The State of the “Engaged Campus”: What Have We Learned About Building and Sustaining University-Community Partnerships

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Dozens of institutions have discussed, pondered, argued, and waffled over the importance of university community relationships and their relevance to the academic core and mission. What forms should these partnerships take? Is this scholarly work? How do we avoid being overwhelmed by community needs? Why and how should we apply our intellectual energies to community issues?

Fortunately, there is a growing understanding of how intrinsic and extrinsic community-university partnerships might enhance the academy. While university-community interactions may not be relevant to the mission of all institutions, for many they have become a way to build relationships with the immediate community, improve image and support, and increase funding or recruitment and retention of students.

University-community interactions usually take basic and new familiar forms, such as service-learning, internships, practica, and capstones—all involving students in community-based learning. Faculty are also key to these learning strategies, and the partnership with community representatives often leads to additional opportunities for faculty to engage in a wide variety of scholarly activities, such as applied research, technical assistance, evaluation, and participatory action research.

But what do we know about the form and nature of the partnership relationships themselves? The many essays and articles written in the last few years have been dominated by “calls to action” that describe the importance and value of directing higher education’s attention and intellectual assets toward our various communities and cities. These essays often focus on imponderable questions about how such partnerships should be developed and maintained.

Once the notion of the engaged campus took hold, many institutions looked for partnerships that would serve their own interests by allowing them to use the community and its problems as study subjects. This one-sided approach to linking the academy and the community is a deep-seated tradition that has, in fact, led to much of the estrangement of universities and colleges from their communities. Those very communities—necessary to fulfill the state of engagement—resent being treated as an experimental laboratory for higher education and resist the unidirectional nature of the campus efforts. As academics, we are trained as experts and tend to imagine community partnerships in which the institution identifies a need and offers an expert solution to the otherwise apparently hapless (or helpless) community.

Some faculty are skeptical about the appropriateness of applying knowledge to community issues and express concern about losing their scholarly agendas to nonacademic interests. Questions are raised about the relationship of this new kind of scholarly work to more traditional scholarly priorities. However, faculty and administrators alike see the potential for enhancing community relations, student learning, and overall scholarly performance of the institution through applied scholarship and various forms of community-based learning.

Many institutions—public and private, large and small, urban and rural—have taken up the idea of more active community engagement and have been pioneers in exploring mutually beneficial relationships. They have had to do so without the guidance of prior research or experience; they have acted largely on faith that community interactions would prove to be valuable and rewarding for faculty and students. As a result, much has been learned on a trial-and-error basis.
Learning From Multiple Initiatives.

During the last two years, we have been involved in several national projects and local studies that permitted an in-depth exploration of many examples of university-community relationships. These include:

The Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation (HPSISN), funded by the Corporation for National Service and the Pew Charitable Trusts.

The Interdisciplinary Professional Education Collaborative (IPEC), funded by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement and the federal Bureau of Health Professions.

- The assessment of the impact of service-learning across the curriculum at Portland State University, funded by the Corporation for National Service and internal sources.

- The Healthy Communities initiative of the metropolitan Portland region, one of 25 sites in the national Community Care Network (CCN) program, funded by the WK. Kellogg Foundation and administered by the Hospital Research and Educational Trust.

- Independent research on organizational change and the nature of university-community relationships at a variety of public and private institutions.

In that exploration, we have used a systematic approach that considered the impact of various community-based learning initiatives on the community, the faculty, the students, and the institution. By analyzing each of these constituencies separately and collectively, we have learned a great deal about how campuses can be more successful in building and sustaining community partnerships that are effective for all who are involved.

When you’ve seen one partnership, you’ve seen one partnership.

We found wide variety in the forms and types of community partnerships, reflecting differences in the history, capacity, culture, mission, and challenges faced by institutions and communities. Institutions must examine their missions and consider the relevance of service to core academic purposes. In addition, the level and types of service activities that a campus can engage in will be shaped by the role of the institution in the community and the nature of the community’s capacity to address their own issues. For example, when West Virginia Wesleyan College, a HPSISN site, set out to design service-learning courses, they discovered that their small rural community had little social service infrastructure to serve as a natural organizing framework for partnerships. Thinking creatively, they began with a door-to-door assessment of community needs and developed a focus for their service-learning activities.

A match made in heaven, or the result of a dating service?

Partnerships should reflect academic program strengths, and academic programs and scholarly agendas should reflect, at least in part, regional characteristics and challenges. Campuses should develop selected arrays of partnerships and cultivate them well, rather than engage in random activities. Portland State University has devoted considerable effort in the identification of partnerships that meet community-identified needs while also developing academic strengths and meeting curricular objectives. Many partnerships that may begin with a specific service-learning course requirement evolve over time and become the basis for more complex joint planning, evaluation, or other mutually beneficial activity. The Allegheny University of the Health Sciences, an IPEC site, has initiated a major community development project in an underserved area known as the Eleventh Street Corridor in Philadelphia, but only after careful reflection and determination that there was clear potential for mutual benefit.

The community knows who it is; do you?

A common failing of universities working with communities is the assumption that they can develop a single, uniform definition of who and what the “community” is, or that such a definition is necessary. The definition of community is itself a difficult challenge; who is the community? is best answered in the context of each institution and community and each chosen area of shared effort. Again, the community that the university works with is defined in part by the degree of fit with institutional academic strengths. Our findings indicate that the natural development of university-community partnerships begins with work between the university and well-organized local agencies and organizations that have the capacity and sophistication to interface with the more bureaucratic university. Over time, these relationships demonstrate the lasting commitment of the university and contribute to the development of trust. These developmental steps are key to gaining access to the deeper, more complex, informal fabric of the community and key populations.

