Beyond the benevolent university: authentic collaboration with communities for educational access and success. Case studies from 3 university-community partnerships in Melbourne, El Paso and Caracas.

Jo Williams and Brenda Cherdnichenko
Victoria University, Melbourne

Jo.williams@vu.edu.au
Brenda.cherdnicheno@vu.edu.au

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Jo Williams & Brenda Cherednichenko
Victoria University, Melbourne

Abstract

This paper outlines research investigating the practice and conceptualisation of university-community engagement, in historical perspective and in the immediate context of neo-liberal hegemony in policy, through an international comparative case study of university-community educational initiatives. It aims to consider possibilities and constraints in achieving social justice outcomes through collaborative university-community educational initiatives.

Informing Victoria University’s Access and Success project, this comparison of similar yet distinct examples of practice across three international contexts seeks to understand how such projects are influencing a diverse range of actors through collaborative educational research, and to investigate their effectiveness in changing the capacity of communities to participate in the practical implementation of specific projects for educational improvement and social change in local contexts.

Comparable projects at the University of Texas, El Paso in the US context, and the popular education initiatives of the Bolivarian University and Misión Sucré in Venezuela, offer rich international perspectives on practical university-community responses to unequal participation and outcomes in education. This research provides rich new knowledge about educational reforms and community building.¹

Introduction

Since their earliest existence, the function or role of universities in broader society, that is, the question of what it is that a university should do and be, has generated much debate. Presently, amidst a generalised call for universities to be better engaged with their communities, and in an international context of persistent educational inequality based primarily on socio-economic factors, there is a growing interest in and discussion around university-community initiatives, particularly focused on issues of access and equity.

¹ This abstract has changed considerably since its first submission, reflecting both the developments in the PhD study upon which it is based, and also in response to the gratefully received comments from anonymous reviewers.

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Universities internationally have responded to this perceived challenge, expanding existing programs and initiatives on a range of fronts, including joint research projects, teaching and learning reform, increases in service learning and democratic, participatory projects for community social change. Such projects appear to be based on an equally diverse range of perspectives and analyses.

This paper discusses research in its early stages, which seeks to understand how universities engage with their communities, what they do to address educational inequality in their communities, what policies and programs they put in place to address these issues and how successful they are, as well as how universities perceive themselves in relation to their communities, and how and what perspectives inform practical approaches to university-community engagement. A particular focus of the study is exploring the possibilities and constraints for achieving social justice outcomes in the context of the dominant neo-liberal agenda. Three rich profiles of distinct sites of innovative practice will be developed and compared. A key aim of the research is to contribute practical insight for university-community initiatives for community empowerment and change, incorporating successful practices and enabling factors as illuminated through the profiles in each site.

The three sites chosen as significant and relevant examples are:
- Victoria University's Access and Success in the West project
- The University of Texas El Paso's (UTEP) Access and Success initiative/s
- La Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela (UBV) and Misión Sucre.

University-community engagement

Despite the international discourse of quality education for all (UNESCO, 2006) inequality in educational opportunity and outcomes clearly linked to class and socio-economics persists (Teese and Polesel 2003; Lamb, Rumberger et al. 2004a; Barton 2005; O'Brien 2005; Wyn and Woodman 2006). Recurrently poor educational outcomes in some communities are inextricably linked to patterns of disadvantage and social exclusion. Socio-economic barriers mean that the successful further and higher education outcomes most likely to ensure future economic and social stability, remain out of reach for many here in Australia (Long 2005).
Part of the broader sociological and economic debate around how to address these issues is the question of how universities should and could respond to the needs and problems of their communities. Discussion and thinking around this question has seen a burgeoning of university-community initiatives for change. The diverse range of activities under the broad banner of community engagement has in turn lead to an increase in the literature around the civic role of the University, with the historic debate around the role of universities and their relationship/responsibility to their communities taking on a renewed importance amongst educational research.

