

Sustaining Liberal Arts Colleges through Community Partnerships and the Co-Production of Knowledge

Wim Wiewel¹ and Jerusha Detweiler-Bedell²

¹ Office of the President, Lewis & Clark College, ² Department of Psychology, Lewis & Clark College

Cite as: Wiewel, W., & Detweiler-Bedell, J. (2019). Sustaining Liberal Arts Colleges Through Community Partnerships and the Co-Production of Knowledge. *Metropolitan Universities*, 30(4), 20-39. DOI: 10.18060/23554

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Editor: Valerie L. Holton, Ph.D.

Abstract

There was a time when universities located in cities set themselves apart from urban life, even, in some cases, building walls that isolated their campuses. As the Cold War and Space Race accelerated the demand for academic expertise, government funding for basic and applied research became a mainstay of higher education. With the end of the Cold War, many institutions turned to a greater concern by addressing domestic societal needs. As state funding began its steady and continuing decline, urban universities developed programs to demonstrate the value they add to cities and metropolitan regions, and public-private partnerships took root. Today, liberal arts colleges are being challenged to demonstrate their relevance and value. Their future is, in part, predicated on their success in building stronger, more strategic, and mutually beneficial relationships beyond their campuses, specifically by collaborating with and adding value to the cities and metropolitan areas in which they are located. A movement that started in public universities should now be adopted more widely by liberal arts colleges.

Keywords: community relations, community engagement, curricular innovation

Leveraging What We Do Well to Sustain Our Future

Most colleges and universities have long been engaged with their home city in various ways. Lewis & Clark, a private institution in Portland's southwest hills, six miles from the city center, is no different. We enroll 3,300 students across our undergraduate college, graduate school of education and counseling, and law school. Both our graduate school and law school have long-established, curriculum-based programs, practica, and clinics. These provide essential services to schools, individuals, families, businesses, entrepreneurs, and nonprofits, with a particular focus on underserved populations in the Portland area. However, this is newer ground for our

undergraduate College of Arts and Sciences, which is why we are taking steps to better structure the ways we engage beyond our campus.

Propelled by our strategic plan, “Exploring for the Global Good,” we are now working to build more coherent, curriculum-based community partnerships that focus on the co-production of knowledge. This objective advances our mission while creating added value for our students, our college, and the city we call home. In undertaking this initiative, we are gleaning lessons from the evolution of higher education in the United States, the experience of large public universities, and our own history as a private college with deep public roots and relationships.

We believe this to be a sustainable model from which other liberal arts colleges can learn and replicate as they prepare for an always uncertain, but eagerly anticipated, future.

How We Got Here: Higher Education in Brief

“In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, higher education leaders believed that the purpose of college education, first and foremost, was to build character in young people—and that one could not build character in a city” (Diner, 2017). For young and highly impressionable minds, the assumption was that the city’s distractions were too many and too enticing. This put urban colleges and universities at a competitive disadvantage, and many “commuter schools” responded by establishing learning collaborations with municipalities, museums, and local institutions.

The public view of higher education as the key to individual, family, and societal prosperity took hold as the GI Bill opened access to new and larger segments of the population. Coinciding with the rise of the Cold War and the race between the United States and the Soviet Union to establish primacy in space, this shift also underscored the emerging importance of higher education to the nation’s economy, security, and sense of well-being.

But growth was segmented, and continued to exclude large numbers of minority and low-income students. It also failed to expand opportunities for women. The great social movements of the 1960s and 1970s for civil rights and equal rights made university enrollments more diverse and somewhat more representative of their communities.

Two forces converged as the Cold War ended, a decrease in federal research funding accompanied by intense public scrutiny:

Higher education came under increasing criticism for everything from rapidly rising tuition to the poor quality of undergraduate education and ‘dumbing down’ of curricula. In search of a new niche and mission, many institutions turned to a greater concern with addressing domestic societal needs in health, education, governance, economic development, and community revitalization. (Wiewel, Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2000)

By virtue of their location and mission, urban public research universities were, and are, well positioned to develop partnerships and alliances that demonstrate the value they bring to cities. They have access to people, expertise, and capital that can result in transformative change within

specific communities, as well as their city and region. But experience tells us that this will happen only when all parties involved are focused on building a true partnership rather than accruing power, and on making progress based on shared interests rather than hidden agendas.

Lewis & Clark: The Public Side of a Private College

At Lewis & Clark, public participation made our beginnings possible as a private college. Established in Albany, Oregon, in 1867 by the Presbyterian Church, the fledgling college took wing when the citizens of the town stepped up to fill a funding gap that threatened to delay or derail construction. Similarly, when the college moved to Portland and sought a permanent campus in 1942, Aaron Frank, a prominent business leader, philanthropist, and staunch advocate of education, initiated a last-minute gift that made the 63-acre Frank family estate the college's new home.

