

## **Green Paper on Community Engagement**

This paper focuses on questions and issues relating to community engagement. University-community engagement is implicated in many aspects of planning, including student experience, strategic research planning, and the University's reputation across sectors. Aspects of this paper will overlap with other green papers.

The paper is comprised of four sections. We begin with an overview of our current context in relation to our geographical location and some notions of community that situate our internal and external relations. The second section describes some key aspects of our history in relation to community engagement and university planning. As we move closer to the present, we see aspects of our own development as resonating with current academic discussions of the purpose, principles and goals of university-community engagement. The third section draws upon this body of literature, which describes contemporary notions of university-community engagement (also known as civic engagement) as driven by epistemological developments, the changing socio-historical context of the university in a global and knowledge society, and the drive to generate research and knowledge aimed at addressing social and economic problems with others outside the university. The final section formulates questions that emerge from the paper as sites for further debate and renewal.

### **1. Our Current Context**

The green paper provides us with the opportunity and the responsibility to better understand ourselves as we prepare for our future. We note that it is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down, in definitive or exhaustive manner, the sum of meanings that attach either to 'community' or 'engagement'. Perhaps most traditionally viewed in terms of outreach or service to neighbourhoods that surround the university, more recent accounts focus on "a two-way scholarly work that may be initiated/planned and co-ordinated by either side in a partnership, which is mutually beneficial and that cuts across the missions of teaching, research, and service" (UVIC Report). York University is a place that borders on several GTA neighbourhoods and regions and that already has significant relations with others in ways that are consistent with this description.

However, as we articulate our current situation and context and refine our vision for the future, we might also want to contemplate 'community' slightly differently. York University is a place where a significant number of people work, study, conduct research, and live, and it is also a large public institution within a municipality, a larger metropolis, the province of Ontario, Canada, and, in increasingly significant ways, the world. Like universities, public and private organisations and institutions are increasingly called upon to contribute in meaningful and clearly articulated ways to the development of civic society. As York University responds to this call and participates in larger debates with other sectors, we must take into account our mission, history, and the specificity of our context.

While our Glendon campus may understand university-community engagement primarily in terms of widely-dispersed and very different Francophone communities, the Keele campus takes its own geography as an important point of departure. Look to the north, east, south and west of The Keele campus and you will see the markers of growth as the suburban areas surrounding Toronto become increasingly urban, more

densely populated, more culturally and socio-economically diverse, more globally situated, and increasingly less dependent on the city centre for employment, recreation, housing, education, health-care, social infrastructure, and cultural venues. A recent City of Toronto Planning document provides a clear picture of what we can anticipate as we look out from York University:

**The Secondary Plan envisions a residential population of approximately 21,000 to 24,500 people and up to 21,000 jobs surrounding the University. Including student enrolment and employment at the University, a total of 105,000 people are projected to live, work and study in the Secondary Plan area....The vision for the Secondary Plan Area is to transform the area from a university enclave surrounded by parking lots and open fields to an urban, human-scaled community integrated with and surrounding the University (Report, York University Secondary Plan Update, City of Toronto, April, 2009).**

York University, like its surrounding region, will continue to become more densely populated, more diverse in terms of its student population and its teaching and research activities, and better equipped with new and refurbished physical spaces. In 2004, some 43,000 of our students declared a home address in the GTA.

Our location within, and therefore as part of, dynamic, rapidly-changing neighbouring communities strengthens York's potential and responsibility as a modern university in a large, increasingly urbanized region. Improved public transportation throughout the region and, in particular, to the university will continue to enable increased flow between the University and the surrounding region. Rather than seeing ourselves, then, as a large university at the edge of a city, we can imagine ourselves as a large university surrounded by a growing and developing metropolis. Our future and the future of this metropolis are intimately connected. University-community engagement holds the potential for identifying and strengthening our neighbouring communities' linguistic, cultural, educational, professional and economic resources at a crucial time of change and growth.

