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Public Engagement and Graduate Education: Ten Principles and Five Recommendations

Abstract

Connection with the public is crucial to the future of higher education, including graduate education. I put forward ten principles (statements that seem to be clearly true) that individually and collectively lead to five recommendations, all directed at the point that public engagement should be an essential part of graduate education.

Public Engagement and Graduate Education: Ten Principles and Five Recommendations

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Abstract: Connection with the public is crucial to the future of higher education, including graduate education. I put forward ten principles (statements that seem to be clearly true) that individually and collectively lead to five recommendations, all directed at the point that public engagement should be an essential part of graduate education.

Public engagement is a crucial, but often overlooked, component of graduate education and scholarship. The CIC Committee on Engagement has adopted the following definition: “Engagement is the partnership of university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.”

Principle 1: Connection with the public is crucial to the future of higher education, including graduate education and the contributions that graduate education can make to society.

Graduate education and the advanced research that accompanies it depend on public support. As our scholarship has become more specialized, and our enterprise larger and more expensive, we are in danger of losing public understanding and support. Higher education is increasingly looked on as a private good, and our research—with the possible exception of biomedical research—is viewed by large segments of the population as either irrelevant or designed to enrich large corporations. With some laudable exceptions, our faculty and students do not make personal contact with the general public in ways that enable the public to understand what we’re doing and allow them to feel that they have a stake in our success. Unless the public perceives that research and the graduate education that makes it possible contribute to the public good, and affect them personally, we will continue to lose support.

Principle 2: Consciousness of the social meaning of scholarly work is an essential part of graduate education.

As Boyer (1990, p. 68) wrote, “The work of higher learning, at the core, is and must remain disciplined inquiry and critical thought. Still, future scholars should be asked to think about the usefulness of knowledge, to reflect on the social consequences of their work, and in so doing gain understanding of how their own study relates to the the world beyond the campus.”

Principle 3: Graduate students want to make better connections between their scholarship and the real world.

It's not just administrators and faculty interested in improving graduate education who think that students need to make more connections between their scholarship and the real world. Graduate students themselves indicate the same desire. A Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate survey asked more than 2000 graduate students in six disciplines what three things they would most like to see improved in their graduate experience. Learning more about the public issues addressed by the discipline ranked third of 21, after how to formulate and carry out teaching and research programs. Many students recognize that there are important and interesting issues in the world to which their discipline could and should make a contribution, but only if it looks outward as well as inward.

As Angelica M. Stacy, Professor of Chemistry at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote in *Carnegie Essays on the Doctorate: Chemistry*: "... students I have known have interests in biology, materials, environmental sciences, engineering, education, diversity, management, and public policy. They all identify themselves primarily as chemists, and this is where their main training lies. Yet, they seek projects and experiences outside the normal boundaries of the chemistry doctorate." And Cherwitz (2004) suggests that such a viewpoint may be key to attracting more minority students into graduate education.

Principle 4: Public engagement has broad support from leaders in higher education.

The growing conversation in higher education about public engagement derives from several sources. These include

- The influential writings of Ernest Boyer, especially "Scholarship Reconsidered" (1990) and his follow-up article "The Scholarship of Engagement" (1996);
- The call by the Kellogg Commission (2000) for public universities to renew their commitment to society;
- Establishment of the CIC Committee on Engagement and the NASULGC Council on Extension, Continuing Education, and Public Service
- Inclusion by the North Central Association's Higher Learning Commission of a new "Criteria 5: Engagement and Service" in its accreditation standards

Principle 5: Public engagement is also encouraged by potent environmental factors.

Public engagement is of crucial significance for the continued flourishing of the research enterprise in institutions of higher learning, because of growing social, political, and budgetary pressures.

- Demands from NSF and other granting agencies that broader impacts and public involvement be considered in research grants
- Rethinking by public research universities of the meaning of their land grant missions, as rural populations have declined, corporations have displaced family farms, and the needy groups in society have become increasingly urban;
- Pressures from business and government for universities to serve as "economic engines";
- Concern of universities in large cities about how to work with and serve their urban neighbors;

- Recognition of trends in society away from community toward fragmented private purposes;
- Student interest in activities, such as service learning, that serve society while garnering academic credit;
- Recognition by state universities that if they don't clarify and publicize the ways in which they benefit their states and regions, their shrinking share of state support may shrink even further.

