

THE UNIVERSITY AND LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Increasing pressures on universities and educational institutions to be more involved in the communities that house them have led to a wave of interactions that have been both creative and mutually supportive. These 'town-gown' relations have stemmed not only from pressures by government leaders, but also from the sense of civic responsibility and the drive for 'service learning' where students move beyond the academic walls to engage in real life situations as part of the learning process. The resultant merits are invaluable lessons and experiences that are mutually beneficial to the students and the communities. Similarly, the involvement of community residents with events on campus fosters a mutual relationship and a positive perception towards the university.

Challenges with such partnerships include the resentment between the community residents and the university members and the 'us and them' mentality that leads to communication blocks, mistrust and resentment. Overcoming these sentiments requires perseverance, patience, and creative thinking.

This paper discusses one successful partnership between the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the City of Springfield in Massachusetts. This collaboration was targeted to benefit the City by helping with their economic revitalization efforts, and the University by giving them a space in downtown Springfield for a 'Design Center', where students have a meeting space for studio and field work and can then exhibit their work. The paper ends with a set of principles that can guide other institutions and communities in developing strategic outreach and engagement activities.

Keywords: town-gown, service learning, partnerships, outreach, economic development.



1. Introduction

Over the past decade there has been increasing pressures on universities, colleges and community colleges to be more closely aligned with the interests of the communities that house them. At times, pressure has come from the governmental leaders (the Governor mandates it!). At times it has come from the host communities who feel short changed by the presence of these academic institutions (they use their services but don't pay them). At still other times, the faculties push the institutions to live up to a sense of civic responsibility and, as well, arguing for the students move beyond the academic walls to see the world as it is.

Regardless of the stimulus, the fact remains that academic institutions are becoming key economic and social changing engines in cities and towns across the nation. In many cases there have been dramatic successes while, in others, the efforts have not held up to expectations.

This paper is an analysis of a series of efforts of outreach experiences across the New England region of the United States, particularly the UMass-Amherst and the City of Springfield partnership, that reflect the characteristics noted above. The paper ends with a set of principles that are important for any city and university that would like to forge such relationships.

2. Literature review

Higher education has historically fostered democracy and social value through its educative responsibilities. This function, in the recent decades has caught wind again in research literature and dialogue, after having gone through a diminishing phase in the past few decades (Sax, 2000). University-community engagement has been formed through various ways from service learning opportunities to consultation and large projects. These have often resulted in an improved quality of life, economic development opportunities and increased provision of expertise (Mullins and Gilderbloom, 2002).

Service learning is defined as 'course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility' (Bringle and Hatcher, 1995, p. 112). Service learning opportunities are invaluable lessons and experiences gained when students engage with the community, whether through class projects, internships, or volunteering efforts. These skills complement classroom learning and provide priceless experiences, while at the same time providing communities with new thoughts, ideas and talent that young minds expend (Bonsall, Harris and Marczak, 2002; Markus, Howard and King, 1993; Cashman and Seifer, 2008).

While not limiting the interaction to be only university based, Bruning, McGrew and Cooper (2006) stress the importance of involving the community residents and 'inviting' them to the university campuses to engage in cultural events (sports, theater and so on).

This type of engagement they have shown to be critical in the positive perception of the community towards the university. In this way, involvement with and contributions to the local community will enhance the image of the university and create a positive environment for continued interactions and stronger partnerships (Kim, Brunner and Fitch-Hauser, 2006).

Leading from stronger partnerships come opportunities where the community and the university can come together to work on a common issue that would be beneficial to both parties. Halverston and Plotas (2006) talk about a 4 year academic partnership between library and a public library which ended up working together to automate their systems. Similarly, Smith (2006) talks of another partnership between a public library and a university library that resulted in shared locations, personnel and collections. The advantages of such partnerships include mutual benefits, reduced costs, greater services for patrons and shared expertise.

