

Just Good Business: Community Development *within* Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

Largely absent from college and university engagement efforts are the community members who work on our own campuses, often those in the lowest-paid positions, even though they are from the communities the campus purports to serve. This article represents the results of a project that scanned the civic microcosm of our colleges and universities to identify these underserved groups and their needs. Topics discussed include campus models already in existence, challenges facing this type of engagement, and strategies for linking efforts to aid this “community within” to campus civic engagement.

Introduction

Much attention has been paid to the ways colleges and universities engage with their external communities. However, institutional engagement efforts often overlook the community members who work on our own campuses, particularly those in the lowest-paid positions. With the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) embarked on a project to systematically recognize this underserved “community within.” NERCHE conducted a “scan” of colleges and universities and convened meetings in which scholars, staff, students, and others discussed ways of identifying this community and encouraging campuses to support its members as an aspect of civic engagement.

Origins of the Idea

Two key events helped shape the initial concept of the project. In 1999 the University of Michigan, with support from the Johnson Foundation, hosted a meeting at the Wingspread conference center in Racine, Wisconsin, that addressed the civic role of a particular type of higher education institution, the American research university. Building on that meeting, Elizabeth Hollander (executive director, Campus Compact) and Harry

Boyte (senior fellow, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota) coauthored the Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University, which later became Campus Compact's President's Declaration. The declaration asks how a vision of public engagement might be made manifest and answers through an examination of each part of campus. The section on staff is as follows:

- A. Staff, in association with institutions, make visible their multiple (and now largely invisible) experiences, talents, and contributions to student learning and to the community-building process at institutions of higher education. Further, their rich contributions to the broader intellectual enterprise of our institutions become more visible and recognized.
- B. Staff build upon and receive recognition for the often extensive ties that many have with the local community, seeing such community knowledge and connection as a resource for community-university partnerships, for student learning, for engaged scholarship, and for the broad intellectual life of the institution.
- C. Staff gain a voice in governance, receive fair salaries and benefits, and are encouraged to participate in ongoing intellectual conversation and public life. The staff assist in the creation of multiple opportunities for staff development and continuing education.
- D. Faculty and others come to recognize that educating students for democracy is an institution-wide enterprise in which staff play key roles in providing opportunities for public work, dialogue with others far different from oneself, and democratic practice on campus. Staff are encouraged to work with faculty to examine and change the campus culture to support engagement. (*Boyte and Hollander 1999, 11–12*)

Here was a clear call to higher education to see staff as a campus resource in creating a democratic institution, consonant with other institutional efforts toward civic engagement. In 1998, NERCHE sponsored a symposium to celebrate its tenth anniversary. The theme of the symposium was community building, both inside and outside the academy. One of the speakers was Mel King (professor emeritus, MIT). In his remarks, he challenged higher education to address the needs of its own community with the same focus and intensity as it does with external communities:

I don't believe in this movement for community building if we don't have community building within the institution of higher education. For me, there are many, many examples of problems in the institution that replicate the problems in the very communities they would dare to think they can change and build. And if we aren't doing that on the inside, then I don't believe we can do it on the outside. . . . We want to talk about building relations to the outside, where better to begin than with the people who you come in contact with every day, who live in these communities on the outside? What kind of contact do you have with the person who does the maintenance? What issues and concerns do they have not only about what's going on inside the institution, but what's going on outside? There are many, many people who you could be building meaningful relationships with—people who are your workers and who are supporting you. (1999, 18)

Mel King pushed the audience to begin to think about concrete ways higher education could develop its community within, making it clear that unless internal constituencies were addressed, external community-building efforts were incomplete. The questions he raises are still relevant.

An Institutional Commitment—Laying the Groundwork

In June 2003 and May 2004, NERCHE convened meetings with community-based scholars, staff, department heads, students, higher education leaders, and foundation representatives in a project intended to further refine the concept of community development within, identify stakeholders, foster collaborations, and continue to identify best practices. A variety of ideas and issues related to laying the groundwork emerged from these conversations.

