Down Under, Higher Education Drives Economic Development

What we can learn from Australian models of the engaged university

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Every region has its visionaries: thinkers whose insights draw attention to issues that require consideration. Many see the novelist Richard Russo as playing this role in contemporary New England. In Russo's books "the Northeast is seen as a decaying behemoth whose old industrial infrastructure has outlived its power to convey prosperity," said a reviewer in *The New York Times Book Review* last year. Once the center of American industry, New England has hit upon hard times, and Russo's books vividly capture this downward trajectory and the ongoing struggle to find means of regaining prosperity. As a region, we are increasingly aware of our need to find new economic strengths. The many candidates for these new economic engines include "knowledge economy" industries such as biotechnology and nanotechnology. New England higher education is expected to play a central role in creating these new routes. But how?

I recently spent five weeks in Australia working with universities on a broad range of engagement practices. Queensland University of Technology (QUT) exemplifies the engagement work at the forefront of Australia's efforts to move its universities into a central role in addressing the global economy. QUT not only has devoted much discussion to how a university might stimulate the creative economy (or, as they call it, "creative industry"), but has also put many of the ideas into practice. Kelvin Grove Urban Village is one result (*kgurbanvillage.com.au*). This award-winning redesign in Brisbane is not just bricks and mortar, nor is it simply programs. It is both. Small businesses in the creative industry have been established and linked to university programs. QUT moved its health programs and biotechnology research initiatives to Kelvin Grove. Faltering elder housing has been redesigned. The university's engagement with the city of Brisbane and the state of Queensland has been central to the success of these efforts. Many such initiatives are now emerging across Australia.

In New England, engagement partnerships like those at Australia's QUT are becoming more common as universities look to address the global economy. In our region, we have gone from a few stellar exemplars of universities working on engagement (notably Clark University and Trinity College) to many other institutions bringing their unique blend of intellectual resources to bear on longstanding problems. Indeed, one need not look far in New England to see the emergence of innovative approaches to engagement. Such efforts can be seen at public universities (University of Maine) and private college, (Bates), at research universities (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and community colleges (Middlesex in Massachusetts.).

As New England institutions of higher education become involved in engagement—and as they struggle with how to engage without losing academic focus—what might be learned from the far-flung Australian universities? Sometimes the most instructive comparisons are those that by their unfamiliarity help us imagine new possibilities. We may be able to think about our New England challenges in fresh ways by examining Australian forays into engagement.

The purpose of my Australia trip as a Visiting Scholar to the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) was ostensibly to share American engagement practices, but in fact the Australians introduced me to examples that we can apply in New England. My travels took me from Perth, on Australia's west coast; to Alice Springs, in Australia's "red center;" to the eastern mega-cities of Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. The similarities between Australia and New England were striking, making knowledge of their practices all the more useful. Although Australia has vast tracts of sparsely populated land and some universities maintain a rural focus, most people live in the densely populated eastern seaboard; universities are situated in the midst of familiar urban problems. The similarities between Australia and New England include common economic problems: the industrial base of Australia's economy is eroding, resulting in the loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs.

At the individual campuses, I saw firsthand many examples of innovative engagement in economic development; many were also showcased at the 2007 AUCEA National Conference on "The Scholarship of Community Engagement: Australia's Way Forward." Wollongong, the former industrial city on Australia's east coast, for example, has seen its manufacturing

base eroded; University of Wollongong leaders outlined the steps they have taken to create an Innovation Campus to jumpstart the faltering economy (*www.innovationcampus.com.au*). Leaders at Edith Cowan University highlighted their Centre for Research in Entertainment, Arts, Technology, Education, and Community (CREATEC; *createc.ea.ecu.edu.au*). During conference sessions in Alice Springs, attendees had opportunities to visit

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the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre, where faculty link with partners to create commercial research applications for desert communities (*www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au*).

The disciplines at the forefront of engagement were not always the expected ones. At Edith Cowan, for instance, the art department is working with Aboriginal painters whose health is increasingly threatened by toxic paints.

What kind of infrastructure is needed to support these efforts? Some Australian universities are at the forefront of modeling engagement infrastructure; the University of Western Sydney (UWS) is such a leader. In addition to a fully staffed engagement office, UWS has three deans whose efforts are devoted to engagement. Leading all of this work is the scholar Barbara Holland whose title at UWS is Pro Vice Chancellor for Engagement. A major reason that engagement is able to attract these resources is that it is increasingly regarded not as separate from UWS's academic focus, but as a "way of carrying out research, teaching, learning and service — the core business of the University" (*www.uws.edu.au*).

As these examples suggest, there is much to be learned from Australia's pioneering efforts. Doing so may improve the prospects for similar place-based efforts here in New England. Consider, as one example, the case of Maine's Environmental Solutions Initiative (*www.umaine.edu/waterresearch*). The Maine effort draws its impetus from a Brookings Institution report, *Charting Maine's Future*, which outlines the difficulties Maine faces in the global economy. In Maine, environmental concerns are pronounced, and this report makes the case for alternative development scenarios for Maine's changing landscape. David Hart, director of the University of Maine's George Mitchell Center, has noted that the flagship Orono campus of the Maine system has the intellectual resources to respond to these challenges, given that nearly a quarter of the faculty do research linked to environmental issues. But attempts to mobilize the faculty face obstacles: individual faculty are sometimes unfamiliar with one another's work, they lack experience working with outside partners, and they cannot always see how their expertise can be combined with that of other faculty.

The task before the Center is how best to facilitate a process by which faculty can be brought together with community partners to arrive at meaningful environmental solutions for Maine. Such a process could provide examples to be used by other campuses around New England, or even possibly worldwide.

Initiatives of this sort, much like those being tested in Australia, have the potential to create practices that engage with regional economic problems. Such initiatives, David Hart has noted, could be a way to overcome the problem of research going unused—what has been called the "loading dock" problem. In this analogy, the production of university research, when carried out in an isolated, unengaged fashion, is not unlike assembly lines in which products are created and moved to a loading dock with the hope that someone outside the plant will use them. But as U.S. researchers Cash, Borck, and Patt point out in their 2006 study, "Countering the Loading-Dock Approach to Linking Science and Decision Making," (*Science, Technology, and Human Values)*, what is produced may not be what is needed, and it may be produced faster than the market can absorb. As a result, unused products stack up on the loading dock: researchers produce their research but the results are never used. Again, could we benefit from considering

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how Australian models confront the difficulties of engagement? These emerging Australian models point to the value of partnerships in which researchers work with partners early in the knowledge-production cycle to identify those research questions of greatest interest.

In the final analysis, however, efforts to encourage the devotion of scarce resources to engagement will be short-lived if universities go unrewarded for activities that extend beyond traditional teaching and research. When these Australian ideas are considered together with the new Carnegie Indicators of Engagement emerging in the United States, the possibility becomes real that the face of higher education in New England will change and that the engaged university, one that makes a difference in regional economic development, could become the norm rather than the exception.

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