ACADEMICALLY BASED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: AN IDEA EXCHANGE

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Summary Report of Faculty Roundtable Discussions

*Authors: Keith Caldwell, Heidi Donovan, Michael Glass, Holly Hickling,
Misti McKeehen, Maureen Porter, Kannu Sahni, Tracy Soska, John Wilds*

A central component of the Idea Exchange was a set of moderated roundtable discussions. Nine tables of university faculty and staff discussed questions on the strengths and opportunities for academically-based community engagement at the University of Pittsburgh. Faculty were also invited to describe how community engagement can enhance the "strengthening communities" objective of the university's new strategic plan. This paper summarizes the key themes and ideas that emerged from the roundtable discussion and, also, provides more comprehensive description of the comments generated by the participants.

Summary: Key Ideas

➢ Academically-based community engagement is welcomed in the Pittsburgh region, and the University of Pittsburgh is strongly positioned to maintain a leadership role in this realm.

➢ Faculty strongly support creating a centralized office for academically-based community engagement. This was recognized as important for cutting across the University's "silos of practice" to provide a clear hub for support and outreach and builds on the University's strategic pillar of "Foundational Infrastructure."

➢ Create clear guidance for faculty about how academically-based community engagement is understood by the central administration for promotion & tenure decisions.

➢ Faculty, students, and community organizations are equal partners in community engagement, but each have different priorities and needs that should be addressed when instituting community engagement projects and support centers.

Approximately 85 faculty participated in the Academically-Based Community Engagement Idea Exchange was held on September 25, 2015 in the William Pitt Union Ballroom. An excellent report of the keynote address and University reaction response that preceded the roundtable discussion is available in a University Times article at: http://www.utimes.pitt.edu/?p=36981.

Further a video is available of that portion of the event at: http://tinyurl.com/zjx5hnj.

Following the roundtable discussion faculty, staff, and administration were invited to a poster session and networking reception that featured over 30 community engagement posters.

Question One: From your academic experience and outreach work what opportunities do you see in the Pittsburgh region for greater university-community engagement?

➢ The **creativity and availability of students** at the university.

➢ The **large nonprofit and foundation communities** in the Pittsburgh region can support our efforts, and absorb the number of students willing to conduct academically-based projects.

➢ The **regional climate supports academically-based community engagement**: there is an amiable political environment (progressive City Council), socially-conscious public opinion, and a general excitement on the part of community organizations to work with the university.

➢ **Considerable local expertise** exists (both regionally and within the university community) that can provide technical advice for faculty interested in promoting and pursuing engagement.

➢ The **University of Pittsburgh is already seen as a leader** in this area, especially in terms of capacity building and community leadership. Pitt's Leadership Institute was mentioned by name; the idea of positive reputation was given.

What challenges do you see?

➢ Academics are not always adept at **fostering and managing relationships** with community partners, and community partners can have misconceptions about the role and scope of the community engagement project.

➢ Challenges for students and faculty **gaining access to community partners** (Pittsburgh Public Schools were named).

➢ Community engagement is **not seen as a priority** for the University of Pittsburgh at present – recognized identification of the issue via the new strategic plan.

➢ The "value" of community engagement for faculty relative to **tenure and promotion is a significant issue,** especially for non-tenured faculty.

➢ **Duplication of projects** across academic units can frustrate faculty and community partners; the general sense that the University of Pittsburgh has too many "silos."

➢ **Funding remains an issue**: both internal and external supports are needed, and this is a recurring issue for longitudinal projects.

➢ It can be difficult for new faculty to know **where to begin with community engagement** (see above point about duplication of projects, silos of practice).

➢ It is **difficult to conduct longitudinal programs** with successful handoffs to the next group of students/faculty, given the constraints of the university/semester system.

➢ **Lack of resources** in specific departments and programs to help faculty begin community engagement projects.

➢ **Potential for negative reputation** to precede a project, if Pitt is associated with UPMC, or if faculty projects have gone awry in the past.

➢ **Resolving liability issues** when students are embedded in community organizations (personal safety and access to sensitive data).

