

Engagement as Social Justice

As a WVU faculty member who works as an Extension Agent in rural, low income Lincoln County, I was pleasantly surprised when Interim President Magrath referred to the Kellogg Commission's report on "The Engaged Institution". It has been a long while since I heard someone in leadership hold that document up. The idea that WVU should "have a broad commitment to being of use and value to society" and that we should be about working on the social issues our communities face often gets little play. It seems to me, that frequently, this is because such engagement is very hard work and not part of the typical academic paradigm.

As members of WVU we pride ourselves in our abilities to provide answers. But that's both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because we often have critically important knowledge to share; a curse because we often suppose we have the needed answers and know what's best for communities.

Engagement ties back into social justice because the best engagement is centered on the belief in equal partnerships between the community and the university. Equal partnerships begin when we at the university respect the inherent knowledge that community members bring to discussions. We have to enter community members' lives on their terms not ours. We need to be willing to listen more than we talk. We have to be ready to share information and realize that communities have timelines often different from the university's. When community members hear "we can't give you any suggestions until we complete additional research" the door to engagement slams shut. Certainly more research is often needed to solidify theories and burgeoning ideas, but we can share our hunches and explain that these may change over time. It is even more effective if we insure that local communities are part of developing the research question, gathering the data, and working through the analysis. This increases relevance at the local level, adds important local knowledge to the process, and helps local people gain new skills and perspectives.

Another piece of the social justice aspect of engagement is the university's willingness to be involved in the tough often divisive issues that communities face. Again, this is hard work. It's easier to stick to the abstract, the non-controversial. What are the best ways to decrease drug abuse? How can we impact unwanted teen pregnancies? What is the appropriate way to divide shrinking budgets among competing interests? How can we best balance environmental preservation with economic growth in the current oil and gas rush? Real dilemmas our citizens face, difficult to solve, but the kinds of critical social issues the Kellogg Commission would prod us to work with communities to address.

Yet, even if we chose not to enter the most divisive areas, we still need to increase our engagement. We need to ground our involvement in the belief that communities are our equal partners. This both increases the influence and cache of the university and promotes a democratic ethos. Our work will then help improve the quality of peoples' lives while supporting local critical thinking and decision making skills that citizens can continue to use once the university has moved on to another project.

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