University Involvement in the Community: Developing a Partnership Model

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A Great Cities Institute Working Paper

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The Great Cities Institute

The Great Cities Institute is an interdisciplinary, applied urban research unit within the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). Its mission is to create, disseminate, and apply interdisciplinary knowledge on urban areas. Faculty from UIC and elsewhere work collaboratively on urban issues through interdisciplinary research, outreach and education projects.

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University Involvement in the Community: Developing a Partnership Model

University involvement in the community is not a new phenomenon. Historian Thomas Bender describes initiatives supported by Columbia University in the 19th century, as well as John Dewey's prescriptions for the University of Chicago at the beginning of the 20th century. Since the last century, the concept of the land grant university has been based on the belief that the university should be useful to its community in a direct and applied way, not just through the education it provides or the long-term potential benefits of pure research. What explains today's new emphasis on university-community partnerships, as reflected in new federal programs, and indeed the founding of this new journal itself?[1] And what is different about the current wave of interest in the issue?

Many pressures contribute to academia's rethinking of its relation to the wider community, including:

- enormous demographic changes in the student body-age, financial capacity, and racial and ethnic diversity;
- changed federal funding climate because of reductions in defense-related research and other programs;
- increased funding competition at the state level as other needs, such as health care costs, infrastructure, public safety, and K-12 education demand ever more resources; and criticism of universities' integrity and commitment to teaching.

These challenges require universities to formulate a new mission, a new societal rationale for themselves. While each university will come up with its own answer, for many institutions, especially those in urban areas, a greater commitment to the concerns of their immediate community makes sense (Harkavy and Wiewel, 1995). This is driven in part by the sheer seriousness of the need: social problems have increased tremendously over the past decade as urban school systems seem less and less able to cope with the needs of today's troubled students and as poverty has grown and become more concentrated in central cities.

It also makes sense for universities to deal with the problems that their funding agencies face. Since state legislators are confronted daily with Medicaid funding, welfare, prison building, and school funding, public universities need to show they can contribute solutions in these areas. As Sheldon Hackney, then president of the University of Pennsylvania, said: "...we will be expected to contribute in directly understandable ways to the solution of pressing public problems... For universities to stand aloof from the task of revitalizing our nation's schools and communities, when society has clearly decided that it is an urgent priority, simply will not be tolerated." (1994:9)

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One unique aspect of the current wave of interest in community involvement by universities is the notion of partnership. In the past, universities generally operated on the deficit model: the community, or society at large, had certain needs, and the university, as the home of experts, would fill these needs. In other cases, the community was merely seen as laboratory, with more or less compliant "guinea pigs."

In a partnership model, things are more equal. It is acknowledged that both parties have needs and that success requires a mutual recognition of needs, shared problem definition, and a joint search for solutions. Politically, the partnership model acknowledges the reality of dealing with external publics who no longer stand in awe of universities. Intellectually, it is based on the notion that knowledge does not just reside in the university, but that there are many kinds of knowledge, developed and held by different sectors of society, and that further advances in knowledge require joint activity. Mary Walshok (1995) argues that universities must develop "knowledge linkages" that university bring different partners to share the types of knowledge they have. Applied to a community context, this suggests that residents and community agencies have an understanding and analysis of community problems that is important and valuable, even though they may use different categories and concepts than academics might.

Over the past few years, more and more universities and colleges have begun to develop programs responding to the new societal context. They have come together to share ideas in organizations such as the Renaissance Group and the Metropolitan Universities coalition and through new urban oriented programs of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (Wiewel, Carlson and Friedman, 1996). Specific new programs range from service learning to community partnerships to greater emphasis on professional service in faculty evaluation. The specific approach taken by the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) will illuminate some of the issues universities must confront in developing a partnership model of university-community involvement.

The Great Cities Program

The Great Cities program is UIC’s approach to the issues described above. "Great Cities" refers to the university's commitment to use its teaching, research, and service programs to improve the quality of life in metropolitan Chicago. In this way, the University will become a model for a land-grant university in an urban setting. At the same time, a university cannot be parochial; through its work, UIC will also contribute to a broader understanding of what is needed for any great city to develop and thrive.

