Engagement in the Metropolitan Research University: The University of South Florida Creates its Identity

By S. Elizabeth Bird and S. David Stamps

Abstract

Although institutional "transformation" is now a theme of the movement to engagement, for the University of South Florida the process is better described as "self-definition." For newer, urban universities, growth has often reflected the need to reconcile the apparently conflicting goals of research excellence and community relevance. This paper describes the development of USF as a confident, research-oriented university with strong community roots, and delineates some of the conditions needed to create such a sense of identity.

Although institutional "transformation" has become one of the guiding themes of the movement to engagement, for the University of South Florida (USF), like many newer universities, the process might be better described as "self-discovery" or "self-definition." Opening its doors in 1960, USF has a short history compared to many of the large, public research universities around the nation. And while some of those have described transformation from land-grant, largely rural roots to an engaged university of the 21st century, new, urban universities like USF have taken a somewhat different path. For institutions like these, the desire to build a reputation has often reflected a tension that still looms over the engagement paradigm—can we grow to become both a nationally-respected research institution *and* a truly engaged, relevant university? USF's development over the last few years has represented a deliberate effort to reconcile these two goals, with the aim of creating a unique identity in the state and region.

Officially founded in 1956, USF struggled for some time to define its identity in a state that was destined to change, perhaps more than any other in the nation. Back in 1960, Florida's population was 4,951,560, with many living in fairly small cities and rural districts. By 2000, the population had more than tripled to 15,982,378, while Hillsborough County (including Tampa, but not St. Petersburg), almost doubled in 30 years, from 490,265 in 1970 to 998,948 (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program). Increasingly, life in Florida has become an urban experience.

The early 1960s were a time of widespread support for higher education, which was seen as a ticket to prosperity and an answer to the threat posed by Soviet scientific advances, forever symbolized by Sputnik (see e.g. Dickstein 1977). USF was born from

that bubble of both optimism and anxiety, which continued into the 1970s, as an unprecedented number of "baby-boom" college-age citizens demanded access to higher education.

At that time, Florida boasted two major research universities, the University of Florida and Florida State University, and it seemed the population of the state was equally divided in its loyalty to the Gators or the Seminoles. What was USF's role? Even its name was ambiguous, located as it was on the western coast of Florida, hardly in the south of the state. Yet from the day of its founding, USF began defining itself in terms that prefigured the rise of the engagement paradigm several decades later. According to USF's official online history (The John Allen Legacy, USF, n.d.), founding president John Allen and his charter faculty put their faith in an "All-University Approach," "a balance between liberal and professional education that sought to extend learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom," and aimed to make major contributions to the increasingly urban communities of Tampa Bay. But what that actually meant was not entirely clear, as USF embarked on an aggressive pattern of growth that continues today.

During the1970s and 1980s, USF mushroomed, intent on expanding opportunities for more and more students, it added graduate programs, and developed a research profile. As a new upstart, USF was still unsure of its identity, and growth was somewhat indiscriminate. Essentially, USF remained in the shadow of the *big two*, and modeled itself upon them, although it lacked the long history and rich funding of either of them. In stressing scholarship, many universities of that era eschewed applied or practical research as lacking in prestige, and USF administrations tended to play down community relevance, at least in public pronouncements.

Sowing the Seeds of Engagement

At the same time, our unique metropolitan location led many throughout the university to quietly begin focusing on what today might be defined as engagement, seeking out partnerships and working closely with community needs. For instance, in 1971, USF's medical school was established as a new kind of enterprise: "We are a *community* medical school, founded on that premise, and leading the way ever since," recalled John T. Sinnott, director of the College of Medicine's Division of Infectious Diseases." (quoted in Bird, 2000). The College has indeed defined itself in that way, and has become in many respects a national model for engaged medical practices, pioneering such initiatives as conducting major research projects in county health departments, and staffing those departments with USF research-trained specialists. But the significance of the medical school's decisions goes beyond the immediate context of the College itself. By making a decision that high-quality, funded research and community engagement can work together, the College played an important role in moving USF toward a process of self-discovery as a both a research-oriented and relevant university.

