

To What End? Assessing Engagement with Our Communities

Valerie L. Holton

Urban and metropolitan universities are integrally connected with their surrounding communities. This is seen in how we teach our students, how we generate new knowledge, and how we value and engage in service. This is also seen in the increasing understanding of the role we play as anchor institutions that can intentionally contribute to the collective capacity of our cities. But how do we know if our efforts are making a positive difference in the lives of our students, employees, and communities?

This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* showcases efforts by colleges and universities to measure some of the effects of their engagement with their communities through teaching, research, and service activities. This collection of articles reveals how institutions of higher education are developing frameworks and tools to aid in this process. The articles were selected for inclusion in this issue for two primary reasons. First, each article contains some evidence of the effectiveness of their approach, as well as identifies the challenges faced. Second, each article reflects approaches that can be applied in other institutions. As the field of institutional research and effectiveness continues to develop, these articles can inform the practice among members of CUMU and similar institutions.

Three themes emerge across the articles. First, the institutions represented here deeply value their engagement with their communities. This is important to understand, particularly when talking about data collection. None of them are seeking to merely collect data, but rather to collect data that will inform their practice, tell their institution's and the community's story, celebrate and recognize successes as well as areas for improvement, and engage in long-term planning that may deepen the impact.

Second, the efforts reflected here are largely driven by offices that focus on engaged activities rather than offices of institutional research. However, institutional researchers and their offices are primarily responsible for the institution-wide data that informs reporting, planning, and decision-making. The scope of institutional researchers is wide, addressing topics associated with admissions, curriculum, enrollment management, student life, and athletics. Given their expertise, reporting responsibilities, and central role in providing information to support university-planning and decision-making, it is worth exploring the connections between institutional research and the community engagement field and offices.

Third, the development of mechanisms that collect systematic campus-wide information on community engagement is challenging because of the multiple

constituencies involved and the diversity of models and strategies. Campuses describe efforts to define engaged activities and identify measureable outcomes that make sense across disciplines and in the context of communities, and that can be aggregated meaningfully. But, despite the complexity of the process, all the authors see great value in the effort to identify and assess engagement efforts, whether that rests in the ability to enhance collaborations, improve practices, or deepen the value of engagement across the campus.

Getto and McCunney reflect on the effort at East Carolina University to develop an inclusive assessment methodology in order to meet multifaceted institutional needs and navigate challenges. This methodology seeks to counteract a focus on quantitative approaches by proposing the use of a mixed-method approach that is intended to enhance the role and voice of community partners.

Perry, Farmer, Onder, Tanner, and Burton from Western Carolina University describe the development of a measuring, monitoring, and tracking system for faculty engagement, particularly as it occurs through courses. The paper provides insights into the development and administration of a survey to collect this type of information.

Using the Kecskes (2009) Community-Engaged Department Rubric, Stanton-Nichols, Hatcher, and Cecil evaluate service-learning institutionalization within Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. They propose adding an additional dimension, social return on investment, to help academic leaders understand the benefits of investing in service-learning and more broadly in campus-community partnerships.

Virginia Commonwealth University provides two examples of data collection efforts with an emphasis on using existing data. First, they describe a process of identifying internal partnerships as a way to track and assess community engagement across teaching, research, and service. Holton, Jettner, Early, and Shaw describe the approach, lessons learned, and uses of the data. In the second article, the team at Virginia Commonwealth University reviews the development and implementation of a pilot enterprise data collection process used to identify and describe external partnerships. They highlight findings from the pilot, how the information has been used, and recommendations for future systematic data collection efforts.

Janke and Medlin explain how the University of North Carolina Greensboro has answered the question, “How do I get faculty and staff to record information about their community engagement and public service activities, partnerships, and contributions?” They present insights about who to talk with, questions to prepare for, and conversations that will increase participation from faculty and staff to report their activities annually.

Howard Rosing of DePaul University has contributed an essay to this issue that challenges campuses to be thoughtful and candid about their motivations and aims for gathering data that describes their community partnerships. He makes a strong case for more intentional attention to how we use such data to describe our role in community

impacts, which too often may only highlight what seems successful from the campus perspective. Can we learn to use data to critique and improve our work? How can we recognize and honor the contributions of community expertise that clearly benefit our institutions? Do we measure and examine what doesn't work, and why, as well as what goes well?

The final two articles focus on the collection and use of information in efforts involving partnerships.

Beckett describes Towson University's new partnership governance and new partnership support system. This includes a framework of four types of partnerships, their characteristics, evaluation expectations, and the support that will be provided by the university. The article also highlights how the information gathered through this effort supported the institution's response after the 2015 riots in Baltimore City.

As part of a larger focus on community-university partnerships aimed at improving the sustainability and viability of its surrounding community, Gannon University has launched the GreenEriePA.org project, a web portal for environmental efforts in Erie County, Pennsylvania. Bomberger and Homan describe the development and ongoing operations of this community-based website and make recommendations for similar efforts.

In conclusion, most urban and metropolitan universities are working to develop these data collection mechanisms and to create the infrastructure to use this valuable information in university planning and decision-making. This collection of articles advances the national dialogue and serves as guidance for other institutions who are also asking, "To what end?"

Author Information

Dr. Valerie Holton is the director of community-engaged research in the Division of Community Engagement at Virginia Commonwealth University. In her current role, she leads and contributes to strategic initiatives that deepen and demonstrate the university's civic mission. She leads the division's involvement in building a university-wide infrastructure to advance community-engaged research (CEnR). Additionally, she supports the development of the division's and university's capacity to track and measure the impact of VCU's engagement.

Valerie L. Holton
Director of Community-Engaged Research
Division of Community Engagement
Virginia Commonwealth University
901 West Franklin Street
Richmond, Virginia 23284
E-mail: vholton@vcu.edu
Telephone: 804-827-2001

