Universities and Community-Building Activities Across the Globe: Responding to Economic and Ethical Crises

Stan Ingman, Terry Clower, and Isidor Wallimann

Abstract

Global concerns regarding economic stability and sustainable communities are exacerbated by unethical business practices and the growing gap between rich and poor. Changes in the role of universities and scholarship may help address some of these challenges through partnerships for research, education, and problem-solving. Exploration of the role of higher education in community-building is not unique to the United States. The authors offer examples of collaborative efforts involving universities and communities working together in Switzerland, Northern Ireland, and Mexico.

Societies and universities across the globe are exploring new paradigms for "community outreach" and "knowledge creation." The academy has long focused on teaching future leaders and workers, as well as creating knowledge for the general welfare. With the ever-expanding gap between "rich and poor," as well as world-wide ecological decline, some universities and nations are exploring new approaches to community outreach and scholarship. From creating "social economy networks" in Basel, Switzerland, Argentina, and Northern Ireland, to forming "sustainable communities" in the USA and Mexico, or a "bio-cultural" preservation program at a university in southern Chile, there are new solutions to "business as usual" (Nolt 1997). This paper briefly describes the concerns that inspire world-wide interest in university-community partnerships, and the common threads in these emerging programs.

Does the status of socio-economic and ecological order require us to rethink our basic educational and economic institutions? In the 1990s we saw the decline in state socialism or state communism models with the demise of the Soviet Union. Global capitalism truly became the dominant ethos, and corporate solutions, especially Western capitalism, became the dominant model. Corporate directors came to universities to tell the academy how they too could be successful and operate a more efficient educational factory or business. However, corporate scandals and recession are dampening enthusiasm for applying the business model to higher education. Moreover, there is a growing realization that for-profit management methods do not necessarily offer "best practices" in the non-profit sector.

The various corporate scandals (ENRON, World Com, Arthur Andersen) of 2002 have given rise to a sense of uneasiness among the population about the ethics of national and international corporate leaders and their board members (Phillips 2002). Unethical, and occasionally illegal, actions by religious leaders have caused many to question our most cherished institutions of morality. And some political leaders seem bent on debasing the dignity of their elected offices. Some wonder if we can depend upon "corporate responsibility" or "corporate ethics" to take care of balancing the books, let alone act responsibly toward the planet or nation state (Foster 2001). Can we rely on new corporate ethics regulations, church personnel policies, and politically-based watchdogs to bring us closer to a more just global economy? Should we consider the public's role in these scandals?

As long as stock prices rose, we were not concerned about pro-forma versus real earnings. We failed to see signs indicating our children were being abused. We have shown voracious appetites for titillation and scandal involving our elected officials. How often do we accept the "business necessity" or "convenience of the moment" of bribing government officials in other countries? Can universities make a difference in reducing corporate and government corruption in Russia, USA, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, especially given the ecological challenges, human injustices, and too often public indifference that exist on a national and global scale (Gill and Ingman 1994; Shabercoffs 1996; Hamilton 2000)?

On the ecological front, the quantity and quality of our water, the degradation of soils, and perhaps global warming are all issues requiring collaborative national and global decision-making (Brown 2001; Lovins and Lovins 1999). Other challenges are famine, AIDS, and poverty. As a UN document notes, "if the present consumption patterns continue, two out of every three persons on earth will live in water-stressed conditions by the year 2025." (Clarke 1999) All is not negative, as we all know. We have our successes like the dramatic increase in life expectancy, the major declines in most infectious diseases and the improvement of water and air quality in some locations over time (Bernard and Young 1997). As health care institutions have adjusted to the shift in attention from infectious diseases to chronic diseases, so other institutions like universities may need to adjust to new challenges and priorities.

Economic inequity demands the attention of educational systems. While most of us see the Internet as the sign of an increasingly inter-connected world and assume it to be a universal benefit, can we ignore the fact that 4.5 billion or so people exist on $2–3 per day? In a recent issue of *Business Week* (August 12, 2002) Laura Tyson quotes Alan Greenspan "that there was a climate of 'infectious greed'… a culture that extolled the pursuit of private wealth as public virtue." Even conservative George Wills on ABC (September 22, 2002) commented on corporate greed. "What kind of incentive is a 10 or 50 million dollar bonus? With CEOs now making 400 times the salary of the average worker, whereas it was only 44 times as much in 1980, why is this not simple stealing, crime or immoral behavior, one may ask?" What is the role of higher education in addressing planetary well-being, economic inequity, and global greed?

