2015-2016 Series
Innovative Concepts to Achieve Campus Transformation

CHAPTER 9
Convene, Cooperate, and Collaborate: How Six College and Universities Came Together to Address Issues of College Access for Urban Youth
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Dr. James T. Harris: President of the University of San Diego

This fall, the College Access Center of Delaware County, Pennsylvania will celebrate its seventh year of serving local high school students and their families. It is estimated that more than 4,000 students have visited the center over those seven years and taken advantage of the many services provided through the collaborative efforts of six institutions of higher learning.

The students and families served by the center come from school districts across Delaware County, which is in the greater Philadelphia metropolitan area, with a population of approximately 500,000. While it exists to serve all of Delaware County, the primary focus of the center is to provide counseling and college advice to students from the Chester Upland School District, one of the state's poorest performing districts. Although there are other college access centers in urban areas across the United States, what makes this one unique is the collaboration between six diverse colleges and universities who collectively decided to address the issue of providing greater access to college for children from underserved and disadvantaged populations.

History of Chester and the Chester Upland School District

The city of Chester was founded by William Penn in 1644 and is Pennsylvania's first incorporated city. The city is located on the Delaware River and was a major center of ship building as well as paper and automotive manufacturing during the first half of the 20th century. The city was a cultural and economic hub for Delaware County with many major retail stores, entertainment venues, and diverse houses of worship. Beginning in the middle of the century, the city started to suffer from deindustrialization when several major employers closed, and it lost a high percentage of its jobs by the turn of the century. By 2010, the population of Chester had dropped to 33,972 from a post–World War II high of 66,000. As unemployment became rampant, the median family income dropped to the lowest per capital income of any city in Pennsylvania and among the worst in the nation. Chester has also ranked annually for over a decade as one of the most violent cities in the country, with drug crimes representing a high percentage of all crimes in the city.

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During the past 20 years, the Chester Upland School District, which serves the citizens of Chester, emerged as the worst performing school district in the state of Pennsylvania ranking at the bottom of the 501 school districts in the state on annual proficiency testing for students. This has had a long term negative impact on the city where today only 69 percent of the adult population reports graduating from high school, and close to 10 percent reports dropping out prior to the eighth grade. At the last census, the proportion of the adult population with a college degree was reported at 14 percent compared to the state-wide average of 26 percent. What has added to this problem is the chaos and controversy regarding the direction of the district. The district has been under state control for almost two decades and has had no less than 12 different superintendents since 2000.

Based on the myriad issues the City of Chester faced in 2007, there were many ways local colleges or universities might decide to intervene. Although the city itself had only one university within its city limits, Widener University, there were several other local universities that attempted to intervene in the city to bring about some positive change. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that any of those initiatives had a lasting impact on the community. Due to this lack of documented success, there was little enthusiasm from potential community partners to engage in any proposed project with local universities. This primarily stemmed from the belief that most universities viewed Chester as only a laboratory and not a place to grow long-term democratic partnerships to address the systemic issues facing the city or its ailing school district. As a result, most universities sponsored initiatives in Chester that were limited in scope and usually restricted to simple community service projects.

Convening a Breakfast Meeting

It was during one of Widener University’s student community service days that I had an experience that made me rethink our role in the city. One Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service, I joined approximately 50 Widener students, faculty, and staff for a day of volunteering. With the wintry weather of January our options for community service were limited. The group from Widener decided to serve at the Chester YWCA to clean up and paint the aging facility. Unfortunately, dozens of students from other local universities were also sent on the same mission, which meant that the YWCA had too many volunteers who had nothing to do and most left that day feeling they had wasted their time.

That experience made me realize that it might be a good idea to convene a group of local college and university presidents to discuss how we could better coordinate our efforts in Chester for greater impact. Instead of asking one of my colleagues at Widener to bring together people from the other colleges, I decided to personally call the presidents of five local institutions I knew had some interest in the City of Chester. To my surprise, every president said yes to a meeting, and within a few weeks I convened a breakfast meeting at Widener. At the meeting were the presidents of Cheyney University, Delaware County Community College, Neumann College (now University), Penn State–Delaware County (now Brandywine), Swarthmore College, and Widener University.

During our two-hour breakfast discussion, we each expressed our own frustrations with being unable to form meaningful, lasting community partnerships in Chester. Quickly, our conversation turned to how we might work together, and we agreed that the most likely place to start would be to discuss how we could help the Chester Upland School District. We agreed we would meet again that semester and would bring our chief community engagement officers with us to discuss our best options. That second meeting was highly productive and generated some ideas of how we might cooperate to bring about positive change.
Learning to Cooperate

At this time, the school district was in the middle of another leadership change at the superintendent level, so we decided to invite a key local elected official to the next meeting of the presidents. As the state senate majority leader, former mayor of Chester, and life-long city resident, Senator Dominic Pileggi had a wealth of experience dealing with the issues in the city. He was very frank with the presidents and said it would be difficult for any institution of higher learning to work directly with the school district and suggested that we meet with the Pennsylvania Secretary of Education to discuss our options since the district was in state receivership. Within a few weeks, we had arranged a meeting with the secretary, and three of the six presidents traveled to Harrisburg for a discussion. The Secretary of Education’s response surprised us. Rather than suggesting that we focus our attention on directly intervening with the school district, he suggested two options we might consider: working to develop new pre-K options for families in Chester and increasing the access Chester high school students have to college.

For the next year, the presidents of the six institutions met to explore ways we might address the issues recommended as focal points by the Secretary. We started by forming teams made up of representatives from the different institutions to investigate national best practices for supporting pre-K education and college access. After we discovered there was little support from the state to initiate any meaningful pre-K programming, we focused our energies on the possibility of creating a College Access Center in Chester modeled on a successful center in Philadelphia.