University-community engagement in times of social and economic change is not without challenges and contradictions. Frank Rhodes (1998, cited in Dragne, 2007) identifies one set of tensions that, while harshly stated, serves as a reminder that global tensions and conflicts are not only the objects of study; they locate themselves in the University and in our neighbouring communities:

**Clearly, we live in a time of global economic interchange, and the ironic thing is that while the global economy requires openness of communications, of individual movement, of social mobility, and of personal choice, at the same time we see a tension between these trends and growing tribalism, nationalism, ethnic and religious hatred and conflict. How those two tensions will work out, how the two forces will resolve themselves, is still not clear.**

We strive to be seen as open and tolerant and as providing the tools and resources for addressing social disparities, differences and conflicts; yet, we are perceived by some as a place of intolerance. We are in an interesting and challenging position to make history and respond to history. We have a responsibility to respond to conflict in ethical,

meaningful ways and to develop positive and constructive strategies to communicate how we understand and address conflict.

## **2. A Brief History of York's Strategic Planning and Priorities**

York University sees itself as committed to social justice and accessible post-secondary education, but this perspective may be neither clearly nor universally understood by those outside the university. Indeed, thoughtful and strategic engagement with neighbouring communities has been difficult to articulate as a collective, institutional priority. 2020 Vision: The Future of York University, endorsed as a planning document in 1992, makes the following statement on the topic of relations with municipal governments and neighbouring communities:

*We can expect to enjoy positive relations with local and regional governments and the ethno-cultural communities, but will always have a degree of strain with nearby neighbourhoods which perceive us (wrongly) as an affluent institution which is insensitive to their needs.*

A short seven years later, the 2005-2010 University Academic Plan identified "Community Education" as one of three markers of York's distinctiveness to be promoted and expanded. This document also shifts the emphasis from the neighbourhoods' perception of the University to the development of programs and initiatives created from dialogue and partnership with and to the mutual benefit of the University and its neighbouring communities. A recent internal document, Inventory of Community Engagement, describes activities across the University in teaching and research and identifies the diversity of partners across all sectors in the community who collaborate with York. The scope, number and duration of these initiatives clearly demonstrate the significant role community engagement plays in the life of the University as well as the ways in which the mission of York University, with commitments to accessible education and social justice, is creatively and rigorously enacted.

More recently, the President's Task Force on Community Engagement, which includes senior-level representatives from government, not-for-profit organizations, business, the college sector, alumni and University representatives, was formed to explore questions relating to York's identity as a community engaged university, the purpose served by community-university engagement, and the role of university-community engagement in distinguishing itself and sustaining its future. The Task Force is scheduled to submit its report to President Shoukri in December 2009, and the report will also provide input for the Provostial White Paper.

These current and past activities, along with the York's overall mission, bring us to an important turning point for the University. Are we ready to define ourselves as a community engaged university? Our past and our present both indicate an interest in and commitment to community engagement, and the feedback from the Task Force has re-validated York's distinctness as an engaged university. The next step is whether or not we will truly embrace that identity as an institution and as an integral aspect of our University's White Paper.

### **3. University-community engagement as an academic movement**

Most university-community engagement projects, initiatives, units and partnerships that currently exist at York University define their mandates in specific terms that are appropriate and proper to its goals and objectives as well as the University's overarching missions relating to teaching, research and service. Some, however, define themselves in relation to external community needs and do not articulate their alignment to overarching university goals or mission. The Office of the Vice President of Research and Innovation has a clear outreach strategy for the development of strategic research partnerships. The President's Task Force articulates key principles of university-community engagement: improved access to post-secondary education; enhancement of student experience/curriculum; community outreach; sharing of university resources; community capacity building; and research partnerships.

These principles point us in the direction of a broad and encompassing set of terms that will be necessary if the University is to claim an identity as a community engaged university. For the purposes of our own community discussion, some descriptions and definitions drawn from other scholars and institutions suggest a range of ways that community engagement resonates with university mandates and traditions.

