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## **Strengthening Communities: Assessing the Quantity and Quality of Faculty Engagement in Neighborhood Revitalization**

### **Introduction**

From University of Pennsylvania to UCLA and University of Akron to Louisiana State, universities located in the urban core have been stepping up to the plate to strengthen the aging communities in which they are located. More and more over the past 20 years, urban universities have come to be regarded as economic development “saviors,” especially in neighborhoods immediately surrounding their campuses. As anchor institutions that would not be inclined to pick up and move because the vast majority of their assets are rooted in their urban settings, these universities have increasingly partnered with their neighborhoods to address the array of challenges that have become common to so many of America’s aging urban-core neighborhoods: high poverty, low homeownership, white flight, low employment rates, educational achievement gaps, high drop out rates, high crime, aging housing stock, health care disparities and much more. Although this view of university partnership in community development is relatively new, civic engagement is increasingly viewed as a third mission in higher education, joined with the traditional charges of learning and discovery.

### **The Problem**

While more and more universities embrace this responsibility to strengthen their adjacent communities, they also face challenges in doing so in an age of shrinking public resources. Urban universities do not have unlimited pools of time, talent and money to devote to community engagement activities, and therefore need to prioritize. They also need scholarship and research to know what strategies in this “pedagogy” of community engagement are most effective and beneficial. Universities need to be able to produce optimal results efficiently and effectively in their communities and to ensure that their pursuits are bringing about the greatest and truest change to truly revitalize and reinvigorate older American cities and their neighborhoods, not just gentrify (which just moves the problems elsewhere). On the whole, universities have not yet developed ways to measure faculty engagement in the community nor do they include measures of faculty engagement in the community in faculty reappointment, tenure and promotion policies.

Three University of Cincinnati faculty members (Michael Romanos, David Edelman and Mahyar Arefi) led an in-depth study of 21 universities across the country who are significantly engaged in community development, assessing a subset of 11 of them against 16 metrics critical to successful community engagement (study released in 2006). This analysis has helped higher education to begin to reflect on best practices -- what’s

working and what's not. A sequel to this study, focusing on Urban Serving Universities, is needed to provide further data, study and analysis and to provide more information about what steps and strategies work best in university-community efforts and to gauge the quantity and quality of faculty engagement, especially in the area of strengthening adjacent communities.

### **Solution**

A study and analysis focusing on the community partnerships undertaken by the member-institutions of the Urban Serving Universities would provide much-needed data and help to identify best practices that can provide models for other urban-located universities. It would also provide much-needed information to take to policy-makers and civic leaders to educate them about university-community interactions and their significant contributions to economic development. A thorough study would also help universities and communities know what best practices to implement in order to address a whole host of urban challenges: including job creation, homeownership rates, educational disparities, etc.

### **Implementation**

The needed data collection and analysis can be completed through the 35 member-institutions of the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities. Building on the Romanos-Edelman-Arefi study, a follow-up study would include quality case studies of USU institutions' community partnerships as well as benchmarking USU members against the earlier study.

The USU is a president-led 501 (c) 6 organization of public urban research universities from every region of the nation. The Coalition advocates for data-driven federal policies that stimulate innovation and partnerships among public urban research universities with America's cities and metropolitan regions. USU initiatives address issues of national concern where urban serving universities are key drivers: developing the future workforce, strengthening urban and metropolitan economies, and improving the health of our population.

USU gathers and analyzes data on issues that matter to cities—such as tracking the effectiveness of teachers in urban schools, interpreting economic data, or better understanding health disparities. This evidence-based approach is the foundation for its three strategic initiatives: Sustaining a Competitive Workforce, Building Strong Communities, and Improving the Health of a Diverse Population. USU's network of urban research universities has the capacity to implement and evaluate shared strategies across U.S. cities. By working collectively, the USU Coalition is able to scale up and translate local innovations to provide a greater impact on high-stakes national issues.

At present, 37 USU member-schools serve in 22 states and in regions with a combined population of over 100 million people. These institutions have an overall economic impact on metropolitan economies exceeding \$35 billion a year.