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Leveraging University/Community Engagement

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Leveraging University/Community Engagement



An interview with Dr. Stephen Percy
Dean of the College of Urban and Public Affairs,
Portland State University

Dr. Stephen Percy became the Dean of PSU's College of Urban and Public Affairs one year ago. Prior to his appointment, Dr. Percy served as the Dean of the College of Public Affairs and Professor in the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Baltimore from 2011-2014. Dr. Percy began his career at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where he served as a Professor of Political Science, Director of the Center for Urban Initiatives, and was Acting Director of the new School of Public Health. He was interviewed by Sheila Martin, Director of the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies at PSU.

Sheila Martin: *You've been the Dean of the College of Urban and Public Affairs for about a year now. How is working at PSU different from other universities you've worked in?*

Dean Percy: Compared to other universities, PSU is more heavily engaged with the community, and has been for a long time. I think that this university really understands and appreciates community engagement and it's that very rich tradition that defines the institution.

I have spent most of my academic career working in urban universities, 23 years at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and three at the University of Baltimore. Urban universities with their openness to educating diverse populations and their potential for meaningful community engagement are where I feel most at home—where I believe my leadership makes most sense.

Indeed, it is university-community engagement that brought me to Portland. Back in 2000 when Chancellor Nancy

Zimpher came on board at the UW-Milwaukee, she came up with a vision to build on the "Wisconsin Idea," the notion that "the boundaries of the university are the boundaries of the state." Chancellor Zimpher asked, what's the 21st Century urban version of the Wisconsin idea? And that led us to embark on the Milwaukee Idea, a variety of initiatives to build university/community engagement. But in creating that, we looked around the country to other universities that were doing this work. And Portland State was the shining example. PSU was a leader. From that time on, I have had great respect for PSU and when the dean position in the PSU College of Urban and Public Affairs became available, I simply had to explore the leadership opportunity.

It's the urban character that puts both PSU and the UW-Milwaukee where the action is, the artistic, economic, social heart of the state. Access to the community becomes a very important part of the mission of urban institutions. As a result,

I think both universities are transforming lives in very fundamental ways.

SM: *What are your initial thoughts about the college's role in the region?*

Dean Percy: One of the advantages of College of Urban and Public Affairs is its rich array of institutes and centers that, together, have long histories, great capacity and energy, and real impact. The academic programs here in the College of Urban and Public Affairs are also really powerful and relevant in today's world. Urban and regional planning, governance and public management, criminology and criminal justice, and public health are all at the forefront of our nation's challenges and opportunities.

I recently asked my staff to create an inventory of projects and initiatives in which our college faculty and centers and institutes have engaged in the state of Oregon since January 2013. So far we have counted 190 distinct projects—efforts designed to support effective government, urban and regional planning, health, and public policy. This is a powerful measure of CUPA's impact in our community, region and state.

And another thing I would say is that Portland is a place where its residents care about governance, planning, and the region's future in a richer and a deeper way than any other community in which I've lived. That doesn't mean that other cities don't care about those things, but it is so deep in the culture here. There are powerful notions here about sustainability and smart planning to manage urban growth and emphasize density in order to preserve natural lands and assets. There is such a strong awareness here of stewardship, that is valuing and protecting the region's natural beauty and resources.

So if you're going to have a school of public affairs, and you want that school to be able to get involved and have impact, you could hardly pick a better place than Portland. It's a community that's willing to ask questions and have important conversations. And that kind of questioning needs the kind of knowledge, convening, and research that a university can provide, and we have that here. It makes CUPA extremely relevant to Portland.

SM: *How do you think that willingness to engage is connected to the fact that the university is located within the city?*

Dean Percy: Well, the centrality of our location is really a wonderful asset because we are literally within walking distance of so many key public policy arenas. So our location makes it easy for us to engage in so many arenas of public policy debate and decision making.

I think that as visibility and appreciation for the university increase—and I think that is happening, as it is for many urban research universities—there's even more likelihood that people will want to become involved and connect with us as a potential asset in all kinds of planning, governance, and problem solving to enhance life quality. I've seen in other universities that, when people learn that you're a willing and relevant community partner, not just a bunch of scholars focused on their own fields, people's willingness and interest in having you at the table increases dramatically.

SM: *What have you identified as the most important opportunities for the college to serve the community better?*

Dean Percy: Well, I would say a few things. First, my goal is for the college to

Portland's a community that's willing to ask questions and have important conversations.

become the go-to place for public policy and planning. That's already happening, so we're not starting from zero. But I'd like to ratchet it up even more, so that if the community has a public policy or planning issue, and they need answers, they will think—we've got to call the College of Urban and Public Affairs at Portland State because that asset base is so important.

