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Understanding Community Engagement Motives: A "Functional" Approach

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Cover Page Footnote

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Understanding Community Engagement Motives: A “Functional” Approach

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Current theoretical lenses do not fully explain the motives of those involved in community engagement activities. This article introduces a needed additional lens, functionalism, that emphasizes how underlying personal goals explain involvement in community engagement activities. To illustrate this perspective, an administrator’s and a faculty member’s motives for becoming involved in community engagement activities are presented and analyzed. We conclude by suggesting the functional approach to motivation may be integrated within an organizational behavior framework to better illuminate the interaction between individual goals and organizational practices, policies, and norms.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Functional Approach to Motivation

Over the past two decades, researchers have been interested in understanding the motives of those involved in community engagement activities. Faculty motives appear to have received the most attention largely because of their roles within the academy. Findings suggest the motives of engaged faculty are complex and often overlapping (O’Meara, 2008) and that various values seem to be operating that support and sustain the complex motivational foundations of faculty community engagement (Kuntz, 2005; Neumann, 2006). One theoretical framework that frequently has been used by higher education researchers when exploring faculty motives is Ford’s (1992) Motivational Systems Theory. This perspective is heavily influenced by an organizational behavior lens to explain involvement in community engagement activities. That is, it “illuminates the ways that organizational priorities, norms, structures, politics, and leadership influence faculty engagement” (O’Meara, Sandmann, Saltmarsh, & Giles, 2011, p. 89) while deemphasizing the personal and professional goals of those who are involved in community engagement activities. Because of this, O’Meara et al. (2011), have concluded that “[r]esearch on engaged work ... needs to get outside the mainstream of research on higher education to consider how new interdisciplinary frameworks and fields might approach this work” (p. 93). This paper presents a new framework, functionalism, to understand the motives of those involved in community engagement activities.

Functionalism has been defined in various ways within the social sciences. Throughout this paper, functionalism is defined from a social psychological perspective and is defined as “the reasons and purposes, the needs and goals, the plans and motives that underlie and generate” (Snyder, 1993, p. 253) community engagement. According to this definition, functionalism emphasizes an individual’s adaptive and purposeful strivings to attain personal and social goals (Cantor, 1994; Snyder, 1993) and has yielded valuable insight into why individuals take action to help others (and themselves). As such, a central tenet of the functional perspective is that individuals can perform the same actions in service of different psychological functions. That is, becoming involved in community engagement activities could serve different functions for different individuals. Clary et al. (1998) have proposed six motivational functions that are served by volunteerism:¹ *Values,*

understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement motives. Values, as defined by Clary et al. (1998), focus on opportunities that facilitate the expression of ideals related to altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others. *Understanding* permits new learning experiences and affords an individual the chance to share knowledge, skills, and abilities that might otherwise not be shared. *Social* motives are concerned with social relationships. *Career* functions revolve around career planning, development, and advancement goals (e.g., networking, documenting skills, training). *Protective* motives reduce negative features of one's self-image (e.g., reducing anxiety or guilt about being more fortunate than others). *Enhancement* functions are related to personal development or personal growth. Research has demonstrated support for the six functions identified by Clary et al. (1998) (see Houle, Sagarin, & Kaplan, 2005; Okun & Schultz, 2003; Okun, Barr, & Herzog, 1998). Additionally, research has suggested individuals are most satisfied with their volunteer experience when they are involved in activities that fulfill their motives (Clary et al., 1998; Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Tschirhart, Mesch, Perry, Miller, & Lee, 2001).

Although no analysis has been done to identify the functions or the number of functions (i.e., motives) for becoming involved in community engagement activities, the functional approach to motivation does provide insight into why individuals become interested in, and sustain or terminate their involvement in community engagement activities. More specifically, the functional approach suggests: 1) individuals can become involved in community engagement activities for different underlying reasons; 2) the motives for becoming involved in community engagement activities can be personal and/or social in nature; 3) involvement in community engagement activities is dependent upon person-situation fit (i.e., the degree of fit between relevant personal goals and organizational characteristics); and 4) the degree to which community engagement activities fulfill a psychological function (i.e., motive), such activities will be satisfying for the individual.

Employing an analysis using the functional approach, we present two perspectives on topics important for the development, growth, and sustainability of engaged scholarship by examining an administrator's and a faculty member's motives for becoming involved in community engagement activities in order to illustrate and provide support for our thesis. The first voice presented represents the perspective of an administrator and the second voice presents the perspective of a faculty member. These perspectives are important because they demonstrate the complex interplay between the motives for involvement in community engagement activities and one's personal goals.

