

The Transformative Power of Anchor Institutions

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Everyone knows by now that colleges and universities are “anchor institutions”: important place-based engines that play key roles in local economies. But the raw facts of size and place are just the beginning of the story; what matters is not just the fact that anchors have an impact on communities, but what kind of impact they have, and on what terms. It is one thing to be an anchor institution. It is another to consciously and intentionally adopt an anchor mission, leveraging all available institutional and operational resources for community benefit.

Higher education is charged with creating new knowledge, preparing a workforce, and impelling life-long civically-engaged learners. As if ensuring delivery of its core mission was not enough, it also must work to eliminate barriers to access, maintain funding and enrollment and graduation rates, and address student debt. As higher education seeks to secure private and public investments, it also contends with the internal organizational challenges of decentralized and siloed operating environments. Often, the public is unaware of these complex and nuanced constraints and challenges. As institutions advocate for, and act to ensure, their own survival and success, leveraging their power to dismantle systems of oppression can start to slip outside the frame. Branding campaigns or regressive land use, hiring, or contracting policies can fail to center the needs, skills, and assets of long-time residents. Higher-education institutions are at risk of sending mixed messages (albeit often unintentional) to their constituencies, which can undermine public trust, student and faculty retention rates, and the ability of campuses to be conscious actors in creating just and livable communities.

To grapple with these challenges, higher-education institutions are becoming more disciplined and resourceful in their efforts to identify and build capacity for organization-wide behavioral change. Universities are coming together, as communities of learning, to think innovatively and practically about the strategies that will move higher education further along in its pursuit of reciprocal partnerships, democratic engagement, and systemic solutions to inequalities. They are breaking down campus silos to build programs in the areas of small-business development, hiring, procurement, housing and investment practices. They are thinking critically about these assets and about ways to address legacies of disinvestment, instead focusing on advancing racial equity. They are working to engage the campus community, integrating faculty and staff. They are working to measure their impact, and build an evidence base for this work. And they are working to reimagine their relationship to community, engaging with a broader array of stakeholders.

This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* journal, for which The Democracy Collaborative was eager to serve as guest editor, highlights a cross-section of key work and critical reflection from across this new field of practice, in particular exploring:

- Infrastructure and resourcing to support the anchor mission;
- Alignment of the anchor mission with other strategic priorities,
- Addressing larger challenges related to structural racism and persistent social and economic inequities.

Articles in this Volume

The issue begins by presenting practical “how-to” strategies for implementing an anchor mission. Higher education has struggled with how to integrate the anchor mission into teaching and learning. Drawing on a mixed-methods research study, Johnson Kebea of Drexel University shares a framework for including students that has the potential to further breakdown institutional silos and better prepare students to be civically minded actors in the workforce. Khandros from the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia details the collective impact purchasing strategy which multiple anchors in Philadelphia have adopted, with the goals of reducing poverty, improving racial equity, and creating sustainability.

Moving from practice to theory, the next set of articles explores innovations in organizational theory that align internal decision-making processes with community engagement practices, and offer insights into how to institutionalize the anchor approach. Del Rio and Loggins of the University of San Diego argue in favor of a community- and cohesion-based concept for integrating diversity and reciprocity into institutional culture, known as joining. Norris and Weiss of IUPUI reflect on lessons learned from the development of athletics programs. They identify effective organizational structures that allow for sustainable and robust partnerships, both within the university and with external community partners. In addition, the article by Bergen of Marquette University and Sladek of The Democracy Collaborative explores the tensions between different paradigms for community engagement, focusing on the public-good frameworks, analyses of academic capitalism, and calls to adopt an anchor mission.

The final article concludes with a detailed report with recommendations for a successful implementation of an anchor mission, based upon the learning realized in and by the Anchor Dashboard Learning Cohort, a community of practice facilitated by The Democracy Collaborative between the years of 2015-2018. Gomez, Sonenshein, Espinoza, and Fuhrmann share insights gained from adopting an anchor mission at California State University Los Angeles. They offer suggestions for incorporating upward mobility measures along with examples for community partnership into the Anchor Dashboard.

Looking Ahead

In order for higher education institutions to adopt a truly transformative and authentic anchor mission, leadership and staff must work to align internal operations with community engagement, to limit the ways in which university actions often work at cross-purposes. This requires an “all in” commitment, calling for greater coordination across campus, from external relations to diversity and inclusion. It will also rely on expanding the set of external stakeholders, and joining place-based, collective-impact initiatives. Building a movement to embed the anchor approach across the higher-education field will mean continuing to invest in building the body of evidence and monitoring progress on goals. We will need to change day-to-day policies and set the stage for long-term system change. We will need to integrate anchor strategies into teaching and learning, and develop curricular innovations. As universities and colleges deepen their implementation across these areas, a shared commitment to identifying and sharing best practices can help revolutionize and reorient institutional power, in order to build just relationships with local neighbors.