

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Reaching Across the Divide: The Role of Universities in Building Capacity for Community Economic Development*

by Sean Markey and Mark Roseland  
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This report raises important issues for community economic development (CED) practitioners, educators and theorists. The authors have reviewed a wide range of Canadian university programs which claim as their mandate teaching and research in CED. The report is framed within a broad theoretical context which problematizes the role of the university in responding to community issues (the “ivory tower” debate), what is meant by the term “community capacity,” and what is meant by CED itself.

Sections 1–5 of the report include a summary of its research methodology, brief reviews of the literature on the definitions of CED and community capacity, and a longer discussion in which CED is explained as a reaction to the “capacity-deficit” of many Canadian communities; a deficit which the authors suggest is best explained by the staples theory of Harold Innis. (Both the research methodology and the associa-

tion of CED with staples theory will be critically dealt with below.)

The main substance of the research findings is presented in section 6, “The Role of Universities in Building Capacity for CED.” The section’s introduction argues that:

The need for a more structured understanding of CED and local development processes, the demand for relevance in universities from public funding sources, the increasing acceptance of participatory methods and flexible program design, and the desire of academics to play a more critical and involved role in society all contribute to new opportunities and challenges (pp. 17–18).

That many universities in Canada are responding to the opportunities and challenges, there can be no doubt. In the appendix, the report gives brief profiles of programs at 16 Canadian universities.<sup>1</sup>

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While specific programs and respondents are not named, the section utilizes data gathered from key informant interviews, program promotional materials and Web sites. This section documents the similarities and, to a much lesser extent, the differences in university responses. The data is organized around the themes of “program descriptions, delivery methods, community—university relations, community-based research and institutional challenges” (p. 18). The authors demonstrate that universities are asking tough questions about their role in CED. As one respondent put it:

The key question is how we can structure it [CED] without killing it? This is the key question facing CED in universities. CED is process-based and community-based, and different everywhere, but there are some basic tenets. It is the role of universities to figure this out (pp. 19–20).

What many of the university programs appear to have in common is a commitment to praxis—the combination of both theory and practice—as a guide to CED research and student learning. This commitment overrides whatever differences may exist between programs in terms of emphasis placed on the organizational, philosophical or technical aspects of CED (p. 20). In keeping with a key principle of CED, many of the programs, whether delivered in a traditional classroom setting, in module format, via distance, in-community workshops or Web-based learning, aim to be highly participatory. There are, of course, barriers to the delivery of appropriately targeted and pedagogically sound CED education. The report discusses the barriers of cost, the time practitioners can realistically devote to education, and the challenge of effective delivery to remote locations (pp. 22–23).

An especially valuable part of the report (6.2) deals with the merits of community-based research. While admitting that the methods used are diverse, the authors state that “[a]ll programs examined were either directly associated with community-based research programs or indirectly participating in research through faculty associations with other departments” (p. 24). Conceptually, “community-based research” is not explained, but from the discussion that follows it can be assumed to mean a method of research in which community members collaborate with the researcher to define the problem to be stud-

ied, participate in data collection, and in which all stakeholders have access to the results. The underlying principle is that the “community” is not a *thing* to be studied by outside, so-called experts. For sound epistemological (and political) reasons, members of the community should actively guide and participate in the research process.

The barriers to a university fully committing to community-based research are identified. “Time needed in the front-end for developing the research with community partners and in the follow-up stages to ensure quality dissemination adds time to the research process that is generally not recognized in an institutional sense by the university or funding agencies” (pp. 24–25). The struggle for recognition by the university and the funding agency proceeds at the same time as researchers and the community are negotiating how best to work together. For example, as one respondent stated, researchers are learning to be “aware of the rhythm of rural life” and not to be intrusive. In turn, communities are beginning to:

understand that the university is a weird place. They accept that providing they get something out of it. For example, they accept that you need to do research and publish academic findings. They also seem to buy the mutual exchange of needs, balancing the academic and the practical (p. 28).

