

Community Solutions Lab (CoLab):
Combining Community and Campus Knowledge
for the Public Good

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Thanks.

Community Solutions Lab: Combining Community and Campus Knowledge for the Public Good

I. Executive Summary: The Difference We Can Make Together

MIIS and CSUMB are committed to embarking on a new approach to community – university partnership. The goal of this new approach is to make a tangible difference on the complex, “wicked problems”¹ that confront the communities of our region.

As two higher education institutions committed to active, community-based learning, both MIIS and CSUMB have developed rich networks of relationships with community organizations in the tri-county region. Each academic year, dozens of MIIS graduate students work on short-term projects with local non-profit, public, and for-profit organizations, developing their professional skills while helping to improve their host organization’s systems and processes. At CSUMB, each year over 3,000 undergraduates work with regional schools, non-profits and public organizations, providing important programmatic support while contributing over 90,000 hours of service annually.

These community-based learning opportunities are powerful for our students. Students experience real-world problems, in real time. They experience the messy inter-disciplinary reality of social problems. They learn first-hand about issues of diversity and power. They discover the knowledge that exists in community, in the citizens they work with and the mentors they learn from. They learn the limitations of one dimensional, silver bullet approaches and the value of holistic, interdisciplinary problem solving. They become more sensitive and effective future professionals, community members and multicultural community builders.² They grasp that hard problems require painstaking nudging and encouragement of people and institutions to move in new directions.

However, through critical self-assessment and recent blunt discussions with our community partners, we have become intimately aware of the limitations of our current approaches. Our efforts are short-term, confined by the semester’s 16-week reality. There is often little continuity from semester to semester, as each one begins afresh with new students and new relationships to form. And while many of our partner organizations have identified extremely useful activities for our students to engage in, we rarely look at the long-term impact of these efforts, nor do we attempt to tackle the deeper, underlying root causes of the problems.

We can do better. We can commit to longer-term, strategic partnerships. We can create collaborative space for mutual learning and problem solving, driven first and foremost by community members and their priorities. We can create collaborative processes for data collection and analysis that inform the work of our partnerships and develop our community’s own capacities as problem-solvers and change-makers. We can make a bigger difference in the quality of life for the communities of our region.

We call this new way of working together, **The Community Solutions Lab**.

¹ (Rittel and Webber, 1973)

² CSUMB defines multicultural community builders as students who have “the knowledge, skills and attitudes to work effectively in a diverse society to create more just, equitable, respectful and inclusive workplaces, communities and social institutions” (Service Learning Institute, 2000).

II. The Urgency: Wicked Problems Demand Wicked Solutions

The world's most intractable problems – climate change; wealth inequality; water, food, and nutritional security; environmental justice; discrimination; exclusion -- cannot be solved with simple and linear policy, technological, or market innovations. There will never be a vaccine, for example, to thwart racism or sexism. They represent not Newtonian, machine-like systems which can be fixed, but rather, complex adaptive systems in which any intervention has unpredictable effects. Solutions in these contexts are always partial. The very definition of the problem is – and always will be – contested in a pluralistic, democratic society. Definitions of success will also be contested, and alterable. Such problems require new kinds of professional competencies, ones not commonly embedded in higher education institutions. And these competencies need to be cultivated outside the academy, within and among community, public and private sector organizations. Making a difference on such complex, some call them “wicked problems,” involves waging not war but collaboration on them.

Such a collaborative approach requires a new breed of social change agent. We need people who are: adept at working across, among, and between long-standing silos (e.g., public, private, and nonprofit sectors); working with and within unpredictability and limits of knowledge, at rapid learning speeds; informed by historical and contextual understanding; and, imbued with the ability to grasp, honor and bridge multiple ways of understanding. And while it will take time to develop this new breed of social change agent, the urgency of these problems requires that we achieve positive impacts not next century, not next decade, not next year, but in the very near term.

Yet this poses profound challenges to the structure, organization, strategy, and purpose of higher education institutions and to the ways in which higher education partners with the community. We need to experiment.

Building on transformative experiments taking place at other institutions of higher learning globally, on two decades of our own hands-on experience with community-engaged learning here in the tri-county region, and most importantly, on conversations MIIS and CSUMB faculty, staff, and students organized over the last year,³ leadership of the two institutions can now envision what such collaboration for social impact can look like locally. This paper defines the broad vision of that new form of community-university research partnerships.

