

Facilitating Knowledge Flow in Community-University Partnerships

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Abstract

During the past decade, words and phrases like “engagement,” “reciprocity,” and “building a two-way street” have been scattered throughout speeches and literature calling for colleges and universities to develop more mutually beneficial relationships with their surrounding communities. The purpose of this article is to advance a model for understanding the challenges and opportunities for building community-university partnerships that are embedded in the values of reciprocity and engagement. This model is advanced through an analysis of knowledge flow theory and case studies of community-university partnerships at two land-grant universities. The core concepts of the model focus on breaking down knowledge flow barriers, building capacity for university-community engagement, and identifying motivators to promote engagement initiatives.

Introduction

The rhetoric surrounding university service and outreach has undergone a transformation during the last decade. Today, words and phrases like “engagement,” “reciprocity,” and “building a two-way street” are scattered throughout speeches and literature calling for colleges and universities to develop more mutually beneficial relationships with their surrounding communities. This new language has emerged because of the widespread perception that current conceptualizations of outreach and public service emphasize a one-way process in which the university transfers its expertise to key constituents rather than developing a shared agenda with communities to address societal issues (*Kellogg Commission 1999*).

Recognizing the need to build more responsive institutions, national groups such as the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) have convened to broaden traditional extension programs with the aim of promoting university-wide engagement and more deeply connecting with community partners (*ECOP 2002*). Still, national leaders of outreach and engagement argue that while many campuses claim that they are “doing

engagement,” there is in reality “more smoke than fire” (*AASCU 2002, 11*). The challenge remains for colleges and universities to create authentic two-way relationships that embrace the perspectives and contributions of constituents outside their institutions.

Purpose of this Article

The purpose of this article is to advance a model or conceptual framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities for building community-university partnerships that are embedded in the values of reciprocity and engagement. This framework is understood through an analysis of knowledge flow theory and case studies of two emerging community-university partnerships under way at two land-grant universities.

Before this framework is presented, two key terms in this article must be clarified: “community” and “engagement.” “Community” refers to geographical regions within states linked by common experiences and concerns (*Anderson and Jayakumar 2002*). The term “engagement” borrows from a definition articulated by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) Task Force on Public Engagement. According to AASCU, “The publicly engaged institution is fully committed to direct, two-way interaction with communities and other external constituencies through the development, exchange, and application of knowledge, information, and expertise for mutual benefit” (*AASCU 2002, 7*).

Community-University Engagement and Havelock’s Theory of Knowledge Flow

In 1969, Ronald Havelock and his associates provided a detailed conceptual framework for understanding factors that inhibit or facilitate knowledge flow among organizations. His theory remains relevant for today’s scholars and practitioners of university engagement because it addresses how organizations negotiate relationships with outside partners and share or protect knowledge. Specifically, Havelock’s focus on knowledge flow barriers such as local pride, coding schemes, and status differences is discussed in this article within the context of community-university partnerships. In addition, capacity building is addressed to acknowledge the importance of leadership, training, and organizational structures in facilitating the two-way flow of knowledge between universities and communities. Finally, key motivators for knowledge flow facilitation—reward value and crisis—are

linked to an understanding of how community-university partnerships develop.

First, a key barrier to knowledge flow is the tightly held belief that knowledge relevant to an organization will come from members of the organization itself, a phenomenon called “local pride” (Havelock 1969). Local pride is evident in colleges and universities as faculty are socialized to place boundaries on what constitutes “appropriate academic behavior.” The result is that faculty advance restrictive definitions of research and promotion that inhibit community-based work (Dickson et al. 1985). Similarly, the two-way interaction proposed by leaders of engagement initiatives is often hampered because university research is designed narrowly, with community partners acting as passive participants, not partners in discovery (Corrigan 2000). This design reflects the conscious or unconscious desire of organizations to maintain stability or order (Havelock 1969).

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In addition, status difference among organizations acts as an inhibitor to knowledge sharing because approaching an organization with higher status may be an intimidating prospect (Havelock 1969). Havelock’s theory supports Corrigan (2000), who observed, “Community partners view faculty as a separate, elite culture that wants to change others while it remains the same” (190). Corrigan notes that the core challenges of working with communities are related to trust and governance of community-based initiatives and that these challenges are exacerbated by community views of the academy, especially in the planning stages of these ventures. Distrust is amplified when organizations develop “coding schemes” in which they create their own vocabulary particular to their group, making it difficult to communicate between groups (Havelock 1969). This can be typical of faculty who are entrenched in the language of their own disciplines.

