

William M. Plater 2012 Interview



In his role as executive vice chancellor and dean of the faculties of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, William was an early supporter of Indiana Campus Compact and our work in service engagement...but not without a little help from a training institute presented by Campus Compact.

Despite the fact that he was leery about the long-term viability of service learning as pedagogy, at the behest of some of his colleagues he accompanied them to Boulder to see what this “fad” was all about.

He wrote about that experience and how his commitment to building a culture of service at IUPUI started at that training in a 2002 issue of the Indiana Campus Compact newsletter. In his current role at IUPUI as distinguished professor and director of the Office of International Community Development, Bill is still a champion for Indiana Campus Compact and service engagement.

As part of our 20th anniversary celebration, “Looking Back. Moving Forward”, I interviewed Bill to hear his reflections about those early days, how the work has evolved over the years, and the importance of institutionalizing service learning in higher education.

Liza Newman: In your article you talk about service learning feeling like a fad. What made you feel that way?

William Plater: It was relatively new as a concept and not widely accepted by institutions we sought to emulate. Because it was a new pedagogy and concept (at least to me) the initial descriptions did not seem convincing to me—it mostly sounded like using class time for volunteer work. Nice, but not what was needed to increase student learning. Of course I was wrong, and as we have seen verified by research, service learning is one of the most effective of the active pedagogies for engaging students and enhancing discipline-based learning in all fields.

LN: You mentioned other IUPUI institute team members who energized you - who were they? Do you still work with them?

WP: As I recall: Gene Tempel, Julie Hatcher, Ed Robbins (education—retired), Kim Manlove (at the time an assistant dean in the Dean of the Faculties office), and Carol Robb. Two of the team members remain active at IUPUI in roles that draw on their experiences and who continue to provide exceptional leadership for IUPUI and our city, for IU and the state, and increasingly for the US and the world. Gene will become the founding dean of the world's first School of Philanthropy and Julie now directs the Center for Service and Learning, a program that she helped create and guide since its inception; it is a Center recognized around the world for its innovative leadership—as

evidenced by the series of books that the Center has developed to guide thinking about and research on service learning. I think all of the team members would say that the experience was very important in their professional lives and in providing an experience to help develop their concepts of engagement and service.



1993 Bill Plater (top row from left) Ed Robbins, Gene Tempel
(bottom row from left) Carol Robb, Dena Rae Hancock, and Julie Hatcher

LN: The article talks about IUPUI's model of institutionalization of civic engagement and service learning, especially in the area of faculty roles and rewards. We still hear about this from faculty at all of our member institutions as an obstacle at both the departmental and campus review level. From your perspective, has this gotten easier? What work still needs to be done?

WP: In many ways, the recognition of service learning as an effective pedagogy and as a strategy for retaining students and enhancing the mastery of concepts has gained ground steadily, and it has taken hold across the country. Faculty who present evidence of using service learning well are often rewarded by consideration in P&T even if this single dimension is not itself sufficient for promotion or tenure. And it should not be—promotion based on teaching has to be multidimensional, and the effective use of service learning should be only one consideration—albeit an important one. Peer review committees are more familiar with the concept and have come to understand its utility. I think the major obstacle to greater recognition and appreciation of service learning is due to the continued secondary status teaching takes to research. I believe all of an institution's leaders—including active faculty leaders as well as chairs, deans, and provosts—have to do more to emphasize the importance of teaching in the reward structure.

WP: I personally think trustees have a responsibility to provide leadership in setting institutional policies that are effective and meaningful. I do not think they do enough to highlight the primacy of teaching and learning because many trustees are fixated on rankings and other prestige factors that are based largely on research and economic development. More broadly, civic or community engagement has been given a place in considering faculty advancement, especially among



professional schools and campuses like IUPUI where the professional culture is strong, influencing liberal arts and science disciplines to accept engagement as both a value and a practical means to achieving mission objectives in research and teaching. IUPUI is fortunate in having a culture that recognizes community-based education as essential to effective learning of a profession. The humanities, social sciences, and sciences have been highly creative in adapting community-centered learning and research to meet their goals even though they are not professions. IUPUI has made community engagement one of its distinguishing characteristics, and the value attached to such a commitment continues to push the campus toward ever more creative and pervasive ways of drawing on the community while supporting it. The ideal of reciprocity is well understood and widely practiced among both university personnel and their community counterparts. As students participate, they, too, learn what it means to recognize and draw upon expertise in many forms—not only from a professor standing in front of a classroom. The recent creation of national awards programs to recognize community engagement are helping elevate the importance of engagement, and these have an impact on the thinking of peer review committees who see that this kind of work is valued by society.

