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Lessons Learned from Seattle University's Journey of Community Engagement

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Abstract

Seattle University's Jesuit Catholic mission calls for "empowering leaders for a just and humane world." Inspired by this mission, Seattle University has, in recent years, made community engagement a hallmark of its educational purpose. The University has pursued this expansive vision by creating a centralized approach to community engagement and pursuing a place-based initiative that features a university assisted community school.

This article explores the critical questions and specific strategies of the three distinct phases in Seattle University's development of its university-wide community engagement initiative. The article concludes by offering "lessons learned" for other colleges and universities interested in leveraging their resources to pursue transformative community engagement initiatives that benefit campus and the community.

Phase 1: Centralization 2003-2008

In October 2000 at Santa Clara University, several hundred people including all of the 28 presidents of Jesuit universities from the United States gathered for a conference on the role that Jesuit higher education plays in pursuing a more just world. Father Peter Hans Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Jesuits, gave the events keynote speech and described the critical importance of mobilizing students to serve, learn and lead in their communities. Father Kolvenbach observed that for students "when the heart is touched by direct experiences the mind may be challenged to change" (Kolvenbach, 2000).

The Seattle University delegation that attended the convening left inspired and ready to act on Father Kolvenbach's directive. Over the next several years a number of institutional leaders called for greater connections between the campus and the community and greater use of academic service-learning as a pedagogical strategy among faculty. Campus leadership saw immense potential in the University's ability to play a more meaningful role in its neighborhood while simultaneously strengthening the educational experience for its 7,500 students.

By 2003, Seattle University had reached a crossroads. An increasing number of faculty showed an interest in service-learning and more and more community organizations wanted to partner with the University but the activities that were occurring were haphazard, sporadic and having mixed results.

Seattle University faced several critical questions.

- How could it efficiently and effectively mobilize faculty to deepen and expand their use of service-learning?
- What investments would leverage existing efforts to expand overall campus and community engagement?
- How could the University become a more consistent partner with neighborhood organizations and residents in order to begin to have more of a positive impact?

These questions fueled a year-long planning process that led to the launch of the Center for Service and Community Engagement in fall 2004. The Center's immediate mandate was to serve as the focal point for campus and community partnerships. Center staff provided coordination and support for faculty interested in connecting their courses to the community. In some cases staff arranged community placements for students in service-learning courses while in other cases the staff worked with community agencies and faculty to scope projects and research questions that students could complete. Finally, Center staff worked with the University's legal counsel to establish policies, procedures, and guidelines for minimizing risk in university-sponsored community engagement experiences.

Simultaneous to the development of the Center for Service and Community Engagement was the creation of the Academic Service-Learning Faculty Fellows Program. In 2002, a Seattle University College of Education faculty member formed a year-long program for Seattle University faculty to learn the theory and practice of connecting community service to academic courses to enhance student learning and make a positive impact in the community. Through an intensive summer workshop and quarterly meetings and discussions, faculty revise a course syllabus to include service-learning, teach the revised course, and conduct an action research project related to their use of service-learning.

The pedagogical support from the Faculty Fellows Program and centralized coordination from the Center for Service and Community Engagement led to significant growth in faculty use of service-learning. By 2007, 100 Seattle University faculty were engaging 2,400 students in 208 courses with a service-learning component. These courses spanned almost every academic discipline and linked with more than 70 community-based organizations. University leadership had taken Father Kolvenbach's speech seriously and

attained success. In only a short amount of time the University was much more connected to its urban Seattle neighborhood and many more students were discovering the opportunity and challenge of working for justice. Yet, this success soon led to additional major questions.

Phase 2: 2009-2015 – The Seattle University Youth Initiative

In 2007, after observing the initial success of Seattle University's community engagement efforts, a University trustee asked a simple question: "If Seattle University were to focus its community engagement efforts on a particular topic, neighborhood or issue, could it make more of a measurable impact on the community?"

Intrigued by the question, Seattle University President Stephen Sundborg S.J. challenged a group of campus leaders to explore ideas and develop a plan. Over the next several years hundreds of campus and community members participated in a planning process that focused on two central questions:

- How might Seattle University apply its resources in one neighborhood to help young people break the cycle of poverty in order to succeed in school and in life?
- How could this full-scale community engagement effort further advance the University's mission and academic programs?

