

# **An Extraordinary Partnership between Arizona State University and the City of Phoenix**

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## **Abstract**

The Arizona State University Downtown Phoenix campus is a grand-scale exemplar of a city-university partnership. Its demonstrated impacts are economic, social, and educational, transforming both the city and the university. The magnitude of the investment of \$223 million by the citizens of a city in a state university is unparalleled in higher education. In 2006, the Colleges of Public Programs (including the Schools of Social Work, Public Affairs, and Community Resources and Development), Nursing and Health Care Innovation, and University College moved from ASU Tempe to become the foundational colleges of this new campus, located strategically to advance the three cornerstones of the ASU mission—access, excellence, and impact—as well as to become the finest examples of two of the design principles of the New American University: use-inspired research and social embeddedness.

## **Introduction**

Only rarely are cities able to reinvent themselves, and universities infrequently do so. On March 14, 2006, the voters of the City of Phoenix approved propositions securing \$223 million in funding for the development of the Downtown Phoenix campus of Arizona State University (ASU). This proved to be a defining moment for both the city and the university, and a vital step toward building both.

The established colleges and schools selected to move from the Tempe campus of Arizona State to become the core of the Downtown campus all have a common focus on the public mission of ASU and a commitment to the social and economic advancement of the many diverse communities of the metropolitan region. The new Downtown Phoenix campus allows ASU to advance the broad educational interests of business, government, and nonprofit organizations and lends critical mass to other educational and cultural institutions located downtown. On March 8, 2006, President Michael Crow noted, “The evolution of the Downtown campus is an important statement . . . and an opportunity to leave to our children and our children’s children a prosperous and vibrant urban environment in which to live” (*Office of President Michael Crow, Arizona*

*State University*). The significance of this partnership is measured in its importance to the future both of the city and the university. One writer for a local magazine captured it in this way: “As ASU and Phoenix battle, build and spend their way toward their respective desired destinies—a New American University and a vibrant urban center—the downtown campus is the symbiotic overlap of both pursuits. It is a time of becoming for both city and university” (*Collins 2007/2008, 74*).

Aside from the sheer scope and speed of execution, one of the things that makes this particular partnership noteworthy is that it stands as an example of purposeful planning. As Perry and Wiewel (2005) have observed, “In the knowledge economy, universities are more important than ever, but in most of these cases neither the city nor the university appears to have wrestled with what this means for the role of the university . . . projects proceed in piecemeal fashion, and cities treat the university like any other organization that needs building permits and other municipal services” (310–11). The Phoenix-ASU relationship stands in contradistinction to their observation and serves as a case study for joint strategic planning.

## **Background**

How and why did ASU and Phoenix come together in this far-reaching partnership? Institutional motivation is key to engagement (*Weerts and Sandmann 2008*). It is true that there were specific problems to be solved: for the city, a downtown area that was moribund, and for the university, a need for additional space. The incentive compatibility underlying the partnership, however, was more far-reaching than solutions to single problems: the future of both the city and the university depended on it, and it became more urgent as the growth rate for both reached exceptional levels.

No lasting partnership springs forth fully formed, however. The genesis of the campus probably began in 1985 when Downtown Phoenix business leaders urged then-ASU president Russell Nelson to create a university presence in central Phoenix, culminating in the opening of an ASU Downtown Center. Another milestone occurred in 1990 when the Arizona Board of Regents approved the establishment of the College of Extended Education/ASU Downtown Center and it moved to a central location. But the proximate history of the ASU–City of Phoenix partnership can be traced to the leadership ambitions of ASU president Michael Crow and City of Phoenix mayor Phil Gordon. Together, they were able to move the idea toward something grand, something that would

last well beyond either of them, and something that was connected with their own broader visions.

Long-time City of Phoenix manager Frank Fairbanks (2008) writes about this city-university engagement, “To be successful, [they] not only had to build a trusting partnership, but all parties had to embrace the need to reinvent the visions and plans of their institutions. We knew we couldn’t be successful without strong, progressive support from state government, the state Board of Regents, and the private and nonprofit sectors.”

Each party had a great deal of work to do to get from vision to reality. The City of Phoenix assembled and acquired eighteen acres of land in the downtown core; developed public support; provided capital funding; and worked with the community at large and downtown neighborhoods to ensure support. The mayor and city council developed an \$863 million bond issue, of which \$223 million in general obligation bonds was to build the first phase of the new ASU Downtown Phoenix campus. ASU leadership developed support among the Arizona Board of Regents and the ASU faculty academic senate, and worked intensively with the colleges slated to move in the first phase. Together they rallied to encourage passage of the bond in a spring 2006 election. On March 8, 2006, the bond passed with overwhelming support from the voters, and the partnership took a huge leap forward.

