

Civic engagement and the value of college

By Margee Ensign

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Perception is reality. That is bad news for those of us in higher education, as several polls show sharp declines in the perceived value of a college education and of colleges in general. A chief complaint is almost always in connection with our relationship to civil society. Critics suggest that the academy is a bastion of politically correct liberal ideas but never really contributes much to the greater good. Occasionally they are right, but mostly they're wrong.

Higher education leaders don't talk enough about the value that colleges and universities contribute to society. Some people know about the value of academic research, which has contributed to everything from the polio vaccine to MRIs, for example, but far fewer know that academic research has contributed to nearly three out of four of the most groundbreaking inventions since 1950, according to a recent study. And the contributions go far beyond scientific inventions.

Some of these important innovations have grown out of involvement in community engagement. At Dickinson College, where I serve as president, students educate local citizens so they can test the waterways where they live and monitor the health of those bodies of water. They do research on solutions to homelessness. They help local business come up with marketing strategies to increase revenue. The U.S. Army War College, our neighbor in Carlisle, Pa., attracts high-ranking military officials from around the world to study; our students in our multi-lingual writing center help those officials hone their writing skills. My point is that colleges and universities are contributing to society, to the common good, in many useful, if not always highly visible, ways.

When I first arrived at Dickinson, we did an audit of the number of community engagement projects offered by our institution. I received 22 pages listing hundreds of such efforts. But many in the greater community didn't know that they even existed. As members of the academy, we have to ensure that our efforts are not only having a positive impact, but that our communities know about those resources. Forgetting this means a significant devaluation of the services that we are providing to our communities.

The 18th-century revolutionary Benjamin Rush founded Dickinson to foster civically engaged students. When I arrived on campus last year, I brought a background of high-stakes community engagement with me. I was president of American University of Nigeria during a time when we were under a state of emergency because of regional terrorist groups. Working with local religious leaders and community leaders, I co-founded the Adamawa Peace Initiative and responded to escalating violence with education, empowerment and community development. Our students and staff fed nearly 300,000 refugees fleeing violence, and helped rescue a group of Chibok students who had escaped after being kidnapped by the Boko Haram. We created educational radio programs for children, multi-ethnic sports programs for teenagers, computer training for unemployed youth, literacy training and materials for women, sustainable agricultural training for farmers, recycling programs to clean the environment and create new jobs.

These experiences took learning outside the classroom, enabling our students to use their skills in both research and application as they learned about the local problems people faced, and helped to devise and implement appropriate solutions. It was life changing. Life changing for our students, for our community, and for the locals and refugees we were able to help.

Ultimately, our job in higher education is to ignite a spark within a student that sets off his or her passion. One of the most effective ways we can do that is through civic engagement. Regardless of the subject matter a student pursues, it's up to us to help our students become graduates who will become servant leaders for their communities. This is valuable work, and we must become better at making certain that our society knows about it.

Colleges and universities must be more purposeful in demonstrating our value to our communities. While our focus must not stray from our primary missions of teaching and research, we need to be hyper-sensitive of our neighbors, the struggles they are facing, and what we're doing to help. By publicizing such important efforts, perhaps our public perception can become more aligned with reality.

Margee Ensign is president of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa. She was president of American University of Nigeria from 2010 to 2017.