

The Next Wave:  
Building University Engagement For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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One of the Federal government's important contributions to democratic life was the establishment of the nation's network of land grant colleges through the Morrill Act of 1862. That act and subsequent legislation led to the creation of land grant institutions in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, land grants at historically black colleges, community colleges for Native Americans, and, more recently, sea grant and space grant institutions.

When President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act into law, the country's first non-elite colleges were born. Their original mission was relatively straightforward: teach agriculture, military tactics, and the mechanic arts, as well as classical studies so that members of the working classes could obtain both a practical and liberal education. Two key elements of the land grant model were the agricultural experiment station which generated practical knowledge, and an extension service to disseminate the station's research, in particular to farmers who could then apply it to increase productivity on their land.

But at the heart of Senator Morrill's (and Lincoln's) purpose was a grander idea than merely expanding crop yields. The land grant vision was of an institution that could be a training ground for democratic life and civic practice. If citizens are not only born but "made" (that is developed through education, training, and exposure to democratic values and ideas), then land grant institutions, by offering access to non-elites, were intended to deepen political democracy and strengthen civic life in the nation.

As George R. McDowell has written, "...the principle behind their establishment was

without historical precedent. That principle asserted that no part of human life and labor is beneath the notice of the university or without its proper dignity. Both by virtue of their scholarly aims and whom they would serve, the land-grant universities were established as people's universities. That was their social contract" (*McDowell 2001*).

In recent decades the contract between land grants and society has been largely broken. The reasons are many-fold: farmers, once the majority of the nation, now number less than 2% of the labor force. Agriculture has become mainly a corporate and industrialized sector, and our population has become urbanized and suburbanized; the traditional extension services no longer directly touch the lives of large numbers of citizens. At the same time many of the "people's universities" began emulating elite private institutions, chasing federal, corporate, and philanthropic research dollars and staking their reputations increasingly on graduate level education (though the great majority of their students were undergraduates). Research conducted by faculty with little connection to the surrounding community or citizenry of the state, and without clear and obvious direct application and social benefit, became the norm. Much good work was done, but the honored tradition of public service, the transfer of useful knowledge, skills, and technology to citizens who could apply them in their own lives and communities, and a commitment to addressing, and even helping to solve, social problems directly in the institution's own environment became marginalized. The vast majority of students and faculty no longer came in touch with the extension services that had once been at the heart of their institutions. And in the halls of state legislatures around the country, land grant presidents began hearing the accusing question, "But what are you *doing* for the people of our state?" Perhaps there is more than one reason state funding support as a percentage of the budget of public universities has been declining for at least the past two decades (*Selingo 2003*).

Given this picture, it was only partly in jest that McDowell concluded his study by noting, "A common reaction to 'I'm writing a book on the future of extension and land-grant universities' was 'do they have a future?'" Indeed, he reports that a friend told him the book might well be an epitaph for the land-grant universities as instruments of social

change in American society (*McDowell 2001*).

The growing public sense that land grants have lost their way—or at least much of what had once made them distinctive and important to American democracy—has not escaped the notice of many concerned university leaders. In the mid-1990s, a group of university presidents, in partnership with the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) convened the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities. A joint statement made by the leadership of the Commission in 1996 offered a dire assessment of that future:

To state the case as succinctly as possible: We are convinced that unless our institutions respond to the challenges and opportunities before them they risk being consigned to a sort of academic Jurassic Park – of great historic interest, fascinating places to visit, but increasingly irrelevant in a world that has passed them by (*Kellogg Commission 1996*).

To meet this challenge, the Commission called for a new “covenant” between land grant universities and society “to breathe new life into their historic mission by going beyond extension to engagement.” As an “engaged institution,” a land grant would respond to the current needs of its increasingly diverse student body, provide students with “practical opportunities” to prepare for the world they were about to enter, and “put its critical resources (knowledge and expertise) to work on the problems the communities it serves face.” Not only was this essential to the future of land grant universities themselves, but to the larger society.

### **Elements of an Engaged University**

In the dozen years since the Kellogg Commission began its work – and in many cases beginning well before – the initial elements of a newly relevant engaged university have begun to quietly emerge in institutions around the country. In December 2006, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the organization that oversees

the national system of university classification ratings, formally launched its community engagement classification. Schools could qualify under either Curricular Engagement (i.e., teaching that addresses community needs) or Outreach and Partnerships or both. To be selected, universities “had to provide descriptions and examples of institutionalized practices of community engagement that showed alignment among mission, culture, leadership, resources and practices.” In the first round, 62 schools met the criteria of both categories. Another 14 schools qualified in one of the two categories: nine in “Outreach and Partnerships” and five in “Curricular Engagement.” Among these 76 schools are such land-grant colleges as Michigan State, North Carolina State, University of California-Los Angeles, University of Massachusetts-Boston, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Vermont (Carnegie 2006, NASULGC 2007).