For the university and the community, respondents agreed the relationship was beneficial in that research could be applied to community needs in a cost-effective manner and universities could make important gains in institutional profile and access to new students and situations in which faculty are drawn into a “real-world context.”<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, none of the respondents cited indicated the potential conflict that exists when funding agencies and universities demand that researchers bring money into the institution. In such cases, researchers can become “consultants,” playing the game of whatever the client wants the client gets, rather than paying strict attention to the principles of intellectual integrity. Such are the challenges of opening up the “ivory tower” to tied sources of funding; a broader issue which the report, unfortunately, does not acknowledge.

Within universities, respondents did point out important challenges which arise from more generally accepted criteria for promotion and advancement. According to one respondent, “[t]raditional output in journals and conducting local workshops are at opposite ends of the scale” (p. 31), with the former accorded much greater significance. Administratively, university bureaucracies are inflexible.

The university is not structured to share resources with the community. For example, in setting-up [sic] research accounts, everything has to flow through the university. You have to work hard to move beyond that and as an institution, it takes a lot of work to serve and understand two separate communities (p. 32).

It is in raising issues such as the challenges and opportunities inherent in universities’ changing public role and their structures, and some salient points in the on-going discussion between universities and communities as to how best to work together that *Reaching Across the Divide* makes its contribution to CED. The report, however, has limitations which can be understood as a challenge for future community-based research on CED education programs and for theorising about CED itself.

The report aims to “review and assess the role of universities in building capacity for community economic development” (p. v). Methodologically, it achieves this by reviewing the academic literature, reviewing the various programs’ promotional materials, and interviewing program representatives. The challenge now, however, is to *critically* assess the programs. To accomplish this, two things need to occur. First, the curricula of the programs need to be analysed in detail to determine what is actually emphasized with respect to the organisational, philosophical or technical dimensions of CED. This means going beyond the highly generalized descriptions found in brochures and university calendars and what representatives of the programs have to say, and being prepared for the possibility of discontinuities and contradictions. Second, a community-based approach needs to be taken by collaborating with students and graduates to problematize the education programs and gather data about their actual experiences. This data is crucial to understanding just how participatory and empowering are specific programs. *Reaching Across the Divide* provides a partial picture of the state of

university-based CED education in Canada. In order for academics and practitioners to have a complete picture and to differentiate between the programs, more work is needed.

With respect to theoretical matters, the presentation of CED as a response to problems best explained by staples theory has serious shortcomings which run the risk of de-politicizing both the problems and the solutions they require. Staples theory tends to adopt a “reified concept of spatial relations” (Carroll, p.6) which can reduce CED (and the focus of its educational programs) to mere technique: A technique for maximising local control and building entrepreneurial capacity without critically assessing the logic of a capitalist approach to development. Moreover, historically, the theory sought to explain “export-oriented growth in new-settler societies” (Laxer, p. xiv) by pointing out the extent to which “hinterland development was determined externally by the pattern of demand and the level of technology in the metropolitan countries and internally by God-given geographic and resource endowments” (Laxer, p. xiii). While offering some insight into the dependence of the Canadian economy on European and later American powers, the theory hardly addresses internal developments such as the disenfranchisement of Aboriginal peoples (the *first* settlers) from *their* “God-given geographic and resource endowments.” The social histories of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples, women, fishers, farmers and labourers offer ample opportunities to theorise about CED as something more than a strategy to reduce “capacity-deficits,” a concept all too easily manipulated by blame-the-victim ideologies. Rather, CED must also be viewed as integral to a range of social and political movements which challenge the structures of racism, classism and sexism.

#### NOTES

1. The authors acknowledge that their list is not comprehensive. *The Aboriginal Education Opportunities Manual*, for example, published by the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers, is a more authoritative guide for programs (university-based and otherwise) which respond to opportunities and challenges in Aboriginal CED.
2. In the social sciences, especially in the fields of applied anthropology and sociology, this engagement with “real-world” contexts, has been going on for at least half a century.

**REFERENCES**

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