Under the leadership of then-President Morgan Odell, who cultivated strategic relationships with civic and business leaders and who promoted four semesters of supervised service in the community as a requirement for graduation, the school established itself as being very much in and of its place, such that it became widely known as “Portland’s college.”

During the 1980s and 1990s, Lewis & Clark’s engagement with the city waned as it began to refashion itself as a classic liberal arts college dedicated to rigorous scholarship and the pursuit of knowledge both for its own sake and in service to others.

This occurred simultaneously with the rise of Portland State University (PSU) as a premier public research institution “internationally known for its whole-university approach to community-university engagement” (Wiewel, Kecskes & Martin, 2011). Indeed, PSU’s location has long been a catalyst for the mission it spells out in bold letters on the side of a pedestrian bridge on its downtown campus: Let Knowledge Serve the City.

At Lewis & Clark, our official motto, in Latin, has less public visibility but is equally expressive of what we do, and also offers a construct for organizing our renewed commitment to engaging our city and community through our curriculum: *Explorare, Discere, Sociare*.

Curriculum-Based Community Engagement at Lewis & Clark

Explorare

The goal of reconnecting with and becoming more visible in Portland, in part through volunteer, clinical, and internship opportunities in the community, is a central component of our strategic plan, “Exploring for the Global Good.” Curriculum-based community engagement in Portland helps fulfill the *explorare* part of our motto, which translates to “explore; search out; test; try out; investigate” (<https://www.online-latin-dictionary.com/>). Our proximity to downtown Portland allows faculty to invite guest speakers and guest artists to their classrooms, to embed opportunities to attend performances, museums, and art galleries into student coursework, and to visit organizations and sites in the region. Classes such as Psychology Internship allow for

explorations of social service-oriented and/or laboratory-based occupations. In this course, students spend 10 hours each week at their off-campus internship sites in addition to regular weekly classes with the professor. All course material is applied one way or another to the students' internship experiences, covering issues ranging from professional ethics to burnout. Through course-based internship experiences, our students are able to try out the fit between their own burgeoning academic expertise and the professional experiences they are able to explore off-campus.

Discere

Opportunities for students to investigate off-campus connections as a part of their formal coursework leads to unique learning outcomes, as implied by the second part of our motto, *discere*, which means to “learn; become acquainted with; acquire knowledge of” (<https://www.online-latin-dictionary.com/>). Our students acquire knowledge about the content and methods of the specific disciplines they choose to study as well as about the location in which we are situated. Our strategic plan endorses the important role of courses with “a local, place-based component, allowing our students to examine and consider how the theoretical or global issues they study in class play out in Portland” (“Exploring for the Global Good,” 2018). For example, in our Historical Materials courses, students visit the Oregon Historical Society, take a historical walking tour of Portland, and complete a project called “World War II in the Portland Landscape.” In a course named “From *Stumptown* to *Portlandia*,” students learn about the history of Portland, starting with industrialization in the 1890s and ending with gentrification in the 1990s. And in one of our public policy courses, students examine the policies the city of Portland has tried over time, evaluate the effectiveness of these policies, and develop innovative policy solutions for the future.

Sociare

Creating a curriculum that invites students to explore, *explorare*, and learn, *discere*, within and about the city we live in is necessary but not sufficient in achieving the goal of creating a campus culture that builds true partnerships with the broader Portland community. The final, yet arguably most essential, component of our motto is *sociare*, which means to “unite; join; ally; share in” (<https://www.online-latin-dictionary.com/>). Central to the success of any place-based curricular experience is a focus on a series of pragmatic, mutually beneficial projects. Further, these projects need to be designed to unite a community partner and the institution in order to establish relationships and build trust. Indeed, our strategic plan prioritizes the development of “external partnerships that support diversity, equity, and inclusion... [and] cultivate active, reciprocal engagement between Lewis & Clark and the external community and alumni.” As discussed in a recent President-to-President column (Wiewel 2019), the goal of co-producing knowledge requires a mutually beneficial relationship that is built over time. In this context, learning is a shared endeavor that comes from working together and assessing the impact of the collaborations. The campus community must support these efforts, and the institution, as a whole, must work to enhance the visibility and success of these relationships.

This level of curricular campus-community engagement sets a high bar, but is nonetheless achievable. For example, in associate professor Mitch Reyes' rhetoric course, students explore

and apply principles of argumentation and social justice in a community-based mentoring program run in collaboration with Portland Public Schools. Our undergraduate students learn theoretical and methodological frameworks for understanding the role of argumentation in fostering social justice, which they explore through readings, discussion, and writing assignments. Additionally, twice a week students spend time at an underserved high school in East Portland, mentoring high school students and helping them to use rhetoric and argumentation to advocate for themselves in college application essays. This means students are exploring, learning, and working together with members of the community in a tangible way that benefits both the undergraduate students and their community partners.

