Making Higher Education Civic Engagement Matter in the Community

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While those who engage in service-learning and its associated forms of higher education civic engagement are surely concerned that their students make needed contributions to the communities in which they are involved, the primary interest of higher education has been, not surprisingly, on what students learn and not on what communities gain. Lately, concern has been increasing both inside and outside of the academy that our efforts at civic engagement should do a better job of serving our communities (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Stoecker & Tryon 2009). Those who stress mutuality with community partners, and who want to place more emphasis on what students accomplish with them, struggle to figure out just how to make such aims reality. Herein we make suggestions for moving in this direction.

What is needed, first, is a fundamental shift in how **community** is viewed.

The term “community” is invoked by nearly everyone involved with civic engagement. However, the trend of pointing service-learning projects at individuals rather than communities often lessens impacts on the larger societal structures. The history of most higher education civic engagement, particularly service-learning, has been largely a history of individual students providing individual services to individual clients of service organizations. The bread and butter of service-learning—tutoring programs, after-school programs, literacy programs, and the like—all tend to favor individuals and rarely turn their focus on the community as a whole.

To participate in improving our communities, this individualistic understanding of “community engagement” must be transformed. Community needs to be viewed as the collective and complex set of systems that it is. However, this is just the beginning if we want our higher education civic engagement to result in deeper improvments in our communities. There are practical changes that also must take place in what we do. These have to do with **design** and **participation**

The Community Impact Pyramid

Pyramids are structures that have been associated with the beginning of recorded history. Their endurance over time rests on the stability of their design. The peak of the pyramid—the ultimate achievement, is only possible because of the strength of the base. And the “taller” the achievement we want, the broader and more stable the base must be. This is a fitting structure from which to reconsider higher education civic engagement.

From a broad and strong base of community development principles and practices, to the participatory relationships that must be in place to implement those principles, grow strategic designs that achieve crucial changes in communities. This may be an unusual way to think about our civic engagement practices, so it deserves some explanation.

Community Development as Base

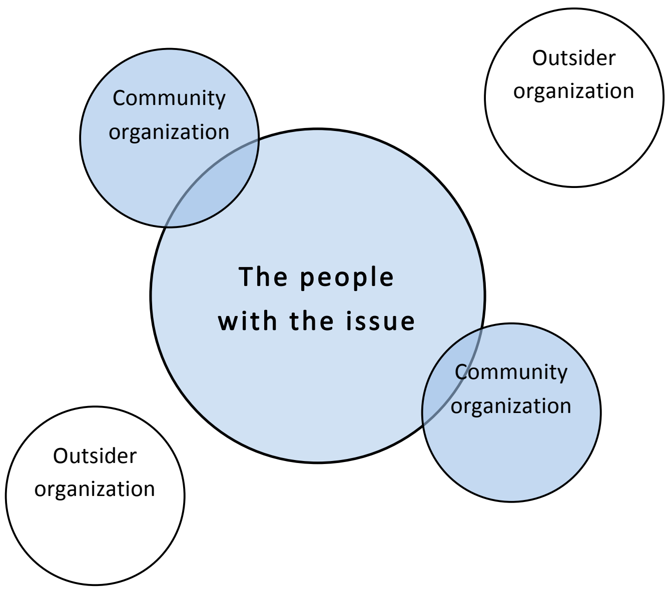
What is community development and why does it provide the base of the pyramid? Community development is a set of principles and practices for changing communities. Any issue you can imagine in a typical community—safety, education, poverty, justice, and many others—provides the basis for the community development approach. Community development workers help people solve collective problems, from getting clean water to building new housing to starting new businesses.

What is most important about the work of community development, however, is that it treats the community as **a social system**. Community development workers do not build houses *for* people. They do not dole out individual services to individuals. They instead engage the members of the community in determining what issues they want to take on, collectively developing plans and strategies for tackling those issues, and then even doing the actual work (Rubin & Rubin, 2007). We want to make clear that we are emphasing a form of community development that builds the leadership and power of those who have been most excluded and are the most vulnerable, not the form led by government and corporate officials. This is most similar to various community organizing approaches that grow from the work of Saul Alinsky (1969; 1971).

