

Confronting the Careless University

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Author Note

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Abstract

In a keynote address at the American Democracy Project conference in June of 2012, Byron P. White argued that despite good intentions, there are powerful forces within institutions that “challenge our best efforts at democratic engagement.” He described a series of disconnects between communities and institutions that must be overcome to fulfill the promise of a university that cares about the community in which it is embedded. Because of the importance and timeliness of the address, the editors chose to publish the speech almost as it was given without peer review. (Audio file of speech included with article)

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One of my first conversations as a new employee at Cleveland State University was with a senior faculty member in one of our health professions disciplines. She initiated the meeting and I soon learned why. Just a few weeks before I arrived, the department had submitted a major federal grant to launch a diabetes prevention program in the Central neighborhood near campus.

Now Central is typical of many of the residential neighborhoods that surround anchor institutions – especially hospitals and universities like Cleveland State – that are located in the heart of major metropolitan areas. It's a proud, mostly African-American community of active residents who are beginning to see signs of neighborhood revitalization after decades of population and job loss, and social decline.

It also turns out that Central has one of the highest rates of diabetes in Cleveland, which is why the faculty member with whom I was meeting and her colleagues had made it the target of their grant application. In fact, one of the features of the proposal was to train residents to possess the skills needed to care for people with diabetes, so that they could better assist their neighbors and family members.

The faculty member's request to me was simple: Given the possibility that we might actually obtain this major grant, she wanted me to help her department build relationships with residents in the Central neighborhood.

Now I know what you're thinking: Shouldn't that have been done first? In the faculty members' defense, she recognized this. She explained that the grant had come to the school's attention right around the winter holidays, and with a short window before the deadline there simply was no time to do the community organizing legwork the project deserved.

Besides, she said, even though we hadn't exactly engaged residents directly, there were several community-based organizations in the neighborhood that had relationships with residents, and we had enlisted their support. And she had the letters to prove it.

However, in my mind, compromising the relationship-building work was simply a symptom of a more fundamental concern. The high rate of diabetes in Central had led this faculty leader to the assumption that residents there needed to become better at caring for victims of the disease. She had built her proposal around this belief.

But I asked her: Couldn't you just as easily have concluded that if so many residents in the neighborhood have diabetes, then, in fact, residents in Central are more highly skilled than most other people at caring for people with diabetes. Maybe the real discovery to be made in partnership with these residents was less about their need for training, and more about identifying and multiplying what they already know.

That doesn't mean there would be no benefit to obtaining a grant for the work. But I suspect the level of innovation in determining what the community and the university might do together would be far greater if we had started from the assumption of what people already possess – what they are able to produce without us – than what they haven't acquired and need to receive from us. Who knows, it might have produced a more dynamic proposal.

My faculty friend saw the merit in this approach right away. The irony is that if she had seen it at the beginning, she would have deemed the contribution from the community so critical that the grant writers would have done whatever it took to make sure they had sought community participation. It would have been as essential as figuring out how to round up those letters of support from CEOs of institutions and organizations even though many were out of their offices during the holiday break. But it wasn't.

Now, before you go bashing my friend and thinking you're more enlightened than she, let me say that I do not believe the problem is about her. It is more about the institution she works for. And before you go thinking that your university is more enlightened than mine, let me clarify further. It wasn't so much about Cleveland State, but about the nature of institutions generally.

The fact is, the way our institutions operate often impede us from fully realizing the principles of the asset-based, peer-related, respectful, mutually beneficial, democratic engagement that we profess in our grant proposals, mission statements, and presentations. It's just a fact that, by their natures, institutions are averse to such notions.

The bottom line is this: Institutions don't care.

Now, if that statement is a bit unsettling for you, there's a reason why: It's because *you* care. Everyone in this room cares about the people in the communities where we are involved. You wouldn't be here otherwise. My faculty colleague who asked me for help on the grant, I am absolutely convinced cares

deeply. But you are also a product of your institution. And your instincts and responsibilities as a citizen or friend, and your responsibilities as a representative of your institution are not the same. In fact, sometimes they contradict.

Institutions don't care. People care.

That's not a bad thing, by the way, even if it does create tension. However, it is time we own up to it if we're really going to "re-imagine, strengthen, and deepen our civic work" as the title of this conference suggests. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, deepening the work going forward may require that we loosen our grip on the community a bit, and take greater hold of the way our institutions operate.

