Public-Public Partnerships for a New Paradigm in the Civic Role of the University

Fletcher K. Alexander[1] and James C. Pushnik[2]

Abstract

Recognizing the need to proactively prepare engaged citizens for the dynamic socioeconomic and environmental conditions of the 21st century, the Institute for Sustainable Development at California State University (CSU), Chico, launched a Resilient Cities Initiative, a concerted effort to scale-up place-based applied interdisciplinary research and teaching to address community sustainability needs throughout its Northern California service region. This initial effort, in collaboration with the City of Chico, is a two-phase study of the South Campus Neighborhood. The project focuses on a 42-square-block residential area immediately adjacent to the university and downtown Chico, with the ultimate goal of assisting in the development of a Neighborhood Improvement Plan. The first phase of the project has been focused on developing an Existing Conditions Report with seven principal components: Neighborhood History, Neighborhood Character, Urban Forest, Transportation & Circulation, Street Lighting, Criminal Activity, and Stakeholder Identification & Engagement. This phase has included participation of an interdisciplinary team of nine faculty members from seven departments across three academic colleges on campus, and has involved over 400 students actively applying classroom theory to real-world problems in their backyard. The South Campus Neighborhood Project represents a clear precedent for CSU, Chico, in terms of the scale of interdisciplinary faculty and student involvement on campus in a single community-focused and community-funded project. This collaboration with the City will have numerous benefits for city administration, community stakeholders, and in particular, university priorities to engage faculty and students in an applied interdisciplinary scholarship and to work regionally to promote community resilience.

Keywords: applied learning; civic engagement; community; partnership; resilience; sustainability

Introduction

Today, we are realizing the complexities of globally intertwined socioeconomic and environmental challenges, necessitating forward-thinking leadership and an engaged citizenry that exhibits the aptitude to communicate across political ideological frameworks, as well as the capacity to employ critical and creative thought processes to arrive at innovative solutions to these imminent challenges.[1] Knowledgeable leadership and engaged citizenry needs to be cultivated through an increased understanding of interactions of the world around us and through personal involvement.

The Civic Role of the University

Institutions of higher education were long-ago founded on the commitment to the promotion of future generations of leaders, policy authors, and informed citizen professionals. It is now our task, more than ever, to equip students for the uncertainties ahead, providing the diversity and depth of skills that will be necessary to navigate and adapt to rapidly shifting global patterns and guide socially responsible policies of sustainable development. Each year we are responsible for educating thousands of intelligent, bright young people and providing them with the

[1]Sustainability Programs Manager, Institute for Sustainable Development, California State University, Chico, California.

[2]Director, Institute for Sustainable Development, Rawlins Endowed Professor of Environmental Literacy (Emeritus), College of Natural Sciences, California State University, Chico, California.

knowledge that is intended to make them successful in our society. As educators in a socially and environmentally dynamic world, we must offer diverse perspectives, encouraging students to not only assimilate information but critically evaluate issues, while enabling them to acquire the agency to apply their knowledge in the context of the real world.[2]

Currently the most prevalent pedagogical approach remains a linear one, guided by lecture, textbook content, and in-class discussion of the relevancy of the presented materials to contemporary issues, and often from a single disciplinary perspective with little experiential practice beyond the campus boundaries. Placing students into authentic civic learning environments beyond the campus provides them with the opportunity to acquire and practice the competencies of participatory citizenship.[3] Active participation in affecting change through focused community-based sustainability efforts fosters a sense of personal agency in terms of students' own potential to have an impact, counteracting the feeling of helplessness and cynicism held by many students about the scope and scale of social and environmental challenges.[4] These learning experiences bridge the knowledge gap of applying theory to practice, and create growing opportunities for universities to engage with their local and regional communities in synergistic partnerships to address the varied and variable challenges of the 21st century.

Public-Public Partnerships: Enhancing the Curriculum

To actualize the potential of this situated learning opportunity, the Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD) at California State University (CSU), Chico, has launched a Resilient Cities Initiative (RCI), an effort to collaborate with local government agencies on community sustainability and resilience issues in a manner that adds value to all stakeholders. The mission of the RCI is to partner with municipalities and communities across the university's service region, connecting faculty expertise and curriculum offerings, along with their students' creativity and enthusiasm, from across the university, with authentic community sustainability and resilience projects.

