

From Gates to Engagement: A Ten-Year Retrospective of Widener University's Journey to Reclaim Its Soul and Fulfill Its Mission as a Leading Metropolitan University

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Abstract

In this reflective essay, we describe Widener University's 10-year transformation from a disengaged institution to an institution that has a metropolitan-focused mission vested in civic leadership, community engagement, and service-learning. We describe our journey to embed an expansive civic frame that includes concrete practices of pedagogy, institutional engagement, and community partnerships. We discuss the rewards and challenges of engaging in long-term, democratic, collaborative work, offering a unique insight about the role of a private, mid-size university in anchor-based engagement. We conclude that Widener's strategy for achieving comprehensive community and economic development is responsible for sustaining multi-anchor regional and local partnerships.

Introduction

*I*n this reflective essay, we reflect on Widener University (Widener) as a metropolitan university and on our comprehensive strategy for engagement—public education, community engagement, economic development, and leadership—which adds value and contributes to our sustainable partnerships. Widener is an anchor institution situated in an urban community. Therefore, cultivating and sustaining reciprocal partnerships is a priority we strive to embed in the scholarly work of our service-learning faculty, in our senior leadership, and in faculty members' community-based teaching. Our university-community partnerships are dynamic and complex; here we offer examples of institutional practices and outreach efforts that helped Widener become mission-driven, enhanced democratic partnerships inside and outside the university, and strengthened the human, physical, economic, and organizational capacity of a distressed city.

The literature on anchor-based institutions has examined the contributions of public and research-intensive universities; however, we offer a unique perspective showing the role a private,

mid-size, doctorate-granting university can play in a distressed and underserved community. This reflective essay examines the innovative ways Widener has assumed its role as an “agent of democracy” through partnerships in the regional community with parents, stakeholders (e.g., Salvation Army, United Way, Chester Boys and Girls Club), other anchor institutions, agencies, K–12 schools, and the local government since 2002 (*Sirianni & Friedland, 2005, p. 58*). We also deconstruct the three general roles or patterns—facilitator, leader, and convener—that evolve from anchor-based engagement and a metropolitan-focused mission, which were cited in a case study of 10 anchor institutions (*Axelroth & Dubb, 2010*).

A Citadel Mentality

In summer 2002, when I, James T. Harris, III, began my duties as the new president of Widener University, I was astonished by the attitude of the university regarding the City of Chester, the community where Widener’s main campus resides. During my first week on the job, two encounters with senior administrators at the university convinced me that Widener University not only needed to develop a better relationship with the local community, but also needed to rethink its mission, vision, and values.

On my first day, I was invited to a meeting with senior university administrators to discuss the feasibility of creating a gated community around the freshman quad with fencing and a single entrance to give the impression that Widener was a safe place for resident students. During the meeting, I was shown an architectural rendering of the fencing and gate. It was explained to me that although the university had a strong safety record, it was felt that the City of Chester had such a bad reputation for crime that Widener needed to make it appear it was taking action. At the end of the meeting, I tried to explain my position, which was that the university should not be using its resources to become a citadel from the local community and that we should seek ways to engage more fully the City of Chester. In response to that remark, one of the vice presidents replied, “Chester is a place that will suck Widener dry and is not worth wasting the university’s precious resources on.”

At the end of my first week, I was asked to visit a local newspaper office to meet the editor and publisher of the paper. I agreed to the meeting through our public relations office. When the day of the interview arrived, I was informed that a campus safety officer would drive me to the newspaper office and escort me into the building. When I mentioned that the newspaper building was less

than five blocks from my office and I could easily handle my own transportation, one senior administrator told me that she could not be held responsible for anything that happened to me that morning. I drove myself to the meeting and returned safely back to my office wondering what had happened to create such a hostile reaction to Chester among certain members of the university community.

Widener History

Widener University was founded in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1821. Originally named the Bullock School, it would later move to Chester, Pennsylvania, and become known as Pennsylvania Military College. In 1972, when the corps of cadets was retired, the school was renamed for a long-serving board member and became known as Widener College. In 1979 it earned university status, and by 2002 it had developed into an independent, multi-campus, doctorate-granting institution with three campuses serving approximately 6,500 students in two states.

The main campus in Chester had always attracted most of its student population from the greater Philadelphia metropolitan region. The undergraduate full-time students were, and continue to be, predominantly majority students, mainly from middle-class families. However, in recent years the university has changed its profile. Today, 26% of Widener undergraduates are considered minority students, and approximately 40% are Pell Grant eligible.