In February 2011, the University launched the Seattle University Youth Initiative, the largest and most comprehensive community engagement project in its history. The Youth Initiative unites Seattle University and the wider community to improve the academic achievement of low-income youth living in the attendance zone of Bailey Gatzert Elementary School while strengthening the education of Seattle University students and expanding professional development opportunities for faculty and staff.

The Bailey Gatzert attendance zone encompasses a two square mile neighborhood immediately south of the University. Children and families living in this neighborhood face significant challenges including barriers to success in school, lack of access to high quality affordable housing and lack of attainment of employment that pays a livable wage. For many of these reasons, the number of neighborhood children living in poverty is among the highest in the city (Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council, 2014). Bailey Gatzert Elementary School also faces challenges. Among Seattle Public Schools, Gatzert School has

the highest percentage of children eligible for free and reduced lunch, a common indicator of poverty (Seattle Public Schools, 2013). There are over 20 different primary languages spoken by Gatzert families and almost half of the Gatzert students speak English as a second language making it hard to navigate the public school system. On any given day 50 to 70 of Gatzert's 350 students are experiencing homelessness.

The neighborhood also has tremendous resources. Over 20,000 people live in the Bailey Gatzert attendance zone that is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the city. The zone encompasses several smaller neighborhoods including Seattle's historic and current cultural home to the African American, Chinese American, Filipino American, Japanese American and Vietnamese American communities. In recent years, immigrants from East Africa and Latin America have also moved into the neighborhood. Leaders from all of these ethnic and cultural communities are actively pursuing efforts to improve their neighborhood and support families who are struggling. In addition, several dozen neighborhood non-profit organizations and public institutions are working to strengthen the community.

Through the Youth Initiative the University is partnering with neighborhood leaders, the City of Seattle, Seattle Public Schools, Seattle Housing Authority, and over 30 non-profit organizations to dramatically improve the academic achievement of 1,000 low-income neighborhood students. The Youth Initiative's central strategy is to create a "cradle-through-college" pipeline of educational resources for neighborhood children and their families.

The Youth Initiative also strives to enhance the University's educational programs by mobilizing university students to serve, learn and lead through academic service-learning, community-based research, internships, practica, work-study, and volunteer activities. University faculty also play a vital role in moving the Initiative forward by utilizing service-learning in their courses and pursuing community-based research projects with neighborhood organizations. Finally, the Youth Initiative strives to advance the field of higher education and community engagement. Seattle University pursues this goal by disseminating promising practices and lessons learned and creating a learning community among universities engaged in place-based initiatives, particularly faith-based institutions.

Community School Model

The initial four years of the Youth Initiative have involved a combination of developing new structures and systems while simultaneously expanding the University's engagement in the Bailey Gatzert neighborhood. In launching the Initiative, one risk the University faced was to expand too quickly and thereby limit the potential for significant impact. For this reason the University chose to focus on school partnerships, particularly a university-assisted community school at Gatzert Elementary. The Coalition for Community Schools defines a community school "as both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources" (Coalition for Community Schools, 2015). A community school's "integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities" (Coalition for Community Schools, 2015).

In pursuing a university-assisted community school model at Gatzert, the University has utilized four approaches (1) direct programming, (2) connecting organizations and systems, (3) advocating for families and the school, and (4) funding critical needs.

Programming. The centerpiece of the University's direct programming effort at Gatzert Elementary School is the extended learning program. Led by a full-time Seattle University staff person who is housed at Gatzert School, the University has partnered with Gatzert teachers and five local non-profits to extend the school-day by two hours for 180 Gatzert students. Over 80 Seattle University students, faculty and staff assist with the extended day program by providing one-to-one academic support and leading enrichment activities such as film making, an engineering club, a running program and a dance class. Last year the after-school program, which did not exist prior to 2010, contributed 25,000 hours of additional learning time (almost 20% more time per student per year). One of the elements of the program focuses on science education for fifth graders. In 2013-2014, 50% of Gatzert fifth graders passed the State MSP Science test; an increase from 10% in 2010-2011 (OSPI, 2015).

