

■ KRISHNA S. DHIR, Feature Editor, Campbell School of Business, Berry College

Provost Peter Barr of Coastal Carolina University has pondered over the issue of institutional social contract and the responsibilities of a university to the community in which it resides. While we have a commendable tradition of taking research and teaching seriously, do we take our service contract with society seriously enough? Public engagement of a university requires its faculty members, staff, and students to collaborate with communities, agencies, organizations, business, and government to address critical societal issues and to share the university's intellectual and cultural assets. At Coastal Carolina University, Provost Barr has not only sought quantifiable outcomes and convincing accountability of public engagement, he has gone further and committed the University to integrating an appreciation for social responsibility, personal responsibility, character/values/ethics, wellness, and environmental concerns into its culture. In the following essay he narrates this initiative.

An Institutional Public Engagement Initiative

by Peter Barr, Provost, Coastal Carolina University

In the hurly-burly of ending the fall semester, I found myself recalling Stanley Fish's categorical and emphatic declaration in last year's *New York Times*, "A professor's job is to teach students, not to fashion citizens" (1).

As a chief academic officer, I monitor, regulate, and oversee the instructional proceedings of Coastal Carolina University. I take these duties seriously and I believe that this institution, along with others across the nation, does a commendable job of teaching the liberal arts and professional disciplines with an admirable body of qualified faculty. I do not dispute Professor Fish's argument for the primacy of teaching. Rather, I believe his distinction between "teaching students" and "fashioning citizens" is a distinction without a difference. Furthermore, I believe that Professor Fish mistakenly commingles a professor's discipline-governed job and an institution's more inclusive job.

After some 20 years in higher education, I have become convinced that we cannot trust naively that teaching alone is adequate or sufficient to earn the public's trust or investment. Rightly and

not regrettably, good teaching is hard to measure in the short-term. The true measure of successful teaching is successful learning realized and manifested years after the student has graduated. On the other hand, applied research and public service—collectively what we are calling public engagement—produce more evident and immediate results in the form of public notice and goodwill (2). Accordingly, I believe that public engagement generates quantifiable outcomes and confers a clear and convincing accountability. To respond to the dispute raised by Professor Fish requires only a persuasive link between good teaching and public engagement. The better response, and the one I intend, is that public engagement increases learning, which is presumably the aim of good teaching.

Any broad institutional public engagement addresses the perilous disconnect between what we higher education professionals understand to be our task and what the public understands to be our task. I cite two constituencies of higher education as examples. Despite the generous approbation regu-



Peter B. Barr

has been the provost at Coastal Carolina University since August 2002 and was the dean of the E. Craig Wall, Sr. College of Business Administration at Coastal Carolina University from 1992

until 2000. He was senior vice president at Burroughs and Chapin Company in Myrtle Beach, S.C., from 2000 until his appointment as provost. Dr. Barr earned a doctorate in business administration from Louisiana Tech University in 1985, and both master's and bachelor's degrees in business administration from Marshall University. He has over 25 years of experience in higher education. His research has been published in numerous professional journals, and he has completed extensive consulting contracts in systems design and economic development. Dr. Barr lives in North Myrtle Beach with his wife Betsy and three children.

pete@coastal.edu

larly accorded to colleges and universities by state and federal legislators, there is a distinctly grudging dispersal of funds. While I fully realize the highly competitive marketplace for public dollars, I am also keenly aware that the pervasive public distrust of governmental agencies extends to higher education and gets translated into legislation. Whatever motivates the distrust, I accept as true that we higher education professionals have made our case in a lackluster way.

The second constituency representing this disconnect between them and us is a more vested group, the parents of our students. Each summer, I talk to the parents of incoming students. In addition to responding to the myriad of queries that typify any parent handing over a child to an institution, I ask what expectations they have of Coastal Carolina—what do they want us to do for their child. After eight years as a business dean and serving in my third year as provost, I have never been answered with “a clear understanding of Moby Dick” or “four accounting courses.” Rather what I repeatedly hear is “helping my son or daughter become someone who will make this world a little better place.”

So, if the public, students’ parents, and students themselves believe that “fashioning citizens” is the counterpart of “teaching students,” I would suggest that institutions of higher education take a corporate stance that benefits their immediate communities in a transparent and immediate way. I believe that “teaching students” and “fashioning citizens” should be indistinguishable because the latter will not only enhance our students’ grasp of content but will also provide meaningful public service. The challenge is to shape required curricula in a meaningful way to demonstrate applications of theory that address social concerns. At Coastal Carolina, we have chosen to collaborate with the local school district with mutual institutional commitments to improving high school graduation rates.

