Enhancing Higher Learning through Engagement in Community and Human Development

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Abstract

Universities are structurally constrained from engaging in community development. Traditional concepts of teaching, research, and service make it difficult to focus on the needs of the community as a motivating force in the higher learning process. Historically black public universities, however, may have fewer such constraints than large private institutions. In any event, there is great need in the world and all institutions must respond to that need according to their ability. Universities have great ability to effect positive change should they choose to use it. Perhaps a different model, where learning relies on the praxis of thought and action, could simultaneously produce better students and create better communities.

Introduction

The idea of university-based community development is in many ways an oxymoron. The university is built on the concepts of teaching, research, and service. This has traditionally meant that its realm is that of generating and disseminating "knowledge," much of which may not be of immediate practical utility. The notion of service is usually limited to university committee work or voluntary or required student community assignments. It is not required that its product be connected to addressing the life challenges of everyday people.

The work of community building is different. It deals with "knowledge" for the purpose of helping people survive or better the quality of their lives. It is not a classroom exercise or theoretical study. It is a roll up your sleeves, learn by sharing process that involves a commitment over time. It requires acceptance of a truism that is difficult for powerful institutions to accept in relationships with the much less powerful, that in a relationship each partner has as much to learn as it has to teach. Acceptance of such a fact is difficult for any large institution, and perhaps even more so in an institution whose culture is characterized by scholars who are experts in their fields.

This article suggests that the needs of the poor and desperate are a universal responsibility, and that even institutions should respond to that need according to their ability. Despite their traditional role, institutions of higher learning have a great ability to engage in the community betterment process should they choose to do so. In addition, by experientially enhancing the learning enterprise they are better able to achieve their stated mission of teaching, research, and service. They will also create a better student and better community in the process.

The questions of institutional constraints, the value and challenges of experientially enhanced learning and appropriate expected outcomes, will be discussed from two perspectives. The first perspective is that of a private research university where I worked as a senior administrator for eighteen years. The second is that of a public university that has recently attained research status and is also an HBCU (historically black college or university) where I have served as president for six years.

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This article takes as its working thesis that large, wealthy institutions, such as universities, are structurally constrained from fulfilling their potential as community improvement agents. It also asks whether identifiable differences between two different types of universities may affect the level of institutional constraints.

The first university is a relatively wealthy private university in a much less wealthy city. The financial resources of its board, students, and immediate neighborhood contrast greatly with the people and neighborhoods, in some cases public housing developments, that begin a mile in either direction from the campus. During most of my tenure there I observed very little involvement with the community betterment process, whether on an individual or institutional basis.

In my fourteenth year of employment and at my urging, the university agreed to a highly unusual arrangement with the local and federal governments. The local public housing authority and its facilities were known as the worst in America. An arrangement was made to avoid the embarrassment of a federal takeover of the local responsibility to provide safe, decent, and sanitary housing to almost forty thousand poor people.

The university was given management authority over the city's public housing in exchange for a federal grant to the university in excess of $12 million over five years. The funds were to be used to create university and community development programs in public housing. The venture was portrayed publicly as a service to the community. However, at least part of the university's motivation for accepting such an unusual responsibility was the considerable indirect cost recovery it realized. Ostensibly 50 percent of my time was assigned to meet the university's obligations under the agreement.

The university initiative had three components, all of which were housed in a university center that I headed. The first was the public housing management; the second was the "academic" programs in the areas of teaching, research, and service; and the third was service programs for and with the public housing residents. The idea was to create a synergy among that three that would allow for the generation of knowledge informed by involvement in the community betterment process.

The "academic" component was headed by a respected member of the sociology department. His first challenge from the faculty was that his funding came from a university center headed by someone who was not a member of the academy. His colleagues saw this as somehow compromising academic freedom and integrity. His second challenge was that the "applied research" encouraged by the center was not the work of choice for tenure and promotion at a research university. His third challenge was the necessary interaction between two totally different worlds to enable the research and learning. His fourth challenge was that in order for the research and learning to have social legitimacy and scholarly accuracy, the concept of academic service had to be reconstituted as something other than a career-advancing or institutionally self-serving activity.

In short, he was up against a set of university cultural norms under which the primary motivation for working in public housing was not to better the community, a necessary precondition to university-based community development, but rather to utilize nontraditional community access for traditional career and institutional benefit.

While the vision for the endeavor was to create an opportunity for a new type of learning and a more relevant, responsible institution, the university flowed to a different current. Good things were done for a while. There was a unique intercultural flow in both directions. Some people got jobs and houses. A detailed intervention database that tracked one hundred families was established. Data

was generated and articles examining the surface of the experiment were written. There were even tutoring programs and a community garden tended in the housing development by students from the university.

However, there were other, less obvious but more unfortunate consequences that help to better contextualize the entire venture. One, as an example, involved a community leader at the housing development where most of the university's efforts were focused. Mrs. K (as I will call her) had been the first resident on a public housing board in the nation. Her development was the first to have a community center. Nothing happened in her neighborhood that she didn't know about. Most of the university folks considered her a charlatan; the residents considered her a leader. I liked her, and I believe she trusted me.

The university folks approached her, for lack of a better term, much as colonial missionaries: partly with pity and partly with disdain. They attempted to buy her allegiance by giving her a consulting contract. Mrs. K had diabetes and hypertension and was on regular dialysis. Medicaid paid her bills. The consulting contract stopped all that. It also caused complications with the Internal Revenue Service and her social services support network. The endeavor that generated career- and reputation-enhancing research also led to destruction of the social and financial support upon which Mrs. K's well-being depended.