In addition to the after-school program, Seattle University has pursued other direct service strategies including placing highly skilled math tutors in Gatzert classrooms through a program called the Seattle University Math Corps (SUM Corps). Seattle University staff and students have also led parent engagement activities including a "Strengthening

Families" parenting program and a talk time program for non-English speaking parents to practice their English skills.

Connecting Organizations and Systems. Seattle University staff have played a leadership role in convening and connecting new community and campus partners to Gatzert School. For example, the University partnered with the Seattle Housing Authority to identify multi-year funding to contract with Catholic Community Services to run a summer program for sixty students at Gatzert School. The University has also provided support and expertise to Gatzert School in developing a new data tracking system to monitor student academic progress. The University has organized service days at the school including a one-day painting and renovation project that engaged 100 participants from the National Association of College and University Business Officers that was holding its annual conference in Seattle. Finally, Seattle University has attempted to adjust its pedagogical system by having courses taught on-site at Gatzert School. One of these courses was co-taught by the Gatzert School principal.

Advocating. Since many of the families attending Gatzert Elementary School are recent immigrants to the United States they have less familiarity with how to advocate for their children within the complex bureaucracy of Seattle Public Schools. For this reason, on several occasions the University has engaged in advocacy efforts in partnership with Gatzert families. For example, in fall 2014 Gatzert School was chosen to receive a \$750,000 three-year grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to start a much-needed pre-school in the building. Yet, political upheaval within the Seattle School Board threatened to deny the school the funding. The University worked to mobilize parents to attend the school board meeting and speak during the public comments portion of the meeting. The parents' testimony led one board member to change her vote and the board voted to approve the funding for the pre-school. On another occasion, Seattle University helped to educate parents about impending school boundary changes that may negatively impact Gatzert families.

Funding Critical Needs. The Gatzert Elementary School administration frequently faces financial challenges to fully serve and educate all of the complex needs of its students including over 15% of the student body who, on any given night, are homeless. Seattle University has partnered with the school to address its fiscal needs. For example, in 2010 Gatzert School did not have a computer lab and had very few computers

in classrooms. Seattle University donated 40 used computers to start a lab. The University then pursued grants from Target Inc. to purchase new machines including several dozen i-Pads for use in classrooms. Gatzert School now has one of the best computer labs in the Seattle Public School District. University staff also partnered with the Gatzert administration on the successful application for \$324,000 from the City of Seattle's Family and Education Levy. These funds provide support for additional social, educational and data tracking services within the Gatzert building.

While it is challenging to show a direct correlation between Seattle University's partnership with Gatzert School and the specific educational results of Gatzert children; positive things are occurring at the school since the University started its intensive partnership in 2010. In 2011-2012, Gatzert Elementary School students had the highest academic growth rate of any school in Seattle. In 2014, Gatzert Elementary School received the English Language Acquisition Award because Gatzert ELL student academic growth was in the top 5% in the State of Washington. While these are notable successes, much work remains as Gatzert students still lag behind the Seattle Public School District average in many academic indicators.

Choice Neighborhood Grant

In 2011 and 2012, Seattle Housing Authority successfully attained two Choice Neighborhood grants totaling \$30 million from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to begin the redevelopment of Yesler Terrace, one of Seattle's oldest public housing communities. The grant funding provided over \$3 million for additional education programs. Since the Seattle University Youth Initiative neighborhood encompasses Yesler Terrace, the Housing Authority asked Seattle University to serve as the lead education partner in implementing the grant and leading a coalition of seven organizations committed to a collective impact strategy of improving educational outcomes for Yesler Terrace children.

As lead education partner Seattle University convenes partner organizations to strategize how to expand and deepen education support activities ranging from parenting programs to summer camps to college prep projects. Through monthly meetings and an annual conference the group uses data and information provided by a Seattle University data analyst to improve program delivery and academic engagement among all 500 children and youth living at Yesler Terrace. An education engagement specialist employed by

the housing authority works with University staff and program partners to help neighborhood families navigate the school system.

Preliminary indicators of the Choice Neighborhood education effort are positive. Twice as many Yesler students are now involved in high quality summer academic enrichment programs and Yesler students are showing improvement from baseline data in 10 of 12 math and reading grade level indicators. While promising, the Choice Neighborhood education collaborative stills has much work to do as indicators such as school attendance among k-2 graders remains a cause for concern.

