

## **North Carolina State University: Building Partnerships with Urban Communities**

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### **Abstract**

The challenges that face urban communities—health and well-being, neighborhood quality, economic and human capital development—are multifaceted and require interdisciplinary engagement of university and community leaders. This article explores the North Carolina State University approach to engaging, supporting, and learning from the urban communities that surround the university while building bridges between the university's colleges, campus, and field faculty.

### **Introduction**

The institution of higher education in the twenty-first century faces a changing society and rapidly changing world. Leaders in higher education began many years ago framing the discussion for a new academy: more engaged in the environment in which it resides, reflective of the diversity of issues and stakeholders, and true to the mission and vision of public education. Ernest Boyer noted that the need was to do far more than expand the reach of the institution, even as universities would be required to maintain their integrity as institutions of scholarship. Boyer called for new millennium universities that would practice a scholarship of discovery, teaching, integration, and application (1990). This integrated scholarship would occur within communities of place, interest, and practice built on the twentieth-century model of agricultural extension.

In 1999 the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities challenged the nation's public institutions of higher education to refocus on the needs of the nation. Universities would need to be responsive, respectful of their partners, academically neutral, and accessible; they would also integrate engagement into the institutional mission, internally coordinate service activities, and commit sufficient resources when partnering. Institutions would become more engaged in their communities, meaning that they would redesign their teaching, research, and extension and service functions to become even more sympathetically and productively involved with community, recognizing various ways of defining community (*Kellogg Commission*

1999). This mandate has resulted in a continuous journey toward scholarly engagement by institutions across the nation.

Land-grant institutions that included the formal extension mandate in the twenty-first century would also require a new view of the community-university relationship. Scholars recognized that extension and engagement were distinctively different concepts. The Futures Taskforce of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) released “Extension in Transition: Bridging the Gap between Vision and Reality,” (1987) which identified four themes critical to maintaining the relevance of university extension functions in the future:

- Focus attention on critical societal issues
- Be adaptive and flexible in structure, staffing, and funding
- Be future-oriented in planning
- Draw on broader university resources in program delivery  
(Ilvento 1997)

Bonnen (1998, 29) suggests that the land-grant university in a more mature form would be devoted to science and education in the service of society by “educating and training the professional cadres of an industrial, increasingly urban, society; providing broad access to higher education, irrespective of wealth or social status; working to improve the welfare and social status of the largest groups in society, often among the most disadvantaged.” Bromley and Kent (2006) more deliberately challenged land-grants to view the environment differently, noting that the physical and economic environment of the country has become increasingly urban. Universities’ response to this new environment should reflect the same commitment and vigor they focused on agricultural and industrial economies with the inception of land-grant agricultural experiment stations and extension over a hundred years earlier.

Urban universities, which are the most impacted by transitioning approaches to scholarship, are surrounded by relatively high proportions of low-income and ethnic minority residents. If they contribute to positive impacts on surrounding neighborhoods, they also improve institutional image, enhance the image of their city, recruit more and better students, and attract more research grants, contracts, and donations. The institutional cultural and ethnic diversity will improve and contribute to recruiting more and better urban minority students and more minority faculty.

The most noteworthy manifestation of the commitment to change is perhaps the 2006 Carnegie elective designation of community engagement in two domains: curricular engagement and outreach and partnerships (*Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching* 2007). Each of these focused directives points to a more substantive view of engaged scholarship and a more diverse view of university customers and partners in urban communities.

### **North Carolina and NCSU in Context**

North Carolina is not isolated from the changing world. The state represents the changing South and the changing face of academia. North Carolina is one of the nation's fastest-growing urban environments; it is projected to become the seventh most populous state in the nation by 2010. Its public universities in urban communities contribute in deliberate and dynamic ways to the state's social, environmental, and economic prosperity.

