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SYMPOSIUM

Dismantling the Ivory Tower: Engaging Geographers in University–Community Partnerships

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ABSTRACT *University–community partnerships offer synergistic spaces for communities to address difficulties and universities to meet their missions. Geographers are well positioned to participate in these partnerships, owing to the discipline’s integrative nature, spatial perspectives and analytic approaches, and its attention to social and environmental issues at many scales. This paper endeavours to assist geographers interested in these partnerships by illustrating three case studies of geography–community partnerships. We reflect critically on the mutual benefits from, and barriers to, these partnerships. On the basis of case studies and literature review, the paper recommends ways to enhance university–community partnerships to help dismantle the ivory tower.*

KEY WORDS: Community engagement, geography, engaged learning, service learning, third mission

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) face numerous challenges in the 21st century which require reconsideration of their goals and methods. One enduring, if unfortunate, stereotype of the university is the ‘ivory tower’—an isolated entity, elitist, disconnected from the place in which it is situated and from practical matters of the ‘real’ world. As a way to bridge this divide, a growing number of HEIs are seeking greater engagement with community organizations. *Engaged scholarship* brings together the pursuit of enquiry and discovery with the integration and application of multi-disciplinary knowledge

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(Boyer, 1996). It emphasizes that “major advances in knowledge tend to occur when human beings consciously work to solve the central problems confronting their society” (Gibson, 2006, p. 2; see also Molnar *et al.*, 2011). Some HEIs are deliberately positioning themselves as ‘engaged’ universities, a designation recognized by the Carnegie Foundation (2010). This poses important questions as to what geographers can bring to university–community partnerships and to the leadership of these activities within their HEIs. This paper has three objectives. First, we illustrate three case studies of partnerships in three places, drawn from our own experiences as engaged geographers. Second, we provide an overview of the benefits and challenges of university–community engagement. Third, we offer recommendations for enhancing geographer–community partnerships, targeted to overcome the particular challenges identified in the literature and our own experiences. We hope to stimulate discussion and critical reflection for staff development, to encourage greater participation by geographers in meaningful partnership activities with community groups. This paper is aimed principally at geographers seeking to establish ‘mutually beneficial’ engagements with local or distant communities (Holland & Ramaley, 2008, p. 34). It continues the discussion initiated by the INLT Brisbane group (Bednarz *et al.*, 2008), which emphasized the diverse student learning outcomes possible from community engagement. The present paper illustrates some of the ‘synergistic’ activities that emerge from engaged teaching and learning (see Conway-Gómez *et al.*, 2011).

Geographers are recognized for their diverse knowledge and skill sets (e.g. NRC 1997, 2010), which puts them in an encouraging position to meet a wide array of community goals. As six geographers collaboratively authoring this paper, we draw on our different personal and institutional experiences of increased geography–community engagement set within our different national contexts. Our professional interests include issues of social–environmental justice, climate-change adaptation and mitigation, hazards and environmental management, health and geographic pedagogy. One author straddles the interface between academic science and practice; another studies community organizations. Others are interested in connecting students to their community, making geography more practically relevant and increasing the employability of geography undergraduates and in championing the benefits of university–community engagement within their HEIs. We draw on these experiences in discussing critically how geographers can build meaningful partnerships with community groups.

Defining ‘Community’ and ‘Engagement’

We define communities as occurring at neighbourhood to international scales; some may exist only in virtual or mental spaces. They may have formalized structures or be quite informal or decentralized. Indeed, some potential ‘communities’ of people may not be organized at all and may not yet realize they share common concerns. Viewing ‘geographers’ and ‘communities’ as a duality is an artifice, albeit one necessary to advance the discussion. Geographers, as students or staff, are themselves members of a range of communities, including some nested within geographic space (e.g. neighbourhoods and cities) and some connected by practice (e.g. interest groups and professional organizations). Thus, in this paper, ‘community’ does not necessarily refer to a geographical entity, but may also involve communities of interests, functions or practices that cut across geographical lines. We define community partnerships as a process for

helping people understand the shared problems they face and encouraging them to work together to seek solutions or improve conditions.

'Engagement' is also a rather flexibly used term. *Engaged learning*, as defined by the American Association of State College and Universities, is place related, interactive, mutually beneficial and integrated interaction between students, staff and their communities. Examples include applied research, technical assistance, service learning, policy analysis, seminars and other exchanges of information (AASCU, 2002). To this, we might add learning opportunities such as internships and community-based participatory research. The place-based and contingent nature of community engagement links clearly to geographers' areas of interest and expertise.

However, partnerships cannot be viewed through a prism presuming a hierarchical structure to expertise. We believe that the optimal outcome of partnerships between geographers and non-academic groups should be *knowledge co-generation*, and at minimum *knowledge exchange*. This contrasts with the traditional notion of *knowledge transfer*, a relationship of unequal power implying a transmission of information from 'expert' academics to 'lay' community members. Co-equal geographer–community partnerships are developed in an atmosphere of mutual trust, in which the contributions of each constituency are valued and the needs of both are met. We begin by grounding our claims and propositions in real-world experiences in the inner city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; the floodplains of central England and a rapidly expanding urban area in Pakistan.

