

AASCU
American Democracy Project
“Moving Beyond Projects: Institutionalizing Civic Engagement”
Thursday, June 16, 2005
4:00 pm, Ballroom II, Hilton Hotel and Executive Tower

Remarks from George Pernsteiner

Thank you Tami. Thanks to all the students here for your interest and leadership on this important matter. Thanks to AASCU and PSU for sponsoring this event. And thanks to all of you for joining us here in Portland to learn with us the what and how of university/community partnership.

Civic engagement: building, connecting, partnering, being “out there.”

This is not easy for us in higher education. After all, we are not known for living in ivory towers for nothing.

Our roots, whether secular or ecclesiastical, whether public or private, are in places apart—places for contemplation, for discussion, for investigation—but not for connection or partnership. To use a hackneyed religious expression, we are in the world but not of it.

Or at least that is how we often viewed ourselves when the leaders of our universities—faculty and administrators alike—came of age and began their careers. We prided ourselves on being different and apart from the world. That ingrained belief of separateness militates against the understanding and embracing of partnership. We know we have to unlearn a belief system—and that makes the connection and the partnership more difficult and more tentative. And because our partners believe us to be aloof, arrogant, and apart, they take our internal struggles and false starts as proof of a lack of sincerity and commitment.

But the whole world is changing—the global, information-based, internet-enabled, and, above all, interconnected society that is evolving so rapidly is built upon connection and partnership. We in higher education are making our cases for our value based on our ability to instill the mindsets of change that enable people to participate fully in that integrated, connected world.

Our research, so focused for the last century on deeper and deeper understanding of narrower and narrower topics, now is built more and more on the connection of knowledge within and across disciplines.

As Tami mentioned, I spent several years at Portland State University just up the street from here. Portland State has an interesting history that is linked to the subject of this conference. In the 1940s, there was no public postsecondary institution in the Portland area. Returning veterans lobbied successfully for the state to establish the Vanport Extension Center at an old shipyard so that they could take advantage of the benefits of the GI Bill. The campus was swept away in the catastrophic Vanport Flood of 1948, but survived two location moves into buildings abandoned by others as unfixable to become the largest and most diverse campus in the state. PSU started out and continues to serve the needs of Portlanders, Oregonians and students from other states and countries who want a quality higher education that connects them to both their present and their future place in the community and society.

And the community has responded. PSU's campus today—its buildings, grounds, fields and laboratories are products not of state funds alone but of city, federal, regional, private, student, donor and other dollars whose original purposes usually had nothing to do with higher education. Partnerships made this

possible. But the partnership was two-way. PSU joined with the city, the transit district, the federal government and private property owners to fund the construction of the Central City Streetcar which Roy mentioned a few minutes ago. How often does a university make a multi-million financial commitment for general public transportation? It happens in Portland—in partnership.

It is not unusual then that the will, stamina, and connectedness to community that marked PSU's early survival continue to flow in its bloodstream. The tremendous growth in its academic programs, inextricably linked to service learning has been phenomenal. And not surprisingly, its graduates are phenomenal too, in their already solid connections to the city and state long before they ever walk across the stage to get their diplomas, as about 4,400 did this past Saturday.

There are many more qualified and knowledgeable speakers than I at this conference—and they will speak to programs and best practices, and how and why models work, so I won't focus on those details of civic engagement. Instead, I'll mention some of the lessons my colleagues and I have learned and observed as

we've worked to bridge some of the streets, parks, and utility lines that separate the academy and the community. The focus here will not be on curriculum, or on research, or on direct service but rather on building the partnerships with others—the schools, the governments, the businesses, the community organizations—who will provide the learning opportunities for faculty and students and ways for universities as entities to integrate into the community.

Our partners will tell you that we don't always get it right, that we are not consistent, and that we have to constantly reinvent ourselves. And they would be correct. But we have confidence that we can connect, we can partner, we can succeed with our communities. It is not a straight line or a steady journey.

Instead, it is about daily efforts, about people, about personalities and temperament; but also it is about shared dreams, shared values, shared interests—all manifest in a thousand small activities with the overall picture emerging only when you step back after years of effort, look at one another, and say, "Yeah, I guess we did do that."

Lesson #1: The relationship needs to start with *a relationship*. Know one another first. Trust is a primary ingredient in civic engagement. Don't underestimate the value in becoming trusted colleagues before you try to become engaged partners.

Lesson #2: There must be an equal partnership, not a paternalistic one. If a university acts like an institution doing things for the community rather than nurturing a true relationship where all parties are equals, it perpetuates the notion that colleges and universities are elitist institutions that expect others to adapt to them, or just don't care what others do at all.

Lesson #3: The relationship needs to come before the grant money. We all would like to receive foundation grants upfront even before we have ventured out and made connections and determined how the various parties will participate. It's the arranged marriage approach; meet on the day of the wedding and get to know each other after that. That can work, but it's not an approach that fits very well in this country. And more and more private funders need proof of campus commitment and a roadmap of engagement before they'll write checks.

Lesson #4: There must be a willingness on the part of universities to trust the expertise of those at the school or nonprofit or business or other organization with whom they want to engage. For example, teachers and administrators at K-12 schools are so accustomed to being criticized by everyone, that to show trust in what they are trying to do is a great first step to opening up a relationship and empowering all parties. Hard as it is to believe, we are not the eternal font of all wisdom (most maybe, but not all).

Lesson #5: Build a bridge, and then tear it down. A university often is described as a small city, with a population of thousands within its confines. But along with that perception of being a small city, can be the perception from the community that the college is a walled city with little connection to the members of the community who surround it. Effective partnerships can begin to span those boundaries and build linkages, bridges that create mutual understanding.

