

The Case for Comprehensive University/ Neighborhood Partnerships

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In the midst of the twin national dilemmas of rising economic inequality and growing student debt on the one hand, and the severe fiscal and moral challenges affecting a significant swath of public and private American colleges and universities, the legacy of American higher education as a viable pathway for social mobility remains a distant dream to many youngsters trapped in shadow communities.

In spite of this punishing public narrative, there is a growing practice between a number of colleges and the poor neighborhoods within their geographic midst. These institutions seek deep democratic partnerships with the K-12 schools which benefit all members of these neighborhood partnerships. If successful in increasing learning persistence through the entire K-through-College journey, not only will students and families find lifelines to the middle class but these schools and colleges will rediscover their confidence in meeting their missions and developing a new generation of young professionals and leaders ready to fuel a more dynamic and just economy while inspiring the residents of these shadow communities to participate more fully in the civic life of a now moribund democracy.

Robust university and neighborhood partnerships are highly productive. For the university they contribute to enhanced student learning outcomes, increased student retention and increased net tuition revenue, strengthened student civic and preprofessional competencies, and institutional focus and improved public standing. The communities gain from access to educational, research and physical resources as well as direct service and significant impact of on economic and social needs. These successful partnerships require clear mutual objectives, visionary and resilient leadership in all quarters, and relationships fortified by trust and respect.

Impact on Universities

Comprehensive university and neighborhood partnerships involve many campus stakeholders. Students are engaged not only in community based learning courses but also sustained co-curricular commitments with community partners. One result of increased student engagement is almost always academic success as measured in grade point average, persistence to degree, student retention, higher graduation rates and continuation into employment and graduate education. In addition when challenged with an inclusive leadership program, students develop particular civic competencies in

collaboration, field based problem solving, social inclusion and diversity, intergroup dialogue and social maturity. All of these student outcomes address two key university goals, particularly for undergraduates, namely, enhanced employment skills and demonstrable civic engagement.

Faculty members benefit in several ways. Often they find significant research connections that assist the partnership work. In addition their students are directly involved practice centered research. Secondly, they find even deeper meaning to their academic work. It grounds much of what can be abstract and individualized work with on the ground immediacy. Finally, faculty develop greater collaboration with students, fellow academic colleagues and community partners. We have found a deeper identification with the University's mission.

Other university stakeholders often benefit. Administrators find allies on the faculty and among their peers as they involve themselves in shared, important and challenging institutional commitments. Trustees and regents take great pride in the university's public presence. Presidential leadership always proves paramount in championing the work and presenting it to internal and external audiences.

Comprehensive partnerships garner specific positive fiscal outcomes. Increased student retention always increases net tuition revenue. As economically stressed institutions, colleges and universities are hard pressed to be strategic. Resources must support priorities. Prudent investments in civic partnerships hold the potential to increase revenue in net tuition, annual contributions, grants and gifts and potential endowment commitments.

Impact on the Community

Most community partnerships include a significant if not exclusive commitment to preparing the next generation of college students through college readiness programs in economically challenged neighborhoods with low rates of college attendance. Mentoring, tutoring, literacy, teacher development, and related programs all provide direct service to schools up and down the pre-K through 12 pipeline. Aligning college faculties with their primary and secondary colleagues establishes important professional development support and opportunities. These ventures are quite impactful on teacher retention and advancement.

These pipeline alliances also have a number of positive side effects for challenged schools. College admissions offices offer important information and guidance for students often without access to adequate levels of college counseling staff. Colleges and universities offer campus visits to middle school and young high school students from first generation college families for whom higher education is a mystery and dismissed as unattainable. Connections to successful college students who themselves graduated from similar high schools in similar neighborhoods, presents K-12 students with key role models that can illuminate a path to success for students who were not considering higher education.

Communities benefit from significant research investments on subjects outside the traditional funding options for challenged neighborhoods. In addition to college readiness, universities offer expertise, resources, social capital and critical practice from schools of business, nursing, allied health areas, education and other key applied fields.

Finally, these partnerships support, prepare and champion a new generation of community leadership from teachers, parents and school administrators to health professionals, local foundation officers, public officials and of course the non profit sector. The community and neighborhoods prosper from increased self esteem, optimism and a positive identity as against the dominant narrative they usually experience that accentuates crime, poverty and personal failure.

Summary

Higher education suffers from declining resources, fiscal crises, declining public support and general skepticism about its mission and practice. Distressed neighborhoods face similar liabilities. They see inequality and racial divides growing, opportunities declining and political disinterest rising. These two sectors need each other now more than ever. Comprehensive civic partnerships are a lifeline for both for all the reasons listed above and more. Universities need to reconnect with their core missions to educate and prepare generation after generation for success in a vibrant economy and an inclusive democracy. Distressed neighborhoods need allies to disrupt the damning “ school to prison pipeline “ and the growing expanse of inequality that despoils so much future economic potential, community assets and personal lives. Together these two sectors will rise to higher levels.