

Research Application Summary

Linking Universities to Communities: The case of EARTH University

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Abstract

This paper shares the approach and experiences of EARTH University in reorienting university curriculum and training approaches that embed strong engagement between a university and communities to not only train a cadre of highly motivated and practical graduates but foster community transformation. The EARTH University approach involves four experiential learning courses: Work Experience, the Entrepreneurial Projects program - a unique student entrepreneurship course in which students open a real business, service learning in the Community Development Program, and an Internship Program.

Key words: Community engagement, EARTH, entrepreneurship, experiential learning

Résumé

Cet article partage l'approche et les expériences de l'Université EARTH en réorientant les approches pédagogiques de l'université et de formation qui intègrent une forte coopération entre une université et les communautés à former non seulement un groupe de diplômés très motivés et pratiques, mais la transformation de la communauté d'accueil. L'approche de l'Université EARTH comprend quatre cours d'apprentissage expérientiel: l'expérience professionnelle, les projets de programme entrepreneurial - un cours d'entrepreneuriat d'étudiant unique dans lequel les étudiants ouvrent une véritable entreprise, le service d'apprentissage dans le programme de développement communautaire, et un programme de stages.

Mots clés: engagement communautaire, EARTH (la terre), l'esprit d'entreprise, l'apprentissage expérientiel

Introduction

Community engagement, extension, outreach or whichever term is chosen to describe a university's extramural activities, is often considered the third mission of the academy, with teaching and research representing the other two legs of the proverbial three legged stool. Nevertheless the image, and all too often the reality, of the university as a cloistered, elitist institution distant from the community in which it is located persists. Perhaps this is a reflection

of the priority which many universities place on contributing to scientific advances and the formation of professionals, rather than in direct service to communities. Returning to the metaphor of the three-legged stool, the leg that corresponds to outreach or extension is all too often very much shorter, or even absent.

Without underplaying the importance of the university's role in advancing knowledge and preparing professionals few, particularly in the developing world, would disagree with the importance of the university's responsibility for agricultural, rural and economic development at the community level. Especially in the case of developing economies in which agriculture represents a significant proportion of economic output and employment, the role of the university in promoting agricultural development is of critical importance. This paper shares the approach used at EARTH University in Costa Rica to reorient the university role to promote agricultural development through a strong university-community engagement programme in both training and outreach.

The EARTH Model

EARTH University, an international institution located in Costa Rica, offers a four-year undergraduate training program, with students coming from 43 Latin America, Caribbean and African countries. EARTH's mission is to "prepare leaders with ethical values to contribute to sustainable development and to construct just and prosperous societies". The University's curriculum is designed to provide students a solid grounding in the technical and scientific knowledge and skills that underlie the agricultural sciences, but who also possess a strong commitment to sustainable agriculture as well as environmental and social justice. EARTH is committed to empowering deserving young people from economically disadvantaged, those from rural communities and those from minority ethnic groups by giving them a first-class education so that they will return to their communities with the skills and tools needed to implement change. Approximately 70% of EARTH's students receive full-scholarships. Due to the significant cultural, social and academic adjustment that is required by the EARTH students, a 10:1 student to faculty ratio is maintained to ensure a strong support network, individual attention and to enhance leadership skills.

EARTH's four year plan of studies is intensive, including 11 months per year of classes and field experience, with classes six days a week beginning at 6:30 AM. Students graduate with a *Licenciatura* degree which, in terms of credit hours, could be considered to fall somewhere between a BSc and a Master's degree. The curriculum is characterized by student-centered learning, the development of entrepreneurial capabilities, a strong emphasis on ethics and values, teamwork, group problem solving, communication skills, vertical and horizontal integration and fostering of social sensitivity through community development skills. Emphasis is placed on agriculture and natural resources as a human activity, the holistic integration of many academic disciplines, understanding today's changing and globalised world and the integration of social and environmental concerns with production and resource management. As a learning institution, EARTH's academic and research programmes, as well as its commercial activities, are focused on innovation, interaction,

Fifth RUFORUM Biennial Regional Conference 17 - 21 October 2016, Cape Town, South Africa 405
analysis, synthesis and dissemination of knowledge for the direct benefit of communities in the tropics.