Case Studies of Geography–Community Engagement

Wisconsin: Community Engagement and Social Justice

This geography–community engagement project evolved from dissertation case-study research at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM; Zupan, 2010). The project emerged from Zupan's exposure to Milwaukee's pronounced inequalities and her observation of over 40 diverse public-participation events in Milwaukee's inner-city neighbourhoods, both of which revealed an apparent lack of local resident and minority population involvement in the neighbourhood redevelopment process. This first-hand exposure to contemporary Milwaukee's urban geographies indicated the unique opportunity to combine geography education, research and community engagement to affect local policies and urban change, and contribute to urban geography scholarship. To facilitate these goals, Zupan co-initiated a community–university partnership, which involved Pam Fendt of 'Good Jobs and Livable Neighborhoods' (GJLN), a Milwaukee-based coalition of local labour-, faith- and justice-focused groups, and two scholars from UWM's Urban Planning (Nancy Frank) and Geography Departments (Zupan).

With grant support from the UWM Cultures and Communities Program,¹ the three partners initiated the *Environmental and Socio-Economic Justice and Oral Histories Project* (2008–2009). The goal of this geography–community engagement project was to increase and enhance minority population participation in the decision-making process in an ongoing planning and redevelopment initiative in Milwaukee's 30th Street Industrial Corridor.² Thus, the project uniquely engaged GJLN, the two UWM scholars, Corridor community residents and students of Milwaukee's Urban Planning High School. The school, founded on the ideals of community building and social justice, serves

Milwaukee's inner-city youth. One of the school's long-term goals is to increase minority participation in the planning profession.

To facilitate the project's goals, the GJLN–UWM partners organized several education- and research-based activities for the students/researchers, including familiarizing them with Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures,³ lectures about Milwaukee's socio-economic trends and environmental justice issues, and training on interviewing and report writing. Second, the partners and students/researchers co-developed interview questions for local residents. Soon after, scholars/community partners supervised students in the process of collecting oral histories from five Corridor residents. The major challenge in the project was recruitment of residents, which mainly occurred due to partners' difficulties with gaining access to Corridor residents. Finally, students/researchers wrote summary reports, which could be used for community organizing purposes and/or the UWM archives on Milwaukee neighbourhoods and community organizations' efforts.

The benefits of this project included the following: (1) *for the students*: enhanced communication, data collection, analysis and writing skills, increased awareness and 'hands-on' learning about local socio-economic, employment and environmental injustices and future planning profession preparedness; (2) *for the community organization*: increased capacity to build relationships, engage in neighbourhood planning and strengthen the community, furthering its visibility locally and furthering its access with the university; (3) *for the researchers*: enhanced awareness and understanding of subject-area knowledge, including urban redevelopment, planning and public participation, improved collaborative and mentoring skills and building trust relations with a community organization and population that is of interest in their field of expertise and (4) *for the university*: extended partnership between community and university, promoting the university's mission of education and outreach and helping to diminish the environmental and socio-economic inequalities in Milwaukee.

UK: Community Flood Resilience and Science Education

Flood risk awareness-raising and flood education work lends itself to geographer–community engagement. McEwen's original community engagement work involved rethinking her academic research activity in historical flood frequency analysis in a Royal Society *Connecting People to Science* Project (COPUS) entitled: "Understanding flood histories—understanding risk" (2004–2006). The main focus of the project was to get communities involved in knowledge co-generation by researching and interpreting their own histories. At the time of the original project, the largest flood in the 20th century on the River Severn (UK) had occurred in March 1947 (snowmelt after a sustained cold winter); older residents were keen to share their memories. This project involved working with geography student volunteers and a wide range of community groups in promoting social learning around flood science and risk awareness (McEwen, 2007b). It was also essential to integrate informal/local/lay knowledge alongside expert flood knowledge in local flood heritage (McEwen & Jones, 2010).⁴ Working with communities and students, they conceived a major multi-organizational community flood forum event, creating a transformative programme of action-learning opportunities connecting with real, local communities in three community venues in Tewkesbury during UK National Science Week, 2006. Here are four sample reactions from participants in the partnership.

Excellent! This sort of event is 50 years overdue. (*Community participant*)

I have found this learning inspirational. To hear the different views on how floods should be managed has brought my learning to life. I really want to work to help people manage floods. (*Student*)

My learning highlight was the Tewkesbury flood tour in the historic bus. We learnt so much from sharing our knowledge and flood experiences as we travelled. (*Community participant*)

I congratulate you and your team on the fruition of a lot of hard work. What was clear to me was that the understanding of risk is gradually improving through such events. (*Ex-head, Institute of Hydrology*)

Since that project, catastrophic floods occurred in July 2007 in the Severn catchment. The Pitt Review of the flood risk management during these events placed government imperative on building community resilience to changing flood risk (Cabinet Office, 2008). Several projects have grown from the original project, which has taken McEwen well away from her natural science roots onto a personal journey in community engagement. Current efforts involve working with students from geography and other disciplines (e.g. heritage, radio production, multimedia, education and creative writing), alongside storytelling professionals and communities in capturing their oral history accounts of recent and historic floods (2007 and 1947, respectively) as digital stories that can be shared in various settings for social learning.⁵ Other current community-led projects with her volunteer involvement include Tewkesbury Community Nature Reserve, initiated by Priors Park Community Neighbourhood project (a disadvantaged area of Tewkesbury). This long-term project will involve students of different disciplines working with community members in a range of activities designed to maximize the community benefits of the Nature Reserve, including baseline environmental and social surveys of wildlife, a recreation resource that also provides flood-water storage, and a setting for community countryside skills development.