On August 16, 2006—a mere five months from the passage of the bond—classes opened at the Downtown Phoenix campus in the Colleges of Public Programs, Nursing and Healthcare Innovation, and University College—colleges previously housed at the ASU Tempe campus—in 300,000 square feet of renovated space for academics and academic support, welcoming a student body of over 2,500 undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral students, and providing on-campus housing for 250 students. From that time on, and to this day, the deputy city manager convenes a partnership meeting every other week with decision makers from both the city and ASU to review the list of issues, make decisions, and ensure that the common project moves forward. In a partnership of this breadth and depth, the commitment of time and focus to this meeting—complementary, of course, to a multitude of other meetings from the highest levels to those with specific focus—ensures that the relationship continues to deepen and increase in productivity and impact.

What did each party expect to gain? The list of expected benefits for both the community and ASU is long. Public, private, and

nonprofit leaders in the community saw the potential to build the future of the city on a foundation dedicated to cutting-edge knowledge, use-inspired research, and significant educational opportunity. They also understood the potential economic impact of the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus, as outlined in a commissioned economic impact study (Pollack 2004):<sup>1</sup> an average of 1,300 jobs created annually with an economic output of \$166.8 million; \$5.2

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million annually in taxes and fees to the state of Arizona, \$1.5 million annually to Maricopa County, and \$1.7 million to the City of Phoenix during the construction phase; and at build-out, an annual operational impact of \$569.5 million with revenues for the state of \$18.7 million annually, with another \$8 million to the county and \$7.3 million to the city. R. Neil Irwin, chair of the Downtown Phoenix Partnership, noted, “In a two block radius immediately surrounding the new campus there has been and will be

in the next 6 months \$996 million dollars invested, not including the cost of the campus itself . . . or the new light rail line which will open at the end of this year” (Irwin 2008).

For ASU it was an opportunity to continue to meet the educational demands of postsecondary student enrollment growth, so critical to its core mission of access. It was also a chance to bring a host of programs dedicated to public service close to their community partners to increase the density of engagement and therefore impact.

### **Mechanisms of Partnership**

In addition to the alignment of leadership agendas—very important, but insufficient—what makes this partnership work? There are at least three action principles that lead to the establishment of an ecology of collaboration:

*Action principle #1: Location, location, location.* Proximity diminishes opportunity costs for ongoing collaboration. For the many adults who work within 1½ miles in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, the location of the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus reduces their opportunity costs in pursuing additional

education and advanced degrees. One student pursuing a master's degree in public administration in the School of Public Affairs immediately switched from Tempe to Downtown as soon as the program started, noting that the program "is close to my job, it is new so it is a nice facility, and the classrooms facilitate discussion." She appreciates the night classes since she works for U.S. Senator John McCain's office as a staff assistant. Another student, Sam Feldman, in the Urban and Metropolitan Studies program, has an internship in the youth development program in the city manager's office. "Here we experience what we learn," he says.<sup>2</sup>

*Action principle #2: Relationships, relationships, relationships.* Relationships are the foundation upon which the capacity for collaboration expands. In order to be successful, collaborations have to be able to develop, change, and grow with new circumstances and changing conditions. These depend upon personal relationships of a particular kind: an academic expert with a practitioner expert. This relationship is built upon mutual respect and self-interest. Each benefits from the other's contribution. To be maximally effective, these relationships become central nodes in a

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social network and serve as a portal to the rest of the university. There must be numerous such dyads, and the range of these core relationships must come fairly close to matching the key needs of the community. Dr. Robert Denhardt, a member of the National Academy of Public Administration and director of the School of Public Affairs, observes, "I've often noted that what strikes me as most dramatic is that every time I go out for lunch, I run into someone from local or state government that I know. Previously, that meeting would have taken a month to schedule, thirty to forty-five minutes for me to drive downtown and park. We would then have the meeting, and I would take the same thirty to forty-five minutes to get back to my office. Now these meetings just happen naturally."

*Action principle #3: Foregrounding centers and institutes.* Certain institutional forms in the academy are better suited to advancing partnerships than others. In particular, centers and institutes have considerable advantages over schools or departments in advancing embeddedness. This is so for several reasons: (1) relative to schools and departments, centers and institutes typically have

a far more circumscribed mission; (2) centers and institutes are often designed explicitly to be outward-looking; (3) centers and institutes often have action-oriented research agendas with specific practical applications; and (4) they frequently provide direct service and noncredit education to community partners.