One particular focus of the literature is a growing interest in and discussion around the purpose, nature and success or otherwise of University-Community Partnerships (Harkavy 1999; Watson 2003; Winter, Wiseman et al. 2006). Internationally, under this banner, universities are expanding existing programs and initiatives on a range of fronts, from joint research projects, to teaching and learning reform, from increases in service learning to democratic, participatory projects for community social change. A range of issues has influenced these projects. In the USA, Bok’s (1982) earlier arguments calling for universities to better facilitate effective teacher training, and in so doing respond to basic social problems in local communities, were a good fit with Boyer’s (1996) criticisms of socially isolated institutions, who he saw as turning their backs on the most critical social, economic and moral problems facing communities. These notions are consistent with historical and contemporary thinking in the Australian context as well (Winter, Wiseman et al. 2005, p.15).

Many contributing to the discourse within educational research around the civic responsibility of universities, emphasise the need for greater collaboration between higher education institutions and their communities, to democratically address public issues and needs. In the US for example, Benson and Harkavy (2002, pg. 26) refer to the “Democratic Cosmopolitan Civic University - a “new type” of university dedicated to the democratization of both schooling and society. Kettley (2007) while discussing the diversity of the body of literature in the UK around the notion of widening participation, suggests that it is “unified by its concern for the relationship between higher education and social justice.” (p.333) Here in Australia, amongst educationalists in particular, the social/community value of education, and educational institutions committed to and driven by social justice and community wellbeing has been strongly argued historically (Connell, Ashenden et al. 1982).
The growing number of practical initiatives informed by such literature reflects a diversity of perspectives and a number of tensions. Some reflect on the historic *town and gown* condition, and suggest a persistent acceptance of historical perspectives on the role of universities and associated values, which is at odds with the developing vision of universities as sites of citizenship (Plantan 2002). Such a tension can see university-community relationships reflecting all existing power relations and imbalances, and potentially “…reinforc(ing), not disrupt(ing), societal inequalities… (as they can be) mandated and funded by the same government that at times reinforces social oppression (Cherry and Shefner 2004). A risk Fisher, Fabricant et al (2004) suggest might be overcome only if the IHE (Institute of Higher Education)”… (is) willing to reimagine its relationship to knowledge production, learning and the community” (p.32).

**Neo-liberalism and education policy**

Attempting to understand these tensions requires an analysis of the backdrop to the discussion around universities and their relationship to their communities, both in Australia and internationally, which is decades of education policy driven by the dominant neoliberal agenda. Connell (2002, p324) suggests that “neoliberalism or economic rationalism as it is often described here in Australia has overseen a steady decline of interest in “equity” issues in education, accompanied by an erosion of the “idea of education as a common good.” The failure/s of a market-driven approach to education from an equity and access perspective have been widely documented (Welch 1996; Whitty 1997; Marginson 1997a; Smyth, Hattam et al. 1998; Hill 2002a; Lynch 2006), and such literature has informed an ongoing debate around how communities and universities and other educational institutions can intersect and collaborate to challenge such an agenda.

Within such a discussion, understanding the impact of social and economic policy on the actual material existence of Universities is critical, and raises key questions about the capacity of neo-liberal requisites for education policy to address the needs and aspirations driving university-community initiatives such as those on the three sites chosen for this research.

Winter, Wiseman et al. (2005) note as one of a number of highlighted challenges facing university-community partnerships, that despite documented positive outcomes of such activity or activities
“The educational, social and economic benefits to universities and to regional communities of strong university-community partnerships are however at risk because of the deepening Commonwealth Government focus on competitiveness, commercialization and funding cutbacks as the key drivers of higher education policy” (p.3).

Some literature suggests that policy exigencies themselves can constitute an alternative motivation to community capacity building aspirations, in pursuing university-community collaboration (Fisher, Fabricant et al. 2004; Winter, Wiseman et al. 2006). Fisher, Fabricant et al. argue that decreased public spending and pressure to find alternative sources of revenue, leave universities with little choice but to raise fees income (one example is community engagement as a narrowly perceived recruiting exercise), or increase privatization and corporate sponsorship (2004, p.31).