Over the years, Widener's predecessor institution, Pennsylvania Military College, was viewed as an important, if not particularly active, organization in the community. As a military college, it confined its involvement in the community to special events, such as when cadets would march through town to participate in a holiday parade or some local celebration. During the tumultuous times of the 1960s in Chester, crime rates grew and the tax base narrowed as the middle class migrated to the suburbs. Pennsylvania Military College was caught in a difficult situation. As a struggling institution with limited funding and no endowment, Pennsylvania Military College and then Widener needed to be careful how it invested its resources. As things began to deteriorate in Chester and concern over violence in the city grew, the university developed a citadel mentality, closing itself off from the troubles that lurked beyond its campus boundary.

Increasing violence in the city and a decline in quality of the public schools led to an exodus of the middle-class population. Faced with enormous problems, the city raised property taxes,

which caused more citizens to leave, exacerbating the situation. As part of that migration, more and more Widener faculty and staff members were choosing to live outside the city, driving an additional wedge between the university and the community. During Chester's more prosperous days, the majority of Pennsylvania Military College employees lived in the city; however, by 2002, less than 5% of Widener employees lived in the city limits. These factors, as well as other decisions made by the university, such as discouraging Widener faculty and students from volunteering in the public schools or crossing Interstate 95, which provided a buffer to the downtown, led local citizens to view Widener as an institution that was unconcerned about the issues facing the city. When I asked the mayor in 2002 how Chester citizens viewed the university, he stated: "Widener is viewed by most citizens as a dragon that eats up land that otherwise would be generating tax dollars for the city."

By the turn of the 21st century, Widener was viewed as neither engaged nor concerned with the problems facing Chester and had no plan in place to strategically engage the local community, with a few exceptions. Widener had created a partnership with the Crozer-Chester Medical Center to create a nonprofit corporation designed to attract high technology firms to the neighborhood between the two anchor institutions. Unfortunately, within a few years, that project failed.

In 2000, the Widener Center for Social Work Education partnered with the Chester Education Foundation to establish the Social Work Consultation Services. The Social Work Consultation Services articulated a dual mission: to improve the lives of low-income citizens in Chester, and to train competent and caring social work leaders (*Poulin, Silver, & Kauffman, 2007*). This new entity was well-received in the community, but the university administration did not support its creation, leaving the faculty to their own devices to raise money for the project.

By 2002, Widener was viewed as a university located in a bad neighborhood within one of the nation's most distressed cities, and Widener had no strategy in place for systematically addressing the significant issues facing Chester or engaging the community in any meaningful way to form democratic partnerships.

City of Chester

The City of Chester is located southwest of Philadelphia in Delaware County, Pennsylvania. It has a proud history dating back

to 1682, when William Penn renamed the small Swedish settlement in the new world “Chester.” Chester played a prominent role in the early colonies, and by the 20th century it had emerged as one of the nation’s leading industrial cities.

By the 1950s, the city’s population had swelled to 66,000, mostly due to the significant manufacturing that prospered in the area in the middle of the 20th century. During this time Martin Luther King, Jr. attended Crozer Theological Seminary, earning his degree in divinity and serving as an associate pastor in a local church. By the end of the first half of the century, Chester proudly proclaimed its slogan: “What Chester makes, makes Chester.”

However, over the next five decades, the city experienced significant economic difficulties as manufacturing and other industries moved away. By the time of the new millennium, the city faced the challenges of an urban environment in decline. As of 2010, the city population had dropped to 35,000, with 32.3% of all individuals categorized as living in poverty and 46.8% of the adults listed as outside the labor force (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2010*). From 2007-2011, the median family income in Chester was \$27,661, representing the lowest in the five-county area, including Philadelphia, and less than half that (\$63,677) of Delaware County (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2010*).

As problematic as economic growth and community development were in the City of Chester, the challenges facing the public schools were equally daunting. The Chester-Upland School District became one of the most troubled school districts in the nation. Out of 501 school districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the Chester-Upland School District has been ranked at or near the bottom for more than three decades. The ability of Widener or any other university to work with the school district in meaningful ways over the years was always compromised by the lack of consistency in district leadership. For example, from 2000 to 2010, at least eight different people served as superintendent.

