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Universities seek to bolster community involvement

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Much has changed in Northeast Portland since I became president of Concordia University in 1983.

The abandoned Kennedy School was transformed by the McMenamain brothers; the Sentry Market at Northeast 33rd Avenue and Killingsworth Street was replaced by a New Seasons store, offering greater selection and more spirit; and Northeast Alberta Street, once lined with boarded-up storefronts, now draws shoulder-to-shoulder crowds who fill its sidewalks on Last Thursday art walks.

In 1983 homeowners commonly had trouble selling their houses for the mortgage balance. Now, homes purchased for \$40,000 in the 1980s sell for \$250,000 or more.

Our understanding of what role an institution of higher education should play in the community has changed too. Antioch University Chancellor Toni Murdock made this point in a Seattle Times column last June. She cited the president of Bowdoin College, who in 1802 expressed the opinion prevailing at that time that college students "had a 'peculiar obligation' to exert their talents for the public good."

Murdock pointed out that over the next two centuries the values and expectations of America's college-educated adults changed. "Social responsibility took a back seat to securing financial success." Academic institutions became viewed as economic development resources incubating entrepreneurs and new technology applications.

Many of my colleagues locally and across the nation have embraced an approach to community engagement that reconciles the contradictions of the public welfare versus economic gain models. It is clear to me, to Dan Bernstine at Portland State University and to over 1,000 other college presidents participating in the Campus Compact coalition that social responsibility is a community development resource. The idea of students and scholars applying knowledge to benefit a campus neighborhood is not new. What is different is that the solutions are not passed down from an ivory tower to a public waiting for deliverance. Now, we listen first and partner with the community based on their agenda and evolve our curricula according to their needs when it is consistent with the mission and purpose of our institutions.

For example, Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., has transformed itself from a sleepy little liberal arts college to a national model for learning in community. Portland State University was a local innovator with its "urban university" vision and innovative programs like the Food Industry Leadership Center that partners with industry to train management talent. At Concordia University, we listened to the concerns of Charles McGee of the Black Parent Initiative and responded with the Concordia Teacher Corps comprised of 33 excellent students who mentor neighborhood youths at risk of dropping out of school.

These initiatives are only possible because of local business community support. Food industry leaders provided the seed funding to establish Portland State's center. The PacifiCorp Learning Foundation helped fund the Concordia Teacher Corps. Legacy Emanuel partnered with Reed College students to spice up the sterility of hospital life with cultural craft projects for school-aged patients. The only limit on these opportunities is our capacity to hear the needs of others, which is a function of our heart for service and our commitment to build community leaders.

Our students receive as much as they give, and all of us benefit from that exchange. One recent Concordia graduate summed it up well: "We're moving ideas out of the classroom and into the world."

With the city as their laboratory, students in service learning projects see how the world is broken and apply the big ideas they learn from their textbooks, or from the neighborhood barber, to make the future a bit brighter in one particular place. The lessons they learn in our neighborhoods will inform their values and contributions throughout their lives, empowering them to transform the communities they love.

We've had institutions of higher education in this country since Harvard University was founded in 1636, in this state since Willamette University was established in 1842, in this metropolitan area since Marylhurst University began in 1893 and in my neighborhood of Northeast Portland since Concordia started in 1905. Given the opportunities created by moving from being a community of scholars to scholars in the community, it feels like we have just begun.

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