Within such a framework, two challenges face higher education service-learning models that emphasize individuals serving individuals. The first is that giving services to individuals risks breaking their existing network bonds by changing the power and skill levels of community members randomly. As some members of the community receive services, and maybe then better jobs, they may leave the community. While the individual got help, the community as a whole was harmed. The second challenge is that simply providing services to individuals risks disempowering them. Effective civic engagement will support community members in harnessing their collective capacity to solve their own problems with minimual outsider assistance.

A community development approach to service-learning starts with a collective focus on an issue or problem, and an assumption that inequalities of power, not just deployment of assets, is at the root of the problem. Thus, any intervention must take those realities into account, moving us beyond an individual client service orientation of civic engagement.

Working in the community, then, means working with the community as a system. And that means understanding the community. We begin by asking who is in the community—is it an urban neighborhood, a rural area, an identity group, people who share a problem? Who has more power and less power in that community? What are the factions in the community? What is the community culture? We could send students out to test the water in the creek, but if they find it's full of pollutants, will the homeowners who live along the creek be thankful to learn they are being poisoned or will they be worried that our civic engagement will wreck their property values? Will the residents who fish the creek, partly because they are too poor to pay for food, be able to find another option for sustenance? We could send students into another community of Hmong and Mexican immigrants to do ESL training, but only work with the Mexican residents because the course sponsoring those students is from the Spanish department. What happens to the power structure in the community as one group of residents develop English-speaking skills while another group is excluded from such services? Does the chance for inter-ethnic conflict in the community increase?



Whether we might be an educational specialist, a biologist, a political scientist, or a recreation studies professor, we must attend to these community development issues. When we send our students "into the community" what they do will reverberate through that community system, and **we are responsible** for those consequences. So we must understand the community and its power dynamics before we act.

It is important to understand that, except in rare cases, the teachers who want the kids to read better, or the social workers who want the poor people to eat better, or the city official who wants people to shoot at each other less, are not the community in the sense that they are usually not directly experiencing the issue. The kids, the undernourished, and the people shooting and being shot at, are the communities in these cases. The social workers might be a community if they are trying to solve their own problems, but not when they are trying to solve someone else's problem. The community consists of the people whose lives are directly affected by the issues at hand, and the community organizations that they control. Interacting with these people are outsider organizations—educational organizations, service organizations, funders, and others controlled by those outside of that very specific community. Some of those outsider organizations may have bridge people—those who come from the community and work for that outsider organization but do not control the organization (Stoecker, 2005). All of these outsiders are certainly worth engaging, along with all the other people from the outside who want to help, but the perspective of community development requires that the people who are actually experiencing the problem play a leadership role in resolving the problem. This goes against our cultural resistance to recognizing power divisions in society, and small rural communities are especially reluctant to seei such divisions, so such an approach must be built carefully and sensitively.

All good civic engagement, then, starts with the principles of good community development, such as those espoused by the Community Development Society (2009):

- Promote active and representative participation toward enabling all community members to meaningfully influence the decisions that affect their lives.
- Engage community members in learning about and understanding community issues, and the economic, social, environmental, political, psychological, and other impacts associated with alternative courses of action.
- Incorporate the diverse interests and cultures of the community in the community development process; and disengage from support of any effort that is likely to adversely affect the disadvantaged members of a community.
- Work actively to enhance the leadership capacity of community members, leaders, and groups within the community.
- Be open to using the full range of action strategies from education to political mobilization to work toward the long-term sustainability and well-being of the community.

As we can see, this approach completely shifts the locus of higher education civic engagement. Now, instead of asking what volunteer experience I can find for the students in my Introduction to Sociology course to help them better learn the course content, I start by asking what issues exist in this community that my students and I can contribute our efforts to tackling.

But that question cannot be answered for a specific class, and often not even for a specific professor. When we start from a community development perspective, before we send our students out to do things, we first have to build the community relationships on which we can design a community-based strategy to fit those students.

Participatory Relationships

Community development, as with most things, is fundamentally about relationships. Once we understand that, the rest falls into place. If we start with treating the community as a community—and remember that can be a small group of people with a shared issue, but is not a group of people doing something for someone else—our very first task is building relationships. It might be useful to start developing these relationships with a few trial projects, keeping in mind that these should be developed with community members so that the focus on community goals is not lost. .

A little bit of homework will help us find groups—ideally community-controlled groups—with which we think we may have some compatibility. For those who are trained in community development, or the more specific skill of community organizing, it may be possible to identify a group of people who are not yet a community, but have a common issue, and work with them to build their own relationships as well.