On the other end of the spectrum, Havelock’s theory suggests some key factors that facilitate knowledge flow between organizations. First, a fundamental facilitator of knowledge sharing is

identifying the reward value between and among organizations. For example, in the case of university-community partnerships, an institution's political capital can be enhanced as efforts to tackle issues of regional concern make the campus visible to legislators and other state officials. Similarly, the community may see the university as an important partner in solving local problems and as a source for new dollars (*Wiewel and Lieber 1998*).

Second, Havelock (*1969*) notes that changes in organizational leadership can help facilitate the entry of new ideas, as they can "shake up the system" and prepare members for changes in the organization. Often, these changes in leadership are linked to an organizational crisis—perceived or real—where the survival of the system is threatened (*Havelock 1969*). In community-university partnerships, campus leadership has been identified in many studies as a key factor predicting institutional commitment to engagement, as university leaders legitimize and facilitate service activities (*Maurrasse 2001; Walshok 1999; Ward 1996; Votruba 1996; Zlotkowski 1998*). Changes in leadership at the executive level can bring engagement to the forefront of the campus, as was evident in the late 1990s with Chancellor Nancy Zimpher at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee or Chancellor Nancy Cantor at the University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign.

Third, training is key to facilitating knowledge flow between organizations (*Havelock 1969*). The university engagement literature suggests that faculty and staff must be trained to be neutral and communicate effectively with outside partners and to "(1) make explicit each other's needs and goals, (2) resolve ambiguities in understandings, and (3) negotiate needed changes in project objectives" (*Wiewel and Lieber 1998, 300*). Such training is essential to effective communication and flow of knowledge between organizations.

A final factor identified by Havelock to facilitating knowledge flow is organizational capacity, or the internal structures that mobilize or house "knowledge entry facilitators" (*Havelock 1969*). In the case of university-community partnerships, organizational capacity refers to integration and coordination of engagement—key factors outlined in the Kellogg Commission's seven-tenet test of engagement (*Kellogg Commission 1999*). These tenets focus on building organizational structures that institutionalize engagement and serve as key "entry points" where community partners can obtain information about opportunities for collaboration with university personnel (*Lynton and Elman 1987*).

Methodology

In this study, Havelock's theory is tested by reviewing data from a multicase study of two land-grant universities that, by reputation, are actively engaged in community outreach and engagement initiatives. To mask their identities, this study will refer to them as Southern State University (SSU) and Midwest State University (MSU). These institutions were selected for investigation primarily due to their national reputation for supporting outreach and engagement. Twenty-five interviews were conducted with campus and community leaders involved in outreach at these two locations. The sampling procedure described below, along with the study's coding and confidentiality assurance measures, was guided by the work of Bogdan and Bicklen (1992). Data were collected in three distinct phases.

Phase 1: The campus provost and chief outreach officers overseeing outreach programs were interviewed to get a sense of the history, mission, and culture that guide outreach and extension at their institutions. These interviewees shed light on outreach efforts under way on their campuses that were typical of their institution's commitment to outreach, and provided names of outreach leaders to interview in phase two.

Phase 2: Leaders representing two key outreach initiatives identified in phase one were interviewed to gain their perspective on how they have created partnerships with their targeted constituencies. Subsequently, these leaders were asked to provide names and contact information for three to six community partners that would be willing to be interviewed in phase three of the data collection.

Phase 3: Community partners involved with the two campus outreach initiatives were interviewed to gain their perspective on issues of university-community partnerships.

Midwest State University (MSU), Towne Center Initiative: The gateway to the southern tip of the MSU campus is South Elm Street, an area of the city troubled by significant urban problems related to crime, persistent poverty, and lack of affordable housing. The region is an area of the city with a significant African American population.

