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Citation Details

Flynn, E. (2015). From Capstones to Strategic Partnerships: The Evolution of Portland State University's Community Engagement and Partnership Agenda. *Metropolitan Universities*, 26(3), 159-170.

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From Capstones to Strategic Partnerships: The Evolution of Portland State University's Community Engagement and Partnership Agenda

Erin Flynn

Abstract

Portland State University's (PSU) reputation as an engaged, urban-serving university continues to distinguish it both nationally and locally. Key partnerships with local, public, and private partners provide students, faculty, and staff with remarkable opportunities to contribute to the physical, social, and economic development of the Portland metropolitan region. This article traces the evolution of PSU's engagement and partnership agenda and shares lessons learned by PSU as it seeks to better coordinate and centralize key components of its vast engagement and partnership portfolio. This reflection describes why and how PSU created an Office of Strategic Partnerships and the role of the newly formed PSU Partnership Council, and explores the challenge of striking a balance between the grassroots level of engagement and partnership activity and the need to take a larger, institution-wide view.

Portland State University's (PSU) motto, "Let Knowledge Serve the City," exemplifies the institution's commitment to community engagement and partnership. For over two decades, community engagement and partnership have been distinguishing characteristics of PSU's mission, strategies, and operations at every level. Historically, the clearest manifestation of this commitment has been the senior capstone requirement. The capstone is the culminating, senior-level course in PSU's University Studies general education program, consisting of teams of students from different majors working together and collaborating with one or more community partners to complete a project addressing a real-world problem in the Portland metropolitan region.

Community engagement and partnership emerged as a centerpiece of the PSU faculty and student experience due, in part, to the university's central, urban location. PSU anchors the south end of downtown Portland, occupying fifty city blocks. It is a dense urban campus within walking distance from City Hall, most major downtown employers, and a short bike, bus, or car ride from myriad government agencies, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. Proximity was not the sole factor driving community engagement, however, as PSU evolved from a teaching college established in 1952 as part of the GI Bill to a full-service research university offering a range of graduate certificates and degrees. By the mid-1990's, engagement and partnership, grounded in the capstone requirement, were celebrated and highlighted as a strategic

advantage by senior administrators who sought to forge a distinct identity for PSU as an urban-serving research university (Ramaley 1996, 1997).

Since AY 1992-93, when the capstone requirement was established, many other forms of community engagement and partnership have taken root across the university. Examples include a large body of professional service and sponsored research delivered by various colleges and institutes across campus to a range of local, county, and state government agencies, particularly in the health, education, and social service fields; a wide range of partnerships with local businesses and industry related to workforce development (e.g., internships and employment); and continuous professional application opportunities for fine and performing arts students with local nonprofit organizations. More recently, a significant body of engagement and partnership work has emerged related to city and regional planning and environmental sustainability.

“Civic Leadership through Partnership”

For the better part of the past twenty-five years, the vast majority of PSU’s engagement and partnership work was initiated by individual faculty members, staff, and/or administrators who had personal relationships with nonprofit, business, and government leaders. Historically, the engagement and partnership agenda relied on *individual* rather than *institutional* relationships.

In 2008, when Wim Wiewel became the eighth president of PSU, he established five guiding themes for the university, one of these being “provide civic leadership through partnerships.” As a scholar of city-university relations, Wiewel was well versed in the concept of universities as “anchor institutions”—that is, large, place-based organizations (public or private) advancing long-term, strategic goals related to urban innovation, economic and workforce development, community health, education reform, and real estate development in metro regions (Initiative for a Competitive Inner City and CEOs for Cities 2002). Upon arrival, he charged PSU to do the following:

- Lead as a civic partner
- Deepen engagement as a critical community asset
- Demonstrate leadership in regional innovation
- Serve as an anchor institution in the metro region

To deliver on these goals, Wiewel established the new executive-level Office of Strategic Partnerships (OSP), organizationally situated within Research and Strategic Partnerships (RSP). In addition to raising the research profile of the university, RSP was created to develop and advance “strategic partnerships” and serve as a front door for community engagement. PSU defines strategic partners to be business and civic partners that typically involve multiple colleges and tap into a range of university assets, including faculty research, student labor, workforce development units, contract research and service, demonstration projects, and planning and development initiatives. These multi-faceted partnerships require coordination, management, and regular reporting due to the complexity and strategic and political import of the partners.

Three strategic partnerships had been identified and were under development in some shape or form when the Office of Strategic Partnerships was created in 2011. These included Intel, Portland General Electric (PGE), and Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU).

