

POSTSECONDARY  
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# ENSURING A MORE EQUITABLE FUTURE: HOW COLLEGES CAN ENGAGE THEIR COMMUNITIES TO ENSURE ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL VITALITY

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# INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities do not exist within a vacuum separate from their communities. On the contrary, postsecondary institutions have the power to provide value that extends to the larger community, by creating new knowledge and technologies through research activities, attracting new businesses and start-up companies, serving as economic engines, and acting as community partners that enhance local infrastructure, arts and health, and advance discourse on critical issues like race/ethnicity. As community anchors,<sup>i</sup> postsecondary institutions have a responsibility to equitably increase and distribute resources in a way that improves the economic and cultural vitality of the community and its residents.<sup>1</sup>

This paper outlines two ways in which institutions can contribute value as engaged community members: as equitable economic engines; and as partners in strengthening communities. In the first role, institutions can contribute to a diverse and equitable workforce in their communities and regions by reducing education debt for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, equitably increasing attainment rates, hiring and retaining faculty and staff of color and women, and supporting minority- and women-owned businesses (MWOBs) through purchasing their goods and offering contracts for their services. In the second role, institutions can serve as community partners who transform the economic and cultural fabrics of their communities by directing research toward local needs, sharing creative and artistic pursuits with the region, and engaging in meaningful discourse to improve the lives of individuals living nearby. The paper concludes by examining several frameworks through which institutions can measure both their economic and their social impact.

## INSTITUTIONS AS EQUITABLE ECONOMIC ENGINES

Postsecondary institutions produce value for local economies by deepening the skills and knowledge of a community's residents, creating jobs, supporting local businesses, and attracting new business and philanthropic resources through place-based revitalization initiatives.<sup>2</sup> The presence of college students, faculty, and staff can spur local economies,<sup>3</sup> but the human capital development that institutions create through educating and conferring credentials on students often leads to additional economic activity and higher wages.<sup>4</sup> For example, a one percentage point increase in the share of people with college degrees in a region leads to a two percent increase in that region's overall economic activity.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, rural areas that are home to universities face lower unemployment rates than surrounding communities that are struggling financially.<sup>6</sup>

The economic impacts of postsecondary institutions can be measured in real dollars. In 2010, in the five major Northeast Corridor cities—Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C.—universities and their associated medical centers employed close to one million people, had nearly \$100 billion in aggregated operating budgets, and attracted sponsored programs, gifts, and contracts that totaled \$28 billion.<sup>7</sup> Research has shown that even small colleges can have a significant economic impact on their communities as well by producing research and technology that

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i Higher education institutions are often described as “anchor institutions.” This concept has emerged in the early part of the twenty-first century “as a new way of thinking about the role that place-based institutions can play in addressing societal problems and in building a more democratic, just, and equitable society” (Taylor & Luter 2013).

can be turned into jobs for local residents and by bringing students, faculty, and staff to the area who spend money on services, cars, and homes.<sup>8</sup> For example, the unemployment rate is nearly 2 percentage points lower in rural Corvallis, Oregon, the home of Oregon State University, than the surrounding rural counties.<sup>9</sup>

Institutions can drive economic activity in communities and regions but doing so equitably requires deliberate attention to attainment and post-college outcomes and cost of attendance. Unfortunately, the cost of postsecondary education coupled with low completion rates and deep racial and socioeconomic stratification across and within colleges and by field of study means that too many Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students, and students from low-income backgrounds leave college with debt, but no degree.<sup>10</sup> When students stop out, they do not receive the wage increase that graduates generally obtain from completing their degrees,<sup>11</sup> making it substantially harder for stopped-out students to pay back their loans.

Even for students who complete their credentials, student loan debt burdens can impede their ability to purchase homes, start families, start and grow businesses, and maintain sustainable lives in rural communities.<sup>12</sup> If institutions were to manage costs so that students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and women did not have to borrow to finance their education, these students might not feel the need to delay traditional life events. Moreover, if they were interested, these students might have more to invest in entrepreneurship activities. In fact, if women and minoritized individuals became entrepreneurs at the same rate as White men, the U.S. would be home to millions more businesses in various sectors.<sup>ii, 13</sup> While educational opportunity and student debt are not the only factors that influence family planning, home ownership, and business development, an inequitable and unaffordable postsecondary system means that individuals have limited opportunities to earn the incomes or build the wealth that is often necessary to engage in these activities. In turn, communities across the nation—and especially in rural areas—miss out on jobs, diverse businesses, and tax revenue.