Nevertheless, the process was gradual, and at times almost covert. USF moved into the 1980s as a sprawling, urban institution, very unlike the traditional universities of Florida.

USF had a more diverse student body, including large numbers of older students taking classes part time while continuing to work. Those students needed a college experience that was integrated with their lives, not set apart from them, and they expected relevance in their classroom experiences. Meanwhile, in the time of Reagan, and on into the 1990s, a national debate on higher education was fermenting, as public universities began to face unprecedented criticism (see for example, Bennett, 1992; Bloom, 1988; D'Souza, 1991; Hirsch, 1977; Kimball, 1990; Sykes, 1990, to name just a few of the best known critiques). At the heart of these critiques was a belief that higher education was bloated and overfunded, but above all that it was at best irrelevant and at worst actively corrupting the nation's youth.

This critique, whether true or not, put universities on the defensive, and found them scrabbling for funds that had previously come without question. Like other universities, USF found itself responding both to specific local issues – the demands of a burgeoning urban community and a large, non-traditional student body – and to a changing national climate. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, USF was finally becoming recognized as a Research University in its own right, passing the $100 million mark in external funding in 1994.This brought increased confidence, but we still had not developed the self-assurance to proclaim what we were increasingly becoming – a relevant, metropolitan university deeply rooted in our community.

Nevertheless, a great deal happened in the 1980s and 1990s that increased our confidence. In 1980, the College of Business Administration created the Small Business Development Center, that has gone on to become a state-wide resource for expert business advice, and which also acts as a practical opportunity for graduate students in business. The growing significance of policy and community-based research on aging was symbolized by the creation of the Florida Policy Exchange Center on Aging in 1983. The following year saw the medical school establish a Public Sector Program, bringing medical care to Tampa's indigent, and the creation of the nation's first doctoral program in Applied Anthropology, specializing in community-based research in the United States. The College of Public Health, Florida's first and only such college, was established, along with the Educational Research Center for Child Development. In 1986, the Institute on Black Life was established "to serve as a bridge between USF and the global community" and to foster "research, training, and program development that will enhance the economic, educational, social, political and religious life of the community."

As the 1990s dawned, USF began, for the first time, to try to formulate a definitive strategic plan that would set a course for the future, resulting in the USF Planning Commission's 1992 report *Shaping the Future*. As the report stated, "USF must establish a clear view of its future" and needs a "distinctive identity." Yet the language betrays a lack of confidence in defining that identity: "USF should not emulate traditional universities; neither should it ignore what can be learned from them," and distinctiveness is hard to discern in the overall plan. The report focused on areas of academic strength, as well as discussing USF's multi-campus environment (at that

time, we had smaller campuses at St. Petersburg, Sarasota, and Fort Myers), and such issues as mutidisciplinary initiatives and library enhancement. Significantly, the university's mandate for community relevance was subsumed under its "service" function, while teaching and research remained distinct. The report recognized the established initiatives of health sciences, noting "a significant non-traditional university-wide role for the health sciences—the Colleges of Medicine, Nursing, and Public Health." Indeed the cooperation between these units in a community initiative was one of USF's great strengths, but at that time it was not highlighted as a campus model.

Shaping a Distinctive Identity

By 1995, USF had become the nation's 18th largest university in terms of enrollment, and the 8th largest urban university, but in many ways we were still trying to decide who we were. Higher education was still in a period of uncertainty that continues today, facing flat funding and a growing sense that the public was not convinced of its value. Yet for USF, this was the period during which we finally brought it all together, and made a commitment to define a clear identity for the institution. We learned to call that commitment *engagement*, and it was through the concept of engagement that USF was able finally to reconcile what had so often been seen as two contradictory imperatives—our desire both to become a top tier research university and to be a model for relevance in higher education.