The Limits of the Traditional Academic Paradigm

Universities in the last century institutionalized the research university as the ultimate model of a knowledge organization separated from society (Phillips 2001). Teaching and service are secondary functions in this institution. Ranking systems for universities continue to focus on research and related grants; however, change is emerging as the Carnegie Classification System, for example, is exploring some reforms that may better reflect the diversity of institutional missions and attention to teaching and service as well as research. Despite the constraints of traditional views of academic values, many institutions have sought more balance in academic priorities by valuing quality teaching and service as scholarly work and elements of faculty evaluations. For example, our own School of Community Service at the University of North Texas (UNT) tries to balance these three criteria, and some faculty receive tenure with a major focus upon teaching and service with only a moderate focus upon traditional research. New national and economic challenges require these new, more integrated approaches to the discovery and application of knowledge.

Community Outreach in USA

With the entry of Community-Oriented Partnership Centers (COPC) program in 1994, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), universities and colleges began to compete for federal resources to support faculty in service to the community. Some 140 HUD COPC grants have been awarded to colleges and universities of many types. The activities of COPC's grants reflect the needs of the communities served by the applicant university: life skill training, workforce development, economic development, community planning, community service and professional services such as health care, youth development, social work, and legal services. Since 1994, interest in the program has increased, but the available fund pool has remained about $7–8 million each year, and only one in eight grant submissions are funded. Universities received the bulk of the funding initially, but now more community colleges and small private colleges are receiving grants.

Some institutions like Portland State University in Oregon have a national reputation for "adopting Portland" as a core focus of the service, teaching, and research work of the institution. The City of Portland is often cited in the business and popular press as one of the most livable cities in the United States. More work is needed to assess the link between university-based community activities and broadly-held public views on the local quality of life. Given current budgetary challenges and likely changes in spending priorities as the US Congress adapts to recent political power shifts, it will be increasingly important for universities to be able to clearly demonstrate the economic and social returns for public investment in community development.

At least two organizations represent some indications of the interest in this movement toward community partnerships and academic outreach. This paper was part of the 8th international conference sponsored by the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities. And, a new Association for Community-Higher Education Partnerships

(ACHEP) was created in 2002 as an attempt to support and expand the COPC funding model, and to promote the institutionalization of community service and partnerships across academia. ACHEP's mission is "to promote creative solutions for our communities." In addition to these two groups, there are a growing number of outreach interest groups in many of the specific disciplinary associations, as more see the teaching and scholarly value of community-based learning and scholarship.

Emerging State Models

Some states are also increasingly interested in promoting higher education's involvement in public problem-solving. In 1979, the Ohio General Assembly appropriated $1 million to the Ohio Board of Regents to implement an Urban University Center Demonstrative Program (UUP). Eight universities were included. They outlined seven goals related to applied research in urban problems (Ohio Urban University Program 2002). In Texas, Texas A&M has a line item funding to extend itself to the border area of Texas to build infrastructure projects like water treatment plants, community centers and sewage systems. In 1997, the legislature awarded UNT a line item to strengthen the infrastructure for volunteerism in Texas, and thus, the Educational Consortium on Volunteerism (ECV) was launched. ECV supports the Volunteer Center, Service Learning Office, and the Certificate for Volunteerism and Human Resource Management at UNT. All these efforts provide sites for students or future leaders to be engaged in local community building, and also to learn about our global interdependency (www.cps.unt.edu/vols). Kentucky, Florida, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and other states have also appropriated funds to promote university involvement in community development and public scholarship. Not all these programs survive during times of poor state revenue and budget cuts. With state and local governments in the US facing estimated combined budget shortfalls approaching $100 billion, many of these programs are threatened as never before.

Global Interest in Community-University Partnerships

The idea of linking the academic work and assets of higher education to public problem-solving is not unique to the United States. Here are a few examples of partnership activities in other nations.

Switzerland and Northern Ireland

In 1996, the Commission for Technology and Innovation and the Swiss National Science Foundation launched Action DORE (DO Research). Action DORE (2002) supports the promotion of competence in applied research at canton-level institutions of higher education in such fields as health, social work, arts, music and theatre, education, applied psychology, and applied linguistics. This program is separate from the traditional, more basic science research programs. Further, in order to ensure the practical relevance of research, applied research projects must be co-financed by external partners. External partners include public and private institutions and

organizations at the communal, canton, or federal level such as hospitals, libraries, private associations, and businesses.