As universities continue to experiment with new academic programs focused on sustainability, there is growing evidence that the most successful programs are those that develop innovative organizational models and new institutional approaches to support interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary scholarship.[5] These types of approaches generally demand relatively significant upfront costs, and often in public higher education institutions, require seed-funding.[5] By design, CSU, Chico's RCI approach is interdisciplinary, leveraging a broad range of the university's academic expertise to reach beyond the campus boundaries to address the complexities of community quality-of-life issues. The collaborative effort between city staff, ISD staff, and campus faculty has focused on the knowledge, talent, and creativity of students across a variety of academic disciplines on different aspects of the municipality-identified—and funded—sustainability and resilience projects.

The efforts described in this article were intentionally designed to foster student integration of knowledge with action, creating opportunities for agency in collaboration with invested local government leadership and with a common commitment to enhancing the social, economic and environmental good.

A Case Study: The South Campus Neighborhood

As an academic office attached to the provost's office, independent of affiliation with any academic college, the Institute for Sustainable Development is well-positioned to direct and manage this broadly interdisciplinary effort. ISD has a long history of successful partnership with local government, utilities, nonprofits, and private-sector actors on a range of sustainability and resilience efforts. The RCI represents an extension of these efforts.

The RCI is a formal affiliate and contributing member of the Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities-Network (EPIC-N). EPIC-N is an international network of more than 25 college and university programs that are modeled on the EPIC Framework—a framework based around a single or multiyear partnership between a university and a local government partner, utilizing existing courses and focusing on partner-identified real-world quality-of-life projects. This framework originated at the University of Oregon in 2009.[6]

For its pilot effort, RCI partnered with the City of Chico Public Works Department to focus on the unique circumstances and challenges existing in the South Campus Neighborhood, a 42-square-block residential area directly adjacent to the university and downtown Chico, with the goals of developing an Existing

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Conditions Report and ultimately a Neighborhood Improvement Plan. (See Figure 1.) The genesis for this project occurred in the summer of 2015 at a Sustainable Cities workshop hosted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the EPIC-Network at the EPA Region Nine headquarters in San Francisco.

ISD has an especially strong history of partnership with the City of Chico, including staff and student fellows supporting development of the City's 2020 Climate Action Plan, working with the City Planning Department to develop and implement an annual community-wide GHG emissions indicator, and university representatives serving in various roles on the City Sustainability Task Force. A Chico delegation including: the ISD director and sustainability programs manager, a Chico city councilmember and former mayor, the director of public works, and the public works administrative manager, attended the meeting. ISD city partners were also invited to bring potential project concepts. One of the main concepts the City was interested in exploring was an effort to address transportation and related public-right-of-way issues in the South Campus Neighborhood. Working together, ISD built-out this idea, which was developed into a Neighborhood Improvement Plan. The plan evolved from an Existing Conditions Report that included seven principal components, referred to as Elements: Neighborhood History, Neighborhood Character, Urban Forest, Transportation & Circulation, Street Lighting, Criminal Activity, and Stakeholder Identification & Engagement.

