A False Dichotomy for Higher Education:
Educating Citizens vs.
Educating Technicians

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Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* last year, Stanley Fish, former dean of the College of Liberal Arts of the University of Illinois-Chicago, admonished the academy to "aim low" (see the interview in this issue of *NCR*). He urged educators to confine their efforts to what they could, in his opinion, reasonably hope to accomplish: giving students a set of materials and skills and stimulating enthusiasm for the subject at hand. Anything else, he argued, was beyond the skill of the educator, the purpose of education, and would run the risk of turning the enterprise of teaching into political indoctrination.[1] Fish was critiquing a commitment made by many institutions of higher education to advance the public good by focusing on developing students' civic capacities, their sense of social responsibility, and their commitment to public action. This commitment has been spearheaded by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Campus Compact, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), and the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU).

Widener University is one of those institutions seeking to promote civic engagement through curricular, cocurricular, and institutional initiatives. In this essay, we present a brief history of the civic mission of higher education and describe the role that civic engagement has played in strategic planning at Widener University. We also look at the opposition encountered at our university and some of the strategies adopted to address it.

Civic Engagement and the Tradition of U.S. Higher Education

The debate over the mission of higher education is not a new one. Proponents on either side of the argument can cite American academic tradition to support their position. Ernest Boyer identifies three discernible yet overlapping phases as characterizing the evolution of American postsecondary institutions.[2] What distinguishes each phase is a generally accepted view of the educational mission of the academy.

The first phase, the "colonial college," was firmly rooted in the British tradition of focusing on development of civic and religious leaders. Faculty were to be teachers and mentors, responsible for the intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of their students. Many of the earliest institutions were seminaries, tied to various religious denominations with curricula largely based on the religious doctrine of the denomination.

The challenge of nation building shaped the second phase of American higher education. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the rapidly developing and expanding nation was in desperate need of technicians with skills to advance the science of agriculture, to build railroads and bridges, and to plan cities. The Morrill Federal Land Grant College Act of 1862 significantly extended the "practical" mission of higher education. Under the Land Grant College Act, states were awarded federal lands, which were to be sold to raise funds to support creation of public colleges and universities dedicated to training students to address the pressing technical

needs of the nation. The democratic and civic mission of land-grant colleges was explicit. In addition to preparing technicians, the land-grant college was to be open to a wide constituency of its state's citizens, and it was to prepare those citizens for participation in civic matters.[3] In fact, service was accepted as an inherent part of the academic mission of both private and public universities. Graduates of the academy were expected to enter civic government, maintain the free press, become leaders of their community, fight public corruption, and in general reshape the morality of society. The colonial college and the land-grant college, although designed for different student populations, shared a mission of "usefulness" to society.[4]

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Toward the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, the "German" model of the university began to exert a strong influence on American higher education. This new model viewed the academic enterprise as most properly devoted to the positivist pursuit of truth through research and intellectual inquiry. The conduct of research increasingly came to be accepted as the primary role of the academician, with teaching and mentoring relegated to secondary importance. The influence of the German model also led to a shift in the focus of curricula. Study of the classics and religious themes was supplanted by an emphasis on discipline-specific, specialized knowledge. Offering postgraduate degree programs in a variety of disciplines became increasingly common. Despite this focus on specialized knowledge, the university of the early twentieth century continued to concern itself with moral and civic goals; "the new scientific focus of college education, particularly the creation of social science

disciplines, was frequently supported by moral and civic justifications."[5]

The end of the Depression and World War II ushered in the third phase in the history of the American academy and witnessed further democratization of higher education. The GI Bill of Rights, authorized in 1944, was a ticket of entry for vast numbers who would have otherwise been unable to attend college. Almost eight million veterans attended college with funds from the GI Bill.[6] In 1947, President Harry Truman's Commission on Higher Education issued a report that called on the nation to provide the means for all citizens to be able to pursue education to their fullest capacity.[7]

Ironically, just as higher education was becoming accepted as a right rather than a privilege, the civic mission of the academy was narrowing. Universities, credited with fostering the scientific know-how that supported the Allied victory, were more than ever seen as the key to the technological and scientific advantage that could secure the country's economic and political hegemony. Priorities shifted to fulfill this role, and the German model of higher education, with its focus on the "professoriate," on "pure" research, and on discipline-specific knowledge, became the ideal of the U.S. academy.