Additional Youth Initiative Partnerships

In addition to the work at Gatzert School and Yesler Terrace, Seattle University is also involved in many other neighborhood efforts through the Youth Initiative. Seattle University students and faculty are partnering on over 40 additional campus-community partnerships directly supporting neighborhood children, youth and families. For example, students from the Albers School of Business provide free tax assistance and financial literacy workshops for neighborhood residents. An additional group of Business students have assisted with a study on the feasibility of expanding small businesses in the local neighborhood. Students in the University's Criminal Justice program have designed a safety plan for neighborhood residents and Nursing students have assisted with health screenings and referrals. Meanwhile, a small group of faculty have responded to evaluation and research questions posed by neighborhood community partners.

The University also has creatively pursued policies and funding opportunities to expand its impact through the Youth Initiative. For example, the University partnered with Seattle Public Schools to open a small alternative high school within the University's College of Education. In addition, thanks to a generous gift from an individual donor, the University established a one million endowed scholarship fund for neighborhood youth to attend the University. Finally, the University made a strategic decision to have all students utilizing the community service work-study program conduct their work within the SUYI neighborhood.

This myriad of community engagement partnerships is having an impact on Seattle University students who are serving and learning throughout the neighborhood. Through concentrated engagement activities in a smaller geographic location students get to know the neighborhood and begin to see how various

community partners and resident leaders contribute to the overall health of the neighborhood. In this way they are challenged to see beyond a model of one-time charitable works to a model of holistic and continual engagement based upon solidarity and mutual trust.

The number of students involved in the neighborhood has grown from 834 in 2011 to 1,708 in 2014. In addition, the number of students making at least a two quarter commitment to serve, which is a major goal of the Youth Initiative has increased from 130 in 2011 to over 200 in 2014. Equally important to the number of students engaged in the neighborhood is the impact the experiences are having on them. The results of a yearlong study that utilized the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire show that Seattle University students involved with SUYI programs demonstrated a marked improvement in interpersonal and problem-solving skills, political awareness, social justice attitudes, and diversity attitudes compared to a control group.

Phase 3: 2015 to 2020

After years of intensive activity and positive results, Seattle University is entering a new phase in its community engagement efforts. The central questions the University now faces are:

- How to maximize the significant work of the Youth Initiative to have an even greater impact on the campus and community?
- What further role the University can play as an anchor institution in central Seattle?

The University will explore these questions by deepening and expanding its Youth Initiative programs and partnerships including building out the entire p-12 pipeline of education support for neighborhood children by expanding its partnerships at the local middle school and high schools. The University will explore its role as an anchor institution by developing and adding new major University-community projects such as a community health clinic, a jobs program, a small business incubator, and a community research center.

These efforts will be supported through the pursuit of a financial plan that sustains current successes and continues growth and experimentation. The University recently entered a new \$300 million comprehensive campaign with a goal of \$30 million for community engagement initiatives.

Lessons Learned

Seattle University's experiences with community

engagement offer many lessons for other institutions. The following recommendations are not meant to be prescriptive but hopefully offer ideas that might inform the process and practice of community engagement at other colleges and universities.

1. *Draw upon one's institutional tradition.* Seattle University's significant movement toward community engagement stems directly from its Jesuit Catholic tradition. Father Kolvenbach's Santa Clara speech struck a chord because of the university's faith-based heritage. Since almost all religious traditions have a focus on service, faith-based universities are particularly well positioned to embrace community engagement as a way of animating their mission. Yet, community engagement is not and should not be just for faith-based institutions. Public and secular institutions also have great opportunities to engage in their communities drawing upon aspects of their tradition and founding ethos. Many have done so with tremendous success. The key lesson from Seattle University is to embrace the distinct features of one's tradition and history that calls the institution to engage in the wider community.
2. *Create a plan.* While Seattle University's Jesuit Catholic tradition might have been the spark to get started, the long-term success of its community engagement programs have depended on how much forethought and planning occurred prior to the launch of each of the University's three distinct developmental phases. For example, Seattle University took almost three years to move the Youth Initiative from an initial idea to implementation. This included extensive research on other university models of engagement, significant outreach on campus and in the community and a major organizing conference that brought together 300 campus and community leaders. This thorough and inclusive planning process made it much easier to move quickly and attain good results once the University launched the Initiative. Planning is also an iterative process. Each phase of Seattle University's community engagement efforts have called for a separate planning process.
3. *Act with humility and cultural competency.* While Seattle University is an increasingly diverse institution, its student body and faculty do not reflect the full diversity of people living in its surrounding neighborhood. In addition, on occasion members of a university can become overly focused on the