For many years, MSU hosted a variety of programs in the South Elm Street area based on serving residents through medical and pharmaceutical clinical programs, and providing tutoring services sponsored by the MSU School of Education. But in

1995, MSU was spurred on to undertake a larger role in the community, due in part to a strategic master plan that unfolded. “The campus plan that evolved in 1995 brought our attention to the idea of ‘campus place’ and MSU’s role in the community,” said one MSU staff member. “We realized that South Elm Street was the gateway to campus and we had an important role to play in improving that area.”

At the same time, a group of Southside neighborhood associations called the South Metropolitan Planning Council (SMPC) were meeting to discuss housing problems, beautification strategies,

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transportation, and general upgrades to life on South Elm Street. MSU was invited by the SMPC to participate in a dialogue about improving the area, mostly due to the human and fiscal resources that could be contributed. Explained one community member about the partnership formation, “When we set out to revitalize Elm Street, the partnership was more than we could

handle. We felt that the MSU had significant assets to bring to the partnership and we couldn’t do it alone.”

The MSU Chancellor’s Office represented the campus at SMPC meetings, and a series of meetings between MSU personnel and community partners ensued. A five-year commitment was made to lease out space in the Elm Street Towne Center to conduct MSU outreach activities in the area. Subsequently, MSU has taken on a role in training the community, providing expertise and resources to build capacity in neighborhoods, and to mobilize community teams to work on key issues such as housing and transportation. Discretionary funding from the Chancellor’s Office and a private foundation support the project, and federal grants through HUD are being pursued.

The partnership has evolved to include a number of partners—the business community, women’s business council, a local private college, a technical college, and the SMPC. A steering committee of eight people from these groups forms the leadership team. The common goals for the project are to build capacity of individuals on Elm Street and to empower them to improve their community.

A major success of the initiative is that MSU faculty involved with the project have embraced their role on the community teams, which have been assembled to tackle specific urban problems such as housing and landscape design. The quality of relationships that faculty members have built with community members in these teams is key. In a characteristic observation about MSU faculty member “Mary,” one community partner said, “Mary just hung around and was committed to finding out how she fit in with our efforts. She didn’t come in knowing it, instead, she listened carefully, took the time to get to know us and our needs, and really came to understand our trials and tribulations.” Similar stories were told about some outreach faculty members who had built strong bonds with community members—these faculty with MSU extension appointments typically represent applied departments, schools, or colleges such as urban and regional planning and the School of Human Ecology.

In contrast to these successes, community respondents indicated a number of challenges related to governing the partnership, especially at the steering team level. First, interview data suggest that governance and power relationships among MSU partners and community partners are still being negotiated, but that MSU is clearly at the helm—an idea that is unsettling to some. One community member summarized, “There is a feeling that the community partners are there to put a stamp of approval on what the MSU wants to do. We would benefit from having a neutral facilitator because the meetings take the shape of the MSU agenda.” One respondent seemed to best characterize this issue: “The university always says ‘university-community partnership.’ The community is never listed first.”

Power struggles like these have also been fueled by community feelings of intimidation unwittingly brought on by a large cadre of MSU personnel. Said one community partner, “MSU invited a cast of thousands to our first meeting to discuss the issues—there must have been fifty people in the room but only five of us community members. It was intimidating and we were all trying to make meaning of it. At first, the faculty tried to force their expertise on us and we had to come out and say that their expertise didn’t fit with our mission.”

As the partnership has evolved, MSU has taken a gentler and more participatory approach. “At first we had more of an attitude like, ‘Here we are to solve your problems.’ We are learning and trying to make this process more participatory,” said one MSU staff member.

My interviews suggested that faculty culture and the culture of academe clash with the business and community cultures represented by partners in the initiative. Meeting hours were set up during times that were most convenient for the university partners, and community members informed me that terms used by the faculty members are very academic, confusing, or as one person put it, “everything is an acronym.” The pace and substance of the meetings were of concern to others, whereas university partners spent a great deal of time discussing the structure of meetings, voting issues, and other procedural matters instead of “tackling the issues,” as was important to business community partners.

Overall, the relatively youthful program has been characterized by successes with faculty and staff on community teams, but challenges at the governance level with the university-community steering team. The initiative is well funded and the Chancellor’s Office support has not gone unnoticed. Said one community member, “There is a sense among us that commitment to this project runs deep. The Chancellor’s Office has highlighted this initiative in a special event and the university can use this initiative to its credit.”