Institutions could also narrow wage gaps in their communities by hiring and paying people of color and women equitably<sup>iii</sup> and by prioritizing hiring or contracting with MWOBs. Institutions like Northeastern University have already committed to purchasing goods and services from local-based MWOBs and hiring women and people of color.<sup>14</sup> If more institutions followed this example and focused their resources on creating an equitable local economy, they could significantly contribute to the economic stability of families of color and women.

As place-based institutions, colleges and universities have the opportunity to emphasize local priorities over market-based interests.<sup>15</sup> For example, Syracuse University's first female chancellor and president Nancy Cantor led efforts to revitalize the Syracuse community through partnerships with the city, investment in urban renewal, student volunteerism, and faculty engagement with the local community.<sup>16</sup> Through deliberate collaborations with community members, city officials, and city planners, postsecondary institution leaders can mitigate unintended consequences of revitalization

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ii Sectors that have high shares of White and male owners include construction and manufacturing industries and tech start-ups, whereas sectors with high shares of women and minoritized owners include food service, accommodation, healthcare, and education.

iii For additional information on the role institutions play as equitable employers, see: DiBenedetto, K., Peters, E.E., & Voight, M. (2021a). Ensuring a more equitable future: Colleges as models for equitable employment. Postsecondary Value Commission. Retrieved from: <https://www.postsecondaryvalue.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PVC-IHEP-Employers-FINAL.pdf>

projects, which can include reducing affordable housing around an institution or contributing to gentrification of a neighborhood.<sup>17</sup> To support positive community transformations, institutions can participate in partnerships such as the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities' (USU) Collaborative Opportunity Grants.<sup>iv</sup> This grant program helps “universities to scale-up emerging partnerships that institutions have undertaken with community stakeholders” to “advance student success, degree completion, and community transformation.”<sup>18</sup>

Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to their communities to be engines that drive equitable economic activity. In fulfilling this responsibility, colleges and universities will ensure that all community members—regardless of race/ethnicity, background, or income—reap the benefits of having postsecondary institutions in their backyards.

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## INSTITUTIONS AS PARTNERS IN STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

Postsecondary institutions are the hubs of research, innovation, creativity, and discourse for many communities. They can direct efforts in fields such as technology and engineering, arts, and medicine, as well as racial discourse to improve the lives of those living nearby. For instance, university-led engineering projects can lead to cleaner air and water or improved transportation networks in communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how institutions are the sites of groundbreaking medical research.<sup>19</sup> Further, colleges routinely contribute to the cultural vibrancy of their communities through theater, music, and the visual arts.

However, these impacts may not naturally flow to the most marginalized members of a community. Rather, institutions must take deliberate steps to ensure their contributions benefit residents who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian-American and Pacific Islander, or are from low-income backgrounds. Several examples illustrate how institutions across the country who are intentional in their role as community partners are delivering equitable value by strengthening infrastructure, delivering programming to underserved populations, and spurring critical conversations about racial and socioeconomic justice.

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iv These grants are supported with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Collaborative Opportunity Grants projects must align with at least one of five priority investment areas, including strengthening the K-16 pipeline, rethinking financial aid, faculty engagement, employer and workforce organization partnerships, and leveraging community assets. All projects must have a collaboration between a public university and an external organization (e.g., local governments, school districts, community colleges, or another university). Current projects include: working to strengthen the pathway between math taught in area high schools and the math taught at the university; improving area high school students' access to, enrollment, and completion within the university; helping students who have stopped out to reenroll and finish their degree; creating a kindergarten-to-college pipeline; and addressing food security and food waste both on and off campus. For additional information, see: <https://www.aplu.org/members/commissions/urban-serving-universities/student-success/cog.html>