Building the bridge is the first step; but the final step is tearing the bridge down because you don't need it any more because the

college has become such a part of the community in its openness, engagement and access that there are no longer barriers.

But before you call in the engagement engineers to build the bridge, you need to start with a collective understanding of who you are and what those not within the walled city think about you. Everybody knows the good stuff, all the ways your campus is beloved. But the university has to go to the “dark side” and research the negative perceptions its communities hold against it—often with good reason, sometimes not, and sometimes based on memories about the putative actions of long dead professors or presidents. People ask what you have done for them today—but they remember the slights and errors of a generation ago. Universities must develop effective means of addressing these issues, regardless of their currency or reality. The hardest obstacle PSU had to overcome in its quest to partner with this community was the reputation it had acquired in the 1960s and 1970s: a reputation, deserved or not, that made it hard for partners to accept either the quality or the commitment of the university. I can still remember when the then Mayor, after years of discussions and a myriad of projects and efforts, standing up in front of the City Club (a well-known civic forum in Portland) to

publicly endorse PSU's efforts in the legislature. She said at that time that she regretted all the years when she did not understand the value of the university and what a resource it was for the Portland community. That day was a major milestone for PSU in its civic engagement. But we know that we must strive with each new leader in each of our community's organizations to overcome those decades-old perceptions before s/he will be able to embrace us as partners.

Lesson #6: More is more. Those who have long histories of civic engagement have discovered that the more partners the better. The synergies can be rewarding for all parties when the DNA strands are crossed during engagement among universities, schools, city government, economic development agencies, transportation entities, the business community, neighborhood associations, philanthropists, social service agencies and other community organizations.

Unlike all of you, I am lazy. I like to have checklists so that I don't forget things. The checklist I use on civic engagement and service learning partnerships includes these components:

1. Respect for one another;
2. A high tolerance for ambiguity;
3. Valuing relationships with the people in the partnership more than getting the job done quickly---a really hard concept for us Type A experts;
4. Understanding that our observations are not necessarily "right" or "true" or divinely inspired;
5. Having empathy;
6. Being obscenely patient and politely persistent;
7. Knowing our strengths;
8. Knowing our weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

Colleges and universities certainly are among every state's most valuable resources, intellectually and in their leadership in seeking the truth and advancing change. Forming and sustaining partnerships with schools and community groups is not easy; but the gains are tremendous for all parties and engage faculty and students in ways that enrich learning and teaching. Civic engagement is not charity. It is mutually beneficial to all parties.

And I guess that is Lesson #7: Partnership is about a mutuality of goals, a mutuality of interest, and a mutuality of benefit. We

can focus on the needs of the partners and what constitutes success for them—and we should. But we are not altruists—there must be benefit to us: educationally, socially, politically, culturally, or financially, or we won't be able to sustain our energy to participate. Mutual success means just that: and it benefits the entire community.

As someone who spends a lot of time in the maelstrom of Oregon's legislative session, I know that if citizens and legislators don't understand the positive impact that a campus has on them personally and directly, they won't see its value and won't pay tuition, taxes or anything else to support it. You can't ask for help from someone without being connected.

I honor your work in meeting the challenge of civic engagement at your universities. It's hard; it can be messy, people growl at you a lot. You may need to work to help civic leaders think differently about the assets and resources generated by the university and how these can be used to help ensure civic health and engagement. Civic engagement involves a transformation of whom we have been or an evolution to who we are becoming.

There are some on our campuses who don't understand why we need to do this; they do not necessarily share these values around civic engagement and this new construct that is not who we think we are, but is who we must become. Instead of separations we need to build connections and this can be different from a discipline-based model of the academy.

There are those who question the continued viability of the academy if the new construct includes engagement of the whole campus community with practice-based, cross-discipline, service-oriented learning. They don't want to lose the depth of the discipline. Civic engagement does not diminish the worth, the sanctity, or the practice of any discipline. We need those who understand something deeply and can, together, grow knowledge across the disciplines. As deep as they go, they also need to go broadly.

Last fall, I had the opportunity to visit with two of my former colleagues at the University of California, both Nobel laureates in physics. One characterized this type of engagement as going deeply into a single area and connectedly into the whole world.

To meet the society and the economy of the twenty-first century, we need global interconnectedness in ways we have not confronted before--a connectedness more akin to a 3rd world construct, or a 19th century construct, than what we have now. By this I mean a construct where everyone's ultimate success is dependent on one another, and collectively a village's or a community's strength and resources are much more powerful than when a citizen acts singly. Nurturing this while maintaining the values of individual freedom will be a major challenge for America in the 21st century.

Keeping the academy separate and within the traditional ideas of town-and-gown may still be viable for some institutions with narrowly defined missions, or those able to exist as self-contained islands. But for most institutions, the value of civic engagement and service learning is well acknowledged and adds significantly to the quality and reputation of the institution. Not to mention engaged, focused students who may become engaged alums, and a high return on investment for the state in terms of skilled, workforce-ready, and civically engaged citizens. Fifty years from now we won't be able to think about the academy in the

traditional terms. But we need your help, on your campuses, to make this change in thinking second nature to all our colleagues.

It has been an honor for me to be with you to help kick off this important and timely conference. I hope you engage, and rage, and blaze new ground for colleges and universities in the area of civic engagement.

And, of course, welcome to Portland! And, please, in between attending conference sessions and networking with colleagues, try to walk around our city, visit the state's only urban university, sample our great wines and Northwest cuisine, get up close and personal with an active volcano, go to Powell's Book Store, sip a latte, and get a flavor for the uniqueness that is Portland. In other words, ENGAGE IN PORTLAND, CONNECT TO PORTLAND, AND, FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE, SPEND LOTS OF MONEY IN PORTLAND. Thank you, and enjoy the conference.

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