The implications of this last point about institutional form raise a long-standing issue in the discussions of community engagement, namely, does the academic core of the institution have to change as a result of community engagement in order for it to be considered truly meaningful? If departments and schools as such do not fully

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embrace community engagement, has anything really changed at all? The most vociferous advocates of the community engagement movement have argued that the institutional transformation could not be considered complete until tenure and promotion standards were modified to reflect the importance of engagement. This kind of approach, however, may have unintentionally slowed the progress of community engagement. In the end, schools and departments must always make the education of students their primary mission, and so partnerships, while important, will always be secondary. Universities advance

the community partnership agenda alongside the core academic agenda by supporting centers and institutes. When both departments and centers are given license to be strong players, universities also encourage partnerships among them which, in turn, lead to community engagement opportunities for faculty and students.

## **Impact**

It would be hard to do better than Mayor Phil Gordon has done in enumerating the many ways in which the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus has had impact in the community: collaboration on research projects outlining policy options, drawing on scientific research for carrying out public mandates, the exchange of ideas in classrooms, and the exchange of ideas in public forums. He wrote in a letter of support:

We needed more partners, and found them in the Governor of Arizona, the Arizona Legislature, the State Board of

Regents and through the broad involvement and support of the private sector and nonprofit organizations. After four years of constant growth, the ongoing partnership with ASU is much more than a city mayor and a university president eating breakfast and scribbling on napkins.

- City departments collaborate with ASU on research projects that help us better understand policy options and craft innovative responses to urban challenges of affordable housing, redevelopment and sustainability.
  - The materials lab of the city's Street Transportation Dept. participates in the Phoenix Urban Heat Island Task Force—charged with reducing heat generated by reflecting off asphalt. City staff and ASU faculty are developing criteria for using porous concrete in parking lots.
  - City government offers students at the downtown campus real world experience through internships, mentoring and project opportunities (participating departments include Parks and Recreation, Engineering, Planning, Human Services and public-access cable channels)
  - Journalism interns gain video and editing experience at the City's two public-access cable TV channels (PHX11, KNOW99), and they leave with a demo reel of completed projects that will help them secure permanent employment in the broadcast field.
  - City employees serve on many ASU Downtown Phoenix campus advisory councils and provide the university with a practical perspective on which courses and programs are most relevant to City government.
  - Elected officials and management staff teach, share experiences and mentor students.
  - City employees can continue their education via tuition reimbursement programs, and the convenience of having a downtown campus is a major factor in making it possible for many to attend ASU as either new or re-entering students.
  - City employees who attend ASU engage their classmates in civic affairs and vice-versa—by bringing students to the Mayor's State of Downtown address and frequently discussing class projects with their colleagues at City Hall.
- (Gordon 2008)*

There are numerous examples of growing impact. Below are five examples of significant and pressing community needs that the faculty and students of the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus have been instrumental in addressing:

- *How best to provide health care to the underserved, a critical community need?* Here is one example: The College of Nursing and Healthcare Innovation collaborates with Grace Lutheran Church in an initiative called Breaking the Cycle Community Health Care to provide family planning and health care services, 0.3 miles from the college site. They serve individuals in their childbearing years. More than 90 percent of the clients are Latino, live below the federal poverty guideline, and do not have health insurance. This collaboration has been supported by Title X contract funds, as well as funding from the Arizona Department of Health Services, other grants, and private donations.
- *Issues in science and math education are prevalent, and like other school districts throughout the country, Phoenix is seeking to improve the opportunities available to students.* The Phoenix Union High School District has benefited from collaboration with the School of Letters and Sciences (University College) to provide students with hands-on experiences that promote scientific investigation and understanding, serve predominantly underrepresented students, and extend science and math resources to students and teachers in charge of accelerated programs.
- *How will changes in the public sector affect the private sector?* The Phoenix Urban Research Laboratory, located on the Downtown Phoenix campus as an arm of the College of Design in Tempe, conducted a study with the City of Phoenix, METRO light rail, and citizens and business owners of the Camelback Corridor to study the impact of the incoming METRO light rail on the character of the neighborhood and community. One of the principal partners, a planner from the City of Phoenix, notes, “I was skeptical because I was unsure whether students could handle both the political and professional expectations of the community and the city . . . [but] the student presentations were well-received by the workshop participants and the final report is professional quality.”<sup>3</sup>



- *What are the best practices in local government, and how might these be applied to the rapidly growing demands on the public sector in Greater Phoenix?* The School of Public Affairs (College of Public Programs), working with the Arizona City Management Association, the American Society of Public Administration, and the National Forum of Black Public Administrators, attracted to Phoenix the Alliance for Innovation, an organization of over four hundred cities around the country interested in innovative practices in local government. It moved its headquarters from Tampa and is now located near the School of Public Affairs on the Downtown Phoenix campus, providing economic benefit to Phoenix, and the opportunity for local governments in the area to benefit from cutting-edge developments in governmental practice.
- *Can parents who have not graduated from high school and do not speak English proficiently—which describes so many of the immigrant parents in this community—be effective in helping their children succeed in school?* Partnering with school districts and in the Phoenix area since October 2006, the American Dream Academy of the ASU Center for Community Development and Civil Rights (College of Public Programs) has provided in-depth intensive parent education and advocacy training designed to empower parents to help their children become successful students and ultimately graduate from high school, even when they themselves have not done so. Seven thousand parents have been served thus far. The American Dream Academy has been supported by corporate and foundation gifts, the school districts, and ASU investments.

