

Town Meets Gown in the USA: University-Community Partnerships and Neighborhood Development. The American Perspective

Mihaela ARSENE

Bucharest University of Economic Studies

Abstract

The paper finds its inspiration in the turn-of-the-millennium developments in the U.S. academic arena where core universities have managed to bridge the historic divide between "town and gown" and have thus emerged as anchor institutions in their neighborhoods and catalysts of urban growth. As such, the paper will highlight some productive trends in the university-community partnerships in the USA, together with their benefits to both parties concerned, as well as the synergies that the U.S. educational industry has been able to generate in distressed neighborhoods and beyond. The overall goal of the approach is to bring to the fore some of the best practices in urban enhancement, if not altogether urban revival, as designed and implemented by American universities. The purpose is to ultimately invite a genuine benchmarking effort in the Romanian academic environment where all too often academic research and scholarship still find themselves captive in their traditional "Ivory Tower".

Keywords

partnerships, university-community partnerships, distressed surrounding communities, community enhancement, urban revival.

1. Romanian Rationale for Interest in U.S. University Engagement

This paper is intended as a tribute to the "global civic engagement movement in higher education" (Hollister 2014: 1) and also as an invitation to Romanian universities to become aware of its comprehensive, multi-tier benefits so as to join the "invisible [...] revolution" that the engaged universities have launched worldwide.

Linking campus and community has long been given pride of place in the mission statements of Romanian universities; however, what university students and teaching staff continue to notice is the academia' time-honored divide from the community. The prevailing perception is that universities in Romania have conducted extensive research thereby acquiring comprehensive scholarship, yet as a rule they continue to be an untapped resource of vast expertise that the authorities and the community appear to be hardly aware of, let alone to be using it for community development purposes.

The most recent validation of this perception was offered this spring as I was teaching a project management course which is part of the English-taught

master program in Educational Research that the Bucharest University of Economic Studies has been offering over the past 10 years for faculty professional development. The distinguished faculty attending the program confirmed that the extensive research they conduct usually gets published, internationally as well, but still fails to make a significant impact on the community at large, that is outside the academic milieu. As if the ivory tower is the foremost option available to university expertise and the academia-community divide is the norm.

2. The University-Community Relationship

The academia-community divide can be extensively documented in many cultures, but I will choose to focus on the U.S. academic environment given the massive inspiration it provides in terms of university engagement with the community.

Any quick historic survey indicates that U.S. universities were originally remote from the community, in physical terms included, and intellectually aloof, an insulated academic microcosm, “an island unto itself”. The fast-paced urban development in the 20th century saw universities being engulfed by the urban communities. As a result they became universities in the city, even though they were not yet of the city: universities still opted for seclusion behind their high walls.

U.S. universities are tax exempt institutions and make extensive use of community resources. In addition, they are foremost real-estate owners. However, for a long while the universities chose to maintain their single-minded academic focus and ignore the problems of the communities surrounding them. They built higher walls and continued to focus on their intellectual pursuits. But the problems besetting the communities hosting the universities - economic distress, physical decay, and the inherent rising crime rate – soon began to have an impact on the universities’ ability to attract and retain students and faculty. Once the community problems hurt the university interests, universities could no longer ignore the problems.

The affluent, powerful universities - both in economic and political terms – became aware that they could no longer afford to turn a blind eye to the surrounding communities in distressed, low-income neighbourhoods. What we see today is the university engagement with the community which has by now emerged as the blueprint for mutual success and the prevalent pattern in the USA, with universities addressing community problems for mutual enhancement, with benefits both for the community and the university.

The win-win approach materializes in university-initiated partnerships with the community that have a twofold goal: to build community capacity and to broaden and enhance student learning by adding the valuable cultural, social, ethical, and political dimensions of social life (see, among others, University of Toronto, Center for Community Partnerships 2015). Such action-oriented partnerships are driven by the community and are grounded in the scholarship that the university makes available.

