University Leaders Gather to Advance University-Community Partnerships
Steve Dubb, Democracy Collaborative, University of Maryland
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A group of over sixty university presidents, researchers, and university-community partnership center leaders gathered on December 1st in Baltimore, Maryland to discuss ways to better use university resources to build community wealth. The Forum, convened by the Anchor Institutions Task Force with the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, aimed to promote the spread of anchor institution-community partnerships across the nation.

Charles Rutheiser — Senior Fellow at the Annie E. Casey Foundation — noted that anchor institutions such as universities have a "key role to play in stabilizing and revitalizing communities." The goal of Casey's support, Rutheiser added, is "to expand the envelope and work for the benefit of communities."

Salin Geevarghese, Senior Advisor in the Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) spoke about the role of anchor institutions from a federal perspective. Geevarghese encouraged meeting attendees to consider, "What does it mean to be a powerful player in place-based economic recovery—one that is not just about job creation – but … anchoring those jobs in places." Geevarghese encouraged universities to " have a high tolerance for being messy, lower the walls of the ivory tower, and engage … Leverage federal tools. And take some risks and create. Pivot to local and regional engagement: stay focused on what is locally and regionally critical."

Phil Martin, Assistant Secretary in the US Department of Education noted two areas where he felt universities could play a particularly important role: 1) building deeper connections with public schools; and 2) teaching students and families to make better financial decisions.

The main focus of the Forum centered on three panels. The first, titled "Results in Communities" showcased efforts at three campuses. Nancy Cantor, Chancellor of Syracuse University in upstate New York highlighted Syracuse's work in two neighborhoods. In one area, South Side, the university has aimed to convert furniture warehouse into "innovation centers." The result so far has been the development of 77 businesses with total revenues of $31 million, creating 72 jobs and preserving another 133, Other activities have included launching a community, setting up community health clinics that operates out of African American churches and barber shops, and starting a food co-op. Syracuse has also devoted considerable resources to the Near Westside: investing $13.8 million to support the development of green housing and arts development. The work, Cantor emphasized, involved many partners: "At the table are residents, local grocers … a cross-sector approach is needed."

Henry Taylor, Director of the Center for Urban Studies of the University at Buffalo described the Better Schools, Better Neighborhood Collaborative, focused on Buffalo's Greater MLK neighborhood. Like Cantor, Taylor emphasized the multi-partner nature of the work. In Buffalo's case, 20 groups have jointed the Collaborative. Taylor said the coalition wanted to "improve public schools and transform neighborhoods, and not just provide social services." The goal, Taylor added, was "a comprehensive strategy that focuses as a team on the problem of neighborhood distress. Efforts focus on four sectors: education, housing and physical development, community economic development, and health and human services. Work so far has included redeveloping a park and developing a mixed-income community. The challenge, Taylor added, was to "connect activities together and catalyze synergies."

James T. Harris III, President of Widener University in Chester, Pennsylvania, noted that the City of Chester is one of the poorest communities in the Commonwealth — with 40 percent of children living in poverty and unemployment at an estimated 42 percent. When Harris came to Widener in 2002, the school was relatively isolated from the City. The murder of a Widener student in 2003 led to a reassessment. "It could have gone one of two ways," Harris said. "We heard some who said we should build walls; but we went a different way … [Widener decided] to change our mission: connect the curricula through civic engagement, create partnerships with nonprofits. Widender chose to focus in three areas: community development, economic development, and public schools. "We've done leadership development. We've partnered with a bank and one community development organization. There is much work to do," Harris said.

The second panel focused on how to institutionalize community engagement within the university. Andrew Frank, Special Advisor to the President of Johns Hopkins University, noted that the original $7 million grant that founded Johns Hopkins in the 19th century was aimed at creating an institution that would help build and serve the community. Now Hopkins is seeking to return to this founding ideal. President Ron Daniels, inaugurated at Hopkins in 2009, identified one of his three themes as engaging the community. Frank highlighted the East Baltimore Development Initiative, a project involving the redevelopment of 88 acres, as key to Hopkins' efforts. Frank said the university was actively looking for "secondary and tertiary benefits to making a real estate decision" — in other words, making sure that large university real estate projects also benefit community stakeholders.

Beverly Tatum, President of Spelman College, a historically black college in Atlanta, spoke about her college's efforts to institutionalize an anchor institution mission. "There has certainly been a long-term interest in community development, Tatum said, "but there has been a lack of focus ... Our students and faculty were doing projects all over metropolitan Atlanta … our impact was clearly a mile wide and an inch deep." In response, Spelman and its partner colleges in the Atlanta University Center have decided to target resources within a 1.7-mile radius.

While Hopkins' and Spelman's efforts are rather recent, Penn's engagement programs go back at least two decades. Joann Weeks, Associate Director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, discussed some of the lessons Penn had learned over that period of time. In particular, Weeks identified five key lessons: 1) provide leadership from the top; 2) integrate the work within the university's academic and corporate missions; 3) develop a comprehensive, integrated approach; 4) maintain democratic partnerships with

community groups; and 5) build links to the university's overall support structure. Regarding this last point, Weeks noted that the Netter Center had been incorporated as part of a university-wide fundraising campaign.

The third and final panel focused on policy. Martin Blank, President and Director of the Coalition for Community Schools, emphasized the importance of embedding the core principles of anchor institution work into broader educational leadership. Blank said that anchor institution principles are often included in small, new Federal programs such as Promise Neighborhoods, Choice Neighborhoods, Sustainable Communities, and full service community schools in the Department of Education. "But bigger bills don't have these principles," Blank cautioned.

David Cox, Executive Assistant to the President of the University of Memphis, emphasized the importance for universities to build coalitions with external partners. "We have lots of policy ideas," Cox noted, but "we need to identify tactics to identify interests of potential partners – identify the ways that can combine those interests and our interests."

Brian Murphy, President of De Anza College, a community college located near San José, California argued that the Anchor Institution Task Force needs to assume a "bully pulpit role … to speak about cities, to talk about social justice and democracy is really important. Murphy added there is a growing sense that the role of community colleges includes "the creation of community capacity – not simply [boosting the] economic capacity of individual students." De Anza, Murphy added is developing a "community organizing" curriculum and has set a goal of graduating 500 organizers a year.

Eleanor Sharpe, Director of Planning for the City of New Rochelle, New York, closed out the final panel. Sharpe, formerly an Associate Director at the Netter Center at the University of Pennsylvania, called on the Anchor Institution Task Force to reach out to community groups, "the people actually doing the work. That's an area for the Task Force to explore."

Following the last set of panels, the forum divided into two work groups — one focused on research and the other on public policy. Following the breakout sessions, the two Forum co-coordinators —David Maurrasse, President and Founder, Marga Incorporated and Ira Harkavy, Director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania—offered brief closing remarks. Maurrasse noted that the group had grown in its first year to nearly 100 members and would reach out to others in the year ahead. Harkavy highlighted the progress made to date. To imagine a gathering of this size of university leaders seeking to improve community outcomes a decade or two ago "would have been regarded as delusionary at best," Harkavy observed. The work going forward, Harkavy urged, was to foster "deep sustained significant partnerships" that can make a difference in local communities and to connect that work at the "local, regional and national" levels.

For more information on the Anchor Institutions Task Force, see:
http://www.margainc.com/html/coordinating_the_task_force.html