

2015

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Citation Details

Spring, A. (2015). Sustaining innovation: Capstones, Curriculum, and Community Partnerships at Portland State University. *Metropolitan Universities Journal*, 26 (3), 5-10.

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Sustaining Innovation: Capstones, Curriculum, and Community Partnerships at Portland State University

Amy Spring

Portland State University (PSU) is honored to have the opportunity to create this special issue of *Metropolitan Universities*. “Curricular Innovation: Engaged Capstones at Portland State University” has offered PSU the meaningful opportunity to reflect and identify some of the hallmarks that have contributed to the successful launch, evolution, and sustainability of the university’s community engagement efforts. This publication shares the story and the lessons derived from PSU’s innovative general education reform, particularly in regard to the senior-level capstone which is the signature and culminating aspect of our community-engaged curriculum. Articles also review complementary pedagogical practices and institutional policies, and some recent innovations in the engagement agenda at PSU. This issue is meant to provide illustrations and lessons learned that we hope will prove useful to other faculty, administrators, and campus communities that wish to initiate or advance engaged learning and community-campus partnership activities within their curricular contexts.

2015 marks the twentieth anniversary of Portland State University’s implementation of the capstone program. As one of the first and largest community-based education programs in the country, the capstone at PSU engages upper-division, multi-disciplinary teams of students in a six-credit course that collaborates with a community partner to respond to a community-identified need. With 240 capstone courses working with 130 community partners to engage 4,300 students in community-based applied learning settings annually, we believe we have discovered useful ideas and practices to share. These unique courses have served for two decades as the backbone of PSU’s community engagement efforts and have proved to be a durable, sustainable, and effective model. On the occasion of this significant anniversary, we are pleased to share how this distinctive aspect of our undergraduate curriculum shapes teaching and learning for students and faculty, contributes to communities and community partners in meaningful ways, and has ultimately served as a catalyst for the expansion of community engagement that touches virtually all corners of the campus.

Historical and Demographic Context

Portland State University is a fifty-acre campus situated in downtown Portland, Oregon, enrolling more than 22,000 undergraduate and 5,600 graduate students. This urban-serving university celebrates its well-known motto, “Let Knowledge Serve the

City,” by animating the student and faculty teaching and research experience with engagement opportunities that use a variety of learning and research models to link the campus community in partnership with community organizations for mutual benefit. In the early 1990s, PSU reformed its undergraduate general education requirements to include a six-credit, senior-level, multi-disciplinary, community-based capstone course, situated within University Studies, PSU’s innovative general education model that features intentional pathways of tiered learning. In the capstone, students and faculty work with community partners collaboratively to respond to a community-identified concern. In 1994, the article “A Model for Comprehensive Reform in General Education: Portland State University” was published in the *Journal of General Education*; it provides the specific details of our unique curricular model that is the foundation of PSU’s success as a leader in curricular innovation and community-university partnerships (White 1994).

On the national scene, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) created the Office of University Partnerships (OUP) in 1994 to promote the union of higher education and local communities (HUD 2015). Central to the mission of OUP was the involvement of higher education institutions in the creation of jobs and healthier communities (HUD 2015). OUP launched several new grant initiatives that greatly increased national attention to the mutual benefit of campus-community partnerships. At the same time, PSU was beginning to examine the role of community-based learning in its new vision for a structured and challenging general education program. The intersection between the establishment of OUP and conversations about how to bring community engagement alive in the educational experience of PSU students greatly informed the initial development of the capstone program.

More than twenty years later, community-university partnerships are at the forefront of teaching and research initiatives focused on community growth and sustainability for many higher education institutions around the world. Anchor institutions are recognized by OUP as exemplars of universities’ and nonprofit organizations’ commitment to local communities (HUD 2015). Significant engagement work ranges from small-scale projects with short-term objectives to larger projects carried out over several years and engaging students and faculty from multiple courses, schools, and colleges. The diversity of community-university partnerships reinforces the need to develop an understanding for the nuances associated with developing authentic relationships between communities and institutions of higher learning. There are remarkable examples of successful community-university partnerships in which the community and university work together to develop and achieve shared goals (Cooper et al. 2014; Sandy and Holland 2006).

Over the many years of our community-engaged practices, PSU faculty, students, and administrators have implemented this full range of partnerships and have learned how to support and sustain—individual course-level efforts as well as multi-year projects that engage a variety of community and university stakeholders. Grounded in the foundational literature surrounding community-based teaching, learning, and research, and informed by effective engagement collaborations and practices over the twenty

years of our experience, PSU has developed some expertise in these arenas, particularly relating to curriculum with the power and possibility to transform campus and community. Therefore, this journal issue focuses on the story and model of our community-based capstone courses.

Included in This Issue

The articles included in this special issue of *Metropolitan Universities* detail some of the important lessons learned in partnership and curricular development that reveal the way engagement plays out in the lives of faculty, students, and community partners. Twenty years of sustained, engaged pedagogy and research have informed how the university defines and forwards faculty professional support efforts, assessment practices, methods of partnership development, systems that support the varied curricular and co-curricular interests of students, and a diversity of projects that are variably suited for students depending on where they are in their academic development.

Partnership activities at PSU began with the implementation of the University Studies curriculum and, more specifically, with the offering of the community-based capstone courses. Over time, partnership activities have made their way into university policy, faculty scholarship and research, and the overall student experience. We have honed our competence in offering community-based capstones and have more recently expanded our work to include community-based research, the development of an institutional commitment to strategic partnerships, focused partnership agendas that target work in geographically bounded communities, and the expansion of community-based teaching using online learning platforms. These innovations in PSU's engagement work are only possible because of the powerful commitment to the idea that community engagement is essential to realization of the university's mission. Establishing and sustaining the capstone program initially catalyzed and continues to reinforce that message.