Creating a Shared Vision for the Future

The educational philosopher John Dewey promoted the idea that theory and practice were not merely compatible, but that combining them was highly desirable, and that the greater aims of society could be accomplished only through participatory democracy. He emphasized that the major advancements in knowledge occurred primarily when the focus was on solving significant societal issues. These advancements most often occurred, according to

Dewey, when the learning in the classroom was continuous with the learning outside the school in the real world (*Dewey, 1916*).

Unfortunately, the real world both inside Widener and outside in Chester was in Dewey's time, and remains to this day complicated, unpredictable, and difficult to control. The past was filled with politics, corruption, shifting economic realities, and changing societal mores, all of which influenced how Widener interacted with or related to the Chester community. Developing democratic partnerships (as suggested by Dewey) with constituents outside Widener to advance knowledge and enhance student learning would be mutually beneficial to everyone involved. Forming such partnerships would prove to be challenging but was paramount if the university was to thrive in the 21st century.

Equally challenging was developing democratic partnerships within a university culture that was unaccustomed to strategic planning and meaningful dialogues about future directions, especially regarding greater interaction with the local community. Widener needed to rethink its relationship with Chester and develop a purposeful vision that would direct our work as a university.

For years, Widener functioned on an annual operating plan that drove the budgeting process. According to the records, by 2002 Widener had never engaged in a sustainable strategic planning process, and there were no long-term university plans in place. The mission statement was common and uninspiring. It essentially gave the university wide latitude to meet the demands of the marketplace and in no way included a focus on working in collaboration with the communities the university served.

In fall 2002, Widener established a university strategic planning committee made up mostly of faculty members who represented the myriad constituencies at the university. Prior to the kickoff of the planning work, I had met one-on-one with more than 100 trustees and faculty and staff members, as well as dozens of community and alumni leaders. In each meeting with internal constituents, I asked who they thought should serve on a strategic planning committee to direct the future of the university. Based on that feedback, 12 people were asked to serve. During those meetings, a clear consensus regarding the future developed. Although every person had his or her own ideas about the direction the university should take, almost everyone believed that Widener needed to engage the Chester community in a more meaningful and sustainable way. One thing was crystal clear from the early discussions: Widener needed to rethink its core mission.

The process of affirming or expanding an institutional mission should never be taken lightly, and, in the higher education tradition of democratic participation in decision making, changes in mission require input from all of the affected stakeholders. Many colleges and universities have successfully navigated these conversations by developing a discernment process in which representatives from various stakeholder groups are brought together to discuss and reflect on the mission of the institution and its relevance moving forward.

An example of including key stakeholders in a discussion about an institution's mission occurred at Widener in fall 2003. Widener held a "visioning" summit on its main campus and included board members, faculty members, administrators, students, community members, alumni, benefactors, and local elected officials to discuss what should be included in the university's mission and vision statements (Harris, 2011). The summit was one component of a 2-year process to incorporate feedback from key constituents regarding the core values of the university into a long-term plan that would chart the university's direction for the next decade.

The Strategic Planning Committee took the feedback from the summit and decided to create a dynamic new vision for Widener, starting with a new mission statement. The mission statement was written by a small group of faculty leaders, trustees (skillfully led by former chairman David Oskin), and key senior staff members. The mission, adopted by the Board of Trustees in December 2003, boldly stated that Widener would create "a learning environment where curricula are connected to societal issues through civic engagement," and would "contribute to the vitality and well-being of the communities we serve." The strategic plan had several goals, including one specifically stating that the university should address the metropolitan region's most pressing problems. The mission, strategic goals, and vision statement, titled *Vision 2015*, were approved by the board at its May 2004 meeting (Widener University Strategic Plan, 2004).

When the planning process was completed, more than 1,200 people had participated, representing all university constituent groups and including several local citizens. Dozens of meetings had taken place with elected officials, business leaders, clergy, community activists, members of the Chester-Upland School Board, and local neighbors. What is most interesting is that prior to this effort, the majority of the faculty had not been asked to participate in planning efforts or to offer opinions regarding the direction of the university. When we made efforts to engage a broader group

of faculty in part of the planning process, there was significant resistance from the faculty members elected to establish governance committees, primarily because they felt their authority was being undermined. In addition, some faculty members considered planning sessions that fully involved community members to be inappropriate and unnecessary.