Southern State University: SSU–Ellisville–Jackson County (EJC) Partnership: Situated in rural surroundings, SSU is located in Ellisville, a small southern town where the school achievement gaps vary drastically by race and class. During the past three years, two local schools in Ellisville–Jackson County (EJC) were listed in an at-risk warning category by the state, indicating that the state would soon take over the schools if test scores did not improve. Within this context, a new superintendent of EJC schools and a new dean of the SSU College of Education arrived in Ellisville. The two leaders met and discussed the fact that SSU and EJC never had a formal partnership to address these issues and that a nationally known school of education should have a role in helping struggling community schools.

The result of their conversation was a press conference to unveil an initial five-year partnership designed to establish at-risk schools as community learning centers where leadership resources and accountability are shared among all the partners, parents, and students. The partnership was deemed a “first attempt” to engage with the school district, although many other programs were already in progress in the district. One SSU staff member connected to the program commented, “It was ironic that we actually had over 350 school initiatives underway in the commu-

nity at the time, but that it was not recognized as being a partnership. The formality of the dean and superintendent sealed the program as a legitimate community program.”

The superintendent and dean assigned key staff people to lead the design team—this included SSU faculty, school district staff, and elementary school principals. The team solicited participation from visible community members, including parents,

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nonprofit leaders, and prominent community members. The design team developed a vision and initiated action teams to take on specific tasks related to improving schools, including revising calendar/year requirements, improving community and parent involvement, and enhancing teacher preparation. The initiative has become high profile, and since its inception it has received strong media attention, including over eighty-five articles in the local newspaper.

Staffing for the partnership is housed at SSU. The College of Education and the provost have absorbed the costs, including one professional staff person, a secretary, and a 50 percent grant writer. The lead staff person for the project is an academic professional—not a traditional faculty member—who admits that “this kind of work won’t get anyone tenure.” She mentions, however, that traditional faculty are starting to get involved with the program due to the support of the dean and the potential of bringing in grants. She notes that the central challenge for faculty interested in this project is “figuring out a way to make this a part of their scholarship.”

I learned from interviewees at SSU that the College of Education is trying hard to promote a two-way participatory model of outreach and engagement with the EJC and local community. This has been done by ensuring that the design team is not heavily weighted with SSU faculty and staff; rather, SSU personnel are seen as being in the background. Language use is also important to SSU staff; one SSU interviewee was quick to explain that they always list community first when they describe the “community-university partnership.” The community members have responded to this effort in positive ways. Said one community

partner, “Those involved with the partnership went to great lengths to ensure that the goals for the project were shared goals. The university was not pushing its own goals for us—the school district had to determine its own vision. There was a feeling of mutual respect, a sense of finding a shared vision . . . educating kids . . . a goal that everyone could hop on.”

Despite these efforts, a feeling of mutual respect has waxed and waned throughout the two-year effort due to some issues of governing the partnership. For example, the fundamental decision to start two pilot schools was made by SSU and the school district without consulting the design team, causing some community members to become frustrated. But the most significant tension seems to be with teachers at the local pilot schools who felt threatened by the partnership. “Initially teachers were upset because they didn’t have a choice about the new program—the Dean and the Superintendent just decided on it. Teachers felt that they didn’t have input on the front end and that created emotional backlash.”

“When community partners were asked what factors were most important to building a productive working relationship with the university, the most common answer was “mutual respect and communication.”

The factors most significant to the successes of the partnerships have been the effectiveness of SSU leaders “Jane” and “Joan,” who are charged with forwarding the program and “inspiring success.” One interviewee summed it up for the community perspectives: “Jane and Joan are making things happen. I look to them for support. If they were gone there would be a significant loss in momentum. Their personal style and excitement for this work are evident in their trips to the school and personal support for my work.” Said another, “Jane and Joan believe that everyone is an expert. And they don’t take any credit, we feel like we really did it.” Successful coordination of the partnership was credited to information sharing by Jane and Joan.

