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# Portland State University's Second (R)evolution: Partnering to Anchor the Institution in Sustainable Communities

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# **Portland State University's Second (R)evolution: Partnering to Anchor the Institution in Sustainable Communities**

Wim Wiewel, Kevin Kecskes, and Sheila Martin

## **Abstract**

*Portland State University has become internationally known for its whole-university approach to community-university engagement. Many academic leaders from around the world are now drawing on models for engagement that originated at Portland State. As the university takes stock of its successes, of changing economic conditions, and of the increasingly urgent need to focus on sustainability, the campus with its new leadership has begun to look closely at how to expand and refine the models. This paper on Portland State's Second (R)evolution provides models and ideas that show great promise of reinvigorating community-university partnerships nationally and internationally.*

Portland State University (PSU) continues to host scores of leaders from higher education institutions and urban centers from around the county and the world who are interested in exploring our community-engagement strategies. In the early 1990s, PSU's initial institutional motivation for innovation and transformation was focused primarily on augmenting student learning outcomes in the context of our urban setting. This purposeful curricular focus led to the development of pedagogical strategies that showed the greatest promise based on adult learning research at the time. Deep integration of these strategies, especially a focus on developing student-learning communities and community-based learning in interdisciplinary senior capstone courses, resulted in PSU's much-studied and awarded general education program, called University Studies (Kecskes, Kerrigan, and Patton 2006). In the early 1990s, the campus was experiencing economic challenges; PSU capitalized on those challenges to innovate (Davidson, Kerrigan, and Agre-Kippenhan 1999). Today, in a global climate marked by economic crisis, PSU is in the middle of a second (r)evolution in as many decades. In this paper, we briefly discuss the five drivers for this change and then outline PSU's emerging pathways forward.

## **Drivers for Institutional Change**

There are five key drivers for change at PSU today: 1) a global economic crisis requiring deep budgetary cuts; 2) PSU's recognized leadership in community engagement; 3) a global appetite for "sustainability" and Portland, Oregon's established reputation for innovation in sustainability; 4) the arrival of a new university president; and 5) the changing agenda for the Academy in the "networked" Twenty-First Century. Each is described briefly here.

**Economic challenges.** Not unlike nearly all economies across the country and globe, Oregon is experiencing severe budget shortfalls. Since PSU is a public institution whose state investment dollars have diminished considerably, action is required, which necessarily forces academic leaders to reconsider funding allocations. PSU’s overarching approach has been to protect and strengthen units associated most closely with the key mission elements of the university, with a particular focus on increasing student success. For a detailed look at PSU’s value-led approach to navigating the current budget crisis, see <http://www.pdx.edu/budget/2009-10-academic-budget-process>.

**Historical leadership for engagement.** At a time when many universities are designing programs for community-based learning (or service-learning) and engaged scholarship, Portland State University already has a long history of innovation and success in community engagement. (At PSU, “community” is understood to include the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors.) As Putnam and Feldstein (2003) point out in the final chapter of *Better Together*, a long tradition of community engagement in Portland has helped it counter negative nationwide tendencies toward civic decline. It should not be surprising, then, that community-university partnerships between Portland State University—the state’s largest and only urban university—and the region’s public, nonprofit, and private sector civic actors have been repeatedly studied over the past decade and a half and consistently lauded as a dynamic and sustainable national model. Indeed, Putnam and Feldstein (2003) and several other national scholars (Colby, Beaumont, and Corngold 2007; Colby et al. 2003; Ehrlich 2000; Kezar, Chambers, and Burkhardt 2005) and higher education associations (AACU, AASCU, NASULGC, and Campus Compact, among others) recognize PSU’s innovative and fundamental role—locally and nationally—in helping build an ethos of strong democratic participation in students, faculty, staff, and in communities. One example is PSU’s capstone program. This mandatory, 6-credit course is designed for seniors and is well-studied as an exemplar of integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum that impacts more than 3,200 students annually. Unlike most other senior capstone or culminating experience initiatives on U.S. campuses today, PSU’s program is entirely interdisciplinary, community-based, and focused on having students work in teams to produce a distinct final product that directly addresses a community-identified problem or issue (Kecskes and Kerrigan 2009). Another example, focusing on student development is the internationally replicated student service leadership development program: Student Leaders for Service (SLS). (For more information on PSU’s Student Leaders for Service program, see <http://www.pdx.edu/cae/sls>.) Annually, 25 SLS members are placed in an equal number of strategically selected community-based organizations (CBO) in the Portland metropolitan area. In addition to providing direct service, the members act as service-learning liaisons to connect PSU students and faculty to educational and research environments to the organization. The SLS members act as pseudo staff members at the CBO; their specific function is to help bridge community and university assets and needs. More recently, PSU also has emerged over the past several years as an international community engagement leader. In March 2009, PSU was awarded the prestigious Paul Simon Award for Campus Internationalization from the Association of International Educators (NAFSA), the premier international education organization in the United States. Also, in 2008, the