knowledge arising from academic inquiry and forget that knowledge arises from many other forms of inquiry. This reality along with the power imbalances that arise from differences in class, culture, race, religion, gender, and nationality have been a central challenge for Seattle University's desire to build long lasting comprehensive campus-community partnerships. Moving into partnership with community organizations and local residents requires university faculty, staff and students to consistently engage with humility and constantly question their assumptions. Fully embracing this ethos increases the likelihood of developing trusting partnerships between the community and campus that can lead to benefit for all stakeholders.

4. *Get Faculty Off Campus.* In many cases, engaging with humility and self-awareness might not be enough to form reciprocal partnerships. Seattle University faculty live throughout the greater Puget Sound region and only a few live in the neighborhoods adjacent to campus. While experts in their field of study, many faculty may not fully understand the complex systems and issues impacting urban neighborhoods. These factors could lead faculty to struggle to effectively lead their students in community engagement activities. One way to address this issue is to provide faculty with experiences designed to develop partnerships and better understand the local neighborhood context. Seattle University has engaged faculty, staff and its administration in a series of local immersion experiences ranging from four hours to three days.
5. *Use the community school model as an organizing strategy.* In launching the Youth Initiative, Seattle University chose to focus on supporting Gatzert Elementary School's interest in becoming a community school. The intensive initial focus on the community school model offered almost every Seattle University college and school an opportunity to partner with Gatzert. For example, nursing students assisted with health education activities, art students partnered with children to create a mural and engineering students led after-school activities. The community school focus also offered quick visible successes for Gatzert School and the University that contributed significantly to a sense of trust between the two institutions. The comprehensive nature of the community school model also has led to positive results for Gatzert children; both in their academic success and the expansiveness of enrichment opportunities. Finally, the successes from the community school approach has established a strong foundation for the University and the community to pursue even greater impact in future years.
6. *Expand engagement through a place-based focus.* Seattle University's choice to pursue a place-based approach in phase two of its community engagement efforts has significantly increased its ability to be a positive change agent in Seattle. The Youth Initiative's neighborhood focus offers a central story to share in communicating the many ways the University is engaged in the community. Funders, community partners, students and faculty have shown much more interest in the place-based approach than the University's previous dispersed approach to engagement. Having one audacious goal and focus is much better than having 30 modest ones.
7. *Place equal value on student learning and community impact.* For Seattle University, pursuing strong community engagement partnerships has meant balancing its focus on university student learning and on community impact. If the university places too much emphasis on its student's learning within its community engagement programs than its community partners will become disinterested in collaborating with the campus because it will not see significant benefit. On the other hand, if the university overemphasizes its focus on community impact instead of student learning, it is highly likely that university leadership will begin to question the university's use of resources and involvement. Success depends on holding student learning and community impact as equally important.
8. *Engage leaders at all levels.* Seattle University is fortunate to have a university president who cares deeply about community engagement. Yet, while very helpful, to attain full success the University has needed leadership at all levels and from multiple stakeholders. Many individual faculty have taken leadership roles in connecting their courses to the community. Hundreds of students have mobilized their peers to serve and learn. Leaders from community organizations have also embraced partnerships with the university to further their mission and goals. Most importantly, local residents have led efforts, shared their resources and voiced their needs. This mix of leadership, at all levels of the university and community is essential for successful university-wide and neighborhood-wide partnerships.

Conclusion

Seattle University's story of community engagement is only one example of the hundreds of colleges and universities that have recognized that substantial campus and community partnerships can significantly enhance their institutions and their communities. Seattle University's experiences provide other institutions with ideas and lessons to draw upon. Yet, in developing and expanding its efforts, Seattle University has benefited from the examples and lessons of many other institutions that have pursued creative approaches to connecting themselves with their communities. In this way, Seattle University and these other institutions, while acting individually in their own communities, are contributing to a much larger movement that has the potential to positively influence the future direction of high education in the United States.

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