Engaging students and community in urban environmental sustainability: CommUniverCity San José

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Critical components for achieving urban environmental sustainability are the collaborations between urban universities and their surrounding communities. This paper critically examines CommUniverCity San José, a unique multidimensional partnership driven by community priorities, through the lens of two, highly successful, long-term projects that have resulted in significant positive change in the urban environment both in terms of the direct, tangible impact on the local community, as well as broader policy change in one of the largest cities in the U.S.

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Introduction
Collaborations between universities and urban communities have been called ‘crucial’ for ‘achieving success in urban sustainability’ [1]. This paper critically examines CommUniverCity San José, a unique multidimensional partnership driven by community priorities, through the lens of two, highly successful, long-term projects that have resulted in significant positive change in the urban environment both in terms of the direct, tangible impact on the local community, as well as broader policy change in one of the largest cities in the U.S.

A multidimensional partnership driven by community priorities
CommUniverCity San José is a higher education–community–government partnership that engages San José State University students and faculty to work closely with historically disadvantaged inner-city communities and local government agencies to address the community development priorities defined by those who are most directly affected by decision making processes: neighborhood residents. Unlike most campus service-learning or community-engaged learning programs that tend to form between two partners (typically the college or university and the community where the work is taking place), CommUniverCity is multidimensional, comprising three equal partners: the City of San José, San José State University, and the communities located within approximately 1.5 miles of the campus.

Located in the heart of San José, the 10th largest city in the U.S., San José State University (SJSU) has a long tradition of service dating back to its origins as a teachers college in 1857, and a mission to provide access to higher education to a highly diverse, largely working class student population (two thirds of SJSU students are racial and ethnic minorities). SJSU is part of the 23-campus California State University System where community service and service learning has long been recognized as a valuable component of the higher education experience for students (Center for Community Engagement; URL: http://www.calstate.edu/cee/about_us/). In 2000, the Board of Trustees passed a resolution that called for every campus to ensure that students have opportunities to engage in community service and/or service-learning and encouraged (but did not mandate) campuses to make service an ‘expectation, condition, or requirement for the undergraduate-education experience’ (CSU Board of Trustees Resolution; URL: http://www.calstate.edu/cee/documents/Trustees_Resolutions.pdf).

CommUniverCity emerged in 2005 out of San José State University’s growing support of community engaged learning (also known as service learning, a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote learning and development [2]), the City of San José’s commitment to become more responsive to its residents, and a local community with both a strong leadership base and significant challenges.

CommUniverCity is part of a rapidly growing constellation of academia-community partnerships that respond to calls for an engaged university that brings its significant resources to bear in addressing the most pressing civic, social, economic and ethical issues of our times [3–7].
Universities are increasingly adopting Dewey’s proposition that ‘democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community’ [8].

Although civic engagement — largely driven by service learning — is widely seen as a key element of the higher education mission in the U.S. and internationally, [9–12] much of the scholarship and research on service learning in the context of community–university partnerships has been done through the lens of academia, focusing on its impact on traditional academic content and skills, as well as ‘socially responsive knowledge’ and commitment to civic service and engagement. Growing evidence suggests that students benefit more from service than do communities [13–23].

There is also a growing recognition that academic institutions, which are designed to be highly self-referential, are not fully prepared to engage in the collaborative, cooperative relationships required to face the complex societal issues that higher education–community partnerships set out to address. This work requires multidimensional relationships that are inclusive, enabling participation of multiple sectors of society [4,11,24–27].

CommUniverCity’s multidimensional, community driven partnership model provides an alternative to the growing criticism that community engaged learning partnerships are developed primarily to meet the needs of academia, without much careful thought given to whether they meet the genuine needs of the community, and the positive — or negative — impact the partnerships have on the non-academic partners [4,16,26,28**,29–35,36*,37–46]. It addresses the need to respond directly to genuine community priorities and ensure accountability between all of the partners. Ten years ago, CommUniverCity set out to develop and maintain a multi sector partnership structured to maximize community impact based on an interdependent, equal relationship, where partners are committed to develop a common agenda, and also share responsibility, decision making power and rewards. The partnership rests on the three-way interaction among communities, the university, and local government. In the zone where all the sectors interact they work together, collectively accomplish their goals, and build community (see Figure 1) [32,47].