Principle 6: Studies of graduate education emphasize the need for more public engagement.

Greater public engagement is needed at all levels of graduate education. However, perhaps the need has been articulated most forcefully—because the gap with current reality is greatest—in the numerous recent and ongoing projects examining doctoral education. A summary of Recommendations from National Studies on Doctoral Education (Nyquist and Wulff, 2000) has as the sixth of its major findings: “Produce scholar-citizens who see their special training connected more closely to the needs of society and the global economy. The Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate, which defines the purpose of doctoral education as “preparing

stewards of the discipline”, emphasizes communication with a wide variety of publics as one of three key capabilities of such a steward. And the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation Responsive Ph.D. Initiative urges that “... the goal of the doctorate [be] redefined as scholarly citizenship...”

Principle 7: Engagement is based on scholarship, integrated with teaching and learning, and reciprocal with community partners.

There are three distinguishing common elements of engagement, according to the CIC Engagement Committee:

- Engagement is scholarly. A scholarship-based model of engagement involves both the act of engaging (bringing universities and communities together) and the product of engagement (the spread of discipline-generated, evidence-based practices in communities).
- Engagement cuts across the mission of teaching, research, and service. It is not a separate activity, but a particular approach to campus-community collaboration..
- Engagement is reciprocal and mutually beneficial. There is mutual planning, implementation, and assessment among engagement partners.

Principle 8: Public engagement is based on public scholarship, which can be local or universal.

It is important to connect this definition of public engagement to the concept of public scholarship: scholarship of value to the public and engaged with the public. Public scholarship falls into two main categories: “universal” and “local”. The distinction between them is important for how universities do their business and for how they are perceived and supported by society.

Universal public scholarship is work that benefits humanity, but without a specific local context in mind: the Human Genome Project is a good example. There is little doubt that this project will lead to biomedical insights that will benefit people all over the world, but the benefits to people in any specific locality will be diffuse, long-term, and hard to identify. The values and reward systems associated with graduate education tend to favor research and scholarship of universal applicability.

Local public scholarship has four typical manifestations within universities: (1) applications of research such as traditional agricultural- and continuing education/extension-based work, and clinical applications of biomedical research in academic health centers; (2) teaching and research on social science and public policy issues such as housing, transportation, criminology, or the rural-urban interface; (3) K-12 and preschool projects; and (4) scholarship that is characterized by reciprocal engagement between researcher and community.

The distinctions between these two broad categories are not always neat. A new AIDS drug (universal), for example, might need adaptation to local conditions and attitudes before it can become an effective treatment. Conversely, the understanding of the factors influencing exposure of children to lead poisoning in a particular neighborhood (local) is likely to have broad consequences in many other communities.

Both universal and local public scholarship are important to civic life and community well-being, but only local public scholarship is generally recognized as such. Better understanding—by both the public and university faculty and students—of the engaged nature of universal public scholarship, and greater efforts to elucidate the local value of universal scholarship, are sorely needed.

Principle 9: Public engagement can enrich research and teaching.

In some specialties, civically engaged research is not just desirable, it is also the best way to do research. For example, many clinicians and social scientists conduct research in communities, where cooperation of subjects and maintenance of long-term participation are often difficult to elicit. Such research is often most successful when engagement is reciprocal: participants suggest questions and approaches, and learn things from the results that are useful to their communities, rather than just being experimental subjects. (e.g., Jordan et al, 2004)

The same holds in teaching. “Learning through activities that contribute to meeting others’ needs also helps students gain a greater awareness and a deeper sense of appreciation of how academic disciplines can contribute to solving real human problems. They not only learn the abstract theories on which those disciplines are based, but they also realize how that theory can be applied to improve the human condition.” (Ribeau, 2002)

Principle 10: Acceptance of public engagement by graduate students and faculty requires support by all sectors of higher education.

