THE ENGAGED UNIVERSITY AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT.
THE U.S. APPROACH

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Abstract

The concept of the engaged university has been attracting attention, energy and resources in the U.S. academic environment for the past 50 years, with the twofold benefit of community development/neighborhood enhancement/community revival, as the case may be, on the one hand, and student development in the wake of their participation in the university-initiated community projects, on the other. The paper focuses primarily on the educational benefits community-engaged universities are able to provide their students, thus building both their civic spirit and social responsibility, as well as the soft skills they need in order to perform successfully in the community-enhancement projects their university is putting forward and afterwards in their own careers.

Keywords: universities' social responsibility, community projects, service learning

1. The engaged university

The engaged university is becoming a worldwide phenomenon as institutions of higher education across the world choose to "become active players in the life of their communities" (Hollister, 2014:1) The trend is particularly powerful across the USA where, in their capacity as economically and politically powerful anchor institutions, universities commit their expertise and resources to solving real-life community problems, thereby enhancing their own neighborhoods and local communities, as well as the quality of the students' academic experience on campus and beyond.

As early as 1994, an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education stated that "universities are learning that they cannot afford to become 'islands of affluence, self-importance, and horticultural beauty in seas of squalor, violence, and despair'" (Carr, 1999:1). The reasons are clear: the university exists in the community and for the community. The Ivory Tower syndrome, with the aloof, self-sufficient university engrossed in academic pursuits and unaware of the problems besetting the neighboring community, is a thing of the past.

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The growing reflection of university engagement in the press indicates that the movement for social responsibility in higher education is gaining momentum and universities – massively in the USA – are redefining the relationship between the academic world and public interest: in addition to building the human capital, which is the core mission of any university, they are also helping to build the community beyond the campus walls, with significant results on student development, too. As clearly stated by university authorities:

Our institutions recognize that 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, U.S. universities have developed a win-win model which gives their students and faculty the opportunity to give their scholarly pursuits a social dimension, by applying their academic prowess to finding solutions to the real-life challenges of the neighboring community. As the recent history of the University of Pennsylvania in the context of the economically distressed Western Philadelphia confirms it, a university is not an island unto itself and successful universities cannot isolate indefinitely long from the struggling communities around them. Actually the options available to universities are dichotomic: universities can opt for isolation **or** for community integration. However, no walls, no matter how high, can protect the students and the faculty from a troubled neighborhood and at some point the dire reality beyond the campus walls comes to impact the university microcosm. Ignorance is no bliss in this context, and the only viable solution for the university is to accept its social responsibilities, and step out of campus into the community, thus assuming the guiding role its scholarship and resources qualify it for. In other words, to build partnerships with the community.

This approach was quite slow in emerging, although the Morrill Act of 1864 that introduced the Land-Grant State University system can be considered the first step in the direction of having universities address community issues and raising their interest in working out a solution that should benefit both the community and the educational institution. However, the universities' time-honored tradition of intellectual aloofness and disinterest in the practical real-life applications of academic knowledge died hard:

It was not until problems – physical decay and rising crime – began to directly affect universities' ability to recruit and retain students, faculty, and staff that many universities could no longer ignore the problems. Today, many urban universities tie their missions to the areas in which they reside and provide services to the surrounding community (Carr, 1999: 2).

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, 1999: 1).

In addition, such partnerships may help hone students' skills, at the same time furthering the development of skills relevant for the needs of the labor market. Research shows time and again that employers seek college graduates who have been able to develop soft skills on top of the academic content and the specialism the college education traditionally assumes responsibility for. "Civic engagement may be part of the solution. Participating in service learning programs can broaden a student's skill set but it can also make university education more relevant and help tackle the skills mismatch" (Warden, 2014:3) between the skills commonly developed by university education and the skills the labor market requires.

University engagement with the community is becoming a key dimension of U.S. higher education. As such, it is effectively captured by the Carnegie Foundation in the Elective Community Engagement Classification that it has developed in addition to the other all-inclusive ones (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education). Community engagement is defined as

[T]he collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. 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 (Carnegie Community Engagement Classification).

Now that we have a clear understanding of the concept of the engaged university in the U.S. academic context, we will explore the impact the activities conducted by universities to honor their social commitment have on the students. The breadth and depth of the universities' social responsibility in the USA explains why I have chosen to focus on the U.S. approach, also in recognition of the socially innovative work U.S. universities are doing as worldwide acknowledged trend-setters and path-breakers.

In fact, few institutions have more to contribute, or have more at stake, in the revitalization of urban communities than colleges and universities. Educational institutions are the creators, repositories, and disseminators of knowledge and understanding that can help address urban challenges. As leading institutions

within their communities, they are powerful economic engines, applied technology centers, major employers, investors, developers, and reservoirs of energetic faculty and students (Carr, 1999: 2).

