

“Universities as Anchor Institutions: Driving Change”

The 2014 CUMU National Conference in Syracuse, New York

Marilyn Higgins

Syracuse University was thrilled to host the twentieth annual Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities Conference, October 5-7, 2014 on the Connective Corridor, a signature revitalization project that connects University Hill with downtown Syracuse. In keeping with the conference theme “Universities as Anchor Institutions: Driving Change,” the Connective Corridor embodies strong working partnerships between Syracuse University and local government, sustainable urban design, and leading-edge faculty scholarship and student engagement. It was exciting to hear colleagues from cities around the United States react to the corridor and engage in dynamic conversations on place-based strategies for urban revival. Everyone seemed to enjoy those three beautiful autumn days in our newly flourishing post-industrial city.

Syracuse University’s Chancellor Kent Syverud, then in his first year at Syracuse University, inspired discussion on the importance of research excellence in creating transformative change within cities that host urban universities. With the goal of inspiring unique presentations and papers, the conference organizers selected these four themes as examples of how urban and metropolitan universities contribute to progress and change:

- Social Entrepreneurs, A New Model for Urban Sustainability
- Healthy Neighborhoods by Design
- Place-based Reform of K-12 Public Education
- Creative Placemaking, Student Engagement, and Community Revitalization.

The resulting submissions depicted the diversity of anchor institution strategies that CUMU members are engaged in throughout the country. Keynote Speaker Jeff Speck challenged conference participants to consider the immense social and financial impact of “walkability” on students, faculty, and residents of cities that are home to colleges and universities. His recent book “Walkable City” quickly became the central topic of discussion among the presidents of member colleges and universities at the chancellor’s residence on Sunday night. Many conference participants enjoyed a performance at Syracuse Stage that evening.

A panel discussion on “Literacy, Education Reform, and Urban Revitalization” the next morning focused on the “Say Yes to Education” program that has taken root in this area. “Say Yes to Education” president, Mary Anne Schmidt-Carey, Mayor

Stephanie Miner, and County Executive Joanie Mahoney were joined by other civic and business leaders in discussing the benefits of collaboration when attempting to achieve major changes in systems within communities.

The oversubscribed tour of Syracuse's near westside sparked the interest of most of the attendees and resulted in conversations centering on student engagement as a leadership opportunity. Walking tours and receptions at the Museum of Science and Technology and the Nancy Cantor Warehouse gave participants the opportunity to exchange knowledge and enjoy Syracuse's Armory Square District. The neighborhood-themed food stations featuring Central New York specialties such as salt potatoes and dinosaur barbeque were exceptionally well received.

Concurrent sessions supported the conference themes well, and gave conference participants new insights into innovative program strategies and research projects derived from diverse urban contexts.

Jomella Watson-Thompson, assistant professor in the Department of Applied Behavioral Science at the University of Kansas, was recognized at the conference as the 2014 recipient of the Ernest A. Lynton Award for the Scholarship of Engagement for Early Career Faculty. Her conference paper opens this issue, and begins with her story of how her undergraduate experiences at Jackson State University shaped her interest in an academic career that would incorporate methods of community-engaged scholarship. She is now an associate director in the Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas, and in that research role she is using community-based participatory action research and evaluation methods to involve community partners in community-based intervention and evaluation efforts in the areas of adolescent substance abuse prevention, community violence prevention, positive youth development, and community capacity-building. Her conference paper describes the exciting and effective, but also intensive efforts involved in the implementation of these research methods. Community-based research methods require considerable time to develop relationships and sustain trust. For example, the cultivation of relationships may require activities of public service (e.g., serving on community boards) that are essential to creating the foundational relationships for research, but such service is not recognized as part of the research process. The intensity of engaged research is often the most effective method for studying community questions, but the nature of the methodology may mean a more modest output of traditional publications that may not be understood by colleagues. Watson-Thompson describes the importance of faculty mentors and peer networks in supporting young, engaged scholars and in educating colleagues about engaged research methods and practices. Her article concludes with the presentation of a four-factor model to help address barriers to engaged scholarship: institutional examination of community context and conditions; design and implementation of principles and models of engaged scholarship; institutional commitment for engaged scholarship at every level; and clear mechanisms for documenting and measuring the contributions of partners to engaged scholarship and the resulting public impact.

Rebecca Tekula, Archana Shah, and Jordan Jhamb from Pace University describe how the university made “a strong commitment to the emerging field of social entrepreneurship by establishing the Helene and Grant Wilson Center for Social Entrepreneurship and positioning it uniquely at the university level, and not within a school or college.” The decision to make social entrepreneurship an institution-wide education and research priority is traced back to the founding principles and values of the university itself, which considers its ‘classroom’ to include the entire New York City Metropolitan Area. The Wilson Center also reflects the university’s recognition that 33 percent of arts and science graduates were taking jobs in the nonprofit sector. The authors provide readers with a useful analysis of the elements of social entrepreneurship as a field of study, including discussions of corollary concepts such as impact investing and the measurement of social impact. They offer a compelling case regarding the substantial opportunities this topical focus has generated in terms of innovation and effectiveness of teaching, learning, and research as well as community impact. The university’s partnership with Impact America has positioned the institution as an innovative leader in engagement by turning the institution into a resource provider and incubator for the social sector.

A creative and very different approach to social entrepreneurship is the subject of Nic Custer’s article. He describes the Innovation Incubator model developed at the University of Michigan-Flint which serves both businesses and nonprofit organizations. The aim of this integrated approach is to enhance these new enterprises to support the diverse and complex dimensions of social, environmental, and economic renewal. Especially intriguing is that the start-ups supported in the facility are a mix of students and community members, all working and learning together to build their enterprises and develop connections that address a variety of challenges and opportunities in the region. The article provides useful insights into how the Innovation Incubator was conceived and how important decisions were made about choice of location, areas of focus, design of spaces and policies to frame the pathway for tenants. Case studies illustrate the effects of the model as it begins to recruit a second generation of tenant organizations.

