

## **University and Community Partnerships: A Full Circle Program**

**Richard Thurlow**  
**Michael Ledoux**  
**Nadine McHenry**  
**Michele Burns**  
Widener University

### **Abstract**

Civic engagement by universities has taken shape in a number of ways. This article describes the efforts of the Center for Education at a metropolitan university in the United States, whose outreach is to a under resourced school district in an economically distressed area. Partnerships with the Local Educational Agency (LEA), private foundations, divisions of the university, and local churches will be addressed. This is a descriptive article showing one university's efforts at civic engagement.

### **Introduction**

Chester, PA school district ranks 500 of the 501 school districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Once a thriving industrial center, Chester is now a shell of a city. A visitor to the commercial center might liken its buildings to Dresden after World War II. Clotheslines stand as testimonials to life against brick structures that would otherwise be thought uninhabitable, juxtaposed with magnificent churches, witnesses of a once thriving community. A major interstate highway serves as a dividing line between the haves and have somethings. The commercial center, served by commuter rail and buses, has the potential to be a thriving suburb of Chester or an economic center unto itself. The campus of Widener University appears as an oasis or an anachronism.

In decades past, universities could remain as cloistered areas of learning, importing youth from throughout the state and nation with little regard for neighborhoods or their local community. The perennial questions of taxation of university property occurred, but in many cases universities were cities within cities, with their own police forces, residents, and governments. Their resources were dedicated to their own citizens rather than the community whose borders touched theirs.

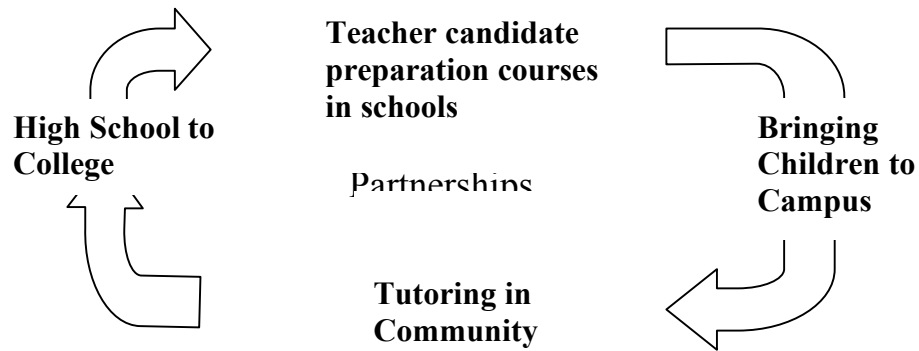
Our university once held this mind set. Recently it began to embrace civic engagement as part of its institutional mission. Previously the domain of the more enlightened, and often ignored, faculty who would situate class assignments in the community in efforts to assist local agencies and provide authentic experiences for their students, the university has now restructured its mission and resources to support and encourage civic engagement and community based academic service programs. "Academically based community service" has expanded during the last fifteen to twenty years sometimes under the service learning or experiential learning. But this

movement is rooted in the academy's long tradition of service to society and the fulfillment of the university's democratic mission (Harkavy, 2004). Astin (1997) notes that the "typical college or university will use language such as 'preparing students for responsible citizenship,' 'developing character,' 'developing future leaders,' 'preparing students to serve society,' and so forth" (p. 211). Many believe however, that even though the focus has been on civic engagement throughout our nations' educational history, "higher education's rhetoric far exceeds its performance" (Harkavy, 2004, p. 9). The literature continues to offer insights into preparing learning communities that include civic engagement aimed at forming an active citizenry and calling for more involvement by institutions of higher learning (cf. Battistoni, 1997; Benson and Harkavy, 2000; Brisbin & Hunter 2003; Boyle & Kari, 2002; Matthews, Smith, MacGregor & Gabelnick 1996).

Historically, the Center for Education at Widener University had made numerous attempts to form partnerships with the neighboring school district. Most of these efforts had been for naught with either the school district or the university being at fault. One result of these difficulties was the choice, several years ago, to create a professional development school in another, more affluent school district in the area. However, separate initiatives with the impoverished district by individual faculty members had resulted in two enduring efforts. The first of these is a Saturday Academy offered on four to five Saturday mornings, twice a year. The academies offer enrichment activities in multiple disciplines and are open to children throughout the district. Once coordinated with the school district, it now is promoted primarily by community activists. The second enduring initiative was the placement of teaching methods courses into local schools. This program was dealt a strong blow when the state took over the district and handed management of all but one school into the hands of a private corporation. However, by moving the classes to the one locally run school and to a nearby parochial school, the program was able to continue. Initially a fiercely independent and distrustful entity, over time, the private corporation running the district has warmed to the idea of partnerships with the university. In addition, local churches and foundations have begun to reach out to the university for partnerships aimed at serving the community. This article describes a circle of programs at the center for education that is designed to serve the educational needs of the community while meeting the professional development needs of our students.