International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership (IPSL), the oldest NGO of its type in the United States relocated to PSU, in recognition of the complementary goals of both organizations. Today, PSU has community-centered funded research, programmatic activities, and consultancies in several countries in Asia and South East Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Australia, Africa, and Latin America.

PSU's transformation has been based on an intentional, scholarly approach driven by its faculty and supported centrally through the Office of Academic Affairs. PSU's engagement activities are characterized by three overarching strategies: 1) embedding engagement into the curricula via the implementation of community-based learning (CBL) and other active learning pedagogies; 2) students' civic capacity and skills building for active democratic participation in communities; and 3) formal faculty rewards for community-engaged research and service. This integrated approach—involving faculty, students, and community partners in every phase of development and implementation—is broadly understood as “the PSU way.” On campus, deans and faculty alike will say that “engagement is part of the DNA of PSU.” Nationally, and increasingly internationally, this approach has earned PSU the reputation as a clear leader in engagement.

The context for understanding community engagement in the United States, and Portland State in particular, needs to be kept in focus. As Wiewel and Perry (2008) argue “[University] relations with the immediate community... appear to be more important in the United States.... The American traditions of individual leadership, as well as grassroots democracy and local autonomy, clearly create differences in the way universities operate” (p. 318). In as much as cities and universities in the United States are exceptions to global relationship or partnership trends, Portland's deep tradition of engagement makes it exceptional among its peer cities in America.

**Sustainable Portland, sustainable PSU.** Portland's international leadership in green job creation and sustainable community development is well established. Indeed, Oregon Governor Theodore R. Kulongoski argued during his State of the State address on January 12, 2009, that “There is a green revolution stirring in America, and Oregon is the beating heart of that revolution. But it won't be for long if we call a time-out on our move toward investing in renewable energy and green technology.” Oregon is the “beating heart” of the revolution for several reasons. Portland has been ranked the #1 Sustainable City in the United States by Sustainlane.com. The Stateline Wind Project, East of Portland in the Columbia Gorge, will soon be the largest wind project in the world. Oregon is home to the nation's first bottle bill, the country's largest solar panel manufacturer, the best coastline in North America for wave energy development, and a green building cluster that leads the United States in integrating processes, disciplines, and technologies (Oregon BEST, <http://oregonbest.org/economic>). In addition, the Portland region has the highest concentration in the United States of real-estate professionals and buildings certified under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standard, the most recognized green building standard in commercial real estate (*Oregonian*, April 2009).

Given Portland's and Oregon's leadership in sustainability, it should not be surprising that PSU has been an international contributor to this field for some time—through work in urban studies and planning, public administration, climate change research, and other areas. This university leadership has been recently bolstered with the announcement of a \$25 million gift to PSU for sustainability by the (local) Miller Foundation. The increasing global awareness of the importance of this topic, combined with the largest influx of resources in the form of a gift to PSU in its brief 60-year history, is functioning to accelerate changes in curricular and research foci associated with sustainability.

**New university president.** In fall 2008, PSU welcomed Dr. Wim Wiewel to lead the institution as its new president. President Wiewel is a sociologist and urban planner who has promoted the concept of higher education institutions as “anchor institutions” in urban communities; institutions, he insists, that must be dedicated to long-term sustainable economic development of the regions that comprise them (Perry and Wiewel 2005; Wiewel and Lieber 1998; Wiewel and Perry 2008).

Arrival of a new president on campus is sure to bring about change. President Wiewel has already begun to signal new focus areas for the university; he has been consistent in outlining his five themes as the priorities that are shaping the current and near-future work of PSU: 1) provide civic leadership through partnerships by deepening PSU's engagement with the metropolitan area as a critical community anchor and engine of the regional economy; 2) increase student success to ensure that student experiences results in higher satisfaction, retention rates, and graduation rates; 3) achieve global excellence in the areas where PSU faculty, students, and programs have the most to offer—such as community engagement in sustainability activities, K–12 education, and community health; 4) increase educational opportunity throughout this region by strengthening pathways from K–12 to higher education and by further reaching out to diverse populations; and 5) expand resources in each of PSU main funding streams—state investment, research, philanthropy, and development through partnerships.