Getting Organized

What became clear upon creation of the new Office of Strategic Partnerships in 2011 was that PSU had little institution-wide understanding of its partnership landscape. Two decades of active partnership development had led to a tremendous amount of engagement and activity, but there had been little structured attempt at cataloging, documenting, or measuring the quantity, quality, or impact of this activity. While the capstone program had developed a structured process for tracking community partnerships and courses, other forms of engagement and partnership were not formally tracked or documented. The formation of OSP highlighted the need to develop a more comprehensive and systematic method for understanding and tracking partnership activity. Another realization was that the lack of protocol regarding outreach to strategic partners had resulted in a mishmash of overlapping requests from PSU to partners. Partners complained about the lack of coordination within PSU and expressed the desire for a “one-stop” point of contact that could vet requests and help partners navigate PSU.

A first step for the newly formed office was development of an inventory methodology to enable internal and external stakeholders to quickly see the nature of an existing partnership. The inventory process included a five-year look at the following:

- Identification and documentation of all sponsored research and service activity between PSU and each partner
- Identification and documentation of all workforce development-related activity (e.g., internships, number of alumni employed by partner, and curriculum-related engagement with partner)
- Capstones courses sponsored by partner
- Philanthropic gifts and in-kind sponsorship from partner
- Key faculty and administrative relationships with partner

The process of creating strategic partnership inventories proved challenging and time-consuming because of the highly decentralized nature of the required pieces of information. Building a comprehensive inventory required data collection from multiple units on campus, extensive face-to-face interviews with relevant faculty and staff, and fact-checking with partners. The inventory process quickly revealed that “strategic partnerships” were composed of myriad formal and informal partnerships and relationships (e.g., research, technical assistance, service, capstones, internships, demonstration projects, philanthropy, etc.), and that it was extremely difficult to capture all related activity. This realization led to a broader, university-wide effort to better categorize, coordinate, and communicate PSU’s partnership agenda writ large.

Development of the “PSU Engagement and Partnership Spectrum”

In the fall of 2013, OSP teamed up with PSU’s Office of Academic Innovation (OAI) to tackle several interrelated engagement and partnership challenges. OAI is responsible for grounding curriculum design and faculty support for the development of community-based learning courses. A “challenge statement” was circulated among deans and key staff, and a series of interviews was held to determine how to best forge collective solutions (Office of Research and Strategic Partnerships 2013). The “challenge” was articulated in the following way:

Despite deep experience and expertise in community engagement and community-university partnerships, PSU has yet to organize, cohere, measure, or communicate its partnership agenda effectively. Year after year, PSU administrators struggle to answer basic questions about community partnership and engagement. PSU’s inability to readily gather information to answer these questions is problematic on multiple levels. It presents challenges for students who seek information about partnership-based courses; for faculty who seek to conduct partnership-based scholarship; for department chairs and deans who want to publicize accomplishments associated with partnership-based teaching and research; and for senior administrators who are frequently asked by the media, legislature, and donors to share partnership stories, data, and outcomes.

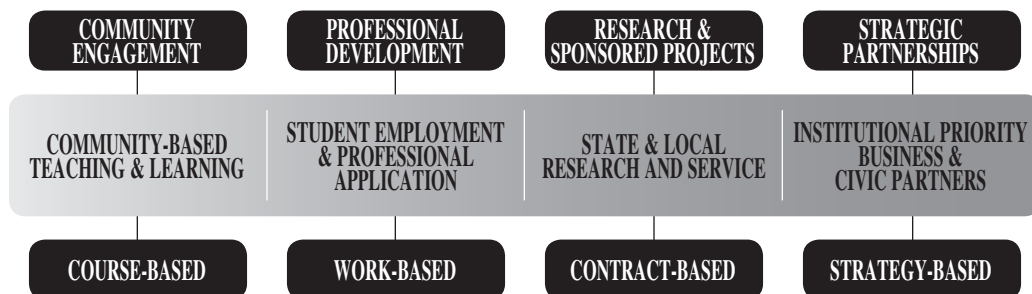
Because of the decentralized growth of partnership activity at PSU, the people who do this work are often isolated within their colleges, units, and divisions. Faculty and staff fail to identify synergies with others doing similar work; duplication of effort and outreach occurs as a result. This is both inefficient and unproductive as partners often complain about PSU’s lack of coordination regarding community outreach.

The current state of partnership also creates challenges for external stakeholders seeking to recruit students and/or work collaboratively with the university on critical issues. External stakeholders aren’t clear how to navigate the tangled web of departments, colleges, and administrative units that make up PSU. External stakeholders must often make multiple contacts within the university before they find the appropriate individual who can provide relevant assistance.