LN: You say “The criteria for promotion and tenure should explicitly address professional service, which is easily related to teaching and research via service learning.” Has that become a fact in IUPUI’s culture?

WP: I have been away from the IUPUI P&T process for over six years, so I cannot speak to the current culture. However, in my last years as an administrator, I was certain that the culture of IUPUI respected professional service—in part because of the dominance of the professional schools, as I have already said, where the clinical and other service work of faculty was well established and valued. However, the culture really was—and I hope still is—more pervasive in that all schools and disciplines recognized and valued the contributions of faculty who were integrating and applying knowledge for the benefit of the community and the university—as well as their disciplines. We used to publish annually the results of the P&T process, and as a part of the report indicated how many faculty had been advanced based on excellence in service. It was a surprisingly large number, and it involved faculty on the tenure track

as well as the clinical track. It is important to note that community engagement can involve faculty in all dimensions of their work: teaching, professional service, and research. There is a very interesting concept being developed at IUPUI by a couple of faculty but principally Genevieve Shaker, a relatively new assistant professor of philanthropic studies who did a PhD in higher education focused on the role of contingent faculty in the university. Her research has led to thinking about the "philanthropic" aspects of faculty work—all the things that faculty do by using their discretion over their own time to do things that contribute to the public good. It turns out that the contribution to the public good—philanthropy—is considerable, and many faculty (part-time as well as a tenure-track) devote considerable time and energy and imagination to advancing the common good of the university and to helping students and colleagues through their service to them. When asked about why they chose a faculty career—and why they remain in higher education despite some serious drawbacks, especially for the part-time and contingent faculty, they often describe the work in terms of a calling. I think this is a really novel and exciting approach to faculty work. It is not definitional in that it is a comprehensive way of defining all faculty work, but it does open up new ways of thinking about what faculty do and why—beyond the normal expectations. The rap on faculty is that they are self-indulgent, focusing their time and talent on research and other activities that have material rewards (salary) and prestige (peer recognition). In fact, a considerable amount of time goes to the public good. This is a line of research to watch. By the way, ICC should take some credit and pride in the fact that one of the inspirations for Shaker's concept of the philanthropic nature of faculty work grows out of an ICC project—the conference and book Rich Games and Bob Bringle edited on "The University as Citizen."

LN: There is a list of suggestions for other CAOs who are working to institutionalize service learning. Were those things you did to establish the institutionalization of civic engagement and service learning on IUPUI's campus?

WP: The list of things suggested for CAOs were all implemented at IUPUI. Perhaps nothing was more important than making absolutely clear that service learning and the related work of community engagement are academic and belong in academic affairs—in a direct report to the CAO. In our case, we were also exceptionally fortunate in having leaders like Bob Bringle and Julie Hatcher to lead the campus work in civic engagement.

LN: Were you supported by Chancellor Bepko? By President Brand? By your deans and department chairs?

WP: Chancellor Bepko was not only always supportive but he as an active spokesperson to faculty and community leaders alike about the importance of engagement and the role of IUPUI as contributing to the development of the community. While President Brand was supportive, the greatest supporter was Tom Ehrlich, who was president when ICC moved to IUPUI (he was the one who said we should provide the support for the relatively new organization) and, of course, he had been one of the founders of the national CC. The nation's leading award for service

learning is named in his honor, and his strong support helped establish the role of service learning (and engagement) across all of IU's campuses—and I think across all of Indiana. Over time, deans and chairs become avid supporters of service learning



and the civic engagement mission for IUPUI. Initially, there was some push-back because many chairs and deans believed that they were already engaged and were suspicious of "new" terminology like "service learning" when other terms were already standards and had much the same impact—community based-learning, clinical learning, practica, etc. It took several years before the campus became comfortable with the service learning terminology. When the School of Medicine established an office of service learning, we knew we had succeeded. Incidentally, Pat Keener who led the office in medicine—along with Bob Bringle—received the national Ehrlich award for service learning.

LN: Over the past 10 years, have you seen a progression toward community engagement being considered as a respected and accepted product of all three faculty legs of development?

WP: Without question. When IUPUI made civic engagement one of the areas for a focused self-study as a part of our last reaccreditation by the Higher Learning Commission nearly a decade ago, we knew that the idea of engagement had taken hold and the issue shifted from making service and engagement a recognized part of our mission and actual practice to assessing it and knowing how to improve and get better. That work is still underway, and the Center for Service and Learning, under Julie Hatcher, Kristin Norris, and Mary Price, is hard at work on developing measures of civic learning that will enable IUPUI to document its real contributions to preparing civic



minded graduates at all levels. This would not have been possible without a realization by many faculty—the majority—that community

engagement depends on our effectiveness in all three realms of faculty work. I think our faculty will continue to do pioneering work in assessing effectiveness of the civic dimensions—Gen Shaker in how she is assessing faculty work as a contribution to the public good, Hatcher, Norris and their colleagues on how to assess civic learning, and Kody Varahramyan, Vic Borden, and others who are documenting our contribution to economic development through research.