The Great Cities concept combines two parts of the institution's history. Started as an undergraduate commuter campus after the Second World War, this new Chicago branch of the University of Illinois was always expected to have an "urban mission," although few could agree on what this meant. Rapid growth during the 1960s and 1970s and the 1983 merger between the new campus and the older University of Illinois Medical Center created a Class I Research Institution, renamed the University of Illinois at Chicago. Maintaining the barely earned Class I designation was a central institutional goal during the 1980s and led to the downgrading of the urban mission as a goal -- indeed, the two were frequently seen as opposites. Appointed in 1991, Chancellor James Stukel soon realized that the new social and political environment required a more distinct institutional mission than simply replicating the original downstate land-grant campus at Urbana

Champaign. He developed the Great Cities concept, which was planned through a broad-based participatory process and was formally announced in December, 1993.

The Great Cities concept rests on the idea of a close relationship between research and the issues faced by people and institutions in the metropolitan area. The metropolitan area poses questions and issues that actually represent opportunities for first-class research, and interaction with external audiences is an essential component in conducting this research.

A critical aspect of the Great Cities program is its inclusion of many programs that were already in existence. As the report of the Great Cities Advisory Committee stated:

> "UIC comprises thousands of faculty and staff members and hundreds of units such as colleges, departments, clinics, institutes, and centers. The Great Cities concept values all of their activities, strengthens them, and is nurtured by their rich variety. The Great Cities concept provides a focus and organizing principle for what many UIC faculty and staff are already doing, and it expresses an institutional commitment to increasing, facilitating, and highlighting work that serves this metropolitan area and others."

This statement reflects the essential idea that Great Cities is a new way of thinking about what the university does, rather than simply a set of new programs. Indeed, one of the tasks of the Advisory Committee and its seven subcommittees was to inventory "Great Cities"-type programs that already existed. Ultimately, 212 such programs were identified and catalogued in the Great Cities Directory of Programs. The Great Cities concept had the important effect of legitimizing and validating many of these programs and helped them grow and in some cases transform into larger new efforts. In addition, several new programs were started to provide a focus and showcase for the program and to model what Great Cities at its best represented. The new programs included the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs (bringing together several existing units in a new configuration); the Great Cities Institute, a new interdisciplinary applied urban research center; and the Great Cities Faculty Seed Fund, which provides incentive funding for faculty to engage in urban-oriented applied research or outreach. The largest of the new programs is the UIC Neighborhoods initiative, started in 1994.

The UIC Neighborhoods Initiative

The UIC Neighborhoods Initiative (UICNI) is a comprehensive neighborhood revitalization partnership involving UIC and two adjacent neighborhoods. Pilsen, just south of the UIC campus, is home to a largely Mexican-American community of about 50,000, while the Near West Side is a largely African-American community of about 10,000, many of whom live in public housing. The initiative brings together university resources with those of the city and communities to address needs in a proactive, integrated, and lasting way. UIC has made a ten-year commitment to the initiative.

UICNI is based on a partnership model. UIC envisions itself as a member of the community, rather than an outsider. As a community member, the university brings its unique resources together with those of others. Defining the application and utilization of these resources must be a joint and cooperative process. Both the community and the university are expected to change as a result. Other institutions, such as Chicago's government and public agencies, corporations, philanthropic and civic organizations also participate in the initiative.

The Initiative aims to be comprehensive in its approach to community revitalization. Increasingly, researchers are recognizing the added value of comprehensive projects that combine a range of disciplines in simultaneous and coordinated efforts. Addressing only educational problems, for instance, while leaving family, health, and economic needs unmet is unlikely to have long-lasting positive outcomes. Pursuit of such a comprehensive approach requires development of intensive partnerships, since no institution alone has all of the knowledge or resources required to be effective.

Implementation of the Neighborhoods Initiative builds organically on previous and continuing projects, including a university-run neighborhood health clinic, several school improvement projects by College of Education faculty, and a history of technical assistance by urban planning faculty for many individual organizations in the neighborhoods. While this gave individual faculty some credit in the community, as an institution the university was widely distrusted, based on the urban renewal that had accompanied campus construction in the 1960s and continued land acquisition in the decades since. Therefore, the Initiative started with an extensive series of interviews, focus groups, and individual meetings to assess what experiences neighborhood representatives had with UIC, what they felt the opportunities for partnership were, and how future projects should be undertaken. Based on these meetings, most existing programs continued, while new programs were developed based on the priorities established, but also driven by funding opportunities. Critical in this regard were two new programs of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development -- the Community Outreach Partnership Center program and the joint Community Development program.

