

Building Community Resiliency: The Role of University Leadership

Guest Editors: James.T. Harris III and Marcine Pickron-Davis

Widener University was honored to host the 15th Annual Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) Conference in Philadelphia, a city with a rich history, culture, and tradition. The location offered an appropriate venue to engage in robust conversations about the role universities can play in strengthening their metropolitan regions. Following the lead of the presidents and practitioners involved with drafting the Wingspread Statement in 2004, “we envisioned this annual meeting as a space to explore new and deeper levels of commitment across the academy as well as to think publicly and broadly about engagement as higher education’s larger purpose” (Brukardt et al. 2004).

This year’s conference theme, “Building Community Resiliency: The Role of University Leadership,” provided a context for over 250 faculty, students, and senior-level administrators to share ideas, experiences, and recommendations about the leadership role that metropolitan universities can assume in promoting community resiliency.

For the first time this year, we included a Provosts and Deans Roundtable to discuss the impact of the CUMU mission on the academic initiatives and challenges facing our institutions. This session provided a networking opportunity for provosts and deans to create or improve upon institutional resiliency strategies.

Among the highlights from the featured presentations were the following:

- The Executive Leadership Panel moderated by Dr. Ira Harkavy, Founding Director and Associate Vice President, Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. Panelists included: Steven J. Diner, Chancellor, Rutgers University-Newark; James T. Harris III, President, Widener University; Ann Weaver Hart, President, Temple University; and Dennis H. Holtschneider, President, DePaul University. The panelists explored the role of university leadership in public education, economic development, health care, environment, and the elimination of poverty.
- Jean Michel-Cousteau, Underwater Explorer, Educator, and Environmentalist, presented on sustainability and the importance of wise environmental policies.
- Jane Golden, Executive Director, City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, described the role of grass-roots organizations in building community resiliency through partnerships with neighborhood residents.
- Sherone E. Ivey, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of University Partnerships, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, convened a town hall on the engagement priorities of urban and metropolitan universities in the 21st Century.

Two signature events illuminated the sustainable university-community partnerships that demonstrate Widener's leadership in promoting community resiliency. On Sunday afternoon, conference attendees participated in a tour of Chester, Pennsylvania, and the campus of Widener University. The community tour, led by James Turner, Director of Economic Development with the Chester Economic Development Authority, introduced the robust evidence of urban resiliency in the city of Chester, where Widener is located and actively involved in creating sustainable democratic partnerships with the community. Such initiatives include University Crossings, the Widener Partnership Charter School, and new housing developments. On Monday evening, the reception was hosted at one of the oldest science museums in the country, the Franklin Institute Science Museum, where attendees sampled the "Taste of Philly" culinary delights while listening to Jane Golden's inspiring story of building community resiliency through her award-winning work with the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program.

Conference Papers

The 2009 conference featured over 100 presentations—poster sessions, panel discussions, paper presentations, student presentations, roundtables, and featured speakers—about strengths-based approaches to community resiliency. The presentations from 55 colleges and universities reflected the diversity of perspectives on topics related to school-community partnerships, student engagement, community-based learning, economic development, educational infrastructure, environmental threats and remediation, wellness and public health, social capital, economic/business development, and impact assessment. This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* presents papers from the conference selected through a post-conference review process.

At the conference, Nick Tobier from the University of Michigan received the 2009 Ernest A. Lynton Award for Scholarship of Engagement. The award honors Ernest Lynton, one of the founders of CUMU and this journal and a major scholar whose ideas shaped the foundations of the scholarship of engagement and the identity of the metropolitan university. The award program is managed by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) and is presented at the annual conference of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities.

Tobier's article is an engaging and challenging reflection on his journey toward becoming an engaged scholar and teacher—one who learns to get off the bus with his students and become authentically open to the experience of a neighborhood and its life as a way of developing a deeper and more complex understanding of knowledge and change. He offers a process-rich analysis of a series of engagements between a university in Ann Arbor and a community in Detroit involving the "growing, cultivating, preparing and sharing food as physical acts as well as operative metaphors" for the stark reality of the community's resource needs, the students' experience of learning from and about the community, and the many revelations revealed by working together. He calls us to consider how much more academics and

students can learn by asking questions “rather than feel the need to have all the answers.” The paper presents frank and compelling perspectives from the different lives and experiences represented among those involved.

Henry Cunningham and Starr Lewis authored a paper describing the University of Louisville’s Signature Partnership Initiative, which linked the university to five urban schools—two high schools, one middle school, and two primary schools, all located in high-poverty areas. The partnership goes beyond mere involvement with the schools by taking a systemic approach to partnerships that seek to address key challenges in the neighborhoods around the schools where the students live. Project activities focus on strategies that address economic development, health, and social and human services while also supporting educational improvements through new approaches to teacher professional development. The Initiative is a university-wide effort that involves faculty and students from different disciplinary fields aligned with areas where school and community learning can improve the context for productive teaching and learning. Early impacts show improvements in teacher retention and school student awareness of college requirements.