Structured interviews with representatives from all seven of PSU’s colleges revealed that the word “partnership” was being used to describe everything from a one-day student volunteer project to multi-year research projects with state agencies. To gain a full accounting of the partnership landscape, it became clear that a more nuanced understanding of community engagement and partnership was required. Through campus interviews and inventory work, partnership patterns emerged that led to the development of a partnership typology (Figure 1). The goal of the typology was to

clarify the major categories of engagement and partnership at PSU and to begin to build an institutional view of partnership activity.

Figure 1: PSU Engagement and Partnership Spectrum



The following definitions were developed to clarify each category:

- **Community Engagement**

Activities in this category engage students and faculty in co-curricular student work or community-based teaching, learning, and research activities. These partnership activities are typically initiated and sustained by an individual faculty member or student group.

- **Professional Development**

Ongoing professional development opportunities and partnerships occur at the college and department level. These opportunities may be required for degree completion or may be designed to produce “work-ready” graduates. This category includes practicum (required for graduation/certification), structured internships, and professional application.

- **Research and Sponsored Projects**

A significant share of PSU’s research and sponsored projects portfolio consists of long-term research and professional development partnerships with state and local government. These partnerships are characterized by research and program evaluation, database development, service delivery, staff training, and professional development.

- **Strategic Partnerships**

Strategic partnerships typically involve multiple colleges and tap into a range of university assets, including faculty research, student labor, workforce development, contract research and service, demonstration projects, and planning and development.

PSU Partnership Council Launch

In the fall of 2014, with support from the president and provost, PSU launched the PSU Community Partnership Council. Utilizing the Engagement and Partnership Spectrum as a unifying framework, the PSU partnership council was charged with the following:

The general purpose of the Community Partnership Council is to fulfill PSU's goal of civic leadership through partnerships. Specifically, the council seeks to better organize, coordinate, and report on significant partnership activity. In addition, the council will identify administrative barriers that prohibit successful implementation of partnership activities and seek to address them. The council will identify, organize, and leverage PSU assets and expertise to deliver on regional strategic partnerships that include, but are not limited to, urban sustainability, economic development, educational reform, and community health. The council is intended to act as a value-added, campus-level forum for identifying strategies to enhance the overall PSU climate for growing and sustaining community partnerships (Office of Research and Strategic Partnerships 2014).

The overarching goal of the partnership council was defined in the following way:

PSU seeks to be at the cutting-edge of "community-university" engagement and partnership work nationally. While honoring the personal relationships upon which many partnerships are built, PSU seeks to build campus infrastructure and support systems that lead to greater standardization and an ability to more readily assess and communicate the impact and value of this work. The end goal is to provide more consistent and better engagement and partnership opportunities to more faculty, staff, students, and stakeholders (Office of Research and Strategic Partnerships 2014).

The associate vice president for strategic partnerships and the dean of the College of Urban and Public Affairs were appointed co-chairs of the Community Partnership Council. Council membership consists of twenty faculty and staff representing each college. The committee membership intentionally does not include students or community partners. Recognizing that many of the initial challenges identified with PSU's unorganized partnership agenda had to do with the lack of systems from within PSU, council leadership decided to limit the initial sphere within which the work would be done to committee members drawn from PSU faculty and staff. Committee members were identified using the following criteria:

1. At least one representative of each school or college at PSU;
2. Both faculty and staff with experience/expertise in partnerships, including faculty members from different ranks;
3. Directors of centers and institutes that engage in research, sponsored projects, and/or professional development; and
4. Representatives of varied disciplines and approaches to partnerships to promote diverse perspectives on engagement issues.

In year one, Community Partnership Council members self-organized into teams organized according to the PSU Engagement and Partnership Spectrum categories. Each team explored and identified challenges and opportunities related to their specific aspect of engagement and partnership work, and the teams each produced a briefing paper that identified strategic actions to advance their work. A significant amount of the first-year agenda became a component part of a campus-wide, five-year strategic plan that places partnership and engagement at its core.

Building Strategic Partnerships: A Bottom-up, Top-down Approach

Gaining a comprehensive view of PSU's partnership activity and establishing the Engagement and Partnership Spectrum helped organize the work, clarified the ways that partnerships were playing out across campus, and distinguished the role of strategic partnerships as a distinctive form of PSU partnership. Strategic partnerships are not separate from PSU's traditional partnership and engagement work. In fact, they are typically composed of all of the partnership and engagement activities represented on the Engagement and Partnership Spectrum. These partnerships are unique because they cut across multiple colleges and require a level of central coordination to ensure that various units on campus understand institution-level partnership goals, and interdisciplinary teams may be formed to deliver on these goals. Strategic partnerships encompass bottom-up and top-down activity simultaneously; they are composed of myriad discrete partnerships knit together with intention and governance to advance the articulated strategic goals of PSU and the partner. Unlike individual departments or colleges, OSP takes a university-wide view of engagement and seeks to facilitate efficient matchmaking between strategic partners and campus units to increase the quality and quantity of engagement between PSU and strategic partners and to measure and communicate the overall impact of portfolio activity.

