Invited Commentary

Pursuing the Anchor Mission in a Fragmented Suburban Setting: Assets, Capacity, and Collective Action

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Abstract

Increasingly, suburban universities find themselves in communities facing challenges that inner cities have had to deal with for decades, including concentrated poverty, housing vacancy, and underperforming school districts. While the problems are similar, the institutional context is different. Compared to central cities, suburban municipal governments generally lack the resources necessary to sustain robust community economic development initiatives. Further, suburbs often lack the rich landscape of nonprofit organizations that were built up over many decades in central cities. This article reflects on the experience of the University of Missouri-St. Louis as a case study of a suburban anchor institution. This experience suggests that anchor institutions in suburban settings need to focus on asset-based community development, support collective action among fragmented institutions, and build the civic capacity of local governments, nonprofits, and businesses.

Keywords: anchor institutions, capacity building, collective action, community improvement, asset-based community development

Introduction

Urban issues are moving to the suburbs. More poor people now live in suburbs than in central cities (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). Most anchor institutions are located in central cities, and the literature on anchor institutions is heavily oriented toward urban contexts. Increasingly, suburban universities find themselves in communities facing challenges that inner cities have had to deal with for decades, including concentrated poverty, housing vacancy, and underperforming school districts.

While the problems are similar, the institutional context is different. Compared to central cities, suburban municipal governments generally lack the resources necessary to sustain large-scale community economic development initiatives. Further, suburbs often lack the rich landscape of nonprofit organizations that were built up over many decades in central cities. The University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) is located in just such a fragmented suburban setting. We reflect on our experience as a suburban anchor institution to draw lessons for anchor institutions located in similar contexts. Specifically, we argue that suburban anchors need to focus on asset-based community development, support collective action among often fragmented institutions and build the civic capacity of local governments, nonprofits, and businesses.

The Suburban Context

UMSL is a land-grant metropolitan university located in North St. Louis County just outside the city of St. Louis (see Figure 1). UMSL views itself as an anchor in the region and in North St. Louis County, but when we formulated our anchor mission we wanted to choose a local geography to focus our efforts. UMSL elected to focus on communities that touch upon a two-mile radius from the center of the campus (see Figure 2). The two-mile radius is somewhat arbitrary, but we believe it captures the communities whose fortunes are tied most closely to the university, and us to them.
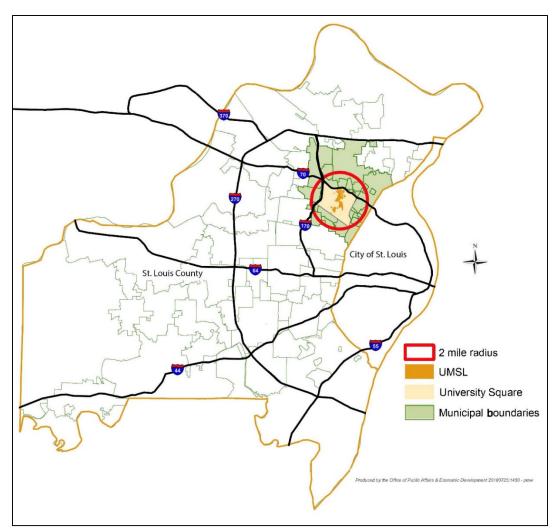
Figure 1. The metropolitan context of UMSL.