Context for Engagement

To provide some context for our engagement activities and personal goals, our campus is located approximately 20 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and is surrounded by three, third-class cities (New Kensington, Arnold, and Lower Burrell) and two second-class townships (Allegheny Township and Upper Burrell Township) that cover approximately 62 miles with a combined population of 41,500. The cities are older and established, and their populations are declining which negatively impacts their long-vibrant neighborhoods. Within the cities, younger residents are relocating to more economically promising areas, leaving deserted factories, declining tax bases, and abandoned commercial blocks behind. The townships are rural, without much infrastructure, and wanting development. Although the need exists for all to work cooperatively to ensure economic development, the cities and townships often work at cross-purposes rather than together largely because they are

suspicious of each other's motives. As a result, they are divided in their efforts to spur economic development and growth for the region.

Our campus is one of 24 campuses that comprise the Pennsylvania State University. It primarily serves first generation college students, offering 13 bachelor and associate degree programs. Students may matriculate from the degree programs or complete the first two years of more than 160 baccalaureate majors offered by the university. Prior to our engagement activities, the campus and the local communities largely ignored each other. Each was perceived as being uninterested, unsympathetic, or unresponsive to the other's wants, needs, and desires. Through our engagement activities in Westmoreland Economic Development and Initiative for Growth (WEDIG), a 501(c)3 corporation (an American tax-exempt, nonprofit association), and through the use of service-learning in psychology courses, perceptions of the university and community have begun to change. It is from these experiences that we offer insight into the motives of individuals involved in the scholarship of engagement.

An Administrator's Perspective

Value Motives

Many college administrators who advocate for engagement do so out of a fundamental belief in the role that higher education should play in society. Public service and engagement is, after all, a longstanding philosophy underpinning our public higher education system. In 1999, the Kellogg Commission produced a report on higher education that noted the increasing importance of community engagement and the need to take engagement to new levels. The report also defined an engaged higher educational institution as one that "redesigned teaching, research, and extension and service functions that are sympathetically and productively involved with the communities universities serve, however community is defined" (p.27).

While at another university, I helped develop community engagement as an institutional strategy to increase regional standing. There, I witnessed the benefits a university can reap from this effort. When I assumed my current position, I intended our engagement activities to achieve similar results: For the campus to be preeminent among smaller colleges and universities within the greater Pittsburgh region in which we compete. However, community engagement has an additional objective beyond merely increasing our regional standing. In the environment in which the campus operates, community engagement is the central component of a strategy that is being employed to ensure the current and future health of the campus itself.

Understanding Motives

The campus' image and future are inextricably linked to that of the city of New Kensington and the surrounding areas. Although the campus is located in Upper Burrell Township (a bucolic area of Southwestern Pennsylvania), a significant portion of residents perceive the region to be characterized by declining neighborhoods, crime, and economic upheaval. Moreover, the population is becoming increasingly older while its growth rate is declining at an alarming rate. The result is an area that has significant challenges in attracting investment, new businesses, and new residents.

Such troubling community issues, in turn, affect the campus' fundraising, image, and enrollment efforts. Demographics suggest significant declines in traditional student enrollment markets, the physical plant needs upgrading/improvements in order for the

campus to compete for students from existing and new markets, and new programs have to be developed to meet community needs and attract undergraduate students. Given the sobering economic situation facing higher education and our limited donor base, there is little hope of raising the revenue needed to address these challenges without engaging the region. In this scenario, engagement is about combining resources with the local area to enhance the economic vitality of both the community and its campus.

Community engagement efforts have helped raise the profile of the campus, improved its image among important target audiences, gained increased coverage in the media, developed new partnerships to enhance the physical plant, attracted a greater number of donors, and most of all, recently, increased various student populations from associated enrollment strategies. For the region, I was able to provide expertise and resources of the campus and university, and, in some cases, demonstrate neutral leadership to overcome parochial attitudes and develop broader working coalitions that attracted attention. Through engagement efforts, the area's self-image has improved and local leaders are eagerly working with the campus and, more importantly, each other to develop a regional economic development plan.

Social Motives

As a transplant to the region, I did not know many people and the lack of a large and functioning social network is a challenge for an administrator who is responsible for fund raising (among other things). One way to develop a social network is through my activities in support of community engagement. Many meaningful friendships have been made possible by my involvement with the community. Because of these friendships, I have been able to meet with elected officials and business owners on short notice even though these individuals know I am meeting with them to obtain financial support for the community and campus. Although not all appeals have been successful, I secured initial seed money to establish WEDIG which serves as a catalyst to improve the economic well-being of the region. For the campus, I secured funding for endowed scholarships, physical plant improvements, and support for STEM initiatives.

Career Motives

Community engagement activities have provided me with the opportunity to work closely with individuals at our main campus while becoming better integrated into the community. The successes the campus has witnessed (e.g., raised profile in the local area, new partnerships to enhance the physical plant) have captured attention from senior leadership and this has translated into additional support and resources for the campus. There is little doubt that community engagement has strengthened my career portfolio and has made me a more appealing candidate should I choose to apply for other administrative positions in the future.