I think this college is at an interesting point where it could be a catalyst within PSU to do things at a more campus-wide level.

Second, I think this college is at an interesting point where it could be a catalyst within PSU to do things at a more campus-wide level, rather than just at a college level. I'll give you an example. I recently convened a meeting of all PSU deans to explore how the university as a whole could embrace the public challenges of an aging population. The college has the Institute on Aging, which is a very important core in this effort.

The issues related to aging are so emergent, so in need of an interdisciplinary approach. Our college can be a catalyst for bringing other people together on the issues. I believe we will have a significant leadership role. Not the leadership role, but an important role, just the same. And if we approach the issue of aging from a holistic, multi-disciplinary perspective, I think the university as a whole will benefit. This whole notion of collaboration is, at least in the back of my mind, one of the key challenges we have in promoting civic life and life quality in general.

SM: *So collaboration within the university is a key to serving the community better?*

Dean Percy: Well, yes, that and collaboration with relevant partners. And this gets to the notion of collective impact. We think about technology and how it's changing things—like improving medical records, healthcare, and other things.

We're relying on technology to be a huge problem solver. It can be. But in solving and responding to human problems, technology may be only one asset. What's also needed is for people to step out of their own realms to do something together for a collective impact. And our capacity to harness human ideas and initiatives and to bring together relevant organizations to work together is just in its infancy.

How many times are you going to hear, well, if only we could work together? But we often don't. And it's hard to do. But that's the challenge of moving forward in the 21st Century—how to harness talent and energy and organizations to collectively pursue issues. And I think a university has this wonderfully unique space where it can operate. In many ways it's a safe place for collaboration. It's often—not always, but often—a step back from the political world, and can serve as a kind of neutral convener in many cases. Our collaborative governance people, in the National Policy Consensus Center, have some very good strategies for doing that.

We also focus on creating and disseminating knowledge. Evidence-based work is in heavy demand—predictive analysis, big data—these are things a university can provide. So we're in this wonderful place where we can be an important node for some of this work. We can be a kind of “collaborative open space” where ideas can be expressed and knowledge can be exchanged.

What I've found is that communities generally appreciate what universities can provide—especially when universities demonstrate that they understand the need to operate on a community timeframe, not an academic timeframe. When you have research centers like CUPA does that are organized to be responsive to requests, and when you have faculty and ad-

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ministrators who understand the importance of collaborative partnerships, and when you understand your value-added—when you get all those things right—the university is more and more valued.



The College of Urban & Public Affairs at Portland State University.

SM: *You mentioned the importance of the university as a supporter of collaborative processes. And you mentioned aging as one of the potential subjects for that. Are there some other general subjects that the university could support the community in?*

Dean Percy: Well, another one we're working on, largely at the college level, is strengthening our role in the field of non-profit management to support a vibrant and resilient nonprofit sector in greater Portland and, really, across Oregon. Again, we're not starting from scratch. We've done great work, but there is more we can do. I've been meeting with non-profit leaders who are encouraging us to get more involved. And, again, we're working to find the University's value-added, so as not to get in the way or disrupt other work that's going on, but so we can contribute in the best ways possible. So we'll be looking at our courses, our programs, our outreach, our engagement and our capacity in that area.

Another subject of interest is the notion of serving as a think tank by bringing together the diverse and rich resources of this college in areas like planning, convening, urban studies, collaborative governance, regional analysis, and economic analysis to create some sort of central "thought space" for greater Portland and Oregon. By that I mean a place where big ideas and future-focused thinking can be explored, examined, and inform public policies that protect and advance life quality in the community.

I think that much of the work that the

Institute for Portland Metropolitan Studies has been doing has been contributing to just this kind of thing: regional convening, thought processes, bringing people together, and having an effective advisory board that represents different communities and stakeholders. These things, like so many great accomplishments of our centers and institutes, are pivotal. The great work is already happening; so maybe the idea of being a think-tank is just about recognizing and harnessing the talent we have and elevating our work in order to create a place for more great ideas to spring up. And again, a lot of that has to do with our rethinking collaboration within the college, and identifying community needs and interests.

SM: *The last question is sort of softball. What favorite places have you discovered in the region?*

Dean Percy: I haven't done as much discovering as I want to. Well, it's trite to say the restaurant scene is very exciting. I love the Coast. I love the downtown and the Pearl—just being there. I love living in a near-in neighborhood. I guess you'd call Burlingame "near in." I have a restful place to live, yet I am ten minutes away from all kinds of fun things to do. The funny thing about picking a place to live here is that everyone you know lobbies for you to pick their neighborhood because their neighborhood is "really cool." There is a really strong neighborhood identity here. Portland is a great place to live and work! **M**

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