Socioeconomic conditions in the communities that touch upon the two-mile radius vary significantly, but many face financial hardship. For example, 21.9% of the population in the footprint is living below the poverty line, compared to 9.8% in St. Louis County as a whole. The unemployment rate is 11.8% compared to 5.9% in broader St. Louis County. Only 15.3% of people living around the university have a bachelor's degree, compared to 42.8% for all of St. Louis County (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Much of the housing was mass produced after World War II to satisfy pent-up demand. Most of the single-family homes are small, 800-1,200 square feet, bungalows and some are larger architecturally distinctive homes. The median house price in the area is $75,117, compared to $181,100 in broader St. Louis County. A few mixed-use corridors exist in the footprint. After decades of disinvestment, a few have seen investment and new energy while others continue to see disinvestment and even abandonment.
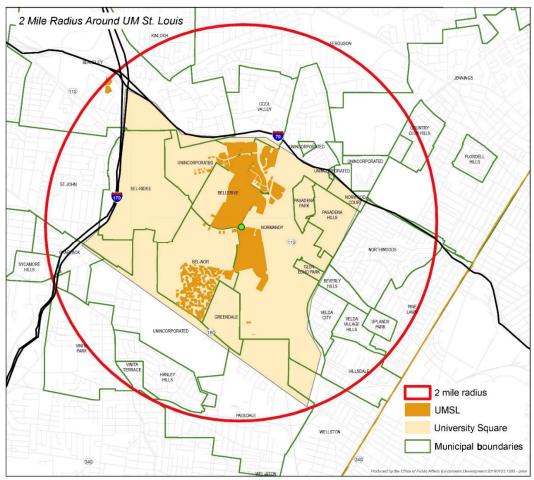
Figure 2. UMSL's local anchor geography (two-mile radius).

Local government around the UMSL campus is highly fragmented. St. Louis County has eighty-eight separate municipalities and ten unincorporated census designated places, making it one of the most fragmented counties in the nation. The area around UMSL is especially fragmented. Remarkably, thirty separate municipalities touch on the two-mile radius around campus (see Figure 2). The population in those thirty municipalities ranges from 182 in Bellerive Acres to 20,730 in Ferguson (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 2018).

Generally, suburban areas are less well served by nonprofits (Allard & Roth, 2010; Weir, 2011). Although there are many social service nonprofits in the two-mile radius, they are often small and lacking in resources, or larger organizations that serve the broader county or region. Community development corporations (CDCs), nonprofits devoted to revitalizing specific communities, are generally lacking in the suburbs. An association of community building nonprofits reports that there are twenty-one place-based nonprofits operating in the city of St. Louis, but only seven operating in the county, which has many more poor people (Community Builders Network of Metro St. Louis, n.d.). As we discuss later, UMSL helped establish one of

these place-based nonprofits and is in the focus footprint of Beyond Housing, one of the region's largest community development nonprofits.

Although the communities around UMSL face many challenges, they also have significant assets. It is essential for anchor institutions to focus on these assets. Successful community and economic development is rooted in asset-based community development (ABCD). ABCD helps communities to identify their strengths and their assets that can be building blocks for revitalization (Asset-Based Community Development Institute, n.d.). The communities around UMSL have significant assets which the university and the community can leverage to improve the quality of life. The anchor mission is rooted in the fundamental truth that large institutions are often not maximizing the impact they can have in community wealth building and place making. The communities in which UMSL is a part have assets, including the headquarters of some of the nation's largest companies, such as Emerson and Express Scripts, historic communities and shopping districts, the oldest public golf course west of the Mississippi, and proximity to St. Louis Lambert International Airport. New assets dot the landscape, as well, including numerous stops on the regional light rail system called MetroLink, bike trails, and job training centers. While anchor work must adapt to the special challenges of working in fragmented inner-ring suburbs, it will not succeed if it does not lift up the area's assets and help to leverage them for the communities' benefit.

UMSL's Journey to an Anchor Institution Framework

UMSL has been engaged in local and regional community building since its inception. The university has deep connections to its public purpose from UMSL's founding through a partnership between the local school district, which donated the land for the campus, and the University of Missouri, which created UMSL as part of the public land grant university system. In the most recent decade, UMSL developed its own framework and governance structure for pursuing the anchor mission, and developed a database to guide the anchor work and evaluate its effectiveness.

UMSL's journey toward crafting a strategic anchor mission began in 2014 when we joined the Anchor Dashboard, a collaboration of six universities, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and facilitated by the Democracy Collaborative, and designed to systematically collect data on the condition of the communities around our campuses. We formed an Anchor Dashboard Committee that facilitated the data collection not just on the surrounding communities, but also on the institutional effort of UMSL to impact issues in the community. The data collection focused on the two-mile radius around UMSL. This data collection effort involved quantitative data, as well as qualitative data from a series of focus groups with residents, business owners, and elected officials. The process of collecting data did not just help to guide our anchor strategy but also helped to lift up the anchor mission and give it more legitimacy inside the university.

