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Book Review: The Key to Sustainability: Exploring University-Community Partnerships

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The Key to Sustainability: Exploring University-Community Partnerships

Review by **Sandra Krupa and Raul A. Leon**
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B.D. Wortham-Galvin, Jennifer H. Allen, and Jacob D.B. Sherman (Eds.),
Sustainable Solutions: University-Community Partnerships.
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Technology has opened the gates of knowledge acquisition, not only enhancing the amount of information students can access, but also widening the number of opportunities of what students can do with that information. On one hand, this technological spur has increased the demands of focusing on the importance of research production. However, it has also served as a renewed call to reconsider institutional priorities such as teaching and service. *Sustainable Solutions: University-Community Partnerships* brings attention to utilizing information and knowledge acquisition as a tool to address problems and issues that impact people, communities, and their environments. In this book, the authors place Portland State University (PSU) at the center of this conversation, discussing the role of holistic development, interdisciplinary learning, and community partnerships.

This book appeals to a wide audience of readers interested in creating university-community partnerships through developing and working on sustainable projects. This book contains 272 pages, and is organized into 14 chapters, each exploring a university-community project implemented by PSU. The projects are grouped thematically in several categories, including service, exchange, cooperative, and/or systemic/transformational partnerships and relationships. Although the university-community projects described in this book are vastly different from one to the next, they are all products of university-community partnerships, and move beyond volunteerism or transactional service-learning projects to create a stronger social and economic impact that can be sustained. The authors reference Aristotle and Emerson to challenge readers to move from the historical idea of education in the classroom, to education into our communities, where students are truly building relationships and partnerships with local stakeholders. Throughout the chapters,

the authors refer to several components that stand out in sustainable community partnerships (e.g., trust, respect, shared decision-making, mutual benefit, resource sharing). In the literature, scholars have identified these components (Benson & Harkavy, 2001; Mayfield & Lucas, 2000; Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2002) as critical aspects of service and community experiences.

Each of the 14 chapters focuses on a different university-community project. Each chapter begins with a summary of how students, faculty, and community partners engaged in the work and built the relationship. The various projects are described in a reader-friendly way that moves from interpretations of theoretical frameworks to a discussion grounded in practice. Illustrating this approach, Chapter 1 incorporates a model of collective impact in a community orchard project (Pond & Ackerman, 2015), creating opportunities for social sustainability, civic leadership, and community-based learning. In addition, many of the community engagement projects provide a list of student learning outcomes and/or conclusions and findings. This is discussed against a backdrop of impact, challenges, and the overall sustainability of the project.

Central to the core thesis of this book, it is clear that university-community partnerships reflect a core institutional value for PSU. This type of work is intentionally embedded in the curriculum and is part of the overall culture of the university. For example, PSU offers credit-bearing university-community partnerships as well as an undergraduate minor focused on civic engagement and delving into community partnerships. PSU has also consistently allocated funds and space on campus. For example, the Institute for Sustainable Solutions seeks to “develop solutions to complex sustainability challenges...address inequities...unlock opportunities for faculty and students...[and] enhance PSU students’ educational experience”

(<https://www.pdx.edu/sustainability/institute-for-sustainable-solutions>). These examples highlight that a focus on university-community partnerships extends beyond a written institutional mission statement, and the book does a great job describing several cases where these principles come to life as students, faculty, and staff at PSU engage with the local community.

Another theme in this book worth exploring is the focus on developing cultural competency locally and abroad. For example, Chapter 10 describes a partnership between PSU and Universidad Tecnológica de los Valles Centrales de Oaxaca in Mexico. In this university-community project, those involved had opportunities to gain cultural competency by further understanding the roles of governmental involvement, facing language barriers, working with partners across different socioeconomic statuses, and being immersed in the livelihoods of people with different beliefs and ways of living. These experiences are deeply connected to gaining the “awareness, knowledge and skills necessary to work effectively across cultural differences” (Pope & Reynolds, 1997, p. 270), a foundation required to gain cultural competence.

Beyond collaborating with community partners and stakeholders, the authors of this book bring attention to the importance of preparing students from a multidisciplinary perspective. For example, in Chapter 8, the authors describe a project aimed to create healthier modular classrooms. For this project alone, students and faculty members from schools of engineering, architecture, and computer science worked together, learning from one another, and bringing unique sets of skills and knowledge to fulfill a common goal. This type of university-community partnership emphasizes the importance of cross-disciplinary research, learning across curricular boundaries, and situating that learning to address real-life community challenges.

Overall, *Sustainable Solutions: University-Community Partnerships* offers great examples of community engagement projects and building partnerships inside and outside of the university campus. Although the authors recognize each type of university-community project cannot be implemented in every community, it does leave a valuable lesson, understanding the principles of design behind each project. However, a shortcoming of this book is not incorporating a closing chapter that brings together lessons and perspective from the editors, perhaps with an accompanying call for action for universities and community stakeholders to explore how these projects might be adopted and adapted in different contexts. Nonetheless, the book does conclude with

small biographical summaries from over 30 contributors to this edition. Reading through their statements, it is clear their work is situated in a context that values community engagement, is aligned with expanding education and research, and seeks to support university-community projects from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Above all, in many cases, the projects started with the passion, vision, and desire to improve local communities, bringing individuals and communities together to think critically about current issues. In conclusion, this book brings forward a number of best practices embedded in building and maintaining university-community partnerships. The lessons provided can help other universities, communities, and stakeholders to re-imagine how to carry out sustainable work, focusing on the role higher education should play in the world.

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