Accompanying the shift to the new model was abandonment of the earlier tradition linking higher education to civic and moral goals. By the late 1970s, the ivory tower was the institutional ideal: a place where discipline-specific knowledge was to be pursued for its own sake, independent of social and political implications and civic obligations. Although religiously affiliated institutions retained their doctrinal missions, the ideal of the secular university was one of intellectual freedom and an arms-length relationship with immediate social concerns. In large part, the student rebellions of the 1970s may be seen as a reaction to the ivory tower turning its back on the social and political struggles of the day.

By the mid-1980s, educators began to organize in an effort to recapture the civic mission of U.S. postsecondary education. Organizations such as the AAC&U, in collaboration with the Campus Compact, the Carnegie Foundation, the AAHE, and more recently the CUMU undertook the task of promoting pedagogical approaches that would encourage civic engagement on the part of students. On July 4, 1999, a colloquium of almost five hundred college and university presidents, convened by Campus Compact and the American Council on Education, issued a declaration of "Civic Responsibility of Higher Education," challenging higher education "to reexamine its public purposes and its commitments to the democratic ideal and to become engaged, through actions and teaching, with its communities."[8]

The Debate Goes on

William M. Sullivan observes that American higher education at the turn of the past century became a "mature industry" that appears to be suffering from a crisis in identity.[9] Like other mature industries, it is highly diversified and made up of public and private sectors, sectarian and nonsectarian identities, large research universities and small liberal arts colleges, highly selective elite universities and open-enrollment regional public colleges. In recent years, this industry has come under attack from many directions. Public officials and consumers alike blame the academy for fiscal inefficiency and question whether the "value-added" (for the individual and for society) of a college education justifies the skyrocketing cost of securing one. Scandals concerning misuse of government research funds and research designs that have placed subjects at what might be characterized as unacceptable risk have raised doubts about the academy's integrity. The downturn of the economy following September 11, 2001, and the political vulnerability of the academy have resulted in dramatic cuts in state funding of public institutions, while elite institutions continue to solidify their fiscal independence through exponentially expanding endowments. The identity crisis

of the industry of higher education, to which Sullivan refers, is its apparent abandonment of the role of agent for promoting civil society, in favor of the role of agent for promoting individual attainment and economic success.

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In the absence of an updated version of the founding conception of itself as a participant in the life of civil society, as a citizen of American democracy, much of higher education has come to operate on a sort of default program of instrumental individualism. This is the familiar notion that the academy exists to research and disseminate knowledge and skills as tools for economic development and the upward mobility of individuals. This default program of instrumental individualism leaves the larger questions of social, political, and moral purpose out of explicit consideration.[10]

The controversy over the mission of higher education has been aired in the popular and academic press over the last several years. One side holds that the academy should stay true to its tradition of civic purpose by addressing urgent social problems, and by preparing students for lives of moral and civic responsibility necessary to support a democratic society. This side advocates giving students learning opportunities that address the real-life problems of our communities and that contribute to the search for solutions to these problems.

