

Guest Editors' Introduction: International Perspectives on Community-University Partnerships

Linda Silka and Robin Toof

Universities around the world are changing. One of the ways in which they are changing is they have begun devoting resources to community-university partnerships. Partnerships have become increasingly common as ways to address persistent problems in higher education, problems that include ivory tower isolation, research that too often fails to make a difference, students finishing college with little contact with the outside world, and the erosion of support for public funding of higher education. These partnerships take different forms in different parts of the world, and these collaborations face different obstacles from one country to the next. But, in all cases, these partnerships represent opportunities for universities to transform themselves to meet the challenges of the Twenty-First Century.

Part of what is intriguing about the work on community-university partnerships is that much of the literature is not found under “community-university partnerships”; it is published in disciplinary journals. Environmental health scientists may be involved with and writing about partnerships, but they are not aware that faculty in education are doing the same. Sociologists are engaged in partnership efforts, but they do not know that engineering faculty are struggling with similar challenges. Faculty might be writing about methods used in partnerships (e.g., participatory research, community-based research), but such writings remain unfamiliar to those outside the disciplines in which these articles are published. No core literature has formed that represents a shared body of knowledge. The result is that partnership lessons keep disappearing and must be relearned.

This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* is devoted to sharing emerging developments in community-university partnerships in different parts of the world. The papers included here were written in response to a call for manuscripts that describe how community-university partnerships are being carried out in various parts of the world, place these efforts in the context of other trends in higher education, and consider the obstacles to and opportunities for community-university partnerships around the world. Our contributors are from many different countries, cultures, and a variety of disciplines. Thus, this issue presents diverse perspectives as well as writing styles. Nevertheless, as these papers demonstrate, there is much to be learned from each other's efforts.

The countries represented in these thoughtful, and sometimes provocative, papers include Australia, Brazil, Great Britain, Indonesia, Kenya, South Africa, South Korea, Sudan, and the United States. Some papers describe the efforts of entire universities to

build engagement practices through partnerships (Portland State University in the United States and University of Queensland in Australia). Some report on individual centers or individual programs and the benefits and costs of universities carrying out their engagement activities through a focused center (University of Brighton, Great Britain, and University of Texas El Paso, United States). Some papers emphasize innovative approaches that can get traction through beginning with individual classes or individual study areas. Some focus on the challenges that result when universities traditionally viewed as elite institutions are now interested in engagement (Brazil and South Korea).

In many ways these papers capture the paradoxes of partnership. Some raise the question about the paradoxical nature of the roles that must be successfully enacted if partnerships between two such different entities as communities and universities are to succeed (South Africa). Some point to the fact that this is exactly what universities should be doing, but the reward structure does not support it (South Korea). Partnerships are deeply about locale. They are about working in the local context. So how can we learn from one another if our contexts, experiences, and approaches differ so vastly? This is indeed the challenge that these papers raise. It will be important to be able to think about the experiences and strategies in the Sudan or South Korea or South Africa and formulate a set of guiding questions about when and how their lessons apply to those of us who work in other countries. We need to learn lessons from each other's experiences, but at the same time we need to be careful not to apply these lessons rigidly to completely different contexts. One of our tasks will be to understand what makes particular contexts for community-university partnerships similar or different.

What are the prospects for a greater emphasis on community-university partnerships in higher education throughout the world? As these papers suggest, there is much promise in this approach. There is much that is likely to be beneficial, but there is also much that is challenging. And the challenges are not merely about resources. The challenges are about whether universities are intended to be places set apart from the ordinary, everyday problem solving or whether universities have a role to play in engaging communities to find solutions to the problems we face. There continue to be those in academia who see engagement as a dilution of the higher education mission. Others see engagement as enriching and strengthening teaching and research. Indeed, community-university partnerships are at the heart of this intellectual battle about the goals of higher education. Throughout these papers we will see that these questions about higher education remain very much alive throughout the world as assessments are made of what universities are doing well and what they need to do better in the coming decades.

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