Those academics who really like a challenge **begin from scratch**—looking for issues in communities that have been neglected or ignored. Often, in such a case, the process of participatory relationship building begins with an interview—finding out what an organized group in a community is trying to accomplish. Some community organizers call this a one-to-one or a **relational meeting** (Chambers and Cowan, 2004). A one-to-one conversation is about getting to know people in the community context—what do they like about their community, what do they dislike about it, what do they do in the community, what would they like to change about their community. For those of us in higher education, as we engage in the conversation, we start listening for places where our skills may be of value. If I'm an education profession and someone says "we really need better schools here" my ears start to perk up. If I'm a political scientist and someone says "if we only had a better council member…" my wheels start turning. And I start focusing my questions—finding out more about that issue.

One such interview usually isn't enough. While one person may really care about the schools, maybe no one else does. Finding a good issue to work on can be a long and arduous process.

The easier path is to look for groups already working on an issue. But this has its own challenges associated with it. Regrettably, social service agencies are often no better than academic institutions at engaging with communities **in ways that empower community members *as a collective***. Coalitions often hold the greatest promise, because they frequently include at least one group actually controlled by the constituency being targeted. Here the one-to-one interview can be with an entire group.

Beware, however, that most of these groups are not looking for the academics' advice. Too many academics enter such meetings thinking they are going to tell people what they should eat, or who they should vote for, or otherwise unload their book expertise on them. Such an approach is a non-starter. What people want is our walk, not our talk. They want to know how good our listening skills are, and whether we can deliver on what they say they want, rather than on what we say they should want. The kinds of questions that best elicit such things are questions asking people about what they are doing, what is working for them, what is not working for them, where they think they are heading, what capacity gaps they are experiencing. **Questions are always better than answers at relationship-building.**

Those participatory relationships then form the basis for trial projects. These will be small and focused actions. They will not be about sending students out to fill volunteer hours, but will focus on accomplishing an actual goal that the community has defined. Such projects, do-able in a single term, allow everyone to test the developing relationship without risking too many of their own resources. This model is now being called project-based service-learning (Chamberlain, 2003; Coyle et al., 2005; Draper 2004)

It is worth pointing out here that we are not talking about the students maintaining these relationships. **This is about the relationship work that the faculty need to do.** Among the complaints that our community partners are most vocal about is the absence of relationships with faculty (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Stoecker & Tryon 2009). If the most we can muster is to send some anonymous students out to ask for volunteer work without ever showing up ourselves, many community groups migh prefer that we keep our students in the classroom.

The intractible challenges facing the communities that we should be working with will not be solved in a single term. A single term project can be a value to the community, but the true potential of an effective project can only be realized when it is **part of a longer term strategy.** It is one thing to pull away if the initial project fails. But if it succeeds, then the principles of community development say that you **should be prepared to commit for the long haul.** A long-term commitment is not always required, especially if the community development project is being fully managed and led by others and they just need some short-term research or technical assistance support. But if the academic starts off being central to the project, then they will probably remain so and need to follow-through on that commitment. This is where it is important to understand and engage in strategic design.

Strategic Design

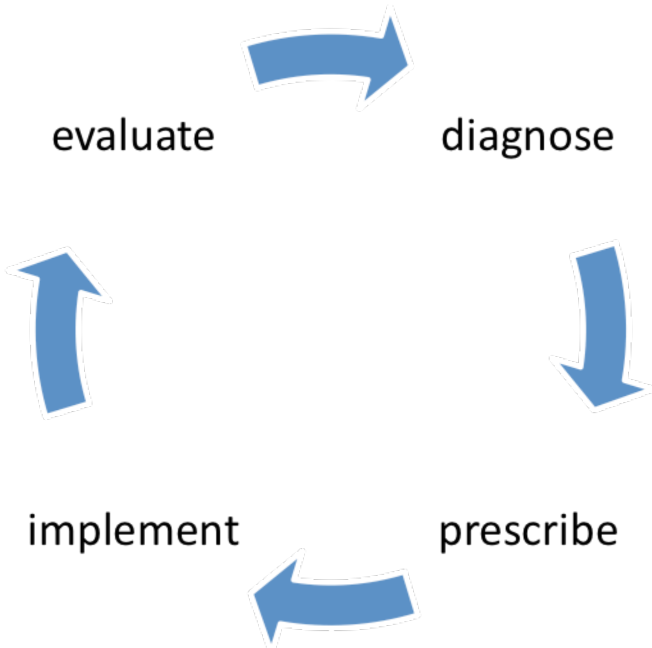
The concept of strategic planning has started creeping into higher education in recent years, but too many of those planning processes have been controlled by administrators rather than by the people who would have to actually implement the resulting plans. In the case of communities trying to overcome the external causes and internal effects of oppression and exploitation, and in a community development context, the ideal process takes on an entirely different and much more participatory character.