III. Rethinking the Role of Higher Education: The Emergence of the Engaged University

As our social and economic problems have become more complex, localized and globally-intertwined, the metaphor of the academy as “Ivory Tower” has ceased to be relevant. Rather than prioritizing isolation and disconnected knowledge development, higher education institutions are recognizing the importance of their public mission, and are building new teaching, learning and research partnerships to more effectively address our complex social and economic challenges. The ethic of the “engaged university” has emerged, embodying an institution that embraces, and is embraced by, its local community and that contributes to both the education of the local workforce and to solving the community's complex social and economic problems.

This emphasis on engagement has affected both how universities educate their students, as well as how they develop and value new knowledge. While designing more active, community-based approaches to learning has been relatively simple, transforming our approach to research and

³ With support from a grant from the Community Foundation for Monterey County.

knowledge development has been more challenging. From a research perspective, the partnership approach has required a rethinking of what is legitimate knowledge, and who are considered to be legitimate knowledge makers. What had been formerly the sole provenance of academics, now needs to become a shared, collaborative process, with faculty and community members working together to solve problems that matter to the community. Traditionally, for academics, knowledge isn't "knowledge" until it passes peer review and is published, often years after the research has been completed. Instead, the engaged university requires an embrace of knowledge democracy.⁴ Knowledge democracy recognizes that legitimate, actionable knowledge exists in many locations throughout society, and not just within the walls of the ivory tower. It also requires an appreciation for research methods that are more inclusive and participatory and for knowledge that can be acted on to make a tangible difference in the conditions of our communities. In the ivory tower, knowledge is prized for its ability to describe the world. In the new engaged university, knowledge is prized for its ability to affect change in the world.

Emergent Examples

Around the world, universities and communities are experimenting with new institutional relationships that seek to have a direct impact on the social and economic challenges that confront communities. The new metaphor is that of a neural network, a living, changing set of relationships and connections between the university and its surrounding community that generates new knowledge, all the while strengthening its problem-solving capacity. The goal of these new collaborative community-university partnerships is not simply to facilitate more active and engaged student learning, or to have students participate in short-term projects that benefit specific community organizations. Rather, the goal is to achieve longer-term tangible impacts on complex social and economic problems.

As described by the editors of *Knowledge, Engagement and Higher Education: Contributing to Social Change* (GUNI, 2013), the focus on community-university engagement requires a fundamental transformation of the basic operating assumptions of higher education.

In this view, universities move from the agenda of simply increasing the general education of the population and the output of scientific research towards a model in which university education and research should work towards specific economic and social objectives, by means of co-creating and exchanging knowledge and by sharing resources, skills and process with the public good in mind (p. xxxv).

There are a variety of emergent approaches and networks bringing universities and communities together in new ways to address complex social and economic problems. While these new community-university partnerships take different organizational forms, they have certain common guiding principles. First, the initial research questions come from the community, emphasizing the community's role as owner of the research agenda. Secondly, they have a stated commitment to having a positive impact on specific conditions in that community, and on collecting the data needed to demonstrate this impact. And finally, they are guided by the principles of reciprocity and equity in knowledge development between the university and the community. Here are a few noteworthy examples:

- In Europe, "Science Shops" are places where universities make their problem-solving capacities available to respond to civil society's needs. They explicitly attempt to harness

⁴ De Souza Santos, 2007; GUNI, 2013.

the expertise and innovation of higher education for the creation of public goods. (www.livingknowledge.org).

