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**Strengthening Communities:
Criteria for Measuring University Impact on Neighborhood Development**

Introduction

It has been nearly 15 years since Ernest Boyer looked at the horizon of American higher education and suggested potential for great change. He called for a “new American college” distinguished by engaged scholarship and engaged teaching, and in 1999 the Kellogg Commission expanded on these concepts. Since then the movement toward civic engagement by higher education has made substantial progress, and in many ways, reinvigorated higher education’s understanding of its relationship to civic life. Yet there are institutions that have not embraced this call and for those that have, many have only begun to “walk the talk.” The 2004 Wingspread Statement “Calling the Question: Is Higher Education Ready to Commit to Community Engagement?” challenged academia to go beyond giving engagement a try and to instead make it a deep and lasting commitment, arguing that civic engagement is the “best hope for the future of higher education in a rapidly changing world” and that a “return to a mission in which the advancement of discovery and learning is fueled by public service is a vision that has never been more right -- or more needed -- by both higher education and the world we serve.” Perhaps most important, the Wingspread statement provided an initial, six-point framework for academic institutions to assess their readiness for a lasting and entrenched commitment to community engagement.

The Problem

Amid this groundswell of greater engagement, urban-serving universities stand at the forefront of institutions who particularly understand the critical role of university-based research, education and engagement in driving local and regional economies, fostering innovation and addressing city challenges. Their commitment to urban engagement often stems from the economic and geographic realities they face as urban universities anchored to their locations in cities. Simply put, they share a mutual destiny with their urban communities. And as a consequence, more and more urban universities are becoming partners in neighborhood revitalization. As deep as their commitment to engagement may run, it can be difficult for these institutions to know how best to engage in neighborhood development and how best to partner. Urban research universities face challenges in prioritizing their resources against the many competing demands they face and doing so in ways that are consistent with their university mission and values. Another challenge is that universities are often working to be effective partners in community development projects in an absence of ground rules or criteria for measuring their impact and involvement in neighborhood redevelopment. A growing body of evidence shows

that this form of engagement can be effective but the time has come for this movement to create rules and criteria.

Solution

The 35 member-institutions of the Urban Serving Universities are located in 35 of the largest metropolitan areas of the United States. The members have begun to work on “Strengthening Communities” as a strand so that these universities can collectively leverage their efforts, and with federal partnership, become even more significant and effective resources for creating robust, socially inclusive and sustainable cities in the 21st century. Drawing from their vast experiences in community engagement as well as a fuller study of their community revitalization efforts as suggested in the accompanying two-page précis, titled “**Strengthening Communities: Assessing the Quantity and Quality of Faculty Engagement in Neighborhood Revitalization,**” these institutions are well positioned to create a follow up to the Wingspread Statement, “Calling the Question,” which spells out the rules of engagement and establishes criteria for measuring the impact of university neighborhood revitalization. While each community is unique and a one-size-fits all approach cannot be recommended, there are nevertheless some common lessons that can be collected and shared so that other universities may gain from the experiences of others as well as common metrics for assessment.

Implementation

Based on the urban serving universities’ experience, several themes have already begun to be identified as particularly vital for effective engagement among 21st century urban institutions and communities. These emerging themes include the following:

- **Reciprocity Among Partners:** Being a part of cities means partnerships. True partnerships require an upfront negotiation process to define the goals of the partnership and expected benefits for each entity. It may not mean equality at all stages and all undertakings. But a level of reciprocity is necessary for every partnership to be effective.
- **Relevant Programming:** The programming must be relevant to the particular urban setting. Each community has different priorities, and universities have unique research strengths or assets particular to that institution. Programs may be more appropriate in some contexts than others. To be relevant, programming choices must reflect these differences.
- **Program Flexibility:** The capacity to fit programming to community relevance requires flexibility in a program’s design. Program design must allow universities and their partners the flexibility to adjust programming to fit community contexts.
- **Program Accountability.** Programming must be accountable. It must be accountable to the communities the program is intended to serve. It must be accountable to the universities and their partners. And it must be accountable to its public and private funders.

Using as a model the Wingspread conference of 41 higher education leaders and practitioners that gathered together and resulted in the “Calling the Question” statement, the USU can take the above emerging themes farther to produce a similar guide on rules of effective engagement and criteria for measuring impact in neighborhood revitalization. Universities and communities across the country would be the beneficiaries of this information.