The university planning process has evolved and now includes an annual planning day meeting at which faculty members elected to standing faculty committees are invited to an all-day budgeting workshop to decide which priorities identified in the strategic plan should be funded. The Board of Trustees also participates in its own assessment of the progress made on the plan at its annual fall retreat and receives strategic plan updates at every board meeting. Local community members provide input about the university's direction at least twice a year through a community advisory board that meets directly with me.

As part of the final planning document, the mission statement proclaims that Widener is a "leading metropolitan university" (*Widener University Strategic Plan, 2004*). It is important to note that its designation as a "metropolitan university" was a bold new direction for Widener. Most people had not heard of the term, and some saw it as possibly limiting the scope of the university's potential. However, most saw the potential for the university to make its mark nationally by focusing locally on important issues. Likewise, as the national higher education dialogue started focusing on "anchor institutions," it was easy for the Widener community to understand and adopt this new nomenclature. Over the past decade, the strategic plan's focus on the metropolitan region could be summarized as concerning three critical areas: community development, economic development, and public schools.

Everyone that participated in the planning process shared a common belief that Widener had the potential to achieve new levels of distinction academically, but it is important to note that, at the time of the initial plan, the prevailing attitude about the university among most Chester community leaders and many within the Widener academic community was skepticism. Most were skeptical that Widener had the ability to lead or even participate in a meaningful way in a renaissance in Chester, as well as the fortitude to take on some of the toughest issues, especially those dealing with the public schools, violence, and poverty.

The University as a Facilitator, Leader, and Convener

During the past few decades, many institutions across the country have become increasingly involved in local community issues that could broadly be placed in three categories: economic development, community development, and public education initiatives. Economic development generally refers to the work of universities in partnering with local municipalities, businesses, financial institutions, and federal and state agencies to encourage and promote the economic well-being of a region or city. These efforts may take many forms, including workforce development, purchasing, capital investments, neighborhood revitalization, technology transfer, and the creation of business incubators to encourage and support entrepreneurial ventures.

Community development typically refers to the efforts of a university to work with local, state, and federal agencies, as well as other community-based organizations, to address community problems that affect the living conditions (e.g., housing, violence, unemployment) of the community where the anchor is located. Likewise, public education initiatives often focus on how a university can partner with the local public school district(s) and other organizations to improve the quality of and access to education from kindergarten through high school (K–12). The ultimate aim of this work is to improve student learning outcomes in K–12 education, and to increase the percentage of students from underrepresented groups prepared for college-level study.

To help articulate the commitment to advancing these three broad issues as part of the mission of a university, the idea of being categorized as “metropolitan,” or “anchored” to a particular location, has gained momentum, especially among urban institutions. According to a recent report on university engagement published by the Democracy Collaborative, anchor institutions that wish to better the long-term viability of the communities where they reside can play many roles, but their work typically falls into three patterns: that of facilitator, leader, or convener (*Axelroth & Dubb, 2010*).

When a university acts as a facilitator, the institution works with local community organizations by connecting faculty members and students through academic service-learning opportunities and by facilitating conversations between various organizations, including the university, to build capacity to address societal issues (*Axelroth & Dubb, 2010*). Usually these institutions have supportive administrative and academic leadership but limited resources to

contribute as major investors in significant community development projects.

According to the Democracy Collaborative, a university is considered a leader when it attempts to address a specific societal issue, such as crime or failing schools, by taking a leadership role in the discussions and by making a significant financial commitment to the efforts (Axelroth & Dubb, 2010). In this situation, the university administration may take an active and visible role in addressing a particular issue, and use the university's influence to attract additional partners and resources.

A university is considered a convener when it builds alliances with local organizations, government agencies, or other partners to set an agenda focused on a long-term strategy to improve the living conditions in particular neighborhoods, establish community health goals, or encourage economic development (Axelroth & Dubb, 2010). In this scenario, the university views its role as a co-partner; it may invest its own resources to advance the initiative, but usually does so only if others are willing to work with the institution to solve the particular issue. Typically, universities who are conveners view their role in the community as part of the institution's mission, and they expect to play a major role in the agenda-setting of the local community.

