Summary Report to the Provost
New York Engagement Academy
June 23-26, 2014

Attendees:
Jane Amstey – coordinator, RIT University/Community Partnerships
M. Ann Howard – Sr. Assoc. Dean/COLA; director, University/Community Programs
Douglas Merrill – Professor/CHST; director, CBET
James Myers – Assoc. Provost for International Education and Global Programs
Dianna Winslow – Assist. Professor/COLA, director, First Year Writing Program

Key Observations

1. Community engagement has been adopted as an institutional strategy in higher education throughout the country, including at RIT’s peer institutions such as Virginia Tech, and Cal Poly. New York institutions that have achieved Carnegie Foundation’s Community Engaged classification include Cornell University, and SUNY ESF.

2. The changing culture of higher education makes community engagement essential to solve wicked problems and compels students and scholars to work in interdisciplinary environments.

3. Community engagement is a vital strategy to attract and retain a diverse student body and faculty, to attract the best and the brightest among new scholars and to develop new ways to engage current faculty.

4. Community engagement offers new opportunities for resource development.

5. Community engagement fits well within all six dimensions associated with RIT’s new Strategic Plan.

6. RIT is exceptionally well positioned to celebrate and enhance its community engagement activities in teaching, research and scholarship.

7. Community engagement is a natural fit with RIT’s culture of experiential and co-op education and applied research.

Overview

This three and one half day conference was sponsored by New York Campus Compact and was one of nine Engagement Academies that have been held throughout the United States. Principal speakers and facilitators included President Emerita Judith Ramaley, Dr. Barbara Holland, formerly of Portland State University and a pioneer in community engagement in higher education, Dr. Lorilee Sandman, University of Georgia and Brenda Wilson-Hale, a consultant in higher education fund raising. Twenty-one institutions were represented at this academy, including University of Rochester, Nazareth College and Hobart and William Smith College.

The definition of community engagement used throughout the academy was drawn from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
[Community Engagement is] collaboration between institutions of higher education and larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in context of partnerships and reciprocity.

The Foundation further notes that

The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and 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. [Emphasis added.]

Dr. Ramaley presented a compelling case for why community engagement is critical to the future of higher education. She emphasized that higher education is at a “watershed moment” and that engagement should be an “important institutional strategy.” She noted that the culture of the academy is changing and along with this change is changing values, priorities, methods and operations. Highlighting the 15 global challenges facing humanity identified by the Millennium Project (sustainable development and climate change, population and resources, energy, health issues, etc.), Dr. Ramaley noted that in order to respond to these problems, academic research has to become more collaborative and networked and collaborative across disciplines. Further, by linking learning, research and engagement, knowledge production increases and attracts diverse sources of funding support.

Significant in Dr. Ramaley’s presentation was the conclusion that “a culture of engagement has become essential” to enhance the relevance of higher education, to properly educate our students, to create capacity to find workable solutions to the world’s wicked problems, to gain access to critical resources for learning and knowledge production, to enhance the impact of scholarship and to build healthier communities.

Dr. Holland noted “academic culture, careers, methods, policies, funding streams, and structures are changing rapidly in response to changing knowledge needs and methods, greater opportunity and incentive to work collaboratively, the generational shift, and the growing urgency of the ‘Big Questions’.” The success of any institution’s effort to become an engaged institution depends on the strength of alignment between institutional goals and the focus of community engaged actions. Dr. Holland observed the key reasons why community engagement matters:

- Improves specific student learning and development outcomes
- Creates happy, involved alumni
- Integrates teaching, learning and research
- Develops interdisciplinary skills among faculty
- Attracts new sources of funding
- Attracts and retains students, and the new generation of faculty
- Engages the whole university in a common cause; creates a new sense of ‘community’
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Brenda Wilson-Hale of Marts and Lundy – fundraising consultants, and former Vice President for Development at RPI, DePaul University and Washington University, addressed the strategic fund raising opportunities for universities who commit to community engagement. She described the current fund raising climate for higher education and stressed the significant appeal community engagement has for potential donors, especially individuals.

Development of a Draft Action Plan

Representatives of each institution dedicated a significant portion of the academy time working in teams to develop action plans. The RIT draft action plan (attached) addresses three major outcomes:

1. Recognizing and celebrating community engagement activities already taking place at RIT.
2. Enhancing institutional and faculty capacity for pursuing engaged teaching, research and scholarship, including amending RIT's definition of “Scholarship” to include the Scholarship of Engagement. (As developed by Ernest L. Boyer, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996)
3. Linking community engagement to all dimensions of RIT's new strategic plan.

Fit with RIT's 2015-2025 Strategic Plan

In reviewing the reports of the Task Forces addressing the six dimensions of the 2015-2025 Strategic Plan, we conclude community engagement has the potential to become a unifying theme of the plan. Several distinct and unifying ideas are articulated in the Task Force reports that mesh well with an emphasis on community engagement, including interdisciplinarity, flexibility, experiential learning, student-centeredness, removing barriers to collaboration, resource development, research and scholarship.

