

# UNIVERSITIES AS FRONTLINE RESPONDERS: *A CALL TO ACTION*

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# ***Introduction***

Out of necessity, civically engaged universities around the world are restructuring their research, teaching, and service priorities and practices to address urgent local challenges. The Talloires Network of Engaged Universities and Open Society University Network have joined forces to support and learn with these "frontline" leaders by listening to and documenting their stories. Throughout 2023, we brought together voices and perspectives from civic leaders at universities in Bangladesh, Chile, Ghana, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, and Pakistan as a working group, and they are creating the path forward by way of cross-border dialogue and exchange.

Dubbed Universities as Frontline Responders, this collaboration seeks to simultaneously document innovative practices at six participating universities as it encourages other universities around the world to lead as bold and nimble civic actors who partner with communities to respond swiftly and intelligently to unexpected societal challenges.

Universities as Frontline Responders included an international gathering of university network members and partners, university heads, student leaders, and leaders in philanthropy who together explored the evolving role of universities and shared different models of universities as frontline responders. In October 2023, nearly 50 participants, most from the Global Majority, convened in Madrid, Spain, to synthesize strategies and articulate a practical call for action to the international higher education sector.

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# ***Call to Action***

**As global challenges are intensifying and getting more complex, universities situated at the frontline are developing their missions to better respond to immediate and long-term pressures endured by their students and their respective communities.** The immediate pressures include emergencies where self-motivated faculty, staff, and students step-up to volunteer, offering help and support to affected communities. Such responses are well intentioned; they are also often sporadic, short-lived, and overlap with other initiatives. However, the root causes and long-term pressures of societal crises are complex and intertwined, requiring a long-standing commitment and a sophisticated approach.

**This Call to Action advocates that universities should have the vision and develop the range of infrastructure for responding to small and large crises in their communities in a timely fashion. Their response should include immediate and sustainable solutions with and for vulnerable communities.** Six partner universities from the Talloires Network and Open Society University Network seek to bridge the gap between academia and real-world problems by **pioneering engaged research, foregrounding community-based teaching and experiential learning, and the development of students with professional skills for ethical and effective crisis management.** A promising way for an individual university **to manage the risks associated with this approach is to operate as a part of a network of universities as frontliners.** That way, resources, expertise, efforts, and influence of multiple universities can be harnessed. A collective framework and coordinated actions also ensure individual universities are not working in isolation unduly exposed to danger.

Based on our work, and to frame common ground for the myriad of approaches applied across these networks and others, this paper lays the foundation for a model that universities can adopt to assume the role of a frontline responder.

# Why Frontline Responders?



Universities as frontline responders is a framework for higher education institutions internationally. It may be used to adapt their mission and vision statements in ways that are relevant to their local context. The framework acknowledges complex realities of institutions and communities and provides a pathway for institutions to develop their role as civic actors by:

- **Expanding universities' public purpose** beyond teaching and research, whereby civic engagement along with other forms of community outreach prompt a shift outside campus walls to respond to and develop solutions to complex local and global issues. This framework necessitates institutional anchoring that mobilizes the university to address immediate crises through capacity building, training, and preparedness of students, faculty, and staff.
- **Acknowledging students' complex realities** as a commitment of higher education that ensures its students from all backgrounds are trained and equipped to analyze and assess local community needs in partnership with those communities. Recognizing and valuing students as crucial allies with inherent power, especially those with personal experiences on the frontlines, entails amplifying their voices so that they improve their own lives and thrive in the world.

- **Pioneering in the production of knowledge** beyond academic consumption towards public purpose, the university aligns research with community needs, placing community voices at the center of urgent solutions. Integrating community insights into classroom practices and university functions, and circulating this wisdom back to communities for their advantage, is essential. Documenting and sharing challenges, successes, and lessons learned informs future endeavors, and benefits students and network partners.
- **Leading on sustained development decision making** through immersive learning and innovative solutions, by involving the engagement of both youth and vulnerable groups, and working across communities and global goals.

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## ***How to Institutionalize this Framework?***

A clear framework for the curricular and extra-curricular programs is a prerequisite to harness, sustain, and scale this momentum and to position the university as a frontline responder. This may be achieved through:

**Revising vision and mission** statements to reflect the university's commitment to being a frontline responder requires defining social responsibility, accountability, and what it means to be a frontline responder within a particular context. This process surpasses thinking beyond the traditional approaches and emphasizes preparedness, outreach, and action as core pillars in addition to research and learning.

**Updating pedagogical approaches** to align with the ethos of civic engagement unique to each university and emphasizing community-based pedagogy at the core of the academic programs. With this focus on experiential learning, students are equipped with real-life skills that extend far beyond their university years.

**Adopting bold policies and procedures** that allow room to maneuver in informal and mostly unstructured settings, off campus and beyond. Universities should develop strategies in alignment with institutional policies, community needs and global objectives, build coalitions on several levels and consider their own national policies for engagement.

