

# **Love of Place: The Metropolitan University Advantage: 2015 CUMU National Conference in Omaha**

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The theme for the 2015 CUMU National Conference in Omaha, NE was “Love of Place: The Metropolitan University Advantage”. The 2015 theme celebrates key elements that establish the identity of metropolitan universities and CUMU as an organization. The theme recognizes the unique opportunities and benefits provided by metropolitan universities for students and communities. Metropolitan universities provide students with enriching educational experiences while contributing to building and strengthening the community. These enriched experiences also support faculty and staff growth as members of the university and community. The theme encouraged conference participants to explore new pedagogical approaches, strategies for sustaining meaningful partnerships, and opportunities for successful engagement of the community by examining the transformative power of the relationships between metropolitan universities and their “place.” Essential to this theme is the notion of stewardship and being good stewards of the communities that we live in, that bless our lives, our families, and our universities. The special issue devoted to the theme and notion of “Love of Place” provides an overview of the stewardship witnessed at the conference and then launches into the full article contributions that illustrate the “Love of Place” exemplified by the great presenters and the many initiatives occurring across the CUMU.

## **The Conference Experience**

The University of Nebraska at Omaha was honored to host the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities Conference October 11-13, 2015. This year’s theme, “Love of Place: The Metropolitan University Advantage”, grew from UNO’s long-time institutional commitment to the city of Omaha and its pride in being Omaha’s university. Of course, UNO’s commitment and pride are shared by all CUMU institutions. The conference included a variety of keynote speakers, sessions, panels, and the presentation of the Lynton Award. Here we provide some highlights to help all remember the “Love of Place” experienced in Omaha.

### **Opening Symposium**

On Sunday, October 11<sup>th</sup>, the opening symposium was conducted at the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center (CEC) on UNO’s campus. Panelists included Barbara Weitz, co-founder of the Weitz Family Foundation, David Brown, president and CEO of the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, John Scott, vice president of the William and Ruth Scott Family Foundation, and Sara Woods, Director of the Community Engagement Center. Panelists discussed the Community Engagement Center as an embodiment of the conference theme and as an example of metropolitan university engaging its community.

The symposium was facilitated by B. J. Reed, Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs at UNO. UNO’s Chancellor, John Christiansen, provided a warm welcome to everyone who was able to attend and highlighted the purpose of the CUMU conference, to learn from one another and have fun! With 300 attendees from 62 universities in 32 states and 3 provinces in Canada, the opportunities for ideation and growth at this year’s conference were abundant. The Chancellor commented on the conference theme, and as a part of UNO he affirmed that Omaha is an incredible place that has been transformed because of the remarkable things created by public/private partnerships, such as the Community Engagement Center (CEC).

The CEC makes the community more accessible and salient to UNO students, faculty and staff and at the same time provides resources to the community (e.g., meeting and event space at no cost, student volunteers) that organizations like Omaha's Chamber of Commerce have used assertively. B. J. Reed kicked off the symposium by asking panelists to first speak to the challenges of building and maintaining the CEC and the vision behind its creation. All panelists agreed that the building grew out of a smaller pilot in the early 2000's to house nonprofit agencies as well as the lessons learned from the inception of a service learning initiative at about the same time. They noted that it was a difficult concept to communicate to potential donors because the idea is difficult to explain to people who are not familiar with the concept of metropolitan universities and community engagement or who had not had firsthand experience with the earlier efforts. Once two key donors committed resources and others provided initial support, sufficient funding was raised to move forward with the project. However, now that the CEC is built and functioning, people are beginning to see the vision in action and the value it provides to both campus and community. Even though the building plan included adaptable and versatile space, creating and maintaining a flexible space and an adjustable plan moving forward to allow the CEC to meet community needs has been another challenge for UNO and CEC sponsors. In addition, the ambiguity surrounding the concept of engaged space with dual purposes of community use and student involvement at a scale that had not been done before makes assessing the performance and outcomes of the CEC very difficult. Woods asserted that the values upon which the CEC was built, such as reciprocity, communication, and collaboration, are the foundation of every decision and continue to drive the direction of the CEC.

The panelists then shared a few lessons that they have learned from the experience of creating the CEC that would be transferrable to other metropolitan universities. One matter discussed was that having leadership at the university that has vision and buy-in to creating and improving community engagement is essential for creating lasting change. In addition, Scott emphasized that being intentional and "serious" about creating a space like the CEC will ensure that change agents can build something truly meaningful and powerful. The primary outcome gained by the CEC is the interaction between students and the community that creates a cultural change on campus and integrates the university and the community. They also noted the importance of engaging potential donors in the process and concept of campus engagement so they can experience its potential on a first-hand basis.