As we have seen, although engagement is a 1990s term, USF had been laying the groundwork for years, and we believe that is a crucial point to bear in mind when we talk about transformation or change. A commitment to engagement cannot be created from the top down—frequently, change represents an institutional reordering of priorities that aims to recognize and formalize a grass-roots movement that is already well underway. At USF, it took the initiative of several key individuals to shape these informal movements into the kind of institutional commitment that seems right for the kind of university we are.

With an established research agenda in urban sociology and interdisciplinary community research, S. David Stamps came to USF in 1982, and became part of much of the rethinking that was going on during that decade. Across USF, individuals were looking for ways to establish university-community links, whether defined as teaching, research, or service, and many informal partnerships were thriving. For instance, while serving on the local board of United Way, Stamps had been able to bring in a class of students from the Accounting Department to assess and codify the chapter's accounting processes, resulting in practical training for students, a tangible and useful product for the partner, and an inestimable reward of good will from the community.

However, the seeds for a more formal University Community Initiative were sown in 1996, when Stamps became Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He was now in a position to start bringing together the many disparate initiatives in that college, which was an unusually large and heterogeneous entity, encompassing both the traditional arts and sciences and several professional and applied programs.

Giving voice to a discussion that had been heard throughout U.S. universities as they formulated responses to the national interrogation of higher education, Mary Lindenstein Walshok (1995) made the case that high quality research and community relevance are not incompatible. In fact, she argues that they each strengthen and enrich the other, as she demonstrates with examples from such powerhouses as Johns Hopkins University and the University of Chicago. Even as the engagement paradigm had gained momentum in the early 1990s, those universities often held up as models had tended to be excellent comprehensive institutions, such as the exemplary Portland State University, a fact that tended to confirm rather than challenge the distinction between Research universities and the rest. For USF, a university with Research 1 aspirations, though still with a lingering sense of second-class citizenship, engagement was still often suspect—perhaps perceived as a way of preventing us from achieving those aspirations. Walshok's work served as a catalyst for the fostering of a new pride in engagement, one into which teachers and researchers across campus could buy.

Stamps developed study groups around Walshok's book, developing a college-wide conversation about engagement as a desirable goal. He began by bringing together representatives from departments with an already-established applied or community focus, including Anthropology, Sociology, Communication, Mass Communication, Social Work, and the Institute on Government, and creating the College Community Initiative (CI) in the summer of 1996. The group was charged with designing strategies for connecting the college to the communities beyond the university, and a coordinator was hired in early 1998. The College CI explicitly did not intend to mandate a particular approach, but rather to encourage the modifying of the college's culture by integrating its teaching, research, and service missions through community engagement. The CI began to develop projects to begin this process, sometimes overseeing them, while at other times piloting projects that then become independent. While recognizing that engaged work is not for everyone, the CI tries to involve as many faculty, staff, and students as possible.

From the start, the CI sought not only to dissolve barriers between academy and community, but also between the missions of teaching, research and service. It established as a central goal "to work in partnership with communities to assess their resources and define their needs, and to supply the intellectual and human resources applicable to the resolution of community problems." To do this, it encouraged strategies such as bringing community issues and representatives into the classroom; developing joint research agendas; providing student volunteers and interns to private and public community organizations; taking courses into the community for educationally and economically disadvantaged residents; and recruiting educationally disadvantaged students.

This was a fairly daunting agenda, but enough people were committed, and many significant initiatives were established in a short time. The CI debuted the Clemente Seminar, a program created by Earl Shorris (2000), and run through Bard College, in which disadvantaged students, usually working adults, participate in a seminar co-taught by five USF humanities faculty. The seminar covers literature, writing, moral

philosophy, art history, and U.S history, and is based on the premise that the way out of poverty is not job training, but education that admits the poor into the cultural life of the powerful. The first Clemente seminar, running from October 1999 to May 2000, was not taught on campus but in space lent by a local mental health center located in a disadvantaged neighborhood close to USF, widely known as "suitcase city." Funding was secured from the Florida Humanities Council, the Hillsborough County Children's Board, and other local community providers. The program was repeated in the same community during 2000-2001, and a second program was launched in a poor neighborhood in South St. Petersburg. The CI also launched "Community Studies," a new course focusing on a single Tampa Bay community, offered each summer and meeting in that community. USF students become immersed in the community, meeting residents, business persons, and neighborhood activists. Student projects are designed to meet an expressed community need and at the end of the term a final product is presented to the community organization.