- The University of Alberta’s “Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families” (<http://www.cup.ualberta.ca>) seeks “to nurture an environment where evidence contributes to effective practices, programs, and policies.” Unlike the usual think tank located within a university, CUP is strongly committed to “diversity of knowledge,” to “engaged research” to “respectful partnerships,” and to “a culture of learning.”
- The University of Victoria created the “Office of Community-University Engagement” (<http://www.uvic.ca/cuvic2016/about/ocue>). The office supports individual faculty to develop community-based research partnerships, as the institution has made “community – engaged research” one of its five strategic components that integrate across all sectors of the university.
- University of Wisconsin’s “Community & Non-Profit Studies Center” (CommNS) is located in the Department of Civil Society and Community Research in the School of Human Ecology. The Center is organized around an “Action Research Core” which supports faculty in their engaged research efforts, responding to critical community needs (<https://sohe.wisc.edu/category/centers/center-for-nonprofits/>).
- Loyola University, Chicago, created the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL), which supports faculty from across the university in community-based action research. CURL emphasizes community participation, and requires community leaders to be involved in the process from conceptualization through data collection, analysis, writing and dissemination. As a result the projects are richly informed by community knowledge and history, and the research results are particularly germane to the setting (<http://www.luc.edu/curl/>).
- Campus Community Partnership for Health (CCPH) is a nonprofit membership organization whose mission is to promote health equity and social justice through partnerships between communities and academic institutions. They now have over 1500 members, and are considered leaders in higher education in developing authentic, principled partnerships focusing on shared power and equitable voice for the community in research processes (<https://ccph.memberclicks.net/>).

MIIS and CSUMB believe the time is now to learn from and adapt these experiments for the benefit of Monterey County and, in particular, in the service of making a difference on very difficult, intransigent, and seemingly unsolvable problems. To do this, we need to:

- commit to longer-term, strategic partnerships;
- alter our stance towards the knowledge and insight that resides within communities and community members;
- rethink our assumptions about rigorous research;
- expand our vision of expertise;
- make impact – social, economic, political – our measure of success; and

- forge new impact-oriented collaborative mechanisms, ones that are not bilateral but multilateral.

In essence, we see MIIS, CSUMB and local communities, community organizations, and activists working together in collaborative spaces for mutual learning and problem solving, driven first and foremost by community members and their priorities but infused and fertilized with global knowledge and experience that our faculties and students can bring.

Fortunately, both institutions have many strengths to build on to make this happen.

IV. CSUMB and MIIS as Engaged Universities: The Potential and the Challenge

As two higher education institutions differentially committed to active, community-based learning, both MIIS and CSUMB have developed rich networks of relationships with community organizations in our region. We have, we believe, much to be proud of in terms of student contributions in Monterey County over the last two decades. In distinctive ways, both MIIS and CSUMB have embraced the mantle of the “engaged university.”

MIIS Community Commitments

MIIS’ Graduate School of International Policy and Management (GSIPM) is distinctive as a graduate program that prioritizes “immersive professional learning.” GSIPM faculty often seek real-world projects in which their students can become engaged, experience the complexities of real world problem solving, and connect these experiences to academic theories and literature. An important focus is on competencies, tools, and knowledge to get at systematic and structural root causes of social injustice and techniques that create positive change. GSIPM faculty are recruited not merely for their competence as theory-builders but for their involvement as practitioners in social change processes. Students leave MIIS with a quiver replete with strategic tools, approaches, and sensibilities that make them distinctively employable in the global social change field.

MIIS graduates have been engaged in the community, working on organizational development projects with a variety of nonprofit organizations in the tri-county region. While many MIIS students go on to pursue international careers, a number become connected to and invested in the region, developing their careers here as consultants, managers in nonprofits, or start social change organizations of their own, such as [Real Good Fish](#), and [Both Co.](#)

CSUMB Community Commitments

CSUMB is also deeply committed to engagement. As it was born from the ashes of the departure of the Army from Fort Ord, and with it 30% of the local economy, CSUMB was conceived to be an engaged university, prioritizing partnership and community connectedness. CSUMB is the only public university in California, and one of the few nationally, that requires every student to take a service learning course, working directly with one of over 400 local schools, non-profits and governmental agencies in the tri-county region. All CSUMB students complete a “Senior Capstone Project,” many of which are informed by their previous service learning work in the community, making direct contributions to their host organizations. CSUMB’s approach to engagement is further strengthened by its broad definition of scholarship, which encourages faculty to apply their knowledge in partnership with the local community. This explicit emphasis on the scholarship of

“Professional Application,” creates an extremely supportive framework for engaged, collaborative, community-based research.

CSUMB is now in its twenty-first year. Over its short lifespan, over 30,000 CSUMB undergraduate students have spent over 1 million hours working in our local schools, after school programs, homeless shelters, food pantries, senior centers, community centers, libraries, women’s shelters, regional parks and open spaces, and other community-serving organizations. The collective impact of these tens of thousands of service experiences is significant. Many of the students now work at these same schools, afterschool programs and community centers; while other students have started non-profit organizations of their own, such as [Everyone’s Harvest](#) and the [Cesar Chavez Futhol Academy](#).