2. The socially responsible university: impact on its students

If we accept that "universities, in principle, are the only modern institutions both designed to encompass the broad range of human experience and devoted to the use of reason to help deal with the enormous complexity of our society and world" (Carr, 1999:7), and if we look upon the engaged university as "an institution whose mission is the general mission of societal improvement and democratic improvement, and whose resources, if appropriately organized, can help achieve that mission" (Carr, 1999:7), then we may begin to grasp the comprehensive learning opportunities that become available thus to the students. The students take part in community projects facilitated by the university-community partnership and they provide service to the community while taking advantage of the service-learning opportunities that have been thus built into their educational experience.

In order to explore the complexity of the issue, we will focus on the Cornell University and its experience with social responsibility. Prestigious Cornell University has published a 31-page booklet entitled "Engaged Cornell" which spells out the benefits of community engagement to the students: as a result of the university's engagement with the community, upon graduation

Cornellians enter the world as educated global citizens who practice [sic] respect and empathy; seek collaboration, cooperation, and creativity; and embrace differences and diversity in all aspects of their personal, professional, and civic lives (Engaged Cornell, 2014:2). True to the Cornell mission that "what happens in the world shapes our laboratories and classrooms and what happens in our university matters to the world" (*idem*: 5), they plan to make community-engaged learning the hallmark of the Cornell academic experience, integrating community engagement by 2025 with teaching, learning and research and turning it into "a shared practice that defines 'any person…any study'" (*idem*: 7).

The concept of community-engaged learning, in the Cornell acceptation, is "a form of experiential education where students, faculty and staff:
- Build collaboration with diverse stakeholders, through organized service-activities in specific community contexts, to address social problems and issues.
- Integrate theory and practice.
- Engage in active, reflective learning.
- Gain knowledge and skills in academic disciplines while advancing their personal, professional, and social development" (*idem*:5).

As apparent from the above example, the engaged university furthers student development through the multiple community-engaged learning opportunities it offers its students. This "new socially aware and collaborative paradigm" "(*idem*:7) that is embraced by U.S. universities has a major impact on the students and aims to help them grow into what Cornell calls "educated global citizens" "(*idem*:7), capable to show respect and empathy, to thrive on diversity, and to cooperate in new and creative ways. Not surprisingly, the learning outcomes such community-engaged courses are expected to generate will include, again from the Cornell perspective, "civic engagement, intercultural competence, integrative learning, critical reflection, and ethical practice" (*idem*: 8).

As universities across the USA have discovered, community-based learning grants richer meanings and immediate relevance to the academic inquiry, at the same time enhancing the learning experience by galvanizing "learning and discovery for students" "(*idem*:18).

3. Student development and its scope

Effective partnerships between communities and universities benefit all the actors involved: from the students' perspective, they are able to add a real-life, civic dimension to their academic pursuits. The Kellogg Commission highlights the long-term benefits students derive from the engaged universities' activities in and with the neighboring community as follows:
Close partnerships with the surrounding community help demonstrate that higher education is about important values such as informed citizenship and a sense of responsibility. The newer forms of public scholarship and community-based learning help produce civic-minded graduates who are as well prepared to take up the complete problems of our society as they are to succeed in their careers (The Kellogg Commission, "Returning to Our Roots. The Engaged Institution": 16).

In practical terms, the community projects students work on as part of their community-learning experience provide ample opportunities to "link theory to practice and apply learning in community contexts" (Ohio State University) thus honing their problem-solving abilities and helping them acquire an in-depth understanding of the subject fields. Moreover, the students' ensuing "enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Ohio State University) correlates with their multi-tier development as their work on community projects helps them grow as people, as community members, and as fledgling professionals.

Work on community projects immerses the students in real-life problems, thereby preparing them for the careers they will have. These off-campus learning contexts give them the opportunity to access new knowledge and research, to put their leadership skills to use for "the Greater Good" (Engaged Cornell, 2014:8) and to

cooperate by demonstrating true appreciation for diversity. The two-way process of mutual transformation and impact that the university-community partnership furthers enhances the academic experience and the students as members of the academic community engaged with the community at large. As "Engaged Cornell" definitively points out, "as our scholars help to shape communities, they in turn are molded, enriched, and energized by their endeavors" (Engaged Cornell, 2014:13). And students will be no exception.

4. Soft skills and service learning for professional and civic development

According to statistical evidence, the college graduates who are successful on the labor market are able to balance the hard skills – that is the content, the specialism they have acquired through their undergraduate education – with a fair amount of soft skills that employers find essential to adequate workplace performance. Soft skills are very versatile in nature and ubiquous as they "include the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and the willingness to learn through experience, and are applicable across multiple disciplines and careers" (Holmes, 2014).