In order to establish and grow this multi sectoral reciprocal partnership, CommUniverCity employs a distributed network leadership model — rather than a more conventional centralized organizational leadership model — that is integrated throughout the entire organization [48*]. A management team composed of a city, a university and a community director reports to CommUniverCity’s Steering Committee with representatives from the community (including grassroots groups, community benefit organizations, local schools, businesses and the faith community), the university (including administrators, students,
faculty and staff) and government (including city and county agencies). On the field, the project teams mirror this structure with a project director (typically a SJSU faculty member) and representatives from the community at large and from government.

Departing from the approach of doing for the community found more commonly in higher education–community partnerships [26,32,37], CommUniverCity employs a community-centered approach (doing with the community), where its work is driven by community priorities, with residents taking the role of co-teachers and co-learners alongside with the academic partners. With the firm understanding that the community and all partners have much to teach, CommUniverCity engages a broad, representative segment of the community in an ongoing assessment of its strengths and needs, and in priority setting that informs the implementation of the community engaged learning projects.

CommUniverCity has also shifted the center of gravity for evaluating impact from a focus on the academic to the community side, maintaining a primary focus on the community in measuring outcomes and gauging success. Outcomes assessment methods include neighborhood-wide longitudinal social capital surveys, annual door-to-door resident surveys, analysis of changing trends in agency and school data, an ethnographic evaluation of the partnership [49**], and pre-project and post-project surveys of community participants. A social capital survey in 2006 and 2011 of over 600 households in the neighborhoods indicated that cooperative efforts by formal institutions and neighborhood residents have increased trust and civic participation in the community [50**]. The survey instrument was based on the social capital community survey developed by Robert Putnam and ‘The Saguaro Seminar’ [51]. It was administered in the Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace (FWBT) neighborhood where CommUniverCity first engaged with the community as well as a control neighborhood (East Valley) with similar demographic characteristics as FWBT but where there is no similar organization actively engaging with local residents. Survey results indicated a significant increase in social capital as evidenced in higher levels of civic participation as well as trust among people in general, toward their neighbors, the police, and members of different racial and ethnic groups in 2011 compared to 2006 and compared to the control neighborhood.

An ecology of community engaged learning projects
Organizing an average of 50 community based projects that engage over 1200 university students and 5000 residents each year, CommUniverCity has created an ‘ecology of projects’ [49**] designed to address the community development priorities identified by the partner neighborhoods. Project structures vary ranging from short-term projects embedded as a component of a semester-long course to long-term, multi-year projects that involve multiple courses and faculty working collaboratively to address the community priority. Students enrolled in the specific courses working on CommUniverCity projects receive academic credit; in addition, SJSU students are hired on a part-time basis to serve as project coordinators often serving as key liaisons between the project stakeholders. Each new community project must first be reviewed by a committee composed of university, city and community representatives who determine whether the purpose, scope, structure and evaluation process of the project fit neighborhood priorities and CommUniverCity’s own community-engaged learning process. Funding to support CommUniverCity comes from three primary sources: one-third from SJSU, one-third from the City of San José, and one-third from grant support and private donations.

Among the 350 projects completed since 2005, two sustainability-related projects deserve special attention as exemplars of CommUniverCity’s brand of community–academia partnership, given their multi sector approach, response to community priorities, and significant tangible impact on the local community. These projects, Five Wounds Urban Villages and Growing Sustainably, address environmental and policy changes though transit oriented development and urban agriculture.

Village planning: engaging the community in the planning process
As part of a planned extension of the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system, a new transit station will be built in Five Wounds, one of the Central San José neighborhoods where CommUniverCity works. The original plan for the station was a large surface parking lot with virtually no connection to the surrounding neighborhood, leading to increased traffic and not supporting community goals around transit-oriented development. Community members were unhappy with the plan, but did not have the resources to effectively advocate for a more inclusive and sustainability-focused plan. CommUniverCity led a team of community members, students, and faculty to re-envision the station plan to create a vibrant mixed use and pedestrian-oriented development. Multiple community workshops were held, including youth-only and Spanish-speaking-only workshops. The initial focus of these workshops was to develop a shared community vision for the station and surrounding area. After an initial vision was established, CommUniverCity convened a community task force, supported by students and faculty, to advocate for the community’s plan and ensure that the community goals for walkable, transit-oriented development was formalized in city policies.