Our Common Challenges

We do not want to minimize the significance of these partnerships and their accomplishments. But we want to ask the question: Why haven’t these efforts produced long-term, inter-generational change on pressing problems here at home? For example:

- Each year we have hundreds of university students and faculty working in schools and afterschool programs in many of our most underserved communities. However, a substantial achievement gap persists between students of color and the white students in our region.
- Each year, we have university students and faculty bringing physical education programs and nutrition education programs to our region’s youth. And still, we have a crisis of obesity and juvenile onset diabetes.
- Each year, we have students and faculty working with the Food Bank for Monterey County and other community pantries to help address the food insecurity issues of our families. And still, nearly 20% of Monterey County residents, the “Salad Bowl of the World,” rely on these sources for food each month.

What more is needed from our two institutions? And, why haven’t such changes already taken place?

The reality is that we are constrained by long-standing academic conventions that create institutional inertia. These constraints include the following areas.

Teaching Focus. Both MIIS and CSUMB emphasize teaching as the core responsibility of their faculty. While faculty members are expected to continue and develop active research agendas, their workload is largely devoted to teaching. As a result, faculty have a challenge to develop robust research initiatives while they are significantly engaged in their teaching.

Limited Local Connections. Most of the MIIS and CSUMB faculty are not from the region, and move here for their faculty positions. They have limited knowledge of and connections to the region. Their research and consulting networks are largely external, linked to previous academic and consulting positions.

Semester Time Frame. The 16-week semester is a constraining factor, as faculty organize their work to begin and end in this time frame. The real-world does not work on such neat blocks of time, as problems do not go away at the end of the semester, when students leave campus.

Higher Education's Ownership of the Knowledge Development Process. Knowledge creation is traditionally the job of academics. They have come to define the terms and dominate the process. This history of isolation and elitism can be off-putting, and difficult for community members to penetrate.

Higher Education's Emphasis on Theoretical Research and Not Application. In higher education, theoretical research is favored. Faculty are encouraged to work on research that can make a contribution to the "literature," as opposed to research that is applied, and can have an impact in the world. Despite CSUMB and MIIS having academic cultures that favor application, the dominant norms are still present and have a constraining impact.

We could continue as is, building partnerships that provide meaningful, community-based learning opportunities for our students. We could continue placing students in short-term service assignments to support our schools, public agencies and nonprofit organizations. Or, we could think more strategically and build partnerships that have a longer-term trajectory and that focus on improving specific conditions in our communities.

Moving forward requires that we develop new goals for collaboration that go beyond creating quality experiential educational opportunities for MIIS and CSUMB students. Moving forward means creating partnerships that seek to have a tangible impact on the pressing and intractable problems that threaten to undermine our very vision of an inclusive, democratic and just nation.

V. A New Vision: **The Community Solutions Lab (CoLab)**

Recently, MIIS and CSUMB were able to undertake an honest self-assessment and discussion with our faculty and community partners.⁵ The conversation made us intimately aware of the limitations of our current approaches. As leaders in civic engagement and immersive professional learning respectively, CSUMB and MIIS have developed unique institutional cultures that value active, engaged learning, and that prioritize community partnerships. While this has created a dynamic environment for student learning, we feel, and our community partners have told us, that we have not nearly maximized our potential to bring about lasting change in the community.

Having worked alongside each other in the community over the past two decades, our institutions would like to now try a new form of collaboration, driven first and foremost by community actors and their priorities, with a goal of making an impact on pressing socioeconomic problems. We call this new partnership a **Community Solutions Lab**, or **CoLab**.

A **Community Solutions Lab** has collaboration at its core. The **Community Solutions Lab** represents a long-term commitment that our universities make with community actors to bring about tangible change in an intractable, inter-generational problem confronting our local communities. It is not a think tank, nor a research center, in the traditional sense. Rather, its goal is to create a nexus for trusting and challenging relationships that seek to democratize the knowledge generation process. It is a space devoted to action and change, and continuous learning about the problem and about the change-making process itself.