Now, before I go on, let me be clear that my goal here is not to bash institutions, especially universities. I am a senior administrator of a large institution and I love what I do. I believe in our mission and I have no doubt that what we do makes a difference in our community, city and region. The potential for the social and economic impact that anchor institutions, particularly in central cities, can make on society is tremendous and largely untapped.

But I have come to realize after years of working on behalf of civic-oriented institutions is that, despite our glowing presentations at conferences like these, we really do struggle to live up to our lofty aspirations for truly democratic engagement. We fall short of sharing full responsibility, accountability and authority for civic work with our community partners, especially marginalized citizens and residents of economically distressed communities.

It is not uncommon for us to submit a grant proposal without full community participation. Or make a major programming decision without community endorsement. Or fail to give residents a measure of authority over the *real* important decisions, like determining how money is spent or who gets hired or what research questions get asked.

I think one of the reasons we compromise our principles in little ways and not so little ways is because we don't believe it's absolutely necessary that we live up to them. We secretly believe that because of the force behind our institutions and the expertise with which they afford us, we can do all that the community does – perhaps even better. We are reluctant to concede that there are things that *only* the community can do. Not things only neighborhood people *know*, but things only they can do.

I mean when we drive by that public housing development, watch the young single mothers, the kids running around outside, the “brothers” hanging out on the corner, it’s very tempting to believe, “You know, really, they need me. They can’t do this.”

Like many of you, I have been greatly influenced in my thinking about community by John McKnight. I sit on the national faculty of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute and have had the privilege of working with John and his co-director, Jody Kretzman, for more than 20 years in Chicago and communities across the country.

Of course, McKnight is best known for his thinking about asset-based approaches to community building, including the practice of asset mapping. But that is not really at the heart of his work. The impetus for his research is around the notion of caring and the community’s unique ability to provide that for itself.

Now, McKnight’s definition of an institution or system is an organization that has impact on the community, but is controlled by professionals and not the residents of the neighborhood. So, some organizations we think of as community-based might be more like institutions under this way of thinking. He contrasts this with associations, which are formal or informal entities that are directly controlled by citizens.

In his book, *The Careless Society*, McKnight says this:

“Service systems can never be reformed so that they will produce care. Care is the consenting commitment of citizens to one another. Care cannot be produced, provided, managed, organized, administered, or commodified. Care is the only thing a system cannot produce. Every institutional effort to replace the real thing is a counterfeit.”

Sounds harsh, huh? Again, that’s because you care. And you sense the tension between your citizen self and your institutional self, both of which are at work in these efforts. But if you think about it, institutions shouldn’t care.

Caring is reckless. It is absurdly human. Caring is the reason why you would throw yourself in front of a moving bus to protect a child. It’s the reason why people run back up the stairs into a burning building. Or open their home to a stranger. Or give money away.

It's impulsive. It's deeply personal. It's irrational. I don't know about you, but I don't want to work for an organization that's impulsive and irrational. I mean once in a while, OK, let's take a risk. But can you imagine the strategy meetings at your university starting with the president or provost saying, "Y'know, I was just kinda thinking. I was in the shower this morning listening to Michael Jackson singing 'Man in the Mirror.' And it hit me: Man, we ought to turn the student center into a homeless shelter! C'mon people, let's make that change."

If staff meetings were like that they would quickly wear thin. We'd be asking for some discipline, consistency, boundaries, focus, in short order. There's a reason why institutions operate differently than communities: Institutions have a singular job to do.

Rich Harwood and John Creighton wrote about this disconnect between the engagement intentions of civic institutions and the practical obstacles they face in realizing those intentions in a report for the Kettering Foundation entitled, "The Organization-First Approach: How Programs Crowd Out Community." Having interviewed dozens of well-intentioned CEOs and executives, Harwood and Creighton write:

"Despite the impulses and aspirations to undertake and sustain engagement, these organizations and leaders find themselves enveloped in a profound and airtight gestalt of inwardness, planning, and professionalism. In short, what we learned is that engagement for these leaders is usually defined in terms of the needs and interests of their organizations, and not those of the community."

These forces of inwardness are powerful. As representatives of those institutions, they pervade our individual intentions to care, sometimes without our even knowing it. My experience is that there are five institutional forces – forces necessary for institutions to function effectively – that sneak into the equation to challenge our best efforts at democratic engagement.

The first force is *mission*. We've all rolled our eyes at the faculty member or administrator who argues against university-community engagement with the flip remark, "We aren't a social service agency." But as short-sighted as the comment may be, it bears some legitimacy. The fact is no institution is going to stray too far from its defined mission. It would be irresponsible to do so. Indeed, the reason institutions exist is to bring strategic focus to a distinct objective.