Others argue that the current global economic environment, promotes a relationship between higher education institutions and community that is essentially measured in terms of labour market value adding. In discussing a definition of community engagement for universities, Sunderland et al. suggest that

as both method and methodology, community engagement can be seen to be heavily consistent with certain social and economic policy trajectories such as increasing focus on community-government-industry “partnerships”; economic rationalism or neo-liberal economics; the downsizing of public institutions and funding in favour of increasing industry and community funding sources; the move toward community based (as opposed to state based) “grass roots” service delivery and community renewal; and the assumption that knowledge and learning must always be “applied” or “commercialised” if they are to be of “value” (Sunderland, Muirhead et al. 2004, p.5).

Two contrasting agendas for university-community engagement

It is argued that the literature suggests two antagonistic agendas driving university approaches to community engagement. One agenda, described in part above, values university-community engagement as a means for further penetration of the neo-liberal agenda into higher education. In contrast, an alternative agenda, involves a discussion about university-community engagement aimed at social change, with objectives antithetical to those of neo-liberalism.
Such a context presents significant challenges for universities in their attempts to engage with communities in authentic collaborative projects, and exploring such contradictions and antagonisms in an attempt to understand motivations for university-community engagement efforts will be an important part of the present study.

**Melbourne, El Paso and Caracas**

While distinctly different, these three sites share a stated goal of improved educational access and success for their respective communities, through the development of authentic university-community collaboration for social change. This paper constitutes the starting point of further study into the practices, perspectives and outcomes of such initiatives, the nature and organisation of community partnerships in each site, and their impact on educational outcomes and broader social justice goals. In so doing this paper responds to Moss et al’s (Moss, White et al. 2004) suggestion that while the history of university-community partnerships in Australia is well documented, research into issues such as “… the legitimacy of the relationship between the university and the partner, how they become established, continue and what the outcomes of these experiences are” is much less available (p.2).

**Victoria University – Access and Success**

The Access & Success project at Victoria University sets itself the goal of developing the educational experience of all young people in the region during their school years, as well as increasing the capacity of their teachers and families to support this improvement. It is a research and development project aimed at collaborating with schools and families to improve the educational outcomes and opportunities for the young people of western Melbourne. Achieving the project’s goals requires a critical understanding of the causes and effects of the disadvantaged context within which VU is situated.

Melbourne’s west is home to vibrant and diverse communities with a unique combination of cultures and experiences, and an economy which is steadily growing. It is also home to several of the most socially and economically disadvantaged suburbs in Melbourne, with low skill levels and educational attainment, persistent (although changing) patterns of unemployment and under-
employment, insecure housing, low income levels (Growing Melbourne's West 2004), as well as cultural and racial discriminations and exclusions (Mesner 2007). The work of Teese and others (2000; 2003) clearly outlines the systemic educational disadvantage facing students in this community. The statistics for education in Melbourne's west are bleak in general, with Teese noting that the aggregate statistics are “…mild when compared with the depth of failure recorded at individual schools where families lack the cultural and economic advantages to manage the intellectual demands of the curriculum.” (Teese 2000, pg. 2) Nationally, growing educational inequality casts a dark shadow over any improvements in educational achievement generally, inarguably a shameful situation for a wealthy developed country.

In response to this grim portrait, Victoria University explicitly claims in its Making VU Mission to ‘transform the lives of individuals and develop the capacities of industry and communities within the western Melbourne region and beyond through the power of vocational and higher education’. As commitment 5a of Making VU, the Access and Success project constitutes a key aspect of Victoria University’s broader response to the international emphasis on university-community engagement, and is researched here as a significant local model.

The practices of Access and Success are firmly built upon, and reflect, the experiences of the VU School of Education, and their particular approach to teacher education. The Project Partnerships (PP) model of teacher education practicum involves VU Pre-service teacher colleagues partnering with schools to develop and implement projects which respond to learning needs of students. This practical approach coupled with the philosophy and practice of the VU School of Education in general insists that learners and their needs must be the central focus of partnership work. Collaboration with school and community partners is based on mutual respect and rooted in the expectation of collective enquiry and the shared development of knowledge (Cacciattolo, Cherednichenko et al. 2007). Moreover, the methodological influence of the VU developed Collaborative Practitioner Research methodology (Cherednichenko, Davies et al. 2001a), which argues for the involvement of all actors as active, valued, contributing protagonists in the research, appears to have facilitated genuine attempts to challenge the historic divide between practitioners and academics in educational research. This framework also bodes well for a conscious approach to these and subsequent research findings.
At this early stage, the leading (driving) role that schools and school colleagues play in defining and planning partnership projects is emerging as an important feature of the VU approach, and warrants further exploration.