The University of Applied Social Sciences in Basel has played a central role in creating a "social economy network" in Basel (Elsen and Wallimann 1998; Dobkowski and Wallimann 2002). This network represents one comprehensive project that best illustrates the merging of theory and practice, and the potential of the DORE program to address some needs of the underemployed and unemployed of Basel to maintain a lifestyle without participating in the moneyed economy of Switzerland. The social economy represents an elaborate bartering system. Currently the EU is funding social economy models in various member states. Northern Ireland also has one such project.

The Social Economy Agency of Northern Ireland was created through the European Commission's Social Economy Department and is housed at the University of Ulster. The agency's philosophy is to engage local distressed populations in meaningful economic activity leading individuals in these communities to be able to identify and meet their own social and community needs. Activities the agency coordinates or undertakes include organizing business cooperatives, self-help projects, credit unions, housing associations, and community enterprises and partnerships such as small business incubators and business assistance centers. In areas of the highest unemployment, the agency sponsors social activities for teens and young adults as ways to keeping youths productively engaged in non-hostile community activities.

For thirty years, the "Troubles" have presented unique challenges to economic and community development activities in Northern Ireland's urban centers. But rural areas are challenged as well, as agricultural industries and farmers struggle to lower their dependence on government subsidies in light of European Union (EU) expansion. Social Economy Agencies in Northern Ireland are funded largely through the European Union's Peace and Reconciliation Programme, the Peace II Initiatives, designed to support economic and community-based solutions to the Troubles. This funding is scheduled to end in two to three years. With former Soviet bloc nations, as well as economically-weaker western European nations set to join the EU over the next few years, Social Economy Agency officials worry that their funding will be diluted or eliminated to meet economic and social needs in new member states.

Mexico
In the late 1990s, UNESCO awarded Instituto Tecnologico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO), a private Jesuit College in Guadalajara, funds to establish a Chair on Social Sustainability. The Chair was housed in the Department of Housing and Urban Community (Habitat y Desarrollo Urbano). Swiss, Cuban, and Argentinian consultants were sent by UNESCO to assist faculty in program development. The concept was to start with the creation of a graduate program for architects and other disciplines around the theme of social sustainability. Project-based learning was to be the primary method to train students with teams of graduate students from community psychology, marketing, business, architecture, and applied engineering assisting with project development. While ITESO administrators were fully behind the program,

traditionalists in various academic units were concerned about losing program autonomy under the proposed interdisciplinary approach to learning. In addition, while several government agencies and nonprofit organizations were very supportive of the concept, on-going funding has proven to be a major challenge to implementation – especially as taxing authority in Mexico has shifted increasingly from local to federal levels.

The value of the community-based, interdisciplinary learning embraced by the ITESCO program is explored in the work of Jaime Morales, an agriculturist, sociologist, and activist on the ITESCO faculty (Morales 2001). Professor Morales examines epistemological dimensions of the sustainable development process and the need for sound information. He challenges many traditional methods of research and knowledge creation as inappropriate. Morales asserts that this approach to knowledge exemplifies the crisis of modernization and marginalizes the usefulness of western science research traditions. Professor Morales implores researchers to move closer to reality, that is, to the local level, and to consider the multiple determinants of how things really work. From the perspective of those studying and promoting sustainable development, research and education must be interdisciplinary (Goetz and Clarke 1993).

University of Colima
In May of 2002, the University of North Texas teamed up with Universidad de Colima and the City of Manzanillo to sponsor an Ecotourism and Sustainable Communities Conference. The Departments of Tourism and Language-and-Economics and the Center for Environmental Management were major partners in the initiative. Universidad de Colima with its three campuses and affiliated high schools has some 26,000 students. In collaboration with McMasters University in the 1980s and a grant from the Kellogg Foundation, they reformed their curriculum to move toward a "Problem-Based Learning" model, as one way to create a more relevant educational experience for their students. More recently the Universidad de Colima and UNT submitted an application to US-AID to take the next step toward project-based learning under the banner of "sustainable communities." This would mean that faculty and students from UNT and Colima would work back and forth between Texas and Colima in an effort to create sustainable communities. Our next program grant would link six institutions in Canada, USA, and Mexico, focusing work on Sustainable Communities issues in three regions, that is, Colima, Mazamitla and Lake Chapala.