Community work on the other hand is comprehensive, overlapping, indistinguishable, and messy. Go into a community and say, “Let’s talk about putting people to work” and you won’t get this keenly focused conversation on workforce training or economic trends. You might end up talking about everything parenting to racism, from faith to transportation.

The second institutional force that impedes democratic engagement is *process* and all that it entails: deadlines, approvals, protocols, lines of authority. That is the reason why our deadline to get the grant proposal done trumped the imperative to get community residents on board. It’s the reason why decisions are made at meetings at two in the afternoon, when the professionals are available to meet but the community folks aren’t around.

I’ve met twice over the last couple weeks with a group of institutional leaders to discuss our joint efforts to secure a major grant to work in a community near our campuses, and we’ve yet to invite a neighborhood resident to the meeting. Every meeting we debate whether a resident should be there, who’s the right person, is it too early to bring in the community, will we raise hopes unnecessarily? And every meeting I leave frustrated for not getting up and leaving and refusing to meet unless someone is there whose primary identification is as a resident who lives in that community and not a representative from an institution.

But you know why I don’t leave the meeting? ’Cause we gotta get it done. There’s a process. Next meeting, I keep telling myself.

The third force is the need for *evidence*. Our institutional impulse is to always inquire: How do we know whether what we are doing will work? Community people often place a higher value on the doing. If one of you stood up right now and called a meeting and said, “I’d like you to join me in helping children,” most of us would have to see a white paper on what you mean by “helping children” before we’d even think about signing up.

But a community meeting with the goal of simply helping kids is enough by itself to ignite support. “Why are you here?” “I’m here to help these children.” “Me too.” “Alright, let’s get to work.”

The fourth force is the over-reliance on *expertise*. Institutions are obsessed with who you are – your credentials. Community people are focused on what you’ve done – your credibility. Here’s what I mean: I walked onto the campus of Cleveland State University in February with little more than the President’s

pronouncement that I was a vice president. For the most part, institutional professionals all over the city look at my title, maybe glance at my resume, and treat me like a vice president. They grant me a measure of respect and authority because of the title I carry.

In March, I moved into an apartment in the Central neighborhood near campus while my family transitions from Cincinnati. Do you think I could go to a meeting of the Central community council, share all my credentials from my previous community work, and declare myself qualified to be community council vice president? I would be laughed, if not chased, out of the room. People don't care that I hang out with John McKnight. They want to know things like: How long have you lived here? Who do you know? What have you done for the community? My expertise would be secondary to some proof that I truly cared about the place.

The fifth force is *power*. One of my research projects examined the power dynamics at play in partnerships between Ohio State University and the Weinland Park neighborhood in Columbus that borders the university – a community much like Central. The main thing everyone in the community kept telling me – even those who had positive things to say about working with Ohio State – was that the university can do whatever it wants to do.

For the most part, that is true of universities. We don't always feel that way, largely because we are aware of all the things that make it difficult for us to get our way. And we certainly don't always act like we can do whatever we want. But few institutions have amassed the combination of financial resources, personnel, information, and political clout as universities. Certainly most communities have not.

By contrast, McKnight and Kretzmann point out that there are seven areas for which citizens are better suited than institutions to have impact on a community: health, safety, environment, economic development, food, children, and managing crises.

They argue that these areas are mostly impacted by the realm of associational and interpersonal relationships. If you think about it, these factors are usually most positive not in those places that are heavily serviced by institutions, but in those places where community and interpersonal ties are closest. Health, for instance, is less about the availability of health services than it is about personal lifestyle

decisions. There are studies that show safety is more closely correlated with the number of relationships on a block than by the number of police officers present. Most people get jobs by word of mouth and personal referral than through workforce development programs. You get the point.

It's more than input, then, that we need from community residents if we're going to witness real economic and social transformation of distressed communities. It's more than their insider information, community knowledge and cultural expressions. It's their capacity and desire to care for one another. Institutions can enable it, expand it, multiply it and exalt it. But we cannot duplicate it with our programs and services.