The other side holds that the ivory tower best serves public purposes by giving students discipline-specific competence and by not inculcating students with partisan views that do not promote critical thinking. Stanley Fish, in various editorials and public appearances, argues that it is both dangerous and counter-

productive for the academy to concern itself with anything beyond imparting discipline-specific knowledge because teachers might cross the boundary from presentation of ideas to promotion of partisan views.[11] It is counterproductive, he says, because teachers untrained in the pedagogy of engagement would do it poorly, and even more important they would be diverted from their primary responsibilities. Fish supports the ivory-tower ideal as a positive and appropriate end point in the evolution of the academy.[12]

Widener University's New Vision and Mission

As members of the strategic planning committee that drafted Widener's new mission and vision statements, we supported the idea of making civic engagement central to the process of "repositioning" Widener as a major metropolitan university. Not surprisingly, we argue that promotion of democratic values is consistent with the commitment of universities to the free exchange of ideas. We also argue that the critics fail to recognize the significant ways in which service learning can energize the learning of discipline-specific content and skills.

In his inaugural address as president of Widener University on October 4, 2002, James T. Harris III made it clear that he expected to make the university's commitment to civic engagement a cornerstone of his administration and suggested that Widener commit itself to four promises:

1. To produce citizens who are trained for both competency and character
2. To prepare citizens who truly understand collaboration and possess community-building skills
3. To produce citizens who embrace the multicultural nature of our democratic society
4. To produce good citizens by modeling good citizenship on and off campus[13]

In making these pledges, Harris made these observations about Widener's urban location:

I know of very few places in the country where a university is located in the middle of such a fertile and promising environment as here in Chester. I have had people say to me, "Oh, Jim, it's a shame that Widener isn't located in a 'better' community." I couldn't disagree more. We are located precisely in a vibrant community with myriad opportunities for scholarship, teaching, and service. Where better than right here and right now to develop a model twenty-first-century university: a university committed to the ideals of all great universities—teaching, scholarship, and service—but also a dynamic twenty-first-century metropolitan university that views its focus as preparing students to be responsible citizens?[14]

This explicit call for Widener to embrace its surrounding community and form partnerships with the community as an integral part of the educational experience of Widener students represented a major shift in institutional focus. A distressed city of thirty-six thousand residents located just twelve miles from center-city Philadelphia, Chester has 41 percent of its adult population outside the labor force, a poverty rate of 27 percent, and the lowest-ranking school district in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. At the time of Harris's arrival, Chester was widely seen on campus as a liability for the university. His predecessor had occupied the presidency for twenty years and used an entrepreneurial style of leadership to continue the transformation of the institution from a baccalaureate military school into a comprehensive institution with significant involvement in graduate education. Although the former president worked to establish close ties with Chester's political leaders, his frustration and impatience with a city bureaucracy and one-party domination of city government dimmed his enthusiasm for any major joint project with Chester. This negative view of the city, coupled with security concerns, contributed to development of a fortress mentality on the campus—perhaps best symbolized by the daily closing and locking at dusk of a pedestrian

walkway over the freeway that separates the Widener campus from adjacent parts of the city.

To reinforce his commitment to breaking down this fortress mentality and repositioning Widener as a metropolitan university, Harris authorized Widener's becoming a member of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities and created a new position, special assistant to the president for community engagement. In supporting membership in CUMU, President Harris committed himself and members of his senior leadership team to establishing a visible presence in that organization. In establishing the Office for Community Engagement, he signaled the importance of community partnerships to his administration.

Concerns About Widener's New Vision and Mission

There was strong criticism from some faculty of Harris's intention to emphasize civic engagement and the metropolitan nature of the university and the extent to which these elements were incorporated in the vision and mission statements that emerged from the strategic planning process launched by the president. The vision statement is that "Widener aspires to be the nation's preeminent metropolitan university recognized for an unparalleled academic environment, innovative approaches to learning, active scholarship, and the preparation of students for responsible citizenship in a global society." The mission statement: "As a leading metropolitan university, we achieve our mission at Widener by creating a learning environment where curricula are connected to societal issues through civic engagement. We lead by providing a unique combination of liberal arts and professional education in a challenging, scholarly, and culturally diverse academic community. We engage our students through dynamic teaching, active scholarship, personal attention, and experiential learning. We inspire our students to be citizens of character who demonstrate professional and civic leadership. We contribute to the vitality and well being of the communities we serve."[15]