Moving away from the classroom, the Good Community Collaborative (GCC) is designed to enhance the civic infrastructure of the region, by engagement in genuine partnerships. Three community organizations, Hillsborough Tomorrow, Speak Up Tampa Bay and the Good Community Alliance, approached the College for assistance in collaboration. As universities are often able to do, the College offered neutral space and facilitation, and has worked with the three groups to develop a collaborative structure. The three civic organizations and CI formed the GCC, and CI wrote a proposal that earned funding for the Collaborative through the Florida Institute of Government. The GCC was a first attempt by USF to assist in forming a Collaborative with three volunteer, nonprofit organizations. Ultimately the attempt was not successful, and it ended in December 2000. Nevertheless, assessment of the factors contributing to the outcome was important in allowing members of the university to learn how to improve future engagement efforts with the nonprofit sector (Amen 2001).

The CI is also developing a mandate to craft a genuinely engaged student experience across the College curriculum, linking their academic education with real world experience, through such initiatives as developing a new community studies/community development curriculum; adding a community element to existing courses; developing community-related learning opportunities for students; and creating opportunities for students to work with faculty on community-based research projects. Some already successful examples include the Urban Studies Certificate Program, which provides an interdisciplinary exploration into the problems and potentials of urban life, with a Coordinator helping each student custom-design a multidisciplinary curriculum, including courses and internships, and self-designed concentrations in such areas as urban planning, urban management, community development, and community organizing.

The CI also aims to encourage faculty commitment to engagement, funding workshops and seminars on how to develop service learning components in existing or new courses, and securing a small grant to support five faculty in their development of service learning courses with community partners. In 1998 the CI began planning a

center to coordinate and facilitate college community research efforts, creating the Center for Engaged Scholarship (CES), which is now an independent center with its own director. The CES director articulated a clear statement of the nature of engaged research, defining it as a "process that requires faculty to relinquish much of the control they have as independent researchers," while stressing that "urging our universities to be good citizens does not compromise scholarship but fosters its application" (Finkelstein 1999). So far, the Center has been coordinating faculty grant proposals and initiating interdisciplinary projects. For instance, a recent project assessed the impacts of political radio advertising, pooling funds from a local television/radio station and the College of Arts and Sciences, applying the expertise of faculty in Psychology, Mass Communications, and Political Sciences, and using senior citizens from USF's Learning in Retirement program as data collectors and coders.

The College of Arts and Science Community Initiative has achieved a great deal in less than two years. Its successes emphasize that there must exist both a grass-roots commitment to the engagement principle *and* a leadership prepared to put often scarce resources into coordinating and facilitating the effort. Faculty in individual departments are often motivated, but do not have the resources to create the kind of collaborative initiatives that are often needed. Although much can be done in individual disciplines, true engagement is often intrinsically interdisciplinary; as the Kellogg Foundation succinctly states, "although society has problems, our institutions have 'disciplines'"(p. 9). Many universities, like USF in the past, have embraced interdisciplinarity while doing little or nothing to make it possible. Interdisciplinary initiatives cannot be ordered from above, without providing support and resources to make them possible. The Clemente seminar is a case in point—faculty from many disciplines have gladly participated, but none could have facilitated the entire enterprise.

