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An Anatomy of a Community-University Partnership: The Structure of Community Collaboration

W. Barry Messer
Portland State University

Kevin Kecskes
Portland State University, kecskesk@pdx.edu

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Abstract

Portland State University for the past twelve years has been engaged in a transformation of its general education program and a renewal of its urban mission. A major thrust of this reform has focused on broadening the involvement of students and faculty in community-based learning and scholarship. Curricular and administrative changes have significantly raised the presence of the university in the community and resulted in numerous academic units actively engaging in community collaboration. The collaboration has proven to be an important platform by which the university has expanded its boundaries into the community through actions involving many challenges to the university and community collaborators. In this article we explore the elements that have contributed to the success and achievements of this engaged work by closely examining a long-term community university partnership.

I. History and Institutional Context

Since the early 1990s, service-learning and a broader focus on civic engagement have challenged and helped change the culture of the academy. What started as a student movement in the 1970s and 1980s, inspired by a desire for greater social justice, morphed into a course-connected pedagogical initiative. Service-learning initially attracted some faculty partly because of the social resonance it held for educators trained in the 1960s. To traditionalists' surprise, service-learning expanded quickly due in part to its proven positive impact on student learning *(Astin and Sax 1998)*. As five straight years of top rankings in *U. S. News and World Report* attest (http://www.pdx.edu/cae/rankings.html), and as PSU's Partnership Map (http://www.partner.pdx.edu) publicly displays, Portland State University has over 8,200 students annually working in community settings, learning how to apply new knowledge and learning about their role in building sustainable, democratic communities.

This institutional transformation began over a decade ago when a historic agenda of comprehensive reform was set forth to align the curriculum, undergraduate and graduate academic programs,

scholarship, and research with community outreach and partnership development. On a sky bridge at the university, students inscribed PSU's motto, "Let knowledge serve the city" *(Kecskes, Kerrigan, and Patton 2006)*. PSU's location downtown enhances its possibilities to be in and of the city and the metropolitan region and symbolically captures its commitment to the communities of which PSU is a part. In the early 1990s, PSU's undergraduate program—University Studies—emerged as a model for integration of student learning with service in the community *(Colby et al. 2003; Ehrlich 2000; Williams and Bernstine 2002)*. In the University Studies program four primary goals are explicitly integrated into the curriculum during the four years of undergraduate experience: inquiry and critical thinking; communication; the variety of human experience; and ethical issues and social responsibility (see http://www.ous.pdx.edu). In their final undergraduate year, PSU students must take a six-credit Senior Capstone designed to integrate the four goals, with particular emphasis on social responsibility. In 1995, there were 5 Capstone courses. In the 2005–6 academic year, there were over 220 Capstone course offerings. Each Capstone is interdisciplinary and team- and community-based. While some Capstones change each year, many, based on sustaining strong community-university partnerships, have continued now for over a decade. One of these latter, "transformational partnerships" *(Enos and Morton 2003)*—the Community Watershed Stewardship Program (CWSP)—is the subject of the next section. The CWSP provides empirical evidence in direct support of the claim that well conceived and executed community-university partnerships are "actionable" examples of how one can both teach about and bring to life an active social sustainability agenda.

II. Community Watershed Stewardship Program

The Community Watershed Stewardship Program (CWSP) is a joint venture by the City of Portland Bureau of Environmental Services (BES) and Portland State University (PSU). The partnership began in 1994, and, since that time, has provided an essential mechanism for the partners to focus on furthering their primary institutional roles as well as jointly participate in an innovative effort to increase community capacity.

The primary goals for the CWSP are (1) to encourage citizens to establish activities that form partnerships in the community and (2) to use volunteers to effect change and improve watershed conditions within the neighborhoods. Other goals for the CWSP are to improve the quality of water in Portland's watersheds (in keeping

with BES's directive) and to provide a platform for education and research for students and faculty while addressing important community challenges (consistent with PSU's mission of "let knowledge serve the city"). These goals in no way conflict with each other. In fact, they are mutually supportive. The challenge that exists for the CWSP is to keep the different goals in perspective, supporting and complementing each aspect, while neither elevating nor diminishing the significance of either one. The CWSP thus provides a useful case study of the challenges of a partnership as well the possibilities for this form of collaboration as an essential mechanism for building institutional and community capacity through social capital formation.

Community stewardship

As the name implies, the Community Watershed Stewardship Program is concerned with promoting two broad goals among its participants: community and stewardship.