During the question and answer portion of the symposium, attendees were able to share their enthusiasm for community/university collaborations, discuss in more detail the staff infrastructure of the CEC, comment on the future challenges in store for this kind of a building, and emphasize the role of the CEC as a facilitator, not a driver, of community engagement.

### **Poster Presentations**

Following the symposium, a reception was held throughout the CEC for attendees to connect and continue touring the building. In addition, poster sessions were held regarding the following topics:

- Building and Strengthening Communities
- Embracing Community Locally and Globally
- Facilitating and Measuring Transformation
- Transformative Academic Programs and Partnerships

The posters generated insightful and collaborative discussions about how universities are demonstrating "Love of Place" by engaging with their communities and meeting their needs in creative ways. Presenters shared examples of service learning, engaged scholarship, and community partnerships and how their efforts created beneficial outcomes for students, institutions, organizations, and communities.

## **Lynton Award**

The Ernest A. Lynton Award was established in 1996 to honor Ernest Lynton and his “vision of faculty scholarly engagement as inclusive, collaborative, and problem-oriented work in which academic share knowledge-generating tasks with the public and involve community partners as participates in public problem-solving” (CUMUonline.org). The award recognizes an early career faculty member whose scholarship in teaching, research, and service is connected to community engagement. More information on the award and Ernest A. Lynton can be found at [www.nerche.org](http://www.nerche.org). The award recipient is selected by NERCHE and presented at the annual CUMU conference. The recipient this year was Dr. Erick DeMeulenaere, Assistant Professor of Urban Schooling in the Department of Education at Clark University. In his teaching, research, and community engagement, Dr. DeMeulenaere demonstrates his commitment to “confronting inequalities and empowering urban youth to create change in their communities” (2015 Lynton award recipient, 2015).

## **Panel of Omaha Nebraska Leaders**

Following the presentation of the Lynton Award, three Omaha area leaders -- Arvin Frazier III, director of College Possible; Pete Festersen, Omaha City Councilman; and Lyn Ziegenbein, Director Emerita of the Peter Kiewit Foundation, discussed how metropolitan universities can partner with their communities to provide economic stability, a continuous flow of new leadership, and social capital. Specifically, the panel examined the dual themes of economic development and workforce growth and how metropolitan universities could play a role in helping their cities attract and retain business and industry, as well as attract and retain a diverse and talented workforce. Ziegenbein discussed the need for building social capital in communities by developing a strong base of community leaders and described the role she believed urban and metropolitan universities can serve in addressing this challenge. Frazier, whose organization provides college mentoring and support to first generation students, discussed how metropolitan universities can provide greater support to underserved populations through deeper community partnerships, commitment to students at earlier ages, and better access to financial aid.

## **Special Conference Issue**

Each year Metropolitan Universities Journal provides a venue where full articles based upon the presentations at the CUMU Conference are published. More than 20 submissions were received this year for the 8 spots in the special issue. Because of the wonderful interest from CUMU Conference participants, it was decided that an editorial board for the special should be assembled to assist with reviewing and managing the article selection process. The Editorial Board included Deb Smith-Howell, Paul Sather, Rosemary Strasser, Brian McKeivitt, Kathy Lyons-Oleson, Sara Woods, Mitzi Ritzman, and Nancy Kelley-Gillespie. In addition to the board, an Assistant Editor, Kelly Prange, was enlisted to help with managing the review process and other tasks to ensure papers moved smoothly through the publication process.

## **Top Paper Award**

In an effort to increase interest in the special issue and to reward the great work being done by so many wonderful faculty and administrators in the CUMU, the University of Nebraska at Omaha introduced the first annual “Top Paper Award”, celebrating the best and most highly-rated submission for the special issue.

The following process was used to decide which paper would receive the award. First, all papers were reviewed by editorial board members and other reviewers as a standard practice for the MUJ. During the

review, raters provided ratings concerning the practical and theoretical significance of the submission, the fit of the submission to the conference theme, the appropriateness to the journal, the quality of the literature review, the quality of the research design (if applicable), and the overall presentation and communication clarity of the submission. Second, the top five, highest-rated submissions were then discussed at length in a meeting of the editorial board and special issue editor. During that meeting, the strengths and merit of each paper was discussed and a final vote was rendered concerning which of the papers stood out above the rest.

It is a great honor and privilege to announce that the first article of this special issue, the winner of the first annual Top Paper Award, and the most highly rated paper from the submission review process, was written and submitted by Judith Ramaley, and is entitled “Collaboration in an Era of Change: New Forms of Community Problem-Solving”.