This circle revolves around, and relies on, community partnerships (see figure 1). No initiative has survived without such a partnership, in part, because of a distrust that has developed in the community brought on by the start/stop nature of earlier university outreach efforts. Currently, in the new climate, we have established strong relationships with numerous groups including local foundations, churches, community groups, and the local school district. Some of the programs exist in the schools, while others involve opening the campus to the community. Still others take place in locations throughout the community.

Figure 1. Circle of Programs



### Methods Courses Taught in Area Schools

Several years ago, the faculty of the center for education made an overt decision to increase the contact hours with schools encountered by our teacher candidates. This was started initially by requiring all undergraduate education students to take an introduction to education course that requires twenty hours of observation in local classrooms. Most of these placements are managed through our office of certification and field experiences and are congruent with the areas of certification that students are interested in attaining. This class has been so effective in helping students determine if a career in education is right for them that we have added a similar course to our graduate certification programs. In addition, we approached the local school district and a local parochial school about placing language arts methods courses in schools adjacent to our campus. For our elementary education teacher candidates, this resulted in one day a week being spent observing language arts classes, reading to students or being involved in demonstration lessons. As mentioned earlier, this program faced some difficulty during the turmoil of the state take-over of the school district. This required moving the classes to a school a few miles off campus which has created some transportation difficulties. However, transportation is also an issue for our professional development schools as well as our participation with a kindergarten academy in another district. We have been successful in dealing with the issue in each case, in part because of our commitment to field experiences for our students. Teacher candidates car pool and faculty are flexible in terms of adjusting arrival and departure times to allow for travel and parking time.

Perhaps our most ambitious initiative to date has been the expansion of our teacher candidate curriculum to include an alternative version of traditional methods courses in what is now called the Junior Block. Traditionally, teacher candidates learn methodology and theory at the university; only towards the end of the course do they apply what they have learned by teaching a short unit as part of a field experience. Teacher candidates enrolled in the Junior Block take four co-requisite courses over two semesters: science methods and language arts methods I in the fall semester and social studies methods and language arts methods II in the spring semester. These four courses are taught by two professors, a professor of language arts and a professor of science and social studies education. Each semester, these two required courses are seamlessly intertwined to demonstrate the principles of integrated instruction both conceptually and pedagogically. Both professors are present for many sessions and are able to lend their individual expertise.

The yearlong program begins field work in the fourth week of the fall semester and continues to build field experiences into the course syllabi as a primary means of learning. While on site, teacher candidates participate in field work for one half of the time slot while university coursework occurs in an empty classroom at the school for the second half. Their field experiences are scaffolded so that teacher candidates begin this interdisciplinary immersion program based on an integrated science/language arts unit developed by their professors. Prior to implementing each lesson in the classroom, the university faculty explain the theory behind the lesson and explicitly model the methodology the teacher candidates will be implementing. Both professors and the cooperating teachers observe, monitor, and evaluate the teacher candidates and the children in their classrooms. In this first of a series of four field placements, teacher candidates employ interdisciplinary techniques that allow them to teach their small groups of fourth graders about ecological concepts through expository reading and writing.

This initial placement lasts approximately four weeks and is followed by three additional field placements in a variety of different school sites. Each field placement places additional pedagogical responsibilities on the teacher candidates so that by the end of the year, they are developing and implementing integrated social studies/language arts lessons in the context of whole class instruction. By pushing teacher candidates to immediately assume the role of the classroom teacher, first as small group instructors and eventually in the whole class context, teacher candidates gain valuable experience and thereby acquire the knowledge and skills specified by INTASC, National Science Education Standards, National Council for the Social Studies, and those recommended by the International Reading Association while enhancing student performance and serving as a source of professional development for their cooperating teachers.