One of the findings from the data was how deeply UMSL was involved in the anchor footprint. UMSL has 370 full-time, part-time, and student employees and over 4,000 alumni who live within the two-mile radius. The university has deep connections with the people in this community beyond its physical placement, professional connections, and public land grant mission. The data collection made it clear that our well-being was closely connected to the fate of these communities.

In 2018, the Anchor Dashboard Committee transitioned to the Anchor Institution Committee, which provides guidance to university leaders on strategy for our anchor work. The Anchor Institution Committee represents key leaders across the university. Deliberation by the Anchor Institution Committee led to the university identifying an anchor framework that covered four pillars of strategies in economic development, community development, health and services, and education (see Figure 3). The university then integrated the anchor mission into the recently completed five-year strategic plan.
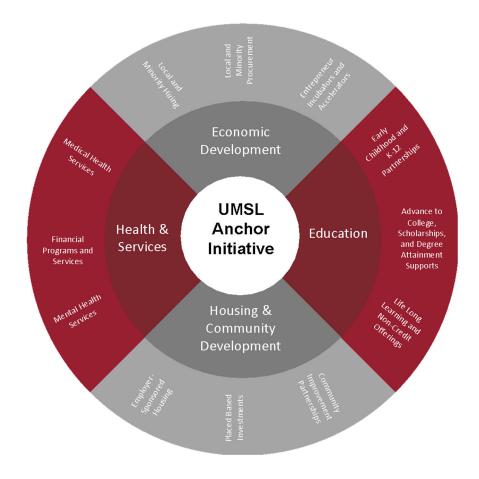

Figure 3. The four pillars of UMSL's anchor initiative.

Anchor Initiatives: Building Civic Capacity

Two events focused UMSL's attention on the challenges facing the communities around campus. In 2012, the Missouri Board of Education voted to withdraw accreditation from the Normandy School District, which covers much of the anchor focus area. This meant that students could transfer to other schools in the region and their tuition dollars would follow them. This soon brought the school district to the edge of bankruptcy. In 2017, the Normandy Schools Collaborative, which was a restructuring of the school district, reached provisional accreditation with improved test scores, but there is still a long way to go.

The second focusing event was the shooting of Michael Brown in August 2014 by a white police officer in the city of Ferguson, which is located less than a mile from the UMSL campus. The massive demonstrations that followed energized the Black Lives Matter movement and cast light on the predatory and racially biased policing practices by many small, under-resourced municipalities in St. Louis County.

After the Normandy School District lost its accreditation in 2012 and Michael Brown was shot in 2014, highlighting glaring inequalities in the region, UMSL took a closer look at how it could better collaborate with neighboring communities. The Normandy School District's loss of accreditation prompted the university to deepen the collaboration between the College of Education and the school district. The events in Ferguson called the university's expertise in trauma-informed care into service. UMSL trained school teachers and leaders on how to support youth from local communities as they returned to school after Michael Brown's death. The College of Education has also partnered with schools on literacy programming and early childhood development.

UMSL has not acted alone; Beyond Housing, one of the highest capacity nonprofits in UMSL's anchor footprint, has led a comprehensive community revitalization initiative called 24:1, based on the 24 municipalities in the Normandy School District. It has won national recognition as one of the most comprehensive community improvement initiatives in the nation (Swanstrom, et al., 2012). To deepen UMSL's collaboration with 24:1, Chancellor Tom George joined the board of Beyond Housing. Based on extensive citizen engagement, Beyond Housing helped the community to devise a comprehensive plan for revitalization that addresses, among other issues, housing, education, health, personal finances, and community engagement. Beyond the chancellor's involvement in this effort, university researchers collected data and performed evaluations for the initiative.