You may have heard of things like logic models (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004), too. While we agree with some of the logic of logic models, their imposition on communities has usually resulted in community members seeing them as a bunch of boxes to be filled in, rather than **a plan to be developed**. Not to mention the fact that those complex logic models get ignored as soon as the first unpredicted program even occurs. A good strategic design process **is much simpler, much more flexible**, **and much more alive** (University of Wisconsin Extension 2008).

Here again it is important to point out how different this is from the frequently occurring process of higher education civic engagement where a faceless faculty member sends out anonymous students to descend on unsuspecting community organizations that haven't been consulted before the students shows up.

In the strategic design process, the professor's course takes a back seat for the moment and the focus is on the community issue. What does the community want to change? What do they need to accomplish the change? What help is needed from outsiders? What help can the higher education institution provide? What help can other outsiders provide?

To some extent it is in the strategic design process where academics can help the most. Most communities, even when they have the skills, lack the capacity to do all the research necessary to make effective strategic design decisions. Skilled researchers, in contrast, make up a good number of higher education faculty and staff. And there are at least three crucial places where research is needed in a community design process (Stoecker, 2005). The first place is in diagnosing a community issue. The community says it has a youth crime problem. How much crime is there? Of what kinds? Who is being affected? At what times? With what consequences? Answering such questions—providing an effective diagnosis—is crucial for the next research step. That next step is coming up with a prescription. If the crime is after school, then that involves a different potential set of interventions than if it is late at night. In either case, the community needs to gather information on possible strategies for addressing the situation, and have criteria for choosing a strategy to try.



Once the group has designed its prescription, it needs to find the resources to put it into play. Ideally, the design of the prescription should take into account the resource environment, but even when it does, those resources still have to be mobilized. It is in this part of the strategic design process where **the difference between an academic-driven process and a community-driven process is most apparent.** An academic-driven process asks only what I can do with my course. A community-driven process **asks what parts of institutions are needed to accomplish the community goals**. It is likely that the community will need multiple parts of the institution through the life-cycle of the project. Some groups of students can help with the diagnostic research, others with the prescription research. Other students may contribute their labor to the actual intervention. And yet others can assist with the third crucial research need—the evaluation.

The most important part of strategic design is building in a feedback process to know quickly and frequently whether the project is moving toward or from its goals. To learn whether the project is moving toward or away from its goals, evaluation is essential. Note, though, that while evaluation is important in this sense, it is not important as an end in itself. If the goal is community change, then the evaluation should help achieve the change, not just find out whether any has occurred. This means that the evaluation starts when the action starts, to help it adjust along the way.

Community Impacts

The top of the pyramid is community impact—**stronger, safer, more powerful, happier collectivities of people,** not simply having 500 students put in 20 hours each of required volunteer time without being directed towards a larger goal. For those who have done their reading on evaluation methodology (Patton, 1997), sending students to do volunteer work is an output—not an impact; it is a strategy that can be directed toward an impact. As such, the strategy is most meaningful if those students are being deployed consistent with a strategic design that knows what they are supposed to be accomplishing. Those accomplishments we call outcomes—specific documentable changes in the community. **Impacts are the accumulated consequences of the outcomes.** Getting 20 students to coordinate a restorative justice program is an output. Getting those students to successfully carry out a strategic design of organizing youth into community development teams that reduces their own crime rate is an outcome. Reducing the overall crime rate as a result of various crime-diminishing strategies and activities, and ending up with stronger relationships and a happier community, are impacts.

