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Civic Engagement: Matching Students' Wants With Communities' Needs

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With millions of high school seniors awaiting admissions decisions from colleges and universities across the country, two questions are sure to come up around dinner tables, in guidance offices and in media coverage: "What's the best college?" and, "Is college really worth the cost?"

While these are certainly important considerations, their dominant place in the discussion of higher education is far out of proportion to the values and priorities of today's young people. A growing body of evidence reveals that, while financial security is certainly important to them, they are more concerned about having a positive impact in society.

Whether millennials (who constitute a high percentage of graduate students) or their younger counterparts in so-called "Generation Z" or post-millennials, studies show they want more in life than material reward. They want to belong to something larger than themselves; they have a strong sense of social and civic responsibility; and they are willing to work for positive change in their communities.

And colleges and universities are providing a myriad of opportunities for them to do so, through innovative, meaningful and sustained partnerships that connect the classroom to the surrounding community. Where volunteering or community service once meant an occasional service event focused on "giving back," today's model is increasingly one based on building together through sustained collaboration.

In short, colleges and universities have evolved from community outreach, to community engagement, to community partnerships. This shift reflects a growing recognition in higher education that our resources -- principally knowledge, labor and leadership -- can and should be applied to addressing immediate needs: Local governments face fiscal constraints that severely limit their abilities to revitalize (in some cases, even to stabilize) the communities they serve. Non-profits are understaffed and underfunded. Tragically, individuals often feel powerless in the face of circumstance.

Higher education institutions are stepping in to help bridge the gap between needs and resources. During the 2011-2012 school year, for example, student volunteers from just 557 schools --roughly one-fifth of U.S. colleges and universities -- contributed an estimated \$9.7 billion worth of services to their communities, working with at-risk youth, the homeless and hungry, people dealing with mental and physical illness; and addressing issues ranging from environmental pollution to cross-cultural understanding.

And most of us are doing these things with little, if any, additional new spending. Instead, it's a matter of aligning resources already earmarked for teaching, research and student life according to the specific needs of our surrounding communities.

At Wagner College, where I am president, we call it the "community defined curriculum." Our approach is not one of "doing for" or "showing how." We recognize that the true experts on any community are the people who live there and that, no matter how genuine our concern or how deep our commitment, long-term success will be defined and ultimately determined by them.

While it's often said that the desire to change must come from within, without the belief that change is possible and the capacity to bring it about, no amount of desire is sufficient. These are what partnerships enable that programs cannot; by focusing on the root causes of society's challenges and not merely the symptoms, individuals are empowered to take better control of their own destinies and contribute to the greater good.

Case in point: On Staten Island, Wagner and more than two dozen local organizations have formed the Port Richmond Partnership. Part classroom, part laboratory and part community resource, the Partnership ultimately serves as an engine of civic capacity. Student nurses don't just treat patients in local hospitals and clinics; they deal with the social and cultural factors that contribute to health issues. Business students work with local entrepreneurs to develop and execute business plans. Foreign-language majors help immigrant parents improve their English, so they can participate more fully in their children's educations and in society generally. The list goes on.

Along with providing opportunities to apply classroom knowledge, these experiences deepen our students' appreciation of what it means to be an active citizen and give them a hand in tackling the complex problems facing our country and world.

Perhaps not coincidentally, they also enhance their competitiveness in the job market. According to a 2013 survey by the Association of American Colleges & Universities, 86 percent of business leaders (presidents, CEOs and other C-level executives) want colleges to provide opportunities for students to work with others to solve important problems in their communities. And 71 percent value candidates and employees who are interested in giving back to their communities.

Stronger communities, better citizens, enhanced opportunities in the job market. And all within our existing budgets. That's what I call a best value in higher education.