Concurrent with this community planning process led by CommUniverCity, the City of San José was in the process
of updating their General Plan. One of the major strategies included in the Plan was ‘Urban Villages’ (City of San José; URL: http://www.sanjoseca.gov/index.aspx?NID=1736). The idea behind the urban villages strategy is to direct housing and job growth into designated areas of the city that could be developed into walkable, mixed-use urban communities, key factors known to support urban sustainability. As the City began to develop the first urban village plan, they drew heavily from the plan created by the CommUniverCity partnership and the Five Wounds Urban Village Plan, approved by the city council in November 2013, became the first of 70 urban village plans to be developed in San Jose (see Figure 2). This participatory planning effort earned CommUniverCity the Environmental Organization of the Year award from the Santa Clara County League of Conservation Voters in 2013.

A key component of the Five Wounds Village Plan is the conversion of an abandoned railway that runs through the neighborhood into a multi-use trail that will connect all corners of the neighborhood to the future BART station. Initially under the leadership of CommUniverCity, this rails-to-trails project has energized the local community and led to the establishment of ‘Friends of Five Wounds Trail,’ a grassroots group that advocates for the development of the trail, and its connection to the regional, San Francisco Bay area wide trail system (see Figure 3). The Friends of Five Wounds Trail group holds meetings while walking along the railway, which is currently being used as a trail. Their advocacy work has resulted in formal inclusion of the trail in the San Jose’s latest General Plan.

Although these land use planning, policy and advocacy projects have brought attention to a part of the city that has been largely neglected in the past, it has become clear to all project partners that the work would not be done until the trail, the commuter rail station, and the urban villages are built. Therefore, the greatest challenge lies in keeping not only the university but also the grassroots organizations engaged as advocates in a development process that will take more than a decade.

This commitment to remain engaged for the long haul was tested in late 2014 when the local transit agency announced plans to remove the Five Wounds station from the BART Silicon Valley extension. The ‘Five Wounds Village Watchdog Team,’ a community group that was created to oversee implementation of the project, quickly responded by organizing and building coalitions to put pressure on the transit agency to keep the original plans for the station at the neighborhood. The original university partners, however, have been mostly absent from these public advocacy efforts, signaling the difficulty in keeping faculty and students engaged in projects that span well beyond the academic term.

As of this writing, the Five Wounds BART station is back on the commuter rail extension plans, largely due to the work of the community advocates. In addition, the link between the university and the community watchdog group has been maintained by an emeritus SJSU Political Science faculty member who is also a resident of the neighborhood, founding director of CommUniverCity, and active member in campus and civic organizations. He has become a ‘super-bridger’ [49] who builds and maintains vertical and horizontal connections across and within institutions and groups.
Growing sustainably: promoting environmental and policy change through urban agriculture

The neighborhoods where CommUniverCity focuses are predominantly low income and a significant share of the population lives more than ½ mile from the nearest supermarket. One of the first tasks CommUniverCity undertakes when beginning work with a neighborhood is to conduct an extensive neighborhood planning process, usually in cooperation with faculty and students in the Department of Urban & Regional Planning at SJSU. A key outcome of this process is the development of a list of neighborhood priorities. A major concern of local residents was lack of access to healthy food and a desire to increase production and consumption of fresh, healthy food in the neighborhood. Out of this community priority, Growing Sustainably was established with a goal to promote both concrete, physical environmental change in the neighborhood related to food access and also to advocate for policy change at the city-level.

Before the development of Silicon Valley, San José was a major agricultural community and remnants of that history remain with numerous fruit trees scattered throughout backyards citywide. Unfortunately, much of the fruit goes uneaten. Recognizing an opportunity to get fresh, locally grown fruit into the mouths of hungry residents, community members approached CommUniverCity to assist with the establishment of a gleaning program. One of the first challenges the group faced was how to organize the program, particularly as it related to liability concerns from gleaning on private property. Law students from Stanford University, in collaboration with urban planning students at SJSU developed program guidelines, including detailed legal documents. The next challenge was to identify residents with fruit trees willing to participant in the gleaning program and community volunteers to help pick the fruit. Working with community leaders, faculty and students from nutrition and food sciences, justice studies, political science, and other departments at SJSU conducted this outreach work. Since 2012, the ‘Neighborhood Fruit Pickers’ program has donated over 20,000 pounds of fresh fruit annually to local food programs. The program has expanded from the original neighborhood to serving most of Central San José with team leaders coordinating gleans on a weekly basis in their local neighborhood.