Conclusion
Two major challenges call for reform in the mission of higher education: (1) global and national issues of sustainability and related concerns; and (2) the crisis of both ethics and equity that threatens global and national economic order and human well-being. By having education become more involved in intellectual work and partnerships relevant to their local geographic area, so the proposition goes, a capacity to blend economics and social well-being with ecological preservation is greatly enhanced. Why? First, the full complexity and interaction of politics, biology, and

economics are addressed. Second, the long-term results of policy choices and their consequences can be articulated and confronted. In addition, by engaging faculty and students in local or regional issues, many hope that a slightly more ethical student is produced. Community-based learning promotes the notion of having more direct responsibility for others by teaching students that the community is a complex educational and socialization issue. Opportunities to volunteer, to do service learning oriented classes, and to learn through project-based learning in a community or agency are all attempts at developing an ethos of service to others, and perhaps to reduce the simplistic association between educational level and a drive to accumulate material wealth for only personal gain (Sterling 2001). This is not to argue that the incentive to make a profit is unethical. However, determining what is an ethical profit and what will enhance economic equity requires in-depth discussion and reflection within a democratic context.

Regulations and the restructuring of organizations may reduce the opportunity and the urge to be corrupt. However, we now know that regulations alone are not sufficient (Cairns 2002). Increasing the ethical content in all classes is another suggestion, but the greatest interest today seems to be in linking student learning to engagement in community service, either locally or elsewhere. Through community-based learning students are encouraged to develop their sense of social and civic responsibility, attributes that are associated with being an educated person in a civil and democratic society.

References

Action DORE: Promotion de competences en re ohereche appliqueé dems los Hante Ecoles Specialisses (HES) cononales Repport dé activités, Tevrrer, 2002.

Bernard, T. and J. Young, *The Ecology of Hope: Communities for Sustainability* (Gabroila Island, British Columbia; New Society Publishers, 1997).

Brown, L.R., *Eco-Economy: Building Economy for the Earth* (New York: Earth Policy Institute, 2001).

Cairns, J., "Sustainability and Sacred Values," *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics* (Eco-Ethics International Union, September 13, 2002): 15–17.

Clarke, R., ed., "Overview: Global Environment Outlook" (United Nations Environment Program, GEO 2000 Team, 1999).

Dobkowski, M.N., and I. Wallimann, eds., *On the Edge of Scarcity: Environment, Resources, Population, Sustainability, and Conflict* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

Elsen, S. and I. Wallimann, "Social Economy: Community Action Towards Social Integration and the Prevention of Unemployment and Poverty," *European Journal of Social Work 1* (2, 1998): 151–164.

Foster, J.B., "Ecology Against Capitalism," *Monthly Review 53* (5, 2001): 1–15.

Gill, D., and S. Ingman, eds., *Eldercare, Distributive Justice and the Welfare State: Retrendment or Expansion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

Goetz, E. G., and S. E. Clarke, *The New Localism: Comparative Urban Politics in a Global Era* (London: Surge, 1993).

Hamilton, L.H., "US National Security for the 21st Century," *Sustainable Communities Review 4* (1, 2000): 37–39.

Hines, C., *Localization: A Global Manifesto* (London: Earthscan Publication, ltd., 2000).

Lovins, A.V., L.H. Lovins, and P. Hawken, "A Road Map for Natural Capitalism?" *Harvard Business Review* (May–June 1999): 145–158.

Morales, J., "Sustainable Development: Elementary for Discussions," *Sustainable Communities Review 4* (1, 2001): 16–23.

Nolt, J., et al., *What Have We Done? The Foundation for Global Sustainability's State of the Bio-Region Report for Upper Tennessee Valley, and the Southern Appalachian Mountains* (Washburn, Tennessee: Earth Knows Publications, 1997).

"Ohio Urban University Program," (Ohio Board of Regents Urban University Programs Committee, Roles and Responsibilities, 1994, 2002).

Phillips, B., *Beyond Sociology's Tower of Babel: Reconstructing the Scientific Method* (New York: Aldins de Gruyter, 2001).

Phillips, K., *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002).

Saegert, Sr., et al., eds., *Social Capital and Poor Communities* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001).

Shabercoff, P., *A New Name for Peace: International Environmentalism, Sustainable Development, and Democracy* (Hanover: University of New England, 1996).

Sterling, S., *Sustainable Education—Revisioning Learning and Change* (White River Junctions, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2001).

Author Information

Stan Ingman, Ph.D. is Director of the Center for Public Service and Professor of Applied Gerontology, School of Community Service, at the University of North Texas, Denton, Texas.

Stan Ingman
308 Chilton Hall
UNT
P. O. Box 310919
Denton, TX 76203
E-mail: Ingman@scs.unt.edu

Terry Clower, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor and Associate Director of the Center for Economic Development and Research at UNT, Denton, Texas.

Isidor Wallimann, Ph.D. is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social Work at University of Applied Sciences, Basel, Switzerland.