While the many small-scale municipalities around UMSL provide great access to elected officials and local decision-making, many struggle to build the capacity to effectively plan and implement economic development initiatives. Many different stakeholders in the community are

working to address these contextual challenges. Beyond Housing's Municipal Government Partnership has helped seven municipalities combine into the North County Cooperative Police Department, facilitated thirteen separate municipal courts merging into two court hubs, and facilitated the first municipal consolidation in the area (Beyond Housing, 2017).

Recognizing that the communities directly bordering on the campus face a number of specific challenges, UMSL collaborated with them on a number of initiatives. Natural Bridge Road was a four-lane avenue that split the UMSL campus and cut it off from surrounding communities. UMSL facilitated a collaboration among the Missouri Department of Transportation, the city of Normandy, Great Rivers Greenway, St. Louis County, East West Gateway Council of Governments, and North County Inc., raising approximately $20 million to reconfigure Natural Bridge into a "complete street" that can accommodate not just cars but also pedestrians and bicyclists. University Square, a university-affiliated CDC established by UMSL, helped to facilitate the project and is working to bring more diverse retail opportunities to the area, such as a grocery store, hotel, and café. The chancellor hosts community meetings for local residents and elected officials several times a year to share what is happening on campus and to brainstorm community improvement initiatives.

As part of the Anchor Initiative, we conducted a series of focus groups to determine how the community perceived the university. The focus groups with local elected officials, business owners, and residents focused on understanding their attitudes toward UMSL and their perception of the university's role in the community. Through these focus groups it became clear that communication between the university and community was a consistent issue. Local government officials felt UMSL communicated with them on a regular basis, but business owners felt less communication, and residents felt even more outside the loop. Residents appreciated having UMSL as a resource, but felt that UMSL did not communicate about major initiatives that would affect the area until after the fact. The focus groups highlighted the reality that strong relationships had been built with elected officials who regularly attended the chancellor's community meetings, but this communication was not trickling down and out to the broader community. UMSL needed to broaden its communication channels and work to more directly talk with residents and business owners. Recognizing that we needed a consistent form of communication, we created a monthly newsletter, *Community Connections*, which keeps community residents up to date on university plans and lifts up community improvement initiatives that are ongoing in the anchor footprint.

The focus groups also showed that local businesses did not feel connected to or knowledgeable about opportunities to do business with the university. To address this concern, we conducted an Engaging Local Business event in 2018. Most of the businesses around the campus are small and are not well prepared to bid on contracts at UMSL. We designed the Engaging Local Business event to rebuild relationships between the university and local businesses, as well as to provide

support for businesses needing to learn how to become a registered supplier and bid on university projects. Beyond training on university procurement, the event also showcased business development supports offered by UMSL and MU Extension, such as a procurement technical assistance program and entrepreneurial support. About 40 businesses attended the event, which generated new bids from local small businesses. Recognizing that more training and supports will be needed to enable local businesses to be more successful at bidding on university contracts, UMSL has decided to make Engaging Local Business an annual event.

The anchor mission is now fully integrated into UMSL's recent five-year Strategic Plan. We have made a point of putting specific anchor goals into the plan. For example, the plan calls for a 10 percent increase in the number of local hires and the amount of procurement dollars spent on companies located in the anchor footprint by 2020. We are presently developing a database to track procurement contracts by geography and reach out more effectively to local businesses. Like many public universities, we are part of a statewide system and procurement procedures are mandated by the central University of Missouri System. Partnering with system-wide leaders around procurement will be crucial for our success. In the meantime, however, we have been able to break landscaping contracts into smaller amounts, thus enabling us to pilot work with local and minority-owned landscaping companies.