Above all, impact has been greatest for students, the primary beneficiaries of the transformation resulting from the establishment of the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus. New academic programs, expanded internship opportunities, exposure to expert practitioners on a daily basis, and a sense of being a part of an academic enterprise devoted to social responsibility all are at the core of the student experience on the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus. Thus, while it would have been easy to move from the Tempe campus to the Downtown Phoenix campus without making any significant changes, academic units have seized the opportunity to transform their academic offerings as well as their identities and missions. A few examples follow:

- For the first time in its history, the School of Public Affairs took on an undergraduate major, Urban and Metropolitan Studies, and went through a strategic planning process prior to the move, changing its mission from one that was inwardly focused to one that better served, advancing urban governance in a global context.
- In recognition of the needs of the proximate community, a number of new academic programs have been started since August 2006, including:
  - » A master's degree in Nonprofit Studies
  - » A doctoral degree in Nursing Practice
  - » A new School of Letters and Sciences, designed to serve the general education needs of the Downtown campus students, and to house high-demand majors from other campuses at ASU.
- In response to the needs of the local and regional economy, a number of centers and offices have been established since August 2006:
  - » The Megapolitan Tourism Research Center (College of Public Programs), in recognition of the economic and social centrality of tourism in this area, which studies tourism security, sustainability, and social impact globally while bringing results to communities locally
  - » The Office of Latino Projects (School of Social Work), in recognition of the growing importance and needs of the Latino community in Phoenix
  - » The Center for Policy Informatics (College of Public Programs), in recognition of the complex public policy issues for which sophisticated tools for decision making are required
  - » The Center for Healthcare Innovation and Clinical Trials (College of Nursing and Healthcare Innovation), in recognition of the need for more effective evidence-based practice in community nursing
  - » The Hartford Center for Geriatric Nursing, in recognition of the elder population in this region.
- Other centers have been transformed. The most dramatic example is the Center for Nonprofit Leadership and

Management (College of Public Programs), which attracted a \$5 million investment from a local partner, the Lodestar Foundation, in recognition of its centrality and importance in the Phoenix community of nonprofits. The center provides direct training and education to local area nonprofits through its Nonprofit Management Institute, mentors the next generation of diverse leaders in a partnership program, Public Allies (supported by a national grant), and is known locally and internationally for its research on community impact of nonprofits. In 2008 the Center was renamed the Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation.

## **Conclusion**

There is growing appreciation for the role that universities can play in the revitalization of cities. James Carr (1999) noted, “By partnering with community-based organizations, local governments, school districts, and public housing authorities, universities are helping to improve economic, social and physical conditions of their neighboring communities while providing opportunities for students and faculty to apply academic knowledge to real-world conditions.” The Downtown Phoenix campus of Arizona State University is a grand-scale exemplar of just this kind of partnership. Its demonstrated impacts are economic, social, and educational, transforming both the university and city in which it is housed. This magnitude of investment by the citizens of a city in a state university—\$223 million—is unparalleled in American higher education. Anxious to be good partners from the first, Phoenix and ASU accomplished in record time what usually takes years at universities.

Since 2006, the colleges of the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus have attracted more than \$10 million in private support and an equal amount of external grant funding, much of it in support of research with, and in service of, community partners. Public, private, and nonprofit sector partners within a two-mile radius of the campus attest to its importance in advancing their effectiveness and shaping their futures. Our experience offers numerous lessons about the factors that contribute to its success: the importance of proximity in reducing the costs of engagement, the optimal conditions for collaboration and capacity building, and the design of institutional forms that are more likely to advance sustained engagement. Both the development of the campus and its impacts provide a powerful case study for engagement on a grand scale that has implications for other cities and their universities.

## Endnotes

1. Note that the original name proposed for the Downtown Phoenix campus was the Capital Center Campus, which speaks to its close proximity to the State Capitol.
2. Student e-mail messages to Associate Vice President and Dean Deb Gullett, Arizona State University, February 2008.
3. E-mail message to Associate Vice President and Dean Deb Gullett, Arizona State University, February 7, 2008.

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