

3 Your City (or Town) is More Than a Place to Call Home

By Wim Wiewel, Ph.D., President, Lewis & Clark College

When I became president of a private liberal arts college after nine years at the helm of a public research university, many surmised that I was practicing for retirement by starting to downsize.

Good-natured kidding aside, the two schools are indeed a study in contrast. Portland State University, where I was, is a public university located in the downtown core with a total enrollment exceeding 27,500 students. Lewis & Clark College, where I am now, is a private institution in Portland's southwest hills six miles from the city center. We enroll 3,300 students in our undergraduate college, graduate school of education and counseling, and law school.

But Carnegie Classifications and numbers don't tell the whole story. Both the large public and the smaller private leverage their Portland connections to enhance their own teaching, research, and student success, all while striving to serve a larger community and build the public good.

College and university leaders have long recognized the value of upending the conceit of the ivory tower by taking full advantage of their location. However, doing this in ways that benefit both the institution and the community hinges on careful management of internal and external expectations, relationships, and resources. Private liberal arts colleges may find such engagement especially daunting at a time when declining enrollments, budget shortfalls, and tectonic shifts in the higher education landscape nationally and globally are roiling our sector. Despite the challenges, at Lewis & Clark we see the present moment as ripe for enhancing the education and experiences of our students by reimagining our connections with Portland in ways that make the city more economically strong, culturally vibrant, and socially just.

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Our own graduate school and law school have long-established, curriculum-based programs, practicums, and clinics. These provide essential services to schools, individuals, families, businesses, and nonprofits, with a particular focus on underserved populations. But this is relatively new ground for our undergraduate College of Arts and Sciences, which is why we are taking steps to better structure the ways we engage beyond our campus.

We are now working to develop curriculum-based community partnerships that focus on the co-production of knowledge. This objective advances our mission while creating added value for our students, our college, and the city we call home. We believe this to be a model that other liberal arts colleges can learn from and replicate.



Connecting for the Co-Production of Knowledge

For us, “connecting with Portland” is a broadly generic term that encompasses working with people in government, schools, businesses, nonprofits, arts and cultural organizations, start-ups, and a constellation of enterprises that operate within the metropolitan region. It is perhaps more accurately described as being in and of Portland.

Because this connection emphasizes partnership rather than power, it does not reduce community organizations to laboratories where we test out various academic and urban hypotheses. Instead, the connection becomes the foundation for the co-production of knowledge. We recognize that different sectors have different kinds of knowledge. Community activists, local politicians, and business people have knowledge that is often different from what people in higher education hold.

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For example, at Lewis & Clark, our library archivists, a professor, and students are working with the local Vietnamese community and the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon on a grant-funded oral history project. The goal is to better understand the social and political issues that continue to affect immigrants in Portland and beyond, thereby advancing local and global citizenship for all participants.

Once you truly respect the idea that there are multiple kinds of knowledge, you open the gates to collaboration. By working together, one institution does not impose knowledge on the group or person that does not possess it. The process becomes relational rather than adhering to a deficit model.

Good partnerships often start with some kind of asset mapping that students can work on with the community. What makes the community vibrant and dynamic? What are its inherent strengths and weaknesses? Where is change possible if we work together?

Surveys and questionnaires provide some of the answers. Interviews where people tell their stories tap into a community’s history, experience, and deep knowledge. Together, the two approaches round data into larger truths that point a way forward.

Informed by Experience

Based on work elsewhere and by scaling lessons learned at Portland State and Lewis & Clark, we know that partnerships designed for the co-production of knowledge must have these characteristics:

1. They must be mutually beneficial.
2. They must understand that relationships take a long time to build.
3. They must recognize that only in working together can you really learn what's needed.
4. They must have campus buy-in, support, and visibility.
5. They must include quantitative and qualitative methods for measuring impact.
6. They must ensure that the institution must have skin in the game.



Key Learning Number 1: Mutually Beneficial

The partnership has to benefit both the college and the community organization. Whichever side initiates the conversation,

they cannot do so with an endgame of taking more than they give. A research project that closes down and leaves once it has the data it needs is exploitative rather than exploratory. On the other hand, a community group or business that wants assistance without regard to how that would be beneficial to students or faculty may score a one-time benefit but will not establish an ongoing relationship.



Key Learning Number 2: Relationships Aren't Built in a Day

Regardless of how they are structured on paper, robust partnerships move forward on trust rather than power. And progress, like learning, is incremental, which makes it

more deeply rooted and enduring. A process based on shared values supplants a more traditional orientation toward achieving specific goals. It is also better to focus on a series of pragmatic projects rather than a grand vision.



Key Learning Number 3: Collaboration Determines Need

It is only in working together that one partner learns what is really important and useful to the other, and that both agree on what can be done. Failure will attend

an initiative that begins with, "We're here to help you. Just tell us what you want us to do." In such cases, power usurps partnership. If a principal investigator writes a proposal to secure funding absent deep community participation, the

project will not succeed. Collaboration will reveal the real skills of each partner and the opportunities available to both.