Conclusion

One of the most prominent lessons from our work is that anchor institutions in fragmented suburban settings need to both improve practices to be a stronger partner with community and work to enhance the capacity of local governments, nonprofits, and private businesses . Supporting local governments to work together to find cost savings, deliver higher quality services, or access training and staff support will be crucial to the success of these communities. Local businesses need support to acquire the capacity to bid on university contracts and bring more jobs and investment into the community. Likewise, nonprofits need to be nurtured, and UMSL is fortunate to have a high-capacity nonprofit, Beyond Housing, in the anchor footprint. In recent years, larger nonprofits have been locating in the area and new nonprofits have been emerging in North County. However, even more capacity is required to address all the issues facing these communities.

Suburban institutions can learn from strategies attempted by others to develop initiatives based on their community context and institutional strengths. Throughout the country, universities like the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) are utilizing partnerships and collaborations to build community capacity. These efforts are paying off for both the broader community and the institution. UCO restructured staff to better partner with the Greater Oklahoma Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on goals shared in the UCO's strategic plan and the chamber's seven community development priorities. Alongside college readiness and employment initiatives,

UCO also developed the Latino Leadership Oklahoma City program with the chamber to grow the number of effective leaders in for-profit, nonprofit, government, and higher education roles (Barthell, Castillo, Mendoza, Macey, & Simmons, 2019). This is just one example of how universities are working with partners to enhance community capacity. Other universities have found ways to support community capacity by playing an intermediary role to support investment and expertise being available to students and community members. Pace University's Wilson Center for Social Entrepreneurship works across disciplines at the university and across nonprofits and community/social enterprises to support successful start-ups (Tekula, Shah, & Jhamb, 2015). Through participation in national networks like the Anchor Learning Network and the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, UMSL has been able to take learnings from other institutions into conversation with local community partners to review ideas and develop strategies that make sense in north St. Louis County.

UMSL realizes, above all, that it cannot do this work alone. The amount of local procurement and hiring it controls is not enough. Large private companies in north St. Louis County need to be brought into the anchor initiative. For example, the impact of a local procurement initiative at UMSL could be greatly improved if large institutions and private corporations engaged in a coordinated effort to contract with local companies. UMSL's anchor institution strategy has evolved to include forming an anchor collaborative with North County institutions and companies. We are currently working with Christian Hospital and the St. Louis Zoo, which has purchased 425 acres for a new facility in north St. Louis County. The collective strength of large institutions to impact the local economy through coordinated local procurement and hiring has the potential to stabilize and revitalize disadvantaged suburban communities.

UMSL's journey to embrace the anchor mission illustrates the need to root anchor institution strategies in a community's assets and support collective action and capacity building across community stakeholders. The communities around UMSL have many small businesses and a few large corporations. Both are assets in tackling high unemployment and poverty rates. As discussed, anchor institutions can design small contract opportunities that are suited to small businesses and can work to form anchor institution collaboratives that broaden the number of jobs and contract opportunities large institutions target to local communities. Success in each of these strategies requires building capacity to analyze an institution's purchasing and hiring patterns, local business options, and increasing knowledge in the community of contracting requirements. Depending on the local context, anchor institutions may play the role of convener or capacity builder and other times the institution might best support collective action and civic capacity building through participation or partnership with others. Universities, in particular, can be powerful partners in addressing collective action and civic capacity building given their experience as educators and their ability to serve as neutral conveners.

UMSL's experience leaves anchor institutions working in fragmented inner-ring suburbs with a set of key questions to answer as they focus on asset-based community development, support collective action among often fragmented institutions, and build the civic capacity of local governments, nonprofits, and businesses.

1) How will you engage deeply across different government, nonprofit, business, and resident groups to identify community goals the institution can engage on and communicate effectively?
2) What assets does your community possess that the university can help leverage to improve the local community and economy?
3) Are there coalitions of stakeholders that cut across individual actors that you can engage with to design and implement strategies? Or does your institution need to play a convener role?
4) What capacity building is necessary to increase a strategy's likelihood of success? What capacity building can the university do and what capacity building requires partnership?

Fragmentation and a sometimes-limited history of social and economic efforts in suburban communities experiencing disinvestment do not seal the fate of those communities. It is merely the context in which the work is done. When that context is accounted for, anchor institutions and the communities they are a part of can achieve their goals.

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