**The networked Twenty-First Century.** The American Association for College and Universities (AACU) President Carol Geary Schneider remarked in her keynote address during that organization's national conference in Seattle in 2009 that responsibility lies squarely with higher education to respond to the quickly changing demands of the world. In particular, Geary Schneider argued that global interdependence and increasingly complex cross-cultural interactions are changing workforce and economic development needs. She suggested that changes in the balance of political and economic power mandate innovations to renew democratic institutions, civic values, and inclusive communities as a way to grow economies and increase prosperity for the global community. These rapid changes on a global scale require higher education to rethink everything from modes of curricular delivery to focus of research.

In summary, five key levers are guiding and precipitating rapid change at PSU today: a global economic crisis; PSU's recognized leadership in community engagement; a global appetite for sustainability; the arrival of a new university president; and the changing agenda for the Academy in the "networked" Twenty-First Century.

## **New Community-based Challenges and Responses Today**

This unique moment in PSU's history of success in community-based learning and international leadership in community engagement provides an opportunity for new, highly innovative program models to emerge. Change and tension often occupy the same space; yet as scholars of higher education have been warning for decades, institutions of higher learning must learn how to adapt much more quickly to emerging community needs (Boyer 1990, 1997). One of the greatest needs today is a community call for help to transform localized economies to respond to the global economic crisis. Therefore, PSU's strategic actions, described in the following text, position the university to proactively respond by leveraging past success and deepening its award-winning approaches to community-based learning while also intentionally focusing on fueling localized, sustainable economic growth efforts via collaborative community engagement strategies. PSU's first (r)evolution in the 1990s focused on creating, implementing, and disseminating community-engaged teaching and learning strategies throughout the curriculum. Now, PSU is leveraging these past successes as it enters into its second (r)evolution to deepen the core while expanding and focusing the reach.

## **Charting the Future**

Despite PSU's history and significant achievements in engaged learning and scholarship, we know that we must take the next steps toward a future in which PSU has even deeper and longer lasting partnerships throughout the Portland region. These partnerships must serve the community in ways that justify our partners' commitment of time and resources. That justification can come only from an accounting and appreciation of the economy, society, and environment.

Our communities look to us for both leadership and partnership. These roles may seem in conflict. How can PSU lead the way toward a more sustainable future for our region while developing and maintaining true and equal partnerships? How can PSU assist other universities to more strategically and equitably interact with their local communities? Resolving the tension requires a path forward that recognizes the strengths and contributions of community partners, acknowledges the missteps and shortcomings of the past, and commits the university to a future that is ever more entwined with that of our communities.

An area of needed improvement for PSU is graduation rates. For example, the 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time freshmen entering in the 2001 cohort was 31.9 percent. Also, PSU has received consistent feedback from community-based focus

groups regarding their desire for some type of easy-to use “front door,” or centralized access point especially designed to facilitate community collaboration with PSU faculty, staff, and students.

As we move forward, PSU will continue to expand partnership efforts in five critical areas, as described here.

**Community-based learning.** It is more critical than ever that students leave our institution with community-based learning experiences that not only prepare them to make significant contributions in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, but also instill a long-term commitment to socially responsible engaged citizenship, within the region and beyond.

PSU’s original motivations for community-based learning were largely to improve learning outcomes and to increase student retention and degree completion rates. PSU continues to apply best practices in CBL toward these ends. In recent years, we have begun to acknowledge and support community-based learning as a tool for improving the relevance of our students’ education and enhancing the value of a PSU degree to future employers. As Paul Romer has noted, it is critically important for students to acquire real-world experience in the application of their skills, rather than being socialized to understand only the academic environment (Romer 2000). Community-based learning courses place students in diverse environments in which to apply their skills; these courses also can increase students’ understanding of the opportunities and needs that exist in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Annually, 8,200 PSU students formally engage with community through community-based learning courses, such as the University Studies Senior capstone program. (For more information on PSU’s Senior Capstone Program, see <http://www.pdx.edu/unst/senior-capstone>.)

Furthermore, while college graduates are the most mobile segment of our society, PSU students tend to remain in the Portland metropolitan area, and PSU has a strong interest in encouraging them to do so. In fact, more than 60 percent of PSU alumni reside in the Portland region. The single most important factor explaining economic success in the global economy today is the ability to create economically valuable new ideas. The evidence that education and skills drive economic growth is overwhelming (Florida 2005). Cities with better-educated populations enjoy higher income levels and also faster rates of income growth (Gottlieb and Fogarty 2003). Furthermore, cities with high levels of human capital are better able to address and recover from economic shocks by reinventing their economies (Glaeser, Scheinkman, and Shleifer 2003).

