AUB American University of Beirut

W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

EARTH UNIVERSITY

GCHERA

TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION

University Engagement with the Community

Foreword

The American University of Beirut (AUB), in partnership with the Global Confederation of Higher Education Associations for Agricultural and Life Sciences (GCHERA), EARTH University and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has launched a project on "Transforming Higher Education". This project seeks to share five Key Elements of Success practiced by EARTH University and others with universities in Mexico and Haiti, and across GCHERA's global university network over a period of three years between July, 2018 and June, 2021.

The goal of the project is to advocate for the education of future leaders with the commitment to serve society–leaders capable of positively affecting changes in their environment, promoting peace and understanding, and respecting diversity while contributing solutions for the major challenges of the 21st Century. The project´s purpose is to encourage and facilitate change processes within the university as well as to promote greater university engagement with the larger community to achieve the twin goals of producing future leaders and change-agents, as well as fostering greater prosperity and equity in society.

This publication is one of a series of five papers that present Key Elements of Success the project seeks to share and which, taken together or individually, can contribute to facilitating university transformation processes. These five elements are considered fundamental in the successful education of leaders who will be prepared to offer solutions to the diverse and complex challenges of feeding an ever growing and more diverse population sustainably, mitigating and adapting to a changing climate while also contributing to the economic well-being of our communities. This requires leaders with strong ethics and values as well as solid grounding in theoretical knowledge and practical skills necessary to provide the technical, environmental and socially sensitive solutions required. The five Key Elements of Success presented in the series of papers are experiential/participatory education; community engagement; training in entrepreneurial education and business development; ethical and value based leadership; and decision-making and conflict resolution.

Three additional factors which enhance the impact of the five Elements of Success should be considered as well. The first is the role of the university professor as a facilitator of learning, the second is an explicit recognition that the five Elements of Success should permeate and be reinforced across the university educational system, including both curricular and co-curricular activities and programs and the third is the need for policy changes which are essential to their success.

The traditional role of the university professor as the repository of knowledge is increasingly being questioned. An educational system featuring the Key Elements of Success envisions a role for the professor as one who guides and facilitates student's learning through discovery, self-directed learning, analysis, reflection, group interaction, among others. The responsibility of the professor is to create a stimulating learning environment and provide students with real life opportunities to observe, develop ideas, apply theories, implement solutions and learn from the results. Rather than focusing on "covering the material", professors should be concerned with students learning on multiple levels, including problem solving and analytical skills, self-confidence, teamwork, personal relationship skills among many others. Professors should be recognized and stimulated for their innovations and contributions as "Facilitators of Learning". The professor's commitment to participatory education, to learning with and from the community, to providing continuous feedback and support requires time and commitment far beyond the delivery of lectures and supervision of laboratory sessions.

In addition to the changed role for the professor as the facilitator of learning, the entire university must be committed to the learning system oriented towards the five Elements of Success. As the five essays make clear, each element of success goes beyond the traditional classroom and involves everyone on campus and beyond, including community members. Participatory and experiential learning occur in the community, on farms, as part of research activities and as part of the university's commercial undertakings. Ethics and values are not just discussed and analyzed in the classroom but must be key features of the university environment, embodied in institutional policies and consistently demonstrated by university administrators, faculty, staff and students. The effective resolution of conflict is an acquired skill requiring systematic evaluation and analysis and should be actively practiced in relations between faculty, staff, administrators and students and well as between the university and the

larger community. Team projects in classes provide a fertile environment for fostering skills in resolving conflicts, as do co-curricular activities. The University engagement with the community involves administrators, faculty, students and staff as does the inclusion of entrepreneurship within the curriculum. Each of the five areas are complementary and reinforcing.

The successful integration of the elements of success will frequently require policy changes, and in many cases a rethinking of the university mission and vision. The education of leaders requires creating a student focused learning community and the university policies need to promote greater faculty, staff and student engagement with the community; student driven learning where students take on more responsibility for their own education; student led business ventures; student supervision of research, and other initiatives. Policy changes may involve changing study programs, institutional access by visitors from the community, student access to laboratories and fields, as well as the level of responsibilities given to students to reinforce their learning. University policies must recognize and reward the new role of the professor as the "Facilitator of Learning" as a valid and viable road to advancement within the University Community. Therefore, it is critical to consider policy changes to ensure any successful university transformation process.

We hope that this series of documents will be helpful to your university as you engage in a process of transformation. Please take them as an invitation to open a dialog and stimulate discussion to enhance the university transformation process[1].

