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## Beyond campus borders

By Robert Forrant | March 24, 2007

THESE DAYS there is a lot of discussion about how the Commonwealth is losing its young, educated population. There is also talk about whether and how universities should extend themselves into their surrounding communities and involve students in activities designed to apply new knowledge to solving social, health, and economic problems.

Under the radar, hundreds of the Commonwealth's two-year and four-year college faculty and staff and thousands of its students are engaged in community-campus partnerships designed to help solve housing, health, environmental, and economic development problems. When the Legislature debates the higher-education budget it should factor in the benefits these activities provide to the citizenry and the likelihood that involved students are more likely to remain in the Commonwealth after graduation.

Coordinating these efforts are groups like [The New England Resource Center for Higher Education](#), which focuses on how to make community-university collaborations work. The Campus Compact, a coalition of over 1,000 college and university presidents, is focused on building strong community-campus links and civic engagement. These organizations, and many others, understand the links between student service learning, civic engagement, and strong communities.

There is even a National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement, which helps to evaluate the work of faculty who are involved in this kind of activity when they are preparing for an annual review, promotion, or tenure. Board members have been leaders in the institutionalization of community engagement, service learning, and professional service.

Engaged colleges and universities can play a catalytic and sustained role in social and economic development beyond simply the theoretical when their on- and off-campus efforts are guided by a reflective institutionwide and communitywide discourse. Two overarching questions permeate the efforts of these institutions. First, how does a college or university restructure its myriad activities, maintain its academic integrity, and have a transformative impact on its region? Second, who should participate in discussions that frame and guide such reorganization?

An emerging perspective, based on research and projects in the field, is that long-term development requires strategies that are interdisciplinary. Diverse disciplines and numerous off-campus constituencies must work together to solve complicated health, housing, environmental, and employment problems.

Outside Boston, UMass-Lowell is determined to help the Merrimack River Valley avoid its historic patterns of booms and busts and attendant social ills.

Much research and teaching is designed to give students rich educational experiences while helping to solve problems associated with global warming. This conceptual and practical approach benefits the community and the university. Students and faculty learn from and with those in the field. Such an interactive process results in a virtuous circle of improvement on and off campus.

A university's most important role ought to be the persistent advancement of cross-community, cross-firm, and cross-institutional learning. In this way, the university will advance its work beyond a random approach to development and play an informative, integrative, and innovative role in the cultivation of a sustainable regional economy.

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