3. U.S. University Approaches to Community Engagement

Given the wide range of approaches as regards university engagement with the community in the USA, in what follows I will survey some of the directions illustrated by U.S. universities large and small, from University of Philadelphia's "community-oriented real-world problem solving" (University of Philadelphia 2015) to University of Louisville's community engagement programs that "bring the university resources to bear on the problems of their neighbourhoods", multi-faceted as they are (The University of Louisville's Housing and Neighborhood Development Strategies (HANDS) 2015).

The University of Philadelphia, through its Center of Community Partnerships, links the high-level theoretical expertise available at this Ivy League school with beneficial community applications, thus generating a mutually productive relationships for the University and the West Philadelphia community. The university's major contribution to the urban revival of Western Philadelphia during Judith Rodin's presidency has demonstrated the full gamut of the scholastic, creative, managerial, and financial engagement with the community of a first-tier university, so as to generate the much-needed economic and urban revival of the depressed neighbourhood surrounding the university (University of Pennsylvania 2015).

A similar vision is shared by another top university in Pennsylvania, this time a major research public university: Pennsylvania State University. Its Center for Economic and Community Development has been successfully working in close partnership with regions and communities in Pennsylvania "on issues of economic development, land use, local government finance, and community asset building" (Pennsylvania State University 2015).

The same community engagement vision informs the activities conducted on behalf of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee by its Center for Urban Initiatives and Research. The center provides research expertise and technical assistance to public and non-profit entities in a range of fields, including, among others, neighborhood analysis and mapping, strategic planning, and survey research (University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee 2015).

Engagement with the community is held as a top priority also at private institutions that provide a top-of-the-line Catholic education. A good case in point is Loyola University which, at its campus in Chicago, has developed a Center for Urban Research and Learning which successfully connects the Loyola students and faculty with community leaders outside the university, so as to address the community needs by tapping into the combined knowledge and experience of university researchers and faculty, as well as community promoters and activists working in community and non-profit organizations, civic groups and governmental agencies (Loyola University at Chicago 2015).

Moving westward to a prestigious research university in California, we notice the same commitment to making university expertise available to the community, so as to inform public policy. University of California at Berkeley established its Institute of Urban and Regional Development as early as 1962 with the explicit mission to "advance knowledge and practice in ways that make cities

and regions economically robust, socially inclusive, and environmentally resourceful”. This is accomplished by means of collaborative and interdisciplinary research that underlays all the practical work aimed at furthering the community dynamics in cities and regions and thus provide a solid foundation to public policy decisions (University of California at Berkeley 2015).

Community involvement informs the vision of Duke University as well, another academic institution epitomizing academic excellence. Not only that Duke University lies at the core of the Research Triangle at Durham, but it also works closely with the surrounding community: the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership was started in 1996 to build a structured partnership between the university and the community, harnessing the university’s array of resources to community development. The university has been able to raise millions of dollars and invest them in the neighborhoods that are its partners, in the form of affordable housing projects, two community health centers, after school programs for at risk students at public schools, among others (Duke University 2015).

The above examples illustrate the scope and magnitude of the quiet revolution that universities, in our specific situation U.S. universities, in their capacity as anchor institutions have been steadily fueling in their communities and for their communities. Universities are leading institutions and “powerful economic engines” (Warden 2014:2) within their communities, oftentimes acting as major employers, investors and developers in their regions, at the same time having unlimited access to know-how in their applied technology centers and the like, renders them eminently qualified to help revitalize their urban communities. The concept of universities as anchor institutions is a reflection of the universities’ unique assets and enhancement policies in relation to their neighboring communities.

The earlier divide between gown and town, between the aloof and affluent university and its neighborhood, frequently struggling if not altogether depressed, was proved mutually counterproductive by the economic realities at the turn of the millennium; as such it is becoming irrelevant. It has actually made way to its very opposite approach, that is inextricably intertwined universities and communities, as urban universities connect their mission to the region in which they are located and provide services to the whole surrounding community. The range of institutions sampled for highlight in the earlier section illustrate the myriad forms this approach may take.