Partnerships bring challenges with them as well; the main one referring to the resentment between the community residents and the university members (faculty and students). A reoccurring issue is the 'us and them' mentality. This mentality leads to communication issues that by themselves result in more challenges and hardships. As Smith (2006) puts it, 'when communication breaks down, relationships become strained and we are less willing to compromise' (p. 631). As universities are tax-exempt institutions, they do not pay taxes or contribute to the local coffers. Thus, when they purchase a building that was formerly owned by a profit orientated company, the city loses tax revenue from that structure. This status makes for most of the resentment and mistrust.

However, many cities are requiring some form of 'payments in lieu of taxes' (PILOTs) if universities buy up taxable properties while others are requiring that universities replace the properties converted into non-profit use by buying non-profit parcels and requiring them to become taxable. This has helped it to be perceived as a responsible community member. Boston was the first city to suggest these voluntary PILOTs from its non-profit institutions and the City is said to receive one of its most generous packages from its universities (Baker-Minkel, Moody and Kieser, 2004).

In summary, these partnerships specifically, and the call for greater civic engagement in general, stems from claims that universities must serve some purpose that is greater than teaching students in classrooms. Addressing socially relevant issues, imparting practical knowledge and experience opportunities, and addressing civic education and public scholarship helps justify universities' continued existence and related (often rising) costs (Ostrander, 2004). The call to move away from 'education as a commodity, students as customers' (Boyte and Kari, 1996, p 185), positions universities at the forefront of civic participation. Other factors such as the increased need for faculty to engage with and work on real world issues facing their communities and imparting this sense of practical readiness for problem solving to students also stresses on the importance of effective civic engagement through town-gown relations.

The next section discusses the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the City of Springfield Partnership as a case study for a relatively detailed look into the workings of town-gown collaboration.

3. The University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass-Amherst) and the City of Springfield: a case study of a successful partnership

The city of Springfield, the third largest in the state of Massachusetts, has had a rich industrial history. It has, in the past decade, seen its share of economic and demographic decline. In 2007, the governor of the State asked UMass Amherst and the City to collaborate and develop initiatives that would help with the City's economic revitalization efforts. Consequently, a Partnership Team was created in December 2007 that consisted of various senior officials from the University and the City government, and its primary duty was to determine how to bring the collaboration to be a success.

In November 2008, officials at UMass-Amherst and The City of Springfield finalized and signed a Memorandum of Understanding that created a partnership between the two entities that would further the research, teaching, and outreach capacities of the university to enhance the economic growth of the greater Springfield area. In particular, the economic effort would be in establishing the Springfield area 'in the long term as a center for environmentally beneficial green industries, to boost the city's arts and creative economy, and to expand relevant university teaching and outreach initiatives' (Blaguszewski, 2008). Springfield has a rich history of manufacturing and industry, and this historical asset was paired with the University's capacity for research in green and sustainable technologies.

Another area of focus was developing the performance arts in Springfield so that it lends to increased life and helps with the revitalization efforts. It was expected that the increase in business related to the arts would attract more people to the downtown area and complement the efforts towards the green industries cluster and sustainable technologies. The City had identified the '21 Elm Street' building as one that would serve as an anchor and target for attracting new residents in the downtown area. This would be possible only if the downtown area was vibrant, and in turn, the vibrancy of the downtown depended on creative activity (CED, 2010). Thus the focus needs to be on encouraging this economic aspect of the City. The City had purchased the 'First Church' located on 50 Elm Street and had hoped to designate it as a space for the artistic community and their activities.

The partnership was jointly funded by a grant from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) for \$150,000, with the City and the University matching the grant for a total of over \$320,000 (Blaguszewski, 2008). One aspect of the partnership involved the creation of a Design Center in downtown Springfield, which opened up in 2010, and runs on funding from the City of Springfield and UMass Amherst, without any other external funding source. The Design Center provides services such as coordination of Design Studios, integration of design and planning disciplines, providing a visual component of ideas, assisting neighborhoods with grant proposals, and hosting events related to the work of the Center.

Community engagement and interaction is a key addition to the work at this location. Public participation and interaction is witnessed and experienced first-hand by students and this is a benefit for both groups. Apart from this, students benefit by having a meeting space for studio and field work, a space for exhibiting their work, and an archive of previous projects. The community benefits by having the university physically present in the City, having a teaching and learning facility, and space for public gatherings (Sleegers, 2011).

