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Nashville Eye Column

College education is enhanced when students also serve community

By MANI HULL



To what extent do the public higher education curricula and programs currently offered in Tennessee prepare students for the real world of work? According to various rankings, despite national size and student volume, Tennessee's quality of academic education, preparation for professional job-readiness, and rhetoric regarding its economic value have, for the most part, not yet been translated into reputable practice.

One possible solution: the adoption of a Tennessee service-learning state Campus Compact. Service-learning is an up and coming pedagogical model that formally engages academic learning with hands-on community service. In a June 2005 press release, Margaret Spellings, the U.S. Secretary of Education, proclaimed: "Through service-learning, students have unique opportunities to learn the value of teamwork and build critical thinking skills while completing service projects in areas such as education, public safety and the environment. Studies have shown that students who participate in such programs demonstrate increased civic and social responsibility and improved academic achievement."

According to Professor James Burton, dean of the Jones College of Business at Middle Tennessee State University (2005), Tennessee's future public higher education challenges include dwindling state financial appropriations, increased demand for higher education, aging facilities, technology costs, qualified staff, faculty salaries and increased accountability. He identifies opportunities as entrepreneurial ventures, greater involvement of the business community, public/private partnerships, curriculum revision and integration, reorganization, refocusing on graduate education and providing more convenient service.

These challenges and opportunities are incorporated into the Tennessee Higher Education Commission's 2005-2010 Master Plan to engage regional and statewide constituencies to support the development of a public agenda for higher education. The commission acknowledges that this would require a high degree of regional cooperation between post-secondary and secondary institutions, as well as business, civic and community leaders.

Service-learning initiatives are creating the much-needed new paradigm for town-gown interactions. The first four out of the seven opportunities identified by Burton reflect service-learning relationships. The adoption of a Tennessee Campus Compact might also be aligned with THEC's statewide goal of facilitating community problem-solving by a formal engagement of diverse stakeholders with a common goal to ensure a well-educated and well-trained workforce.

Campus Compact is an incorporated nonprofit organization founded in 1985 by the presidents of Brown, Georgetown and Stanford Universities, and the Education Commission of the States. Today, it manages a rapidly expanding membership and challenges all of higher education to make civic and community engagement an institutional priority. It has provided seed grants for newly developing state campus compacts. Over 87% of compact member institutions are from states where there is a state compact. To date, there are 30 state Campus Compacts, four in developing stages, and universities in 14 states with individual institutional memberships to the national Campus Compact.

State compacts are independent coalitions formed by a core group of committed presidents and campus staff across various sectors. They are organized to provide better access to local and national resources, increase the potential for statewide collaboration, and improve the networking capacity of the national office. They see themselves as playing a critical role in helping colleges and universities prepare students to be leaders and more responsible future citizens. The civic mission of higher education is also re-invigorated.

In Tennessee, many postsecondary institutions maintain individual memberships in the national Campus Compact and manage a modest office or an ad hoc committee that oversees service-learning initiatives. A consolidated state Campus Compact would leverage funds, expertise and support through connection with a national network of academic leaders in 47 states and over 900 institutions of higher learning. Tennessee should eye this opportunity.

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EXPERIENCE:

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| <i>Director, Tennessee Academic Civic Engagement Program and Tennessee Campus Compact, Learn and Serve America, Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies</i> | 09/06-08/09 |
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| <i>Director of Bids & Proposals, ACDI/VOCA, Washington, D.C.</i> | 10/94-12/98 |
| <i>Director of Administration, Institute for International Research, VA</i> | 07/88-07/94 |
| <i>Education Specialist, Egyptian Embassy, Washington, D.C.</i> | 02/88-06/88 |
| <i>Program Director, WC for Development & Training, VA</i> | 09/86-01/88 |
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EDUCATION:

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- Master of Health Science, Johns Hopkins University, credits completed toward degree, 1998
- Certificate, Procurement & Contracts Management, University of Virginia, 1995
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- Bachelor of Arts, Political Science, University of Arkansas, 1984