From her experiences, McEwen identified these key learning points in community engagement: (1) the importance of a problem-orientated approach to working with communities, linking theory to practice and integrating ‘local communities as classrooms’; (2) opportunities for engagement can be provided by major external events or triggers (e.g. floods) set in rapidly evolving policy contexts for adaptation to climate change; (3) initial projects can build in unexpected and stimulating directions; (4) students, staff and community gain from co-learning in many ways—through research-informed enquiry and in the development of personal skills; (5) the importance of both formal curricula and extra-curricular (volunteering) activities for student learning; (6) the benefits of linking students who are ‘web savvy’ with less computer literate members of communities through digital storytelling; (7) funding can ‘oil the wheels’, but a large amount of geographer–community activity can be generated with small funds; (8) the importance of building longitudinal relationships with, and networks within, communities beyond individual projects and (9) the significant positive impact that community engagement can have on directions of personal research activity.

Pakistan: Need for Community Participation in Development

This case study illustrates some historical barriers facing these kinds of partnerships in Pakistan and the ways in which these barriers are being overcome. In the 1950s, community development was considered the best strategy to address a variety of social problems in many developing countries, including Pakistan. Programmes of community development were started in these countries, but many failed. The main reason was the failure of these programmes to incorporate citizen participation. The perspective of a participatory approach to public policies and programmes is now endorsed by the policy and education communities in Pakistan, although other priorities may pre-empt this.

For institutions of higher education in Pakistan, different challenges have existed. They have many responsibilities to tackle under their mandates from the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC), which supports over 130 universities.⁶ In Pakistan's HEIs, geographers are responsible for identifying major physical, social, economical and ecological problems, and ideally, then working with community organizations to find solutions for those geographical issues. Geographers can examine where certain social groups are concentrated and how they are related to other social groups and concentrations. They can help find solutions to common problems of social differences and inequalities.

Across Pakistan, community networks, relationships and groups are organized both socially and geographically. Changing the approaches towards education policies and enhancing the practical goals of research can lead to improved community engagement to help address the problems in the country. Education has always played a crucial role in the society as it disseminates knowledge, provides necessary skills and helps in forming attitudes. It is evident that providing adequate and timely information, educating people about development initiatives and outlining a plan of action are critical in generating a process of participation.

HEC is now focusing on the enhancement and sustenance of academic environments conducive to excellence in community development, encouraging research and designing implementation plans. Some of the prime programmes in this HEC framework are the Pakistan Programme for Collaborative Research (PPCR), Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Pakistan (SSHRC) and National Research Programme for Universities (NRPU). These are the initiatives by which HEC supports academia to conduct research from the communities, for the communities.

Through these programmes, HEC has provided grants for many hundreds of research projects. In Bahawalpur, geography students and researchers of HEI, collaborating with Salzburg University (Austria), are carrying out a project entitled 'Urban Water Management in Arid Zone.' It is funded by the PPCR. The project's main focus is to enhance sustainable use of water resources by increasing community awareness. The benefits of this project include: (1) *for students*: practical implementation of their knowledge, interaction with international researchers, experience with field surveys and observations and improving critical thinking and report writing; (2) *for the community partnership*: awareness among people regarding their resources, their utilization and conservation; (3) *for researchers*: gathering tactical and strategic information through field surveys, forging bonds between the community and higher education, building powerful strategies that can impact policies and conditions, enhancing appreciation and understanding of the subject in the country, promoting social change in the communities and increasing opportunities for training researchers; (4) *for university*: potential to become an important institutional base for community development through social planning and actions.

Despite these steps forward in community engagement, institutions of higher education in Pakistan face some problems. First, only 2.9 per cent of the population has access to higher education. Second, there is a history of weak community participation in past community development programmes. Pakistan's Government accepted in principle the need for community participation, but its implementing agencies perceived this as only an official ritual. They did not delegate any substantial authority to community participants nor consult with them during programme planning; community participation was passive or non-existent (Siraj, 2002). Thus, geographers at HEIs in Pakistan need not only conduct research to identify and resolve community problems but also motivate the people to participate actively in such projects.

Geography–Community Partnerships: Mutual Benefits

From this sampling of case studies, it can be seen that engaged partnerships can benefit geographers, their students and their institutions as well as the community organizations they work with, provided such partnerships can be meaningfully initiated and sustained. Here, we summarize some salient points, enhanced with reference to the existing literature relevant to geography.

Benefits for Geographers and Their Students

Public funding for universities is increasingly strained as government resources shrink. In many countries, universities are under mounting pressure to streamline their expenses, justify their use of government resources and be accountable to their missions of preparing undergraduate students for the diverse demands of the 21st century. Given this context, the importance of demonstrating the connections of universities to their community constituencies through attention to the 'Third Mission' and 'engaged scholarship' is manifest [e.g. Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), 2005; HEFCE, 2009]. CIC identifies engagement as 'scholarly' involving both the act of engaging and the product of engagement; cutting across the mission of teaching, research and service; and as reciprocal and mutually beneficial (Burkhardt & Lewis, 2010). Engaged scholarship connects staff and students with their communities and can lead to meaningful teaching and research, and potentially transformative learning experiences for both staff and students.

