Community-Campus Partnerships: Learning Beyond the Ivory Tower

Keynote Address Summary: Margaret Ann Jozsa

Margaret Jozsa has been an active community leader for over 25 years. She has served as a board member for numerous community organizations, has worked in higher education and as a journalist. Over the past several years, Ms. Jozsa has been instrumental in building a strong community-campus partnership with Portland State University. Currently, Ms. Jozsa serves as the Executive Director of Neighborhood Health Clinics, Inc. in Portland, Oregon.

Abstract

Ms. Jozsa engages us with a look at service-learning and long-term community-campus partnership from a community perspective. She addresses some of the assumptions all partners bring to the table, the differences between volunteers and service-learning students, and provides practical advice concerning how to create a win-win situation for students, faculty members and community organizations from the outset.

A Look In and A Look Out

Good morning. First of all let me do two things. One, I want you to notice how I’m dressed. I bring this to the attention of those of you who are from university settings so that you can take an important message back to your colleagues: people in the community do know how to dress when they come to professional meetings or conferences. Now, I’d like to invite you to look out the window. There’s a community out there and this university sits in a community. It is not separate from the community, it’s a part of its community. When I stand out there as a community member, I see a university in my community. I don’t see three separate things: a university, a community and service-learning–indeed the partnership between universities and communities. There is a struggle. Why is this? In some sense it is about change; a new view. It’s about power, the power of knowledge, the power of resources, and the power of human beings.

I am a product of higher education; I have 2 master degrees, one in sociology and one in social work. I did not choose to work with the community because I couldn’t get a job somewhere else. I choose to work where I do because of my commitment to bring resources back into the community.

A Two-Way Street

The university benefits from their community in a number of ways. They use public utilities and public transportation infrastructure; without either, it would be impossible to carry out even the most basic daily operations. There are tax and project dollars. Those dollars come from constituents outside university walls. Students and families pay for tuition; they get their money from local businesses, corporations that are out there in the community. The very existence of a university depends on the community in which it sits.
The community also enjoys benefits from the university. It certainly reaps economic benefits due to the increased influx of people and resources into this community. For example, every graduation the number of tours of this town goes up. Also, the university knowledge base, regardless of the department, brings expertise out into the community, knowledge that I use on a daily basis.

**Service-learning is Practical Education**

Service-learning in education has been around for almost forever. We just haven’t been very good at acknowledging it. I don’t think that there’s a single person in this room who would like to go into the operating room with a doctor who just spent 4 years in the classroom merely studying about how surgery was done, or looking at pictures of how it’s done. I don’t know about you, but I might take a pass. Why, because I certainly want my physician to have a certain amount of real experience before s/he touches me. The same holds true for social work. Why? Because I don’t want to be the first client. Because I want a social worker that has some experience and not just someone who has read something in a book. That’s service-learning. What the community says is "we would like every discipline, every department, to engage with us in order to better prepare students before they professionally practice in our community."

**Value of Education Must Address the Values of Society**

If there is value in education, the values of society must be taught. The value of honor, the value of honoring credentials, the value of wanting a university, community college or a college in your town and feeling that it brings something back to you. In these walls are the values of a society and it’s time for the universities to acknowledge that service-learning indeed has great value. Because the value of community is right here in this room, it is right here within these walls.

**Both Worlds**

Having been to both worlds, I challenge my university colleagues as well as my community colleagues to convince me that we can live without each other. We can’t. We must live with both—the practical experiences as well as the theories that serve us. Service can be in every discipline. I heard grumblings this morning about chemistry, about how we might make service-learning work for chemists. As a professional health care provider, I often hear others in my profession say to clients "you’re just going to have to live with the side effects." There are days when I think I would like to have those chemists in my room so that they can see what living with those side effects might mean. It means not being able to go to work, it means not being able to be emotionally available to your children, it means not being able to contribute to your community. Maybe then we’ll be able to get more people to understand that the side effects that we’re "just living with" are not acceptable.