Engagement, then, is a paradigm that must spread at all levels of an institution. At USF, the achievements of the College CI became the catalyst for a truly university-wide movement that is rapidly gaining strength. An initial principle of the CI was to participate in university strategic planning, and to promote engagement throughout the university and beyond. When USF began a new planning process to build on 1992's *Shaping the Future,* David Stamps advocated the creation of The Provost's Strategic and Planning Task Force on Community and Urban Initiatives, an entirely new formal concept for USF. Stamps co-chaired this multi-college task force, with other College CI members in key leadership roles. The Task Force's final report, written by CI staff, presented specific recommendations that would significantly enhance USF's commitment to engagement, becoming the basis for one of the Provost's five major strategic directions for USF.

An Institutional Commitment

USF's *Strategic Plan 2000* was a document very different from *Shaping the Future.* By then, USF was a much more confident institution, having just joined UF and FSU as one of Florida's three state-recognized Research I universities, having passed FSU in external funding, and looking forward to being ranked later that year in the top tier of

U.S. research universities by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Learning. Buoyed by the university-wide discussions on engagement that had been taken place, and the realization that "engagement," "scholarship," and "excellence" are indeed mutually compatible, the report presents are much more distinct identity for the university. The five central goals—enhancing research and scholarship, developing a student profile consistent with a Research I institution, fostering interdisciplinary efforts, increasing engagement, and enhancing the intellectual climate—help paint a picture of the research-oriented, relevant institution USF wants to become. The plan's preamble stresses that public service should no longer be an "add-on activity," but rather that USF should strive to "accomplish the teaching and research mission...through study and analysis of actual community needs and issues." Later, the plan lays out the central goal of community and urban initiatives: "USF has a social responsibility and obligation to work in partnership with its external community to apply and disseminate knowledge, test theories, and address critical health, economic, social, educational, environmental, and technological problems." The report recommends the adoption of the principles of Holland's (1997) model of engagement, and provides a series of key strategies, many deriving from the success of the Arts and Science CI.

As part of the planning leading up to this report, the USF Deans Council had created a University Community Initiative (UCI), aimed at fostering the UC engaged paradigm throughout the University. As with the Arts and Science initiative, the quick adoption of the idea signaled both leadership and a significant level of existing commitment. The then Dean of USF's St. Petersburg campus had floated the idea of a Center for Metropolitan Studies; Stamps saw this as an opportunity to combine some initiatives and create an inter-collegiate, inter-campus entity. Meanwhile, the Louis de La Parte Florida Mental Health Institute (FMHI) a USF unit under the leadership of Dean David Shern, had been developing its own commitment to engagement, through such initiatives as the Collaborative on Children and Families, which grew from a faculty grass-roots effort in 1996. The Collaborative awards grants to faculty, who must be working in interdisciplinary collaboration with a community partner. In redefining its mission, FMHI had closed a clinical facility, and funds had reverted to the Provost, who wanted to use them for activities concomitant with FMHI's mission. Stamps, Shern, and others wished to ensure that any formal initiative was created with full community partnership; they began the process by inviting community leaders from the private, public, and grass-roots sectors to a consultative meeting. Participants met in groups, and developed an agenda of community-based priorities, such as criminal justice, education, and social welfare, which became the basis for the formal founding of the University Community Initiative. After consultation with USF deans, the new UCI was born in 1999, with an initial budget of about $325,000; derived from the Provost's central funds, added to $100,000 from the Allegany Franciscan Foundation and $6,3000 from the state's community assistance program.

An immediate priority was the creation of a competitive process to award a number of annual grants of up to $15,000 (increased to $20,000 in 2001) to faculty carrying out research and/or teaching with community partners, modeled on the Collaborative on Children and Families' program. Several awards were made in 1999, with a second round in 2000. Significantly, the grants were awarded to faculty from across the disciplines, from Social Work to Art. And these appointees knew the real meaning of engaged scholarship – that it must actively involve partners, not merely use them as research subjects. As one community partner, an American Indian Movement activist, put it, "Usually they come with their questions already set up; it was really unusual for people from a university to ask us how things should be done" (quoted in Bird 2000, p. 21). Other projects exemplified the ideal of providing expertise that then becomes *owned* by the community partner; for instance, a parenting class designed by a Social Work professor and implemented in a local jail led to the Sheriff's Department being able to attract a $1.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Bird).