Now in its second year of operation, the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative consists of some 40 programs involving faculty from virtually all colleges. Some of the largest programs are:

- the Affordable Housing Consortium to support improvement of existing housing stock and develop new affordable housing through participatory design and planning and home improvement loans and grants.
- the Joint Community Development Program which uses HUD funds to create $50 million in commercial and business development, with the assistance of UIC faculty and students to ensure high quality development responsive to community needs.
- UIC Hiring and Purchasing Community Linkage Program to increase access to UIC jobs and contracts.
- Great Cities/Great Careers in which University faculty work with the neighborhood high schools and large corporations to improve vocational education and assist in the transition from school to work.
- School Partnership, which links neighborhood elementary schools with UIC in a variety of school improvement programs.
- Mile Square, UIC’s neighborhood health clinic, treating 40,000 patients per year.
- UIC Neighborhoods and Nonprofits Network, linking 50 community agencies to the Internet through UIC's computer.

Lessons Learned

This brief description of the Great Cities program, and the UIC Neighborhoods Initiative in particular, yields some lessons that may have wider applications. They include the importance of

leadership, the skills required for development of partnerships, the need to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of different partners, and the need for changes in structures and processes.

Leadership Matters

Regardless of the popularity of praising "bottom-up" and "grassroots" initiatives, there is no substitute for strong leadership from the top of an institution. The Great Cities concept was initiated by the Chancellor and supported unequivocally by him and his management team (Stukel, 1994). Without such support, it would never have been possible to gain acceptance for a whole new way of thinking about the identity of the institution and its relation to the community.

Of course, leadership can only work when ideas make sense, given the history and context of the institution, and if they are formulated and implemented the right way. In this regard, formulating Great Cities to bring together different parts of the institution's history, and its incorporation of many existing programs, was critical. Strong support from the top can create amazingly rapid change, even in such notoriously change-resistant organizations as universities. This requires the utilization of all leadership tools, including frequent use of the "bully pulpit" to talk about the program; a willingness to use internal administrative power and discretion to allocate resources and speed up approval processes; using external power to obtain new resources and validation; and constant attention to how the concept may be implemented in all parts of the institution, rather than marginalized in one or two specialized units.

Partnerships Take Time

An evaluation of the Neighborhoods initiative's first year noted that projects that worked best were those already under discussion by faculty and community organizations, rather than those that had been developed specifically in response to requirements of a Request for Proposal. The primary factors here were both knowledge and trust. It takes time for faculty to understand what might really be needed in the community and which of the programmatic faculty ideas might actually make sense in a particular context. Similarly, it takes time for the community to trust that a faculty member will not just use them for data, will actually listen to what they know, and will stop to think about adapting his/her own knowledge to the specific situation.

However, it also takes time for faculty members to figure out whether community representatives are really who they claim they are. At least one of the UICNI programs failed in the first year because community representatives turned out not to know the community well enough and not to be able to recruit the participants they had promised. With another community organization, even after a UIC graduate was hired as executive director and after providing free interns and other project assistance for a year and a half, trust was so lacking that only the University's threat to withdraw $250,000 in project support brought people back to the table.

The latter example also highlights another aspect of these partnerships. They are laced with complicated power relationships. In comparison to an inexperienced community agency, most universities are very powerful and faculty extremely privileged. However, often community agencies are quite sophisticated, and universities, perhaps especially public ones, quite susceptible to political pressure. Furthermore, as is the case in all large institutions, different parts do not always work in tandem. Thus, it was a sign of institutional maturity on everyone's part when one community agency was simultaneously negotiating with the Great Cities office

over its participation in a HUD-sponsored housing and economic development program and paying a full-time organizer to mobilize the community against the university's plans to acquire additional land. Staff from both UIC and the community organization recognized that disagreements in one area do not preclude strategic cooperation elsewhere (Wiewel, 1995).