The people in North Carolina cities are younger and more ethnically and culturally diverse than in the remainder of the state. The average person in North Carolina cities is thirty-three years of age, as compared to the average age of thirty-nine in rural communities. Urban citizens are two to three times more likely to be foreign born than the state's rural citizens and three times as likely to speak English as a second language. North Carolina urban residents are better educated, but poorer and own far less real property than those in rural communities. Urban residents are less likely to own their own home, with home ownership more than 22 percent more frequent in rural communities than in the cities. Urban residents are more likely to have attended college; however, the rate of poverty in urban communities is higher. The cities of the Research Triangle region of North Carolina, Raleigh and Durham, reflect best the demographics of urban communities. Economic growth is progressive and the region is growing faster than all other regions of the state, with a population fast approaching over one million.

North Carolina State University (NCSU) is uniquely a resident of the community in the state's second largest and capital city, and it is one of the state's two land-grant universities. The university reflects the diversity of the city. The home of ten different schools and colleges, the campus is the educational home for over 31,000 students. White students constitute 76 percent of the student population, with African American students making up the largest minority population. A significant number of minority students represent over 63 other nationalities and ethnic groups.

Faculty focused on teaching, research, and outreach number 2,040. Over 300 field faculty offer opportunities to build the relationships needed for effective engagement through Cooperative and Industrial Extension. Field faculty in urban communities represent a broad range of expertise, but their most important abilities are the process skills needed for outreach.

The university has committed to creating an environment of authentic diversity and scholarly engagement in its urban environment. The faculty commitment to six critical responsibilities influences creative scholarship that is valued and rewarded by NCSU. Scholarly contributions must reflect an appropriate mix of these six realms, both in fact and in faculty perceptions (*NCSU n.d.*). These six realms of faculty responsibility represent the principal criteria for decisions about reappointment, promotion, and tenure:

- Teaching and mentoring of undergraduate and graduate students
- Discovery of knowledge through discipline-guided inquiry
- Creative artistry and literature
- Technological managerial innovation
- Extension and engagement with constituencies outside the university
- Service in professional societies and within the university itself (*NCSU n.d.*)

### ***Beginning an Urban Initiative***

The university chose to develop within the Office of Extension, Engagement and Economic Development more focused attention on the urban community within which it resides. Such a focus is reciprocally critical to the success of both the university and the community. The broad concerns of urban communities are the most appropriate place for the university to begin its expanded effort to be a community partner. In 2006 a core planning committee began the exploratory process by focusing on in-reach and out-reach.

#### **In-reach**

A university the size of NCSU faces challenges in recognizing where its resources reside and in communicating that information to its faculty. This is a unique challenge for NCSU, with staff housed in county extension centers, research stations, and business centers

all across the state. Applying for and achieving the Carnegie classification in Curricular and Community Engagement in 2006 was seen as a first step toward integrating improved service to our urban community into the university's commitment to extension and engagement. The university joined and actively participated in the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities and the National Outreach Scholarship Conference. Participation in national discussions helped the faculty to conceptualize an NCSU Urban Initiative that reflected the best in theory and practice. The 2007 NCSU All Extension Conference served as an introduction of the urban focus to the campus. The vice chancellor of Extension, Engagement and Economic Development invited 136 campus and field faculty identified by university deans and directors to participate in a series of Campus Cafes focused on addressing and encouraging dialogue between the faculty in eight colleges and including field faculty working in the Raleigh and Durham communities prior to the conference. Faculty members were asked to identify and consider work in three critical areas of need in the two cities:

- Improving urban health and well-being
- Strengthening communities and neighborhood quality of life
- Strengthening pre-kindergarten–college education

Campus Cafes offered faculty opportunities to learn about the outreach and research activities of others on the campus and discuss new partnerships. Cafes were designed for small discussion groups of twenty-five to thirty participants guided by questions of content and vision. The participants, who included faculty, field faculty, and community members, were asked to describe their current activities in the city, discuss their interest in future activities, and engage others in the two cities.

