

Focus Group Discussion on Community Engaged Pedagogy

A Summary Report

Context

The Carleton Academic Plan (CAP) 'Realizing Our Dreams as Canada's Capital University' establishes as part of the university's mission a commitment to promoting active student learning through engagement and discovery (Objective 4.1) and to enhancing excellence in teaching and learning (Objective 1.1). Various formal and informal bodies at Carleton University have responded to the Plan by exploring what engagement, discovery and excellence means in the teaching environment at Carleton. Recently, a survey of faculty and staff organized by the Carleton Committee on Community Engaged Pedagogy, in cooperation with the Office of the Provost and the Educational Development Centre, determined that some 116 faculty and staff identified themselves as working with a range of strategies for student instruction that engage with private, public and not-for-profit organizations outside of the university setting. These include field projects, coop placements, course assignments and various other forms of community-engaged pedagogy (CEP) concerned with real-world problem-solving, innovation and university contributions to the public good. Following on this survey, the Office of the Provost convened two focus groups to develop ways to enhance and enable community engaged teaching and learning at Carleton. This report is a summary of these discussions.¹

Participants

Focus Group #1 , Monday, January 17, 2011

Danette Nearing-Guibord – Criminology and Criminal Justice

Darrell Herauf – Business

David Hudson – Sprott

Katherine Graham – Senior Advisor to the Provost

Kim Davis – SLaLS

Lisa Meyer – *SLaLS*

Martha Wiebe – Social Work

Patricia Ballamingie – DGES

Peter Andree – Political Science

Peter Johansen – Journalism

Focus Group #2, Tuesday, January 25, 2011

Bessa Whitmore – Social Work

Karen Schwartz – Social Work

Katherine Graham – Senior Advisor to the Provost

Cheryl Schramm – Systems Engineering

Dane Rowlands – NPSIA

Steve Prashker – Geography

James Milner – PSCI

Richard Marquardt – Sessional in SPPA & Kroeger College

Randall Germain – PSCI

David Dean – History

Facilitator: Daniel Buckles – Department of Sociology and Anthropology

¹ Prepared by Daniel Buckles, Adjunct Research Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Notetaker: Karin More, Office of the Provost and Vice President (Academic)

Process Summary

10:00 – 10:15 Self-Introductions, followed by an overview of the context, working definition of community engaged pedagogy, statement of how the expected outcomes from the focus groups feed into future activities (Katherine Graham).

10:15 – 10:20 Overview of today's tasks: What are the key barriers? How can current supports be enhanced/strengthened? (Daniel Buckles, here and rest)

10:20 – 11:00 **What are the key barriers?**

- In random pairs, name barriers to community-engaged pedagogy (strategies of instruction) at Carleton University. Discuss and select two. Write one barrier on each card using 2-3 key words, with details on the back (10 minutes).
- In plenary, group members pile and sort barriers on the wall, and label each pile as needed. Start with one barrier, then place cards with the same or very similar barrier in a pile. Bring out each barrier until all are sorted in piles. Label piles and group together piles that are similar, and add categories, as needed. Aim for a maximum of 8 piles (20 minutes).
- In plenary, each group member selects top 2 barriers from their point of view. Move from barrier to barrier assigning 2 points if top barrier, 1 if second barrier. Total scores, and convert to bar chart. Discuss relative weight of the barriers and relevance of overall result (15 minutes).

11:00 – 11:30 **What are the key institutional supports?**

- In plenary, build a list of **current** institutional services and course management options that **support** CEP and post them directly to the wall. Post below barriers, if match, and to side if not. Discuss along the way **how these could be done differently or enhanced** to reduce or overcome barriers. Identify other supports or shifts that might enhance and enable community engaged teaching and learning at Carleton. Identify priority actions (30 minutes).

11:30 – 11:35 Closure (5 minutes).

Analysis

The top 5 barriers to CEP identified by the two focus groups are the same, although weighted differently by each group (see list and weight in parenthesis, below).² In general, the two lists of barriers refer to the specific features of CEP, how the practice is perceived and managed within the university, and the relationship between the university and communities.

Group 1:

1. CEP is inherently time consuming (10)
2. Little coordinated or central support to the management of ongoing relationships with outside groups (9)
3. CEP is not valued in the tenure and promotion process (4)
4. Student buy-in is equivocal, because CEP requires extra time, creativity and work to prepare, engage and be graded (2)
5. Differences are significant between Community and University cultures in terms of project definitions, expectations, preparation, and cycles (2)
6. Many faculty and administrators do not have a clear idea of what CEP involves or how to go about it (0)
7. There are few financial resources available for meeting special costs (0)
8. CEP is hard to do in large classes (0)

Group 2:

1. CEP is not adequately valued in the tenure and promotion process. This is particularly problematic for younger faculty (9)
2. Doing CEP requires more time than other instructional strategies, both to set up and to run (8)
3. The differences in Community-University conditions and requirements are significant (different cycles, greater unpredictability in community settings, different learning objectives) (6)
4. There is no pan-university coordination of the multiple administrative requirements of CEP (security, insurance, transportation, risk of oversubscribing) (3)
5. CEP increases costs for students, including travel, equipment and time requirements (0)

In both focus groups, people noted that the various barriers interact with each other. For example, the fragmented approach to addressing the multiple administrative requirements of CEP adds to the time needed to set up and run CEP activities. Nevertheless, even with strong administrative coordination and support, CEP would remain relatively time consuming because it requires the negotiation of key differences between community and university conditions and requirements. Similar cautions were also raised by the two groups -- if greater value were given to CEP more faculty might get involved, which would

² All barriers identified by participants carry some real weight and are therefore relevant in and of themselves. The final weighting in parenthesis reflects only the scores given by each participant for their top two priorities. This was to determine where the group placed the greatest weight among the various barriers identified.

in turn require more attention to management of the relationships so as to avoid saturating communities.