**Access and Success Research**

Early scoping suggests that much more strategic research is required internationally into the practices and outcomes of university-community initiatives. VU is seemingly well placed in this regard, with a clear research plan and initial research tasks underway.

Although very tentative at this stage, emerging findings from Access and Success research are suggesting a number of issues worth pursuing in the more comprehensive research to follow, and which are related to the contextual and policy concerns raised above. Differing expectations of both the organisation (practice) and outcomes of the Project Partnerships, barriers to the full engagement of schools and teaching colleagues as equal participants in the thinking through and evaluation of the Project Partnerships, and the effects of historic perspectives on teacher-training and university-school collaboration, are issues which can be identified in initial conversations with school partners.

Also, working alongside and with the A&S research agenda, is the School of Education based Researching Innovative Partnerships in Education (RIPE) project, involving site based teams of Teachers, Pre-Service Teachers and University colleagues collaboratively investigating the practices and outcomes of Project Partnerships in schools. Arguably this framework constitutes a commitment to a deeper understanding of the partnership work with schools, and how the relationships are contributing to the community through improved learning outcomes. This research agenda will positively support the development of the rich profile of VU initiatives.

**The University of Texas, El Paso**

In the US, Ira Harkavy and colleagues have been influential in the development of university-community partnerships and a commitment to the civic responsibility of universities in addressing the social and economic problems facing communities (Harkavy 1999).
The key policy document of the Bush administration, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 was met with a diverse range of criticism from progressive academics and teachers in schools and universities across the US. Objections included a critique of the standardised testing offensive and what was seen as the empty rhetoric of NCLB, and its failure to respond concretely to any of the research-identified priorities for eliminating educational inequality (Ginsberg 2005). A document signed by over 40 organisations in the education and community sectors listed similar concerns around testing, sanctions and inadequate funding.

Responses to the NCLB policy add weight to the arguments being made by what Ira Benson and Harkavy refer to as the ‘University Civic Responsibility Movement’, for a university-community partnership approach to building the capacities of schools to support and improve learning outcomes for all students.

**Abandoning attempts to be “Harvard on the border”**

Located in the Chihuahuan desert, on the Mexican US border, The University of Texas El Paso is the largest research intensive university serving a predominantly Mexican-American student body ([www.utep.edu](http://www.utep.edu)). The inequality in education at the core of the discussion around NCLB, is present in the El Paso region, with “(m)ore than 200,000 El Pasoans living in poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and the median income per household in El Paso, $30,968 … well below the national median household income of $46,242.” (Rollow 2007)

With a surrounding community with comparable (but distinct) demographics and social indicators to VU, the past 2 decades have seen a well promoted university-wide commitment to increase the educational opportunities and outcomes for the population of El Paso.

Victoria University has stated its commitment to forging an identity that distinguishes it from other more established institutions, setting itself the task of collaborating with others in response to local community needs. Similarly, an interview with UTEP President, Diana Natalicio reflects on UTEP’s significant shift in perspective in the late 1980’s, from a struggle to become the “Harvard on the border” to a university that “…leveraged its distinctive attributes: a high population of bilingual first-generation college students and strong programs in science and engineering” (Kuh and Natalicio 2004).
Part of that re-envisioning has involved a changed approach to a more student-centric model of teaching and learning, with the work of Gardner, Barefoot and colleagues (Upcraft, Gardner et al. 2004; Barefoot, Gardner et al. 2005), on the experiences of first year college students in the US, and potential support frameworks for improving retention and success proving influential (The Policy Center on the First Year of College).