Institutions can leverage their resources toward just and equitable infrastructure improvements.<sup>20</sup> For instance, lack of internet infrastructure in rural areas deeply limits opportunities for many residents,<sup>21</sup> a problem that has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>22</sup> This is especially true for rural Tribal communities.<sup>v, 23</sup> Postsecondary institutions have the ability to address these community infrastructure needs. In fact, informational technology experts from the College of Menominee Nation (CMN) worked with various community stakeholders (e.g., tribal elders, tribal government departments, the chamber of commerce, the tribal childcare center, and the school district) and the University of Wisconsin-Extension—through the Building Community Capacity through Broadband initiative—to create a Comprehensive Community Technology Center (CTC) on CMN’s campus. The CTC expanded broadband and provided basic computing classes, technical degrees, and higher-level trainings for local Indigenous residents. This project created a strong example for how colleges and universities can partner with Tribal communities to address community infrastructure needs.<sup>24</sup>

Colleges and universities can also implement initiatives and programming that target and support underserved populations. For example, institutions can design service-learning courses in which students apply what they have learned in an academic curriculum in ways that benefit the local community, such as by helping families identify sources of lead poisoning in their homes.<sup>25</sup> Many rural public colleges host museums that celebrate and preserve rural culture and customs. These museums benefit the local economy by attracting visitors and serving as critical sources of arts and cultural programming for residents, many of whom might not have the economic means to travel to cities to engage with such programming.<sup>26</sup> Through initiatives like *The Just Project*, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are serving as COVID-19 diagnostic testing hubs, ensuring that communities of color—which have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic—have better access to critical testing resources.<sup>27</sup> These efforts benefit students, faculty, staff, and the broader community because they provide opportunities to build connections and work together to identify and address local injustices.

Furthermore, institutions can serve as physical spaces that help break down racial and socioeconomic hierarchies within their surrounding community. For example, the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) Campus Centers effort<sup>vi</sup> works with institutions to prioritize “expansive, community-based healing activities that seek to change collective community narratives and broaden the understanding of our diverse experiences.”<sup>28</sup> The TRHT Campus Center at Rutgers University-Newark broadened this critical dialogue by creating Undoing Racism trainings for high school and college students and anti-bias trainings for first-year students and faculty. The center also sponsors interactive community projects to discuss local issues, such as the water crisis in Newark that is affecting marginalized communities.<sup>29</sup>

Partnerships between institutions and their surrounding communities can improve the lives of students, staff, faculty, institution leaders, and community members. To engage in fruitful partnerships, institutions must embrace their role as key stakeholders in building a more just and equitable community—listening and responding to the needs of the community and prioritizing its

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v Tribal colleges have the slowest and most expensive internet access of any higher education institutions in the United States.

vi In 2016, AAC&U joined the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s Truth, Racial Healing, & Transformation (TRHT) effort. AAC&U is partnering with higher education institutions to develop TRHT Campus Centers, with the goal of developing at least 150 self-sustaining, community-integrated TRHT Campus Centers. For additional information, see: <https://www.aacu.org/trht-campus-centers>

most vulnerable members. Moreover, institutional leaders must fully support and promote faculty participating in community research.<sup>30</sup> For example, tenure and promotion committees should include individuals who are knowledgeable about this type of scholarship to ensure that faculty are evaluated fairly and their work is considered a valuable asset to the college or university.<sup>31</sup> By focusing resources on infrastructure, arts, health, and dialogue, colleges and universities and their faculty, staff, and students can better engage with local residents to support the community's short- and long-term economic and cultural vitality.

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## MEASURING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS AN ELEMENT OF POSTSECONDARY VALUE

The Postsecondary Value Commission's work centers principles of both equity and measurement.<sup>vii</sup> Equity is the commission's North Star, while evidence and research inform its framework for measuring the equitable delivery of postsecondary value. The commission's Postsecondary Value Framework uses data to identify inequities in postsecondary attainment, completion, and outcomes and inform policies and programmatic solutions that address them. This data-driven approach extends to the role institutions play as engaged community members. Beyond examining why and how they interact with their region, institutions should measure the impact of their initiatives on surrounding communities.<sup>32</sup>

Several frameworks can help institutions measure their economic and social impact, including:

- **Emsi's Economic Impact Study** helps institutions determine their impact on the economy through two types of analyses: Economic Impact Analysis and Investment Analysis. Key indicators in these analyses include: the net income generated in the region due to the institution's payroll and its purchases of supplies and services; the impact of student spending on the local economy; and the added state revenue and social savings due to the institution's presence in the area.<sup>33</sup>