### **Out-reach**

Cooperative Extension and campus faculty began to identify and inventory partnerships and collaborations currently in place. Outreach and engagement grants were funded to encourage reciprocal partnerships between faculty and community members. Faculty and community members identified infrastructure needs for continued urban community engagement in research, teaching, and extension. Community members, faculty members, and often faculty from other universities are convened around specific issues and interests to initiate relationships and later identify mutual interests around which sustainable programs can be created.

## Results

Of the 136 faculty and staff invited to this initiative, 73 in 8 colleges identified activities in Raleigh or Durham. Of these, 35 percent engaged in research or outreach activities that enhance community health and well-being. Community partners included parks and recreation departments, senior citizen councils, county and city government, neighborhood organizations, churches, public health and social service departments, other universities and public hospitals, and Latino community action groups. The Colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences; Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences; Design; Management; and Natural Resources were involved in health-related outreach initiatives. Issues being addressed by faculty included HIV/AIDS prevention, family development, health disparities and health care access, domestic violence in the Latino community, nutrition education, adult caregiving, social worker licensure and professional development, intergenerational interventions or children and family, older adult health, crime and safety analysis, and access to parks and open space for adults and youth. We also learned that while we were involved as professionals in intra-mural and interscholastic sports, faculty members as community members were key leaders and partners in a variety of activities, such as providing leadership of a Latino extracurricular soccer league. Programs were at times located in the same physical location, but had little or no awareness of the potential for collaboration.

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Further responses indicated that 32 percent of the faculty were involved in research, teaching, or outreach that strengthened pre-kindergarten through college education. The College of Education had significant numbers of faculty involved in this initiative, as one might anticipate; however, other colleges were also actively engaged in education-focused work. The Colleges of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences; Physics and Mathematical Sciences; Natural Resources; Engineering; and Agriculture and Life Sciences all had faculty engaged in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade education. Activities included middle school curriculum design, middle school educators technology and global positioning activity, Kids Together in Parks, robotics exploration with the Engineering

school, and a variety of exchanges and interactions with the Physics and Mathematical Sciences College through its Science House Initiatives with students and teachers.

In addition, 33 percent of the faculty representing six colleges were involved in community capacity-building activities. Faculty in the Colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences; Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences; Design; Education; Management; and Natural Resources participated in a variety of outreach and research activities in the following areas: energy conservation, emerging Latino English communities, neighborhood revitalizations, green space and greenways, public safety leadership, leadership development, gang prevention and intervention, affordable and sustainable housing, building nonprofit capacity, faith-based community work, and evaluating mixed impact housing.

### **Lessons Learned**

North Carolina State University faculty have a pervasive interest in outreach and engagement with the urban community in which the university resides. While there are varying paradigms of what extension and engagement might be, the campus has an opportunity to build on the culture within all the colleges that promotes and rewards extension and engagement. Recognition and development are dependent upon clearly defining the current state and the expected benchmarks. It was recognized that an interactive database of current activities, accessible to faculty and community, would be helpful; however, the quantity and quality of the work required to achieve this task could not be readily ascertained.

Helping faculty connect to expertise in other colleges was seen as a real benefit for both field faculty and those on campus. Extension access functions are often not understood by campus faculty, and extension faculty often do not understand access functions of teaching and research faculty. Convening communities of interest will need to be more systematic, and will need to include more intensive strategies for engaging community members. These are achievable tasks that frame the work to be completed by the urban initiative.

### **Implications and Future Questions**

North Carolina State serves as one anchor among many in an extremely resource-rich community. Building reciprocal and authentic relationships within this urban environment can benefit not only the university, but the region. The success of the Research

Triangle Region is a direct result of the willingness to partner. A system for needs assessment and benchmarking that responds to the needs of the community and the campus is important to future work. As a campus we will continue to study the design of frameworks that encourage and facilitate interdisciplinary work internally and externally. The broad educational community of colleges, universities, and community colleges in the region is an asset to the community. A reexamination of relationships with institutions who are often seen as competitors will make it possible to build on the assets of all partners for the greater benefit of the region and the institutions.

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