Building Capacity: Widener as a “Facilitator”

Universities as facilitators focus their efforts on building capacity for community organizations and residents. By partnering with city and community organizations, these institutions are able to facilitate broader, collaborative efforts for community development. (Axelroth & Dubb, 2010, p. 7)

As is true for the other institutions highlighted in this issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, community engagement is an institutional priority of the president (Axelroth & Dubb, 2010). I established the Office for Community Engagement and Diversity Initiatives after my first year at Widener to reinforce my commitment to breaking down a fortress mentality and to signal the importance of community partnerships to my administration (Wilhite & Silver, 2004). Reporting directly to me, this office functions as a “facilitator” and assumes leadership to foster university and community partnerships with schools, business and civic leaders, and faith-based organizations; collaborates

with and supports faculty members engaged in service-learning and community-based research; broadens staff volunteerism in the community; and assists in the development of short- and long-term strategies that address the social, economic, and educational needs of the local community.

In 2005, a Civic Engagement Committee was created as a standing committee of the Widener University Board of Trustees. The Office for Community Engagement and Diversity Initiatives serves as the liaison to this committee, and is charged with the responsibility to promote and institutionalize a comprehensive engagement and outreach strategy across the university's four campuses. Chaired by Ira Harkavy, a Widener trustee and the director of the University of Pennsylvania's Netter Center for Community Partnerships, the committee serves as a catalyst to align Widener's institutional priorities to ensure sustainability of engagement. The committee functions in a consultative role, supporting the development of Widener's commitment to civic engagement—its practices and internal projects—toward the advancement of an anchor institution agenda.

In addition, Widener institutionalized an engagement agenda through the establishment of the President's Community Advisory Board, which comprises members of community organizations, public and private civic and faith-based groups, and governmental and business organizations. Functioning as a "think tank," the advisory board meets regularly with the president and university faculty and staff to discuss a broader community and economic development agenda, address concerns, and think strategically about building on the assets of the local neighborhoods.

Another example of Widener as a facilitator is the university's Academic Service-Learning Faculty Development Program, which underscores Widener's commitment to civic engagement and community-based learning. Since the program's inception in fall 2004, more than 50 service-learning faculty fellows have developed courses that employ service-learning, demonstrating the goal represented in Widener's strategic plan of embedding civic engagement as part of the undergraduate and graduate experience.

The Academic Service-Learning Faculty Development Program is intended to provide faculty members with resources and experiences that will enable them to do one of the following: convert a traditional course to an academic service-learning course, modify and enrich a course that is already being offered with an academic service-learning component, or develop a new

course employing an academic service-learning methodology. Faculty members from the Schools of Human Service Professions, Arts and Sciences, Business, Engineering, Hospitality Management, and Nursing have participated in the program. More than 80 different service-learning courses are taught at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Students fulfill approximately 15–20 hours of community service in each course. Most notably, more than 1,700 students have completed a service-learning course, and more than 50 community partners have worked with Widener students to provide rich, hands-on experiences. Almost half of the faculty fellows teach courses that link students with after-school programs and local schools to offer academic support to K–12 children. Faculty members who have completed the program continue to teach courses with a service-learning component, have had articles about their courses published or accepted for publication, and have presented at local, statewide, and national conferences.

Community Development Partnerships: Widener as “Leader”

Universities as leaders focus on the improvement of conditions in their immediate, challenged neighborhood with a significant investment of resources, engage in dialogue with the community, and set the community revitalization agenda with a focus on public health, K–12 education, and community development. (*Axelroth & Dubb, 2010, p. 9*)

Widener University has demonstrated leadership in leveraging institutional resources to contribute to the health and vitality of the City of Chester, with particular emphasis on community development. In 2000, the Social Work Counseling Services initiative was created to address the gap in the human service needs of residents in Chester. Social Work Counseling Services was developed collaboratively by the Center for Social Work Education and a local community partner, the Chester Education Foundation, to provide social work services to local grassroots organizations. The concept of a university-sponsored field internship emerged out of faculty interest in serving the local community, integrating the social work model of professional skills training through field internships with civic engagement models of service-learning as well as engaging the human capital of students in supporting revitalization efforts (*Poulin, Silver, & Kauffman, 2007*).

Currently, Social Work Counseling Services fulfills a dual mission of maximizing student learning opportunities and expanding the capacity of the human service infrastructure within the community. Social Work Counseling Services provides free direct social work services to local residents and free or low-cost capacity-building services to community-based human service and educational organizations, including the Widener Partnership Charter School. Clients are seen on site at partner agencies, in their homes, or in Chester community hospital program offices. Social Work Counseling Services also offers online counseling services for residents with mobility challenges. Teams of Social Work Counseling Services staff, students, interns, and Widener faculty fulfill a variety of social and behavioral health service gaps in Chester and provide more than 1,000 counseling hours to clients annually. Pro bono services include individual and family counseling, sexuality and trauma counseling, job readiness counseling, and individual counseling to women on welfare to help them become gainfully employed. Social Work Counseling Services also offers research and evaluation, staff development and training, and program development and planning services to local under-resourced organizations (*Widener University President's Honor Roll Application, 2010*).