As new faculty members have joined the center's ranks, the drive to embed field work into coursework has become more and more palpable as seen in the Junior Block program. Over the past several years, faculty members who teach education courses that are appropriate to field work (i.e., methodology courses), receive an additional teaching load for that field work. This focused attention on field work as central to the development of teacher competence has given our teacher candidates the professional, pedagogical, and disciplinary background to enter student teaching as confident and proficient professionals. Courses focused on issues in early childhood and elementary curriculum take place in our own child development center as well as in a local school district that has developed a kindergarten academy where emergent literacy is the basis for the entire curriculum. Our secondary teacher candidates learn about reading in the content areas by working in middle school and high school classrooms. The Center's programs have recently expanded to include a five year bachelor's/master's degree in elementary and special education. As we looked to give additional resources to the district which has an estimated 70% special education designated population, students from our Special Education program began spending 30 hours per semester working in the district's middle school for a year. This gives candidates a long-term view of student progress and helps the district with trained aides.

In all cases, field experiences are the hallmark of the center for education's focus on experiential learning and our university's call for civic engagement. However, these partnerships

must include a long term commitment between the university and the community schools. As stated earlier, school districts tend to be distrustful of university track records, coming in on a wave of grant-funded programs and leaving once the funding is finished and the research is complete. School districts must view themselves as part of the university's community, developing a sense of trust over time. Having the same programs in place over many semesters and using the input of the teachers, administrators, and students in the community in helping to shape future field experiences will create this sense of trust and will allow for continuous program renewal.

### **Bringing Children to Campus**

The Saturday Academy program is one of the oldest and most successful of the community outreach programs at the university. Begun originally as a field placement opportunity for graduate students, it is now organized and run through our undergraduate education association as a service learning program. Twice a year, in the spring and the fall, an educational enrichment program lasting four to five weeks is offered to local children in locations on campus. The programs involve high interest, high interaction activities covering a wide range of topics. Science and technology are always popular; however topics have varied from electricity, astronomy, and ecology, to poetry, history, and reader's theater. Computers are used in most programs and the students become familiar with various facilities at the university. Academy programs have been developed by faculty from Education and the College of Arts and Sciences, as well as undergraduate and graduate teacher candidates.

One difficulty for some teacher candidates who are interested in the Saturday Academy is their dependence on weekend employment to help with college expenses. These teacher candidates were originally given tutoring opportunities in after-school programs in area churches to enhance their field placement experiences. However, complications with transportation and supervision led to the creation of an After-School Academy at the university. Working with a local education foundation and after-school church programs, students from the area are now bused to campus to receive lessons designed and delivered by teacher candidates. There are five sessions currently operating four days a week, two working with high school students and one each for pre-school/primary, intermediate and middle school age children. Each session is led by one or more teacher candidates who design and implement their own lessons. The teacher candidates are allowed to be creative and create high interest lessons. Many lessons take place in the center's computer lab, a situation that the children have found highly motivating. This has been an excellent way for undergraduates to gain experience with the lessons they've designed for a class, or to try new ideas and expand their portfolio. Other undergraduates and experienced alumni volunteer to support and give feedback to the classroom teachers.

As one would surmise, the district with which we work ranks among the lowest in achievement on standardized test scores. As part of a Twenty-First Century Grant initiative with the same local district, the university involves graduate reading specialist candidates in two ways. First, candidates who are enrolled in diagnosis of reading difficulties class are asked to each evaluate four children for reading problems. This is orchestrated with the after-school programs and parents. The evaluations provide certification candidates with authentic experiences in convenient locations and provide the children and caretakers with a strategy for remediation that does not always exist within the struggling district. The program takes on two

sets of students, uses multiple tests and provides results to the schoolteachers, caretakers, and tutors from our own after-school program with suggestions for reading improvement strategies.

This diagnosis class is immediately followed by a practicum in diagnosis and remediation that includes a summer reading camp for students with reading problems. Three students are assigned per candidate for intensive assessment and reading remediation in a fun day-camp setting on the university campus.

This program, which has run for more than twelve years, has become very popular in the community and has a long waiting list for students. However, it has long been open to students from more affluent areas and little was done to communicate each student's progress to the school districts. However given the needs of these disadvantaged children, we hope to integrate the camp more seamlessly into our overall support of the district and provide more systematic assessment data that will help to improve individual reading scores as well as to provide curricular information that will improve their reading program. Communication has traditionally been a difficulty within and among schools, and as a result, the reading curriculum and recommended strategies are not always heeded. Even finding a consistent reading curriculum and support for reading in content areas has been a struggle. The assessment data collected from summer camp participants may be conduit for this flow of communication to lead to curriculum cohesion as well as improvements in student reading.