In contrast to the emphasis on transferring “technical expertise” that was at the heart of the original agricultural extension programs, the emerging new model is in the main based on a collaborative approach to problem-solving – a two-way street in which practitioners and community members contribute to shaping the research, teaching, and service agenda of the university. In some cases, a community advisory board or other formal mechanism helps ensure that the voice of the community is present. In others, land grant faculty and staff actively work to engage community members to identify issues for research and action, understand the impact of alternative solutions, and design and implement plans that build upon local assets and emphasize shared leadership and active citizen participation. At its best, the collaborative approach enables a land grant to fashion an expanding civic, problem-solving extension portfolio relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To cite only a few examples:

- **The University of Minnesota's** Center for Democracy and Citizenship sponsors numerous projects focused on “public work.” Beyond specific projects and programs, the university has established a Council on Public Engagement (COPE), an institution-wide body charged with strengthening the public mission and practice across the full range of University activities in order to “enrich scholarship and research; enhance curricular content and process; prepare

- effective, productive citizens; address critical societal issues and solve public problems; and contribute to a democratic way of life.” (Boyte 2004)
- **Pennsylvania State University** has established a “community development extension” program that focuses on improving community and economic decision- making. The university recently also launched a new undergraduate minor in civic and community engagement, with students moving beyond traditional service learning through advocacy training (Dubb 2004).
  - **Oregon State University** became the first Research I institution to “redefine” scholarship in ways that acknowledge and reward teaching, research, application, and service that are connected to problem-solving and meeting community needs. Accompanying changes have elevated the position of field staff in extension offices to faculty status (McDowell 2001: 161-165).
  - **Michigan State University’s** Center for Community Economic Development focuses on “engaging in responsive and innovative scholarship designed to improve the quality of life in distressed urban and regional communities.” Among other activities, the Center provides training to increase the capabilities of Michigan’s community-based organizations. Within each of its targeted communities, the program maintains a resident community development professional who lives and works with community members (Dubb and Howard 2007: 56).
  - The **University of California, Los Angeles**, through its Community Building Initiative, has supported the creation of a citywide organization to help tenants of rundown apartments improve their living conditions. Its Neighborhood Knowledge LA interactive web site, for instance, has helped community members successfully pressure landlords to invest \$250 million to bring their buildings up to code. UCLA also offers a senior honors course called “Community Development from the Ground Up,” in which each year an entire class works

intensely with a single local community-based organization; each year a new partner organization is selected (Dubb and Howard 2007: 58).

While we focus in this paper on land grant models, there are also many related examples from other private and public universities. The University of Pennsylvania, for example, is internationally recognized for its Netter Center for Community Partnerships. CCP works throughout West Philadelphia on a wide range of initiatives such as university-assisted community schools, public school reform, urban nutrition, and faith-based programs. Portland State is a national leader in core curriculum reform as well as programs in community development and training to increase the capacity of community-based organizations. A few institutions, such as the University of Cincinnati, are pioneering efforts to invest portions of their endowment in targeted community revitalization; in the case of the University of Cincinnati to the tune of dedicating \$100 million of its endowments to finance four-percent interest loans that will help finance 1,600 beds of student housing, over 1,000 units of affordable housing and roughly 450,000 square feet of commercial space (Dubb and Howard 2007: 59-65, 70, Dubb 2007).

- **Leveraging University Financial Resources for Civically-Engaged, Community-Based Development**

Institutions of higher education have an obvious vested interest in building strong relationships with the communities that surround their campuses. They do not have the option of relocating and thus are of necessity place-based anchors. While corporations, businesses, and residents often flee from economically depressed low-income urban and suburban edge-city neighborhoods, universities remain. At a time when foundations that help establish community-based projects are commonly unable to continue with ongoing involvement over long periods of time, universities are inherently an important potential institutional base for helping community-based economic development in general, and civically engaged development in particular.

In 1996, more than 1,900 urban-core universities in the U.S. spent \$136 billion on salaries, goods and services – nine times greater than federal direct spending on urban business and job development in the same year. These institutions collectively employ 2 million workers (only a third of these jobs are faculty; the remaining two-thirds are administrative and support staff positions) and are among the fastest-growing employers in the country, adding 300,000 jobs between 1990 and 1999. America’s colleges and universities also hold more than \$100 billion in real estate (ICIC and CEOs for Cities 2002).