James B. French | Project Director

1 What is written in this series of documents represent the views of the authors and does not necessarily represent the thinking or vision of American University of Beirut, GCHERA, EARTH University or the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

University Engagement with the Community – Addressing Community Challenges

Dr. Julieta Mazzola[1]

Introduction

Universities have responsibilities in many different areas. They are tasked with equipping professionals with sophisticated, work-oriented scientific and technical knowledge, and supporting the development of responsible, self-sufficient citizens. They are also required to generate knowledge and innovation through research, and promote alternative ways of improving the quality of life of the community. These three typical dimensions of university work (teaching-learning, research and community engagement) are closely intertwined, and it is the faculty and students who, through teaching-learning and research processes focused on real-life circumstances, can initiate the university's engagement with the community.

If universities are to train professionals to address the challenges of the 21st century, and also to be responsible citizens, students must be able to identify and critically analyze the major needs and problems of communities, as well as the complex global challenges, and commit to promoting **changes** in the situation. Bringing about positive changes in society calls for ethical leaders who promote dialogue and collaboration; demonstrate humility, social commitment, honesty, respect and empathy; inspire and create trust; and seek creative solutions, and work to implement them. Working with the community is an excellent way to develop or enhance these skills and values.

Students benefit, in both human and professional terms, when they assume community challenges as part of their educational process. When faced with complex situations, students will have more opportunities to reflect on their own ideas and knowledge, improve their capacity for analysis, enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and stimulate their creativity and initiative.

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This paper looks at certain aspects of university-community engagement. It presents some important concepts, touches briefly on the evolution of the relationship, describes specific forms of implementation, considers the case of EARTH University, and highlights key elements and lessons as final thoughts.

Background and brief theoretical context

For universities, the integration of teaching, learning and research to address local needs and problems is both a responsibility and an opportunity. If students, faculty and the university community work together with local communities, it will be easier to address community problems and tackle global challenges, and also to produce professionals who are responsible citizens concerned for the collective well-being.

In recent years, collaboration between universities and communities has taken several forms. A case in point is the evolution of collaboration of this kind in the United States, where in the 1980s *community service movements* emerged that focused on voluntary work or extracurricular activities. The term and practice of *service-learning* also dates from the same decade. Adopting a more academic approach, it focuses on deeper cognitive aspects and civic engagement and therefore is linked to the educational objective and, in some cases, to specific courses. In the 1990s, *civic engagement* became the dominant paradigm, with the main objective being for students to actively participate in the processes of democracy (Swearer Center, 2017).

In the early 2000s, universities began focusing on measurement and research related to outcomes of service-learning, with the evidence subsequently suggesting that the episodic nature of service-learning activities was not the most effective means of engagement either for student learning or community impact. As a result, a new paradigm of community engagement emerged in which community needs and interests were re-centered—with the emphasis on the importance of long-term, reciprocal relationships with local and community organizations and groups—and partnerships with those actors became a key element for universities (Swearer Center, 2017).

The Carnegie Foundation defines community engagement as "the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity." The university's engagement with the community should be a long-term relationship in which each party contributes its needs and assets and, through a collaborative process, defines goals and outcomes that benefit all the actors equally. The emphasis is on reciprocity, a two-way relationship that should benefit both parties simultaneously (Campus Compact, 2008).

The promotion of teaching-learning and research processes linked to the community's real situation is an excellent scenario for training students, harnessing experience and practice to find solutions to local and global problems. Addressing complex real situations is essential in order to understand, analyze and improve decision-making processes that seek to resolve problems. Furthermore, this link makes it possible to develop sensitivity and social commitment and citizenship in students, promoting creativity, critical thinking, empathy, dialogue and other skills and core values for the construction of ethical leaderships that can promote changes in society. Working closely with the community, analyzing its challenges and opportunities, students can consolidate their business training, replicating experiences or promoting business projects with local people.

EARTH University's experience and various forms of implementation

Universities can intensify their engagement with the community by making it one of the institution's priorities and, as described in the RUFORUM report (2017), including it in their students' learning processes, research activities, knowledge sharing, curriculum and course reviews, facilitation of educational processes and promotion of social innovation with students, faculty and officials, among others. These forms of interaction are described briefly below, highlighting the main learning outcomes and challenges in each case. The example of EARTH University's engagement with the community is also presented,

which is mainly based on teaching and learning processes. Details are provided of one of the service-learning courses known as *Escenario Comunidad*.