Given their new outlook and enhanced mission, universities develop partnerships with the community so as to jointly address the problems besetting the latter. The university-community partnerships address diverse issues ranging from community revitalization projects to employment, neighborhood safety, and children’s health. Through their partnerships with local organizations, universities prove their relevance to the community and their ability to act for their significant transformation. That is to say universities have the mission and the means to act upon their neighborhoods. And as the dramatic situation of University of Pennsylvania before its engagement in the urban revival of Western Philadelphia documents it, universities also have the need and capability to become leading actors of the enhancement of their surrounding communities.

Such community-enhancement programs thriving on university-community synergies have a number of distinctive features that account for their long-term relevance and success, as evident from the sample universities presented previously. Of these distinctive features one necessarily needs to mention the fact that the community residents are involved in the institutional decision-making process concerning the specific assistance to be provided by the university to the neighborhood. Community-based organizations partner up with the universities from the inception of the projects to their completion. The goals jointly established become part of a multi-tier, comprehensive strategy for community revitalization and enhancement.

On the university side, faculty and students provide assistance for the successful implementation of the community projects and use applied research extensively. Service learning opportunities enrich the students' educational experience as they provide service to the community. Involvement in such community projects is perceived as productive for faculty as well, as the work they do to the benefit of the community is acknowledged as career enhancement, alongside the traditional indicators of successful academic performance, that is teaching and research.

4. U.S. Universities as Anchor Institutions and Agents of Change

The community engagement of U.S. universities account for their current role as powerful engines of change, oftentimes the leading change agent in their neighborhoods or even regions. Today's universities in the USA are looked upon as the core institutions of modern society (Carr 1999:2). Geographically rooted to their cities, communities, and/or neighborhoods, U.S. universities are ideally suited to act as agents of change, betterment, and enhancement. A survey of the reasons is offered in the next paragraph.

Universities in the USA are, as a rule, affluent, they possess enormous resources, real estate included; as a result, they rank among the largest non-governmental employers in many communities. They are therefore re-examining their mission and re-positioning themselves in their surrounding neighborhoods, while redefining their very role in society. University engagement in the community is developing a new, vibrant and enriching dimension that benefits all stakeholders, that is students, faculty and community. What used to be looked upon as "parks within cities" (Carr 1999:5) are transforming their neighborhoods, and transforming themselves in the process. U.S. universities are becoming engines of change, changing the reality beyond the campus and at the same time changing their own identity and mission (Models and Best Practices: University & Community Partnerships 2014).

The universities highlighted are a random sample of educational institutions that have made a commitment to help revive and enhance their surrounding communities. One could always mention, in awe, the collaborative efforts launched by Yale University, Pratt University in Brooklyn, University of Alabama at Birmingham, among others, that are meant to "reverse decades of

disinvestment” (Carr 1999:1) and re-build their surrounding communities. As stated as early as 1999,

These and at least 80 other universities are part of a powerful trend across America to create university-community partnerships that revitalize communities through "service learning" and other outreach initiatives. As Ernest Boyer wrote in the Chronicle of Higher Education in 1994, universities are learning that they cannot afford to become 'islands of affluence, self-importance, and horticultural beauty in seas of squalor, violence, and despair'.

By partnering with community-based organizations, local governments, school districts, and public housing authorities, universities are helping to improve economic, social, and physical conditions of their neighboring communities while providing opportunities for students and faculty to apply academic knowledge to real-world conditions. (Carr, J. H., 1999:1)

The above quote captures the reality at the turn of the millennium: about 80 U.S. universities - which were then the exception out of the over 4,500 ones operating throughout the USA - had made a commitment to community engagement out of enlightened self-interest, aware that in times of economic distress it was hard, if not altogether impossible for them to do well without doing good. Almost 15 years later community engaged has become the norm rather than the exception for U.S. universities as they “become active players in the life of their communities”, thus “redefining the global relationship between the academy and the public interest” (Hollister 2014:1).