### **Top Paper Spotlight**

*Collaboration in an Era of Change: New Forms of Collaborative Problem-Solving.* Ramaley’s article portrays how the digital age is changing our society and creating complex issues in our communities, which challenges metropolitan universities to adapt the way they approach higher education – that is, promoting a more innovative, collaborative, and competency-based scholarship framework (Levine 2015; Heifetz et al. 2009). She also explains how metropolitan universities can support community-based learning experiences for students by creating a culture of engagement and participating in collective impact efforts to solve community issues. Ramaley gives examples of how Portland State University has implemented programs to support PSU’s commitment to helping students prepare for excelling in their professions and for solving the “wicked problems” their communities face. Through multi-year, collaborative partnerships and a commitment to creating and sustaining an age-friendly university, PSU demonstrates its promise to be a partner and a resource for their community while leading readers to reflect on the 2015 CUMU conference theme, Love of Place: The Metropolitan University Advantage.

### **Articles in this Volume**

*Reflection Promotes Transformation in a Service Learning Course.* Stover, a professor in the college of nursing at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, describes the importance of the social aspects of health and social justice in determining the true health of individuals (Marmot and Allen 2014). She describes an exploratory service learning course that brought this issue to light for nursing students at a metropolitan university. Most importantly, her paper describes the use of reflection activities that lead to transformative learning outcomes and provides an exemplary illustration of best practices in service learning.

*Teacher Training in Urban Settings: Inquiry, Efficacy, and Culturally Diverse Field Placements.* McGlamery, Franks, and Shillingstad, professors at UNO, offer expertise about preparing elementary education majors to confidently teach mathematics and science to culturally diverse students (Buss 2010). They describe a field experience in which elementary education majors worked with female children at a camp to introduce them to STEM topics. The college students’ self-efficacy was measured, and significant increases were found from pre-scores to post-scores, indicating that the field exercise and community partnerships are a potential solution to helping prepare effective teachers.

*The Dynamics of University/City Government Relationships: It’s Personal.* Curry, the dean of lifelong learning at Simon Fraser University, discusses the importance of university/city government partnerships for building love of place, yet the difficulties inherent therein (Huxam 2003). Best practices are described for reducing roadblocks and building trust between partners so that mutual objectives can be met and the community can benefit.

*Enhancing the STEM Ecosystem through Teacher-Researcher Partnerships.* Tapprich, Grandgenett, Leas, Rodie, Shuster, Schaben, and Cutucache, from UNO and Omaha Public Schools, describe K-16 partnerships formed between UNO faculty and teachers at public schools to conduct research. This long-term collaboration is a response to the national priority given to STEM education. Positive outcomes are anticipated for both faculty and students involved as this program continues.

*Collective Impact versus Collaboration: Two Sides of the Same Coin OR Different Phenomenon?* Prange, Allen, and Reiter-Palmon review literature regarding collective impact, reiterating the importance of having a common goal, shared measurement systems, reinforcing activities, continuous communication, a backbone organization, and certain mindset shifts when solving our communities' complex social issues (Kania and Kramer 2011; Kania, Hanleybrown, and Splansky Juster 2014). To delve deeper into the practice of collective impact, the authors draw comparisons from organizational psychology literature and conclude that collective impact is a specific form of inter-organizational collaboration.

*The University Next Door: Developing a Centralized Unit that Strategically Cultivates Community Engagement at an Urban University.* Holton, Early, Resler, Trussell, and Howard, from Virginia Commonwealth University, provide a case example of a unit within a metropolitan university dedicated to increasing community engagement. To do so, Kotter's (1996) model of organizational change was adapted to fit the structure and needs of a metropolitan university. Through this change, Virginia Commonwealth hopes to create lasting change in their communities through cross-sector and cross-departmental collaborations.

*Volunteer Program Assessment at the University of Nebraska at Omaha: A Metropolitan University's Collaboration with Rural and Spanish-Speaking Volunteers.* Scherer, Graeve-Cunningham, Trent, Weddington, Thurley, Allen, and Prange, from the industrial/organizational psychology program at UNO, describes the efforts of a student-led organization that provides volunteer program evaluation tools free of charge to non-profit organizations and provides professional development opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students. This unique organization has demonstrated love of place by translating their tools and outreach to rural populations to meet the needs of community partners. The authors stress the importance of building trusting, reciprocally beneficial, relationships with community organizations.

## **Conclusion**

As the conference summary and articles contained in this issue illustrate, "Love of Place" truly catches the spirit of the vision and aims of many Metropolitan Universities. These articles embody the combined efforts of administrators, faculty, staff, students, and community members in celebrating their unique "Love of Place" in their respective communities and universities. It is the hope of the entire editorial team, the CUMU Conference leadership, and the contributors to this issue that those who read the contributions will catch the spirit of "Love of Place" and perhaps engage further in building the universities and communities that lift us all.

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