“Sustaining Change: Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned from Twenty Years of Empowering Students through Community-Based Learning Capstones” outlines the essential building blocks that make the capstone program effective as one of the largest and longest sustained community-based education programs in higher education today. Author Seanna M. Kerrigan expands on the historical and institutional contexts of the program's design; describes structural and operational issues related to the program, including those involving staffing and budget; and offers nuts-and-bolts details involved in efficiently managing a program of this size and scope.

In “Connecting Curriculum to Community Research: Professional Services, Research, and Teaching,” W. Barry Messer and Peter Collier describe a successful and long-running partnership program with local governmental organizations. This program, which originated as a single pilot capstone course, has effectively engaged many students and faculty in community-based teaching and research in paid and unpaid roles that produce scholarly outcomes as well as useful outputs which inform regional waste management policy.

“Cultivating Community: Faculty Support for Teaching and Learning” identifies how the capstone program encourages internal community-building among faculty as a means to provide professional support for those who are teaching community-based courses. Celine Fitzmaurice highlights the ways that the program’s faculty support and assessment efforts align and inform individual professional growth and overall programmatic improvement.

Seanna M. Kerrigan, Vicki L. Reitenauer and Nora Arevalo-Meier describe lessons learned about “Enacting True Partnerships within Community-Based Learning: Faculty and Community Partners Reflect on the Challenges of Engagement.” Their article is based on the results of a qualitative study of faculty and community partner perspectives. Interviews with these practitioners give voice to both the challenges of partnership and its rewards, and offer new insights on effective collaboration among faculty, community partners, and students.

“Putting Impact First: Community-University Partnerships to Advance Authentic Neighborhood Sustainability,” by Michelle L. Holliday, Tony DeFalco, and Jacob D. B. Sherman, describes how the Institute for Sustainable Solutions focuses its partnership activities in geographically defined neighborhoods to create synergy among the efforts of numerous faculty members and students. In the spirit of their collaboration, this article is co-authored by a PSU staff member, a PSU graduate student, and a community partner.

“To This Day: College Graduates on the Lasting Significance of Relationality and Experiential Learning” describes a long-term partnership that has engaged more than 3,500 students in an intensive, transformative, educational experience with persons experiencing significant disabilities. Grounded in the critical incident technique, Ann Fullerton and Vicki L. Reitenauer provide insights about what characterizes students’ most significant learning experiences in college and generalizes the applicability of these factors beyond community-based learning settings.

“‘Contagious Co-Motion’: Student Voices on Being Change Agents” highlights a unique course among capstone offerings—one in which students select their own community partners and pursue projects related to those collaborations. The authors, Vicki L. Reitenauer, Tetiana Korzun, Kimberly Lane, and Melinda Roberts, include three students who offer their experiences and perspectives in their own voices, as they reflect on how a course can build on their personal backgrounds and interests in ways that propel them to heightened levels of leadership around social and political issues of their choosing.

“Online Community-Based Learning as the Practice of Freedom: The Online Capstone Experience at Portland State University,” by Deborah Smith Arthur and Zapoura Newton-Calvert, describes initiatives that have launched online community-based courses and which continue to work toward the successes in student learning and engagement that mark face-to-face community-based courses. Based on a comprehensive review of the literature around online learning, the authors reflect on

their teaching practices, lessons learned, and further opportunities for curricular development and community engagement in the online realm.

“From Capstones to Strategic Partnerships: The Evolution of Portland State University’s Community Engagement and Partnership Agenda” provides the framework of a recently developed partnership typology and an administrative structure that is being used on campus to systematically understand, organize, and manage partnerships within a highly decentralized campus context. Written by Erin Flynn, the article includes a case study reflecting how the university is engaging a strategic partnership agenda through multiple units, schools, and colleges in collaboration with a large public utility.

“Beyond the University: An Initiative for Continuing Engagement among Alumni” describes a recently implemented pilot program that harnessed the enthusiasm students have for the community work they do in their capstones and moved them into supported roles as change agents in their communities in their transition from students to alumni. The authors, David Osborn, Jennifer Alkezweeny, and Kevin Kecskes offer two theoretical models that ground this program and reflect on insights garnered from this of-the-moment effort.

Conclusion

It is our hope that these articles will help the reader understand how the capstone program has served as a cornerstone of much of the community engagement work PSU has done over the last twenty years. The bold and important decisions that were made back in the early 1990s, that resulted in undergraduate general education reform and the embedding of community-based learning into the requirements of nearly all students receiving an undergraduate degree from PSU, have shaped a host of additional engagement activities. The ingenuity and enduring commitment of all those who engage in this work allows us to celebrate the sustained changed and continuing growth of PSU’s engagement efforts. The lessons learned from this unusually large, effective, and sustained model of engaged learning may inform and encourage other institutions as they design engaged curriculum in the context of their mission.

We, the guest editors of this issue (Amy Spring, Vicki Reitenauer and Seanna Kerrigan), deeply thank the authors included in this publication for their scholarly approach to teaching and learning, engaged research, and reciprocal partnership practices. Special thanks to public administration graduate student Nora Arevalo-Meier for her exceptional research contributions to many parts of this collection.

We are grateful for this opportunity to reflect on this effective model of engaged learning and partnerships, and we hope readers will find applicable elements and ideas that will advance the community-university partnership movement on their own campuses.

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Author Information

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