A variety of outcomes can result from bringing local children to campus. Not only do such programs provide a tremendous opportunity for both graduate and undergraduate certification candidates to work with children who have specific needs and motivations, but it also allows children to recognize the kinds of activities that are associated with university life, leaving them with a basis upon which to make informed decisions regarding college attendance. The interactions between university certification candidates and the children in their charge become an exemplar of service learning in which all constituencies are benefiting.

### **High School to College**

A symbiotic relationship between the university and the community schools exists as a link between university coursework and high school students. A formal part of this program is the choice of three or four high school students from the local district who wish to become teachers and their enrollment in our *Introduction to Education* class. This class, which includes a requirement for tutoring students and encourages participation in the student education association, completes the circle of outreach by providing students with an incentive for college attendance. These students are transported by the university, given full access to library, athletic, and computer resources, transcribed for the three-credit class and graded just as typical university students. The uniqueness of this approach is taking high school students from the local district, providing them with higher education in their community, training them and asking them to serve the populations that are most proximate and in greatest need. This process not only allows high school students good tutoring models but also more incentive for higher education and visible proof of the opportunities available. These students, working with other high school students also share vocational and educational objectives and become accustomed to the university and its environs.

Two other recent initiatives have also been used to help local students think of themselves as prospective college students. First, our student education association worked with a local education foundation to develop and support a youth summit on campus. Usually held at the high school, this year's summit was held on the university's campus and its topic was *Reducing Violence to Improve Academic Excellence*. The summit was praised by the high school students for giving the event more prominence and a greater sense of educational value with seminars and guest speakers on the university's campus.

The other recent initiative was the creation of a summer camp for middle school students on robotics. In partnership with a professor from the School of Engineering, a professor from the Center combined students from the local middle school and our professional development school to form a team to compete in robotics competitions. One of the specified goals of the initiative is to have local children consider careers in engineering and science, and to believe that a college education is well within their grasp.

### **Tutoring in the Community**

Teacher candidates began working in community for many years and, to a great extent, are trying now to bring children to campus more often for educational enrichment. However, activities continue in the community. In fact, the increased visibility and campus wide commitment to civic engagement has resulted in students outside of education becoming involved with the schools and community organizations. While education maintains a focus on teacher training, our faculty and students are involved in supporting the larger University efforts. Students from all areas of the curriculum are working in schools and other community organizations to help children succeed through disciplinary service learning courses in a variety of majors. The university is currently supporting a program of service learning grants where selected faculty become service learning fellows. These faculty collaborate throughout one academic year to develop service-learning opportunities which match their specific course content to current needs in the community.

As service-learning courses are increasing in the university's curriculum, there are also opportunities for our students to volunteer in programs that are not necessarily linked to their coursework. Our *America Reads* program provides more than fifty tutors who work with three to seven children each on one-to-one reading tutoring. These tutors could be placed in most of the schools, even the ones that Edison runs. The program is sponsored with federal work-study money. Each of the tutors go through an orientation and training program with the program coordinator and will average about ten hours per week with his or her group of students.

The center's Reading and Academic Skills (RAS) Center sponsors an after school program for neighborhood elementary school children, most of whom would otherwise return to an empty home. Frequently these children have little parental support and encouragement. They live in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city. At a local church, the children are supplied with a safe and supportive environment in which to complete their homework, enjoy art projects and games, and have dinner before going home at about 6:30. The Church is very poor and has little to offer other than the encouragement of their dedicated volunteer staff, who shoulder the expenses as best they can.

Tutoring programs are only one part of the total outreach from the Center for Education. Linked with the activities are regular drives for food and books to help sustain families and sustain local programs. Since the fall of 2003, The RAS Center has been supplying individual tutors for children and has also provided backpacks, school supplies, Christmas gifts, Easter baskets, and dinners through the generosity of our own staff and student workers. These seemingly ancillary activities actually link as many organizations as possible and foster a better understanding of the needs of the community and school district among all partners.

The need for civic engagement cannot be seen as simply students from better socioeconomic backgrounds assisting those in need. All of the programs illustrated use older students to help younger students within the community. This reciprocal process helps to instill in all students the need for active citizenship and partners more middle class students with students who are less socio-economically advantaged for informal learning and friendship.