The community must take a leadership role in defining what the university or college will do in the community.
setting. Community sites participating in a partnership of the George Washington University and George Mason University (participants in both the HPSISN and IPEC programs) have been carefully selected so that specific populations and contexts complement program goals. However, each community site participates in planning the curricular experiences and in defining needs and designing service activities that match those needs well.

**Leadership matters.**

The interpretation of the role of community engagement in an institution’s mission must involve a discussion among all levels of campus leadership, including faculty. While it is critically important that executive administrators consistently articulate the level of institutional commitment, they cannot unilaterally create and sustain partnerships or mandate faculty and student involvement. Community engagement as a core academic and scholarly activity involves the identification and support of faculty leaders and mentors who will sustain partnership activities over time and integrate engagement into their overall scholarly agenda. It is important to keep in mind that institutional involvement in community service does not devalue traditional scholarship, nor does every faculty member have to adopt service as part of their agenda. Community engagement requires a broader view of scholarship so that those faculty for whom service makes scholarly sense can be evaluated and rewarded for their efforts.

Each institution must decide the level and type of engagement that best reflects its mission and then test that decision by listening to the community. Then campus leaders must work to ensure that a critical mass of faculty have the skills and support to fulfill that commitment. Leaders also contribute by ensuring adequate infrastructure to support the partnerships. The community-based teaching activities at many institutions, such as the University of Kentucky, the University of Scranton, Portland State University, and the University of Utah, are strengthened by a campus-wide center for service or volunteerism that provides faculty development programs and other assistance to faculty and students.

**It’s the curriculum, stupid!**

We found partnerships that incorporate aspects of student learning to be the most mutually sustainable and comfortable paths to creating and testing relationships between the campus and the community. The community feels a sense of reciprocity in helping students develop civic responsibility and respectful understanding of critical human issues while learning new skills and exploring careers. For faculty, engagement in community-based learning through course instruction is less threatening than partnerships that may seem to impinge on their research agendas or may not be recognized by reward systems. Experimentation with community relationships through teaching allows faculty to explore linkages to the rest of their scholarly work. Students report that they learn much more about the community and find links to their academic goals when service is done as part of a course and not as an extracurricular volunteer activity. Students who participate in required course-based service-learning show greater personal transformation than those in optional programs. However, the issue of required service-learning remains controversial.

**We all have something to give and something to gain.**

Most people understand that successful partnerships focus on mutual benefits. We describe effective partnerships as knowledge-based collaborations in which all partners have things to teach each other, things to learn from each other, and things they will learn together. We have seen that an effective partnership builds the capacity of each partner to accomplish its own mission while also working together.

Sustainability is directly associated with an ongoing sense of reciprocity related to the exchange of knowledge and expertise. The University of Utah (a HPSISN site) places pharmacy and nursing students as companions in a seniors housing facility. Not only did students remark on what they gained from their service-learning experiences but the housing manager also played a role in the classroom as a facilitator of structured reflection, a key element of service-learning.

In many campus settings, community partners began with the view that they would not be accepted as coteachers because of their different experiences and credentials. Both they and faculty were often surprised at how professional expertise, extensive social and communication networks, and entrepreneurial skills allowed community partners to assume key roles in the student learning experience.

**The learning never stops.**

As knowledge-based organizations focus on learning, collaborations inevitably evolve and change. Effective partnerships require a shared commitment to ongoing, comprehensive evaluation from the earliest stages of the relationship. A commitment to evaluation helps build
trust and confidence between partners, especially when the community sees that the campus is open to criticism and that there is an authentic commitment to improvement.

Advisory groups were organized at most institutions as a way of gaining input. When advisory groups also played a strong role in evaluation, the partnership tended to expand into new community networks and collaborations. As a community-based organization, the Portland Healthy Communities initiative (a CCN site) has relied heavily on student and faculty participation since its inception. The nature of university involvement has varied over time, depending on the initiative’s view of community needs. Projects have included strategic planning, staffing of action groups, membership on an oversight council, administrative and policy support, evaluation, use of geographic mapping and information systems technologies, website development, and facilitation of community meetings. The range of activities in the partnership is not limited but is designed to reflect both assets and needs. Evaluation has been critical to tracking those evolutionary changes and supporting improvement in the relationship.

Conclusion
While partnerships take many purposes and forms, there are common features associated with “success, which most define as sustainability.

Sustainable partnerships have the following characteristics: (1) there are mutually agreed-upon goals; (2) success is defined and outcomes are measured in both institutional and community terms; (3) control of the agenda is vested primarily in community hands; (4) effective use and enhancement of community capacity are based on clear identification of community resources and strengths; (5) the educational component has clear consequences for the community and the institution; and (6) there is an ongoing commitment to evaluation that involves all partners.

The challenge facing higher education is twofold: first, making the changes in curricula and institutional culture that encourage partnerships with communities based on mutual learning as well as mutual benefit; and second, learning how to do this well.

The notion of the engaged campus will, no doubt, be sustained as a critical aspect of the mission of many institutions. We hope others involved in partnership evaluations will share their findings and learning widely so that higher education may grow in its effectiveness in working beside and within communities to develop rewarding and sustainable relationships.

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