The first year experiences of UTEP students became a focus for what are now recognised as successful examples of student access and success programs, primarily housed in the University College. Many of the specific initiatives are responding to issues shared with VU, for example improving family educational literacy, teacher education, improved individual degree pathways, and university and school partnerships for improved teaching and learning.

The El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence

The El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence is a partnership involving UTEP and a broad range of local educational organisations, businesses and local government, with the intention of raising educational access and success in the El Paso region and beyond. Its work includes collaborating closely with teachers, administrators, parents and the community to develop projects to improve teaching and learning, and innovative teacher education programs that are closely linked to the curriculum and practice of K-12 years in the region. An example is the Think College Now program, which aims to build the knowledge and aspirations of local students, their families and the community around post-secondary education, with the aim of more students enrolling. Other initiatives include a range of innovative programs in mathematics and science involving a range of school and community partners.

More difficult to discover in the available literature and public reports, and warranting further investigation as part of the present study, is the nature and practice of such collaboration, the role and voice of each participant in the partnerships, and any evaluation of the success or otherwise of the various initiatives.

The UTEP website highlights a number of other programs, housed primarily in its University College, designed to provide improved support of student learning and engagement. These include;

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A number of outreach programs designed to respond to regional educational inequality, build the educational capacity and experience of young people in El Paso, and support their transition to post-secondary education, including: a range of partnerships, University presence in community organisations and committees, service-learning initiatives and tutoring of local students. Examples include the Gear up program (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs); the Mother-daughter program, the Bilingual Education and Enhancement Mentoring program.

*University 1301: Seminar for Critical Inquiry* - an example of a curricula response to improved student success. Students can choose from a range of topics, through which they engage academically, strengthen study skills, build relationships with fellow students and ultimately become better equipped to achieve success. The model involves small class sizes and a teaching team of lecturer, student mentor and librarian.

- Learning Communities. UTEP actively promotes the Learning Communities model (Lardner 2003) which promotes interconnected, cross-disciplinary small-group based learning.

- Programs committed to improving student engagement with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, especially amongst under-represented minorities. One example is The national Model Institutions for Excellence program, an eleven-year effort by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), which has impacted positively on STEM teaching and research, and has seen an increase in retention of students studying STEM, and in the number of STEM degrees awarded to minorities.

The breadth of partnership activities that UTEP is involved in is significant, and it is expected that research reflecting on the practices and outcomes of these programs will be of value beyond the university itself.

**The Bolivarian University of Venezuela and Misión Sucre**

Further south, the Bolivarian University (UBV) is described as an institution founded with social justice and equality at the core of all educational content and delivery, and as a project central to the nationwide social reform taking place in Venezuela presently. Misión Sucre, with its specific focus on increased access to University and other post-compulsory education for marginalised sectors of the community, is one of a number of social missions or programs seeking to redress...
historic inequality of opportunity in Venezuela primarily around the key social issues of education and health (MEDV 2004; Winter, Wiseman et al. 2005; Moreno 2006; Muhr and Verger 2006). Focusing on these two projects in an investigation into the educational reform currently taking place in the broader context of society-wide goals of social justice and equality in Venezuela, adds a relevant and challenging dimension to the analysis of our own and others’ initiatives, and raises some useful questions for further consideration.

Again, sharing the same stated aim as VU and UTEP, Misión Sucre constitutes a national effort to increase the number of Venezuelans, particularly those historically most excluded sectors, participating in higher education. According to the Venezuelan Ministry of Education and Sports (MEDV), Misión Sucre is “… an extra-ordinary plan, of a strategic nature (not fixed), that intentionally facilitates the incorporation and guarantees the continuation of studies in higher education for all those previously withdrawn, of average education that have not been admitted to some official superior institution, in correspondence with the constitutional mandate to guarantee the right to education.” (MEDV 2004, p.65) Furthermore, that the fundamental objective of Misión Sucre is to unify and coordinate the higher education system across Venezuela, through “the generation of new spaces and the creation of new modalities of conventional and non-conventional studies”, emphasising geographical connectedness, in every region of Venezuela, but with a global vision. (MEDV 2004, p.65-66)

The mission is facilitated through the establishment and expansion of the UBV, which is a new nation-wide multi-campus university, housed in previously unused buildings, or in the offices previously used by the chief executives of the now state-owned oil company PDVSA. Legislation has prohibited charging for public education, but Misión Sucre also offers around 100,000 scholarships each year to the most disadvantaged Venezuelans to further assist them undertaking post-secondary schooling. Although a complex process, there are reports that the programs are being met with success (Muhr and Verger 2006).