To take advantage of the experiential learning involved in these situations, the Great Cities office sponsors production of a manual on the creation and maintenance of partnerships, which will also serve as the basis for workshops and a new course. However, just as with any self-help manual, it is not clear how much of this can actually be taught and how much must be learned by each person and each institution through experience.

Understanding Unique Strengths and Weaknesses

A critical element of a healthy partnership is acknowledgement that each partner has unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs, and a reasonable mutual awareness of what these are. Typically, representatives from community agencies know very little about the workload and constraints faced by faculty (Nyden and Wiewel, 1992). This may lead them to have unreasonable expectations about the type and amount of work a faculty member can devote to a project. Conversely, faculty rarely understand the political intricacies of maintaining legitimacy within a community Thus, they do not understand that the person they had a pleasant and cooperative discussion with before a public meeting can stand up ten minutes later and denounce everything the university has ever done.

Some strengths universities bring to partnerships are the availability of experts in many fields; the access to multiple sources of funding and to other potential partners; the fact that the university often is, or at least is perceived to-be, relatively neutral; and the ability to take a long-term perspective. Countervailing weaknesses are that faculty are extremely free and autonomous, cannot be forced to do anything, and are hard to keep accountable; that in spite of a new emphasis on interdisciplinary work, disciplinary boundaries remain strong; that faculty research is often funding-driven; and that partnerships require communication, cooperation, and a willingness to compromise, which conflicts with the culture of faculty autonomy.

The more external partners understand these strengths and weaknesses, the more successfully they can negotiate partnerships. Similarly, community agencies, depending on their nature (schools, community-based organizations, health and social service agencies) bring their own assets and constraints. They know the issues in the community, what approaches might be acceptable, and who the key leaders are; they can provide grassroots legitimacy; and they have a long-term stake and commitment. On the other hand, they may be more concerned with their own power and survival than with the good of the community; they may be too parochial and limited by what has been tried before; and they may be too small, poor, or overextended to provide the time required to sustain a partnership or to follow up consistently.

An awareness of the issues can be useful in assessing the likelihood of particular partnerships succeeding and developing design structures and processes that avoid or mitigate potential problems while enhancing complementary strengths.

Adapting Process and Structure

Finally, the new activities undertaken by universities require changes in internal processes and

structures. Faculty evaluation is probably the most critical, and much is being done to improve the measurement and evaluation of professional service (Lynton, 1995).

The departmental and college structure of universities is often an obstacle to interdisciplinary work; the proliferation of interstitial centers and institutes attests to this. At UIC, the system by which units are given credit for external funding began to allow credit to be divided across multiple units, an essential requirement for interdisciplinary projects.

The main structural complaint external organizations generally raise is the inaccessibility and lack of transparency of the university. in some cases the creation of a high-level access point may help address this. More often, multiple access points work better, as long as each knows of the others and is able and ready to refer requests. Electronic directories of projects and faculty are essential for this process, although personal knowledge continues to be important.
Clearly, the type of approach discussed in this article does not lend itself to the creation of single "outreach" or service units. The whole point of the Great Cities program is that it represents a broad, institution-wide commitment, with many individual university units participating. At the same time, a central coordinating office has been critical in signaling the Chancellor's commitment, in maintaining a high internal and external profile for the program, and in its ability as a neutral party to create partnerships across the university and on the outside.

When the Great Cities program was started, some faculty argued that UIC should not promote partnerships until it had made some of the structural changes described. in reality, the very creation of partnerships exerts pressure that speeds up internal change. As partners make demands, and as faculty learn what it takes to sustain partnerships, they become advocates, internally and externally, for the process and structural changes needed.

Conclusion

Universities must engage in partnerships to survive politically and intellectually. They are no longer the sole sources of knowledge and learning. Partnerships can be created with a variety of external partners, ranging from community organizations and schools to businesses and governments. In all cases, universities make unique and valuable contributions. At the same time, they need to learn modesty and approach the task of sustaining partnerships with a philosophy of equity and equality. The universities that take the lead in this will benefit from what the partnerships bring them and will be ahead in a whole new field of endeavor.

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