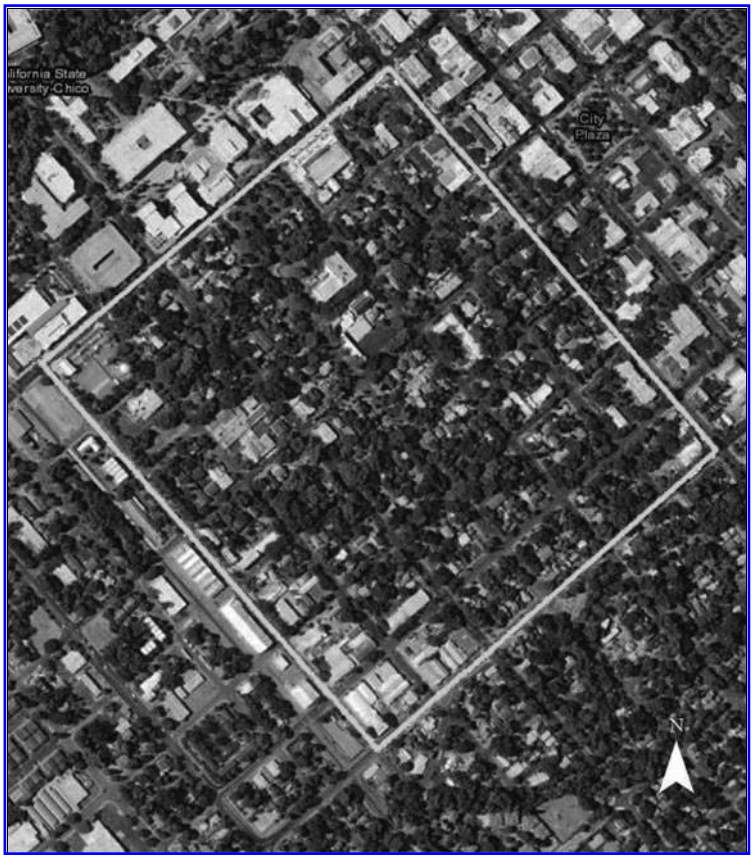

Figure 1. The South Campus Neighborhood is a 6x7 block residential area originally laid out in the 1860s. It is bordered by CSU-Chico to the north, downtown Chico to the east, Little Chico Creek to the south, and the Southern Pacific Rail Line to the west.

A concept proposal for the South Campus Neighborhood Project (SCNP/Project) was presented to Chico's seven-member city council in November 2015 and was approved unanimously. A three-year Master Services Agreement (MSA) was established between the Institute for Sustainable Development and the City of Chico Public Works Department beginning January 2016, under which two phases of the SCNP were contracted, recognizing the potential for numerous future partnerships. The MSA provides a framework for scoping out and contracting these additional future projects, focused on a broad range of community sustainability and resilience issues.

Once the MSA was established and the funding for Phase I of the SCNP was in place, IDC worked to match existing courses in the university's curriculum with the different Elements of the SCNP. The authors reached out to potential faculty partners and offered them the opportunity to opt-in for a semester with one of their courses—which included funding for participation and materials as well as administrative support and connections with city staff, data, and documents—and to fit participation into the existing curriculum. The response and interest from faculty was very positive, enabling the establishment of the Phase I cohort relatively quickly.

The SCNP represents a clear precedent for CSU, Chico, in terms of the scale of interdisciplinary faculty and student involvement on campus in a single community-focused and community-funded project. Faculty

participation in Phase I has included nine faculty members from seven departments across three academic colleges on campus, from first-year faculty to department chairs, and their students from at least one course section each. Participating disciplines have included history and English in the College of Humanities & Fine Arts; biology and environmental science in the College of Natural Sciences; and anthropology, geography and planning, and health and community services in the College of Behavioral & Social Sciences. This phase, which ran for three semesters—spring 2016 through spring 2017—included the participation of over 400 students, from first-year to graduate students, and the deliverables will reflect an estimated 18,000 hours of student time and hundreds of hours of faculty time.

On the university side, the project is being managed by the sustainability programs manager, under the direction of the ISD director. Subcontracts have been established with each participating faculty member and their work supported throughout the course of their involvement. Student field work began in the spring of 2016 and has included a wide range of efforts collecting data on various components of the neighborhood.

Students in history and anthropology courses dug into the historical records of the neighborhood (a large portion of it is a registered historical landmark) and conducted walking audits and surveys of the neighborhood to define its history and character. Students in biological and environmental sciences courses developed a street tree inventory protocol and conducted data collection on species type, tree health, and areas of interference with streetlights or powerlines on over 1,000 street trees throughout the neighborhood. (See Figure 2.) Students in geography and planning courses audited and mapped transportation infrastructure in the neighborhood, used pedestrian and cyclist counting equipment to track circulation patterns, and took over 2,000 data points to map lighting levels on every one-block segment of the neighborhood. (See Figure 3.) Students in health and community services worked with the police department to analyze five years' of criminal activity in the neighborhood for trends and problem areas. Students in an English Rhetoric course identified various neighborhood stakeholder groups and developed different strategies for engaging and soliciting feedback from them. Once the semester ended, an individual or team of student writers was hired by ISD from each participating course to work on developing a report summarizing the work and findings from their class. Each report was then edited and formatted to comprise an Element of the South Campus Neighborhood Existing Conditions Report.

