

Academics and University Mission: Attitudes, Conditions and Implications for University Civic Mission Integration

- research results abstract -

Contemporary universities are being faced with a series of new circumstances, which demand changes both in their internal structure and in the relationship with their surroundings. Apart from excellence in research and teaching, they are all expected to substantially and directly contribute to social and economic development. In that sense, universities are cooperating with their surroundings and establishing collaborative relationships (partnerships) with various stakeholders in the community. This segment of academic activities is explored within the new area of research - the university's third and civic mission. It seeks a better understanding of the university's interaction with the community and its contributions to local, regional and national development.

The interaction between universities and different stakeholders in the community is a question of university and higher education purpose and represents a major challenge for contemporary universities. The current political and economic pressures encourage universities to transform themselves into business organizations, which are expected to foster economic development. At the same time, the academic community is strengthening its resistance to these processes and is advocating principles of university civic mission. The university civic mission implies the extension of the universities' public purpose and the responsibility of university teachers as bearers of positive social changes in the community.

The concept of university civic mission has not generated considerable interest in the Croatian research community. In other words, there is little information on what our universities have done (and how) in integrating the civic mission in academic activities. Considering the domestic higher education system does not institutionally promote university civic mission, it is clear that the Croatian academic community has been given the freedom to position itself towards the concept of university civic

mission depending on one's personal understanding of civic engagement and accountability to the (local) community.

Taking into account previous research, which has systematically shown that the civic mission integration within core academic activities is the only sustainable way of its integration at the university, it is evident that the integration is associated with the transformation of traditional patterns of teaching and research, in which university teachers become its key agents.

The research analyzes the possibilities of integrating the civic mission into academic activities at the Croatian universities with regard to the basic determinants of its successful integration: (I) university teachers' attitudes and value dispositions on civic mission and (II) mechanisms of institutional support which would encourage civic mission integration into the core academic activities.

The research used a quantitative research approach. Empirical data was obtained from surveys on a representative sample of 570 respondents (university teachers), using an on-line questionnaire.

University teachers' value dispositions and attitudes concerning the analyzed aspects of civic mission show that university teachers in Croatia regard civic mission and its principles as an important purpose of higher education. Furthermore, they express positive attitudes toward civic engagement, and they respect the responsibility of universities and university teachers in promoting student civic engagement and in educating socially responsible and active citizens. However, they do not associate the concept of civic missions with the contribution of universities to the development of local communities, and they do not assess focusing university's potential on collaboration with stakeholders in the local community as significant. In other words, in their daily teaching and research, they least aspire to develop student motivation, knowledge and skills to solve problems of local communities.

Assessing possibilities of promoting civic engagement in teaching and research activities, university teachers believe that the involvement of students in the community cannot be promoted nor encouraged by teaching core courses, and give priority to elective and specifically designed courses. To integrate civic mission in their teaching and research activities the university teachers would be most encouraged by: (I) student interest, (II) available administrative support and infrastructure, (III) flexible workload opportunities and recognition of various academic activities, (IV) financial support to cover expenses for designed activities and (V) further training opportunities.

The results of this research indicate that the following groups are more sensitive to the concept of university civic mission: (I) university teachers of social and humanistic sciences and art, (II) women, (III) associate and tenure professors and (IV) university teachers from 41 to 50 years of age. A lower reported sensitivity towards the concept of civic missions have the youngest respondents, up to 31 years of age, working as young researchers and teaching assistants.

This research raises new research questions directed at different aspects of the relationship between Croatian universities and (local) communities in which they operate. Even though the domestic scientific discourse recognizes the need for more systematic research approach to the university third and civic mission, specific questions and challenges are posed directed at developmental possibilities of integrating the civic mission in the academic activities at our universities.

Bearing in mind the positive attitudes of university teachers towards certain aspects of the civic mission, and with regard to the assessment of motivational potential of certain institutional mechanisms to support the integration of civic mission in academic activities, this research recognizes segments of available developmental possibilities for integrating civic mission at our universities, and suggests guidelines for creating an encouraging (academic) environment for its integration.