Stewardship is based on the idea that if people take an active role in improving the health of the environment, they will be more invested in the long-term results, will get involved in other avenues, and will be more involved in their community in general. Citizen members gain an understanding of environmental issues, and in turn pass their knowledge on to other members of their community. The cumulative result is education and information dissemination over time and across generations.

Much of the drive toward stewardship stems from the human need for a sense of place within the natural environment *(Howell 1997)*. Such a sense of place has what economists term existence value; it is considered desirable for its own sake rather than for direct use. Individuals' lives no longer depend on a close relationship with the land. In many cases people have distanced themselves from any deep interaction with the environment, and in its place is a latent desire to feel connected. Many Americans hold a romantic notion of going back to "simpler" days, when the environment was pristine and the most important activities of the day brought us into contact with the earth. By taking part in stewardship actions, community members can begin to reestablish the connection between their actions and the health of the environment. They become propelled by the notion that individuals have a responsibility to future generations, or the notion that people, as a collective, need to protect the environment for their grandchildren's grandchildren and further down the line. Stewardship can be a legacy for the future and a way to teach our children valuable lessons about the importance

of environmental issues. It is also a bridge across race, culture, and gender since the state of the environment affects everyone living in a proximate area.

The term *community* has been traditionally difficult to define, as it has the capacity to take on many roles depending on context. At the simplest level, it signifies a collection of people who share similar interests and involves the strength of attachment. A community can be defined geographically, such as a neighborhood or watershed, or it can be defined socially, as in communities established through interactions within religious or academic institutions or in a service club. Size is irrelevant. Communities can be as large as a hundred thousand or as small as three. The unifying factor is a shared interest in working for similar purposes in order to achieve common goals *(Cochrun 1994)*. Community involvement in public activities and planning initiatives is desirable if only because no one knows better than community members what the local, day-to-day problems are and who will be affected by them. Those who live in the community have a personal stake in the future of the neighborhood and are likely to be more passionate about the success of a program than an outside agent. Involvement increases the chances that decisions will reflect the desires of the community *(Cochrun 1994)*. If residents involve themselves in the planning process from the initial concept stages, they retain the ability to affect the outcome and shape the community to meet their needs.

> *"Community involvement in public activities and planning initiatives is desirable if only because no one knows better than community members what the local, day-to-day problems are and who will be affected by them."*

Involving the community in a project transforms it from a technical and impersonal activity to one of establishing relationships that will influence the way the local government acts. Local associations can act as mediating bodies between small groups and larger institutional entities. The balance of power is shared, and people experience greater satisfaction in their neighborhood and increased social bonding *(Cochrun 1994)*. Empowerment and recognition are gained from the experience of participation and belonging.

A connection with the environment can be critical in establishing a sense of community. People who use public spaces reinforce

their identification with a neighborhood and strengthen the sense of community by interacting in that space *(Cochrun 1994)*. Public parks, interpretive trails, and tree plantings are examples of opportunities that encourage people to interact with each other in their surroundings. By taking an interest in their natural surroundings, community members develop a sense of responsibility and a shared purpose in protecting something that is incapable of defending itself.

Elements of the partnership

The PSU/BES Partnership has worked as a team to establish ways to build social sustainability via community ownership of watershed stewardship. This work involves the following activities carried out through the mechanism of the partnership.

1. Faculty and graduate students participate with program managers in BES to discuss BES watershed priorities and PSU educational and research interests in order to weave community involvement opportunities into the developing CWSP plans each year.

2. Students at every level of education are provided with community-based learning opportunities in general and specific research or projects in their area of study. This occurs through work-study, internships, the community-based learning program, and undergraduate curricula, including Senior Capstones.

3. The community is given access to the knowledge and resources of the university through a number of accessory programs.

4. Graduate students are provided an opportunity to work in the community so that they might offer organizational and technical assistance to community groups interested in implementing their own watershed education or water quality improvement projects.

5. A working plan establishes the foundation for continuing to develop stronger connections between PSU faculty and graduate students, community watershed leaders, BES watershed managers, public involvement professionals, and community organizations.