1. Student Success
   The Task Force report discusses many of the same challenges higher education is facing as those discussed at the Engagement Academy by Dr. Ramaley and Dr. Holland. The Task Force report emphasizes student retention and on-time graduation. There is a significant body of research supporting the proposition that community engaged academic learning experiences enhance student retention and overall academic success. While the Task Force speaks to co-curricular activities, it is important to note that the value of engaged teaching and learning encompassing rigor and outcomes assessment, especially in activities such as community-based research projects, is what makes community engagement an important strategy for student success.

   The Task Force report emphasizes the importance of experiential learning and a multidisciplinary capstone that “includes service to the community and engagement with RIT faculty.” This is precisely the kind of academic experience embedded in a commitment to engagement. However, to be faithful to the
principles of engagement, the capstone must be part of authentic, reciprocal, mutually beneficial partnerships with community partners.

2. Organizational Agility The Task Force report urges a clear and universally understood identity and strategic direction. Community engagement could be the unifying theme through which this identity emerges. RIT could build its reputation by being recognized for its transformative partnerships, locally, regionally, nationally and globally. The Task Force further recommends that the focused definition undergird “all university initiatives.” That is the potential community engagement represents. The Task Force also recommends that RIT “create a real collaborative and interdisciplinary structure and culture for students/faculty/staff/alumni.” Interdisciplinarity is the hallmark of all community engagement activities and this recommendation is consistent with the underlying value of a commitment to community engagement.

The Task Force suggests that the university be “willing to take risks” and “empower local decision making responsibilities.” This would enable each academic unit to assess community engagement opportunities and allocate resources to implement appropriate student and faculty community engagement activities.

3. Global Engagement and International Education Many of the recommendations in this Task Force report complement an emphasis on community engagement. The report links knowledge and multicultural competencies with a range of student experiences, and promotes the development of globally oriented curricula and research. Global engagement could be one of the cornerstones of an engagement strategy for the university, and can be achieved while enhancing a commitment to local community engagement. In fact, local experiences are one pathway for students to build that knowledge and understanding and to enhance personal growth and development. Rochester is host to a broad range of international communities and through academically appropriate activities may provide the first opportunity for students to experience cultures different from their own.

4. Curricular Innovation and Creativity This Task Force report provides the foundation for developing community engagement, with an emphasis on collaboration and interdisciplinarity, innovation in teaching, integrative learning, fostering enhanced student/faculty relationships and building a reputation “for exciting and dynamic educational models.” Further, the Task Force recognizes the importance of creating learning experiences that enable students to “find the connection between the classroom experience and the world around them”, and building an institutional reputation for being “committed to thoughtful and informed positive change within the community in which it resides and the larger global stage.”

5. Diversity The strong linkage between community engagement and diversity is a prime justification for embracing a community engagement culture at RIT.
Research suggests that universities that embrace community engagement have a distinct advantage in recruiting and retaining a diverse student population and faculty, including women and underrepresented minorities. Further, through community engaged activities, embedded in reciprocal and mutually beneficial partnerships, students gain an appreciation of the imperatives for valuing diversity and learning to live and work in a diverse world.

6. Research and Graduate Education Community engagement is a natural vehicle for fostering a strong research agenda for faculty and students. New funding opportunities through sponsored research sources can open up because of research needs identified through strong community partnerships. Many public funding agencies have allocated specific resources for research projects that utilize a community-based participatory research model and a growing number of PhD students are using this methodology for dissertation research. The Task Force emphasizes the value of interdisciplinary research and urges placing a higher value on interdisciplinary research initiatives, including recognition for co-PIs. Engaged research is inherently interdisciplinary and every member of the research team, including community partners, plays a critical role in the research endeavor. Community engagement at the graduate level can be a catalyst for graduate research projects and funding.

Next Steps

The draft Action Plan outlines a series of actions to enhance institutional and faculty capacity for community engagement.

The Engaged Scholarship Working Group, with representatives from across the campus, will continue to meet to promote the concept of engaged scholarship, to build capacity among interested faculty for engaged work and to assist with the implementation of the Engagement Action plan.

As part of the plan, the RIT team strongly urges institutional support to bring Dr. Ramaley and Dr. Holland to campus for two days in September to meet with administrators, development representatives and interested faculty to propel a campus-wide conversation about developing RIT’s commitment and reputation as a community engaged institution. We suggest that they be invited to a Liberty Hill Breakfast to present the very compelling case for why community engagement is critical to the future of higher education institutions and to discuss the many benefits to be derived by making the commitment to community engagement. They should also meet with the Academic Affairs Committee of Academic Senate if the committee is charged with amending RIT’s definition of scholarship.

We spoke with Dr. Ramaley and Dr. Holland about this possibility and they are both available September 22 and 23. The estimated cost of the two-day visit and related expenses would be approximately $9,500.
Conclusion

RIT 2015-2025 will be recognized as an engaged university, fostering transformative partnerships – locally, regionally and globally – through teaching, research and scholarship.