To Explore, Learn, and Unite: Keys to Success

Taken together, our motto reminds us to explore and learn while working together with the local community, and in order to do so effectively, we have identified six characteristics essential to our success in building stronger, more strategic, and mutually beneficial relationships beyond our campus (Wiewel 2019):

1. Focus on making the partnerships synergistic. Successful partnerships become mutually beneficial by simultaneously advancing the learning of the students, the intellectual lives of the faculty, and the needs of the community group. One example of this is “Theatre from the Inside-Out: Illuminating Mass Incarceration,” a joint project between our History and Theatre Departments and a local minimum-security facility. Associate professor of history, Reiko Hillyer, teaches a course on crime and punishment to 15 Lewis & Clark undergraduates and 15 incarcerated individuals. The course covers the history of imprisonment and brings out the creativity of those who experience it every day. Associate professor Rebecca Lingafelter also teaches several sections and organizes the writing and performance of a theatre piece by all students in the class.
2. Recognize that community partnerships take time to build. Establishing trust is essential, and this requires us to reorient our focus early on, from achieving desired goals to identifying shared values (Wiewel & Lieber, 1998). Time spent on the process of relationship-building will greatly increase the likelihood of beneficial outcomes. Recognizing the importance of building trust, and the time commitment involved, our Student Leadership office maintains close relationships with a small number of community organizations for which our students can do volunteer work. This provides the organizations with a reliable, consistent source of volunteers, and reduces the time required to constantly develop new opportunities. It also makes transportation to the volunteer sites much more efficient.
3. Work together to determine needs. With a foundation of trust and shared values, it is much easier to collaborate. Importantly, community partners have as much to offer to the institution as the institution has to offer to the partners. The goal is for everyone involved to identify their unique skills, their specific needs, and the opportunities for growth that can come from the relationship.
4. Create strong support structures within the institution for the partnerships. This requires giving strategic importance to the co-production of knowledge, rewarding faculty who engage in this

work, and giving tangible support through the investment of time at an institutional level (e.g., establish an Office of Community Partnerships to maximize the internal visibility of community partnerships). At Lewis & Clark, rather than creating a new office with the accompanying financial needs, we created the Portland Connections Council, which brings together many of the individuals engaged in work with the Portland community (from academic, student life, and administrative units) in order to offer mutual support, share experiences, and coordinate activities. Representatives from the graduate and law schools, in addition to the undergraduate college, attend the council. This provides opportunities for internal collaboration across the three schools as well as a chance to build on one another's pre-existing local connections. The council meets once per semester, and creates a communication mechanism all year round.

5. Assess the impact of the partnership and report progress. On the surface, assessment seems to run counter to relationship building, but measuring progress and being transparent about the results is central to the success of any community partnership. When the outcomes are not as robust as hoped, treat this as an opportunity for further learning and growth rather than as an indication that the relationship needs to be abandoned.

6. Prepare for the long-term investment of the institution's strategic, financial, and programmatic resources. Community engagement should not depend solely on a particular faculty member's interests or time-limited external funds. Instead, partnerships should be built into the institution's curriculum and given budgetary support. As an example, our institution now has a new course designation Connect-Portland, which is assigned to undergraduate classes that highlight the experiential, experimental, and/or inquiry-based learning derived from our location in the Pacific Northwest.

Making the Future Our Own

Connect-Portland courses and the community partnerships that evolve from them have the potential to further nourish the local and global citizenship values that our students embrace, especially social consciousness and making a positive impact in the world. Curriculum-based civic engagement programs also have the capacity to strengthen our initiatives for recruiting and retaining top-level students, faculty, and administrators. What's true for Lewis & Clark is also true for many of our peers: strategic enrollment management is the bridge to our future, and community partnerships are key supports in this bridge as they create options for students to pursue their social justice interests while also acquiring real-world skills. What's also true for us is that we are still in the early stages of refining and implementing a more structured and robust program of community engagement within our undergraduate college. We offer the following takeaways, not as caveats, but as guideposts:

- In higher education today, nimble must be our new normal. Private liberal arts colleges have a degree of administrative flexibility that is often unavailable to large public universities. We must leverage this advantage.
- The times, not to mention current and prospective students and their families, demand that we be ever mindful of return on investment and other measurable outcomes, but

adapting to rapidly evolving demands does not require abandoning our core values and key strengths. It means building on them.

- We must link community engagement to the academic experiences and development of our students in ways that build world-ready skills, add value to their degrees, and advance professional success.
- Emphasizing the co-production of knowledge navigates the space between those who advocate pursuing knowledge for its own sake and those who champion experiential learning, or transforming knowledge into practical action.
- Community engagement is always dynamic. Key players move on, power shifts, and demographics change, so the structure and process must remain stable and constant.

Urban public universities have long demonstrated the value of community engagement. The model we describe here is one from which liberal arts colleges can learn and replicate. By focusing on who we are, where we are, what we do well and can do even better, we can best educate our students and collaborate with our home cities and towns.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Joe Becker and Jim Enright of Lewis & Clark's Office of Public Affairs and Communications for their assistance.

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