**Establishing specialized landings for community outreach** to bring the concept of universities as frontline responders into realization. This involves engaging key personnel to liaison the university's strategic plan and secure buy-in across the campus community and external stakeholders. As demonstrated by the Covid-19 pandemic, these connections will ensure an array of emergency response is possible (volunteering in hospitals, door to door blood donations, cost effective protective equipment and supplies).

**Developing key performance indicators for outreach** that capture the impact of the work done and its complexities. Such a system would function to monitor and evaluate the university's role as a frontline responder. Equally significant, rankings and ratings within academia should acknowledge and value civic engagement, which can be further enhanced by leveraging network best practices.

**Harnessing Partnerships with community partners** to provide more effective interventions, build a common agenda and shared vision reflecting local (or network) principles. This entails the development of a well-articulated commitment for action that leverages university strengths, amplifies impacts, and shares multiple resources towards clarity in the desired outcomes of the response and in the collaborative implementation of projects.

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## ***How to Make the Case to Stakeholders***

Universities already possess the assets and influence to operate as effective frontline responders to both emergency and systemic crises. Doing so delivers many benefits to the university and its various stakeholders, which include:

### **For the university**

- While operating as a responder, universities reinforce their relationships with various stakeholders like government and business, thereby deepening the institutional relationships which aid the work of universities.
- Frontline work enables universities to test and strengthen their institutional processes, procedures, structures, and resourcefulness thereby building their resilience as societal institutions generally.
- It ensures that universities contribute to crises which can escalate and pose existential threats to universities and their communities. In their work as frontline responders, universities ultimately serve their own interests.
- Work as frontline responders endow universities, especially state-funded universities, with additional legitimacy in the eyes of the public as they deliver more immediate benefits.

## For Students

- A university that operates as a frontline responder provides an opportunity for students to go beyond traditional volunteering and to consider their own role in addressing the social issues they confront . In addition to developing individual skills and values like organizing, effective communication, negotiation, inventiveness, resilience, and dealing with ambiguity, they can evolve their sense of agency to act. Perhaps most critically, that agency can be motivated by empathy.
- Learning these skills within an academic context affords students the opportunity to innovate informed by evidence, disciplinary frameworks and best practices.
- A wide range of students connecting with communities can reach a wider range of communities where access to university resources have traditionally been limited. Students as partners can increase university effectiveness in partnerships with communities to address needs.
- Students cultivate new professional connections and strengthen existing relationships by working with local communities, personnel of partner organizations, and their home university faculty and administrators.

## For Faculty & Staff

- The university's work as a first responder can better support faculty who can join with communities to incorporate experiential learning opportunities that are meaningful for students and communities that includes rigorous research and real solutions that can help students understand arcane concepts and theories through engagement.
- Acting as a frontline responder allows faculty to be engaged in the centers of crises that brings resources to community responses that can also serve as a social laboratories for research that enable faculty to apply their unique skills in support of developing new knowledge that supports communities and which can be applied in other contexts.
- University staff benefit from the opportunity to apply their skills in more varied ways, enabling them to build capacity under strained circumstances, hence equipping them as professionals with sharpened competencies for their everyday duties.
- Staff can act as liaisons between faculty, students and communities to help make linkages that provide better coordination of resources.
- The staff can be incorporated into university response. This allows deeper partnerships with both faculty and communities that acknowledge the unique skills staff can offer.

## For Communities

- The investments that states, cities, and donors make into building the assets of universities are harnessed more fully to serve wider and immediate purposes.
- The engagement with universities as frontline responders provides communities ready opportunities to explore additional social and economic collaborations that benefit citizens.

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## ***Closing Remarks about Leadership and Risks***

Effective frontline leadership is essential in fostering relationships across campus and with communities. This includes establishing institutional goals, designating resources and providing inspiration for action. Leaders who recognize the significance of the roles universities can play in helping to address community needs can help prepare students to lead with confidence and competence and model transformative leadership that emphasizes critical thinking, effective communication, creative problem-solving, and a spirit of inquiry applied on behalf of the public good.

At the same time, operating as a frontline responder presents risks that must be acknowledged and managed if universities will succeed in this endeavor. These risks include:

- Universities risk unwittingly departing from their traditional purpose of teaching and research as they pursue the role of frontline responders. This can be mitigated by ensuring the crisis management work they do is informed by a clear and full assessment of their intellectual, financial and network assets. When this is done, universities can align pre-determined responder commitments with their institutional mission and assets in partnership with community leaders.
- There exists potential physical and psychosocial harm to students and faculty or staff during the frontline responder work, especially in situations of natural disasters like earthquakes or flooding. Universities should endeavor to work with better equipped partners like the Red Cross or national disaster management agencies in such situations, limiting their contributions to that of supporters. Responses can incorporate expertise, training and preparation that mitigates impacts.
- Universities take on reputational risks such as being seen as aligning with one party in a conflict. Reputation risks can be managed when universities have clearly communicated their interest in and commitment to helping tackle specific social difficulties or crises. This leaves little room for misinterpretation of efforts. Preparation coordinated with community organizations and leaders can establish plans that integrate university responses that allow for partnerships to be navigated in advance of an emergency.