Central San José has a varied housing mix with a combination of single-family dwellings and larger apartment complexes. Residents of the latter often lack space to garden and grow their own vegetables. Through Growing Sustainably, SJSU students and community members worked together to establish a neighborhood gardens program where homeowners with space provide an area where apartment residents can garden (see Figure 4). Garden education is provided to participants and an informal ‘sharing economy’ has been established where gardeners share excess produce with each other and their neighbors. Similar to the Neighborhood Fruit Pickers program, Stanford law students developed the necessary legal documents to ensure that issues related to liability...
and program management would be clearly spelled out in the gardening agreement. Although establishing the initial group of shared gardens was a challenge, we have seen an increase in homeowners converting their front yards to garden space and the number of residents growing their own food has increased significantly.

Similar to the shared residential gardens, some of the smaller apartment complexes in the neighborhood have also participated in Growing Sustainably’s neighborhood garden program. Complex owners agreed to have CommUniverCity convert an unused area into shared garden space for residents (see Figure 5). Surveys of residents before-and-after indicate that they have increased consumption of fresh vegetables and, as an unintended benefit, they experience better relations with their neighbors as a result of increased contact through tending the garden area.

CommUniverCity’s projects do not always succeed, however. One of the neighborhood gardens at a local apartment complex saw early successes for the first two years, but as water rates in San José rose, the apartment manager closed the garden despite willingness from the residents...
to pay for the additional water costs. A key lesson learned from this experience is the importance of working closely with all stakeholders and identifying potential problems and solutions well in advance.

The local environmental changes brought about by the Growing Sustainably project are significant and important, but influencing policy change at a broader level is an important component of the work CommUniverCity does. In partnership with a local non-profit, Garden To Table, that grew directly out of the Growing Sustainably project, CommUniverCity has successfully advocated for several improvements to the urban agriculture policies for the 10th largest city in the U.S. Agricultural activities, including urban farms, are now permitted in commercial-zoned and industrial-zoned areas of the city with no additional permitting requirements. The team is currently working on the implementation of a state law, AB 551, that would authorize the establishment of urban agriculture incentive zones where property owners could receive reduced property taxes through partnerships with small urban farms. In addition, Garden To Table is working directly with the Neighborhood Fruit Pickers program and the County of Santa Clara to permit the sale of backyard, gleaned produce at local corner stores. For neighborhoods with limited access to grocery stores, having access to low cost fresh fruit nearby would benefit residents.

A transformative partnership

Increasingly assuming the role of steward of a thriving community, San José State University has begun to erase the boundaries that keep the university and the community separate and foster significant, long-term improvements to the urban environment. By realizing the indistinguishable consequences of ‘what affects me affects the wider community, and what affects the wider community affects me,’ the university has engaged in a deep reciprocal relationship with its community and government partners [52].

Local communities and government agencies are increasingly looking to CommUniverCity to provide crucial support to neighborhoods in the aftermath of the deepest economic crisis in over 70 years for both the City of San José and the State of California. This load transfer away from government to local institutions, including higher education, has made community members increasingly look to the university to mobilize resources, create social capital and engage in neighborhood revitalization and environmental stewardship. CommUniverCity has thus become well known in the world of community service providers and policy makers in the Silicon Valley region.

CommUniverCity has nurtured a partnership where stakeholders are transformed through their relationship with each other [34,53]. Faculty and students are no longer dispassionate observers in the arena of high stake land use policy decisions — they join the forces of the community to advocate for sound decisions that will affect our environment for generations to come. Community members are increasingly confident about calling on their academic partners when the outcomes of their projects deviate from the original direction set by the community. City agencies are learning to work with academic partners and transcending the time-bound and professional and organizational barriers that kept them apart. This multidimensional relationship is one of interdependence where partners contribute experience and knowledge and share control of the direction of the partnership.

The partnership, however, is not without challenges. Having evolved with a loosely structured organizational framework, the partnership relies heavily for its long term sustainability on the work of ‘super bridgers,’ a small cadre of deeply committed, charismatic individuals (primarily university faculty, community residents and city staff) who are skilled at making connections across institutional boundaries and highly diverse constituencies [49**]. The critical process of identifying and grooming the next generation of ‘super bridgers’ for CommUniverCity has proved elusive at best, placing the partnership at risk of losing essential connections and institutional memory should key stakeholders leave the organization.