Thus, retaining talented graduates for the region is an important, community-wide benefit of PSU’s engagement strategies. Community-based learning initiatives that create strong connections between students and neighboring organizations and institutions can increase a student’s attachment to the community not only by connecting them with potential employers, but also by giving them a sense of ownership in local assets and challenges.

**Expanding research partnerships in key areas.** PSU is positioned to expand research that addresses problems of importance to the community. Over the past ten years, PSU has more than doubled its externally funded research from just over \$17 million to over \$37 million. PSU has attracted an increasing number of faculty who are interested not only in externally sponsored research, but also in research that is relevant to the problems and opportunities facing our regional communities. Thus, rather than simply aiming to increase the volume of research grants from any source and for any purpose, PSU specifically is targeting research that is relevant locally as well as internationally distinguished.

Developing and maintaining research partnerships with other community institutions is the only way we can achieve these goals. Outdated linear models of innovation portray the university as the creator of new scientific knowledge that flows outward and ultimately is adopted and applied in the private sector. But in reality, the most valuable innovations involve the users in the development and adaptation of a new product or process (Von Hippel 2005). The essence of this emerging paradigm is known as transdisciplinary research, which mandates collaboration in the very earliest research stages of protocol development and problem definition. Transdisciplinary research judges the value of the research outputs in both the traditional terms of peer-reviewed knowledge creation as well as in terms of utility, as judged in large part by the community partners themselves (Gibbons et al. 1994; Gibson 2006). This interaction speeds the innovation process because it ensures that researchers are searching for responses to the problems that users want solved. Partnering with the private sector in the development of new products, processes, and business models will ensure their relevance and a faster diffusion that will increase their economic benefit to our local area. Similarly, partnering with public sector agencies in the development of better public policy and new regimes for service delivery will increase their relevance and practicality, speed their diffusion, and increase their impact.

Research collaborations and partnerships are also essential to increasing our research in an era of scarce resources. Few universities are sufficiently large to excel on their own in a broad technology area such as biotechnology or nanotechnology. By specializing in technological and policy niches important to the local economy and partnering with other universities and the private sector, PSU can speed the technological, organizational, and policy innovations that offer important economic advantages to local industry and superior policy alternatives for elected leaders.

Many examples of this kind of collaboration can be found at PSU. The Oregon Nanoscience and Microelectronics Institute (ONAMI) applies a powerful formula of partnership among the state's universities, the private sector, and the state and federal government to position Oregon to lead in several niche areas of nanotechnology (Martin 2008). The economic impact of ONAMI has netted a 76 percent internal rate of return to Oregon's taxpayers and a benefit-to-cost ratio of 2.15 (O'Connor, Wood, and Walls 2008). The Oregon Transportation Research and Education Consortium (OTREC) applies a similar formula to the problems of transportation engineering, planning, logistics, funding, and policy. The Oregon Translational Research and Drug



Development Institute (OTRADI) joins the complementary research expertise of several universities to speed the development and commercialization of new drugs. The Oregon Built Environmental and Sustainable Technologies Center (BEST) connects the state’s businesses with its shared network of university laboratories to translate research in green building and renewable energy into products, services, and new companies that create jobs in Oregon.

Each of these research consortia includes a student component that improves the student experience via community-based learning and research initiatives that better prepares students for a productive career. They usually include graduate and sometimes undergraduate students in research projects, improving the student’s success and value in the job market upon graduation. They also offer students an opportunity to network with private, public, and nonprofit partners so that they understand the opportunities available to them in these sectors.

These research partnerships are easier to achieve at PSU relative to other institutions, perhaps because the institution is not invested in the traditional research infrastructure that requires maximizing revenue from royalties and licensing fees. Further, PSU’s incentive structure doesn’t value single-author publication over those that are often produced by multiple individuals associated with research partnerships. Portland’s uniquely collaborative culture—titled “The Portland Exception” by Putnam and Feldstein (2003)—permeates PSU and supports the notion that multidisciplinary, multi-institutional research teams can accomplish more with less because we do not shut potential partners and beneficiaries out of the innovation process for fear of losing revenue or credit.