On the city side, the project is being managed by the director of public works; other city staff directly involved in the project include the public works manager of operations and administrative manager, the parks and natural resources manager and field supervisor, the principal planner, the deputy chief of police, the fire chief, and the city manager. Additional stakeholders include neighborhood property owners and residents, business owners and employees, and numerous nonprofit organizations. The City of Chico has dedicated $100,000 to Phase I of the SCNP. This funding and dedication of staff time underscores the value of this partnership to the city administration, and their commitment to working with the university to revitalize this important part of the City of Chico.This project has provided an incredibly powerful platform to unite these diverse

Figure 2. Biology and environmental science students measure trees as a part of the Urban Forest Inventory in the South Campus Neighborhood. The student on the left is using a clinometer to measure tree height; the student on the right is measuring tree diameter-breast-height. The students also assessed the health of the trees and whether they obscured street lights.

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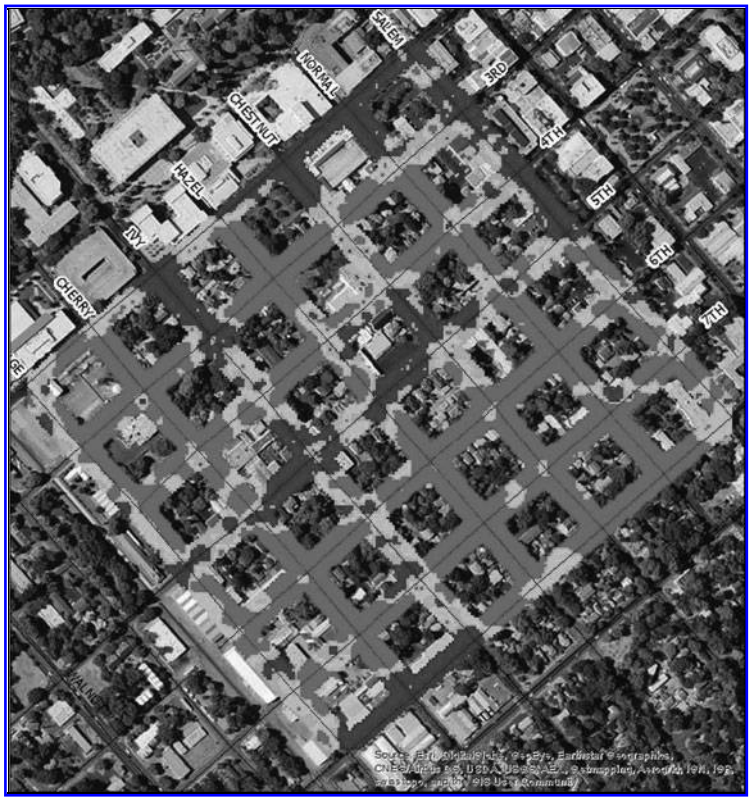

Figure 3. Students in the advanced Geographic Information Systems course used GPS and luminescence meters to measure actual street lighting levels along the sidewalks at over 2,000 locations along the South Campus Neighborhood's 42-square blocks. They then produced maps, such as this one, using ArcGIS, showing the variance in lighting levels at night across the neighborhood.

interests around a common cause: the vitality and resilience of the neighborhood where the university and the town meet, where a significant portion of the CSU, Chico student body resides, and where so many campus-community issues intersect.

Results

As Phase I of the project is wrapping up, several deliverables for the City of Chico are being prepared. These include the seven South Campus Neighborhood Existing Condition Report (ECR) Elements, each with a stand-alone executive summary and poster, and a South Campus Neighborhood Project website. The website currently under construction will be a stand-alone site dedicated to the SCNP, making the ECR report Elements publicly available, and providing a broad context of the project, the partnership, and the RCI. The website will include an interactive mapping feature that will allow visitors to comment on the different issues being addressed by the project and to pin those comments geographically to locations in the neighborhood. The ECR and website (as of press time) will be delivered to the city council in fall 2017 and will be made public once accepted by the city council. A symposium on campus is also being planned around this time to provide the student participants an opportunity to showcase their work to the campus and to further engage with the campus community at large.

