

## **Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement: Vice-Chancellor Janice Reid by Lorlene Hoyt**

February marks the start of our monthly Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement series. We begin with the Talloires Network Steering Committee Vice-Chair and leader of the University of Western Sydney, Janice Reid. According to Vice-Chancellor Reid, the location of the University of Western Sydney (UWS) is a driving force behind her commitment to making civic engagement an institutional priority. As one of the largest of Australia's 39 universities, each of UWS's six campuses aims to fulfil the University's motto, "Bringing Knowledge to Life". Reid believes that with its 40,000 students UWS can make a difference by reinforcing and contributing to a vital and productive future for its urban region of 10,000 square kilometres. She notes, "The area is transforming socially and economically. It is very diverse and there is a visible need for productive partnerships through community engagement." Reid's background in public health and anthropology also explains her keen professional and personal interest in leading the University in a way that makes a demonstrable contribution.

The University of Western Sydney has numerous programs which aim to enhance civic engagement. When prompted to point to a successful effort, Reid pointed to the University's coordinated focus on more than 900 schools. She described a rich array of activities including after school tutoring by student volunteers of refugee and Aboriginal students in disadvantaged schools. Such initiatives, she believes, not only provide opportunities for university students, but also "demystify higher education" by bringing the campus into the community. "Breaking down such barriers" is essential. UWS aims to be a "university without walls". The University's advisory board ensures that communication between the University and its school partners is well informed, robust and meaningful. In Reid's words, "The stakeholders set the direction and priorities for the partnership. They are the way finders." Reid explains that trust and management are key ingredients in success, especially in the early stages of engagement. The University must understand its role in the community and "take cues from senior leaders in the region."

At the same time, Reid acknowledges that civic engagement is challenging work. UWS's civic engagement work is not funded by government or philanthropy. Some programs, such as SMExcellence (a free learning platform designed by students and staff to support small business owners) take on a life of their own and absorb more resources than initially anticipated. Civic engagement is vital, yet the availability of sufficient resources to support it is a perennial challenge.

Reid believes the global civic engagement movement in higher education will receive more attention from philanthropists, governments, and private investors in the future as they "begin to understand that building social capital for their regions is in their best interest" and that universities are "powerful agents of change." Reid explains, "Engaged universities extend their mission-based activities out of conviction that their role should be transformative." In the next phase of its work, the Talloires Network can "highlight the value and rewards of civic engagement in the public mind and for other universities," while "bearing in mind the cultural and national differences in the way civic engagement is approached." By building a more vibrant network, financial support will follow. Reid has directly contributed to strengthening the network in several ways, including the establishment of the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) at UWS. Most Australian universities are members of this national organisation.