Engagement has a pay-off for geographers through the advancement of knowledge: putting theory into practice and providing empirical grounding for theory development. Community engagement offers opportunities for geographers to undertake socially meaningful research. Exploring and applying how a geographic perspective can be relevant to the community should also make the discipline more attractive to undergraduates. Additional benefits include (1) self-fulfilment in the opportunity for students to grow and learn, (2) supporting their community and (3) personal growth and development of a professional identity (O'Meara, 2008). Working in community partnerships can also improve teaching, as engaged learning transforms instructors 'into reflective practitioners actively engaged in systematically improving their teaching' (Carracelas-Juncal *et al.*, 2009, p. 28).

The subject knowledge and skills needed by undergraduate geographers (indeed geographers *per se*) are articulated in the Geography Benchmarking and Threshold Learning Outcomes Statements (e.g. UK Quality Assurance Agency, 2007; Australian Learning & Teaching Council, 2010). These mesh closely with the potential outcomes of

geography students from engaged learning opportunities, as summarized by Bednarz *et al.* (2008), who recognized that students are a critical central element in partnerships between geographers and their communities. Providing several examples of geography student involvement in service- and research-oriented community work, Bednarz and colleagues noted that such engagement often results in expanded content knowledge, improved problem-solving skills and more active citizenship. Such partnerships also help students to link theory and practice, and foster mentoring relationships between staff and students (Bednarz *et al.*, 2008). Engagement offers students meaningful enquiry-based learning that delivers on traditional learning outcomes and also targets the affective domains, influencing and transforming their lives. These learning opportunities also sharpen the skills that employers increasingly desire such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration (e.g. Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2010). In a 2009 survey of over 300 US employers, more than 80 per cent believed that community-based field experiences would be valuable skills for college graduates (AAC&U, 2010).

Benefits to Geography Departments and the Host Institution

The ability of geography departments in HEIs to engage in mutually beneficial relationships with communities will depend on their institutional setting and how their academic role is conceived (Boyer, 1996). Community engagement (or learning through 'service' to the community) has a long tradition in some universities, whereas in others it may be 'newly discovered' (Zlotkowski, 1996). Service is sometimes described as the third mission of universities, alongside teaching and research. The extent to which needs of communities and 'their' universities dovetail depends on, among other things: (1) the extent to which institutional level strategic planners see value and synergy between community engagement and research/teaching and actively support the notion of an 'engaged university' (Lawson, 2002); (2) institutional positioning and sphere of influence (regional, national and international) and (3) the history of the HEI's relationship with its communities. There must be a mutually perceived need by all stakeholders to partner and support the integration of students in local communities. Both the HEI and the community must actively promote these opportunities to foster better university–community relationships.

Collaborations between university and community fulfil the fundamental goal of the institution, knowledge creation, through 'the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources' (Carnegie Foundation, 2010). Knowledge is co-created by both parties to respond to community agendas as well as to enhance research, teaching and learning activities. Engaged research and teaching connect the institution's assets—inter- and multi-disciplinary expertise and quality students—to community issues. Initially, movements to connect HEIs and communities arose at community and liberal arts colleges or state universities, for which civic service is a central tenet of their defining missions. University research and teaching missions can also be enhanced by community engagement, and within the last few years, research universities have also begun to encourage engaged scholarship (Gibson, 2006). That the Carnegie Foundation initiated a new elective classification in community engagement in 2006 illustrates the growing recognition of its importance. By 2008, nearly 200 HEIs across the USA had been recognized with an 'engaged campus' designation (Carnegie Foundation, 2010). Some institutions (e.g. Brighton University, UK; Portland State University, USA) have made community engagement a key element of their institutional profile and ethos.

To realize this pay-off, HEIs must encourage research that provides social, economic, environmental or cultural benefits to members of the community, but such encouragement will only be meaningful if it is supported through financial means, relief from other professional obligations and recognition of professional and learning achievements. One model of partnership will not fit all circumstances; models of engagement vary according to local community contexts and must evolve with the needs of the participants over time. Each of the three case studies illustrated the importance of recognizing local context in initiating and sustaining partnerships. Having an established centre at a university, one determined to expand local community–university partnerships and provide financial and administrative support for such partnerships, was a significant asset that greatly facilitated the UWM project (see Wisconsin case study; i.e. funding for community partner’s staff and educational and research materials used in the project).

Benefits to Communities

Communities identified by HEIs may not define themselves, or function, as such and may possess varying degrees of formality and structure in their networks. Self-identification and awareness as a ‘community’ through engagement itself can be empowering, as is determining and agreeing upon community goals and collective problem solving. This process can also help communities see and understand how they are spatially and functionally linked to other entities and processes through environmental, market, governance, information, social and cultural connections and channels and use these connections to their advantage. HEI–community partnerships can draw on the positive aspects of community development and mitigate internal antagonism and division sometimes found within community groups.

Community engagement can involve enabling poorly resourced, not-for-profit groups (Buckingham-Hatfield, 1995) and targeting particular community sectors, including minority or hard-to-reach, disadvantaged and vulnerable society members (cf. Mansuri & Rao, 2004; Scott-Baumann, 2007). To those groups in particular, partnering with universities can provide access to hands-on support and university expertise; students’ energy, enthusiasm and ideas (and low-cost help); opportunities to tackle tasks that otherwise would not be funded and opportunities for local individuals and groups to gain insights into what the university is and what it can provide now and in the future (see Brighton University, 2010).

