

# Does place still matter? The future of higher education depends on vibrant local communities

Colleges and universities were founded with civic purposes. Today, the missions of every type of institution of higher education still call upon campuses to serve those larger purposes. And yet, as Ira Harkavy, director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, poignantly asks: “If the American higher educational system is really so great, why does American society have such great and growing problems?”<sup>1</sup>

As colleges and universities continue to navigate the health, economic, and social ramifications of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, attention has been drawn to a broader reality about the connections between campuses and their surrounding communities. Higher education is not an island apart; rather, colleges and universities are inextricably linked to the world beyond the walls of our campuses. As such, even as campuses practice social distancing and offer more remote options for courses, events, and convenings, higher education needs to be engaged with the most pressing challenges facing society, from the coronavirus public health crisis to other complex topics such as climate change, systemic racism, and economic inequality.

These topics are *wicked problems* because they are adaptive challenges that can't be solved with technical solutions or the usual way of doing business. They involve issues with competing values, multiple perspectives, and tough trade-offs. A commitment to addressing wicked problems needs to be built into all aspects of planning and decision making in higher education, including in the fundamental tasks of teaching and scholarship. Colleges and universities can launch this new model of public engagement in their local communities.

Many academics may want to avoid controversial topics in the classroom or in their scholarship given the hyperpolarization surrounding contentious issues, along with the increasing distrust of higher education from the public. It's worth noting that confidence in higher education has decreased more since 2015 than any other U.S. institution that Gallup measures.<sup>2</sup> Decreasing trust is largely the result of the lack of relationships and social connections.

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1 Ira Harkavy, “School-Community-University Partnerships: Effectively Integrating Community Building and Education Reform,” *Universities and Community Schools*, 6:1-2, 1999, 7-24.

2 Stephen Marken, “A Crisis of Confidence in Higher Ed,” Gallup Blog, April 12, 2019. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/248492/crisis-confidence-higher.aspx>.

To address the growing disconnect between higher education and the public, colleges and universities must be engaged and relevant not only in tackling the many immediate stresses brought on by the pandemic, but for the long term. This involves deploying institutional resources toward advancing public problem-solving while simultaneously tapping into the abundance of assets in local communities for learning and knowledge creation through ongoing, reciprocal relationships. As Byron White, associate provost at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, explains: “Perilous trends in higher education can all be addressed by establishing a deeper, tighter interdependence between the purpose of higher education institutions and the economic, social, and cultural well-being of the places where those institutions are located.”<sup>3</sup>

This insight about the importance of becoming stewards of place has emerged in a growing number of community-based research and practice collaboratives. Many higher education institutions recognize their responsibilities as anchor institutions and the unique roles they play within their surrounding communities—often having significant influence on the educational, economic, cultural, and civic lives of the communities where they are situated. Indeed, the future success of institutions of higher education depends on ensuring that these places are healthy and thriving communities—and vice versa.



**Colleges and universities must work with their local communities to develop the social, economic, and cultural capital needed for long-term health and well-being.**

Place-based education is one powerful response from higher education, even during the pandemic. Defined by Erica Yamamura and Kent Koth as a “long-term university-wide commitment to partner with local residents, organizations, and other leaders to focus equally on campus and community impact within a clearly defined geographic area,”<sup>4</sup> place-based education matters most especially for campuses located in urban or rural settings. Bringing Theory to Practice’s Partnerships for Listening and Action by Communities and Educators (PLACE) Collaboratory offers a promising set of practices

in this regard through the civic experimentation of an entrepreneurial group of campuses in four cities (Los Angeles, Greensboro, Baltimore, and Newark) supported by a Mellon Foundation grant. Projects emerging from the collaborative include the University of Southern California working with community residents to design a public history and dialogue project about gentrification in Boyle Heights; the University of Maryland-Baltimore County creating undergraduate PLACE Fellows to work with community-based organizations; and Greensboro-area colleges (North Carolina A&T, Greensboro College, the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, Guilford College, and Elon University) developing a project-based joint course on reclaiming democracy.

The midst of an ongoing pandemic may seem an odd time to reinforce the importance of place. Many students at residential campuses have had little interaction with local communities since March 2020, even as students at most institutions of higher education continue to live and work where they attend college. Regardless, the future of institutions of higher education depends on vibrant communities. Colleges and universities must work with their local communities to develop the social, economic, and cultural capital needed for long-term health and well-being.

Higher education can build that critical capital by establishing deep and reciprocal relationships with local communities around the core work of teaching and scholarship through community-based research, service learning, internships, and practicums centering on mutual public engagement. Place-based partnerships also involve recognizing other powerful resources within the purview of colleges and universities that can transform communities, such as purchasing local products, investing endowment funds equitably and sustainably, hiring nearby residents, making facilities open and available, creating educational opportunities and

<sup>3</sup> Byron P. White, “Toward the Community-Centric University,” *Higher Education Exchange*, 2021, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Erica K. Yamamura & Kent Koth, *Place-Based Community Engagement in Higher Education: A Strategy to Transform Universities and Communities*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishers, 2018, p. 18.

pipelines to college for local youth, and being genuinely responsible neighbors around local issues like affordable housing, quality education, and municipal government funding. Making these kinds of commitments to place

could mean that higher education emerges from the pandemic with closer community ties, more trust, and stronger partners for the future.

## Read more

Barker, Derek W. M. & Lovit, Alex, "Institutions and the Public: A Troubled Relationship?" *Higher Education Exchange*, 2021.

Yamamura, Erica K. & Koth, Kent, *Place-Based Community Engagement in Higher Education: A Strategy to Transform Universities and Communities*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishers, 2018.

Longo, Nicholas V. *Deliberative Pedagogy: Staging Grounds for Democratic Renewal*. TIAA Institute, 2022

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