**Taking problem sets from the community.** PSU is committed to focusing its research, teaching, and engagement on problems that are most important to the Portland region’s communities. An important example is in the area of sustainability. The citizens and leaders of the Portland region and the State of Oregon have a deep commitment to sustainability in every sense of the word—economic, social, and environmental (*Oregonian*, April 19, 2009). PSU’s shared commitment is leading us toward increased leadership in sustainability research, education, and outreach. Research collaborations, community-based learning projects, and convening community about social sustainability issues are all important pieces of our plan for elevating the focus on sustainability at PSU. These activities build on PSU’s well-recognized strength in community-engagement strategies. For example, PSU is working closely with the local development community to refine new technologies and standards for green building that go beyond the now commonplace LEED certification. We are exploring the social impacts of urban renewal to identify methods for ensuring that public investments benefit populations more broadly. Recognizing public education as a fundamental pillar in research and action centered on social sustainability initiatives, we intentionally are partnering with Portland metropolitan school districts to enhance the local K–12 educational systems. In one of his first acts, President Wiewel, jointly with the Portland Public Schools Superintendent, appointed a taskforce to refocus PSU’s dozens of projects with the public schools to become more

strategic and focused on key interventions: teacher training and professional development and STEM-focused college readiness. We are also experimenting with a bike station, jointly with the regional public transportation system, which will include a bicycle garage, repair cooperative, and a bike loan program on campus that will demonstrate the benefits of a bike-sharing program in our community, among many other initiatives.

**Expanding PSU's international partnership initiatives.** PSU's intentional and coordinated efforts to internationalize the campus have been externally rewarded by NAFSA via the Senator Paul Simon Award, as mentioned earlier. PSU's Office of International Affairs continues to chart a path forward that builds on the university's community engagement strengths. One salient example is the consistent growth of short-term, faculty-led international programs for PSU students. Unlike more traditional year-long or semester abroad programs, PSU's international CBL courses are much shorter in length, often placing students out of the United States for two weeks. This curricular innovation has emerged out of necessity for the university to respond to what is now commonly considered the "new majority student." Most PSU students—like others in the new majority—are generally older, employed with one or more jobs, and have children. This demographic requires that the university provide shorter-term international immersion experiences for these students. Over the past five years, PSU's short-term, faculty led international programs have grown by 500 percent. This trend will increase for students; further, the university is planning to guide PSU faculty on similar international, community-based immersion experiences created specifically for them as a way to accelerate the diffusion of the model further into the disciplines at PSU. (To learn more about PSU's internationalization strategies, see <http://oia.pdx.edu/images/uploads/intlbroch08.pdf>.)

**A longer-term, more strategic focus.** Finally, PSU is working with its community partners to examine and reinvent its institutional structure and activities around community engagement. Our goals for this realignment are 1) to continue to develop longer-term partnerships that will survive changes in institutional leadership; 2) to offer a transparent structure that engages the community and helps them feel comfortable and informed as our partners; 3) to be more strategic about focusing our partnership resources in ways that achieve noticeable, community-informed results; and 4) to measure and communicate the results of our community partnerships more effectively. PSU will focus community-university partnership building efforts simultaneously on three levels of the institution: 1) micro level work with individual faculty and students; 2) meso level work with cohorts of students and faculty (e.g., departments and interdisciplinary faculty teams); and 3) macro level work at the institutional level, such as policy development and implementation in collaboration with the City of Portland and Portland Public Schools, for example (Kecskes, Spring, and Lieberman 2004). Also, PSU will create the new position of Vice President for Research and Partnerships to symbolize as well as ensure institutional commitment and internal and external visibility for these efforts.

Today, five key drivers are guiding and precipitating rapid change at PSU: a global economic crisis; our recognized leadership in community engagement; a global appetite for sustainability; the arrival of a new university president; and the changing agenda for the Academy in the “networked” Twenty-First Century. These change levers are leading to a new or renewed focus in five primary areas: deepening community-based learning strategies; expanding research partnerships in key areas; taking problem sets from the community; expanding international partnership initiatives; and continuing to refine and develop a longer-term, more strategic partnership focus. To accomplish this, PSU will continue to create engaged learning and research environments that leverage faculty expertise, community experience and wisdom, and students’ assets and interests to meet community-defined, compelling needs and challenge all stakeholders to create and apply useful, new knowledge in real-world situations. At the foundation of these activities is recognition that Donald Schön (1995) was correct when he challenged the Academy to create new epistemologies. PSU’s second (r)evolution will be enacted when our community-based learning strategies more seamlessly blend with new engaged research initiatives in ways that leverage both approaches to continually transform us and community organizations and institutions locally and worldwide.

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