The engaged universities are higher education institutions aware of their social responsibilities. Social responsibility lies at the core of the revamped university mission and the following short quote on Tufts University is just one of the many available across the USA: “[...] we do not exist in isolation from society, nor from the community in which we are located. Instead, we carry a unique obligation to listen, understand, and contribute to social transformation and development”(Hollister 2014:3).

As a result, in 2005 the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching developed the Community Engagement Classification for socially responsible universities. This classification documents institutional mission, identity, commitments, and undertakings. Based on self-documented university practice, the Carnegie Foundation determines whether the institution meets the community engagement standards and qualifies for acknowledgement as a community-engaged institution (Carnegie Foundation).

U.S. universities are aware that their community engagement enriches the community and enhances their students’ academic experience. Not surprisingly, since

The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and

civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.

(Ohio State University 2015)

Or, as Ohio State University conclusively states in its definition of university outreach and engagement:

Outreach and Engagement is defined as meaningful and mutually beneficial collaborations with partners in education, business, and public and social service. It is:

- That aspect of research that makes what we discover useful beyond the academic community.
- That aspect of teaching that enables learning beyond the campus walls.
- That aspect of service that directly benefits the public (Ohio State University 2015).

The university engagement with the community has profound consequences on

the learning outcomes as well, increasing the students' civic engagement, honing their intercultural competences, and developing their integrative learning skills, their critical thinking, as well as their reflective and ethical practice.

The town has certainly met the gown in the USA, to their mutual benefit and advancement, thus replacing their earlier "adversarial relationship" (Martin, Smith, Phillips 2005:2) and traditional divide by reciprocal benefit.

References

- Hollister, R. (2014). "The Engaged University – An Invisible Worldwide Revolution". *Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service*. URL: <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/about/dean-rob-hollister/publications-and-presentations/the-engaged-university-aninvisible-worldwide-revolution/> (May 2, 2015)
- University of Toronto, *Center for Community Partnerships*, <https://www.ccp.utoronto.ca/> (April 20, 2015)
- University of Pennsylvania, *Center for Community Partnerships*, <http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/> (June 8, 2015).
- University of Louisville's Housing and Neighborhood Development Strategies (HANDS), *Sustainable Urban Neighborhoods*, <http://sun.louisville.edu> (June 2, 2015)
- Pennsylvania State University, *Center for Economic and Community Development*, <http://cecd.aers.psu.edu> (July 2, 2015)
- University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, *Center for Urban Initiatives and Research*, <http://uwm.edu/Dept/CUIR> (June 25, 2015)
- Loyola University Chicago, *Center for Urban Research and Learning*, <http://www.luc.edu/curl> ((July 2, 2015)
- University of California at Berkeley, *Institute of Urban and Regional Development*, <http://iurd.berkeley.edu/> (May 12, 2015)
- Duke University, *Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership*, <http://www.community.duke.edu> (May 14, 2015)

- Warden, R. (2014). "Engaged universities contribute to economic development", *University World News*, <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20141119095107901>
- Models and Best Practices, *University & Community Partnerships*, <http://community-wealth.org/strategies/panel/universities/models.html> (July 12, 2015)
- Carr, James H. (1999). "It's Not Just Academic: University-Community Partnerships Are Rebuilding Neighborhoods". *Fannie Mae Foundation: Housing. Facts and Findings*, vol. 1, issue 1, 8 pages
- Carnegie Foundation, *Community Engagement Classification*, classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/.../community_engagement.php (June 4, 2015)
- Ohio State University, "What is Outreach and Engagement", *Frequently Asked Questions about Outreach and Engagement*, <http://outreach.osu.edu/about-us/faq.html>
- Martin, L., Smith, H., Phillips, W. (2005) "Bridging 'Town & Gown' Through Innovative University-Community Partnerships". *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, Vol. 10(2), article 20. <http://www.innovation.cc/volumes-issues/martin-u-partner4final.pdf>