In addition to the three original strategic partners identified when the office was established (Intel, PGE, and OHSU), PSU has identified four additional strategic partners that meet the criteria outlined in the Engagement and Partnership Spectrum. These include Portland Public Schools, Multnomah County, Metro Regional Government, and Technology Association of Oregon. Today, OSP is working with each of these partners to advance a coordinated, strategic, and mutually beneficial relationship. In the following section, one of these strategic partnerships is examined in depth.

PGE-PSU Strategic Partnership

PSU's strategic partnership with Portland General Electric is a good illustration of PSU's strategic partnership approach. PSU and PGE have been working with focused intention on this partnership as a strategic partnership for five years. The level of communication, coordination, and engagement grows each year as the partnership develops and delivers results. PGE is Oregon's largest electric utility, serving 840,000 customers in fifty-two Oregon cities. The company headquarters is located a few

blocks from PSU. Recognizing a history of collaboration in applied research, PSU's president and PGE's CEO signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in 2010, pledging mutual commitment to showcase PSU and PGE as regional anchor institutions and leaders in renewable energy and urban sustainability. Specifically, the MOU stated that PGE and PSU would do the following:

- Build on the region's reputation for green leadership by developing and implementing innovative demonstration projects;
- Capitalize on the Portland metro region's leadership position in urban innovation and sustainability;
- Leverage existing strengths, capacity, and expertise, and align research and philanthropic investments.

The lofty goals contained in the MOU did not provide an implementation road map for the PGE-PSU strategic partnership. In fact, the partnership stalled the first year, as there was little clarity among the initial team about how to move forward, alongside no record of what the university and PGE had actually done together in the past. In August 2011, the partnership publicly kicked off, to great fanfare, with the opening of "Electric Avenue," an all-electric, one-block street on the PSU campus that featured free electric vehicle battery charging and a range of charging stations. Electric Avenue was a demonstration project created by PSU, PGE, and the City of Portland to highlight the city's commitment to transportation electrification. The demonstration site has been a great success, as measured by press coverage, new product rollouts, and local use.

But other aspects of the partnership failed to get off the ground. For example, PSU was not able to deliver on an anticipated electric vehicle research agenda, as it could not identify faculty with a research focus on transportation electrification. Likewise, a planned "sustainability center" at PSU that was to be financed through state bonds and would feature PGE smart grid technology did not materialize. These challenges were exacerbated by the fact that OSP had not yet been established, and PSU had not designated a lead staff person to manage the PGE-PSU partnership.

When a new associate vice president for strategic partnerships was hired at PSU in the spring of 2011, three key steps were taken to set the partnership on the right track: first, a formal governance structure was established, with designated members from both PSU and PGE assigned responsibility for setting goals and moving the partnership forward; second, a comprehensive inventory of how PGE and PSU work together (on research; community-based learning, including capstones; philanthropic giving; and boards and committees) was conducted; and third, clarity regarding PSU's faculty expertise in renewable energy and power engineering was established, and hiring plans were shared.

Through a disciplined process of quarterly meetings, documentation, and regular communication, the PGE-PSU strategic partnership began to take shape, deliver consistent results, and build momentum. A turning point in the partnership was the appointment of a new faculty member in the engineering school with expertise in

power engineering and a passion for applied learning. Another faculty member was hired to build PSU's power engineering program, which quickly became a centerpiece of the partnership, as PGE provided financing for a new power engineering lab. The lab was created to provide a real-world engineering setting for students. Within three years of its founding, the Power Engineering Lab had secured over \$500,000 in sponsored projects and research grants from PGE.

In June 2015, the PGE-PSU strategic partnership held a five-year review session. The partnership has evolved dramatically and is producing strong results for both institutions. The strategic partnership has resulted in twenty-six sponsored projects (involving five PSU departments) with a dollar value of approximately \$730,000; eight capstone projects involving thirty-two students; and an electric vehicle demonstration project and conference series that has garnered international attention. The next iteration of the strategic partnership will work on a regional energy workforce continuum and smart grid research and development.

