

Community spirit: universities redefining how students learn

Sara Ladrón de Guevara and Anthony Monaco on why institutions should collaborate with their neighbours to develop ideas and solve local problems

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At hundreds of universities in dozens of countries around the world, some of the best learning is happening not in the classroom but in nearby towns and villages where students and faculty have found eager partners to engage in real-world problem-solving.

An international movement of civically engaged universities is redefining how students learn, and where. These schools are developing formal, ongoing symbiotic relationships with the communities that surround their campuses.

Students are collaborating with their neighbours to develop new ideas and to solve local problems. And the universities – moving beyond traditional models of classroom-based learning and unpaid summer internships – are supporting students as they incubate new business ideas, launch innovative projects to advance health and civil society, and nurture community partnerships.

Much of this work is taking place under the umbrella of the Talloires Network, an innovation itself. Launched in 2005 and convened by [Tufts University](#)'s Tisch College of Civic Life, this network connects 368 universities in 77 countries that incorporate civic engagement and community service into their research and teaching mission. The results speak for themselves.

Take the example of the University of Zimbabwe. Clive Nyapokoto, a student there, grew up on an organic farm. His parents were farmers. His plan was to follow the family career path, but he wanted to expand into new farming methods. His dream was to do aquaponics, a system that connects a fish farm to a vegetable farm so that fish waste nourishes the crops.

Nyapokoto had a working model – replete with live fish and plants – small enough to fit inside a classroom. But he wanted to grow it to scale and help other farmers in Zimbabwe install their own aquaponics systems.

He found a programme at his school where university staff encouraged him to take business classes to develop his idea. They connected him to other entrepreneurs. Eventually, the programme awarded him a small grant to start his business. Now he is serving his first customers.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, students at Universidad Veracruzana (UV) in Mexico recently developed a sustainable fruit-drying machine that relies on solar energy. Their university offered them time in its business incubator, where the students are earning course credit for their work.

And beyond campus boundaries, UV is offering similar opportunities to non-students. UV maintains several satellite “University Houses” in communities a few hours’ drive from its main campus. In a twist on the usual semester abroad, students can live and work in these houses.

These two universities are both participating in a four-year experiment called Yepi, or the Youth Economic Participation Initiative – a project designed to catalyse change in the way universities prepare students to thrive in career and life. Yepi includes eight universities in the global south and is supported by the MasterCard Foundation.

This approach to teaching and learning represents a change in pedagogy. Business incubation, for example, has emerged as a curricular framework to support robust entrepreneurship education in universities. Other schools, including many in the US, are designing and completing academic research with the help of local community partners. And, as in the case of UV, at some universities students are able to live in nearby communities to focus on projects as they learn.

Students who participate in these innovative courses report not only enthusiasm for this model of learning but also an increase in self-awareness, confidence and readiness to do meaningful work upon graduation.

At a time when the challenges to our civic life are plentiful, the need to build bridges within and among communities could not be more urgent. Programmes such as these provide just such bridges. They are not extracurricular “nice-to-have” programmes that simply burnish university websites and admissions brochures. They are substantive, for-credit, scholarly endeavours, and they carry the potential to shape student life, enhance classroom learning, and link higher education directly to real-world challenges that demand solutions.

Students around the world want to make an impact. They have the talents, energy and skills to make a real difference in our communities. And the truth is that we need their talents and their insights to change the world – now more than ever before.

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More than 200 higher education leaders will gather to exchange ideas at the [Talloires Network Global Leaders Conference](#) in Xalapa, Mexico, later this week.