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vii For a discussion of the Postsecondary Value Commission's guiding principles, see Chapter 2 in: Postsecondary Value Commission. (2021a). Equitable value: Promoting economic mobility and social justice through postsecondary education. Retrieved from: <https://www.postsecondaryvalue.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PVC-Final-Report-FINAL.pdf>

- **Initiative for a Competitive Inner City’s (ICIC) Anchor Institution Strategic Framework** defines seven roles for anchor institutions in urban communities, including postsecondary institutions, and offers strategies and best practices for adapting these roles to accelerate economic revitalization.<sup>viii</sup> For each area, ICIC provides examples for how anchor institutions can use these roles to positively impact their communities. As one example, the University of Pennsylvania partnered with the Pennsylvania Minority Business Center to identify local vendors and help prepare them to do business with the university. In so doing, they have helped these businesses generate revenue and increase the size of their staff.<sup>34</sup>
- **The Democracy Collaborative’s Anchor Dashboard** aims to provide anchor institutions with a means of measuring and interpreting their impact on the community, and especially low-income households. This initiative recommends collecting data that fall under five focus areas: Engaged Anchor Institutions, Economic Development, Community Building, Education, and Health, Safety, and Environment. Key metrics include: whether the anchor mission is part of the strategic plan, whether there are staff positions and departments that focus on anchor engagement, percent of minority hires in staff positions, percent of local hires in staff positions, amount in dollars that is spent on neighborhood development, and whether there is a community advisory board.<sup>ix, 35</sup>
- **The Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement** is an elective designation by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching that indicates institutional commitment to community engagement. Institutions can achieve this classification by detailing on an application how the institution invests in, communicates about, and assesses the impact of their community engagement efforts.<sup>x, 36</sup>
- **The National Assessment of Service and Community Engagement (NASCE)** is an institutional assessment for measuring how well participating colleges and universities fulfill their mission statements as they relate to community engagement and service. Undergraduates at participating institutions complete a web-based survey measuring the rate, frequency, and depth of student community service across nine areas of human need (i.e., civic participation/public awareness, economic opportunity, elder care, environmental, health/fitness, homelessness/housing, hunger/nutrition, religious/spiritual, and youth). Institutions receive a POP score, based on the Percent of the Possible service performed by students, for the entire institution as well as each of the nine focus areas.<sup>xi, 37</sup>

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viii These roles include: “provider of products or services; real estate developer; purchaser; employer; workforce developer; cluster anchor; and community infrastructure builder.” See ICIC’s Anchor Initiatives webpage for additional information: <https://icic.org/research/anchor-initiatives/>

ix This dashboard was originally developed in 2013 and further refined through The Democracy Collaborative’s (TDC) Anchor Dashboard Learning Cohort. The cohort’s main goal was to develop new ways to track how anchor institutions impact their local communities. Six universities participated in this cohort (Sladek 2017). From this initiative, TDC, in collaboration with the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) launched a three-year partnership called the Anchor Learning Network. Additional information can be found here: <https://www.cumuonline.org/cumu-and-the-democracy-collaborative-partner-to-launch-anchor-learning-network/>

x Institutions can use the free National Inventory for Institutional Infrastructure on Community Engagement (NI<sup>3</sup>CE) Tool to help them prepare and apply for the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. Additional information can be found here: <https://public-purpose.org/initiatives/national-institutional-inventory-of-infrastructure-for-community-engagement/>

xi The Public Purpose Institute partners with the Siena College Research Institute on this assessment.

These frameworks offer helpful metrics to examine an institution's community engagement. The field should continue to assess and refine such frameworks to fully account for the ways in which institutions can and should deliver equitable postsecondary value through their role as engaged community members.

**Through their engagement with residents, colleges and universities can showcase the value that postsecondary education can provide by enhancing the economic and cultural vitality within communities.**

The ongoing health and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have illuminated the central role of postsecondary education in the social, political, and economic prosperity and stability of communities, regions, and the nation. Now is the time for institutions to serve as equitable economic drivers in their communities and take up or strengthen their local partnerships to improve infrastructure, deliver programming to underserved populations, and facilitate conversations about race/ethnicity, equity, and justice. Through their engagement with residents, colleges and universities can showcase the value that postsecondary education can provide by enhancing the economic and cultural vitality within communities.

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