Achieving such impacts is an **ongoing, coordinated, year-round, long-term team effort.** It can't be done by one class over one term except in rare cases. It may seem entirely impractical to ask higher education faculty to become part of such a process. And yet, many of us have done exactly that—worked with a community year-round, plugging students into specific parts of the project through courses, independent studies, and even the occasional paid position.

All this may sound daunting, and it is clearly a challenging process. But the point is not about doing it perfectly. It is about thinking differently, thinking about a community-driven, system-oriented approach versus a campus-driven individual oriented one; thinking of larger, longer term action, done in a highly participatory manner that involves ongoing evaluation and redirection. So next we provide a couple examples of how we can move toward putting this model into practice. Neither example attempts to show a perfect implementation of the model, and thus each illustrates both potential strategies and challenges to implementing this new approach.

Case Studies

1. Developing an information service program for Madison

Randy Stoecker, Katherine Loving, Nicole Gilbertson, and Molly Reddy

This project began with a University of Wisconsin-Madison academic staff member—Katherine Loving—and a professor—Randy Stoecker, partnering with Eric Howland of the nonprofit information technology support provider DANEnet. DANEnet did not have the capacity to meet all the needs for computer support for the many nonprofits in Madison. Our partnership hoped to create a sustainable system for engaging skilled students in the process of meeting some of those needs.

We began in the fall of 2007 with a small group of about a half dozen organizations, identified through our professional networks, interested in nonprofits and computer technology. They helped us design a study of nonprofit information technology needs, beginning with a survey of 500 nonprofit organizations asking them about their information technology needs and their interest in a student-based program trying to help meet those needs. Sixty-five organizations responded. Randy, Katherine, and Eric, supported by a small sub-grant, then co-taught a student seminar that did more in-depth research with the 65 groups and options for meeting their information technology needs. Fifteen students—a mix of graduate and undergraduate students, enrolled in the course. Most students then conducted in-depth interviews with the 65 organizations, completing interviews with 30 of the groups. A smaller group studied a student-based computer support program serving students, faculty, and staff at the university, along with DANEnet itself. At the end of the semester we had a written report and organized a community event to which we recruited the organizations that had been involved in the study. Students presented their findings, and then we engaged the organizations in a planning process to design the actual program. Essentially, then, we completed both the diagnostic research—understanding the organizations' needs—and the prescriptive research—analyzing two methods for meeting those needs—in the same semester.

The organizations were interested in obtaining personal face-to-face service and having the same person working with them long-term. So we decided to create a system of pairing students and organizations. The organizations also accepted the reality that we could not guarantee a student for longer than a single semester. We focused on accomplishing specific technology projects rather than providing on-call trouble-shooting, and emphasized capacity building of the organization staff rather than simply supplying them with finished products. An organization that wanted to update its website, for example, would get a student to help with the updating in a way that also involved educating one or more staff on the process of maintaining the site after the student left.

We began implementing and evaluating the program in the fall of 2008, surveying area nonprofits to learn of specific possible information technology projects. We settled on website development as a prime need. We also attempted to recruit students skilled in website design, offering them each 1 credit for an approximately 40-hour commitment that included 10 hours of training and 20 hours of actual project work. In the end we had four students each partnering with one organization. We required students to blog regularly on their progress and meet with student program coordinators in order to catch challenges as quickly as possible. We had a fifth organization and student, but realized that neither the student nor the organization was prepared for the commitment required to complete the project.

Even though Randy, Katherine, Eric, and three part-time student coordinators spent more than 800 hours attempting to coordinate four 20-hour projects, we had only one project that was a clear success by the end of the semester. To date, two of the projects have not succeeded because of technical issues. Clearly, we had chosen projects that were too complex. Based on these evaluation results, the next semester we focused on Web 2.0 projects—helping organizations develop a Facebook presence, or a YouTube video, or a blog, that did not require original coding and intense design work. We were able to increase our capacity to 11 organizations and 11 students, but still put in over 800 hours of program management time. We also intensified our evaluation efforts—tracking students' progress even more carefully and frequently than before—to greater success.

Our community development goal in this project was to increase the capacity of Madison area nonprofits to more effectively use information technology. We believed that, in doing so, we would increase their capacity to do their work and thus improve the community in general. In this case, our target community was the nonprofits themselves, since they were the ones experiencing the technology problems. Our diagnostic research focused on the technology challenges they faced and our prescriptive research focused on strategies for engaging students in meeting those challenges. Neither of these research processes prevented us from making mistakes, but our evaluation research prevented us from repeating mistakes.