### **The Circle Expands as Needs Expand**

As university faculty, community partners, and the local school district reflect on the continued needs of the area, the circle continuously expands. The community continues to seek resources, sometimes without a coordinated plan for their use. Federal, state, and local politics wreak havoc upon the already tight resources through manipulation and mismanagement. As the community wrestles with its problems, well-intentioned non-profits attempt to set up new programs without connecting with programs in progress, simply adding to the confusion and the competition for resources. Caretakers, desperately seeking means for student success ask that successful partners, like the university, take on added responsibilities. In our case, the state has asked the university to develop the K-5 curriculum for the elementary schools and to run one of its schools.

The Center for Education at Widener University is part of the School of Human Service Professions. This configuration houses Physical Therapy, Social Work, A Doctorate of Clinical Psychology program, and Education. Although education will take the primary lead in curriculum development, the full resources of the school are needed for the establishment of total coverage for a community partnership program to take place.

Family support, home resources, employment, adequate housing, and appropriate modeling at home are all issues that this expanded circle must address. As our center for education expands to work with the centers for social work, physical therapy, and clinical psychology, the broadening of services and resources from the university becomes clearer. As the circle grows, it is our hope that the university will no longer be an oasis within this city, but equal partners in a revitalized community that can reclaim its roots and its prominence as a contributor to the greater Philadelphia region.

In the environment of distancing ourselves from the community, the Center developed an elementary professional development school in another, more affluent, nearby school district which has now expanded to include a middle school and will eventually include their high school. This move toward a more affluent area, allows us to give students more diverse settings for field experiences (which both state accreditors and NCATE require) however, stretched vital

resources and focus from an area in greater need to two different areas with competing needs and centers of communication. This struggle will continue as long as multiple relationships are deemed necessary for effective teacher preparation.

### **A Circle of Services**

The approach described in this article can be likened to a circle in which each of the efforts for partnership engagement help another area. In the figure that follows, one can see that work in methods classes with their field requirements flow into bringing children to campus for diagnosis and remediation programs, as well as for after school tutoring and Saturday academies. These tutoring programs utilize students from the community who are also enrolled in introduction to education courses to help make visible to students the potential for college success of students from their own community. These students (enrolled in courses) then work toward their own success and, it is hoped, enroll full-time, in teacher education programs, to complete the circle. It is our belief that with effective community involvement, this circle can help move members of our community from a circle of poverty and despair to a new model of excellence in education using all of the resources the community has to offer and to help Chester reclaim and surpass its former pride as a thriving sector of the metropolitan region.

### **Lessons Learned and Hopes for the Future**

The expanding circle model of services has helped the University learn many important lessons. Beyond the enrichment of individual lives in the cohorts of both the providers and the recipients, the university has become reintegrated into the community. Although great distrust still exists on the part of community citizens because of the University's historic fickleness, there is a new appreciation of its efforts of behalf of the city. Many questions remain as to how this partnership will continue. Presidential leadership may cause the academy to retrench in the future. New initiatives, such as a proposed charter school sponsored by the University, may prove beyond sustainability. Continued corruption in the local area may lead to the discontinuance of partnerships.

The optimistic view is always brighter. The partnership programs may lead us to further expansion and revitalization of a distressed community. Greater educational opportunities may lead local citizens to remain in the area and seek better paying jobs, helping to spiral up the economy and the local area. One cannot predict the future from current partnerships, but can hope that the involvement of the well meaning will serve as a catalyst for greater civic responsibility from all constituents.

### References

- Astin, A. W. (1997). Liberal education and democracy: The case for pragmatism. In R. Orrill (Ed.), *Education and democracy: Re-imagining liberal learning in America* (p. 210-211). New York: College Entrance Examination Board
- Battistoni, R. (1997). Service learning and democratic citizenship. *Theory into practice*, 36, 150-156.
- Benson, L. & Harkavy, I. (2000). Integrating the American system of higher, secondary and primary education to develop civic responsibility. In T. Ehrlich (Ed.), *Civic responsibility higher education* (pp. 174-196). Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- Boyle H. C. & Kari, N. N. (2002). Renewing the democratic spirit in American colleges and universities: Higher education as public work. In *Civic responsibility and higher education*, 37. (T. Ehrlich, ed) Phoenix: Oryx Press
- Brisbin, R. A & Hunter, S. (2003) community leaders' perceptions of the university and college efforts to encourage civic engagement. *The review of higher education*. 24,4 467-486.
- Harkavy, I. (2004). *New perspectives in service learning: Research to advance the field*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Matthews, R., Smith, B. L., MacGregor, J. & Gabelnick, F. (1996). Creating learning communities. *Civic responsibility and higher education*.