Despite the many reasons that public engagement is important to higher education, graduate students and faculty are reluctant to devote effort to it. Graduate students are strongly influenced by faculty attitudes, and most faculty are more concerned with the professional imperatives of their disciplines than with making stronger connections with the public. To change these attitudes requires action by professional societies, funding agencies, ranking organizations, top university administrators, and faculty and students themselves.

Recommendation 1: National professional organizations should do more to recognize engagement as an intrinsic part of scholarship.

The behavior of most research-active faculty, and thus of graduate students, is driven more by their disciplinary peers across the country and the world, than by the desires of their home institutions. Therefore, there needs to be strong encouragement of more civically- engaged professional behavior by the scholarly societies and their leaders. This especially means encouraging the presentation of engaged research at society meetings and the publishing of such research in scholarly journals. If granting agencies are funding engaged research, then such research should be presented in regular professional venues. Some of this will be, in Boyer's term, "scholarship of discovery", but "scholarship of engagement" should also have a place.

Recommendation 2: Rankings should take engagement into account.

Research universities are ambivalent about rankings, but they are a fact of life and are unlikely to go away. We should therefore try to influence what is ranked, and try to be sure that engagement is one of those factors. This makes it incumbent on us to devise suitable measures of engagement, which can be objectively and equitably applied across institutions.

Recommendation 3: Graduate deans and other central administrators should support, facilitate, and reward engaged scholarship.

If public scholarship and public engagement are vital for universities and our contribution to society, then what can graduate deans, provosts, and other central administrators do to foster them, while respecting resource constraints, faculty and departmental autonomy, and similar realities? Here are four ideas (adapted from Bloomfield, 2005b).

First, encourage multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research and teaching. Significant social problems are rarely uni-disciplinary. Since the Graduate School is often at the center of interdisciplinary arrangements, it can have a particularly important role to play by providing seed resources and small grants, noting communities of interest, facilitating partnerships among academic units, and helping to overcome bureaucratic barriers.

Second, provide the "top-down" to complement the "bottom-up". Successful public engagement requires both ideas and commitment from faculty and students, and support from key administrators. They should articulate the recognition that public engagement and public scholarship are crucial to the continued support and success of research universities, and help faculty, department chairs, and college deans recognize ways in which public scholarship should be acknowledged in tenure, promotion, and salary decisions.

Third, use the access that their position provides to open doors for faculty to talk with community and business leaders, politicians, policy makers, and foundation executives. They can invite community leaders to campus, where they can participate in discussions of research problems and priorities and become stake-holders in university work. The physical presence of top administrators at meetings and conferences, to express support and engage in sharing of ideas, can provide important encouragement to faculty who are trying to develop programs.

Fourth, work with university public relations offices to get engagement stories out. Using their broad familiarity with research across their institutions, they can pass along information about research that exemplifies the personal aspects and civic consequences of academic work. Local public scholarship, with reciprocal engagement at its heart, is particularly suitable for such stories.

Recommendation 4: Faculty should recognize the many ways it is in their best interest to value engaged scholarship.

Faculty are key to the public engagement involvement of their graduate students. If they don't give explicit or at least implicit approval, most graduate students will be afraid to get engaged even if they might like to. And if faculty don't model to some extent what it means to be an engaged scholar, teacher, and citizen, students will recognize that it's not a characteristic part of the professional life to which they aspire.

For faculty to become more engaged, they need to be persuaded that it's in their best interest. They should recognize that the future prosperity of universities, especially public research universities like those in the CIC, very likely depends on greater engagement, at least to the extent that the public has a better sense that universities are working in the public interest. They should become more aware that engaged research may have a better chance of getting grants. The NSF requirement for broader societal impacts, and NIH's requirement of effective minority recruitment into clinical studies, are helping to raise awareness. We may also conjecture that foundations, most of which have moved away from funding higher education initiatives, may be more willing to fund public-university partnerships in which the community is the PI and at least an equal partner.

In community-based research, it seems pretty clear that a steady, reciprocal partnership with a community leads to better, more effective research, e.g., better retention and compliance, peer recruitment of subjects, and unexpected insights from the "inside" that may lead to new or better research plans.

