Address at the opening of the Community Engagement week

Eden Grove

1 March 2010

Introduction

The Deputy Vice-Chancellors, the Director of Community Engagement, colleagues, students, ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for the privilege of addressing you this evening at the launch of Community Engagement Week.

Alongside producing and disseminating knowledge, today an accepted third purpose of universities is *community engagement*.

We must make a distinction between a university being responsive to its political, economic and social contexts and *community engagement*.

Being alive to context does not mean that a university is necessarily engaged with communities, however we may define these.

That is to say, in much as sensitivity to economic and social conditions and challenges is a necessary condition for community engagement, it is not a *sufficient* condition.

At different moments and to differing degrees, community engagement has encompassed community outreach, student and staff volunteer activities and, more recently, what has come to be termed ‘service-learning’.

Further, community engagement has tended to be approached in two different ways.

One is where teaching and learning, research and community engagement have been conceived of as essentially distinct activities. In

this instance, they have been pursued as separate and independent activities and there has been little or no connection between these activities.

Another approach has been to view teaching and learning, research and community engagement as related and intersecting activities, with their intersections constituting the specific activity of service-learning.

Service-learning has sought to build on the core knowledge production and dissemination purposes of the university. Instead of being an add-on, disconnected from the University's core activities, as community outreach and volunteerism have often been, service-learning has sought to become a "curricular innovation" (Stanton, 2008:2) infused in the teaching and learning and research activities of the University.

Service-learning seeks to

> …engage students in activities where *both the community and student* are primary beneficiaries and where the primary goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance student *learning* through rendering this service.
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> This form of community engagement is underpinned by the assumption that service is enriched through scholarly activity and that scholarly activity, particularly student learning, is enriched through service to the community (CHE, 2006:15).

It should be clear that there are good reasons why as a University we should be committed to undertaking community engagement and devoting resources to it.

Our location and immediate context, however, provide additional compelling reasons.

It must be observed that the economic and social structure of Grahamstown, like thousands of towns across South Africa and Africa, has been profoundly shaped by colonialism and apartheid.

Fifteen years into our democracy, the legacies of colonialism and apartheid remain stark, and there is a considerable distance to be travelled for economic, social and human rights to become substantive realities for the historically disadvantaged and socially marginalized inhabitants of this town.

During the past fifteen years of democracy in South Africa there have certainly been some important economic and social gains. Yet the reality is that our country continues to be one of

the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, education, health and living conditions.

The cleavages of ‘race’, class, gender and geography are all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of our fellow citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while a vulgar mentality of “greed is cool” runs rampant in our society.

Patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to economic and social development. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that destroys innumerable lives and wreaks havoc in Grahamstown and elsewhere.

HIV/AIDS exacerbates the fault-lines of our society, intensifies our social challenges and has reduced life-expectancy from almost 60 years to about 47 years.

These realities must offend our sensibilities, fill us with shame, and should as students, as staff, and as an institution spur us to action.

Rhodes' mission statement proclaims that we shall strive 'through community service to contribute to the development of the Eastern Cape', and that we shall 'foster the all-round development of our students'.

Our Community Engagement policy commits us to draw on our knowledge and expertise to work 'actively to improve the quality of life of individuals in Grahamstown and Eastern Cape communities', and to 'fostering an ethos of voluntary community service (among our) staff

and student body, leading to well-rounded graduate citizens who will be active agents for positive social change'.

Community engagement provides the opportunities to put our commitments into practice and to exemplify our values through deeds and action; to put our knowledge, expertise and skills to work, and to forge mutually respectful, beneficial and reciprocal relationships with defined constituencies, institutions, organisations, groups and individuals.

As much as we seek to help build the capabilities of specific institutions, constituencies and individuals, we also seek to develop as individuals and citizens, and as an institution, through a process of discovery, listening, understanding and contributing.

As one of our past student volunteers, Cassidy Parker, who is currently on a Flanagan scholarship at York University in the UK, has commented: ‘volunteering has taught me about myself and my relationship to people and the world around me in ways that no text book on philosophy or economics ever could’.

I’m not surprised! My own abiding interest in the history and geography, the philosophy and sociology, and the economics and politics of higher education was acquired not through lectures but through my involvement in student political organisations in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

My communication skills and expertise in writing proposals, interacting with donors and fund-raising were honed outside the classroom in a community newspaper that I headed in the Western Cape in the mid-1980s

Throughout the 1980s it was through participation in media, community and educational organisations that I had the privilege of a marvellous schooling in ethics, discipline and organisation building and development.

It was from the workers in the emerging radical trade union movement that I learnt the vital and rewarding culture of democratic practice.

It was also through these workers, poor Xhosa and Afrikaans-speaking men and women, and youth and students, that I developed a passion for educating, and that I learnt about teaching and learning, curriculum and pedagogy.

Necessary and invaluable as academic disciplines and formal study are, there is a limit to how much you can learn, develop, and

discover yourself through books, lectures and essays alone.

There is no substitute for involvement in community organisations and projects if one wishes to expand one's knowledge, enhance one's understanding of the world, and extend one's skills and competencies.

Rhodes' Community Engagement provides the opportunities for this.

At the same time, it is an engagement on the part of the future intellectuals and professionals of our society with our social problems and challenges and an expression of commitment to address these.

It also helps us to give expression to the idea of universities promoting critical and democratic citizenship, contributing to widening educational

and social opportunities, and advancing the public good.

Conclusion

The Rhodes University motto is ‘Truth, Virtue, Strength’!

Our slogan proclaims that we aspire to be a place ‘where leaders learn’.

The Jewish sage Hillel reminds us that: ‘If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?’

Community engagement provides the opportunity to give effect to our motto and slogan and to embrace and personify Hillel’s wise words.