A team of campus deans and several endowed chairs have described the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s (UNO) strategy to create endowed ‘community chair’ positions as a catalyst for campus collaborations in STEM. In exploring the unique opportunities for metropolitan universities as they seek to respond to the national call for greater production of STEM graduates, UNO recognized that they already had a strong history of partnership with P-16 education so they sought to create a new approach that would support new levels of collaboration and strategic innovation. First, UNO made STEM programming one of five strategic priorities, and then they decided to create a leadership team to lead the priority by establishing four ‘community chairs’ in different faculties with responsibility to initiate new work across departments. The paper describes the early effects of this strategy and some examples of the new interdisciplinary and community partnership initiatives that have arisen from the work of the community chairs. Already, the concept demonstrates success as new, large teams of interdisciplinary faculty and community partners are working in new directions.

Given the challenge of all metropolitan and urban universities to be involved in improving student success at every level of education, this article is a must read.

The robust presence of access to the arts is certainly a key element of community success. As public funding for higher education has been reduced, some campuses have made cuts to arts programming and facilities. The Tacoma Theater Project at the University of Washington—Tacoma (UWT) describes a creative university-community partnership that has developed new opportunities for campus and community audiences. Author Michael Kula reflects on the development of the relatively young UWT campus and its academic programs. At a time when others might be reducing theater programs, UWT faculty asked: Does our mission and community culture make it important to initiate one? “Despite the larger academic and societal trends perhaps suggesting the contrary, as UWT began to consider theater arts as an area of strategic growth, the question facing the university quickly turned from *if* to *how* the university should move forward. How could or should the institution build a vibrant, relevant, and sustainable program in theater that both respected the university’s resources during economically challenged times and, at the same time, held the university’s mission at its center?” This exciting article describes the emergence of an innovative solution: a campus-community partnership that recognized the need to create more affordable access to theater productions and a greater diversity in the perspective of productions without reducing audiences for existing fringe theater companies with similar aims. Since this is an article about theater, this introduction will not reveal the full plot of the creative solution UWT developed, but the title will give you a hint: “Zipcar Theater: The Tacoma Theater Project as an Anchor for Audience Development.”

Craig A. Talmage, Rosemarie Dombrowski, Mikulas Pstross, C. Bjørn Peterson, and Richard C. Knopf collaborated on an article describing their research project in Phoenix that asked three big questions: Where is downtown, what is downtown, and who is downtown? Arizona State University has created a successful downtown campus in recent years, and it has spurred growth and renewal. The research agenda, as described by the authors, explored “socio-cultural value in the heart of an urban downtown area through an applied community learning experience, which involved university students, faculty, and community members. The experience was spurred from a grant-funded initiative that sought to illuminate the stories of socio-cultural diversity in downtown Phoenix, Arizona.” The authors give a clear description of the importance of applied learning opportunities for large numbers of students, strategies for developing community partnerships, and framing the study project that became known as the “We are Downtown” initiative. To explore the three main questions about downtown, a highly diverse, multidisciplinary team of students, faculty, and partners conducted interviews with downtown workers, residents, and passers-by to learn about the characteristics of the respondents and their views and perceptions of the area. As many CUMU campuses are located in center city spaces, the article provides interesting reading about the deeper conversations and connections that developed during the project among diverse groups, and how that will inform the next stage of this innovative research and partnership project.

In their examination of town-gown relationships, Gavazzi and Fox (2014) drew on literature about marital relationships to analyze data gathered from a sample of community members living and working in three municipalities surrounding a Midwestern regional university. Using marriage relationships as metaphor, they developed a model of four types of relationships that can be used to describe the characteristics of typical campus-community interaction: harmonious, traditional, conflicted, and devitalized. The article provides useful insights into understanding, and perhaps anticipating, how good and difficult town-gown relationships can be understood, managed, and improved.

Toward the goal of greater success in student educational achievement, Staten Island's three institutions of higher education – College of Staten Island/City University of New York, St. John's University, and Wagner College – have brought together their high school and community partners to form the Staten Island Educational Partnership. This distinctive “all-in” partnership across the island’s educational providers at every level has set a goal of 30,000 new college degrees awarded by 2025. The authors report that “college readiness for a stronger Staten Island is a direct outgrowth of Staten Island educational leaders’ participation in the 2013 CUMU conference. The Staten Island Educational Partnership was formed in order to achieve the results sought by a similar coalition of business, government, higher education, pre-K-12 education, and community organizations in Louisville.” The authors, representing dimensions of the partnership, share insights about the initial development of an organizing framework based on the principles of collective impact and provide useful insights to improve the educational partnerships of any metropolitan institution.

Finally, Nicholas Siewell, Stephanie Aguirre, and Madhavappallil Thomas describe their research on the extensive and unusually intentional community garden project in a neighborhood in Bakersfield, California. The authors (one a professor from California State University, Bakersfield and two community-based professionals who were also graduate students), recognized that while many universities launch partnerships to develop community gardens, there was a need for research that would seek to measure the impact on health and well-being of residents in the neighborhood beyond mere social activity and/or access to fresh food. Their study looked at physical and mental health, social capacities, and the spiritual health of individuals and neighborhoods. If you think you understood the value of community gardens, this study will expand your awareness of its deeper impact on residential well-being.

In summary, the 2014 CUMU Conference was a benefit to Syracuse University through the opportunity it created to develop new friends and key contacts as well as gaining access to the vast expertise this event brought to our city. The articles in this issue offer a sample of the wisdom and innovation that was exchanged throughout the event.

Author Information

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