EARTH University has developed a distinctive and novel curriculum best exemplified by four experiential learning courses: Work Experience, the Entrepreneurial Projects program - a unique student entrepreneurship course in which students open a real business, service learning in the Community Development Program, and an Internship Program. Further work experience on EARTH's teaching farms focuses on the routine and often labour intensive activities of crop, animal and forestry production. Students not only acquire technical skills that help them work with farmers and agro-industries in the future, they also develop a respect for and appreciation of rural farm labour. In the student's fourth year, they acquire important management experience, becoming the supervisors of the Work Experience programme designing the course schedule, identifying farm needs and overseeing student activities, with the support of faculty advisors and the farm managers.

One of the most distinguishing aspects of EARTH University's curriculum is the entrepreneurial project program. In this multi-year course, students form enterprises with their colleagues, develop and implement a business venture and share in the profits. Reflecting a profound shift in the relative importance of the private and public sectors in development over recent decades, through this course, emphasis is placed on providing graduates with the tools and experience needed to become successful, and socially responsible entrepreneurs. Social consciousness and community development are promoted in the University's service learning programme. First, second and fourth year students spend a full-day each week (during a semester long module each year) working with local rural families involved in agriculture. This program is designed to promote an understanding of everyday rural life. By giving students the opportunity to establish a positive and respectful dialogue with the host family, students develop communication skills that will better equip them to solve farm and community challenges.

Third-year students live with a rural family for a 7-week period in the region surrounding the University's *La Flor* campus, located in the dry tropical region of Northwest Costa Rica. During this period they engage in both community development efforts as well as working in local enterprises. During the last trimester of their third year, these same students leave campus to undertake a 15-week professional Internship with a host organisation such as a business, non-governmental organisation or a farm. Using knowledge and skills acquired in their first three years at EARTH, students obtain real-world practical experience. During their internships, they also must engage in a community development project, either of their own design or by participating in an existing project.

EARTH seeks to develop professionals who not only understand their field, but also demonstrate social sensitivity, environmental awareness and a commitment to building prosperous rural communities. The process to create this socially responsible professional actually begins in the admissions process, where priority is given to students who demonstrate past social engagement and leadership. Once at the University, students are organised in ways to promote cultural and social exchange and students share responsibilities with and

for their peers in order to foster a commitment to the wellbeing of others. This focus on values and commitment to society is continually reinforced by EARTH's faculty and administration.

Linking students to communities is a vital part of the EARTH curriculum. This creates a two-way bridge between the University and the community. In this relationship, students provide a value or service to improve the quality of life of the community, and the community transmits real-world experience and provides technical, cultural and social learning opportunities for the student. EARTH University's service learning programme benefits many stakeholders. First, it creates a connection between the University and community, using students as the conduit. It benefits the community by building their capacity to develop and succeed in a globalised economy, and it provides EARTH students with an essential learning experience in working with rural communities and providing technical and vocation training—a skill which will be important to their success upon graduation.

EARTH University's service learning programme and entrepreneurial and sustainable agriculture training programmes demonstrate how meeting community needs can complement academic programmes—providing a benefit for students, faculty and the community. By incorporating TVET for rural settlers into the University's service learning programme, through such programs as the *Open Classroom for Farmers*, EARTH is providing essential learning experiences for its students while contributing to the development of the rural community where it resides.

The University's success in this area can be attributed to several factors. The University's teaching/learning methods are in-line with the University's mission and the academic setting and structure emphasises collaboration and exchange among specialists creating a multidisciplinary approach and integrated curriculum. Faculty are evaluated based on teaching, community outreach and research. Finally, the University is located in a poor, rural community, and its students, faculty and staff live, work and interact daily with the same beneficiaries of the service learning programme.

Conclusion

RUFORUM's Biennial Conference, emphasizing linking agricultural universities with civil society, is a clear call to break down the ivory tower that too often separates our institutions from the community. Our universities are in a unique position to integrate community development and academics, professional training and scientific discovery with training and vocational education. University administrators must help professors adopt this ethos by embracing it as part of the university's vision and mission. With a flexible curriculum and administrative support, universities can develop successful service learning programmes that will help create socially-committed graduates with real world experience, while contributing to the sustainable development of their communities and countries. Fortunately, there are ongoing efforts in Africa, such as at Gulu University in Uganda (Kalule *et al.*, 2016) and Egerton University in Kenya (Mungai *et al.*, 2016) that are making headway to strengthen university role to foster rural transformation through entrepreneurship development at community level.

Acknowledgement

This paper is a contribution to the 2016 Fifth African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference.

References

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