One expression of opposition to this agenda focused on service learning and the issue of faculty control of the curriculum. Some faculty read the mission statement as a dictate to faculty across all curricula to convert traditional courses into service-learning courses. They viewed this statement as signaling an inappropriate administrative intrusion into the faculty's purview over curriculum. There was also speculation that units and departments that resisted would be punished through withholding of resources. Underlying these concerns was the view that encouraging civic engagement was not an appropriate expectation of faculty, whose primary focus must be engaging students with content specific to the faculty member's area of expertise. Some faculty feared the emphasis on civic engagement would result in additional burdens being placed on them without sufficient resources to make the demands manageable, given the existing expectations for retention, promotion, and merit salary increases.

Promoting Learning Outcomes That Go Beyond Discipline-Specific Knowledge and Skills

Stanley Fish is certainly correct in his assertion that not all faculty are well prepared to encourage civic engagement through service learning or other pedagogical tools. If a university decides to promote civic engagement as a means of educating "citizens of character," it must be prepared to support faculty to develop the knowledge and skills needed to use civic engagement effectively. At Widener, this support is reflected, in part, in a new faculty development program focused specifically on service learning. This program provides a one-course release for each of two successive semesters to those selected for the program and funding to cover the cost of replacement adjunct faculty. In the first semester, academic service-learning fellows participate in a weekly seminar designed to introduce them to concepts and issues associated with academic service learning and to help them in designing a course to be offered the following semester. Support for the design includes assistance from the Office for Community Engage-

ment in identifying a community partner for the course. In the second semester, the faculty fellows offer for the first time their academic service-learning courses. In addition to this new faculty development program, the university has also doubled the budget for two other faculty development programs, either of which could also help support faculty's involvement in service learning.

Widener's strategic plan includes a mechanism to address the issue of how to reward faculty for civic engagement efforts. Specifically, there is an objective in the plan that calls on all faculty groups to "reassess and adjust where appropriate"[16] standards for promotion, tenure, retention, and merit-based salary increase in light of new goals for academic excellence relating to teaching, research, or program development. Therefore all faculty will have the opportunity to help ensure that expectations for faculty performance are consistent with the university's new mission and the resource infrastructure that is being built to support the mission. In this regard, the academic leaders of the institution can also play an important role in encouraging faculty to consider how enrichment of teaching through civic engagement can also become part of the scholarship of faculty. At Widener, there has been an emphasis for several years on collaborative research between faculty and undergraduate students. For some faculty, community engagement projects may be a fruitful context for such collaborative research.

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It is unrealistic, however, to expect all faculty to adapt their courses or research to promote civic engagement. At Widener, President Harris has explicitly stated on several occasions that service learning is only one of an array of pedagogical approaches for encouraging civic engagement. He has also suggested that service learning would not be an appropriate methodology in many courses, and that far fewer than half of all faculty would ever be involved in service learning. To reinforce the commitment to faculty control of curriculum, Widener's strategic plan includes specific objectives and action steps affirming faculty's direct involvement in reviewing and revising the curriculum. For example, a major goal was added to the plan: "Ensure academic excellence by maintaining the university's commitment to academic freedom and by upholding faculty governance, especially in matters pertaining to pedagogy, curriculum, and scholarship."[17] In addition, under the goal that reads "Achieve an unparalleled academic environment by promoting rigorous educational programs, productive scholarship, and lifelong learning,"[18] objectives and action steps call on each academic unit to establish goals for academic excellence in the areas of curriculum, faculty accomplishments, and student accomplishments and to propose, where appropriate, adjustments and revisions of promotion and tenure guidelines in relation to the goals for academic excellence. Thus the plan explicitly and specifically identifies the faculty as the primary agent for curriculum revision and all that flows from revision of the curriculum.