The beginning of the partnership was spent defining the work program, understanding the roles each organization would play,

and establishing how the two could work together as a team. The scope of work for PSU was defined theoretically and in broad terms, which provided both the opportunity to be creative and the challenge to define it. The most challenging part of the partnership is and will likely continue to be a difference in cultures. University culture is set up around four terms and midterms, finals, and vacations, with deadlines based on those. Curricula must be established months in advance. On the other hand, government work does not cease for the summer months, and the faster pace of project implementation and external deadlines makes it difficult to incorporate academic pursuits. For example, professors need to plan their classwork over the course of the summer months, and during this window of opportunity the program is operating with only one or two graduate students. The CWSP acted as a broker for agreements and relationships between community groups and PSU faculty and students. Students are provided the opportunity to make their work meaningful and useful while providing a service or information to the community.

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The real strength of the partnership is that through it, PSU, BES, and several community partners can share their goals and bring to the partnership resources that would otherwise be inaccessible. PSU provides credibility and a willing group of volunteers and students; graduate student input provides a fresh perspective and a solid knowledge base. BES provides technical expertise and resources. Community members' participation creates a holistic community integration of programs. The end product is an amalgamation of ideas, responsibilities, resources, shared visions, and an agreement to work collectively for a common goal. These groups can achieve more together than if they worked alone and in so doing build social capital that directly enhances social sustainability.

This method of establishing goals for the program encourages unity among community members and helps people define their own roles within the larger intent of the partnership. This unity then becomes infused into other sectors of community involvement and improvement. The process of relationship building promotes stewardship of watersheds and understanding of larger issues of human impact on the environment, such as water quality, erosion, and native species reintroduction. Many projects target children,

planning and implementing hands-on educational activities to establish a foundation for future lessons and to shape their respect for the environment from an early age. Through these avenues the entire community can be involved, including youth, adults, and professionals alike.
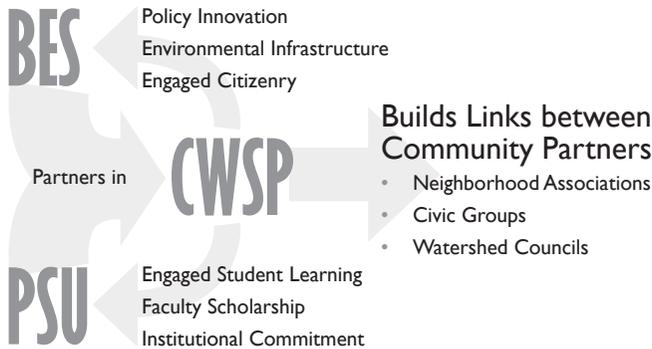
A catalyst for change

A key element of the CWSP is a small grants program for community members who seek seed money to help initiate education, monitoring, and restoration projects. Grantees are given up to $5,000 for materials and project coordination. During the past ten years, over a hundred grants have been given to community organizations.

Desirable projects demonstrate stewardship and long-term community involvement and provide resources to empower the community to improve Portland's watersheds. Though the amount of funds for any given community project is small, the grants supply an important catalyst for community involvement and partnership. In addition, the grants provide an essential tool for capacity building. Community groups are invited to apply for the grants each year through a request for proposal (RFP) issued by the BES. PSU graduate student program assistants work with the potential grantees in helping to frame the project idea initiated by the community group. This provides a mechanism for students and community partners to collaborate and identify important work elements for the envisioned projects, as well as opportunities for other forms of community and student involvement. As a result of this collaboration, important resource areas are identified within the community, the university, and the BES. Connecting resources and people builds social capital and increases the capacity of the grantee to leverage the grant amounts into considerable additional resources. The grants thus become a catalyst for building groups and engaging numerous entities and resource systems that otherwise would be missing from the envisioned projects.

The success of any organization is ultimately based in its ability to mobilize financial and other necessary resources to forward its own purposes. Connections, knowledge, time, and skills, among other intangible and tangible resources, are also key to the ultimate success of organizations, particularly grassroots associations, which invariably have few if any institutional resources. For grassroots associations, effectiveness often depends upon their ability to leverage resources from their membership and from outsiders

Figure 1. Anatomy of a Community-University Partnership: Community Watershed Stewardship Program

BES

Policy Innovation
Environmental Infrastructure
Engaged Citizenry

Partners in   CWSP

Builds Links between Community Partners

- Neighborhood Associations
- Civic Groups
- Watershed Councils

PSU

Engaged Student Learning
Faculty Scholarship
Institutional Commitment

whom they can convince to support their cause *(Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, and Vidal 2001).*