Annemarie Jay and Dana Korin describe a quite different approach to improving school outcomes for children through an initiative that focuses largely on building parental skills and involvement. Their article reports on the design and outcomes of a “Parents’ Academy” run by Widener University as an enrichment activity for parents of K-4 students at a charter school managed by the university. Looking beyond the school-university partnership, this project aimed to develop healthy connections between home and school by supporting parents to be more involved in their child’s learning experience and the life of the school. The partnership behind the initiative involves staff, faculty, and students in many departments of the university; local government; community organizations; and the Parent/Caregiver Council of the school. The project recognizes the role of interactions and learning in the home as a way to enrich literacy and student social skills. Planning of the project’s design was participatory and led to a series of training events that equipped parents with ideas for improving literacy in the home to complement learning in the school. Jay and Korin show how the strategies to enhance parental involvement are supported by theories regarding the development of self-esteem and the adoption of new roles in regard to collaboration and learning development. The authors believe these strategies are also equipping the charter school’s parents and families to strengthen neighborhoods and the community overall.

Judith Liu and Donald Kelly presented a paper that raises the bar for the level of university-community collaboration and cooperation in service-learning classes. Their idea to offer an upper-division class focused on “consensus community organizing,” cross-listed in Sociology and Ethnic Studies and team-taught by a community member and a university faculty member, first emerged in 2004 at the University of San Diego. Class members included USD students and community members, who were called “community fellows.” The class challenged the participants to work together to learn

consensus organizing techniques and work together for organizational change. Over the years the traditional views of learner/teacher group dynamics, students and community residents, young people and older adults were all challenged as the members of this unique class worked together to make decisions and agree on actions. The paper gives a candid view of the internal and external challenges of teaching such a class that seeks to break many barriers between academic and community views of learning, cooperation, and community change.

The Institute for Physical Therapy Education (IPTE) at Widener University also takes a collaborative approach to planning its service-learning initiatives. This doctoral degree program intends to instill social responsibility and altruism in its students but found its past approaches had minimal impact on students and community. Faculty champions, students, and community stakeholders worked together to identify improvements to partnership and program strategies and improve links between different programs and activities. The authors, Palombaro, Lattanzi, and Dole, report that creating time for the inclusion of authentic student and community voices was essential to their success in creating greater student buy-in and more sustained and better coordinated partnership efforts. The article reflects critically on the process that led to a new philosophy of partnership and the impact on the culture of the program and its links to community.

Service-learning research has correctly been criticized for its lack of rigorous evaluation of impacts and outcomes for students and the community. Lori Simons and her colleagues used a validated pretest and posttest survey to measure the differences in interpersonal and personal development among service-learning students in educational psychology and criminal justice courses. This is one of the largest studies of its kind, involving more than 600 students over six years, in a context where student age, race, and service activities remained consistent. Because the service activities were conducted in schools, teachers and supervisors working with the university students were also surveyed over the six-year study. Readers will be interested in the findings regarding impacts on student development in areas such as communications, problem-solving, and attitudes regarding social justice issues. The importance of a strong and obvious link between the service activity and the content of the course is reinforced, as is the role of the community teacher in designing relevant service activities. This paper is a significant contribution to service-learning research literature.

Also included is an article by Michelle Jacobus and Robert Baskett sharing a timely perspective on the impact of the economic downturn on school-university partnership activities. The authors describe partnership projects of Lewiston Auburn College at the University of Southern Maine, arguing the urgent need in these economic times for colleges and universities to increase their engagement with communities with low educational attainment and low employment. They call on universities to support and expand their engagement with schools and communities to improve educational outcomes as a direct assault to disrupt the cycle of poverty. This thoughtful and well-crafted paper offers specific examples that frame eleven strategies for expanding

school-based partnerships aimed at engaging youth in learning, raising aspirations, and facilitating educational progress.

The papers presented in this issue illustrate the value of the CUMU conference as a high-quality venue for sharing contemporary research and practice innovations that can inform strategic improvements at any college or university, especially those academic institutions that seek to engage daily in the challenges and opportunities of America's cities, which are the hub of our nation's economic recovery.

Conclusion

Dr. Ernest Boyer once wrote: "I have this growing conviction that what is needed for higher education is not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation's life" (Boyer 1994). Each year, the annual CUMU conference attracts stakeholders who bring a strong and authentic conviction to the community engagement movement across higher education and the nation's cities.

Please plan to attend the 16th annual CUMU conference, hosted by Fresno State University, October 24–26, 2010. Papers and presentations will examine the topic of "Aligning the Metropolitan University with Business, Government, and the Non-Profit Sector."

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Author Information

James Thomas Harris III became the ninth president of Widener University on July 1, 2002. During his tenure as president, Widener has gained national recognition for its work in building community resiliency and developing democratic partnerships to advance the university's mission while simultaneously addressing some of society's greatest needs in the city of Chester, Pennsylvania. He serves on the executive committees of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, National Campus Compact, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association and on the boards of several other non-profit organizations.

Dr. Harris earned degrees from the University of Toledo, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, and The Pennsylvania State University. An active scholar and teacher, Dr. Harris is often asked to speak on the topics of leadership, civic engagement, and the role of higher education in society.

Marcine Pickron-Davis joined Widener University as the special assistant to the president for community engagement in October 2003. In this position, she serves as the university liaison and the president's delegate to build community relations and strategic partnerships with the city of Chester. A major priority of her work is to advance Widener's institutional mission to contribute to the vitality and well-being of the Chester community. Dr. Pickron-Davis has played an instrumental role in raising the profile of Widener's civic engagement mission, which has been recognized by external constituents such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Project Pericles, and the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll.

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