To the degree that promoting learning outcomes beyond discipline-specific knowledge and skills does become part of an educational institution's mission, it is important for those learning outcomes to be routinely assessed. Assessment in turn requires formal articulation of those learning outcomes. As Widener begins to implement its strategic plan, an essential step in the process is to establish student learning outcomes that are emblematic of being a "citizen of character," and to specify how "connecting curricula to societal issues" can be expected to contribute to those learning outcomes. Only through this process of gathering information about the efficacy of the university's attempts to promote

civic engagement and the impact of that engagement on learning can the members of the university community critically evaluate this new emphasis.

Civic Engagement and Service Learning as a Form of Active Learning

Critics often seem to ignore the potential positive impact of civic engagement and service learning on discipline-specific learning outcomes. There is a growing body of literature to suggest that learners experience greater retention of information with which they actively engage.[19] Activities such as

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small-group discussions and cooperative projects, peer tutoring, reciprocal teaching (where students assume the role of teacher), debates, role playing, and a variety of writing exercises encourage students to better explore their understanding of new information and to organize it so as to increase its interconnectedness with other information already residing in memory.

Service-learning models, in which community-service projects are embedded within academic coursework, are one form of active learning. This approach gives students the opportunity to apply formally acquired knowledge and skills to community problems and needs. Nearly one-third of all K–12 schools and half of public high schools provide such service-learning programs.[20] Considerable recent evidence suggests that participation of adolescents in service-learning projects promotes an array of positive outcomes, among them improved academic achievement, positive attitude toward school, increased civic engagement, social maturity,

concern for others, emotional intelligence, positive self-concept, and reduced involvement in risky behavior.[21]

The beneficial effects of participating in service-learning projects may derive in part from their collaborative nature. Findings suggest that students working with other students, in comparison to students who interact primarily with an adult teacher, are more likely to be adventurous and innovative in dealing with new information, are more likely to develop a sophisticated view of how epistemological beliefs are constructed, and have more opportunities for elaborating on their understanding of information and for discovering flaws in their thinking and reasoning.[22]

Although much of this research has been conducted with middle school or high school students, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that similar positive effects on learning can be found with college students. For example, service learning has been positively associated with social and emotional development, and college students who have service-learning experience show greater evidence of community involvement following graduation than do students who did not have such experience. Furthermore, the research suggests that service learning can promote achievement of student learning outcomes in courses in which it is a part and in subsequent courses.[23]

Conclusions

In our view, the argument that encouraging civic engagement through service learning is a distraction from the primary goal of furthering student academic achievement and development of discipline-specific knowledge and skill is misguided. Its proponents ignore the evidence that service learning and civic engagement can facilitate and deepen the understanding of both discipline-specific knowledge and other skills and attitudes that the institution wants to encourage its students to develop. We

argue that institutions can educate for civic as well as technical competence. In other words, the dichotomy that has dominated the debate is a false and unnecessary one.

In adopting its new vision and mission, Widener University joined ranks with those academicians who argue that pedagogical goals and approaches that promote civic engagement are neither a disguise for inculcating partisan views nor an obstacle to maximizing discipline-specific knowledge. We take the position that higher education has a responsibility to promote development of values that contribute to creating and maintaining a social order in which the formalized critical inquiry essential to developing discipline-specific knowledge can flourish. We believe that civic engagement is a potentially powerful tool for promoting development of such values. Furthermore, embedding consideration of such values in courses across the curriculum, as opposed to creating special courses for inculcating such values, has the potential to improve learning outcomes for both civic values and discipline-specific knowledge and skills. Better understanding and appreciation of civic values can be achieved if they are examined in the context of discipline-specific issues and encountered as recurring curriculum threads across the program of study. Encouraging pedagogical activity across disciplines that are designed to encourage civic engagement can constitute a multidisciplinary base for considering how an educated citizen can contribute to creating a social order that promotes development and use of knowledge.

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