Last week, I attended a meeting of a community advisory board that I sit on. Of the 15 or so people at the meeting, only one person was there whose primary identity was as a resident of the community – even though one-third of the members on the roster are residents. (That's telling isn't it?) Anyway, we got into this discussion about why the community doesn't trust institutions in the neighborhood. One coordinator of a community program mentioned that the residents she talks to don't believe the institutions really do much to help the community. All of us began to defend ourselves, talking about all the wonderful things we're doing for the community. Pretty soon we were devising a community awareness campaign to communicate all the great programs we have as a way to engender trust.

Then the community resident spoke up. She said, "The problem is that people don't see how you are helping them to make a difference in their community." In other words, the reason residents don't find us relevant is not because we aren't doing anything to help them. It's because they have no stake in what we're doing. They are recipients but not producers. And their longing is to be producers. To apply their care in a way that gives them a measure of control over their community. That's what they want from us.

So, what do we do about this? Well, believe it or not, I'm not trying to convince you to go back home and double your efforts. I'm not going to give you five things you can do to better engage citizens. I am not going to give you the luxury of believing that your individual efforts are enough to compensate for the institutional forces of our universities.

I'm also not trying to persuade you to distance yourself from your institution. Sometimes we think that standing at arm's length from the power structure that signs our checks makes us immune from its influence. But we aren't immune. And even if we were, divorcing our work from the institution just cheats the community out of the full economic, political and technical benefit that anchor institutions have the potential to deliver.

So, as you stand in that gap between your university and the community, facing outward, ready to do more, I want to suggest something unconventional: Back off a bit and concede some authority to the folks in the community to not only define what they need, but to create the path to a solution. And instead, pay a little more attention to addressing the institution back over your shoulder.

I believe the next great leap in the university-community engagement movement is going to be less about how we change communities or behave as individual professionals and students in communities, and more about how we fundamentally change the way our institutions operate – about figuring out how we temper the institutional forces that impede our civic sensibilities.

I'm not alone in this assessment. John Saltmarsh and Matt Hartley point this out in their new book: "To Serve a Larger Purpose: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education." In the book they warn:

"As they are most often expressed, civic engagement activities rarely call on colleges and universities to fundamentally change the ways in which they operate, thus preserving underlying assumptions and institutional behaviors. Engagement defined by activity and place has provided a vitally important foundation for the civic engagement movement. Democratic engagement, however, requires something more." They add, "It requires a careful rethinking of the core work of the academy."

While I believe Saltmarsh and Hartley are largely focusing on the academic enterprise, their critique could just as easily be applied to the administrative operations of the university. This makes my job interesting. As a vice president, I am less on the front lines than I once was. My primary job is to create an institutional infrastructure that supports, enables and promotes democratic engagement as an institutional practice.

At Cleveland State engagement is prevalent. But I want democratic engagement principles to be a core operating practice – so that my faculty friend doesn't run

into bureaucratic protocols that prevent her from embracing community expertise. So that the notion of seeing the community first as producer rather than a client is not so much an “aha moment” as it is an “of course” moment: “That’s just the way we do things.”

That means we need to think not only about whether our faculty, students and staff possess the skills to practice this way, but also whether we have adopted business practices that enable them to do so. Fortunately, we have a culture receptive to this challenge and a president in Ron Berkman who has championed such an agenda throughout his career, from his days as dean of urban affairs for the City University of New York system.

But when I really need inspiration, I think of Anzora Adkins.

Ms. Adkins is the president of the Evanston Community Council in Cincinnati, an active partner of Xavier University when I was there. Ms. Adkins sometimes talked way too much at meetings than I thought she should. As far as I was concerned, a lot of times she completely missed the point. She could be irrational, ill-informed and annoying. She would tell you off during the meeting, then give you a big hug after it was over. To be honest, there was more than one time when I felt she was in the way of our being able to really get something done.

But Ms. Adkins worried about the children in her neighborhood more than I did. She was more annoyed than I was by the trash on the street. She loved her neighbors more than I did. She was prouder of the history of her community than I was. She agonized for the family of a gunshot victim more than I did. She was more determined to get residents jobs and keep them out of trouble.

And when I would go back to my cozy office or home at night, she would go home to Evanston, still fretting about her community. And now that I’ve moved on with my career and I’m focused on a different community, she’s still fretting about Evanston.

No amount of expertise or strategic planning or grant funding can substitute for that. If we are serious about social and economic transformation of our communities, what Ms. Adkins contributes must be understood, affirmed, and promoted as every bit as critical, every bit as essential as anything our universities can bring to the table.

In our zeal to make a difference, let's give the Ms. Adkinses in all of our communities the room to lead. And let's push our institutions to establish the practices to let them do it.

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Author Biography



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