For those faculty who value teaching, introducing examples of engagement into their courses—whether through service learning or just through examples of social impacts of the discipline—should enrich the learning experience in their classrooms and labs.

Recommendation 5: Graduate students should recognize their own interests in public engagement and, if necessary, take things into their own hands.

The Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate defines the purpose of Ph.D. education as training stewards of the discipline. A steward is a person whose responsibility is to take care of something: in this case, the well-being of the discipline. Without the regard of the public, based on cognizance of the importance of the discipline for public well-being and civic purposes, the discipline will not prosper. Graduate students who have invested years of their lives in disciplinary study should have a concern, and feel a responsibility, for the continued prosperity of their discipline.

When they are on the job market for a Research I university job, graduate students will be judged not just by how many papers or books they have published, but by how novel and path-breaking their work is, and how it may fit into the plans and emphases of their potential academic department. Since public engagement is a new and strong emphasis throughout higher education, a graduate student whose scholarly work or teaching experience has emphasized engagement and campus- community connections may have a leg up on the competition. If the research area is one that demands skills in community- based research, then obviously a student who has experience and training will have an advantage.

If the student is looking for a position in a liberal arts college or community college, then public engagement experience is all the more pertinent. Liberal arts colleges are increasingly emphasizing public engagement as an important part of their educational mission and role in their communities. Community colleges are even more deeply embedded in their communities, and have non-traditional students for whom strong campus-community ties will provide meaning and context to their educational experience. Community college jobs are requiring more research, but that could be on social/community issues.

In any position that requires teaching, a knowledge of actual and potential applications of the discipline to public issues will enliven course material and enhance the interest of students. And even the most cloistered scholar will find his or her career (and life) enhanced by the development of people skills.

If the student is looking for a job outside of academia, in a corporate, government, or non- government organization setting, then public engagement is essential to the mission of the organization, and a potential employee who has experience and has thought deeply about how his or her field of study relates to the public will be viewed as being able to make a strong contribution to the work of the organization.

How can graduate students develop knowledge and sympathy for public engagement in their scholarship and professional lives? It is, of course, enormously helpful if their faculty advisors and mentors provide encouragement, approval, and validation. This is part of the multiple feedback loops that are needed in academia. However, even if faculty are not explicitly supportive, there are things students can do on their own. They can organize brown-bag lunches in their departments to discuss the public engagement aspects of their disciplines and how they might turn them into scholarly projects, just as they now get together to talk about how to cope with prelim exams and writing a dissertation.

An increasing number of universities require their graduate students to have some training in research ethics and the responsible conduct of research and scholarship. Such training might be viewed as more attractive if it were combined with discussions of the social implications of the scholarly disciplines. Even better if both were integrated into a Preparing Future Faculty program.

Campus-wide graduate and professional student organizations provide an excellent opportunity to make contacts outside the department and discipline. It is through such contacts that new ideas for interdisciplinary work often emerge. Some of these ideas may be relevant to community engagement. And the challenge of explaining scholarly work to an outsider often leads to articulation of the more public face and purpose of the discipline. Not the least of the value is the fostering of community on the campus, among people who would otherwise have little contact with one another.

Graduate students today have limited time. Families and child care make demands, and students may also have to work outside of school. Therefore, it may seem hard to find the time to do anything more than focus narrowly on the chores required to complete program requirements and write the thesis or dissertation. The other side of this coin, however, can be that such students are more connected with their communities, as homeowners, parents, and employees. This can provide excellent opportunities to talk with other members of their community about the interesting and important scholarly work that they're doing, practice in justifying its importance to the broader society, and possibilities of introducing an aspect of their discipline into a school curriculum.

Summary

These principles and recommendations, each of which seem plausible in itself, together add up to an overwhelming argument that public engagement has a crucial role in graduate education and in helping graduate studies play their proper role in achieving the more general purposes of the university as an engaged institution. We end as we began, with a quote from Boyer (1990):

"The aim of education is not only to prepare students for productive careers, but also to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose; not only to generate new knowledge, but to channel that knowledge to humane ends; not merely to study government, but to help shape a citizenry that can promote the public good." (pp. 77-78).

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