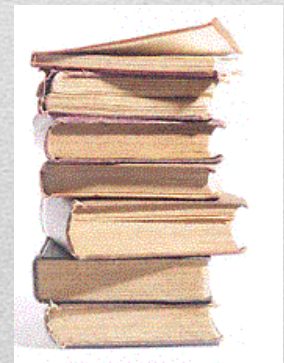# Eleven Theses on Community Engagement at Universities

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Introduction

In embracing CE at universities critical engagement with certain issues is unavoidable:

- The idea of the university itself and its core purposes, responsibilities, and functions
- Notions of knowledge and how it is constructed
- The rationale for undertaking community engagement, and expectations of its benefits
- The value basis of community engagement
- Understandings of engagement
- How 'community' is to be defined

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I will address the following issues:

1. How are we to conceptualize community engagement and what are the merits and implications of different approaches to community engagement?
2. While learning and teaching and research are indisputably core purposes of universities, is the same status to be accorded to community engagement?
3. In so far as there is a relationship between learning-teaching and research, what, if any, is the relationship between community engagement and learning-teaching and research?
4. What are the necessary conditions for the effective undertaking and institutionalization of community engagement, and what are the implications of institutionalizing community engagement for different arenas of the university?

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THESIS 1

With respect to the status of CE: a provisional first thesis is that universities serve two core purposes and play at least five key roles:

- Purpose 1 = to produce knowledge
- Purpose 2 = disseminate knowledge and form and cultivate inquiring and critical minds
- Role 1 = Produce knowledgeable, competent and skilled graduates
- Role 2 = Creatively undertake different kinds of rigorous scholarship – of discovery, integration, application and teaching, etc.
- Role 3 = Contribute to forging a critical and democratic citizenship
- Role 4 = Actively engage with the pressing economic and social development needs and challenges of societies
- Role 5 = Proactively engage with our societies at the intellectual and, more generally, cultural level

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THESIS 2

- We must make a distinction between the social responsiveness of a university to its political, economic and social contexts and CE.

- Being alive to historical and contemporary conditions, whether local, national or global, and being socially responsive does not mean that a university is necessarily actively or institutionally involved in CE - being sensitive to economic and social conditions and challenges is a necessary condition for community engagement, but is not a sufficient condition.

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THESIS 3

What status are we to accord to CE? Is CE a third purpose of higher education? Or is CE simply one further key role of a university?

- Wish to contend that the value and quality of the CE undertaken by a university strongly depends on the quality of a university's teaching and learning and research. That is to say, ultimately, any meaningful CE and respectful and beneficial partnerships with communities requires a university to be characterised by high quality research and teaching and learning.

- What basis, otherwise, can there be for mutually respectful and beneficial partnerships - as opposed to disdainful relationships - with communities?

THESIS 4

- Historically, CE has encompassed civic duty, community outreach of different kinds and, more recently 'service-learning'.

- Also necessary to distinguish between CE undertaken as a volunteer activity by individual students and scholars, and CE as a matter of conscious institutional policy or practice.

- CE tends to be approached in two different ways.

- ✓ In some cases, teaching and learning, research and community engagement are conceived of as essentially distinct activities, and are pursued as separate and independent activities with no or little connection between them.

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- In other cases, teaching and learning, research and community engagement are conceptualised as related and connected activities.

- As <u>intersecting</u> activities
= service learning
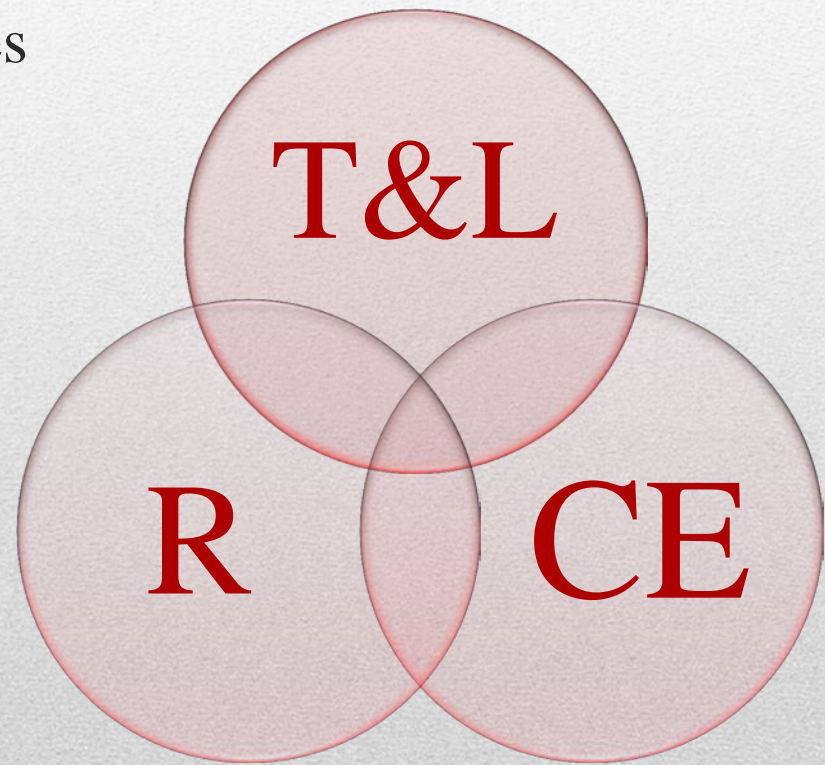
- As <u>cutting across</u> the activities of teaching and learning and research, and having implications for all the teaching and learning and research activities of the university.