Even though the success of the collaboration is ongoing and cannot be fully measured, there are various accomplishments that have been made by this collaboration. Initial accomplishments include meetings on a regular basis for continuing discussions to new strategies that can be undertaken by the collaboration, networking between the director of the Partnership and a variety of people on and off campus to elicit support for the projects, an inventory of programs on campus that are Springfield-based that relate to the industries that are being encouraged, community forums for those in the creative arts fields as well as those involved in green industries, and conferences and fairs to exhibit and create interest in the collaboration and its work.

Apart from the above, continued efforts were put in determining potential sites for spin-offs from the university in the City in the targeted industries, creation of the Urban Design Center, channeling new activities to the First Church building that relate to the creative economy, applications for grants to the State for funding for the collaboration work that would create jobs, and bring vitality to the downtown area. From dance companies, to art exhibits, continued efforts in fostering the creative economy is bringing success to the works of the collaboration. In terms of green industries, significant advancement has been made with the collaboration of UMass Amherst and the Springfield Technical Community College (STCC) in the creation and running of the STCC Incubator that attracts and gives incentives to green industries locating in the area. Not only has there been continued dialogue between the Partnership entities, but the inclusion of the community has also been key in the success of this collaboration.

All plans and studies that have been put in place have been discussed by the City, the University, the community stakeholders and the residents.

These activities and accomplishments highlight the commitment of the University to Springfield's future. With the presence of the University in center city Springfield, encouragement and attraction of green industries and the creative arts community has been enhanced. The benefits also accrue to the University participants. From service learning, to space and venues for further expression of talent, faculty and students from UMass Amherst can find ways to put theory to practice and increase their regional/global marketability.

From the above experiences, one can construct a set of principles that may be of value to other institutions interested in developing strategic outreach and engagement activities in their host community or nearby cities and towns. These principles are noted below and are followed by a set of conclusions.

4. Guiding Principles for Effective Town-Gown Collaborations

4.1. Principle One

The Mayor and the President of the university must be in agreement concerning mutual involvement. At the most basic level, it should be solidified through a signed Memo of Understanding (MOU).

This agreement should contain the agreed on PILOTs and should be publicized and used as a working guide for actions that follow. The absence of a working guide can lead to suspicion. For example, the efforts of Harvard University to build a new campus were first developed with little regard of the needs of the City of Boston, the neighborhood or even the Mayor. This failure led to a collapse in advancing the project, acrimony between the University and the Mayor and a sense of distrust between the institution and the neighbors. This split between 'town and gown', we expect, will color the implementation of this project for decades to come.

In contrast, the partnership between Boston's Mayor and the Suffolk University and Emerson College has dramatically transformed the city's Downtown. This area ravaged by changing markets and the Great Recession of the past four years, was in danger of being quite endangered. Today, new buildings, dormitories, classrooms, and entertainment facilities are located throughout the district. It is a lively, vibrant place that brings pride to both universities and the city.

4.2. Principle Two

Universities must promise only that which they can actually deliver. Universities hold an honored place in their host communities across the United States. However, their honored position has often been tarnished by their outreach work. The local community will hear, for example, that a university is coming to the community to undertake some project. This quickly gets interpreted as there will be a long term presence of the university some place in the city. When the project ends, the university goes home and, once again, the community is bitterly disappointed. There must be a clear understanding of the university's roles and objectives.

For example, the University of Massachusetts Amherst developed a one year workable program for 2011-12 that called for: (1) the movement of its radio station, with forty new jobs to Springfield, Massachusetts, (2) the creation of a design center that would assist the city's planning department, (3) investment in a Life Sciences Institute that would be located in the city, (4) increased links with the city's school system that are designed to expand the number of students enrolling at UMass from Springfield City Schools and (5) establishing a physical presence in downtown that, hopefully, could be expanded over time.

All five of its goals/objectives were announced in the press and thus, expectations for that year became known. As well, the goals/objectives became the score card on the effectiveness of the University-City partnership.

4.3. Principle Three

While faculty should be encouraged to undertake research in the community, they should not use the city as a laboratory.