**Expanding our World View**

Service-learning is about gaining valuable experiences, about being willing to change our personal world views and about seeing how other people live. My experience is that of an educated white woman, of a mother, of a wife, and of all those other life experiences that I bring to the table. Our backgrounds influence us. Sometimes, in a community of color, I sense for a moment how it must feel to be a
minority because I'm the only white face at the table. Our view expands as we work with a population that we can't even count because they may not be documented. Or, it's working in a population that may feel like the world cannot understand any of their issues because an interpreter isn't available. Now folks, those aren't part of the standard set of experiences that I have had in my university-based life; the only way that I might have those experiences is to cross over into the community.

Assumptions We Live With – A Skewed View on Both Sides

Let us not throw out the theory of human behavior with the bath water. Let us not forget what we know about people and group dynamics. Let us not throw out the books. We must learn by working together. There are many good things on both sides of the fence. And there are assumptions out there that we all have to live and work with.

The university sees the community as uneducated folks who say they have life experiences. In the greater Portland area there are 11,000 not-for-profit organizations. Many of those staff members have either a Bachelors, Masters or Ph.D. degree. 11,000 not-for-profits. Most are small or medium size agencies. It is a force that indeed universities like Portland State cannot ignore. Nor can the 11,000 non-profits that are struggling for survival ignore university-related resources available to them.

The community also makes assumptions about the world of higher education. We assume that those in higher education don't have much real life experience, and that most of their knowledge is based on theoretical perspectives or on information found in books. From my perspective, it's not real life here at the university. Often, the university goes out to the community and says "service-learning, all you guys want is cheap labor!" What the community says back to the university is "No, we'd like to see some change. We'd like our educational institutions to better prepare students to serve their community." The fact of the matter is that the community doesn't simply want cheap labor and that students aren't totally ill prepared to meet pressing community needs upon graduation. Both views are incomplete, inaccurate.

There's a third assumption. The university works with the community and says, "you have nothing to offer." The community says to the university "you have nothing to offer." Both assumptions are incorrect. Each has the world to offer the other. In my work with PSU in the past 8 years, we have discovered a lot to offer each other. More than just useful, free university resources coming into the community, we have found that working together can also create a bridge between specific communities and local universities. Community based youth living in areas where a non-profit organization is active can meet university students and see what it might mean to be a student in a university. Often, young people from the community think, hmm, if she can make it, then I bet I can too. Community people get to know faculty and the bridges get built. After repeated interactions, young people are willing to cross the river and come to this urban university, in part because they have been engaged with students and faculty from this university over time. They hear the philosophies and values and they see the efforts being made to bridge the two worlds. They see and believe that they can study at a university, that their life experiences will be valued, and that they can get that four year degree.
Recognizing Our Assumptions is Where the Dialogue Must Begin

Both sides think the other is untrained and not supportive of the other. Both sides are right. The university is untrained and not supportive in interactions with the community and the community is certainly untrained and can be very unsupportive in their interactions with the university. That’s where the dialogue must begin.

Those of you here today have undoubtedly been in meetings where a local politician or university representative might be talking about Clinic A. In the middle of the discussion about the clinic finally someone says, oh, the community is not represented here. So someone makes phone calls to various members of the community and eventually a community representative arrives at the table. The assumption is that this is the initial meeting. When the community representative finds out that the assumption is incorrect, they personally resent being brought into the meeting. I don’t make it a requirement that you ask my opinion, not at all, I protect the right that every company, institution, every not-for-profit to do their own thing. But if you want my opinion, and if you ask for it, then I expect to be there at the outset. Then we can begin the dialogue.