Widener's Institute for Physical Therapy Education opened the Chester Community Physical Therapy Clinic (the Clinic) in fall 2009 primarily to provide the Chester community with physical therapy services and health and wellness education to address the health disparities of its residents. The clinic serves patients who are denied care from local physical therapy clinics due to their uninsured status or exhausted insurance benefits. The Clinic partners with community health clinics and local physical therapy practices to complement, not compete with, existing physical therapy services in Chester, and to identify clients who may benefit from the Clinic's services. The Clinic provides valuable health care services to underserved residents and fosters students who are able to apply their academic knowledge firsthand and who possess the strong character necessary to serve as leaders within their field. Furthermore, based on a new vision of clinic management with student leaders at the helm, the Chester Community Physical Therapy Clinic is a student-run clinic. Pennsylvania-licensed alumni physical therapists supervise students' on-site clinical care services (*Widener University President's Honor Roll Application, 2010*).

The Widener University School of Law provides opportunities for students to be exposed to the Public Interest Resource Center

on the Wilmington, Delaware, campus and to the Public Interest Initiative on the Harrisburg campus. Backed by its dedication to public service, Widener Law School's outstanding trial advocacy curriculum provides an effective training center for aspiring prosecutors, public defenders, and government attorneys. Through the Public Interest Resource Center, students are connected to public service opportunities, which are unpaid volunteer internships. In Harrisburg, Widener's School of Law offers students the rich rewards of being in the capital of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The students are introduced to state government, and have the chance to participate hands-on through the law and government program.

As the only law school in Delaware, Widener's School of Law on the Wilmington campus offers opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience working with Delaware's judiciary and legislature. Students volunteer with prosecutors and public defenders, legal aid offices, and other nonprofit and government agencies. Notably, the Wilmington campus offers these opportunities throughout the metropolitan region. Each year, law school students volunteer almost 50,000 community service hours in Widener's legal clinics, which include the Delaware Civil Law Clinic, Pennsylvania Civil Law Clinic, Harrisburg Civil Law Clinic, Environmental Law and Natural Resources Clinic, Pennsylvania Criminal Defense Law Clinic, and the Veterans Law Clinic.

Public Education Partnerships:Widener as “Convener”

Universities as conveners have the opportunity to make strategic choices to engage in neighborhood revitalization while leveraging external resources towards economic development and capacity-building of particularly challenged neighborhoods. (*Axelroth & Dubb, 2010, p. 10*)

Of all of Chester's social and economic challenges, education persists as the most acute; the need for creative, collaborative action was clear. Chester had and continues to have one of the highest dropout rates and the highest percentage of adults 25 years and older without a high school degree in the state, as well as low numbers of college-bound students. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, only 63% of students in the Chester-Upland School District graduated from high school in 2009–2010, compared to 90% in the state.

Over the past decade, Widener has fostered a strong commitment to university-school partnerships. As one of our most successful areas of engagement, our public education partnerships exist on a continuum of engagement, including tutoring and mentoring, service-learning, teacher education field experiences, academic enrichment, college-preparation programs, and teacher professional development. Widener provides these substantial resources to the entire school district in the community, which comprises six kindergarten through eighth grade schools and three high schools.

Following the adoption of the university's new civic mission, Widener's role as "convener" emerged to respond to the pressing needs of a district identified as the worst-performing in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Of the 501 school districts in the state, the Chester-Upland School District ranks 500 in student achievement. The university lacked the political support and financial strength to contribute to a comprehensive district-wide reform strategy, but strong senior administrative leadership led to the creation of a university-sponsored charter school. This community development initiative aligns with Widener's mission of promoting access and high academic achievement.

