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Lead Blog



CULTURE FORMING CAN BE MESSY

[Winthrop University](#)

Culture Forming Can Be Messy

This past week I found myself giving a public farewell to a Winthrop employee, Boyd Jones. I hired him 22 years ago and he has provided wonderful service all this time to our students and campus community. I opened by reminding all in attendance that many of us in the student affairs profession are culture formers and culture keepers. I especially extolled the incredible work of this one person for taking student social programming to nationally recognized levels, and he did it as an educator. Doing so he demonstrated to faculty and other staff that the sometimes derided “fun and games” part of our work is central. His work through the years brought an incredible array of cultural and popular performers to our campus that entertained, enlightened, and allowed students to often re-create their thinking about diversity, acceptance, civic discourse, personal and social responsibility. At times, Winthrop, through him, really “pushed the envelope” with some of our performers’ lectures on social issues in a conservative state. I remember having to write a semi-legal brief for off-campus critics defending the right of a serving US Army Colonel to speak at our

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public campus about her sexuality and becoming a gay-rights activist after a 15 year marriage and having four sons. Col. Margarethe Cammermeyer gave the best talk I have ever heard on civil rights! Our campus and our publics evolved. The same issues of civic discourse and engagement emerged other times when we booked Sarah Weddington, repeatedly, to discuss her representation of “Jane Roe” before the US Supreme Court resulting in the landmark pro-choice *Roe v. Wade* case.

What does it mean to change institutional culture? Many institutions genuinely promote their commitments and even appear to take action toward achieving them—but too often, their work produces few sustainable results. To achieve lasting transformation, colleges and universities must face the challenges of institutional change directly. How can those responsible for leading change initiatives systematically address the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of faculty, staff, and students in a manner that is influential, assessable, and sustainable? How can they involve an institution-wide audience that may not be psychologically present or even predisposed to addressing such matters because their own disciplines are front and center in their everyday eyes? How can they move beyond superficial commitment and create real cultural change that crosses many institutional domains and involves many actors? In my view, the key to systemic culture formation change lies in engaging the individual agency of faculty, staff, and students (Ardaiolo, 2013).

We know students’ growth and development around issues of Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement have become an international concern. Accordingly, President Jamie Comstock Williamson of Winthrop asked our Dean of Arts and Sciences and me to co-chair a task group to examine where Winthrop is now in its efforts in these arenas and to identify gaps we have still to fill across our complex university dedicated to student learning in all its domains.

Accordingly, we identified a group of faculty and staff as excellent representatives of our many disciplines and program areas that could best inform this review. This group of 17 comprises well-informed representatives that can advance this discussion on our campus and take us into the future. Using the “Civic Institutional Matrix: Assessing Assets and Gaps in a Civic Minded Institution” as presented in The National Taskforce on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement’s (2012) *A Crucible Moment*, we have had many fruitful discussions about Winthrop’s civic ethos, literacy, inquiry, and action. Along the way, these university citizens are identifying our progress and gaps that need substantive filling.

Recently, this vice president was somewhat taken aback when one of my own program areas that I had designed and nurtured was characterized in our review as out-of-date and not fulfilling its promise. I immediately became defensive and was silently ruminating to myself, “Can you believe this? I created this great program years ago with little funding, and now the group I formed is suggesting it be removed from my administrative portfolio.” Yes, culture forming can be messy and even disorienting. However, making

systemic change happen involves providing the agency for many significant actors to move forward for the better of the whole institution with the intent of instilling civic learning. This is especially true even if it creates some messy cognitive dissonance in a vice president who must now refocus on his own responsibilities and reach what is best for all. And the best for all is systemic transformation that is sustainable for the common good.

References

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