Moreover, high level institutional support for the partnership fluctuates with top leadership changes at both the university and local government, making it depend even more on its grassroots, decentralized nature. The closely knit, reciprocal relationships that are forged between community residents, faculty, and staff from community serving organizations and local government agencies while developing long term projects are key to ensuring the success and sustainability of these efforts in the long run. Although cross sector collaborations are difficult to create and maintain it is worth taking the time to explore them in order to deal more effectively with complex societal and environmental issues that spill over sectoral boundaries.

CommUniverCity may appear to be the result of a perfect storm, though its essential ingredients can be found in most urban centers: a willing residential community, an institution of higher education, local government agencies, local businesses, and community serving organizations. Terry Christensen and Melinda Jackson, [54] two SJSU faculty members actively engaged in the partnership provide a list of essential components to establish an effective community–city–university collaboration, CommUniverCity-style:

- Look for an existing community or neighborhood organization to work with so that residents can be
involved in the selection and implementation of projects.

- Reach out to someone in city government for support: a mayor or city manager or district council representative.
- Reach out to schools, community colleges or universities. A single faculty member could start with his or her own service learning projects, but it would be best to find a few colleagues with whom to collaborate, simply by concentrating projects in a selected neighborhood.
- Reach out to potential partnering organizations. CommUniverCity’s partners include the school district, and community benefit and faith based organizations that work on health, environment, affordable housing, and education.
- Set a priority-setting exercise with the community. Residents could develop broad project priorities at a single workshop or faculty could simply take project proposals to the community organization for approval (and buy-in).
- Like so much that we do in community development and academia, this can be done with the sweat equity of those involved, but success is most likely with some staffing, including an executive director, a community director, university students and volunteers (such as volunteers placed with AmeriCorps, a program of the National Corporation for Service)— but it does not have to cost a lot of money.

Despite some challenges facing CommUniverCity, the model has proven to be effective and the potential for replication by other institutions is high. In the area of urban sustainability, the CommUniverCity approach has been extremely successful, with significant direct environmental improvements to the local communities where CommUniverCity works, included increased access to health food and the establishment of community recreational opportunities and transit-oriented development, as well as broad policy impacts affecting the entire City of San José.

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References and recommended reading
Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest


This study responds to an evolving critique of community-university partnerships’ centeredness on the benefits to academia by, instead, examining the impact on service agencies hosting college students in service learning activities. The study found a mixed bag of benefits and challenges for service agencies engaged in service learning. The authors issue a call to extend beyond self-referential studies that focus on student outcomes to carefully examine the impact of community-university partnerships on community partners.


The authors call attention to the dearth of community-focused research in service learning, and offer a participatory action research model to examine the process and outcomes of community service-learning focused on the community–university partnership as the unit of analysis.


In this study, San Jose State University Anthropology faculty and graduate students used a variety of ethnographic techniques, including content analysis, participatory observation, focus groups, interviews, and ‘indigenous evaluation’ to explore the quality and depth of the social capital that CommmUniCity has built among its stakeholders. The authors articulated the structural challenges that the organization faced as it transitioned from ‘start-up’ mode to a point of maturity.

50. Garcia CE, Vera-Sanchez CG, Rudy P: Social capital from the ground up: building trust and participation in San Jose. San Jose State University; 2014.

This study examines the results of a community survey in San Jose utilizing the social capital framework developed by Robert Putnam and The Saguaro Seminar. The analysis of the surveys found that levels of social capital in the neighborhoods served by CommmUniCitySan Jose have increased significantly from 2006 through 2011.


The Saguaro Seminar developed a comprehensive framework for measuring social capital and a survey instrument that has been used in more than 50 communities throughout the country. This body of work on social capital and its connection to community indicators such as economic prosperity, children’s wellbeing, safety, health and civic participation, is of seminal importance in the field of community development.


Terry Christensen and Melinda Jackson, two San José State University faculty members who were instrumental in the creation of CommmUniCity, provide an overview of the organization’s origins and early evolution. They also offer a tool-kit for replicating this multi-sector, community-driven partnership model.