Defining the “community within” population: Defining our target population as “low-paid workers” was not enough. Without a sharper, more quantifiable definition, people were quick to apply their own lens to the project, for example, by defining the target as low-paid graduate assistants. In looking at Lawrence Katz's study of low-wage workers at Harvard University, we realized that low-paid campus employees are most easily broken into three general staff categories: parking and security, janitorial and

facility, and dining services. Though Katz recognized that there are other low-paid employees in secretarial, clerical, and laboratory positions on campus, these positions are most often salaried positions that have the potential for professional growth and development because of their clear connections to departments or divisions. Katz therefore concentrated his work on the full-time or part-time nonstudent employees paid by the institution on an hourly basis, not by stipend, subcontracted pay, or annual salary (2003). By defining members of the community within in a similar way, we can target staff who are in full-time or part-time positions at an institution, paid on an hourly basis, and not directly connected to the institutional mission.

Help from the business sector: The concept (and related benefits) of strengthening communities from within is not limited to the academic arena and is, perhaps, best modeled in the for-profit sector. “The Corporate Social Responsibility Report,” published by *Business Ethics Magazine*, annually highlights corporations who recognize their employees not only as workers but as valuable members of their corporate, public, and private communities. Similarly, popular periodicals feature lists of the best companies to work for, most of which win this accolade because of their corporate commitment to their employees as people first and revenue generators second. Many of these companies’ publications proudly highlight their commitment to “work-life balance” and offer evidence of the many programs they support that help employees achieve it. Programs range from educational opportunities and professional development seminars to employee assistance benefits, child daycare initiatives, inexpensive legal assistance, flexible work schedules, and memberships in fitness centers, stress clinics, and weight-loss programs. By making this investment in their human capital, many companies have discovered the medley of professional and financial advantages that caring for their employees can make to their bottom lines, retention strategies, and corporate reputations.

Help from the Annie E. Casey Foundation: The primary mission of the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) is to foster public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families. To that end AECF talks about the importance of “anchor institutions”—educational institutions, medical centers, and public utilities that are unlikely to move out of those communities where

they have significant infrastructure investments. Andrew Hahn and colleagues, in a report for AECF titled *Colleges and Universities as Economic Anchors*, make the case for encouraging institutions of higher education “to begin to think about their economic anchor roles in a cohesive and coordinated manner, that is, as an integrated cluster of activities and practices, and not as piecemeal and separate phenomena” (Hahn, Coonerty, and Peaslee 2002, 1). The report highlights colleges’ and universities’ roles as

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employer and workforce developer and identifies steps that they should take in these roles. These steps include incorporating job training and professional development programs in employee programs to ensure that residents are fully prepared for employment, providing needed services for employees from the neighborhoods, such as child care and transportation, and providing living wages and other

provisions that will build assets of local residents as part of a community economic strategy.

These influences of business sector notions about investments in human capital and AECF’s ideas about community development and higher education as anchor institutions factored into our thinking about definition and language. We settled on “community development within higher education” as the concept that best reflected the elements we felt were important. It both captures current notions of the roles of colleges and universities as employers and allows for a broader way of thinking about engagement.

Culture and relationships: Any successful community engagement effort must be carried out in an environment of respect, which is formed at the level of human relationships. Relationships formed between workers and students can be especially potent. At the Massachusetts College of Art, the incoming students are introduced at orientation to the people who will be cleaning their residence halls and serving them meals. The fact that the workers are paid for their participation in the orientation is noteworthy. With this simple action—putting names to faces that may have otherwise remained anonymous—the college sets a tone of regard for the dignity of all members of the campus community.

Emerson College's English Exchange with its employees brings students and low-wage workers together for weekly dialogues across language, culture, class, and status. The program was initiated by a student who had become friendly, through hand gestures and smiles, with the Spanish-speaking janitor in her residence hall and recognized that a partnership could be mutually beneficial in her quest to learn Spanish and his need to learn English. During the 2002–2003 academic year, twelve students and ten employees participated in the program, and a grant won from Campus Compact by this student provided funds to help expand this program to an even broader set of interested students and staff. Similarly, a program at Regis University encourages a greater sense of justice and equality on campus among people of different communities by employing student volunteers working toward their ESL certification to teach ESL lessons for non-English-speaking workers (*Melissa Nix, message posted to Service Learning Network electronic mailing list, service-learning@csf.colorado.edu, March 2003*).

Human Resources as a Starting Point

Many campuses offer quality programs and services that support lower-income employees on campus. Unlike service-learning programs or public service initiatives offered through campus offices such as the office of student affairs, programs that directly affect employees tend to be offered through the human resources department at each institution. This is an important distinction. In this organizational framework, employee issues and needs are not handled by those working with students and community outreach, but rather by a department that is often perceived as somewhat ancillary to the academic mission of the institution.

