Chapter 34
Community–University Engagement in an Electronically-Defined Era

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ABSTRACT

Universities can enhance the return on the public investment that they represent by collaborating with their natural allies in addressing pressing social issues. That work can be further enhanced by harnessing appropriate digital technologies. In this chapter, the authors profile a current example of a community-led, multi-layered partnership that was formed to strengthen the infrastructure of the charitable sector in Canada. In particular, the chapter demonstrates that the “habit of partnerships” combined with the “habit of technology” is a potent strategy for addressing community needs. The authors argue that no single partnership or technology will transform the academic enterprise, but rather that the widespread adoption of technologies among universities’ allies, competitors, students, and faculty that characterizes the electronically-defined era will compel universities to adopt both the habit of partnerships and the habit of technology. That, in turn, will transform the way universities do their business and those with whom they do it.

INTRODUCTION

Universities are under pressure to show significant returns on the public investment they represent by demonstrating that they have a tangible impact on real problems. They recognize that critical social problems can only be addressed through approaches that require academics to collaborate not only within disciplines but across them and to form partnerships with a range of external stakeholders. At the same time, developments in electronic telecommunications technologies have radically changed who can communicate with whom, about what and why. Suddenly anyone can be a source of knowledge and have access to a global audience. Agencies, like universities,
that were previously tasked with generating and legitimizing knowledge and mediating relations between knower and knowledge-seeker, now find their knowledge empires under attack. Emerging digital technologies also make forming and maintaining partnerships much more cost-effective.

The writing is on the wall: in the future, successful universities will collaborate with other knowers, value a variety of ways of knowing, and work with other formal and informal knowledge mediators to expand both access to, and the scope of, the knowledge domain. In challenging universities to renew themselves as transformational institutions, the Kellogg Commission may not have called on universities to do anything new, but emerging digital technologies certainly do (Kellogg Commission on the Future of Land-Grant Universities, 2001).

THE HABIT OF PARTNERSHIPS

The University of Alberta in Canada was established along the lines of the American “Wisconsin model” in 1908 to serve the needs of the province. It established a Department of Extension in 1912 to share the university’s answers to economic and social problems with everyone (Archer & Wright, 1999). Since then, Extension has been engaged in a wide variety of outreach activities contributing to the cultural and economic well-being of the province. The work of Extension continues to evolve in response to changing community needs and opportunities. It currently offers a range of informal (unorganized, unsystematic) and non-formal (organized, systematic, but not credentialed) learning opportunities, formal continuing education credentials, a post-baccalaureate certificate, an embedded graduate certificate, and a graduate degree. Faculty members engage in both community-based and discipline-based research, practice the scholarships of integration (making connections across disciplines) and application (generating knowledge through practice) (Boyer, 1990), and are active citizens of the university, professions, and communities of interest and practice.

In 1975, Extension (which was just about to be promoted from a department to a faculty) was approached by a charitable organization, the Legal Resource Centre of Alberta Ltd. (LRC), with a request to enter into a partnership. The LRC had been established to develop a program of educational resources and services that would assist the public to become more knowledgeable about the law and better equipped to engage in legal affairs individually and collectively. At the time, the notion of educating the public about the law was considered radical, even dangerous (Gander, 1999). In today’s engagement terminology, Extension would become engaged with communities in discovering, sharing, translating, and mobilizing legal knowledge and competencies, particularly through the scholarships of integration (e.g., integrating legal, education, and library science knowledge) and application (practice in a variety of community and professional contexts).

The unit that carried out these activities was headed by a lawyer, drawn from a university-affiliated student-run legal service, who would, in time, become a tenured faculty member. Its multi-disciplinary staff included educators and librarians. Priorities were established within the unit. The operating costs of the unit and some projects were funded by the Alberta Law Foundation. Government departments and foundations were the principal sources of funding for other projects. The University and Extension provided in-kind support (furnishings, equipment, technical assistance, and sometimes space). The role of the board of the LRC varied throughout this period, at times taking full responsibility for obtaining funding for the program, giving direction in its overall development, and providing advice and assistance on specific activities.

In 2007, the program devolved out of the university to the LRC (Gander, 2009) and their roles reversed. The board of the LRC became...