In some cases, community partners had interesting insights about their perception of institutional commitment to service-related activities. Some identified the school initiative as a special exception that is not widespread or institutionalized across the

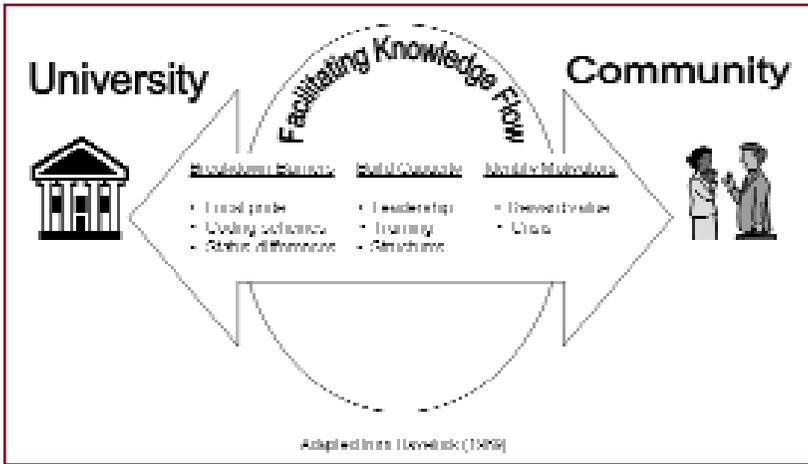
university. “This partnership has been strong, but SSU as a whole is not engaged with the community. People on campus are not aware of the poor people who live in Ellisville because they don’t get out the door,” said one interviewee. However, some acknowledged that the dean’s -level leadership has had an impact on institutionalizing the College of Education’s approach to outreach and engagement. “They [faculty] always said that they did public service but it was really that they got a grant and were looking for guinea pigs to test. It took the Dean’s level leadership to change the culture—the feeling that they were doing service work despite their real duties of research.”

In sum, the EJC-SSU partnership has blossomed over the past two years, but it faces continual challenges with establishing a governance system that is viewed as equal among partners at the schools and SSU. When asked what factors are most important to building a productive working relationship with SSU, one community member had an especially insightful response: “The trick is for the university not to hold themselves above the community, instead to be very attentive to the partners and school district. . . . Lots of people have never been to campus and SSU may as well be Mars to them. We need to demystify what the university is all about.”

A Model of Community-University Partnerships

Havelock’s theory applied to the case studies of MSU and SSU provides important implications for creating authentic, two-way relationships between universities and the communities that they serve. Figure 1 adapts Havelock’s theory of knowledge flow to a model of university-community partnerships, emphasizing the breaking down of social and cultural barriers between organizations, building organizational capacity to facilitate engagement, and identifying motivators for engagement.

Breaking down barriers: The case studies suggest that Havelock’s theory of knowledge flow inhibitors applies well to problems of community-university partnerships. In particular, the case studies illustrate how local pride can hamper an institution’s efforts to perform community work. For example, as the review of MSU and SSU demonstrated, trust may wax and wane during the formation of these partnerships based on the role that an institution is playing in the partnership. When community partners were asked what factors were most important to building a productive working

Figure 1: Model of Community-University Partnerships

relationship with the university, the most common answer was “mutual respect and communication.”

The case studies supported other literature suggesting that community-university partnerships are most fruitful when the community-based entity takes the lead and the university is viewed as “the partner” (Corrigan 2000). In this way, academic local pride is minimized so that university experts share their expertise when requested and focus their energy on identifying needs and strengths and solving mutual problems.

The analysis of MSU and SSU also revealed that language was important to community members, who were sometimes confused or intimidated by the acronyms or language used by the faculty. Participants broke down these status barriers when individuals formed personal relationships and when steps were taken to narrow the gap in status between the university and community. One clear instance of breaking down barriers was the SSU faculty and staff practice of visiting EJC elementary schools and offering expertise and personal support to teachers and administrators. Said one community member, “The faculty members are well loved, they really humanize the university.”

Building capacity: Community-university reciprocity can occur only when the appropriate infrastructure is in place. Havelock (1969) suggests that leadership at a high level is critical to facilitating knowledge flow between organizations. The case studies show that top-level leadership legitimizes and rewards engagement

activities and is critical to their sustainability. Community member interview responses indicated the importance of the Chancellor's Office involvement in the MSU Towne Center partnership and the dean's leadership in the EJC-SSU partnership.