If we want to change the notion of “untrained and unsupportive,” there has to be dialogue and it has to start right at the beginning. Equal is not fair and fair is not equal. So the training is not going to be the same on both sides. Training will be different for the university and support will be different for the community. Personally, my support of neighborhood health related issues is passionate. University support of health clinics generally comes in the form of resource allocation. I don’t expect a university to be as passionate about my clinics as I am. It’s not their style and it’s okay. Conversely, universities don’t expect me to provide financial resources for them and for them that’s okay. It’s all about dialogue: what do I value and what can I bring to the table? Often, each side begins with “we know, we know.” Over the last 8 years, one of the things that I learned in working with PSU and the community is that “they don’t know, they don’t know.” There is fear! The university is concerned about what the community expects them to do. The community is constantly concerned about being taken over. Fear is only overcome by constant collaboration and talking. We have such misconceptions about what’s going on in the community and what’s going on in the university that just being able to bring people together, and keeping them sane, is cause for celebration!

We all have to ask questions now whose answers we’ll need five years from now, such as: What is the value of a four year degree? Should not-for-profits or community organizations be more rigorous? Why should teaching and research be considered so valuable? Might life experiences be of equal value?

Service-Learning: A Partnership of Dialogue and Discovery

Service-learning is an incredible partnership of dialogue and discovery between the university and the community. It is an opportunity for students to learn in the most non-threatening setting possible. It is the opportunity for community based organizations to experience university constituents in a non-threatening environment. Business students, sociology students, doctors, nurses, medical technicians, pharmacists, dentists, I’ve worked with all those students. I take great care in their treatment, and provide them with a great experience in the community. In turn, they give me a wealth of knowledge that I can’t afford. Regardless of their age or race,
religion or prior occupation, students come into the community wide-eyed. Many wonder if the experience is going to kill them or if it might be the best thing in the world for them. They’ve learned that those of us in different communities don’t bite. You can’t get that experience in the classroom. In the community, I can’t teach you the way it’s done in the classroom. Both are different, both are important, and service-learning is the bridge joining them as we look to the 21st century.

Volunteers and Students: Important Distinctions

There is a difference between volunteers and service-learning students. I will talk about those differences for a minute because they are very important. If you come to me and say that you want to volunteer for Neighborhood Health Clinics, I expect you to do almost anything I might ask of you. Service-learning students are different; community-based organizations owe part of an education to their students. Students don’t arrive and do whatever we need them to do. The community partner’s role is to teach students about our world, and about how their discipline interfaces with our world. Whether it’s the business student, the social worker, the sociologist or the chemist, we owe them a particular type of education, an education found in the experiences of the people that we serve. And I am there to help facilitate that learning. I am there to help them understand how their community experience fits into what they learned in the classroom. When they look at me and say that what they have been taught doesn’t fit with what they see, that’s option A. In option B what they experience and what they are reading and learning in the classroom does fit together. Then there’s option C, which I like the best, when students determine that they may have to rethink how a discipline aligns with community concerns. Education is about learning, it’s about thinking differently about your world. When the student meets the streets, they have no other choice but to think differently about their world. Mostly what I do is help students see how their discipline can be useful in dynamic community settings.

Pay Now or Pay Later

Service-learning can be a win-win situation across the board. But service-learning advocates and participants need to realize that ultimately service-learning is for the student, and is about learning. The community-based organizations and the universities need to make it the win-win situation for the students so that they can leave campus upon graduation and make positive contributions in their communities. Service-learning can teach us about “the other guy,” people different from us, and we all need to learn that. We can pay now, or we can pay later, but at some point we will pay. We can struggle now with service-learning, with our students and with the travail of university reorganization, or we can struggle later at a much greater price. In the long run, through dialogue between the university and community-based organizations, with flexibility and power sharing on both sides, we can create valuable and sustainable resources for our community.

Service-learning can unlock the door to deeper mutual understanding. It is time that the ivory tower take on the full continuum of values of its community by bridging the gap between knowledge and life experiences. By welcoming both sides to the table, both the university and the community, I wish you all the best in your work. The challenges are worth it. In the end, watching students take their discipline into the streets of any community is indeed a valuable experience for all of us.