The above observations are made not to impugn individual behavior, but to note how university institutional requisites worked against the needs of the community to be served. I do not think that any of the noted actions were consciously malicious. They were more likely the most efficient route to the access that was sought for the purpose of generating research.

Indeed, even though I grew up near public housing and worked extensively with poor people's organizations, and the head of the residents' component was a former civil rights organizer, I have no doubt that on more than one occasion our actions served the university even though the needs of the community may have dictated a different approach. The need to collect a paycheck can motivate anyone to rationalize almost anything.

The upshot of the entire experience is that ten years after the work in public housing commenced, there is little if anything remaining that one would consider university or community improvement. The focus public housing community is now only empty buildings, Mrs. K has passed away, and the university

has no service-learning or community-based programs in public housing. The unique hundred-family database, which tracked every intervention and outcome for each family member, has also been forgotten.

I became president of the comparison university in 2000. Many of the ideas and lessons learned from my prior university-based community development work came with me. The institutions are different in ways other than their historical underpinnings. The second institution is public, it is the only university in a smaller city, and for the most part the faces of the people who work here are the same color as the faces of the people who populate the challenged neighborhood of which it is a part.

Our public posture from the outset was that the progress of the university was tied directly to the betterment of the community around it. It was a declaration of necessity. Indeed, the vast majority of the ministers and public employees, including schoolteachers, social workers, and other public servants in the surrounding city, were educated here. The university has for a very long time been the primary and preferred employer for the local African American populace.

Interestingly, as we moved into the community betterment arena some institutional challenges were the same as at the first institution. One example was the education initiative. Through a sizable grant from the federal government we were able to comanage our neighborhood K-12 schools. Despite the obvious opportunity to generate knowledge and better both our community and our college of education, the involvement of the latter was much less than enthusiastic. The ostensible reason was that the initiative was housed in the president's office and not in the academic college.

Some of the other cultural norms of higher education are present as well. For example, because this institution is an emerging research entity, the bias toward basic research has a growing presence in its tenure and promotion process. There is also the sense that there is little to learn from the members of the surrounding community who are not also members of the academy.

On the other hand, while it is too soon to tell if the community improvement work of my present institution will become institutionalized over time, for the moment there are encouraging signs. With minimal seed funding we were able to create a service-learning requirement that is now widely accepted by the students. The service-learning program places students in government and

nonprofit agencies; it recently won a national award for the work performed in connection with Hurricane Katrina.

Other community initiatives are in the beginning stages but seem promising and increasingly well accepted. Two neighborhood reconstruction initiatives have started, one of which has the potential to be a national "new urbanism" model. A healthy lifestyles initiative is in place and growing in popularity. In addition, the public school initiative, which met early resistance, is now the pride of the university and meeting all of its stated goals.

It is difficult to know for certain why, at least in the early stages, some community development activity seems more acceptable at my present university. First, there is a vast difference between the bully pulpit of the president as opposed to that of a senior administrator. There are probably historical and cultural differences between historically white and historically black, public and private, research and emerging research universities that are at play and require further exploration.

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In any event, it seems clear that we live in a greatly challenged world. The level of human suffering and unaddressed need is such that no individual, no institution can be afforded the luxury of inaction. All are required to respond according to their ability, and modern universities are large, powerful institutions with great ability to effect positive change now, and in the future through the graduates they produce.

Perhaps a better model is needed, one that minimizes institutional constraints against the university's direct involvement in community and human development. Institutional missions can include a commitment to the underserved. Presidential vision can embrace community relationships. The learning process can incorporate experiential enlightenment. The faculty reward system can facilitate a focus on community and human betterment.

Knowledge for its own sake is important, but a model that incorporates the praxis of thought and action is more appropriate to the times. We should think then do, learn from what we have done, think on it some more, and then go back and do it better. Such a learning process generates a deeper understanding of human needs,

educates better leaders, and builds healthy communities in the process. In other words, it would ensure that the idea of university-based community development would no longer be an oxymoron, but rather part of higher learning's reason for being.

About the Author

• Ronald Mason, Jr., assumed the presidency of Jackson State University on February 1, 2000, bringing with him more than twenty years of experience in higher education, community development, and law. He is chief executive officer of the only university based in the largest metropolitan area and capital city of the state of Mississippi. At the time of his appointment by the Board of Trustees, Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, Mason was serving as the founder and executive director of the National Center for the Urban Community at Tulane and Xavier Universities in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Prior to his work in urban issues and community development, Dr. Mason enjoyed a successful eighteen-year tenure at Tulane University that encompassed several positions, including senior vice president, general counsel, and vice president for finance and operations.

Dr. Mason has been involved in numerous public service and professional activities, including membership on the boards of the American Council on Education, National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, Office of Postsecondary Education, and the White House Board of Advisors for Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Dr. Mason also serves on the boards of the Thurgood Marshall Scholarship Fund, National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), Quality Education for Minorities (QEM), Jackson Medical Mall Foundation, Mississippi Technology Alliance, and Mississippi Authority for Educational Television.

He is a native of New Orleans, Louisiana, and received his B.A. and J.D. degrees from Columbia University in New York City. He is a graduate of the Harvard Institute of Educational Management and the recipient of the Mayor's Medal of Honor from the City of New Orleans and the Martin Luther King Lifetime Achievement Award from Dillard, Loyola, Tulane, and Xavier Universities.

In 1996, the U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development appointed Dr. Mason to serve as a Federal Monitor of the Public Housing Authority in New Orleans. This role afforded Dr. Mason the opportunity to establish innovative partnerships between institutions of higher education, grassroots community programs, and federal initiatives that eventually

grew into the National Center for the Urban Community at Tulane and Xavier Universities.

He is married to the former Belinda DeCuir and has one daughter, Nia, and two sons, Jared and Kenan.