In collaboration with the Horry County School District, Coastal Caro-

lina has paired teams of two or three university students with a public school student. The team approach, which allows a sustained mentoring relationship for the public school students as university students matriculate or transfer, responds to numerous mentoring studies showing that short-term mentoring may do more harm than good. The accepted wisdom is that “the longer the mentoring relationship, the better the outcome” (3). Mentoring time was spent in establishing caring relationships between the university and the public school student. Tutoring, while occasionally useful to emphasize

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the importance of academic performance, plays a minor role in the mentoring process, which seeks to engage the broader range of human concerns and performances—social, emotional, and cultural.

The selection of a critical social concern that could purposefully engage the entire university evolved from the numerous studies and reports identifying South Carolina’s lack of a skilled and knowledgeable work force as the greatest danger to the state’s economic and social well being. The Foundations for the Future report funded by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education further focused and drove the relevant selection of an institutional commitment (4). Specifically, South Carolina’s high school graduation rate in 2003-04 ranks last in the nation with just 51 percent of students starting the ninth grade earning a high school diploma on time. The national average is

68 percent with the highest, New Jersey, graduating 86 percent.

Fortunately, experts in the field advise that students likely to drop out before graduating from high school can be identified as early as the fourth grade. Interestingly, South Carolina’s PACT test results show that fourth-grade students in our state score significantly better on nationally normed tests than do our eighth-graders. Moreover, not only can dropout candidates be identified early on, there are well-accepted retention methods that work. Chief among these methods is mentoring. The Horry County School District and a persuasive body of research believe that mentoring works. Studies regularly attest that mentoring achieves improved academic success, reduces substance abuse, and advances social attitudes and skills.

The key ingredient to successful mentoring is an adequate and sustainable source of mentors. Coastal Carolina intends to be that source. With a comprehensive institutional commitment to building and supporting sustained mentoring relationships, Coastal Carolina’s goal is to transform at-risk students into *successful* students. With the right social stability and influence between the fourth- and tenth-grades, the majority of at-risk public school students can graduate. Addressing a declining graduation rate that ranks 50th nationally is intended to have a salutary effect on the University and the social and economic quality of life in South Carolina.

I recognize that the social and political justifications for Coastal Carolina’s Public Engagement Initiative, while perhaps critical to the institution’s wellbeing, do not attend directly either to the institution’s teaching and learning mission or to Fish’s argument. Moreover, my close acquaintance with the glacial nature of higher education recognizes that assigning substantial resources to an external agency demands no-nonsense justifications to students who worry about post-graduation employment and to faculty

who worry about another intrusion into normal classroom conduct.

In response, I return to the aforementioned hurly-burly end of a semester that, this time, was highlighted by two notable events. The first occurred following a recent commencement exercise. An accounting graduate, now employed in the New York offices of Deloitte & Touche, told me that he considered his participation in UNIV 360 to be "an educational capstone." He went on to say that, during his Deloitte Touche interview, he referred to his mentoring a fourth-grader and asked if Deloitte Touche encouraged community engagement. Surely, he got the job because he has the requisite accounting courses, but I suspect his acknowledgement of corporate duties beyond the ledger gave him a distinct advantage.

The second event—53 student evaluations of a course introduced in the fall 2004 semester, UNIV 360, Topics in Citizenship and Community—corroborated the accounting student's story. Enrolled students, after training and the required legal checks, were assigned to mentor fourth- and fifth-grade public school students weekly throughout the semester. University students signed up for the course on an elective basis, and the public school students were identified by the school district using a standard at-risk profile and teacher recommendations. The University student evaluations produced testimonials that differ with Fish's assertions on the proper job of higher education. One student cites what I think is a critical life skill:

I am learning a lot from my student about patience and the challenges of building a relationship in an unfamiliar situation. I feel that together she and I closed some of the gaps of insecurities and shyness and were able to have a productive interaction.

Mentoring time after time resulted in mutually beneficial exchanges. A University student writes:

My student really showed how much she trusted me by asking me to read her journal that discussed her feelings about her dad. I told her I could relate

because I have not talked to my father in almost seven years. I hope that from my experience I will be there for her to help her through this tough time. I especially know how much it hurts. This visit was very encouraging to me. I really feel as though they feel close to us and trust us.

Another student writes:

I feel so lucky to be in this program. This new relationship rewards both of us as we journey through this trip called life. Dan's father thanked me for being there for Dan and told me the little guy always talks about me. He said whatever I have done for Dan is just amazing.

Another student reports her student's budding self-esteem:

My student seems to feel special about me coming to see her. The other kids are looking up to her more and want to know what we are talking about. They all gather around and Angel likes that extra attention.

A graduating senior remembers meeting her student and the student's father for lunch:

I met my student and her father for lunch. Her father talked to me as if I was one of the family. He turned to me and asked, 'Did she tell she made the honor roll?' He did this with a smile as if he was so proud of her, and was happy to share that sentiment with someone who also cared for his daughter.

