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# A Neighborhood Partnership One Model for Transformative Justice

By Kent Koth

As at many Jesuit institutions of higher education, Seattle University's mission statement and core values speak to its service to society and commitment to social justice. For many years the university drew upon this mission to engage students in academic service learning, volunteer activities, internships, practicums, and other forms of community engagement. But in 2011 the university expanded its community engagement commitment to a much larger mission. Drawing upon programs like the Harlem Children's Zone, the university launched the Seattle University Youth Initiative. This initiative, the largest community engagement project in the university's history, has experienced initial success and is becoming a signature element. This article presents a brief overview of the initiative's planning and implementation, current successes and challenges, and several lessons learned.

In 2007 a University trustee asked a simple question: If Seattle University were to focus its community engagement efforts on a particular topic, neighborhood, or issue, could it make more of a measurable impact on the community? Intrigued by the question, President Stephen Sundborg, S.J., gathered a small group of university leaders to explore ideas. What followed was a three-year planning effort that engaged hundreds of campus and community members in a process that moved from a vague concept to a specific plan focusing on the crisis of educational inequality.

The first goal of the youth initiative is to dramatically improve the academic achievement of 1,000 low-income students living in a neighborhood immediately adjacent to campus, one of the most diverse and impoverished communities in Seattle. The university is pursuing this goal by partnering with the City

of Seattle, Seattle Public Schools, Seattle Housing Authority, and with over 30 nonprofit organizations to create a "cradle-through-college" pipeline of educational resources for neighborhood children and their families.

The second goal of the youth initiative is to transform the education of Seattle University students by further mobilizing them to serve and learn through academic service learning, community-based research, internships, practicums, work-study, and volunteer activities.

Focusing on these two goals, the initiative has attained several noteworthy initial successes, which include:

1. **Extended Learning.** The university has worked with five local nonprofits to extend the school day by two hours for 180 Bailey Gatzert Elementary School students. The after-school program did not exist until 2010. Initial results, based upon the district's Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), suggest that participating students increased math scores by 29% and reading scores by 13%. In addition, in 2011-2012, Gatzert Elementary School had the highest academic growth rate of any school in Seattle.
2. **Expanded Services.** Seattle University partnered with Seattle Housing Authority to obtain a \$30 million "Choice Neighborhood" grant. Part of this grant provides over two million dollars for early learning, summer learning, and college prep programs for neighborhood children. Through the grant, during summer 2012 the university also mobilized ten community organizations to offer summer learning and enrichment activities to over 300 neighborhood children, a 100% increase in summer learning participation from 2011.
3. **University-wide Engagement.** The university expanded and developed new partnerships to provide 250 neighborhood children and families with services such as health education, financial literacy, citizenship tutoring, tax assistance, parent engagement workshops, and early learning. This involved the university's creating 40 new service and research projects. The university also mobilized 47 faculty from 28 disciplines to engage 1018 Seattle University students in the neighborhood through 96 service-learning courses, representing a 75% increase in student participation since 2010.

While attaining positive initial results, the youth initiative has also faced challenges. For example, the initiative's success depends completely on multiple campus and community partners working together to deliver results. Aligning partners with different organizational cultures, motivations, reward systems, and

funding sources is, in fact, very difficult. Another challenge has been navigating the power imbalances that arise from differences in economic class, culture, race, religion, gender, and nationality. The university, its partners, and neighborhood residents must adopt a high degree of cultural competency to overcome these barriers. This ongoing challenge is also a tremendous educational opportunity.

Still another challenge has been acquiring adequate resources during a time of tremendous financial challenge. The university provides base operating support, but two thirds of the initiative's \$1.2 million dollar budget comes from outside, which requires thoughtful fund development and stewardship strategies.

For institutions of higher education wishing to embark on a major place-based community engagement effort, the Seattle University Youth Initiative can provide several major lessons. One is that a comprehensive university-wide community engagement initiative requires thoughtful and inclusive planning. Seattle University took almost three years to move the initial idea to implementation. This thorough planning process led to significant ownership from many partners, which has made it much easier to move quickly and attain success in the initial implementation phase.

Another central lesson is that success requires carefully balancing community impact and campus engagement. If the effort becomes too focused on the students' learning experience, then the community will become disillusioned, question the university's motives, and eventually cease to participate. Conversely, if the work overemphasizes the external focus on creating an educational pipeline for local children, university leaders may question why the institution should be involved at all. The success of the initiative depends on how the two goals dovetail and complement each other. A delicate balance!

While it has only been two years since its launch and five years since the initial planning phase began, the Seattle University Youth Initiative is beginning to transform the local neighborhood and the campus. This is the good news. But there is much more to be done. As the initiative matures it must build upon the original foundations. This means significant additional planning as well as the willingness for campus departments and community organizations to coordinate activities while remaining true to their identity and purpose. By doing so, the youth initiative will successfully offer an example for other institutions to draw upon in our collective Jesuit pursuit of the faith that does justice. ■

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