Question Two: How can the university more effectively support the academically-based community engagement work of faculty?

➢ **Overcome "silos of practice" through a centralized office for community engagement**. This office could:

- o Identify community needs and priorities.

- o Match faculty with community partners.

- o Provide a 'clinic' where problems could be assigned according to needs/skills of faculty.

- o Develop and maintain relationships with community partners.

- o Generate metrics on the outcomes of community engagement.

- o Generate public relations material about community projects.

➢ Create clear **acknowledgement that academically-based community engagement is valued** by the central administration:

- o Provide clear guidance and about how community engagement work affects promotion and tenure decisions: is it service, is it research? Who makes these decisions?

- o Incentivize faculty and student participation in community engagement through recognition (awards & credit were cited).

- o Allowance in course loads to reflect the time-intensive nature of academically-based community engagement process.

➢ **Benchmarking University of Pittsburgh community engagement efforts** against other schools – the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification was noted and the University earlier Community Outreach Partnership Center were often referenced in roundtable discussions as well as in the opening remarks.

Question Three: How can we enhance our collective impact in "Strengthening Communities" per the university's new strategic plan? How can we ensure our students are part of this collective impact?

➢ **Make academically-based community engagement's relevance explicit** to students and faculty:

- o Make it a requirement for graduation, recognized with a designation on the degree
- o Make explicit the difference between service and engagement through early-stage discussions with students

➢ A **systematic approach is warranted**, to identify community needs and priorities.

➢ Develop and maintain relationships with key communities, i.e. **a "place-based" perspective on engagement**.

➢ Encourage faculty to **embed community engagement in their learning objectives**.

➢ **Learn from and promote current "best practice" units**, like the Business School's emphasis on 'outside the classroom' (OCC) activities.

Closing Commentary

This faculty dialog and showcase on academically-based community engagement generated strong interest and enjoyed enthusiastic discussion over the roundtables. The feedback provides guidance for how faculty can feel supported in this community-based work. The forum was especially timely given the University strategic planning process is presently underway and enhancing the University's "community impact" features as a strategic pillar of the plan. Faculty comments from this idea exchange underscore how academically-based community engagement can create substantial impacts for the community, while supporting the goals of the University strategic plan:

- Community-engaged learning can strengthen teaching by bringing classroom knowledge and student training into the field, where our graduates will live and work.

- Community-engaged, applied research promotes interdisciplinary scholarship and community impact. This is a public demonstration of the University's capacity to address community-identified issues and vital social problems.

- Community Engagement exposes faculty and students to diversity and inclusion. This promotes a stronger sense of diversity and inclusion both on and off campus, and encourages students to deepen their roots to this region.

- Lastly, connecting the University's public service mission to its mission of teaching and research is an important "foundational infrastructure" to enhance our University for the future.

Addendum: Historical Context of University-Community Engagement at Pitt

This faculty-centered Academically-Based Community Engagement Idea Exchange represents an ongoing campus dialog on community-engaged learning (as it has come to be more commonly known), and it has built on a long history of university-community engagement that began with Pitt's new status and expansion as a public university in the late 1960s. Emerging from a period of turmoil and conflict with it surrounding Oakland neighbors, and for many years throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the University maintained an often embattled Office of Urban and Community Services headed by Jay Roling under then Chancellor Wesley Posvar that mostly engaged with its contentious Oakland neighborhoods.

Under short-term Chancellor Dennis O'Connor, the office later became the Center for Community and Public Service under Vice Chancellor for Public Affairs, Leon Haley. The office promoted a broader service and outreach agenda to other communities and greater Pittsburgh region. Under Chancellor Mark Nordenberg this office became the Office Governmental and Community Relations and, later, the Office of Community and Governmental Relations, which has continued under Chancellor Gallagher with Paul Supowitz as Vice Chancellor.