In the case of *learning processes,* students and faculty can apply their knowledge and expertise with selected communities or groups, collaborating with them to solve problems and improve residents' quality of life. This can be done with students from a variety of disciplines or courses, and is what is usually referred to as service-learning. Service-learning is a form of community-based learning, a pedagogy that engages students in studying community issues in order to improve their understanding and the application of academic content. Other forms of community-based learning are: field visits, internships, practicums, work experience, voluntary work, among others. The process of learning together with the community should be well planned, with clear objectives, activities and forms of evaluation understood by all the actors. The key elements of the experience with the community are action and practice but, for these to become learning outcomes, processes of reflection, discussion and dialogue are needed. Through reflection, students examine their experiences critically and enhance both their learning and their community support actions. Reflection also promotes more complex problem and solution analysis, and leads to new ideas and critical thinking (Ash S. and Clayton P., 2004).

Communities can also form part of *research projects,* theses and dissertations. Research can integrate the knowledge, practices and experiences of local residents, and communities can become key actors in participatory research, research-action processes or collaborative research. In this way, the community contributes its expertise and shares the responsibilities and ownership of the knowledge gained (RUFORUM, 2017). In this regard, adequate communication, trust and mutual respect, integration and respect for human diversity and different cultures is essential, as is effective management of the challenges that may arise, such as power and resource inequality, long-term commitments, conflicts of interests, budgets or financing, among others. (Suárez-Balcázar Y., Harper G. and Lewis R., 2005).

Community-university integration of this kind can also promote *knowledge sharing* among the various actors, with communities afforded access to the academy's knowledge through training, manuals and technical assistance. But the communities can also contribute their knowledge and practices to academic processes, and together the parties can construct new local

knowledge. Local knowledge is the integration of traditional knowledge (ancestral wisdom) with technical expertise from academic or scientific areas (Mazzola J., 2015). This partnership with the community can contribute to the design of *a new curriculum or courses* to meet the community's specific needs, both for community members and students, and the facilitators may include community leaders or other prominent local residents (RUFORUM, 2017). *Social innovation* and social entrepreneurship are new models designed to solve problems or meet social needs, but which also encourage people to think about ways of innovating in order to have greater impact (Swearer Center, 2017). Students, officials and faculty can contribute to this process through new forms of extension, community service and teaching-learning. These new models should be explored in greater depth.

The mission of EARTH University is to prepare leaders with ethical values to contribute to sustainable development and to construct a prosperous and just society. Its vision, on the other hand, is to alleviate poverty, promote social justice and build a future where communities achieve sustainable and shared prosperity. As part of the training provided at EARTH, during their four-year course students have the opportunity to participate in different experiential curricular activities in which they learn about, analyze and tackle community problems, and promote or take part in projects aimed at the development of the community and rural well-being. These activities serve to hone certain attributes that graduates are expected to possess, including leadership skills, social commitment, effective communication, teamwork, the ability to think, analyze and synthesize in order to solve problems, entrepreneurship, and the ability to work for sustainable development. All these attributes can be developed or enhanced during their experience with the communities and in their rural surroundings, but actions must be planned to ensure that these experiences are powerful and transformative. Described below are the main curricular activities linked to the community, by year and according to the principal objectives.

In both years 1 and 2, the course level integration activities are experiential and include a community component. In year 1, students take part in a week of field visits designed to expose students to different kinds of productive activities in Costa Rica's humid tropical regions. They visit farms or businesses and learn about aspects of tropical crops, agricultural machinery and equipment, markets and firms, cattle raising and the environment and community leadership. In year 2, they are

assigned to a farm or a business in Costa Rica for a one-week, self-managed internship. This experience allows students to learn, evaluate, contribute their knowledge and become familiar with technical aspects of agribusinesses based on a prior agreement with their hosts.

During years 1 and 2, students also take part in a compulsory course called Work Experience, and each term work on one of the six learning scenarios (Crop Farm, Forestry Farm, Integrated Livestock Farm, Organic Integrated Farm, Agricultural and Environmental Services Internships and the Community Scenario). Further details of the Community Scenario are provided below. In year 3, during their stay at the La Flor campus (located in Costa Rica's dry tropical region), students live with a rural family for seven weeks and engage in community development activities while working for local businesses. During the final term of year 3, the same students undertake an internship with a firm, a farm or a nongovernmental organization that could be located anywhere in the world. During their internship, students are also required to participate in ongoing community development projects or a project they themselves design. In year 4, students complete the Professional Experience course at one of the six Work Experience scenarios. One group has the opportunity to select the *Community Scenario* and, if they so wish, may undertake their graduation project or final research project in the community.