In recent years, a number of universities have begun to focus a small part of their economic activity in ways designed to benefit their surrounding communities. As of 2007, The University of Pennsylvania had shifted 12 percent of its annual purchasing, thereby injecting over \$85.7 million into the West Philadelphia economy. Howard University, collaborating with local civic and neighborhood groups and Fannie Mae, created 307 new housing units in its surrounding neighborhood, which in turn helped spawn commercial development and improvements in vacant and boarded up properties. The Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership Initiative has invested more than \$2 million in an affordable housing loan fund to promote home ownership and community stabilization. The University of Southern California has instituted a program to increase employment from neighborhoods immediately surrounding its campus, and in one recent period, one out of every seven applicants for staff positions was hired from the seven nearest zip codes (Hahn 2002; ICIC and CEOs for Cities 2002, Purchasing Services 2008).

Ohio State provides an example of a large land-grant college investing endowment funds in community redevelopment. Gordon Gee, who initiated the effort, came to Ohio State from a senior administration post at Brown, where he had seen community-university partnerships work in Providence. Gee played a key role in gaining university support for investing in an area that had been neglected for decades. David Dixon and Peter Roche, who worked with Gee, noted that Gee wanted to shift “the university’s public investment focus from the traditional agricultural concerns of a land-grant university to social,

economic, racial, and other issues.” Ohio State chose to work through a nonprofit community development corporation, Campus Partners. The project involved renovating over 1,300 units of housing and building a 500,000 square-foot shopping center. To finance the project, Ohio State trustees agreed to provide \$28 million out of endowment funds. The Ohio State commitment leveraged an additional \$100 million in external funds, including a \$35 million federal New Markets Tax Credit allocation. The South Gateway complex opened in the fall of 2005 (Dubb and Howard 2007: 65).

At a time when federal and state subsidies are being cut and charitable programs are proving insufficient to meet growing local needs, channeling university financial resources and expertise toward place-based development models can help produce the kind of economic stability that is a requirement of strong, vibrant, healthy, and democratic communities.

- **Enhancing Teaching, Research, and Training the Next Generation of Engaged, Democratic Citizens**

In some visions, the engaged university seems almost like a social work or business development agency—with little or no relationship to its educational and research mission. We disagree. Indeed, we think both the educational and research functions of the university can be enhanced by civic engagement work—if, that is, the concept is taken seriously.

As noted at the outset of this paper, the original land grant vision was much more than simply an idea about agricultural research and extension. These institutions were meant to serve as intellectual and practical training grounds for non-elites to become more effective participants in the nation’s political democracy. This mission has never been more important than it is today, at a time when public opinion polls consistently show that the great majority of Americans no longer believe their voice matters in government, when electoral participation (even taking into account the most recent presidential election) is extremely low, and when millions of new immigrants, racial minorities, and

disenfranchised populations remain detached from local and national decision-making.

### **Awakening the Sleeping Giant**

Funders seriously committed to achieving community economic development are increasingly challenged by the need to inject new resources into community building activities. Locally anchored institutions—particularly the nation’s network of more than 4,000 universities and colleges—represent an enormous (nearly untapped) potential resource. With strategic leveraging, huge resources—*literally tens of billions of dollars*—could be unlocked in coming decades for community benefiting purposes.

In recent years diverse strategies have demonstrated a variety of ways universities can partner with surrounding communities to address local problems of poverty, unemployment, affordable housing, crime, and other social issues. The specific building blocks which can be integrated into a comprehensive model of effective university-community partnerships are now available in isolated but successful experiments around the nation. Taken together, it is clear that we are on the verge of an important new vision of what might be possible.

- **Facing Current Fiscal Realities**

The current political and fiscal climate clearly does not bode well for traditional community economic development programs, particularly efforts that aim to assist those who are most disadvantaged. It is increasingly obvious that foundations cannot fill the gap. In 2003, total foundation support for community economic development was \$523 million, the lowest level for community improvement since 1999 (Cohen 2005). Foundations also can rarely fund projects for more than a few years. Few have the resources to enable more than a very small number of communities to develop long-term, sustained responses to the many difficult issues they face. Clearly, if there is ever to be a

serious response to the needs American communities face new resources—and new partners—must be found.

- **A Twenty-first Century Vision of an Engaged University**

Within the culture and rewards system of academia, too few institutions as yet assign value to community-based work. And virtually everywhere, core funding for university-community partnerships has been difficult to secure. Universities often seem like walled-off cities with special, narrow concerns to those who have dealt with them, either from the perspective of a poor community, or from those who seek to help achieve community development goals.