The UCI continues to plan for an increasingly high profile on campus, with various sub-committees involved in such projects as building a searchable data base of engaged scholarship, developing a substantial web presence, and conducting a national search for a full-time director. UCI members were key participants in the planning of the 2001 University as Citizen Conference, from which this special issue was derived. Apart from the conference's impact on the participants from around the nation and abroad, it was significant for USF in providing a very public affirmation of engagement, endorsed by the new USF President as part of her inaugural week events.

President Judy Genshaft arrived at USF in the Fall of 2000, once again underlining the importance of committed leadership in maintaining a high profile for engagement (Kellogg 1999). Genshaft made a rapid commitment to the model, illustrated by her endorsement of the conference and the strategic plan. She also provided funding and support for the production of a glossy, 32-page magazine, *USF and the Community: Celebrating Our Engagement.* This publication, written by the first author of this article (Bird 2000), drew on submissions received from faculty across USF's campuses. It defined the engagement model, and featured over 60 projects and initiatives, organized around interdisciplinary themes: children and families; health and wellness; art and the community; business and technology; educational innovations; social and community issues; natural and built environment; and learning for life. The magazine was made available to all participants at the University as Citizen conference, and has been widely distributed to universities nationwide, as well as to regional community groups, business and political leaders, and so on. The President continues to use it at all community events, and many of the featured faculty have been contacted for media coverage.

Looking to the Future with Confidence

In 2001, engagement is truly a way of life at the University of South Florida, an institution that has finally established its identity. The recent appointment of David Stamps, one of the most visible proponents of engagement, as permanent Provost, symbolizes the confidence USF now has in its engaged identity. We believe there are significant lessons to be learned from our experience, as well as significant challenges ahead:

- An institutional commitment to engagement works effectively when both the university and the community see it as a natural fit. USF has grown in a particular way; we are an urban university in a diverse region, servicing many non-traditional students, and attempting to meet the needs of an ever-expanding population and employment base. Community residents and leaders actively *want* an engaged institution to serve their needs.
- A commitment to engagement cannot be mandated from the top down, but must be embraced by faculty, all levels of administration, and students. For many years, USF had been carrying out engaged activities, but uncertainty about our identity made it difficult to embrace this mode as a guiding principle. Thus, leadership and the allocation of funds is crucial in bringing together activities and initiatives and providing support and focus.
- It is crucial to initiate a clear, campus-wide discussion of engagement, and how it fits with other goals, such as high-quality research. One still hears the complaint that engagement simply means community service, illustrated in such quips as, "so now he can get research credit for refereeing soccer!" Initiatives such as the UCI faculty grant program emphasize the point that transformative, community-based research can and should also be rigorous. For instance, the UCI suggests as an ideal that grants should be treated as seed money, with a goal of developing projects into larger proposals, and publishing in peer-reviewed journals.
- USF still needs to work through some of the familiar issues of engagement. Some worry that engaged research will be privileged over basic scholarship, or that everyone will have to commit to engagement or be penalized. Conversely, some worry that engaged scholarship will be judged as inferior by tenure and promotions committees, or that the time spent developing service learning will detract from the research needed to gain tenure. We still need time to work out these issues, which will have to be addressed at all levels, from the department upwards. Ideally, we will reach a consensus that values all approaches as equally important where they are most appropriate.

We are not presenting this account of USF's journey toward engagement as a simple success story, although we are proud of the successes that have been achieved. Even now, there are many at USF to whom "engagement" is an abstract, even suspect concept, rather than a lived reality. Rather, we have attempted to suggest what it might take to shape one new institution's identity, emerging as a metropolitan research university that is both an integral part of its community and a significant participant in the national and international academic enterprise.

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