The key ingredients of organizational and personal success include team work, communication, and leadership. Soft skills underpin them all. As the business community has been quick to notice,
soft skills are increasingly becoming the hard skills of today's work force. It's just not enough to be highly trained in technical skills, without developing the softer, interpersonal and relationship-building skills that help people to communicate and collaborate effectively ("Why Soft Skills Matter").

Soft skills encompass personality traits and habits. Present-day college education equips students with academic and technical knowledge while expecting them to naturally develop the soft skills they will require for successful transition to the job market, primarily in the areas of communication, analytical thinking, initiative, and collaborative activities. As employers around the globe are concerned about the limited soft skills graduates display on their entry level jobs, "educators are asked by employers and policy makers to provide instruction which would develop student skills in both the 'hard' (academic and technical) and 'soft' (personality traits and habits) skills required to be workplace-ready" (Washor Stack, 2015). In this respect, the engaged universities are effectively responding by providing students with opportunities for community projects.

The focus of the U.S. universities' attention is on developing what research perceives to be the seven core skills that facilitate the graduates' seamless integration on the labor market. By means of stand alone courses or embedded learning, engaged universities help students develop in the following areas: communication; cognition, with particular attention attached to thinking skills and

problem solving skills; collaborative work; life-long learning and information management; leadership; initiative and entrepreneurship; and ethical and professional conduct.

This dual academic focus in which the hard skills - that is the core content traditionally imparted through college education - are complemented and ultimately enhanced by the soft skills rounding off the college education and preparing the students for a smooth transition to their professional lives has been designed to bridge the gap between academic training and employers' needs.

Recent research shows that soft skills often make the difference with entry level positions and beyond. More specifically, "the top ten most popular soft skills companies say they look for when hiring include: 1) Candidate has a strong work ethic, 73 percent; 2) Candidate is dependable, 73 percent; 3) Candidate has a positive attitude, 72 percent; 4) Candidate is self-motivated, 66 percent; 5) Candidate is team-oriented, 60 percent; 6) Candidate is organized, can manage multiple priorities, 57 percent; 7) Candidate works well under pressure, 57 percent; 8) Candidate is an effective communicator, 56 percent; 9) Candidate is flexible, 51 percent; 10) Candidate is confident, 46 percent" (Career Builder, 2014).

No matter how soft skills are structured and approached for research purposes, collaboration, communication and interpersonal skills, leadership, problem solving, and time management are the major areas in which the extracurricular activities conducted on campus or in the middle of the neighboring community help to build the foundation of a successful career. What is more, soft skills underlie long-term success both in the profession and the community.

Soft skills development is facilitated by service learning which is a distinctly U.S. pedagogical technique extensively employed across the U.S. higher education environment. For example, the University of Minnesota, in the Faculty and Instructors' Guide to Service Learning issued by its Community Service-Learning Center, looks upon service learning

as a way to join campuses (and specifically, academic departments across the curriculum) with their communities to positively respond to community challenges and opportunities for collaboration. ... Service-learning can be defined as both an educational philosophy and a pedagogical technique for combining community service with academic objectives. Academic Service-Learning is a teaching methodology which utilizes a community involvement component as a means for students to gain a deeper understanding of disciplinary course objectives and to gain a deeper understanding of civic life and participation through structured reflection (University of Minnesota, 2015: 2).

According to the prevalent educational vision in the USA, the experiential learning facilitated by service learning is integrated with the academic learning traditionally

provided by universities. Activities like classroom presentations and discussions, alongside various assignments, encourage students to analyze the "service experience in the context of the course academic and civic learning objectives" (*idem:* 5).

The beneficial impact of service learning on the students' soft skills development is clearly apparent when surveying the benefits - academic, personal, and professional – that community-based learning commonly provides. Any selection, no matter how minimal, will include among the service-learning benefits relevant for soft skills development the following: development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills; enhanced skills, especially in communication, collaboration, and leadership; improved ability to handle ambiguity and the flexibility to adapt to changing situations; appreciation of lifelong learning and civic participation and development of the skills needed for this; increased reflection on building a career path by integrating interests, skills, and values.

Engaged universities emphasize mutually beneficial partnerships with the communities around them and promote service-learning as the perfect method to enhance both the communities and their own students. Ideally suited to help materialize the universities' enriched mission, in the U.S. perspective service learning connects academic pursuits with community engagement and personal growth. In the words of the promoters of service learning on the University of Minnesota campus, "service learning is the name for a teaching method that uses a community involvement component to enhance students' understanding of course material and sense of civic responsibility, while addressing community identified needs" (*idem*:18).

The golden triad of the universities' civic responsibilities has come full circle: from engaged universities to service learning and then further on to soft skills development.

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