Too often, for example, an educator will obtain a grant to improve science scores in the center city middle school. With a cadre of graduate students, the faculty member provides instruction for a year to these students. They are remarkably successful for that one year and then go home to write up their findings. In the meantime, the students return to life as it occurred before the project. Who really gained? In many cities, this constant short term 'quick' interventions practice has so embittered school administrators and teachers that city systems often balk at the offer of universities' involvement. It is clear that an understanding of where the project fits in terms of the existing curriculum is crucial. It is hard enough for local teachers to satisfy federal and state mandates without adding new assignments and spending time on non-essential activities that raise expectations that cannot be met. Again, a workable program is essential.

4.4. Principle Four

A town-gown relationship should be developed for the long term. It must be able to withstand the life of university projects and the term limits of mayors. Otherwise, all projects will be short term and reflect the dictum of 'If it can't be done in one term, it can't be done'.

Unfortunately, community investments, particularly capital projects, require years and years to build. Patience is a virtue in a town-gown relationship. This is a sensitive issue for often the mayor and the president of the university are at odds. In most cases in New England, it has been most effective when staff irons out the cantankerous issues and then presents the solutions to the leadership as a 'fait accompli'.

4.5. Principle Five

A town-gown relationship must be a true partnership. This means that shared decision making must occur. It also means that some times each side will lose.

Given that two powerful leaders are in charge, this is often acrimonious. Still, well-meaning people can work together. To insure this long term relationship, staff from the university and the city at the strategic level must be assigned oversight of the partnership. The key word in the above is 'strategic'. The staff must be able to interact at the senior level of both institutions. Critical elements of their jobs will be the creation of the annual work plan, finding the funds to pay for the projects and insuring that the partnership remains healthy.

4.6. Principle Six

The physical presence of the university in the community is important. While one can understand the idea of the university has a place of quiet thinking and analysis separated from the realities of everyday life, the reality is that the university is a critical player in stimulating the 21st century economic engine.

Citizens of the host city want to be able to see the university's structure and students and faculty moving about the community. They want the banner of the university at the grade schools, laboratories and theaters where the university is involved. In many cases the image of the community's presence is more important than the actual activities that occur in the buildings housing its program. Such is the case in Hartford, Connecticut where the University of Connecticut's MBA program is housed in one of Hartford's high rise buildings. Attached to the building is a large marquis that announces UConn's presence. The actual space occupied by UConn is a scant number of floors. On the other hand, the impact of the new Hafen University in Hamburg's Hafen City was a major stabilizing influence in the revitalization of this area. A similar result can be found in Trinity College's urban neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut.

In a final analysis, if universities occupy key space in the community it can be a major value to the community. We have found, as silly as it sounds, that banners, flags and signs proclaiming the university's involvement in the host city are critical. Very quickly, the mayor will trumpet the fact that a new university has established a footprint in the community, pictures of the building will appear in promotional materials and the university space will become a meeting venue.

Stated alternatively, one cannot underplay the economic, social, educational and political impact of housing a university in a city. When universities move into a neighborhood they introduce new people, tend to add value to homes, change markets and can stimulate regeneration. It is clear, however, that both the community and university have to be aware of their impacts.

4.7. Principle Seven

The university-town connection is enhanced by two-way student actions. The university's students can spend money in the host city, create more activity through the downtowns and stimulate vibrancy throughout the entire city. What's more they can rent space not easily filled.

One can see this vividly at work as Suffolk University's night Law School brings vitality by bringing hundreds of students to downtown Boston five nights a week. A similar experience can be found in Manchester's Amoskeag Mill Works that houses the University of New Hampshire's Manchester branch. Placing students on the street helps to make the area safer and more exciting. The involvement of students in a downtown moves far beyond spending. Students are lively and bring vibrancy and a sense of youth to the community. Imagine a formerly decayed urban downtown full of such people. The sounds and color alone are priceless. All one has to do is to take a walk along Providence's College Street or Worcester's Route 9 at two in the morning to see the impact that students can have on the neighborhoods where they live. Irritating? Yes. Priceless? Also yes!