In addition to leadership, the case studies of MSU and SSU showed the importance of training university personnel to build a climate of reciprocity and engagement. In fact, the interview data suggest that socializing faculty and staff to effectively work with community partners is just as important as building organizational mechanisms and policies to encourage their participation. In other words, identifying the cultural and social factors that underlie faculty success in the community is critical to facilitating engagement. For example, one community member revealed the frustrations of working with faculty members whose behavior did not promote a team approach: "MSU must do what they say they are doing . . . if this is an initiative of equals, act like equals. Turn off your cell phone. Don't take the call in front of all of us—if you are that important have someone else join us." A main implication of this article is that developing an academic culture to support community work is critical to developing successful partnerships that embrace the values of engagement and reciprocity.

Havelock also emphasized the importance of internal structures to support knowledge flow and points of entry into the organization. Throughout the case studies, it was clear that organizational structure is a challenge to facilitating engagement. One community respondent summarized, "It is hard to get to know a place as complex as MSU. We often don't know what is available on campus to even ask for help. Our council is still trying to figure out how we can access the entire MSU as a resource and this is difficult given complexity of the institution." Said another who expressed frustration with the organizational structure of the decentralized nature of campus, "I felt like I was sent through this maze to the point that I almost lost interest [in participating in the program]. It is overwhelming in size and we didn't know who to talk to first."

The case studies demonstrated that a central challenge to engagement is that outreach and engagement are happening far beyond the boundaries of a central administrative unit, even within centralized outreach structures. Furthermore, the complex web of outreach and engagement activities makes it difficult to harness and understand the breadth and depth of these activities, even at the highest levels of leadership. Still, the structures themselves can send a message to community constituents that the engagement initiative

under way is legitimate and highly valued. This phenomenon supports theorists who contend that organizational structures can serve as an important signaling mechanism for communicating an organization's values to its constituencies (*Scott 1992*).

Identify motivators: Fundamental to building capacity and breaking down communication barriers are identifying motivators to ignite action at the institutional and community level. Havelock discusses how perceptions of crisis can lead to action and subsequent knowledge flow between organizations. In the Towne Center (MSU) and Ellisville–Jackson County (SSU) case studies, outside forces propelled institutional leaders to take collective action in response to adverse conditions outside the institution. At MSU, the declining state of South Elm Street threatened the vibrancy of the gateway to the campus, igniting action at the MSU Chancellor's Office to address the issue. Similarly, the EJC-SSU initiative was spurred on by the pending risk of closing two area elementary schools. The dean and the superintendent reacted by forming an alliance to address this problem that would benefit both Ellisville–Jackson County and the Southern State University. Leaders at MSU and SSU were heavily influenced by conditions and information from outside their campuses and reacted to external pressures critical to the vitality and well-being of their institution.

In the MSU and SSU cases, the reward value for the campuses and communities was improved social and economic conditions in the region and the establishment of lasting town-gown connections. When asked why they wanted to work with the university, community members talked exclusively about the intellectual and financial resources that the university could bring to bear on their problems. At the university, the rewards of making the community an attractive place to live and staying true to its land-grant mission guided the institution's behavior. These rewards, combined with the proper infrastructure for engagement and attention to breaking down barriers, are essential to developing true community-university partnerships where the concepts of reciprocity and engagement are highly valued.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

The case studies in this article suggest that knowledge flow theory is useful for articulating the challenges and opportunities of creating community-university partnerships that are embedded in the values of reciprocity and engagement. In particular, knowl-

edge flow theory provides a conceptual framework for linking a chain of factors that are necessary to make these partnerships work: eliminating obstacles to engagement, building infrastructure to support engagement, and motivating engagement efforts on and off campus.

While this initial application of knowledge flow theory is informative, it requires further testing to make it more useful among scholars and practitioners. A limitation of this study is that the partnerships described in this article are not fully mature and are still aspiring toward reciprocity and engagement through trial and error. Consequently, these partnerships have not yet provided definitive results or measurable outcomes of success. Further research is necessary to examine aspects of knowledge flow that may be responsible for the ultimate success or failure of these partnerships in the long term.

An important contribution to this literature in the future would be to analyze how various aspects of knowledge flow theory might facilitate movements toward definitive goals such as economic renewal and improved quality of life in a community. An analysis of this nature would provide a more practical model for determining best practices for building community-university practices that produce measurable results.

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