Finally, a student-athlete says:

I was also very touched when I walked my student into her classroom, and another student asked her who I was. She replied, "That's *my* mentor!" It made me feel that I was important and a special person in her life.

The experience that produced these extraordinary testimonials was spending a few hours each week in mentoring fourth- or fifth-grade students. University students would join their assigned student in the lunchroom, at recess, in the classroom, for after-school recreation, or bring the student to the campus for a cultural or athletic event.

I hold the view that the direct beneficiaries of the Public Engagement Initiative will be Coastal Carolina students and faculty. The public school students

earning a high school diploma in a timely and economic fashion are obvious beneficiaries. As an institution, Coastal Carolina needs to introduce students to an appreciation for social responsibility, personal responsibility, character/values/ethics, wellness, and environmental concerns.

The sort of broad and interdisciplinary learning, that is, teaching students and fashioning citizens, can best be achieved with integrated on-campus internal and off-campus external components. For the internal component, a faculty task force has developed an English 101/102 curriculum that incorporates life skills instruction—character, values, and social responsibility—through a series of textbook readings, writings, and reflection. ENGL 101/102, Common Ground: Thinking and Learning in Community, incorporates two first-year, writing-intensive courses that seek to foster a critical understanding of social concerns through historically and politically informed reading and writing. Specifically, students engage with and write about academic, civic, and global issues that are central to community life. Students also have the opportunity to combine academic inquiry with community outreach by participating in a focused service project for the Horry County schools.

The external component of public engagement, mentoring in the schools, begins in the second year by introducing students to the value of involvement in the quality of life in the University's contiguous communities and calls for a specific curriculum-based course in a student's major with content addressed to mentoring.

The goal of improving our high school graduation rate to the national average is unarguably the right thing to do, and the commitment of institutional resources appears justified on education, social, and political grounds. I appreciate that the University's Public Engagement Initiative will not answer all the questions and resolve all the issues of South Carolina's disturbing high school graduation rate. However, even based on early assessments, I

am convinced that the educational experience offered at Coastal Carolina will bring significant benefits.

Some of my associates and colleagues will argue, with Stanley Fish, that institutions of higher education, Coastal Carolina included, should continue to focus on "teaching students" in the classroom without regard to molding citizens. Even so, when it is evident that a more thorough understanding of classroom instruction is achieved through "hands-on" practical applications, why shouldn't we, as educators, use the proven learning process to address critical social concerns?

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Endnotes

1. Stanley Fish, "Why We Built the Ivory Tower," *New York Times*, 21 May 2004, sec. A, p. 23.

2. The "public notice and goodwill" I have in mind are illustrated in a recent editorial and front page article printed in the Myrtle Beach, S.C. *Sun News* reporting on the University's Public Engagement Initiative: Editorial, "A Better School Alternative," *Sun News*, 9 January 2005, sec. D, p. 4; and Johanna D. Wilson, "Strand Students Increasingly Request Model Mentors," *Sun News*, 29 January 2005, sec. A, p. 1.

3. While I cite the Jekielek et al. article at

<http://www.childtrends.org/Files/MentoringBrief2002.pdf>

which summarizes the significant mentoring literature through 2002, I also refer readers interested in further public engagement research and resources to The Corporation for National and Community Service at

<http://www.nationalservice.org/>

and the National Service-Learning Partnership at

http://www.service-learningpartnership.org/service_learning/organizations.cfm

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at

<http://www.servicelarning.org/index.php>

provides valuable resources that are indexed on the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). ERIC offers a rich database of journal and non-journal education literature. Coastal Carolina's public engagement and mentoring website address is at

<http://www.coastal.edu/cec/mentoring/index.html>

4. The text of *Foundations for the Future* report funded by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education is available online at

<http://www.che400.state.sc.us/InfoCenter/FoundationForTheFuture.htm> ■

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strate that students' success at meeting the learning goals is evaluated with the results informing management of the learning process.

The shift to assurance of learning is the largest conceptual change in the 2003 standards. It signals a strong concern for the products of our schools, and it is in line with programs in other areas of higher education and in the larger society that call for enhanced accountability.

Conclusion

The three major divisions of the accreditation standards indicate AACSB International's definition of how to spot quality. The accreditation process is a systematic evaluation of the operations in place in higher education institutions. Accreditation truly represents ideas and contributions from business educators worldwide. While the proc-

ess is more involved than observing bulletin boards, it is an effort that provides tremendous informational value to participating schools (and to reviewers). Schools should use the process for their own benefit through bringing the careful and conscientious quality-spotting capacity of qualified professionals into the service of the school. ■