Geographic Insights and Tools to Solve Community Problems

Geographers’ expertise and skills match well with the top 15 global challenges facing humanity (see Millennium Project, 2010). Spatial perspectives and analytic approaches, tools and insights enable communities to solve community problems. However, geographers need to communicate their approaches and skill base effectively to communities at the outset. Many public misconceptions remain about geography such as dated perceptions of the subject as a trivia-game category. Although geographers certainly do not have a monopoly on integrative approaches, they often are interdisciplinary in language, knowledge, skills and orientation; accustomed to communicating across internal and external boundaries between disciplines and able to recognize the influence of scale on spatial processes. Some geographers argue that we have a ‘geographic advantage’ that should not go unrecognized or unused to its fullest extent. For example, Hanson (2004, p. 720) argues, this “confers an understanding of: relationships between people and the

environment; the importance of spatial variability (the place dependence of processes); processes operating at multiple and interlocking geographic scales; and the integration of spatial and temporal analysis". Skole (2004, p. 742) adds, "the advantage to geography is our ability to link spatial technologies and the measurements and observations they enable to the people-environment approach."

Figure 1 identifies some of the tools that geographers can bring to community partnerships and the ways in which community engagement can bridge the divide between HEIs and

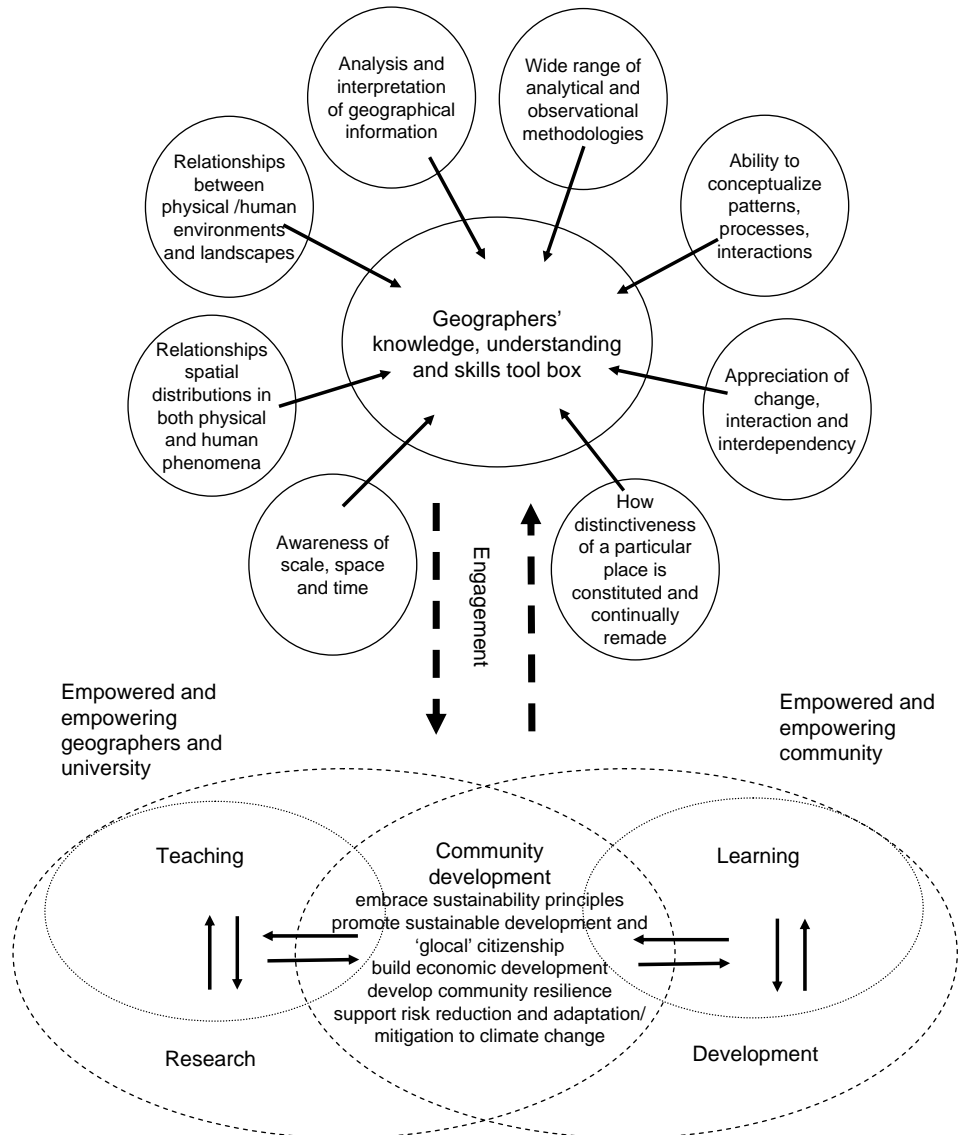


Figure 1. Geography in university–community partnerships. The subject understanding and skills are derived from the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2007).

communities, while meeting the needs and enhancing both constituencies. Geographers can make explicit for communities the interrelations between the cultural, economic, political, social and ecological processes that shape community development. Simultaneously, geographers can partner with communities to assist them in shaping their environments in a positive way. Geography's breadth as a discipline mirrors the breadth of the 'glocal' challenges that communities face. Geographers, already working at the science-practice interface—multi-disciplinary and integrative—are well positioned to address dual scientific and policy agendas in which vital policy decisions are made (NRC, 2010).