Two other earlier university research initiatives were also important in demonstrating the public service and engagement mission of the university in the 1970s and 1980s. The University Center for Social and Urban Research (UCSUR), established in 1972 has served as a resource for researchers and educators interested in the basic and applied social and behavioral sciences, as well as a hub for interdisciplinary research and collaboration that promotes research focused on the social, economic, and health issues most relevant to our society. UCSUR served as the engaged research support during the University's Community Outreach Partnership Center.

One of the more outstanding examples of community-engaged research was evidence in the Rivers Community Project carried out in the early to mid-1980s under the leadership of the School of Social, which sought to study the impact of the region's industrial collapse on its communities and peoples. Not only did the studies capture the impact of our regions industrial decline on communities, as well as on families, minorities, youth, the elderly, and others, but it served as a catalyst for engaging faculty and students in the regions river communities and for generating many programmatic and organizational responses to address the problems and issues in the wake of this industrial collapse.

A more contemporary history of engaged learning started with the Campus Compact established in 1985 as a commitment among university leaders to improve community live and enhance student civil and social responsibility. The University of Pittsburgh signed on to the Campus Compact, and in the mid-1990s Pitt established Student Volunteer Outreach as its major student service office – previously the base for student volunteer service had been the Pitt/Oakland YMCA. Two other campus community-engagement initiatives were active during the mid-to-late 1990s, an international service-learning organization, Amizade, affiliated with the University to

conduct study abroad service-learning courses that engage faculty in several disciplines, including Education, History, among others. Other locally-based community-engaged courses were supported through Generations Together in the University Center for Social and Urban Research with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, which, together with the National Corporation for Community Service was encouraging service learning on campuses.

In 2000 after several unsuccessful initiatives, the University secured a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of University Partners grant to establish its Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC), which continued for over ten years as the primary community-engagement initiative on campus. Co-led from the School of Social Work and the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, this COPC initiative, which the university matched funding with HUD, provided a base for many schools and disciplines to establish service-learning courses, engaged research efforts, and community service projects that involved faculty, staff, and students, especially student interns, with numerous neighborhood partner organizations to address community-identified issues.

The renamed Office of Community and Governmental Relations provided additional management support. More than a dozen schools and disciplines were involved in the COPC during its HUD funding with community partnerships in Oakland, South Oakland, West Oakland, Oak Hill, and Hazelwood. HUD funding for COPC ended by 2010, but the University had succeeded in securing two such grants from HUD and establishing a strong local and national reputation for its community partnership work.

During the COPC program period at Pitt, the University Senate through its Community Relations Committee conducted three important University Plenary dialogs that involved a large university and community participation; these included:

- 2002 Plenary on "Service in Our University Mission" – that helped define service at our University and led to establishing a regional service-learning network among Campus Compact schools in the region.

- 2006 Plenary on "The Scholarship of Engagement" – that led to greater recognition of engaged scholarship and public service in tenure and promotion and encourage exploration of the emerging Carnegie Community Engagement classification.

- A 2010 Plenary on "The Future of Oakland" – that helped serve as a catalyst for the Oakland 2025 comprehensive planning initiative.

Where the Community Outreach Partnership Center served for many years as forum for dialog and exchange between university and community partners, the Senate Community Relations Committee has, post-COPC, served as the forum that now includes community partners among its members.

Most recently, under the Office of the Provost and with strong leadership from then Vice Provost of Student Affairs and Dean of Students, Dr. Kathy Humphrey, the University impaneled an advisory committee to work on developing and establishing a new office of student service and engaged learning. PittServes was established in 2014 replacing Student Volunteer Outreach and enhance the role of community service and engaged learning for students at the University.

The University Center for Social and Urban Research served as a base for a growing community data and technical assistance effort that has evolved from the COPC, including the Pittsburgh Neighborhood/ Community Information System, the new Southwest Pennsylvania Community Profiles, and the emerging Open Data Center in partnership with the City of Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, and other community partners spurring further outreach and applied research.

The University is now engaged in an intensive and comprehensive strategic planning that includes a goal for "Community Impact." We hope this commitment to community impact will continue to foster and support community-engaged learning, engaged faculty research, and ongoing community partnerships.