The list of current institutional supports to CEP identified by the two groups also had many similarities. Both groups recognized and appreciated the good will of many Department heads, the availability of ad hoc logistical support and the encouragement contained in the language of the Academic Plan. While they noted that these do not in and of themselves fully counteract the various barriers identified, participants also recognized that significant work has begun to reduce the barriers, strengthen existing supports and fill key gaps needed to broaden and deepen CEP at Carleton. The discussion of the forces at play generated many specific observations and suggestions, listed below. They refer, in general, to ways to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of engagement with groups outside of the university setting (managing and supporting working relationships), and ways to value CEP appropriately in the workload, tenure and promotion structures of the university.

Group 1:

1. Logistical support is often available at the Departmental level (small discretionary funds, an extra TA, help from a staff member in Student Services Department). Also, some Departments are willing to cooperate with each other in the delivery of CEP, and share resources. This could be enhanced through university-wide support to the management of working relationships between university groups and communities, a centralized database and modest funds for recognition of community contributions (parking passes, honorariums, gifts).
2. Peer support is present (teaching awards that recognize CEP contributions, the CEP Committee, EDC meetings). This could be enhanced with 'toolkits' of materials such as waivers, access to methodological support, and wider sharing of best practices through the EDC.
3. Some students and graduates are very enthused about CEP, and acknowledge its value to their learning and CV. This could be enhanced by aligning student effort with student credit (for example, the Arts One and CUTV models of 1.25 credits/course). Caution: provide options or hybrids to avoid penalties to students unable to do CEP.
4. The Academic Plan encourages a culture of CEP even if it is not formally valued or coordinated. This could be enhanced by launching a discussion of workload, tenure and promotion issues raised by a commitment to CEP.

Group 2:

1. Some teaching release for coordinators is available in Departments that routinely do placements. For example, the coordinator of the Public History Program gets a ½ course teaching release. More generally, faculties, programs and administrative units are willing to assist. Some may be doing CEP but not labeling it as such. This good will and practice could be enhanced by raising the profile of various forms of CEP.

2. Small financial assistance/grants for courses are available, although these are ad hoc and uncertain.
3. The 4 pillars of the university public statement include community engagement. We can build on this language and create a new brand for Carleton (as U. of Waterloo has done), with the assistance of high-level Champions within the university.
4. There is a new Wiki for raising the profile of CEP at Carleton. This could be enhanced to provide outside groups with appropriate access to people and programs at the university.
5. Students doing CEP are typically very enthused, driven in part by increasing demand for interdisciplinarity in learning and the work environment. This could be strengthened by recognizing the extra student time required for CEP, possibly through an additional course credit. (Caution: how can we align credits, etc. across faculties and programs?)

Discussion of these various supports and ways to enhance them also recognized that some forms of CEP are already well structured in parts of the university (for example, 4th year projects with industry by Engineering students), while in other parts of the university structures are embryonic. Needs also vary. For example, the requirements of CEP involving international communities are quite different from those of CEP with locally-based communities. The asymmetry of the CEP structures and needs was not seen by participants as a problem in and of itself, but rather simply a reality that calls for flexibility and attention to **strategic actions** that can increase the breadth and depth of CEP at Carleton.

Interpretation

The following interpretation did not emerge directly from the focus groups but rather is offered by the facilitator based on a reading of the analysis.

The extra time, effort and complication of CEP compared to conventional instructional strategies is challenging for faculty because of its impact on workload. This impact is exacerbated by a widespread tendency to overlook the value-added of CEP to the development of excellence in teaching at Carleton University. CEP is seen as just another instructional strategy of no particular significance or weight in the allocation of teaching responsibilities. While some current institutional supports counteract difficulties inherent to doing CEP, they too are underdeveloped. This reflects not only general budgetary constraints at the university but also a gap between the public commitment to student learning through engagement and discovery and key structures in the university (coordination of and support to community-university partnerships, incentives for excellence in teaching, and incentives for students and younger faculty to engage in applied and action oriented research).

Action

Two actions were emphasized by both groups, more or less equally:

1. Mandate and resource a university-wide mechanism for supporting CEP and managing ongoing relationships with groups outside of the university (for example,

a database of organizations, a practitioners toolkit, high-level and credible Champions, etc.).

2. Initiate discussions about structural changes needed to align CEP commitments with appropriate student credit and faculty compensation (for example, an Arts One approach to CEP course credits, stronger linkages between community-engaged teaching and community-engaged research, recognition of the implications of CEP for workload, tenure and promotion, etc.).

Follow-up on these actions requires a Champion(s) at a high level.

Observations on the Process

The simple but structured process used to facilitate the focus groups was efficient and effective -- while each meeting lasted only 1.5 hours a great deal of information was mobilized and applied during the discussion. Various participants expressed their satisfaction with the process. Convergence in both groups around priority barriers and ways to enhance current supports suggests that the findings are **salient** features of CEP at Carleton. They provide a reasonable basis for further discussion, in conjunction with the findings of the survey by the Carleton Committee on Community Engaged Pedagogy and other background documents such as the recent Education Advisory Board report "Structuring, Encouraging, and Assessing Community Service Learning within the Academic Curriculum". While probably "good enough" to act on, the findings from these various sources would still benefit from student perspectives on CEP and further attention to developing a language for discussing CEP that includes compatible practices in Departments and Faculties that may be doing CEP (for example, Engineering), but not labelling it as such.