Both the form and content of these university-community initiatives is relevant to the present study. The studies of every student at UBV are based around Proyectos (projects), community based problem solving initiatives, in the area students live. Teacher education and medical training have become largely community based, with interaction through direct partnerships between the UBV and local health and education providers. These programs are all developing,
stating the ongoing challenge to deepen the philosophical goal of these projects amongst faculty and students (Ruiz, Gilbert et al. 2006).

The philosophical perspectives on the role of higher education in society reflected through Misión Sucre and the UBV are of particular interest. The MEDV state that

Education is conceived from the perspective of fundamental human rights, within the framework of a process of the construction of a social democracy, a state based on justice and rights. The search for equality, towards the construction of social democracy, constitutes the principles and fundamental aims of all educative actions. (MEDV 2004, p.i)

Muhr suggests that “(t)he educational transformation in Venezuela is intrinsically linked to the construction of a new national project characterised by endogenous development, a more egalitarian social structure, political sovereignty and a higher grade of independence from the centres of the world system” (Muhr and Verger 2006). Alongside increased public expenditure in education from early childhood to higher education, increased public sector involvement and provision, as well as Freirean curriculum developments based around the empowerment of people to become active agents in a burgeoning participatory democracy (Muhr and Verger 2006).

An initial investigation suggests that the Bolivarian University and the educational missions constitute an effort to put educational reform at the heart of a new social agenda: orienting the national economy to meet educational needs based on community aspirations and community building, rather than reforming education to meet or adapt to micro and macro economic reforms centred on corporate profitability. Moreover, the education missions demonstrate an alternative partnership approach, as the education agenda becomes the responsibility of local communities, who themselves, appear to be beginning to dictate goals, parameters and fields for further research.

In many ways, UBV and education in Venezuela more generally looks and sounds like Benson and Harkavy’s (2002) “democratic, devolution revolution.” At the very least it seems to offer a creative and challenging perspective in any re-visioning of the notion of the engaged university.
Concluding comments and questions for further study

Benson and Harkavy summarise their perspectives on the question of university-community engagement with a challenging statement.

Our position is simple, unequivocal: no democratic, radical reform of American higher education, no successful democratic schooling reform, no truly democratic society. Summarized succinctly: Participatory democratic societies require the development of participatory democratic universities. The radical reform of higher education will most likely occur, we hypothesize, in the crucible of significant, serious, sustained, active engagement with public schools and their local communities. Scholastic, abstract, contemplative, ivory tower isolation neither sheds intellectual light nor produces societal fruit. Fortunately, a rapidly growing and deepening University Civic Responsibility Movement is now emerging and working to create a new “engaged”, democratic American university with major intellectual and societal promise. (2002, p.11)

The experiences of Victoria University and The University of Texas El Paso, provide models of university-community partnerships, and a commitment to building the educational capacity of their respective communities. These are well worth exploring further, and the present research hopes to provide valuable insight into perspectives, practices and outcomes. One challenge facing these institutions is how to transfer these micro examples of great work, into a macro model approaching and indeed developing the university-wide image of Benson and Harkavy and others.

The Bolivarian University of Venezuela and Misión Sucre, in a radically different social and economic context, provide an alternative perspective and framework for an education and community building partnership, as a new motor force for social and economic development, an alternative to the dominant model of neo-liberalism.

Further study will consider the development of a framework that goes beyond university benevolence (assisting disadvantaged communities) and instead seeks to challenge the accepted neo-liberal approach to government education policy and argue for a new community-education social contract, based on the social needs and aspirations of those most affected by more than 2 decades of neo-liberal reform.

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