The second element occurs through the university's involvement with the city's residents. For most people universities are highly mysterious places that can be intimidating. One would be surprised by the number of youngsters who pass a campus

gate regularly but never enter. They believe that such places are for someone else. By bringing these kids to campus or the building in the city, some of the fears of higher education can be minimized. Further, if the university's students help the parents of student prospects to prepare forms, advise about financing and courses and explain about campus life, the possibility of improved recruiting could occur.

One interesting example of how this is being explored is a creation of a program that would allow any City of Springfield, Massachusetts high school student to obtain free transit from the city to the Five Colleges area, fifteen miles in distance. The five colleges are Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, Smith and the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The intent is to help overcome the sense of distance between the city and those often perceived intimidating places. It is a small step but one that will prove beneficial. In short, the human side of the university interacting with the people of the city can add great value to the experiences of both.

4.8. Principle Eight

The university must remember that it is primarily an educational institution. Too often in state mandated instances or through the appeals of local leaders, universities get drawn into assignments that are outside its core mission. At times, for example, it will be given the assignment of improving the water system, creating cultural attractions and/or even serving as city staff. While all of these can work on the short term, they should not become part of the university's portfolio.

On the other hand, workforce training, preparing a diverse school population for higher education or building a branch campus in the host community are activities that are clearly within the mission of most universities. So are bringing sports events, theater productions and art exhibits to the city. In these cases, the triumph of the local team, the applause of a well-performed event or the crowds at an exhibition all add to the positive cache of the university in the city. The community is even more proud when the participants come from the local community. There is clearly a mutuality of interest between the university and host community but it must be part of the university's mission.

4.9. Principle Nine

Universities have the ability to respond to the needs of surrounding neighborhoods. The experiences of Yale in New Haven and Trinity in Hartford are quite telling. In both cases, the universities have invested in their surrounding neighborhoods by providing low cost mortgages to faculty and staff, opening several theaters and assisting in local education. In these instances, there are self-interests at stake: a safer, more aesthetically pleasing place and easy access to the university are all assets for the university while improved housing and a higher tax base are in the interest of the community.

In any case, universities have consistently been ready to help improve their surroundings. On the other hand, this must be undertaken with great care: universities also have the power to transform neighborhoods. All one has to do is look at the

experience of Boston's Northwestern University or its surroundings. They have changed from areas with working class characteristics to ones populated by students, faculty and upscale shops.

4.10. Principle Ten

Collectives of universities and colleges can add great value to the host community. Too often, universities located in the same city develop their own town-gown protocols without regard for the other institutions in the community.

This may result in more projects in the community but also can create extensive duplication of efforts and the atomization of the impacts. It is clear that creating a climate of collaboration can be more effective: more funds, more depth of effort and better coordination can result. Of course, it means that each of the institutions must sacrifice its independence. Doing so is not always an easy task. The best example in New England is Five Colleges, Inc. which is an umbrella organization that promotes cooperation among the five institutions of higher learning in the mid Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts. The organization has focused upon ongoing continuous dialogs with nearby communities with great success. Arguably the most impressive result has been a Five College Bus Route system that connects the five colleges and is free to all students and residents of nearby communities.

5. Conclusions

Not all universities are alike. The United States is made up of private colleges and universities, community colleges, public colleges and universities and, increasingly, 'virtual' universities which offer on-line education. In all instances, the style and degree of involvement will be different. What's more, there are no rational models or legislative directives that can serve as guides. Still the opportunities are endless. It is clear that there is no turning back the clock to the times of the high walled, cloistered university of old. The university must now become a critical player in the future and economy of its city and region. There is no formula, set of standards or national programs that can guide how best the participation of these institutions can occur.

However, there are now tens of 'best examples' that can be found throughout the US. These range from projects as personal as providing mortgage assistance to faculty and staff to the creation of large business centers, industrial parks and even new town centers. In all cases, the orientation of the university will require the commitment of its administration to change how it operates, to commit funds and staff to the effort and to become a true partner with its host community. As the university's students reach out beyond campus walls for knowledge so must the university reach out to build the community.

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