From the city's perspective, the involvement of citizens in the production of a public service, otherwise known as coproduction *(Glover, Parry, and Shinew 2005)*, is a mechanism for filling gaps between what the institution can achieve and what is needed within the community *(see Backman, Wicks, and Silverberg 1997)*. Coproduction is a means for BES to deliver services and is especially appropriate in confronting the health of urban watersheds. Many problems associated with the degradation of water quality and watershed health in general emanate from the community as nonpoint sources of pollution *(Adler 1995)*. Thus, effectively addressing these problems requires directly engaging the community at its source closest to them—the individual residents and businesses within the neighborhoods. The PSU-BES partnership grants initiative facilitates access to and encourages participation from residents that are closest to the source; it has resulted in over a hundred community projects sponsored by neighborhood schools, civic organizations, churches, and neighborhood groups. These projects have leveraged thousands of volunteers and scores of additional neighborhood-based organizations, public agencies, and businesses to address neighborhood-scale projects of watershed and water quality improvement.

From the university perspective, mechanisms are needed within the community that provide opportunities for educational work that addresses real problems with real community organizations. The CWSP provides such a mechanism for university students and faculty to engage in meaningful educational and research projects that directly increase community livability, thus adding to the community's social sustainability.

III. The Structure of an Engaged Community-University Partnership

The CWSP framework provides diverse and numerous opportunities for the institution to find common ground within the community and ways to explore and expand the involvement of an increasingly wide array of volunteers, organizations, and associations (see figure 1). The initiatives supported in the PSU-CWSP partnerships have provided a mechanism by which the soft infrastructure within the community continues to be constructed and capacities are built to address shared goals among the collaborators and community partners. The building of this infrastructure has been a key success factor contributing to an increase in the level of involvement of community organizations, volunteers, and residents, as well as of the city and university partners. These gains can be summarized as follows:

Impact on students: The CWSP provides an opportunity to directly engage students in community-based learning activities. During the course of the partnership, more than twenty Senior Capstone courses and twelve other undergraduate courses have involved more than six hundred undergraduate students completing projects working alongside community volunteers. The CWSP has provided the organizational mechanism for offering these courses, and their effectiveness has been greatly enhanced by access to an ongoing organizational structure. Students in these courses were afforded the opportunity to build from the work and relationships with community partners established by the CWSP.

"The partnership has strengthened community organizations and their capacity to be direct participants in and contributors to public policy initiatives."

Impact on community organizations: The partnership has strengthened community organizations and their capacity to be direct participants in and contributors to public policy initiatives. Through the CWSP, community groups have direct access to technical assistance as well as a means of increasing their workforces for addressing conditions resulting from nonpoint source pollution. In addition to the undergraduate students that supported the work of community partners, over twenty graduate students have been engaged in providing technical assistance to organizations developing and implementing projects within their neighborhoods. This assistance has been invaluable in providing the bridge enabling the nearly one

hundred community organizations that have partnered with the CWSP and the BES to become involved in the production of critical improvements to watershed conditions citywide.

The multiplier effect: The mechanism for collaboration has resulted in numerous links among individuals and organizations within the community through the opportunities for participation provided and supported by the partnership. Neighborhood schools and both formal and informal community associations have been given direct access to structures for participation in neighborhood work connected to similar associations doing like work throughout the city. Many of the community organizations that have partnered with the CWSP have benefited from each other's participation. Each year connections among the participants have yielded more new organizations participating in the CWSP. The increasing awareness of the different neighborhood projects has had a multiplier effect in terms of disseminating information about the opportunities to become involved and the work that benefits the neighborhoods and watersheds. This multiplier effect is demonstrated by the over eight hundred organizations, schools, and businesses that have worked to contribute support to the community organizations that have partnered with CWSP.

Impact on the main partners—the city and the university: The mechanism for collaboration has resulted in increased capacities for both the city and university partners. An uninterrupted mechanism for engaging with volunteers and organizations to work at the community and neighborhood level has offered numerous emergent opportunities and innovations. Individuals within the community working alongside students in designing and implementing approaches to improving watershed conditions in the neighborhood have developed unique and effective ways to address the challenges faced within an urban area. Such applications have greatly contributed to the richness of students' learning. Also, effective approaches to urban watershed challenges have been developed that neither the university nor the city would have had access to without the mechanism provided by the CWSP.

Impact on the physical environment: In addition to the structures for partnership, the mechanism for collaboration has directly produced physical improvements to neighborhoods and watersheds. Through the CWSP community organizations have conducted projects resulting in extensive measurable outcomes. In the twelve years of the CWSP program, over 23,000 volunteers have contributed nearly 150,000 total hours to plant 76,000 native plants and restore 1.9 million square feet of upland/riparian areas

in watersheds throughout the city. Over that time, the city made nearly a hundred small grants totaling $436,000 that have generated matching contributions of nearly $2 million. Without the mechanism to connect community residents and organizations, these results would not have been possible.