**The engaged institution is committed to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through the mutually beneficial exchange, exploration and application of knowledge expertise and information. These interactions enrich and expand the learning and discovery functions of academic institutions while also enhancing community capacity. The work of the engaged institution is responsive to community-identified needs, opportunities and goals in ways that are appropriate to the university's mission and academic strengths. The interaction also builds greater public understanding of the role of the university as a knowledge asset and resource. (Barbara Holland, 2001, 7, cited in Dragne, 2007)**

**Engagement implies strenuous, thoughtful, argumentative interaction with the non-university world in at least four spheres: Setting universities' aims, purposes and priorities; relating teaching and learning to the wider world; the back-and-forth dialogue between researchers and practitioners; and taking on wider responsibilities as neighbours and citizens. Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU 2002, cited in Dragne, 2007)**

**'Public engagement' involves specialists in higher education listening to, developing their understanding of and interacting with non-specialists. The 'public' includes individuals and groups who do not currently have a formal relationship with an HEI (Higher Education Institution) through teaching, research or knowledge transfer. Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2007a, cited in Dragne, 2007)**

**Dimensions of university public engagement include examples of the following:**

- 1. Public access to facilities**

2. **Public access to knowledge**
3. **Student engagement**
4. **Faculty engagement**
5. **Widening participation**
6. **Encouraging economic regeneration and enterprise in social engagement**
7. **Institutional relationship and partnership building (cited in Dragne, 2007).**

Another important resource is The Talloires Network: Promoting the Civic Roles and Social Responsibilities of Higher Education, which “aims to catalyze a worldwide movement of individuals and institutions dedicated to promoting civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education. A 2005 conference hosted by Tufts University (in collaboration with Innovations in Civic Participation) generated four recommendations for organizing civic engagement at the University.

- A). Locate the initiative in the President’s Office
- B). Establish an interdisciplinary coordinating centre
- C). Integrate civic engagement into hiring, compensation and academic promotion
- D). Find funding for good civic engagement projects and make such funding available to faculty for research and teaching

#### **4. Questions.**

1. What opportunities might result from identifying ourselves as a community-engaged university?

2. Initial discussions on the preparation of this green paper raise the question of what access to post-secondary education signifies for the University. In one direction, access refers to identifying and responding to obstacles that impede access to and success in post-secondary contexts. In a second direction, access refers to the means for members of our neighbouring communities to engage the University in various modes of research, innovation and capacity-building.

Complicating, in interesting ways, this second direction are contradictory perspectives on the value of university-community engagement. On the one hand, community-based partners are seen by university researchers as already possessing important and relevant knowledge and understanding of their context and concerns. On the other hand, the community partners often express their own desire to have the University lend legitimacy and expertise to their initiatives. How does thinking about these two directions together renew our conceptualization of and commitment to access and civic participation?

3. What are the mechanisms for understanding the conflicts and contradictions that inevitably arise in relation to university-community engagement? What new areas of inquiry, strategies for inviting public debate, forums for articulating dissonance across and within communities (including the university community), and modes of

commenting on and debating the transformation of the University as it engages in this work?

4. A related question challenges us to inquire critically into the nature of the values that we bring to our university-community engagement initiatives, those that evolve in our engagement activities and programs, and our capacity to evaluate the work from multiple perspectives, including those informing academic recognition.

5. What forms of community and qualities of community engagement are created by the University's degree and non-degree curricula? How do these curricula take up the call to prepare our students as engaged citizens? What are the University's mechanisms for conveying the reach and range of as well as the contradictions within this body of University curriculum?

## References

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[http://www.toronto.ca/planning/york\\_u\\_plan.htm](http://www.toronto.ca/planning/york_u_plan.htm)

The Talloires Network

<http://www.tufts.edu/talloiresnetwork/>

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