LN: You mention the Center for Public Service and Learning becoming the Center for Service and Learning in 2001. I found an announcement that talks about IUPUI's mission "to develop and apply knowledge to ever-changing social issues through teaching, research, and service . . . and to serve as a model for collaboration and interdisciplinary work through partnerships with the community." IUPUI is obviously a nationally known leader in this field, with renowned scholars in Bob Bringle and Julie Hatcher. What was most important in making that happen?

WP: As I have already suggested, the key to our success was two-fold. One part was recognizing what was nearly universal across IUPUI and elevating its commitment to and engagement with the community to be a definitional aspect of our character, values, and mission. This is what unifies IUPUI across its two university identities and its many different schools and disciplines. Secondly, we were very fortunate to have had Jerry Bepko as our Chancellor, Tom Ehrlich as a national leader in engagement as our president at a critical time, Bob Bringle, Julie Hatcher, and dozens of other faculty as effective scholars and teachers who could communicate clearly how their work and the advancement of the community were mutually interdependent. With people like Susan Sutton joining the effort, we were able to take a global perspective on engagement, including service learning—which now has a significant portion of study abroad projects based on service learning. Just think about how the AMPATH program led by Bob Einterz and the campus-wide partnership with Moi University have been so transformational for the participants, including hundreds of people from the Indianapolis community. So, recognizing who we are as a university community, having exceptional leaders at all levels, and being persistent have been the key ingredients to our success—now re-energized by the recognition of peers outside our city and state.

LN: Why are service learning and community engagement important to you?

WP: I think the experience of talking with people like Gene Tempel, Bob Payton, Bob Bringle, Julie Hatcher, Joe Mamlin, Bob Einterz, Tom Inui, Gen Shaker, Tom Ehrlich, Jerry Bepko, Herman Blake, and others has forced me to reflect on what is important in both my personal, or individual, professional life and what responsibility I have had as a steward of the campus—reflection is a powerful incentive for doing well by doing good, as the old saying goes. As I grow older—and freer to speak my mind—I have come to believe that given the state of the state, the country, and the world, nothing is more important than the duty of higher education to prepare not only civic minded graduates, but graduates who are truly prepared for the responsibilities of citizenship with enough practice in the arts and sciences of citizenship to recognize their duty and to use their knowledge for the betterment of all. We must have a dual consciousness-effective

citizens in our own local communities and globally competent citizens who know how to interact with others around the world in perceiving and preserving a commons that knows no national or geographic borders. I think it is a tragedy to have college graduates willingly substituting prejudice and belief for reason and facts. Citizenship



demands more.

In our increasingly polarized political community, we have lost sight of the common good—the commons as the Ostroms have helped us understand. Service learning and community engagement are powerful experiences, offering participants the opportunity for reflecting on their learning as they are engaged with it so that they can become self-aware about both their duty and their capacity for good. I am proud of Charles Bantz and Uday Sukhatme for building on the early engagement work and taking us to new realms, and I am thrilled at the prospect of Nasser Paydar's becoming Executive Vice Chancellor since he was a part of the group that helped recognize, shape and build the idea of engagement as the way to create and identify and define a character. His coming back home with the experiences of being elsewhere will sustain this trajectory of innovation and improvement, energized with fresh ideas and renewed commitment.

LN: What can Indiana Campus Compact do (or continue to do) that will ensure future administrators are as invested in their community (including their campus) as you were?

WP: Keep them engaged, keep them talking, find things that relate to their priorities. Above all, hammer away on the necessity as well as the duty of every college and university, public, private, for-profit, to ensure that its graduates are prepared for the responsibilities of citizenship in a global context and that it can document the civic learning to prove the graduates' readiness. Nothing less than the democracy we have come to take for granted depends on it. ICC has considerable authority and power as a convener. It has to use this power carefully, but you can do things no one else can as a trusted, neutral partner to all institutions.

LN: What do you see as Indiana Campus Compact's role in the future of civic engagement and higher education?

WP: Keep on keepin' on! But with an eager eye and ear for changes that will keep ICC relevant, fresh, and useful. Continue to innovate. Be willing to take some risks. Lead.

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