In many ways, having the human resources department handle employee-related issues and needs makes good sense. Not only do they have the best overall sense of what employee needs and issues might be, but they are in a good position to advocate, institutionalize, and assess policies and practices. Privy to confidential compensation information, the HR team is best able to target those on campus who are truly the lowest-paid members of the community, demand high standards of treatment for incoming contractors and subcontractors, and oversee benchmarking and compensation scales to ensure that, at minimum, a fair “living wage” is earned by all. As the department overseeing employee benefits, they have information appropriate for providing valuable

insight into the needs of staff. However, the human resources team has little contact with those who are traditionally the leaders in public service efforts on campus. It is therefore plausible that their recognition of employee needs rarely translates into a wider mobilization of students, faculty, and staff.

Relevant HR benefits and programs: When scanning the landscape of American higher education to find current programs that embody the spirit of the community within project, HR-sponsored programs often jump to the forefront of the exploration. Programs such as the Bridges to Learning & Literacy Program at Harvard University offer ESL, GED preparation, and computer training to hourly employees twice a week as paid work time. The University of Hawaii's Blue Collar Supervisory Leadership Development Program offers management and supervision training programs to those on the bottom rungs of their profession, in hopes of empowering them to move upward. Middlebury College offers an employee mentoring program that partners lower-paid employees with higher-paid, more established professional role models in hopes of fostering informal professional development and coaching. Salem State College, Massachusetts, advertises certain fringe benefits such as free memberships in a local credit union, sliding-scale child care, a dependent care assistance and referral program, and reduced-price flu vaccines as particularly beneficial to the lower-paid workers on their campus. Yale University has recently embarked on a new venture to make low-interest loans available to faculty and staff who buy property within a certain radius of campus. The goal is not only to revitalize the surrounding area, but also to support faculty and staff in their home purchases (Lewin 2003, A18).

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As of this writing, programs generally are either educative and skill based or fall into the category of services. Most fall into the realm of human resources, but campus service directors and

service-learning faculty and students are also developing initiatives. Rarest yet most promising are programs born of partnerships between HR and faculty, students, and staff. For the community within conception of community development to truly support the lowest-paid members of an institution in the same spirit as other community outreach programs, we need to step beyond the HR benefit program model and think about how to (1) help campuses understand the value of supporting all members, even the lowest-paid members of their staffs and (2) institutionalize this commitment to include their own communities as part of their civic engagement agendas.

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Challenges

Current campus commitments: One meeting participant who is part of a national higher education association commented, “Oh no—another constituency that needs attention!” This comment underscores a key challenge in introducing these ideas to campus leaders. Presidents, unit directors, and faculty already feel overburdened by the need to attend to new initiatives, especially given the tight resources at many institutions of higher education. Unless the community development from within model is conceived as inherent to learning on campus, it will be difficult to get campus administrators and faculty to see the benefits of this model and embrace it on their campuses. In asking campuses to go forward with new initiatives, we must acknowledge that they are already feeling considerable pressure in terms of funding and accountability measures. A key strategy, then, is to make sure that these initiatives and discussions are tied to those already existing at a given institution.

Class and race: Meeting participants made it clear that who you are—your role on campus—makes those that we have marked as “invisible workers” less invisible. For example, African American men on a white campus are very aware of the security staff on campus—who are not invisible to them. We need to be aware that

the workers we call invisible are not invisible to their own internal peer groups or to those administrators and professionals who regard them with awareness, commitment, and respect. While thinking about the importance of hiring diverse faculty and staff as a strategy, it is important to note class and race differences in framing the issue.

Subcontractors: A disturbing issue that surfaced in the discussions is that many low-wage workers on campuses are employed by subcontractors, rather than by the institution itself. The university has little jurisdiction over the employee policies governing subcontracted workers. Thus when colleges and universities make such investments as job training and tuition remission for their permanent staff, they render contract workers second- and third-class citizens of the institution. However clear the economic benefits of motivating low-wage workers to perform their duties satisfactorily, such larger issues regarding institutional responsibility to these community members will not be easily resolved.

Unionized employees: The role of campus unions was not investigated deeply. Unions might be in favor of these new efforts because they strengthen and provide additional services to employees. However, offering auxiliary services could also be seen as a way to distract unions from wage issues. There are already many complex time and labor issues “on the table,” and their complexity deepens when unions are involved. Some immediate issues to consider include:

- When do employees take advantage of services or support?
- If it happens during the work day, can they count the hours as work time?
- Who determines which employees are “in need”?

