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Why Clusters: Enhanced Opportunity for Partnerships

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Why Clusters: Enhanced Opportunity for Partnerships

August 16th, 2016 by Don Birx

One of the things that so impressed me about the origin of public higher education was that it was built on the idea of partnership with its local community. In fact, whole segments of universities were given over to this idea of "extension services" or working collaboratively on the various challenges they faced in the community. This became the motivation for much of the research and experiential teaching and engagement that occurred in universities and which we are just now "rediscovering." The result was a tremendous growth in national productivity, job creation, and innovation. It wasn't teaching job skills, it was about creating new jobs and new skills and ways of learning and doing things that were responsible for 85% (estimated – national academy report) of the increase in our standard of living over the past 150 years.

When we compartmentalized education, we not only separated knowledge components into disciplines, which did not yield the breadth of knowledge required to play a significant role in our communities, we also eventually decreased the level of interaction with our communities and allowed ourselves to become glued to the classroom – hence the pejorative "Ivory Tower."

Clusters allow us to provide the type of education, even at the freshman level, that integrates the learning process in such a way as to create opportunities to interact with our communities again. Using open laboratories, we can work across disciplines and with community members to solve problems and challenges that give students insights into how education is relevant to the needs of the world and their role in innovation, entrepreneurship, discovery and exploration. It is an exciting, invigorating and integrated education in which partnerships with community members (yes, including business and industry) greatly increase the educational value of our programs to students. It provides a portal (open laboratories) we have not had and a two-way window between the university and the community that enriches both.

And if you are teaching in an area where you don't see the role of partnerships outside the university, don't worry about it, but look to see if there are some internal partners with whom you might join forces.

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