Key Learning Number 4: Success is a Function of Priorities and Structure

Attention must be paid to how a project is prioritized, structured, and made known within the college or university. A structure that works for one institution may wreak havoc in another, but there are characteristics and considerations that apply to all:

1. Make the work a priority. At Lewis & Clark, we built consensus through our institutional strategic planning process. Our plan, *Exploring for the Global Good*, links community engagement to the academic experiences and development of our students in ways that build world-ready skills that add value to their degrees. Emphasizing the co-production of knowledge navigates the space between those who advocate pursuing knowledge for its own sake and those who champion experiential learning, or transforming knowledge into practical action.
2. When the objective has academic import, it will die on the vine if it lacks robust support from the faculty. The institution must have a clear policy on the role that faculty-led community engagement has on promotion and tenure.
3. Organizationally, the responsibility for coordinating the work must be located at a level that signals institutional support. For example, establishing an Office of Community Partnerships that reports to the president is more likely to succeed and be sustained than a process which atomizes responsibility and is dependent on the good will of a few professors.
4. Internal visibility and communication can make or break success. Institutional structures sometimes run toward being so opaque that it is difficult for interested community partners even to know where to start or whom to contact.



Key Learning Number 5: Measuring Success

It is fine to say, "We're doing good work." It is even better to show how and the results. Currently, we lack a holistic process of cataloging, coordinating, and measuring

our community engagement. In creating a stronger identity for Lewis & Clark as being in and of Portland, we are also developing a process to monitor our impact and to assess and report progress.



Key Learning Number 6: You Must Have Skin in the Game

If community engagement is to be sustainable, the institution must have skin in the game. Grant funds that jumpstart

a project one year may not be available the next. Faculty and external partners want assurance that the institution is invested in community engagement financially, strategically, and programmatically. Building the program into the curriculum is one way to demonstrate that commitment. We are now implementing a special designation—Connect-Portland—for undergraduate courses that link with or draw on city history, conditions, issues, or organizations. More than half of our academic departments have already identified courses that have a substantial in-and-of-Portland focus.

Collaborating from the Inside Out

One current example of the type of collaboration I discuss is an interdisciplinary project involving our history and theatre departments and the nearby Columbia River Correctional Institute: “Theatre from the Inside-Out: Illuminating Mass Incarceration.”

This project expands a course on crime and punishment in U.S. history that Associate Professor of History Reiko Hillyer teaches at the minimum-security facility located in Northeast Portland. The course brings together 16 of our undergraduate students with 16 incarcerated students to learn as fully engaged peers. The course focuses on the

history, race, and stigma of the prison crisis and what it is like to be incarcerated, and it amplifies the voices and creativity of those who live that experience every day. This spring, Associate Professor of Theatre Rebecca Lingafelter collaborated by teaching several sessions and coordinating the writing and performance by all students in the class of a theatre piece at the facility. Future plans include engaging the larger public by staging the production at a local theatre.

Finding Your Place

Demonstrating the value and relevance of our particular brand of higher education is more urgent than ever. A large public university often has the scale and the resources to partner with a city or town in ways that can drive a local economy. Smaller privates may not be primary economic engines, nor do we necessarily aspire to be. But by focusing on who we are, where we are, what we do well, and what we can do even better, we can best educate our students and collaborate with our home cities and towns. We can shape a collective future by developing curriculum-based community partnerships that focus on the co-production of knowledge. This is a model that other liberal arts colleges can learn from and replicate. Now is always a good time to get started.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Wim Wiewel is Lewis & Clark College's 25th president. Since he took the helm in fall 2017, President Wiewel has brought new energy, vision, and focus to the community. He has led the development and implementation of a strategic plan, *Exploring for the Global Good*, and has initiated the quiet phase of a comprehensive campaign that has raised more than \$50 million in less than two years.

During his previous nine years as president of Portland State University, that institution became the largest and most diverse university in Oregon. Retention and graduation rates increased every year, funded research went up 50 percent, and fundraising tripled. His leadership earned him the Council for Advancement and Support of Education's Chief Executive Leadership Award in 2014.

A proponent of strong civic engagement, Wiewel has served on a number of prominent business and cultural organizations. As a vocal advocate of teaching and practicing sustainability, he works closely with government, industry, and academic leaders to drive collaboration.

Wiewel has authored or edited nine books and more than 65 articles and chapters that have appeared in such publications as *Economic Geography* and the *Journal of the American Planning Association*. His most recent books are *Global Universities and Urban Development* and *Suburban Sprawl*.

A recipient of a classic liberal arts education as a high school student in his native Amsterdam—and the first in his family to go to college—Wiewel holds degrees in sociology and urban planning from the University of Amsterdam and a Ph.D. in sociology from Northwestern University.