" (p. 19). Although a potentially iconoclastic notion, core institutional values can be determined and measured by what is actually being rewarded and reinforced in faculty promotion and tenure decisions, policies not likely to have been substantially reviewed or infused with innovation in years, if ever.

The text continues with a cogent discussion on the roles of leadership in institutionalizing service learning, moving it from the “margins to the mainstream” (Pickerel & Peters, as cited in Langseth and Plater, p.33) and includes topics such as faculty support, financial support, supportive infrastructures, the roles of service and new faculty members, and structural alignment. The text presents a plethora of ways service learning can benefit an institution; in addition to the obvious aspects such as improving student learning and fostering an engaged citizenry, it also addresses less apparent issues such as institutional accountability and depth of content. Jim Ostrow eloquently addresses the problem of depth, and states that when educators present knowledge as information that is simply to be held and later deposited at the next examination “we thereby train a populace that could not be more ill-equipped for an active responsiveness to a fluid, constantly changing world” (p.76).

Hence, service learning is a powerful tool for establishing relevance, for fostering innovative thinking, and for promoting meaningful learning. Of particular interest is the discussion on the misconceptions and biases that many faculty may hold in viewing service learning as less than a scholarly endeavor. Certainly recognizing potential misconceptions about service learning held by some faculty, especially senior faculty who may hold prominent roles in promotion and tenure decisions, can be the first step toward change.

The case studies and specific colleges examined cover situations such as integrating service learning into the strategic planning process, institutionalizing service learning, developing strategies for institutional change, promoting faculty status and ownership of service learning, and engaging board of trustee support. San Jose City College succinctly identifies nine items which are critical for service learning program success, including a discussion on the necessity of board of trustee commitment and states that the “Service learning Program is a direct response to the expectation of our board of trustees that student learning form the central commitment of our work” (p. 206). Further, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) posits the argument that the chief academic officer must deliberately ensure that service learning “plays a clear role in annual performance reviews of the campus, academic units, and faculty” (p.129) and must also purposefully articulate how service learning is congruent with the institutional mission and values. In total, there are 11 different colleges presented, including Miami-Dade Community College, University of Michigan, University of Southern Mississippi, and DePaul University among them. Specific colleges represent a variety of institutions, including small, private colleges, urban colleges, and large public institutions.

In conclusion, the text provides an extensive commentary on the particular relevance of service learning in current higher education environments. Further, the imperative of academic leadership in service learning, rather than mere rhetoric is convincing, specific, and broad in content. The numerous contributors are impressive, as are the range of institutional examples. Finally, the text cautions:

Institutions ignore a changing environment at their peril. Like dinosaurs, they risk becoming exhibits in a kind of cultural Jurassic park: places of great interest and curiosity, increasingly irrelevant in a world that has passed them by. Higher education can not afford to let this happen. (The Knight Higher Education Collaborative, as cited in Langseth and Plater, 2004, p. 51)

Leaders of higher educational institutions, and specifically community colleges, have an opportunity to become beacons of civic engagement and exemplars for educational relevance and innovation through sustained and supported service learning programs. This text clearly provides a multifaceted justification for service learning and defines how academic leaders can effect powerful change, at the same time encouraging one to examine institutional roles, rewards, and consistency of institutional missions and purpose with operational procedures.