To provide a desperately needed educational alternative for children, the university partnered with families and residents in fall 2006 to launch the Widener Partnership Charter School—the first university-sponsored charter school in Pennsylvania. As the "convener," Widener viewed parents and caregivers as co-participants in pledging their support for the mission and vision of the charter school. Moreover, this collaboration involves joint goals and reliance on each other to accomplish them (*Kezar, 2007*). According to Axelroth and Dubb (*2010*), sustainable campus-community partnerships involve inclusive planning processes that embed transparency. The School of Human Service Professions coordinated strategic outreach with local organizations, parents, caregivers, and residents through town meetings, focus groups, and other activities to ensure that information regarding the school's programs, admissions policies, and curricula were widely disseminated to elicit feedback from all local community constituents.

This kindergarten through fifth grade charter school serves 300 students and their families who are drawn from the population of the Chester-Upland School District, which characterizes many of the problems endemic in urban education, such as school dropout rates above state averages, low percentages of college-bound students, and some of the lowest standardized test scores in the state.

One of the distinguishing features of the school is its focus on partnering with parents. The school engages parents and caregivers as partners in its holistic approach, providing a forum for family participation in its operation. Interdisciplinary teams of Widener faculty members and graduate students in education, social work, clinical psychology, physical therapy, and nursing work with the children and their families on an ongoing basis to promote social, emotional, and intellectual development. In addition, Widener education faculty members and undergraduate and graduate students work with the principal and teachers to plan and implement a holistic, rigorous, standards-based curriculum that includes art, music, and foreign language. The Widener Partnership Charter School provides multiple opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students, including field experiences, service-learning, clinical internships, and student-teacher placements.

Statewide assessment test results each year demonstrate the success of the Widener Partnership Charter School in meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP). In 2009, 76% of its third graders scored at proficient or advanced levels in reading, and 70% of Widener Partnership Charter School students scored at proficient or advanced levels in math. By comparison, the average for third-fifth grades in the Chester-Upland School District was 46% for reading and 54% for math at the same levels.

The Widener Partnership Charter School was developed as a long-term strategy to address the educational needs of the community. However, immediate needs existed regarding the students currently enrolled in the Chester-Upland high schools. In response to the immediate need to improve the percentage of Chester-Upland School District college-bound students, Widener convened the presidents of five local colleges and universities to discuss what they might do collaboratively. The result was the Chester Higher Education Council, which was created to meet the critical educational needs of the children and families of Chester. Today, the Chester Higher Education Council is a 501(c)(3) association of six colleges and universities: Cheyney University, Delaware County Community College, Neumann University, Penn State Brandywine, Swarthmore College, and Widener University. This consortium is unique because it consists of a historically Black college, a community college, a faith-based institution, a satellite campus of a large public university, an elite liberal arts school, and an independent metropolitan university, respectively, and hence represents a distinct model of collaboration. Situated in southeastern Pennsylvania, these six institutions of higher education offer a comprehensive

and balanced approach to meeting the educational needs of the Chester community and simultaneously enriching its surrounding communities.

The Chester Higher Education Council coordinates activities among member institutions through regular meetings of their presidents, affording each institution the increased opportunity to leverage time, talent, and resources effectively. The College Access Center of Delaware County, which opened in February 2009, represents the first major initiative instituted by the Chester Higher Education Council. The United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and United Way of Southeast Delaware County are also integral partners of the College Access Center. The Chester Higher Education Council and its partners provide valuable college admission, advising, academic, and financial aid guidance in support of the College Access Center's primary goal of increasing the number of successful college graduates.

The mission of the College Access Center is to provide underserved residents with programs and activities to enhance their access to and success in postsecondary education. The College Access Center offers free services to students from middle school through 12th grade and to adults who choose to pursue or complete a college degree. Resources such as SAT/ACT testing, advising, and financial aid guidance are provided by leveraging the institutions' resources. Located in a building owned by Widener, the College Access Center is equipped with a computer laboratory and resource room for residents to research a broad range of higher education opportunities. It also includes space for individual and group advising and workshops. More than 1,000 youths and adults were served by the center in its first year.

One last example of Widener as a convener is the Widener Center for Violence Prevention. This center emerged out of the Delaware County Violence Prevention Collaborative as a shared project between Widener and Crozer-Keystone Health System to address a critical community concern: violence. Over the years, violence in the City of Chester has escalated so much that the mayor of Chester has had to declare a state of emergency during certain times of the year due to the ongoing violence.

