# Community Engagement and Higher Education

## The context

One of the important lessons of the Covid pandemic is the enduring power and significance of family bonds, friendship networks, and community – but also, at the same time, the extraordinary challenges these vital forms of social capital – as sociologists would characterize them – are facing.  So, to give a bit of context first, the question of the role and significance of communities is one of both promise and peril.

Apart from financial and economic hardships which caregivers – including teachers and university faculty – are facing, they also report higher anxiety, depression, chronic fatigue, thoughts of suicide, sleep disturbance, lower social participation, increased food insecurity.   If we consider first responders as formal extension of our immediate community networks, one study of health-care workers notes that more than three quarters reported symptoms that fell within the clinical range for depression (76%) and anxiety (78%).  Perhaps it should come as no surprise then that we have also seen a record 100,000 deaths from overdosing between May 2020 and April 2021.   100,000! — 275 every day — that's enough to fill the stadium where the University of Alabama plays football.  "Big country," some may say;  a lot of people die every day – but this particular number has roughly doubled in the last eight years.  Numbers like these justify that we speak of, and take very seriously, the crisis of communities.

## Higher Education and the community – from engagement to partnership

In most general terms, the role of a university vis-à-vis the community it is located in should be considered as one that is mutually beneficial.  In the past this has not always been the starting point or basic assumption.  Three decades ago, Ernest Boyer (1990) introduced the concept of an engaged institution and the related concept of the scholarship of engagement, which is also sometimes called "Community-Engaged Scholarship."  As institutions, universities and colleges are members of their community, and have a vested interest in the economic, civic, and social well-being of all members of this community.  With that said, universities – in particular public universities – may seek engagement with their community for a number of reasons:  maybe in order to gain access to research sites, for student internships or job placement, for labor, or simply to convey their knowledge to communities.  All good reasons, but this is essentially a one-sided view of engagement that has been replaced by one seeing the relationship more as a partnership that is mutually beneficial.  In that view, the university provides knowledge and expertise, "while the community provides insights to cocreate this knowledge and

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presents a platform for knowledge to be shared" and applied in the real world.[1]  Thus, an important lesson of this view is that community partners and students should be in the driver seat of directing projects, rather than having academic conventions and norms define that engagement.[2]

Often universities find themselves thrust into unforeseen challenges and opportunities to serve the community.  I vividly recall in late 2012, when Superstorm Sandy swept through the Northeast and left thousands of people in need of help.  Many of them ended up in designated emergency shelters at City University of New York campuses, including the one I worked at.  So, with the assistance of FEMA, ATF, and other volunteers, well over 600 people were housed for weeks on army cots lined-up in the Academic Building, while another 200 needing medical care where in our Sports Center.  Volunteer crews kept the bathrooms clean and movies were being shown for the kids in the auditorium 24 hours a day.  Did it disrupt the academic business at the end of the semester?  Absolutely, with classes cancelled for almost two weeks; but it was simply the right thing to do, and the campus came together and met that challenge.  In fact, we called them and treated them as our "guests."  Following the immediate emergency, the Small Business Development Center at the campus morphed into a Business Recovery Center.  Needless to say that all these efforts were widely appreciated in the community and benefitted the image of the campus.

But, of course, the relationship with the community should be and usually is bigger and broader for an engaged institution than such immediate disaster situations.   Still, arguably, in the post-COVID world higher education's community partnerships will also need to evolve.  There are new demands and expectations both from companies and from within communities.  Economic and Community Engagement is a wide-ranging portfolio allowing the university and its different programs, departments, researchers, and faculty to become engaged.  In fact, Community-Based Learning is a recognized high-impact educational practice and can be infused into many different courses and programs.  Given the range of expertise in various fields represented at many tertiary institutions, there are numerous potential projects and possible opportunities for engagement with communities:  internship programs, research partnerships for graduate and undergraduate students, public-private partnerships, and technology transfer, but also purposeful outreach to regional business, and to academic partner institutions. Such community partnerships not only immediately benefit students and communities;  they are vital to longer-term economic growth and redevelopment.  And so, the task of

envisioning appears as an important ongoing activity: to explore – together with community representatives and regional business corporations, state government representatives, chambers of commerce, and others – how the resources of the University can be made to intentionally interact in order to create new economic, civic, or social opportunities for local businesses, individuals, and community organizations. To be sure, in the act of envisioning already lies the call for action that will have to follow.

Continuing Education can serve as a central hub in this actualization of economic engagement and community partnerships, allowing us to seamlessly connect economic and community projects to the earning of academic credit and credentials – e.g., through building student leadership pathways modeled after management consulting firms. Active programs offering online courses and degrees, professional development (including certificates), youth programs, support centers for small businesses, and customizable services can all serve community engagement, education, and economic development. Continuing Education does not always have to be the expert, it can and should serve as an honest broker to build bridges with and within communities. In that regard, it is important to position Continuing Education, keeping in mind and pursuing the following principles[3]:

- Make engagement a priority
- Build your network and seek partnerships, on and off campus
- Establish a reputation as a connector
- Develop strong facilitation skills and provide unbiased space for different voices to be heard
- Convene stakeholders around shared issues
- Seek overarching goals to build collaboration and encourage action.
- And then finally, share your initiatives in internal and external publications

So, see a need, fill a need!