In the year and a half since the SCNP began, in the spirit of commitment to enhancing the South Campus Neighborhood and responding to the informed suggestions of the campus community and neighborhood stakeholders, the Chico Public Works Department has already undertaken a number of improvement efforts. These include the installation of stop signs at a couple of high-traffic intersections; the replacement of older streetlights with brighter, high-efficiency LED lights; the planting of street trees (with student help) on blocks in the neighborhood adjacent to the university; and the addition of buffered bike lanes on both sides of Ivy Street, of one of the busiest north-south streets in the neighborhood.

The SCNP supports a wide range of benefits to participants and stakeholders on all sides. It supports a variety of university priorities, including sustainability, civic engagement, service learning, applied education, and interdisciplinary partnerships. It also satisfies a variety of city goals related to community development and resilience, outlined in the city's general plan and climate action plan. These priorities and goals are supported in a highly collaborative and highly visible manner that is elevating town-gown relationships to new levels. The Resilient Cities Initiative structure as established is robust, and is one that can accommodate both future projects with the City of Chico and with other communities in the region. It is a replicable model that has been shared with sustainability-focused staff and faculty from across the CSU system at the annual Sustainability Officers' Summit and the ISD's annual This Way to Sustainability Conference.

The SCNP was recognized for its innovative design and breadth of impact with a Best Practice Award in Sustainability Innovations at the 2016 California Higher Education Sustainability Conference in Fullerton, California.

As has been very clear with students participating in the first phase of the South Campus Neighborhood Project, participation provides an application of classroom theory to the real world in their own backyard, where they feel a strong sense of ownership, and it provides valuable professional connections with decision makers in their community who are working in areas related to students' fields of study. Residents, property and business owners, business and community organization leaders, and staff in the neighborhood are realizing social benefits in terms of increased attention and resources dedicated to their neighborhood, and an elevated and engaged conversation around a range of important issues. The long-term recommendations coming out of the project's second phase should have substantial environmental, social, and economic benefits to the neighborhood and its constituents.

Discussion

Plans for the upcoming second phase of the SCNP include developing a range of recommended actions across the project's seven components to be synthesized into a Neighborhood Improvement Plan. As the plan is developed, suggestions will be incorporated into complete street design concepts, which will be broadly vetted for feedback. The plan is intended to guide collaborative development in the neighborhood toward a more sustainable and resilient community with a stronger sense of place. The aim is to develop a neighborhood that is safe, well-designed, well-maintained, clean, healthy, appreciated, and engaged.

The process of matching courses to Phase II project elements has already begun, and a new cohort of faculty and courses will begin work on developing the Neighborhood Improvement Plan, soliciting input in the process. Phase II will include working with faculty in two additional colleges—the College of Communication & Education; and the College of Engineering, Computer Science & Construction Management—as well as returning and new faculty from colleges and departments that participated in Phase I.

This project has the potential, by the end of its second phase, to have directly involved and impacted many thousands of diverse stakeholders in the community, and to have indirectly involved and impacted many thousands more. It is already well on its way. These stakeholders include numerous faculty and staff across campus, numerous elected officials and their staff, a variety of business and community organization leaders and their constituents, many hundreds of students directly involved in participating courses, and thousands of residents of the neighborhood—current and future—who will be impacted by the beneficial actions resulting from the project.

An unquantified but highly significant benefit of this program is captured in this unsolicited statement from students in a participating English course, Environmental Rhetoric, that serves as a culminating capstone experience for CSU, Chico's general education curriculum: "On behalf of Professor Fosen's ENGL 338Z class, we would like to formally thank you for the opportunity to work on the South Campus Neighborhood Project. It is safe to assume that we, as a whole, appreciate the ability to directly benefit the community that we have all been a part of for so many collective years. This is a wonderful chance to improve a small, but very influential sector of downtown Chico. Many of us commute through, reside in, or do business within this area of concern, and all have opinions on how best to improve this area."[7]

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Address correspondence to:
Fletcher K. Alexander
Institute for Sustainable Development
California State University
400 West First Street
Chico, CA 95929-0633

E-mail: falexander@csuchico.edu