Community-Campus Partnerships and service learning: harnessing untapped potential for rural Australia

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Summary
Rural and remote communities are constantly defined and described in terms of their deficits and poorer outcomes across a broad range of socially determined indicators of health (1-4). Poorer educational outcomes and employment opportunities, higher morbidity and mortality rates, declining economic status, climate change and diminishing resources (5; 6) are themes that dominate government sector activity at strategic, policy, funding and practice levels (4; 7-9). This cycle of deficit dependency for funding and resourcing of programmatic activity fails to impact on the root causalities of inequity experienced by these communities whilst continuing to endorse remediation focused interventions (10).

How to break this deficit dependency cycle has challenged policy makers, funding agencies, and communities since the initiation of rural reforms in the 1990s (11). Theory and evidence have identified the critical need for innovative and visionary rural and remote leadership and engagement as a core foundation in creating sustainable social change (6; 12; 13). For communities that experience human, economic, intellectual and resource capital constraints the capacity to drive innovation and vision requires clever responses. The literature tells us that resilient communities can, and do, leverage off larger institutions to address their complex social challenges and where they do, their endeavours are more likely to be successful over the long term and the sustainability assured (9).

This paper describes the evolution of a cross-sectoral community-campus partnership in far western NSW that draws on the innovation, vision, experience and tenacity of regional innovators and leaders in harnessing the commitment of a metropolitan university to undertake meaningful activity in a regional context by drawing on their human, social, network and resource capital to address root causalities of rural and remote inequity. The partnership is enabled and facilitated through the academic embeddedness and practice experiences of a remotely located University Department of Rural Health.

The model draws on international and national policy documents (3; 4; 6-8), complexity (14; 15), social justice (16) and empowerment theory (17), the principles of community engagement (18), community-campus partnerships (19) and solution focused collaborations (10). Academic and student engagement is influenced by active, engaged scholarship (20) and transformative learning (21) through service-learning (22; 23) and solutions focused programmatic activity.

The evolution of this model has provided critical learning experiences for community and campus partners and service learning participants in the areas of governance, engagement, theory, practice, service and strategic alignment. Insight has been gained into the paradoxes experienced by community and university partners in the development, planning, implementation and evaluation of complex cross-sectoral partnerships. This model has the capacity to transform and enhance regional leadership, regional capacity and productivity whilst attracting academics and students with a desire to work on and contribute to real world solutions in service to the community.

The model currently facilitates the engagement of community organisations and individuals with academics and students from across the disciplines of Business, Agricultural Sciences, Architecture, Law, Criminology, History, English and the broad Health disciplines to work collaboratively on locally and regionally identified and prioritised projects and programs.
The model has implications for government policy, funding and practice, academic engagement and research approaches, and acknowledges the role of community leadership and innovation in addressing inequity through the creation of sustainable partnerships and solutions.

References
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