⁵ We are grateful to the Community Foundation of Monterey County for a planning grant to support this process.

We see a **Community Solutions Lab** as a space where community knowledge and university expertise are combined, bringing about tangible change in local problems. Like combining carbon and iron to make steel, the mix leaves us stronger. Like combining cement, stones, and water to make concrete, we become more durable and long lasting.

We see a **Community Solutions Lab** as an inclusive space where CSUMB and MIIS faculty, students, community professionals and residents themselves work together in an open and public learning process.

We see a **Community Solutions Lab** as having a minimum of a 5-year timeline -- perhaps even 10-15 -- so that the time frame of solution matches the depth of the problem's root causes.

We see a **Community Solutions Lab** as comprising specific and accountable action/learning goals, assessable progress markers, and transparent impact indicators.

We see a **Community Solutions Lab** as being committed to building community capacity so that, over time, as these impact incubators phase out, new ones are born, and citizens and activists feel empowered to ask hard questions, conduct research, and problem-solve.

We see a **Community Solutions Lab** as providing opportunities to more vitally connect global ideas and practices to our local environment,

Most of all, we see **Community Solutions Labs** as a way for CSUMB and MIIS to fulfill their commitment to the health and well-being of the tri-county region as community members and neighbors.

VI. Moving Forward

Building **Community Solutions Labs** will require new ways of working together, and will challenge many of our existing norms and ways of doing business. We will be challenged to satisfy the community's need for tangible impact, with the university's need for careful, considered research and development. We will have to find a way for both community members and faculty to be resourced to build these collaborative relationships, as they take a significant investment of time and energy.

We will also need to physically decenter **Community Solutions Labs** from our campus world, grounding the process in community. We will need to bring the university's capacity for data collection and analysis into the community in ways that are appropriate, and that all can access and learn from.

In Ten Years, What Will Success Look Like?

Community Solutions Labs represent a new way of thinking about the university's role, working with communities, developing faculty and students, and changing the world for the better. How could success be gauged? What evidence would we see in ten years' time that would indicate success? While we don't claim to have the full answer right now, a few performance arenas seem particularly important:

- We will see greater continuity in the actors involved over time and a palpable accumulation of knowledge and experience among those actors.

- We will see clear evidence of the tangible impact on the social problem, and the community will recognize the changes that have occurred.
- We will see increased capacity for problem solving and negotiating administrative, political, social, and cultural hurdles to accomplish goals.
- We will see a heightened sense of trust and mutual accountability and our faculty will be in relationships with leaders in our community.
- We will see new knowledge disseminated both locally in the community and in the academic networks, generated by the **CoLab**.
- We will see increased capacity for advocacy and a more active role in policy formulation at local, state and national levels.
- We will see the new knowledge generated by the **CoLab** informing the content of the curriculum and knowledge-base in our universities.
- We will see our research methods evolve so that they are more open to and inclusive of community partners and local knowledge.
- We will see community change leaders more frequently on our campuses, and dynamic opportunities for their continuing education will be created.
- We will see more healthy relationships between community organizations related to the social problem being addressed, with less competitiveness and less ego-driven decision-making.
- We will see more data-informed and evidence-based conversations about what constitutes change in very hard to measure areas.

VII. Conclusion

Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them.⁶

There are times when wisdom cannot be found in the chambers of parliament or the halls of academia but at the unpretentious setting of the kitchen table.⁷

Around the world, communities and universities are inventing new ways of engaging with one another. This is not simply out of comity, or open-mindedness, or mutual accord. New forms of collaboration are emerging because the world's intractable problems demand that we confront the very silos that, in many ways, have allowed the problems to grow.

We need incubators not merely for business start-ups, but for collaboration to tackle society's most pressing problems. We need to harness entrepreneurial ardor in the service of long-standing, seeming intractable problems that no single institution (e.g., government), or societal sector (private, public, nonprofit) can solve on its own. We need hubs where approaches are tested, opportunities for investment facilitated, and new public policy is generated. And we need action-spaces where we meet on a level playing field and practice learning across our different gifts, perspectives, histories, and challenges.

We believe the **CoLabs** can move us toward such a place. And that Monterey County would be the better for it.

⁶ Laurence J. Peter, cited in Conklin (2005).

⁷ E.A. Bucchianeri

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