2. Addressing Obesity in South Bend

Mary Beckman & Bethany Cockburn

In 2004, two individuals from the local American Heart Association board, a staff member of the University of Notre Dame's Office of Human Resources, and a member of the University's Center for Social Concerns who is also a faculty member in Notre Dame's Economics and Policy Studies department called together local organizations that had an interest in addressing the growing incidence of obesity locally, particularly in low-income areas of the city. The initial gathering resulted in what has come to be known as the Reducing Obesity Coalition, or ROC. ROC grew to 30 local organizations, including universities, businesses, and health and other nonprofits. Its original mission was to "promote healthy lifestyles…through the prevention and reduction of overweight and obesity….".

In what can be identified as the group's effort to diagnose the problem, ROC applied for and obtained a community-based research grant from Notre Dame's Center for Social Concerns soon after it formed. The research focused on the level of access to healthy food options that low-income families residing on the predominantly low-income and minority west side of South Bend experienced. The study also aimed to assess the willingness of these consumers to purchase healthier food if they had better choices. The grant required a team approach to the research that drew expertise from the academy and from community partners, and involved undergraduates and graduate students.

The results of the study led to new activities toward meeting ROC's goals. Several different groups, including local health coalitions, requested to learn more about the study. As a result, the primary academic investigator and undergraduates working with the project gave presentations to local health experts and community members. The presentations inspired a new west side farmer's market, several healthy cooking demonstrations by a culinary group and the Health Department at a local health fair and at other venues, and community gardens. Furthermore, data from the study have been requested and used by a number of organizations, and continue to be requested to assist related projects. For example, both the YMCA and the Health Department sought and made use of the results of ROC's study, and ROC data has been requested for inclusion in program evaluations of a health project at a local homeless shelter and a summer youth sports program.

In the fall of 2008, ROC revised its mission statement, created goals and objectives, and wrote operating principles. ROC created an advisory board, and crafted its membership to better reflect ethnic, gender, and occupational diversity.

The work of ROC provides an important comparison to the community impact pyramid. ROC attempted to see the bigger community development picture from the start, though it did not define its work as community development per se. Though there was not a single over-riding strategic plan that brought together disparate activities, considered how they might fit together, and evaluated them as a single strategy from a community development standpoint, ROC did take opportunities to evaluate its efforts and rethink its direction, as exemplified in the revision of its mission statement. It also attempted to develop a diverse membership, even though those who were likely to be most impacted by obesity were not specifically sought out for participation.

More to do….

As university and college educators, we engage in service in our local communities. We do research that assists area non-profits. We ask our students to contribute to community organizations in ways that are respectful of off-campus partners and make positive contributions.

Generally, our efforts are individually meaningful. They enable children to read better, those with physical disabilities to reach health clinics, and individuals in jail to get their GEDs.

Yet our efforts along these lines are disparate. They do not necessarily lead to changes that get at root causes, such as the problems with the school system or the lack of decent jobs for parents that results in children needing extra help with school work.

What we are attempting to describe here is an evolving framework for getting at those deeper causes. Doing so does not mean that our students won't tutor children in reading or prisoners in high school math. But if they do, it will be as part of an integrated broader strategy to address the deeper issues in our schools and communities. Teachers and students alike would be able to have confidence that the service they are doing is not only helping one individual but is assisting a larger enterprise that is aimed to improve the situation for all those affected by the issue. And that may mean doing tutoring in a very different way.

We believe this work can be successful, however slow it is and however foggy the path toward it may be—because many voices will be in the process—determining the goals, evaluating, redirecting, and addressing the large and small pieces along the way. The many voices support a solidarity among those at all levels of privilege, and provide the variety of skills and sensibilities needed to sustain the vision.

The examples provided above shift the orientation of higher education civic engagement from one that is driven by the campus, its needs and its self-understanding, toward one that sees university participation as one element in a broad-based effort for the benefit of the entire community. The involvement of faculty and students follows a community-led direction, of which the university community is only one participant. Student and faculty involvement occur in response to the large agenda identified by a diverse coalition, rather than by a faculty member's class or scholarship interests.

We believe others are engaged in similar efforts and experiments. We look forward to joining with them in helping this framework evolve.

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