The Injustice of Institutional Silence

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Mission and vision statements are the seemingly sacred pronouncements of colleges and universities. Almost universally, they profess the self-evident social, moral, academic, and civic purposes of higher education: educating for the arts of liberty, upholding the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and—to quote one college president speaking in the aftermath of repeated incidences of racial injustice nationwide—committing to “teaching, thinking, and scholarship to help end injustice, violence, and oppression.”

These are valiant educational aspirations, and while we in higher education tend to view these as the desired outcomes of education for our students, less often do we take them to heart as principles to guide the institution itself. If we did, higher education as a whole would give greater consideration to the scholars who comprise the next generation of faculty, the kind of scholarship they do, and whether we have in place an institutional reward structure that allows them to thrive and succeed. For too many underrepresented faculty—particularly women and faculty of color—their work in the academy is not fairly valued or legitimized. Indeed, they are victims of a subtle but very real institutional injustice and oppression.

It is no longer enough to simply claim, as many campuses do, that faculty undertaking emerging forms of scholarship, like community-engaged scholarship, are progressing through the promotion system. When campus policies and criteria effectively ignore or give mere lip service to engagement, early-career faculty are left to suffer the
injustices of arbitrary and often capricious processes that cause real harm, personally, professionally, and institutionally.

At Tulane University, under the leadership of the provos, a white paper on “Academic Review and Engagement” was released in 2013 stating that, “given the centrality of engagement to Tulane’s mission and to the ongoing strategic planning process, we cannot continue to sustain a culture of academic review that is silent on engagement.”

Indeed, like Tulane, other campuses—and other campus leaders—will no longer be silent. In 2009, Syracuse University’s then-Chancellor Nancy Cantor led that institution’s commitment to revising its promotion and tenure guidelines to specifically articulate the value of engaged scholarship. The revised guidelines were inclusive in their commitment to “longstanding traditions of scholarship as well as evolving perspectives on scholarship,” while recognizing that “the role of academia is not static, and that methodologies, topics of interest, and boundaries within and between disciplines change over time.” Although SU would “continue to support scholars in all of these traditions,” it would also support “faculty who choose to participate in publicly engaged scholarship.” The guidelines went on to describe such scholarship as that which involves “partnerships of university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, creative activity, and public knowledge; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address and help solve critical social problems; and contribute to the public good.”

Similarly, in 2009, as part of a strategic planning process at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH), the campus formed a Task Force on Future Promotion and Tenure Policies and Practices. The task force recommended that emerging forms of...

scholarship—specifically digital scholarship, interdisciplinary scholarship, and community-engaged scholarship—be considered in tenure and promotion processes. The plan states that “because the tenure and promotion policies and criteria for most units on campus do not recognize engaged scholarship ... each academic unit should review and revise its tenure and promotion criteria to include engaged scholarship.” The purpose of this recommendation was—and is—not to revise policies in an effort to lower standards but rather to apply high standards appropriate to the type of scholarship guiding faculty work. It is fundamentally an issue of fairness and equity.

These and other campuses recognize that the shifting demographics that have given us a much more diverse student body have also given us a more diverse faculty—and with that diversity a significant interest in emerging forms of scholarship. Research indicates that faculty rewards—criteria for teaching, research and creative activity, and service—either recognize community engagement as service (counting for little in promotion and tenure) or do not specifically reward community engagement in any part of the faulty roles.

When institutional policies are silent on engagement, they create disincentives for faculty to undertake community engagement across their faculty roles—and often punish them when they do. Silence perpetuates what KerryAnn O’Meara has identified in the recent edited book Democracy’s Education (2015) as “inequality regimes” of power, privilege, and oppression within the academy. Within the silences, subtle considerations of identity characteristics and unconscious bias take hold. In the new edited volume Faculty Work and the Public Good (2015), Tierney and Perkins write, “The professional reward structure needs to shift. Institutions need a diversity of routes to academic excellence and some of them will pertain to being involved outside the ivory tower.... [T]he reward
structure and those practices that socialize faculty need to shift in a way that supports engagement rather than disdains it.”

In 2011, colleagues from the Center for Institutional and Social Change (Columbia University), Imagining America (Syracuse University), and the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (University of Massachusetts Boston), published *Full Participation*, a white paper examining the connections between essential but often disconnected institutional priorities on many of our campuses. Research indicates that many higher education institutions have identified diversity and civic engagement as core institutional commitments, yet they have failed to forge the critical connections needed to reap the benefits of the synergies between them. Research also indicates that the academic success of systematically and traditionally underserved students is enhanced by increased opportunities to participate in high-impact teaching and learning practices tied to the curriculum—practices that involve greater engagement in learning, such as service-learning or community engaged teaching and learning.

Research also suggests that the academic success of underserved students is enhanced by increased opportunities to identify with faculty and staff who represent ethnic, racial, gender, and cultural diversity. Further, there is considerable evidence that women and faculty of color are more likely to engage in both interdisciplinary and community-service-related behaviors, including community-engaged and inclusive pedagogical practice in teaching and learning, and building research agendas related to public problem-solving in local communities. They are also more likely to cite such experiences as critical to their purpose in the academy.
In the late 1990s, the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, attending to significant trends in American higher education, added a number of questions to their Faculty Survey aimed at assessing faculty involvement in civic engagement in their scholarship and teaching, and their perceptions of their respective institutional environment. These new questions appeared for the first time in 2004-2005. One of the questions was whether, in the previous two years, the faculty member had “collaborated with the local community in teaching/research?” In the 2013-14 survey, the “yes” response to this question from faculty at all undergraduate campuses was 48.8%. At public campuses, it was 50.4%. Among tenure track faculty, it was 51.1%. Among women faculty, it was 52.4%. Among Hispanic faculty, it was 55.2%. And by all institutional types, all faculty ranks, both sexes, and all race/ethnicity groups, the data showed increases in the percent of faculty indicating community engagement in their teaching and research in every dimension from when the question was first asked a decade earlier.

As is often the case, academic research and data can’t tell the human story. Recently, a woman of color whose work is being evaluated for promotion and tenure sent a memo to her dean. It read, “As I’m sure you are aware, there have been recent reports issued by professional, academic organizations such as MLA and AHA, which call for senior faculty and administrators to update their institutional evaluations of digital/online publications, public scholarship, and written work generated by faculty’s civic engagement. I seriously doubt—based on the unofficial [departmental personnel committee] report I have seen—that these recent recommendations were considered, and thus my work in these three categories was not given adequate consideration under ‘research, professional and creative activity’.” Within the silences of institutional reward polices, this faculty member refused
to have her and her scholarship silenced. The current processes can only continue if faculty, particularly senior faculty, don’t enact the changes needed to fulfill the highest values of the academy.

I think of bell hooks and her observation in *Teaching to Transgress* that “we have to realize that if we are working on ourselves to become more fully engaged, there is only so much that we can do. Ultimately the institution will exhaust us simply because there is no sustained institutional support.” If there isn’t support for the next generation of scholars and their scholarship, the institution will not only exhaust them but—if we define “exhaust” as “to draw out all that is essential”—will exhaust higher education itself. For those who value the democratic purposes of higher education and believe in its role of educating for justice, it is time to act on those values in the departments, colleges, and universities where we work to successfully counterbalance the dominant academic cultures. The alternative is that higher education will become increasingly irrelevant to students, to emerging scholars, and to the wider public good. Claims that the goal of scholarly work is to help end injustice, violence, and oppression will ring hollow in the face of institutional practices that mock the essence of higher education.

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