IV. Conclusion: Community-University Partnerships: The "Soft" Infrastructure of Engagement

The diverse outcomes of the Community Watershed Stewardship Program are indicative of the benefits that can accrue from systematic efforts to build and maintain mechanisms for supporting partnerships between institutions that engage at the community level. Such mechanisms can be effective strategies for building the "soft" infrastructure of the community. This soft infrastructure adds capacity and energizes the mission of public institutions as well as organizations and individuals within the community. As the CWSP case indicates, building this infrastructure can enhance the capacity of groups and individuals involved. It can also lead to "hard," cost-effective results. Quantitatively, less than a half-million dollars of hard resource investment has generated five times that amount in soft match. One primary community-university partnership, the CWSP, has impacted thirty-two courses, providing more than six hundred students over the past dozen years with opportunities to learn critically important "soft" life skills—personal agency, collaboration, communicating with diverse groups, public problem solving, and so on—skills often undervalued in the hardened walls of the Cold War Academy *(Leslie 1993)*. That same primary partnership—between Portland's city government and its public university—has increased the bridging capital of over eighty community-based organizations working on the common cause of non-point source water management. More than 23,000—twenty-three thousand!—volunteers have strategically placed more than 76,000 native plants into the ground to restabilize the soil, enhance wetlands, and augment the city's watershed management plan. These are significant results incentivized by pennies on the dollar compared to the size of most cities' "hard" infrastructure investment budgets.

However, what remains to be quantified (and will be the focus of our next study) are outcomes much more challenging to measure, but perhaps more important in the medium and long term: the increases in social capital and the associated social sustainability generated in the community. What quantifiable differences might be documented in some of those eighty community-based

organizations that partnered with the CWSP, or in even 100 of the 23,000 volunteers who felt a sense of civic agency when planting trees and restoring wetlands, or in graduate students who helped facilitate creative solutions in neighborhood communities? How many of those eighty organizations have since continued to partner with each other, in new and dynamic ways, to address other compelling community-level issues at *no* cost to the taxpayer? How many of those six hundred undergraduate students now work in the nonprofit sector or in social or political advocacy groups and so on?

When higher education began to reawaken and return to its moral roots in the 1980s, service-learning was officially born. Over the past quarter-century, the growth of community-university partnerships has been substantial. The literature suggests and the experience of the CWSP confirms that when university faculty design and deliver high-quality community-university partnerships, everyone wins. Perhaps one day in the not-too-distant future the lines between the "hard" content outcomes of traditional courses and the "soft" learning outcomes—effective communication, coalition building, a strong sense of social responsibility, and so on—will blur, and maybe even disappear. In similar measure, city planners, community organizations, civil engineers, and neighborhood citizens may soon choose to evaluate infrastructural outcomes with more equilibrium between the hard, tangible results and the less visible, soft infrastructure that is built between us all. Higher education can and must continue to play a role. Building and sustaining effective community-university partnerships can build social sustainability in our communities, can help address entrenched public issues, and can be a powerful response to legislators and taxpayers clamoring for a sense of higher education's relevance as the twenty-first century continues to dawn.

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About the Authors

• Dr. Barry Messer currently holds the appointment of assistant professor, Urban Studies and Planning, Portland State University. His professional experience includes nearly twenty years in public services. As a faculty member, his teaching experience has included both graduate and undergraduate courses in community development, environmental management, and civic leadership. His research experience has included numerous sponsored research activities, publications, and projects involving community-based environmental management initiatives and community-university partnerships, including serving as the principal investigator for the Community Watershed Stewardship Program. He holds degrees from Whittier College (BA), University of Pittsburgh (MA), and Portland State University (PhD).

• Kevin Kecskes is director for community-university partnerships at Portland State University. Prior to joining PSU's Center for Academic Excellence in 2002, Kevin was program director of the Western Region Campus Compact Consortium and director of service-learning at Washington Campus Compact. Kevin cofounded the Boston College International Volunteer Program and spent a dozen years in the developing world in various capacities. He formally studied at Boston College, Harvard University, and Portland State University. Kevin has numerous peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters; he edited *Engaging Departments: Moving Faculty Culture from Private to Public, Individual to Collective Focus for the Common Good* (Anker Publications, 2006).