When companies recognized that turnover was costly to the organization, employee assistance programs (EAP) were introduced as a way to increase the retention of employees. Providing EAP services is not terribly expensive to the company, but it is a tangible way of demonstrating commitment to employees and their families (all family members are eligible). Some campuses, such as Boston University, have decided to include contracted employees in the EAP program, making it available to employees that aren’t even on their payroll. Unions might support similar initiatives spawned by such efforts.

Links to service-learning: While we have concluded that community development within is consistent with the mission of campus service-learning efforts—in fact, it can be a powerful component of a service-learning program—we are also aware of challenges. Student implementation of service-learning projects may yield mixed results; thus proposals for initiatives involving service-learning must include ways to ensure that they offer benefits and no harm to the campus employees they are meant to help.

Small Steps

Change often occurs incrementally, and participants at the discussions offered strategies for moving recognition and support of the community within onto campus agendas. Ideas included:

- Find out more about lower-level staff. Campuses often know little about this campus population.
- Helping campuses conduct a “quality of life” survey for all employees may be a good next step in identifying the employee assistance needs on individual campuses. The survey results, rather than mandates from outside the institution, could then be the driver of new initiatives.
- At one campus students had great difficulty getting to the city immigration center (transportation issues, time constraints, scheduling problems) for a service-learning project. Campus officials worked hard to resolve these issues for students, but in fact many of the workers on campus needed the same support. Developing awareness of others on campus who may benefit from efforts that support students is a win-win solution.
- Students are important. There are ways to prompt students to initiate support for the community within from the ground level. It can also be tied into the living-wage campaigns that are surfacing across campuses.
- Is there a place for these efforts in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act? For example, is it reasonable that federal work-study funds are paid only to those day care centers who care for the children of lower-wage workers? Are there other ways to siphon work-study funds to agencies or organizations that care for the specific needs of this population?
- Following standard research protocol may also be a good way for intermediary organizations to develop a strategy for large-scale implementation. This might include conducting a survey of randomly selected colleges, creating a target list of cam-

puses that might be open to change, developing a mobilization strategy, and formalizing assessment protocols to strengthen the argument for this type of change on other campuses.

- How do you influence a sector? There may be information available about sectoral employment and the ways that various industries have refined, upgraded, and changed a particular workforce.
- Use the rubrics created to assess diversity and its definition, depth, and breadth on campus as a way to assess this type of civic engagement work. Though this suggests a more institutionalized focus on campus, the rubrics are applicable for noninstitutionalized efforts. The benchmarks for diversity assessment include:
 1. goals (are the goals for diversity broadly and deeply understood and easily articulated by all constituents on campus?);
 2. resources (are adequate human capital, resources, and time resources dedicated to diversity?);
 3. capacity;
 4. leadership;
 5. centrality (how central are these efforts to the mission of the institution?).
- Develop a practitioner-focused document that talks in plain language about the community development within model and provides examples of ways to introduce this on a campus. This “tool kit” approach could include concrete suggestions: “bring residential life staff and facilities teams together at orientation, incorporate facilities team into new student orientation,” and so on. Start with campus examples that have been documented.

Conclusion

Perhaps one of the most menacing developments looming on the horizon for low-wage workers on campuses is the plight of public higher education, which is suffering as a result of strained state budgets. Traditionally, public higher education has been the access point for economic and social mobility for low-wage earners and their children. As public support continues to dwindle, so do viable opportunities for these populations to escape poverty and social isolation. So, in a sense, a focus on the community within is a reaffirmation of one of the central components of public education’s mission. Higher education leaders’ adoption of a firm,

united position on issues of access and equity can enable all members of the internal campus community—much in need of a galvanizing moment in these dispiriting times—to see that their work stands for something larger than the bottom line.

As we move forward in our work with the community within project, it will be important for us to remember that we are asking campuses to reshape the way they currently view and talk about their commitment to social responsibility and civic engagement. In this shift toward greater intracampus awareness, new language will evolve and new service-learning philosophies will be embraced. We will strive to build healthier communities not from the outside in, but rather from the inside out.

Although examples have been cited, this is a relatively untapped subject, with room for great exploration and further discussion. Very little research has touched on the importance of building community from within, and few campuses seem to have truly incorporated the spirit of this project into their institutional outreach priorities. We believe this project has powerful potential for campuses and that it can serve as an excellent model for future community development projects.

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