Protective Motives

As I noted earlier, a significant portion of the region is characterized by declining neighborhoods, crime, and economic upheaval. As I come into contact with individuals who struggle with such societal challenges, I am frequently reminded of how fortunate I have been in my personal and professional life. Additionally, given that the campus takes significant financial resources from the community (we are a tax exempt organization) and consumes services paid for by the community, we have an obligation to serve the public good. Thus, community engagement activities are an excellent way for me to give back

and “pay forward” my good fortune and for the campus to support the community.

Enhancement Motives

I am extremely pleased with the community engagement activities I have initiated and supported. Students at the campus can find financial rewards for their work through chancellor fellowships, internship opportunities and employment possibilities with our community partners. These opportunities would not have been possible without our engagement with the community. Faculty have access to new grant and scholarship opportunities. The community has gained greater access to the resources of Penn State (e.g., faculty and staff expertise, the ability to convene all parties on issues, the ability to build appropriate programs, and funding development) and has developed a sense of direction and purpose. Others seem to have noticed our successes as demonstrated by being recognized by Smart Growth Partnership of Southwestern Pennsylvania with a Smart Growth Award.

A Faculty Member’s Perspective

Value Motives

Many faculty see community engagement as part of their role and identity (O’Meara, 2002). As such, they consider community engagement as a way to educate their students and inform their research. Indeed, I believe the best teachers and researchers understand how education frees the individual to pursue their own interests yet they realize such freedom is made possible because of others. These exemplary scholars understand what Cronon (1998) said so eloquently:

Education for human freedom is also education for human community. The two cannot exist without each other. . . . In the act of making us free, it also binds us to the communities that gave us our freedom in the first place; it makes us responsible to those communities in ways that limit our freedom. In the end, it turns out that liberty is not about thinking or saying or doing whatever we want. It is about exercising our freedom in such a way as to make a difference in the world and make a difference for more than just ourselves. (p. 79)

Community engagement activities are a means for me to make a difference in the lives of my students, my campus, my university, and my community. For example, in my teaching, I try to help students understand their interconnectedness with the community and the responsibilities they have to it by involving them in community engagement activities (see Harnish & Bridges, 2012). Such lessons are important because today’s youth are more narcissistic than any other generation (Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010; Twenge & Foster, 2010), placing more importance on money, fame and image than on helping others (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). Although more of today’s youth participate in community service (Twenge et al., 2012), their participation is largely due to high school graduation requirements (Planty, Bozick, & Regnier, 2006). Only 4% of high school students are genuinely civically and politically engaged (Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011).

Understanding Motives

As one may have guessed from the statistics on narcissism and today’s youth, I am a social psychologist. Besides my interest in narcissism, my research focuses on decision-

making processes as they relate to interpersonal relationships (e.g., when individuals choose to maintain or terminate a relationship). Given the outward migration the region has experienced and continues to experience (i.e., individuals have terminated their relationship with their community), it is a laboratory in which social psychological methods and theories (e.g., interdependence theory) can be applied. Because of these interests, community engagement was a natural fit. Indeed, over the past eight years at the campus, I have conducted a number of student-led community engagement activities by introducing a service-learning component to an applied social psychology course I teach. Additionally, I have published several research articles on outward migration which is based upon data collected through my community engagement activities (e.g., Harnish, 2008; Harnish & Bridges, 2004).

Social Motives

Being involved in community engagement activities has allowed me to get to know my students, campus staff, community leaders and residents on a more personal level. For example, the deeper relationships I have developed with my students make it easier to understand their academic and career goals, and with such knowledge I can tailor coursework so it is more impactful. Additionally, because of our social bonds, the classroom climate is more warm and friendly facilitating the exchange of knowledge. While the campus has a reputation for being a friendly place to work, working with campus staff on community engagement projects has strengthened already strong friendships. One of the benefits of such friendships is a greater willingness of the campus staff to extend deadlines for me or to help me with paperwork. (It should be noted that such offers are not extended to all faculty.) Finally, because of my involvement with community engagement activities, I have strengthened my friendship with several community leaders. These friendships have provided a number of benefits that have assisted my research program (e.g., grant opportunities) and my students (e.g., invitations to conduct internships with the community partners).

Career Motives

The opportunity to connect community engagement with research and teaching has had a positive impact on my career; I recently was tenured and promoted to associate professor. Professionally, the University has recognized the work I have done by featuring it in University publications and nominating me for various teaching and service awards. Indeed, my decision-making research, teaching and service awards, all made possible through community engagement, have garnered attention among my peers at other universities as demonstrated by unsolicited discussions of joining their departments.