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R

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Service-learning represents learning, enquiry and discovery on the part of students and academics through mutually beneficial and respectful engagement with specific communities around mutually defined issues.

- Whereas civic duty and community outreach through student and staff volunteerism have traditionally been activities distinct from teaching-learning and research, service-learning has sought to be embedded in and to build on the core knowledge production and dissemination purposes of the university.

- Instead of being a separate and disconnected activity from the University's core activities, community engagement in the form of *service-learning* has become a 'curricular innovation' infused in the teaching and learning and research activities of the university.

THESIS 5

- In so far as there are three possible approaches to community engagement, (separate, intersecting and cutting across), rather than prescribe what is the ideal approach in the abstract there should perhaps be room for different approaches as appropriate to the different and diverse roles that may be allocated to universities in any national system of higher education, in accordance with the specific mission of a university, its values and institutional and developmental context.

THESIS 6

- The Talloires Declaration: universities 'carry a unique obligation to listen, understand and contribute to social transformation and development. Higher education must extend itself for the good of society… and 'the university has a responsibility to participate actively in the democratic process and to empower those who are less privileged' - raises the ethical and social value basis of CE

- CE can facilitate the pursuit of specific institutional values and commitments and translate these into concrete deeds and action. Through CE, universities can help give expression to the great promise of higher education to be 'a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy' and can 'embrace the ethics of social accountability and an expansive humanism' by being 'guided by the developmentalist and democratizing demands of global "public good"'

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THESIS 7

- Many virtuous claims made for CE - must, however, continuously and critically interrogate the claims that are made.
- Must also acknowledge that CE gives rise to numerous and diverse challenges:
- Forging institutional consensus on whether the core purposes, roles and responsibilities, of universities include CE
- Conceptual challenge of defining 'CE,' and institutionally elaborating and developing an associated praxis
- Conceptual challenge also extends to the meaning of 'service learning'
- Development of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and research methodologies related to CE and service-learning - profound epistemological and ontological issues involved.

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- Integrating CE, and specifically service learning, into academic programme development and academic planning and institutional planning.

- The conception of 'community'

- Whether responsibility for CE is to be infused into and located entirely within academic departments, or needs to be also located within a separate central entity within the university

- Effective monitoring, review and quality assurance of CE, including a code of ethical conduct.

- Institutional recognition and reward structures

- Scholars and practitioners with the knowledge, expertise and skills to guide and support the institutional development of community engagement

- Logistical issues related to the implementation of CE

- Finances for developing, extending and sustaining high-quality CE•15

THESIS 8

- No alternative to continuous engagement and persuasion around the importance and academic and related and related benefits of community engagement.

- Critical to build among diverse actors (individual and institutional) through open and deliberative conversations the valuing of community engagement as an *institutional* activity; and to then formulate explicit and clear goals related to community engagement, consider the implications for staffing, infrastructure and finances, and to develop clear and explicit indicators of success.

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THESIS 9

CE involves choices, and the critical issues are how are we to 'formulate the available choices', how are we 'to argue over them', and through what just mechanisms will there be the 'opportunity to choose' and to make decisions

(Wright Mills, 1959: 174).

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THESIS 10

- Commitment and passion essential for CE but so too are theorisation and dispassionate reflection, as befitting a university. Vitally important to adequately *theorize* community engagement – both what it *is*, and what it *is not* if universities are to have an adequate community engagement practice.

- Important tasks:
- to develop a scholarly knowledge-base through rigorous scholarship;
- to ensure that CE becomes an arena of scholarly and professional development through university education and training. •18

THESIS 11

- CE has to inspire academics and students, and be effectively communicated, managed, and implemented

- Requires sober, careful, detailed and realistic planning - best laid plans are only as good as their implementation

- The challenge for CE is to map a deliberate, bold and resolute, yet sober path with continuities and discontinuities as appropriate to given and changing conditions.