Geographers could act as institutional pioneers or a hub for HEI–community engagement activities collaborating with other disciplines such as sociologists, biologists, historians and others. 'Engaged' geographers (Morrill, 2009) are especially well placed to contribute as interdisciplinary facilitators to agendas for community development that embrace sustainability principles, promote sustainable development and citizenship, mitigate environmental hazards, foster economic development, build community resilience and challenge a culture of dependency, and assist with risk reduction and adaptation to or mitigation of environmental changes, among other issues (Kellogg, 1999, 2002; Dorsey, 2001; Moser, 2010).

What Geographical Partnerships Should Do to Benefit Communities and Society?

The question 'What specifically can geographers do?' cannot be answered in detail without exploring and specifying actual needs together with community partners. In principle, it involves encouraging universities, geographers (including students) and communities to work together to increase quality of life, sustainability and resilience, and enhance economic prosperity in regional regeneration and development (Sarewitz & Pielke, 2007; Vogel *et al.*, 2007; Kasperson, 2010).

This involves using community–geography–university engagement to develop social and cultural capital, ensuring social and environmental justice and promoting effective citizenship education (Colby *et al.*, 2003). This also requires—as each of the case studies illustrated—the valuing of traditional informal/local/lay knowledge within communities and common wisdom (knowledge that comes from living in place over time) alongside expert knowledge. One key research-practice focus is to create self-sustaining environmental and social enterprise 'projects' (see NRC, 2007, 2010; HEFCE, 2009). Such projects can act as catalysts to empower communities (if historical legacies and barriers can be overcome), as well as students, and promote the ability to create the local conditions and futures the communities want.

Such projects also integrate interdisciplinary collaborative problem solving with participatory methods of knowledge exchange or knowledge co-generation (see UK case study). This intimately links student and staff learning to social learning and capacity building within communities. Potential activities are disparate: ranging from local environmental assessment and monitoring ('*Living in a watershed*'; Curry *et al.*, 2002) to supporting major local and regional events and planning processes [e.g. Community Flood Forums; McEwen (2007a, 2007b) and the UK case study above]. Community engagement varies on several criteria, including the extent to which projects are genuinely participatory and community based (compare, e.g. the Wisconsin and Pakistan cases above), the topical focus, the forms of engagement, the level of research and types of learning opportunities involved, and the range of outcomes and benefits for communities.

In participatory methods of engagement, the *process* as well as the *outcomes* should be designed to benefit different stakeholders. The development of longitudinal partnerships is particularly important beyond the timescales of individual projects, so that communities do not feel abandoned.

Synergies from Geography–Community Partnerships

To maximize the practical advantages for the communities, geographers must not simply pursue their discovery-driven research interests (by ‘using’ community organizations as research objects and platforms), but be proactive in reaching out to and enabling these communities, learning about their specific questions, concerns, and information and support needs. On the basis of these insights, partners should co-define community-relevant research questions and goals, build trusted relationships and work towards the goal of knowledge co-generation (NRC, 2009). We identify several achievable synergies through the literature and our case studies, including

- Attracting geography graduates to working and staying in communities as effective citizens, thus delivering on university employability and citizenship agendas and benefiting community capacity building (Yarwood, 2005; Royal Geographical Society, UK, nd).
- Enhancing understanding and access to state-of-the-art geographical–spatial–environmental science knowledge and decision-relevant information that links research and policy for both partners (e.g. Curry *et al.*, 2002; LEAPSe, nd).
- Building capacity for all stakeholders, e.g. with geographic analytical, modelling, visualization, decision-support tools, Geographic Information Science (GIS) or any number of participatory engagement tools (Ghose, 2001; Longan, 2007).
- Providing the potential for transformative learning experiences for all participants—such as new ways of seeing, new value systems and new collaborative enterprises; a new sense of self or power as an actor in community affairs (see Mezirow & Taylor, 2009).
- Enhancing student experiential learning and engagement with the problems of their immediate geographical community through service-learning initiatives and community projects (Buckingham-Hatfield, 1995; Mohan, 1995; Dorsey, 2001).
- Incorporating participatory action research in undergraduate GIS courses, which enhances students’ learning of GIS and fosters their critical reflection on the use and impact of technologies, research design and methodologies (Elwood, 2009).
- Attracting more resources and expertise, e.g. grants for community-focused projects.
- Developing approaches to solve real-life problems such as urban sustainability (e.g. Molnar *et al.*, 2011).

Barriers and Challenges to Geography–Community Partnerships

Despite the numerous mutual benefits described above, engagement and partnerships between geographers within HEIs and communities always encounter challenges, though these may not be insurmountable. These challenges arise from both sides of the partnership

and vary over time with the type of interaction (e.g. research, problem solving or service learning), the academic institution and community, and the people involved. We place these barriers in several categories: institutional, practical, skills related and attitudinal. As will be clear from the discussion below, having one or more champions within the academic institution, among faculty and in the communities involved can be critical to overcoming barriers (Bednarz *et al.*, 2008; Boland, 2008; NRC, 2009; Moser, 2010).