Protective Motives

As a native of the region, and having attended the campus for two years before moving onto the main campus where I earned my undergraduate degree in psychology, I witnessed the economic upheaval that characterized the region and the despair and uncertainty about the future that many of my friends, neighbors and family experienced and, unfortunately, continue to experience. Through community engagement activities, I have helped restore some vibrancy to the region, to its institutions, and to its people.

Enhancement Motives

Like my co-author, I take pride and pleasure in what our community engagement

activities have accomplished. I have seen how students have come to support their communities, and in doing so, have developed an enhanced sense of civic responsibility through their involvement in community engagement activities. To illustrate, I present two students' comments about their experience with community engagement. One senior majoring in psychology stated:

Dr. Harnish likes students to be involved in and outside the university. In my social psychology class, we organized and conducted a voter registration drive, and I will be working on an assessment study on the use of technology in the classroom for the New Kensington-Arnold school district this spring semester. I chose the internship with the school district because I could apply what I am learning in my research methods and principles of measurement classes. In addition, I know that what we discover from the research will have an impact on how students learn for years to come.

Another student also majoring in psychology said:

Dr. Harnish's classes are different from other classes that I've taken. They are a lot of work but you reap far more rewards than just a course grade. I like how I have become involved with the community. I think I've made a difference not only for others but for me as well – I am part of the community. My internship will be in the district attorney's office this spring semester. I don't think I would have explored this internship if it were not for my involvement with the community.

Similarities and Differences in Motives

Although both the administrator and faculty member were involved in community engagement activities, they had similar as well as different motives for engagement with the community. The administrator's *value motive* revolved around a belief that higher education has an obligation to improve the quality of life for society. Similarly, the faculty member's *value motive* addressed the belief in the interconnectedness between the privileges bestowed by the community onto the academy and the responsibilities those privileges have. *Understanding motives* appears to be similar in that both used their knowledge and skills in their community engagement activities; however the skills brought to the community engagement activity were different. The administrator's and the faculty member's *social motives* for involvement in community engagement activities were dissimilar. Because the administrator was a transplant to the area, a large and functioning social network was needed to raise funds for the campus. The faculty member who was a native of the region did not need to develop a social network but to deepen an already existing social network. *Protective motives* for the administrator and faculty member appeared to be alike with their community engagement activities reducing feelings of anxiety and guilt over their good fortune in life. Finally, they shared similar *enhancement motives* such that both expressed satisfaction with their community engagement activities.

Differences emerged between the administrator and the faculty member in terms of how their motives were fulfilled. Yet, it appears that the overarching goal for both was related to *career motives*. Thus, an individual's motives for involvement in community engagement activities seem to be mediated by the situation (i.e., the role one plays within an organization and the demands the organization places on the role). Although theorizing and research on the functional approach to motivation does not suggest a hierarchy of

functions (e.g., *career motives* are dominant), it does propose that the functions that are manifested are dependent upon the situation. Thus, the functional approach to motivation may fit nicely within a broader organizational perspective (i.e., Motivational Systems Theory) to illuminate the interaction between the individual's goals and the organization's practices, policies, and norms. Future research is needed to explore how the functional approach to motivation may be integrated within an organizational perspective.

Interestingly, because the overarching goal for both authors was related to *career motives*, questions might be raised concerning how such motives impacted the nature of our engagement with the community. More specifically, did our engagement activities genuinely serve community interests? Certainly, additional research is needed to answer this question; however, we would like to believe our engagement activities did serve the community's interests. Some support for our conclusion may be drawn from a comment made by one of our community partners, Mayor Donald Kinosz of Lower Burrell:

Our communities are struggling economically and will not survive if we do not cooperate. Knowing this, we needed expertise that the university could provide and more importantly, an independent broker to bring all parties to the table. Penn State New Kensington has made a difference for our communities. While we still have a way to go, the path forward is clear and there is a sense of hope that we will get there.

Conclusions

We proposed that the functional approach to motivation could explicate the motives for becoming involved in community engagement activities. We argued that individuals become involved in community engagement for different underlying reasons. This premise appears to be supported from our analysis of the administrator's and faculty member's motives for involvement in community engagement activities. Additionally, we postulated that motives for becoming involved in community engagement activities can be personal and/or social in nature. Support for this assertion can be found in the administrator's and faculty's members *value*, *understanding*, and *social motives*. We also hypothesized that involvement in community engagement activities is dependent upon the degree of fit between relevant personal goals and organizational characteristics. Validation for this claim can be found by examining the roles and objectives set by the organization for the administrator and faculty member (i.e., their *career motives*). Finally, we proposed the degree to which community engagement activities fulfill a psychological function (i.e., motive), such activities will be satisfying for the individual. An inspection of *enhancement motives* suggests that involvement in community engagement activities are fulfilling needs for the administrator and faculty member. In sum, the functional approach to motivation provides a useful lens in which to explore the complex motivations of those involved in community engagement activities.

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