The Widener Center for Violence Prevention opened in fall 2009 to provide leadership among violence prevention organizations, to enhance interagency efforts, and to ensure effective service delivery. The collaborative includes more than 40 community partners, such as the U.S. Attorney's Office, Delaware County's District

Attorney's Office and Juvenile and District Courts, Upper Darby and Chester Police Departments, schools, and social service agencies. Upon this sound foundation, the Widener Center for Violence Prevention has developed expeditiously to divert approximately 40 youth from the criminal justice system via the Juvenile Screening Project. Working with the local police department and Juvenile Court, the Widener Center for Violence Prevention provided professional training on gang prevention (with 183 attendees) and the juvenile justice system (with 140 attendees), and hosted a Youth Anti-Violence Summit (with more than 600 youth attendees). Students and faculty are integrally involved with the Widener Center for Violence Prevention: Communications majors develop training videos, environmental science students use GIS (geographic information system) for asset mapping, criminal justice students and faculty conduct research, and social work graduate students take Practice with Communities and Organizations, a service-learning course in which they learn community mobilization, needs assessment, and coalition-building, integrating academic content with service.

A Final Reflection on 10 Years

In reflecting on Widener's journey, the success of our engagement over the past decade can be attributed to our multi-anchor democratic partnerships. During the last 10 years, we have learned that universities are not positioned to resolve poverty in distressed and underserved communities within a vacuum. Forming strategic and democratic partnerships with other anchor institutions, such as regional institutions of higher education, local hospitals and health care centers, faith-based organizations, community leaders (e.g., mayor, elected officials), and corporate investors has been integral to community development and the economic revitalization of the city. As an anchor institution, Widener is inextricably bound to the health and vitality of the Chester community and has instituted a place-based approach to ensure that existing institutional resources have the greatest impact (*Axelroth & Dubb, 2010*). This has been achieved by making substantial investments in securing funding and leveraging resources to address poverty, urban education, crime, local capacity building, and scholarly engagement.

Along the way, Widener has learned much from other institutions across the nation. Our membership in the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, as well as our affiliation with the Anchor Institutions Task Force, has positioned Widener to learn best practices from more than 100 other institutions whose core

values are (1) collaboration and partnership, (2) equity and social justice, (3) democracy and democratic practice, and (4) commitment to place and community. As we move forward with assessing the impact of our community-engagement practices, data will guide Widener's efforts to leverage our assets and engage community stakeholders in deeper strategic conversation focused on opportunities, challenges, and possible steps forward (*Anchor Institutions Task Force, 2010*).

Prior to 2002, Chester was widely perceived by the Widener administration as only a liability for the university. For decades, Widener experienced a distant, and sometimes strained, relationship with the community of Chester, which fostered distrust among local residents. The creation of a new mission and identity and the development of strategic partnerships have enabled Widener to address the pressing needs of its metropolitan region, allocate the investment of human and fiscal resources, and deliver sustainable and value-added civic engagement initiatives. In 2002, the mayor described Widener as a liability to the community. Fast-forward to 9 years later, and, during the dedication of a new academic building in spring 2011, the same mayor spoke about the substantial impact the university has had on Chester. In his words: "I don't know where Chester would be without Widener."

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About the Authors

James T. Harris III became the ninth president of Widener University in 2002. Under Harris' leadership, Widener aspires to be a national model for how a university uses its resources to develop a robust learning environment for its students while addressing the most pressing needs of the metropolitan areas it serves. Harris has been asked to serve in several local, state, and national leadership roles, including as chair of the board of directors for the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania (AICUP) and on the Board of Trustees for the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). Harris has been the recipient of many awards and honors, including the Chief Executive Leadership Award from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) District II, and the Citizen of the Year award from the Delaware County Chamber of Commerce in recognition of his contributions to the local community. Harris earned degrees from the University of Toledo, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, and The Pennsylvania State University.

Marcine Pickron-Davis is chief community engagement and diversity officer at Widener University, and reports directly to the president. In this position, Pickron-Davis serves as the university liaison and the president's delegate to build community relations and strategic partnerships with the city of Chester. Pickron-Davis oversees the Office for Community Engagement and Diversity Initiatives, which is responsible for fostering university and community partnerships with schools,

business and civic leaders, and faith-based organizations; collaborates with and supports faculty engaged in service-learning and community-based research; broadens staff volunteerism in the community; and assists in the development of short- and long-term strategies that address the social, economic, and educational needs of the local community. She earned her bachelor's degree from The Pennsylvania State University, her master's of social work degree from Temple University's School of Social Administration, and her doctor of philosophy degree in educational leadership from the University of Pennsylvania.