A creative collaborative project which illustrates so well how new needs and demands in the business community can lead to new programs and projects that the University can offer involved Western Technical College and shows how expansive the field of *mechatronics* is becoming.[4]  Based on an NSF grant, Western Technical College started collaborating with local high schools, local electrical companies, and a major manufacturer in the region. Through their collaborative partnership they created a viable program to teach Industry 4.0 technologies, invested in a Mobile Skills Lab serving four

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[3]       Shannon and Wang, ibid.

[4]       Information for this section was gleaned from https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/mechatronics-education-it-takes-a-community/99702/.  Mechatronics is an interdisciplinary branch of engineering that – as the name suggests – integrates mechanical, electronic and electrical engineering systems, and also includes a combination of robotics, electronics, computing & data analytics, telecommunications, and systems, control, and product engineering.  It is a field that affects more and more areas of production and logistics).

high schools in the region teaching dual credit courses in smart sensors, PLCs, robotics, and general AC/DC.  The final missing piece was to ensure that students who started these new courses in high school could then transfer their credits towards a bachelor's degree in Engineering Technology – Automation.  To accomplish this, the College partnered with a University of Wisconsin campus and students may now complete a Bachelor's degree within two years upon graduating from their local technical college.  Similar new and promising programs are, for example, certificate programs in medical coding, cyber security, dispute resolution, DEI, or in blockchain development.


**The need for strategic pursuit of community partnerships**

While all the above arguments may seem plausible to most of us, the question of mission, vision, and strategic pursuit of economic and community partnerships nevertheless must play an important role when it comes to community engagement by colleges and universities.  Often communities themselves are not fully aware of all the fantastic opportunities and resources comprehensive universities and community colleges have to offer;  but other times the campus community also may not be sufficiently aware of all the contributions it could make.

Many university mission statements talk about "modelling community engagement" and thus articulate a clear and strategic commitment.  But it is one thing to state the intention, and yet another to pursue it in a coherent, purposeful, and intentional manner.  Thus, a Strategic Community Engagement Planning exercise would be the first step of bringing all stakeholders together to take stock, define needs, and envision opportunities.  The development and management of an asset map program is a useful starting point in that regard and would need to form an important part of a Strategic Community Engagement Plan.  But, in this time, institutions of higher learning are asked to do more, reach even higher, and reimagine their practices.  And so, the pursuit of the elective Carnegie Community Engagement Classification offers a number of best practices as a template.  The following reasons would speak for a Strategic Community Engagement Plan:

a) The planning exercise mobilizes the campus community

b) A strategic engagement plan begins to build and extend trust, bridges, networks, and create ongoing rapport with different external communities

c) Purposeful pursuit of community partnerships helps to make a campus look beyond reaping low-hanging fruit and think about strategically using its resources vis-à-vis such community partnerships

d) A campus-wide plan makes sure that all campus stakeholders have tangible commitments, measurable outcomes, and a recording system to work towards,

particularly towards criteria and evidence to support a successful Carnegie classification.


**Back to the context:  education and the revival of communities**

In his landmark book *Bowling Alone* from 2000, sociologist Robert Putnam drew a dismal picture of the erosion of social capital and communities in America since the mid- to late 20th century.  Thus, in 1992 77% of the workforce found that "selfishness" and "the breakdown of community" were serious or extremely serious.[5]  A few years later, over 80% of Americans found that there should be more emphasis on community, even if this put more demands on individuals.[6]  So, if you think it's only your neighborhood, your town, or your state – no, this is and has been a shared sentiment all around the country!

But Putnam was also able to demonstrate that there is concrete evidence that strong communities, social bonds, and civic engagement benefit us as individuals.  Particularly important aspects of social capital are education and children's welfare.  Even if there is not necessarily a <u>direct</u> cause & effect relationship, research demonstrates that education and children's welfare generally work better in states with high social capital.  Putnam summarizes the available empirical evidence in this regard the following way:

> "… social capital is second only to poverty in the breadth and depth of its effects on children's lives.  While poverty is an especially potent force in increasing youth fertility, mortality, and idleness, community engagement has precisely the opposite effect."[7]

Considering Putnam's research, we can confidently posit that universities and colleges have a direct role to play in community engagement.  Both, communities and the higher education institutions located in them and servicing them deserve that community partnerships are taken as a serious field of the overall higher education enterprise.  Mission commitment and strategic planning are therefore, or should be, important aspects for trustees, administration, and faculty members.

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[5]     Robert D. Putnam, 2000. *Bowling Alone.  The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 25.
[6]     Ibid.
[7]     Ibid., 297.