Institutional Barriers

For engaged scholarship to succeed, several generic barriers in HEIs must be overcome (summarized by Gibson, 2006) (1) traditional organization by disciplines rather than around issue or problem areas, (2) emphasis on abstract theory rather than actionable knowledge derived from practice, (3) lack of understanding about what engaged scholarship entails and (4) absence of incentives to reward engaged scholarship. Institutional commitment is necessary, particularly so that staff work in this area is supported. Academic performance of staff and students is typically evaluated on the basis of formal requirements and social and professional norms. Academic geography staff often experience institutional and external pressures to focus on research that produces publishable papers in high-impact journals. Although community outreach or service is nominally required, research, grants and publications are often valued more highly in the quest for tenure and promotion. In addition, student assessment may require formal methods that are more difficult to devise for the nature of learning in community settings (McDowell, 1995; Brown *et al.*, 1997).

Lack of institutional coordination or support and lack of strategic management of relationships among the involved partners, especially those external to the institution, can also undermine effective engagement. For example, lack of mechanisms for periodic review of progress to ensure mutual benefit makes building trust more difficult and may prevent learning from the engagement. At a higher level, lack of appropriate national frameworks may inhibit institutions wanting to engage with university-external communities (Ministry of Justice, 2009).

Among the community partners, institutional barriers may involve issues such as privacy or confidentiality limitations on data sharing. Legal requirements to use certain types of information may result in less interest or openness to a knowledge partnership. The lack of a mandate, mission or job-related space for interaction with academic institutions undermines their willingness and availability for such engagement.

Practical/Logistical Barriers

Practical barriers can arise from how the university–community interaction is designed and managed. These include a lack of experience, planning, orientation, training, supervision and evaluation of service learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Ill-designed projects may reveal a mismatch between university/student expertise and community needs. A history of disappointing previous interactions or a history of donor–client relationships may make renewed and active engagement difficult. Lack of commitment and continuity can result in piecemeal projects. Sustaining a partnership over time involves different challenges than initiating one, and ways to meaningfully do so should be carefully planned. The Pakistan case study illustrated several of these barriers.

Community engagement requires significant time commitments of staff, within the curriculum and beyond the classroom. Communication takes up much needed time, but

infrequent and ineffective communication is likely to waste everyone's time. Some engagement projects also require sufficient financial resources. Research grants and institutional support can be critically important to garner the necessary resources to enable ongoing engagement.

The practical and logistical issues are just as real for the communities involved. In some instances, the communities may entirely depend on resources from the academic institution; in others, sharing the responsibility for leadership, planning, financing, facilitating, reviewing and evaluating is possible and necessary. In other cases, it may be easier for the community group itself to bid for the necessary funds (e.g. those targeted at community development). As the UK case study revealed, funds are necessary, but often budget requirements are not huge.

Lack of Skills

Geography–community partnerships stand and fall with the skills of the individuals involved. These skills are partly knowledge based (i.e. on subject matter or project) and partly managerial and social (i.e. related to the interaction). For example, a lack of local knowledge about the university, student community, faculty skills, disciplinary knowledge and resources, and the community can all hinder effective interactions. Lack of awareness of effective engagement and partnership models leads to inefficiencies.

Academic staff committing to engaged research and teaching may need to develop new skills and language, because effective communication with professionals and citizens from outside academia is essential for successful partnerships. Staff, students and administrators must be sensitive to community concerns and problem definitions, provide an open and honest account of campus and department resources and remain open to diverse opinions. Effective means of gaining regular feedback from community partners and students about their perception of the partnership are necessary to avoid disconnects and inefficiencies (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Staff also may need to acquire facilitation and even mediation and conflict-resolution skills. The longer that geographers work with communities, the greater the likelihood that conflicts will get aired, and they may find themselves having to navigate in some very tricky waters.

Among community groups, there can be a lack of awareness or outright misunderstanding about what geography can offer to community-based projects. Language barriers can be significant; each partner's vernacular may be unfamiliar to the other. To the extent community members are involved in research projects, they may require training in data acquisition and analysis or technological skills.

Developing and sustaining geography–community partnerships requires patience. Truly collaborative partnerships necessitate a “commitment to mutual relationships and goals, a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility, mutual authority and accountability for success and sharing of resources and rewards” (Mattessich *et al.*, 2001 cited in Monk *et al.*, 2003, p. 95). Reaching that level may take considerable time as partners build trust and overcome potential issues of territoriality or historical legacies. Monk *et al.* (2003) recount the stages of establishing partnerships among geographers and women's community-health advocates on the US–Mexico border, revealing the commitment needed by all members of the partnership. Baker (2010) provides an Australian example of the steps needed to maintain a successful, long-lasting partnership of students with community groups, working on social and environmental issues.

Attitudinal Impediments

Finally, attitudes about the relationship, the partners involved and the project or problem as framed can subtly or overtly influence the quality of the interaction. Attitudes may determine whether an interaction becomes a true partnership. Academics may hinder that sense of partnership through any sense of superiority or arrogance vis-à-vis their partners. Inappropriate (hierarchical) power dynamics among individuals or the partners involved, especially if the university is perceived as dominant, will undermine trust and amicability.