In the case of the Community Scenario, during years 1 and 2 students spend a term working one full day each week with families and rural organizations involved in agricultural and environmental activities. The general objective of the course is to promote students' social awareness, involving them in community development activities that lead to greater comprehensive personal development. This experience enables students to see first-hand and gain an understanding of the real social, economic, environmental and political situation of rural communities close to the university; gives them an opportunity to share ideas and experiences with local residents and families, promoting a respectful dialogue and permitting students to benefit from their knowledge; and allows them to actively participate in rural development projects and initiatives, and reflect on their personal experience and everything going on around them.

This experience could be part of the service-learning strategy, as students deepen their social commitment, hone their communication and critical thinking skills, identify the needs

and problems of rural families and local organizations, and participate in the search for solutions. Students also have the opportunity to learn about and apply diagnostic and participatory planning tools, and others used for project evaluation and monitoring. These learning outcomes are achieved as students work to promote sustainable agriculture, organizational strengthening, value added, small local enterprises and environmental awareness among the communities, with both communities and students benefiting from the exercise.

Every student's experience in the community is unique, because it depends on the life lessons learned and their previous knowledge and cultural context, and the organization or family with which they interact and their circumstances and initiatives, among other variables. Hence, a key element of this experience is individual and/or group reflection, since the Scenario is designed to bring about changes in students' social awareness. Students should have opportunities to explore and question their own behavior, attitudes and thinking. Authors such as Mayhew and DeLuca (2007) suggest that learning outcomes related to aspects of social justice can be achieved by creating structured spaces for reflection and discussion in order to consider different ways of looking at the world. Learning occurs when students are exposed to new ways of thinking about themselves and the societies in which they live.

Fourth year students who participate in the Community Scenario spend the whole year spearheading the design, implementation and evaluation of a community development project in the areas of sustainable agriculture, entrepreneurship or organizational and social-human development. These activities are intended to improve students' ability to manage projects, resources and people, and their social and environmental commitment. Working with the communities, students undertake activities for the identification of problems (assessments, one-on-one meetings, gathering of information) and the design (definition of objectives, work plan, responsibilities, budgets, formulation of the project), implementation, monitoring and evaluation of their projects. In addition, they produce reports and presentations of results for the different stakeholders. Under their respective projects, students also facilitate workshops and train the community in various subjects, according to the needs identified. Furthermore, they are required to plan, supervise and evaluate the activities of year 1 and 2 students taking part in their projects. The Community Scenario provides an excellent means of promoting participation and inclusion, assertive

communication, values (honesty, respect, solidarity, responsibility and humility) and cooperation. This is why students are required to integrate other actors and their perspectives into their projects, in order to work with them as partners.

Most projects aimed at improving the quality of life of the communities close to EARTH University (Guácimo Campus) are overseen by the Community Development Program (PDC), an academic unit comprised of three rural development specialists that focuses on enhancing aspects of local entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture and organization building, and on integrating students into these processes. This program is of key importance for the university and the

academic development of the students, as they are the ones who determine the strategic lines of work with the communities, provide permanent technical and logistical support, and create the connections with key community actors.

This initiative at EARTH is an example of the many ways in which universities seek to engage with communities. Other cases could be cited, of both a simpler or more complex nature, depending on the social, cultural or political context, the resources available and the size of the university, among other factors.

Final reflections, some lessons learned, and recommendations

Through community engagement, universities interact with the public and private sectors and civil society for their mutual benefit and collaboration, improving research and innovation, teaching-learning and the students' citizenship training, but also contributing to capacity building among the communities,

generating projects, advisory services or specific assistance, promoting new practices and even new government programs and policies. These are just some of the aspects that contribute to the common good and social transformation. The students are a key element in this connection, since they can improve their technical expertise and develop soft skills and their social commitment as they experience the real world and promote positive changes in society. However, for such experiences to be really positive in both directions, the following points should be taken into account:

- The academic activities should be carried out on a platform of projects designed with the communities and keyed to their needs and problems. The projects should aim to generate measurable impact. To achieve this, it is important that there be a technical team to prepare and provide follow-up to the projects.
- The links with the community should be medium or long term, and benefit all the parties involved.
- The academic activities should be well planned, with clear learning objectives and forms of evaluation that integrate the perspectives of the different actors.
- Through their work with communities, students can develop their critical thinking, understanding of complexity, social awareness and decision-making skills, but opportunities should be created for dialogue, discussion and reflection to promote the process of personal development.
- It is vital that students reflect on what they do and experience in order to convert action into learning, explore and question the situation to be addressed, propose creative and innovative alternatives, and bring about rural transformation.
- In the community, students can apply their technical expertise, but the faculty can also create opportunities for work with colleagues from other disciplines and enrich their classes with real examples close to home.
- Clear communication teamwork and respect for diversity and cultural perspectives are essential in university-community interaction.

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