**Engagement Australia Conference**

**TITLE:** The University/Community Dilemma: *Putting the Town in the Gown; Putting the Gown in the Town*

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**Abstract:**

Universities talk about communities; universities study communities; universities bring programs to communities; universities own property in communities. And universities attempt to engage communities.

In recent decades, engagement has emerged as an important element of university strategy – some efforts (service learning, student internships, engaged research) have become institutionalized (Crow & Loui, 2006). But many examples of co-mingling of university and community are geared toward fulfillment of university goals (public/community relations/government support). And other efforts are borne of particular situations such as the desire to develop university-owned real estate, changing demographics, and the intrusion of expanding student populations (Hartley, Harkavy, & Bensom, 2006, pp.27). There are many examples of these various types of engagement, often yielding mixed results. A broad overview illuminates several common, well-documented challenges: the limitations of academic schedules; misaligned incentives and goals (Schomberg, 2006); pressure to publish in academic rather than populist journals; the double edged sword of a large student body interested in learning through real-world experience but relatively unskilled and inexperienced; haphazard coordination and continuity in relationships; lack of on-the-ground experience of faculty; long histories of mistrust (Anyon & Fernandez, 2007; Lerner & Simon, 1998); and a scarcity of effective, long-term, sustainable, and successful examples.

In this presentation, we explore the question of whether traditional universities are fundamentally capable of facilitating *authentic* community-engaged work. We define "authentic engagement" as including: an honest flow of information (with lay participants on equal playing fields with academicians and institutional representatives); open sharing of data and information; the co-creation of research design and knowledge, and a commitment to the importance of community thinking, brainstorming, and analysis that will actually be included in and influence decision-making within universities (Tiger, 2007).

Based on the literature and case studies of university-community work, as well as Fern Tiger Associate's (FTA) 30-year history of community-engaged work with both communities and institutions (and specifically Prof. Tiger's studies of university/community engagement), it is evident that authentic engagement is possible but necessitates a *transformation* of the university – re-definition of power, restructuring, and a shared accountability for outcomes. It is also evident that different kinds of approaches are needed – innovative and inviting approaches that level the playing field; that create spaces where "expert" and community perspectives can exist side by side, whether in conflict or agreement, co-generating new and more robust solutions; and the development of tools that support action and implementation, not just research.

> *Too often, scholars and practitioners think of collaborative processes more or less as black boxes. They seldom inquire into the dynamics of actual deliberations, the structure of the processes, who the participants are, or the methods by which conclusions are reached. But all these things matter because they make the difference between authentic collaboration*

> *and a process that co-opts, manipulates, or simply does not reflect a genuine agreement, much less a societally-beneficial conclusion.* (Innes & Booher, 2010)

Using two specific case studies, we highlight the importance of creativity in conceiving, developing, and engaging communities – emphasizing the differences between authentic engagement and other more typical outreach/communication/presentation methods.

The *Voices to Vision* project focused on the Albany, CA waterfront – land that has been the focus of a 50-year, bitter tug-of-war between those who hoped to see commercial development at the 102-acre, privately-owned site that is currently the site of a racetrack and those who favored transforming that parcel into a public park. In 2008, the city of Albany hired FTA to design and facilitate a process to educate and engage residents in the hopes of developing a shared vision for the site's future.

After extensive primary (including more than 80 one-on-one interviews) and secondary research, FTA produced a 20-page newspaper-size magazine (complete with robust and critical information in lay terms, about the history of the site, geotechnical factors, regulatory agencies, acreage comparisons, zoning, etc.) mailed to every address in the city so that residents would be prepared to participate in complex discussions about the site. FTA facilitated 40 identical community engagement sessions, where one of every ten adult residents actively participated; and analyzed the results to produce a community vision and land-use recommendations. The centerpiece of the sessions was "The Albany Waterfront Game," which enabled residents to become decisionmakers and to weigh tradeoffs and benefits from environmental, fiscal, and social vantage points.

Six months after the completion of the project, the large, public, prestigious local university decided it wanted to develop a research site and sought potential locations – one of which was the Albany waterfront. The university's lack of awareness of the process that had preceded it, the lack of transparency and respect for the community vision (along with ill-conceived notions of outreach), ultimately led to a lack of support on the part of city government and community to the proposal.

The second case study describes a very recent engagement project, *M-Power Maui*, around a renewable energy future for Maui County, Hawai'i. Residents wanted to be part of the decisionmaking process, and felt there was a lack of transparency, no objective sources of information, and biased information from the utility. FTA designed a process that brought participants into deep discussions, using innovative hands-on exercises, regarding Maui's energy future – teasing out the tradeoffs around types of renewable energy, and providing a forum for participants to draft messages to the community, government, and the utility company.

Universities can learn from progressive, creative communities that are utilizing "authentic" civic engagement processes that are establishing meaningful dialogue and encouraging participation in decisionmaking, bringing about positive social change, growing community capacity, and building toward participatory democracy. The presentation will delve into the process and design of innovative exercises that have been used to support authentic engagement, discussion about how these tools can be adapted for use in the university setting, and how authentic engagement increases both community capacity and university relevance.

Universities have the opportunity to become strong leaders and models for constructive partnerships that build and sustain both the university and the community. To do so, they need to yield some degree of institutional power and allow themselves to be transformed through the process.

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