If pre-existing sensitivities are missing, students need to be prepared and learn how to respect and accommodate social and cultural differences, respect and abide by the partnership policies, accurately and dependably fulfil their project responsibilities and behave professionally.

The attitudes of members of the communities may also impede interactions, including distrust, lack of openness, prejudice against academics or even a fear of science and so on (e.g. Evans & Durant, 1995; Bak, 2001). The Pakistan case illustrates how occasionally negative or passive attitudes persist from past experience and can affect current project interactions. Careful attention to such attitudes and personal relationship building can help overcome them.

Conclusion: Recommendations for Enhancing Geography–Community Partnerships

The case studies and literature review illustrate geography’s contributions to HEI–community partnerships. As practitioners frequently working at the human–physical science interface, addressing multiple scales from the local to the global and focusing on integrating diverse perspectives and approaches, geographers are well positioned to lead successful HEI–community partnerships. Geography can enhance these strengths by addressing the challenges identified above. This concluding section offers recommendations in the four areas of barriers and impediments identified in the previous section: *institutional, practical/logistical, lack of skills and attitudinal impediments*.

Institutionally, research suggests several approaches to enhanced geography–community partnerships, recognizing that different types of universities may want to position themselves to different extents. HEIs should establish a campus-wide definition of scholarship that values community engagement, align the institution’s mission to support community engagement and complete a campus-wide plan to provide a framework for community engagement (Furco & Holland, 2004; Stanton, 2008; Sandmann, 2009). This breaks down disciplinary silos and allows geographers to work strategically with other disciplines (e.g. ecology, economics, sociology, psychology, history and political sciences) in the development of effective university–community relationships. Institutions should establish a centre with the mandate to coordinate and support long-term partnerships (Crump, 2002). One illustration of this is the new Center for Engaged Research and Civic Action (CERCA) at the University of Northern Colorado. It is designed to act as a ‘research- and project-generating bridge’ between staff, administration, community and government partners to encourage applied research that serves broader community needs (CERCA, 2010).

Institutions and geography departments should reduce excessive bureaucracy, develop clear and open structures for the legal sharing of data and information and promote the

benefits of geography–community partnerships. HEIs should recognize and support staff participation in community engagement in negotiating workloads and promotion and tenure (Monk *et al.*, 2003; Furco & Holland, 2004). Geographers need to develop models for student assessment relevant to the community setting such as reflection papers, team and individual evaluations, and project updates.

Practical/logistical recommendations address both what HEIs and communities can do to create successful partnerships. The case studies reveal the importance of investing the time and patience to build longitudinal relationships beyond the individual project (McEwen, 2007a, 2007b). This requires careful planning, trust and open channels of communication. HEIs and communities should incorporate service learning into curricula throughout undergraduate and graduate programmes (AASCU, 2002). Collaboration between communities and institutional researchers should develop a clearly defined research purpose, questions, analysis and plans for dissemination to both professional peers and the community (Van de Ven, 2007). Although the research should be set within the broader literature and published in professional geography journals (Cooper, 2009), researchers must be careful to maintain an ‘honest broker’ position that widens the range of options and knowledge base, rather than impose their values on the problems, solutions and decisions at hand (Pielke, 2007). Student and community expectations need to be managed from the beginning and monitored throughout the project; and further negotiated among participants as new issues arise (Alev, 1999; Holmes, 2005).

Both communities and institutions need to address the *lack of knowledge-based and social skills* and provide professional development programmes tailored to community engagement (AASCU, 2002), as demonstrated in the Pakistan case study. Professional development programmes should provide geographers opportunities for developing communication skills with the public and develop awareness of the community and its resources. All parties involved may need to enhance skills in data acquisition, management and analysis. The Wisconsin case illustrated the importance of preparing the students/researchers in the skills needed for the project’s success.

The final challenge category focuses on *attitudinal changes*. Researchers need to reduce the fear or distrust of scientific expertise that may impede interactions with non-academic communities. Learning from and cultivating respect for community knowledges can strengthen partnerships and enhance research outcomes. Academia–community partnerships should ensure that all participants are full and equal partners who can accommodate and respect social and cultural differences. Knowledge co-generation is the ultimate goal of successful geography–community partnerships that can achieve the goals of all parties and help to dismantle the ivory tower.

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Notes

¹ See <http://www4.uwm.edu/milwaukeeidea/cc/cup/index.html> for further information on the UWM Cultures and Communities Programme.

² The 30th Street Industrial Corridor is a 5-mile (8-km) long area with the highest concentration of brownfields in Milwaukee; 97 per cent of its 33 000 residents are African-American.

- ³ The IRB reviews research projects that involve human subjects to ensure that subjects are not placed at undue risk and give uncoerced, informed consent to their participation.
- ⁴ See original website at <http://www.glos.ac.uk/severnflows>.
- ⁵ See <http://www.insight.glos.ac.uk/cofast> (Community Flood Archive Enhancement through Storytelling) and <http://www.insight.glos.ac.uk/severnflows> (Lower Severn Community Flood Education Network).
- ⁶ This total includes 73 public-sector universities and 59 private-sector universities; data from HEC website <http://www.hec.gov.pk/OurInstitutes/Pages/Default.aspx>.

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