

EVALUATING THE ENGAGED INSTITUTION:
THE CONCEPTUALIZATIONS AND DISCOURSES OF ENGAGEMENT

Victoria A. Steel

Dr. Peggy Placier, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

As a relatively new term applied to the activities of higher education, “engagement” is an emerging conception that is being constructed and defined by actors within and outside of higher education. These constructions can be linked to one of two legitimizing discourses regarding the role and purpose of higher education as a whole – epistemological and political (Brubacher, 1982). Nested into the political perspective are three distinct themes for how higher education should meet its social or public service mission – civic education, collaboration, or public service (Kezar, 2005). Currently, systems and measures for evaluating engagement are being developed. The activity and process of evaluation defines measures, refines concepts, directs resources and shapes policy. Thus, the discourses that are invoked to support the evaluation of engagement and the construction and selection of the measures are simultaneously revealing and setting the boundaries for problem and solution conceptualization. Using discourse analysis, this study examined two systems – the North Central Association-Higher Learning Commission and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Gee’s (1999) tools of inquiry were assimilated with Barnetson and Cutright’s (2000) typology of performance indicators to develop engagement evaluation tools of inquiry, which revealed the multi-faceted ways in which the concept of engagement is being constructed and evaluated by different stakeholders.