The evolution of the PGE-PSU relationship over the past five years illustrates the power of a campus-wide, coordinated approach to engagement where appropriate. By gaining a clear understanding of the discrete ways in which PGE and PGE already partnered (e.g., in capstones and through sponsored research), establishing an accountable governance structure, and establishing ambitious and mutually beneficial goals, the PGE-PSU partnership has delivered more significant results and more value to students, faculty, and PGE than a decentralized approach could have yielded. The strategic partnership has provided PGE with strong confidence in PSU and its ability to be responsive to its needs. This, in turn, has resulted in greater financial investment by PGE in the partnership and PSU.

Lessons Learned

The Office of Strategic Partnerships is now beginning its fifth year. The experience of building central capacity to support and advance university-wide strategic partnerships has been challenging, but ultimately rewarding, as the results of better coordination, communication, and higher expectations between PSU and partners are realized. On a daily basis, OSP must navigate and balance the tension inherent in more centralized documentation, reporting, and communication, and the highly decentralized and individual nature of relationships between faculty, staff, and partners that yield the real, day-to-day results of partnership. Sometimes the centralized aspect of strategic partnerships can be viewed as threatening. While the intent of OSP is to advance partnership work occurring at the unit and college level, faculty may suspect that OSP is trying to take over the work and/or claim credit for it. Building trust with faculty and staff who have spent years cultivating relationships with partners is key. An important step in building trust is to meet with individual faculty to learn about their work and to make clear that the goal of strategic partnership is not to claim credit for faculty work but to enhance and build upon it by bringing additional resources to bear in the form of staff and organizational capacity, resources, and relationships.

Engagement and partnership activities are an important contribution of urban-serving universities. At many universities, however, it is difficult for internal and external stakeholders to navigate the partnership landscape. Today, public universities are under considerable pressure to demonstrate results, not just in terms of graduation rates but in how they contribute to the vitality of their metropolitan regions.

Engagement and partnership is a demonstrable way that universities create value. As more and more urban-serving universities seek to build, improve, and communicate their engagement and partnership agendas, we offer the following lessons learned:

- **Make Partnership and Engagement Visible**

It is critical to make partnership and engagement work visible and transparent to internal and external stakeholders. Because the information required to do this is very often decentralized, a data collection process needs to be established and put in play. To start, form a team of people who are responsible for key aspects of partnership and engagement and work to define common categories. At PSU, we developed the Engagement and Partnership Spectrum to facilitate organization of the agenda. Begin regular reporting at established intervals to gain a quantitative view of partnership.

- **Tell the Partnership Story**

Build capacity for regular storytelling to capture the qualitative and inspirational aspects of the engagement and partnership work. PSU is currently working to launch a partnership newsletter for consistent and regular reporting on the engagement and partnership work across campus. An easy-to-access website with all relevant partnership information is also central to partnership infrastructure.

- **Engage Faculty and Staff in the Partnership Capacity-Building Process**

Gaining the trust and buy-in of faculty and staff requires respect for all aspects of engagement and partnership work. Build trust with faculty and staff by bringing them into the partnership capacity-building process and keeping them informed about what you are doing. Recognize and celebrate all different types of partnerships, as each has an important role to play for students, faculty, partners, and the institution as a whole. Acknowledge and honor the work of individuals who have built discrete programs. Strategic partnerships are additive, not competitive. Done well they strengthen existing programs and bring more resources to bear.

- **Strike a Balance between Centralized and Decentralized Roles and Responsibilities**

A centralized partnership function is critical for certain aspects of the partnership agenda (e.g., campus-wide coordination, documentation, reporting, and matchmaking). Strategic partnerships are arguably best led through a central office, but recognize that the vast majority of partnership and engagement work will occur at the level of individual faculty, departments, institutions, and colleges. Do not try to control all aspects of the engagement and partnership agenda. It is not possible or desirable. Regarding strategic partner outreach, it is desirable to have some type of communication protocol and/or to work through a central office. Partners can become annoyed when random requests are made that are not part and parcel of agreed-upon goals.

- **Delight Partners by Exceeding Expectations**

Build trust with partners by being responsive, communicating regularly, and following through on commitments. Partners often complain that universities are hard to work with. Change their perception by exceeding expectations.

Conclusion

The highly decentralized and entrepreneurial nature of universities creates challenges for building partnership capacity. At the same time, without some level of central coordination, documentation, and communication, it is extremely hard for internal and external stakeholders to understand what is happening in the partnership realm or to measure impact. This is important for public universities, in particular, as they strive to demonstrate their value to the community at large as well as to legislative bodies. With the PSU Community Partnership Council as a key structure bridging bottom-up, top-down approaches, PSU has continued the strides it has made in striking a balance between grassroots engagement work and institutional-level, strategic partnership work.

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