Transforming Universities; Transforming Communities

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

Given that communities are at the center of all urban environments, understanding how to effectively learn about, communicate with, and work alongside them should be at the center of the work of urban practitioners. Yet universities, responsible for training successive generations of influencers and professionals, often lack the skills to recognize the complexity and uniqueness of communities — and to leverage the resources and power they hold to support community desires. And, while an increasing number of universities recognize the strategic benefits of community engagement for their own institutions(1), others continue to take a public relations approach rather than a deep process of engagement(2).

The limitations of rigid academic schedules, incentives to publish in journals not read by practitioners, and long histories of mistrust between communities and institutions further compound the challenges that universities face at both the classroom and institutional level(3).
Using a case study focused on land use in a small but active waterfront city, in close proximity to a major west coast public university, the presentation will contrast two approaches to working with communities: first, a locally-initiated, two-year transparent process that engaged one in ten adult residents in the development of a vision for their waterfront; second, just a few months after the adoption of that vision, the local university, acting as a developer, sought to develop the site and ignored the existing vision.

What was different about these two approaches? This presentation will highlight some of the key competencies required for deep, relevant, and authentic community engagement – at both the classroom and institutional level. Practitioners must deeply understand a community’s context: history, assets, key influencers, needs, and challenges; think creatively about how to develop and implement unique and appropriate processes, tools, and approaches. This deep contextual understanding allows practitioners and the community to build mutual trust and to identify strategic solutions that are co-created, implementable, and equitable.

This could require a wholesale transformation of university power structures, curriculum, decision-making practices, and humility in the face of community wisdom.

Change is hard… but oh so exciting!

1. Crow and Loui, 2006
2. Hartley, Harkavy, and Bensom, 2006

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):


An artist by training (with postgraduate work in cognitive psychology), Fern Tiger’s early interest in the importance of integrating diverse disciplines in order to address contemporary issues, led to a career as a strategist – combining the innovative, perceptive, and holistic insights of an artist/designer with the practical and systemic tools of planners and researchers. Fern is founder/creative director of the Oakland, CA-based Fern Tiger Associates, FTA, (www.ferntiger.com) and recently retired as Professor at University of Washington Tacoma (Urban Studies).

The firm’s 30+-year history includes projects that have influenced the direction of scores of communities, organizations, and public agencies – helping each to be strategic and effective. Fern has led FTA to design multidisciplinary and innovative approaches to projects and to build community involvement in often-complex and controversial issues.

In 2004, Fern was appointed the first Professor of Practice at Arizona State University, which also hired FTA to develop a comprehensive plan to support ASU’s goal of becoming a “socially-embedded university.” This project took Fern to more than 20 universities across the US to assess their role in the broad communities they called “home.” Both in her role as a professor and as the spearheading force of FTA, Fern is focused on seamlessly integrating
community-based action research; strategic planning and communication; advocacy documentation; civic engagement; and public policy and evaluation.

While it may appear that Fern has strayed from her roots in the world of art, she sees her work as the logical extension of that training, which resulted in problem-solving skills, creative and holistic thinking, and innovative approaches to policy and civic engagement. She believes strongly that these skills are essential to address today’s ever more complex problems.

**Anneka Olson:** B.A. (History) Bard College; M.A. (Community Planning) University of Washington

Anneka Olson, a Project Associate at FTA, has worked on a range of community-based engagement projects across the US. From working in a small bike shop to leading neighborhood active transportation advocacy efforts in New Orleans; from neighborhood art and storytelling to municipal historic preservation projects in Tacoma, WA, her focus always centers on meaningful community self-determination. She has conducted large-scale projects focused on best practices for civic engagement for local government and was a Scan | Design Fellow researching the topic in Copenhagen, Denmark.