

Important Carolina Initiative: Academic Plan and Engagement

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Chancellor Holden Thorp

Two important and overlapping initiatives are getting underway at Carolina. The first is the creation of a new academic plan, and the second is an initiative around innovation and entrepreneurship. They are exciting and both align well with the work of the School. This post will talk about the academic plan, and my next one will talk about the innovation initiative.

The campus is getting ready to write a new academic plan, which will be “a concrete to-do list that we will use to allocate time and resources and by which to measure ourselves.” Chancellor Thorp has done a short video that explains the academic plan, and you can find it embedded in [his blog post](#) about “how knowledge creation & engaged scholarship can co-exist.”

[The last academic plan](#) (July 2003) had a section on engagement and Holden expresses his support for a similar section in the next academic plan. His post discusses the relationship between the creation of knowledge and engaged scholarship. While “creating and distributing knowledge will always be our primary activity,” Holden points out that we always have applied our



knowledge to real-world problems. “The idea of applied scholarship in the social realm at Carolina has had a storied history with Howard Odum, Gladys and Albert Coates, John Sanders, and—of course—Bill Friday.” Holden also tracks the different ways we have described this work over time—“public service, engaged scholarship, extension, and now social entrepreneurship.” He thinks “the reason we can’t seem to settle on a way to describe it is that we’re struggling to acknowledge the importance of applied work without backing away from our primary commitment to create and distribute knowledge.”

The distinction between creating and applying knowledge for the most part is a false one. “There is no engaged scholarship without knowledge to apply, and hence, all scholarship is engaged scholarship.” I agree in the sense that engaged scholarship depends on knowledge that somehow has to be created and evolve for engagement to be effective. The School is unusual because we are so balanced in our focus on the creation and application of knowledge, which means that we place greater emphasis on application than most academic units. By including engagement in the next academic plan, Holden doesn’t want “to send the message that increasing the influence of our scholarship reduces the importance of basic knowledge.” That seems highly unlikely given the culture at Carolina and other research universities. He wants the engagement focus of the academic plan to create “an environment where scholars and students can optimize the impact of their research and find avenues for applied scholarship when it makes sense.”

The School of Government always has been a leader in engaged scholarship (even when it was known by other names), which has never caused us to choose between creating knowledge and applying knowledge. One of our enduring strengths has been our ability to bridge the gap between scholarship and practice. The School’s mission fits squarely within the framework that Holden is describing as an important element of Carolina’s next academic plan. The upcoming planning process offers an opportunity for us to provide leadership for the campus in navigating these issues.