One of the obstacles to expanded university-community engagement has been the idea that such efforts deviate from the educational mission of higher education. Fortunately, a new and deeper understanding of the educational importance of engagement is emerging. Leading scholars have shown that by strategically focusing their many resources—from academic programs and research to business practices—universities can improve their core intellectual and academic work—in part by giving students and faculty real-world experience which can inform both research and teaching. The emergence of this understanding—and, further, the related understanding that the campus, as an anchored part of a broader community, cannot thrive if surrounded by a sea of poverty, disinvestment, dilapidated housing, and other signs of a failing social structure—has become an increasingly important element in reducing internal academic resistance to community engagement strategies.

- **Precedents for Shaping the Direction and Focus of Higher Education**

The impact an integrated strategy might achieve over time cannot properly be gauged by focusing only on academic institutions alone. A key matter is the nexus of funders, state governments, and the federal government, and how these can bring about sweeping policy changes to provide new incentives and motivations to higher education. In fact, the vision of an “engaged university”—one with its sleeves rolled up, working in partnership

with its local community to solve real-life problems—has a long and proud history in U.S. higher education, thanks in large measure to federal policy.

State governments have also exerted significant influence on higher education in recent decades. The economic impact of universities is, in fact, an issue of keen interest among many state legislatures. As of 2000, state governments collectively provided 19.4 percent of all university research funds, most of which goes to efforts broadly defined as supporting state economic development (albeit clearly not always of the kind that significantly benefits disadvantaged communities). For example, the West Virginia Rural Health Initiative Act funds (at an annual cost of \$7.5 million) rural health education programs attached to medical colleges to help cover underserved counties (Dubb and Howard 2007: 39, 41).

What is implicit in the record of engaged universities—or should be—is that none of the various precedents for impacting and altering our understanding of what higher education can and should do occurred on its own. In each case, something made it happen—commonly a policy coalition (when federal and state legislation is involved) or funders who strategically leveraged higher education to contribute to the realization of social goals (such as women’s rights, diversity, and environmental protection).

Clearly there are many precedents that demonstrate how public and private funding can help shape the priorities and agendas of universities and colleges. The question becomes: how might we develop and systematically further a comprehensive longer-term engagement strategy aimed at building upon both the public policy precedents and the emerging university experience? How, specifically, might a sophisticated approach gain leverage so that existing university resources could be steadily deployed in new ways and so that additional public and private resources might be developed?

#### **A. Foundation Commitment and Leadership**

In our judgment, what is needed above all else is a determined, organized effort among funders—individually and collectively—to strategically move forward over the coming decade to implement a comprehensive agenda of change. A funders’ group committed to steadily advancing a coherent overall agenda could prove decisive in focusing the economic might of universities for the benefit of their communities—and to mobilizing new resources and incentives to achieve major impact. (A new strategic grouping could build upon what has been learned through the “Living Cities” experience; indeed, given the Living Cities agenda, it might well make sense to establish this initiative as a fully funded and staffed element within that funders’ collaborative.) Regardless of the specific structure of a funders’ group, it must be understood that this is no “quick fix” campaign: an initiative of this import and magnitude should not be undertaken unless understood as at least a ten-year effort.

To be successful, a strategic initiative will require adequate dedicated staff to organize the effort and to implement a two-track strategy working both within and outside of the higher education system: 1) a systematic, step-by-step strategy directed at developing and promoting federal and state policies that can provide the right mix of incentives to bring about a major reorientation in some of higher education’s goals; and 2) a parallel strategy aimed at building up the internal capacity of universities to become fully engaged with their communities.

Success will also depend on individual foundations giving consideration to what they can do in their own grant making to influence and motivate university engagement. This need not depend on using limited community development grant funds. In 2005, only 3.5 percent of foundation giving went to community economic development; that same year more than 22 percent of all foundation funding went to colleges, universities, and graduate schools. Re-focusing some of the latter to provide incentives for university engagement could have a substantial impact (FC Stats 2007).

## **B. External Organizing Strategy**

The first element of a serious strategy should identify specific state and federal opportunities for immediate action. It should also develop comprehensive longer-term legislation, perhaps based on the idea of a 21<sup>st</sup> century “civic engagement” vision comparable to the land-grant vision. A great deal of research, thinking, consultation, and analysis will need to go into developing a meaningful legislative and policy agenda. Simply by way of illustration, some near-term elements might include:

- **Revive and Expand the Community Outreach Partnership Center program;** restoring its funding level minimally to its FY 2005 level of \$6 million and ultimately increasing funding to \$100 million, as proposed by David Cox, former Director of the Office of University Partnerships (and currently Executive Assistant to the President of the University of Memphis). This would enable a tripling of the number and amount of awards, with funds split between universities and community partner groups (Dubb and Howard 2007: 88). Programs similar to COPC might also be established in other federal agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency or the Department of Energy.
- **Develop a partnership between the Department of Education and a funders’ entity,** similar to the current arrangement between Living Cities and the Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Health and Human Services. The partnership could develop a 10-year project involving two-dozen cities, anchored by community-university collaboratives focused on community revitalization programs.
- **Create a faculty grant program within many federal agencies,** modeled after the National Science Foundation junior scholar program, to reward exemplary academics doing community-based research.
- **Build an urban extension focus to complement the nutrition and agricultural programs of the cooperative extension network** of the nation’s land-grant universities. One possibility might be to establish an "Urban Grant" or

“Metropolitan Grant” program—modeled after the Space Grant, Sea Grant, and Sun Grant legislation—through which universities would compete for federal funding to become leading community development institutions.

- **Encourage innovative state-level policies** through which state governments could play a role in helping universities leverage their assets, particularly their \$411.2 billion in endowment funds, for community development (NACUBO 2008). For example, a state could provide credit enhancement that leverages university funds or could help form an entity to utilize New Market Tax Credits. Many options are possible, but states need to be offered a menu of policy options.
- **Assist municipalities to leverage university resources for their own community needs.** A growing number of universities, for instance, now make regular annual “payments in lieu of taxes” (PILOT) to the city in which they are based as a way of building community goodwill. For example, in Providence in 2003, city officials reached a PILOT agreement with Brown University and three other area universities to collectively provide Providence with \$50 million over 20 years to stabilize municipal finances. Other cities that have negotiated similar agreements with their universities include Boston, New Haven, and Ithaca. Yale, for example, pays the City of New Haven \$7 million a year through a PILOT program. Variations on this theme might target funding to community economic development in the manner of community benefits agreements (Dubb and Howard 2007: 84).

Led by the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities, a group in which over 40 urban research university presidents participate, a movement to enact legislation to support community-university partnerships has gained new momentum. The Coalition developed out of the Commission on the Urban Agenda at the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, which itself is a product of the Kellogg Commission discussed above. In 2007, the Coalition was the lead sponsor of a bill introduced in Congress to develop a grant program to support urban university

community partnership work in the areas of K-12 partnerships; economic revitalization efforts; and public health outreach, education, and intervention. The House Committee on Education and Labor issued a favorable report, approving a measure that would have authorized \$50 million in annual grants for community partnership work. In its report, the Committee noted that it “believes that supporting urban institutions of higher education in research and programmatic initiatives will help to address these [urban] challenges, bolster our nation’s economic competitiveness, and make our cities better places to live.” Although the urban research university provision was ultimately dropped from the 2008 Higher Education Act, the Coalition continues to push for legislation and new legislation in this area may be anticipated in the upcoming Congress. (Glaser et al. 2008; Committee on Education and Labor 2007: 279-280; and U.S. House of Representatives 2007; and Coalition of Urban Serving Universities 2008).

### **C. Internal Organizing Strategy**

We noted above that most universities are open to new strategies, but that it is also true that the strategies don’t fit within their normal day-to-day routines or priorities. Very few actively oppose change, but very few know how to undertake it, or currently wish to devote resources to it. This is an odd circumstance—one that in our judgment offers many opportunities for positive change but no obvious source of initiative within specific institutions. Put another way, the level of resistance to change is much lower than many think. Often opportunities are not taken advantage of simply because there is no sustained capacity to catalyze forward movement.

While some cases of change involve responses to perceived external community problems, in all successful cases we have studied where there has been a serious change process, at the core of it have been a few “catalytic agents.” These are the equivalent of the “social entrepreneurs.” Perhaps the most impressive example is at the University of Pennsylvania where a leading scholar, Ira Harkavy, worked over more than two decades to catalyze change on the academic side of the institution (for many early years against

seemingly difficult odds) and President Judith Rodin worked equally hard to change the institution's business practices over a ten-year period.

In many universities it is similarly possible to identify a few people—a senior faculty member, a Dean, a Vice President for Administrative Affairs, or a President—who by dint of hard work became the catalytic agents who found ways to bring together the many latent possibilities which existed for change in their home institutions.

One way to think about this is to consider the problem of internal university mobilization as precisely analogous to that of mobilizing neighborhood or community resources: what is often needed is a community organizing effort—and a small group of “organizers.” One major difference between attempting to organize resources and constituencies for change within the campus community of the university—and organizing in poor neighborhood communities—is that universities have significant resources.

America's anchored institutions, in particular its universities and colleges, are a sleeping giant ready to be awakened.

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