We recognized immediately that this would require the institutions of higher learning to cooperate in ways that they had never done before. The presidents met and developed a legal structure that could serve as the umbrella organization for the center. A new 501c3 was formed called the Chester Higher Education Council (CHEC), and it was agreed that the officers of the CHEC would be the presidents from the six institutions.

Moving from Cooperation to Collaboration

The rapid pace in which the six institutions mobilized to address the issue of college access for the students of the Chester Upland School District surprised everyone involved. The creation of a new nonprofit and a college access center helped move the initiative along, but there were still issues of governance, funding, and location that had to be determined. Resolving these issues required a level of collaboration most of the institutions had not experienced with each other in the past.

The first issue was to secure funding. Without sufficient funding to hire a director and provide resources for the access center, there was no sense in moving forward. Once a budget was prepared, one of the first working groups formed was a committee made up of advancement officers from each institution to identify prospects. The local United Way was identified as a potential funder and approached for support. The United Way of Delaware County agreed to provide a three-year grant of $100,000 annually but required that the center serve all of Delaware County and not just Chester. After that funding was secured, the six colleges and universities agreed to an annual dues structure, and each institution identified volunteers and provided computer equipment and office furniture to create the center. During this time, Widener University identified a building near its campus that was on a bus route, purchased it, and remodeled it as the new home of the College Access Center. Swarthmore College wanted to place student volunteers in Chester, and to facilitate this they provided the services of a senior college official from the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility, Ms. Cynthia Jetter, to supervise the new center director and be the liaison for CHEC. An advisory board made up of local citizens along with college officials from each institution was developed to oversee the center’s activities. The current director of the center, Mr. Julani Ghana, has done remarkable work in forming partnerships with key people in the community to make certain the center is fully utilized and the needs of Chester high school students and their parents are met.
In spite of several changes in leadership at the CHEC member institutions over the past six years, CHEC has attracted new financial support, continues to expand its offerings, and has become a model for intercollegiate collaboration. In the spring of 2015, CHEC hired a part-time executive director, Michelle Johnson, to help coordinate new CHEC initiatives and secure additional funding. After developing a strategic plan and adopting a vision to become a national model for multi-institutional collaboration that increases access, opportunity, and success for post-secondary education in an urban environment, CHEC is now investigating how it might work with the state to identify new models for pre-K education to help prepare young children for school and increase the pipeline to college.

**Key Ingredients for Success**

The creation of CHEC and the College Access Center of Delaware County demonstrates successful collaboration between six very diverse colleges and universities. Without a doubt, the creation of similar organizations around the country would significantly benefit thousands of students from underperforming school districts. Unfortunately, institutions of higher education aren’t usually willing to collaborate with other colleges and universities and are viewed as competitors for students and scarce resources. From the outset, CHEC worked because each president put aside his/her own ego and personal agenda and saw the potential in collaboration. This was never seen as a project led by one institution which was supported by others, but rather was viewed as a collaborative effort from the beginning. It also helped that different presidents were willing to take the lead on different aspects of CHEC and personally dedicate the time to this important work. Just as former U.S. president Harry Truman once said: “It is amazing what can be accomplished if you don’t care who gets the credit.”

In addition to strong presidential support three other key ingredients were present that made this project work:

1. **A Clear Sense of Purpose or Mission**—The six institutions agreed from the beginning that the focus of any collaboration would be narrow and specific. In this case, the primary focus was on improving access to and success in post-secondary education for the children of Chester and other local low performing school districts.

2. **An Urgent Need to Collaborate**—The need to address college access for Chester children was self-evident and urgent. Every CHEC member institution had tried with various levels of success to intervene in Chester, but each realized no one institution could do it alone, given the enormity of the problem.

3. **A Commitment to Forming Democratic Partnerships**—CHEC seems to work because each member institution views this work through the lens of democratic partnerships, both with other institutions of higher education and key community partners.

There is a desperate need in America for colleges and universities to collaborate and address some of the major issues facing distressed school districts and their inability to produce graduates prepared for the rigors of higher education. The model created by six diverse colleges and universities in southwestern Pennsylvania that are part of the Chester Higher Education Council is definitely one worthy of duplication and further study.
Dr. James T. Harris III has served as a college and university president for over 20 years. In 2015 he began his tenure as the president of the University of San Diego. Earlier in his career he served as president of Defiance College (1994-2002) and is President Emeritus of Widener University (2002-2015).

Under his leadership, Widener was recognized nationally for academic excellence and community engagement efforts. From 2002-2015, Widener experienced record growth in philanthropic support, completing its largest comprehensive campaign in history, achieved record undergraduate enrollment, and grew its endowment by $58 million.

Dr. Harris serves in several local, state, and national leadership roles, including service on the executive committee and as chair-elect of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) board, former chair of the board of directors for the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania (AICUP), and former vice chair of Campus Compact, a national coalition of 1,200 college and university presidents. He served as chair of the President’s Council of NCAA Division III and as a member of the executive committee of the NCAA.

In 2011, he received the Chief Executive Leadership Award from CASE for his outstanding efforts in promoting and supporting educational and institutional advancement. Earlier in his career, he was recognized by the NAACP of Northwestern Ohio for his commitment to civil rights. In recognition of his contributions to education and the communities he serves, Harris was named by the John Templeton Foundation as one of the Top 50 Character Building Presidents in America. In 2013, he received the Association of Communicators in Higher Education (CUPRAP) Ciervo Award presented to one who exemplifies CUPRAP’s fundamental purposes of supporting and advancing the understanding of higher education.

Dr. Harris earned degrees from the University of Toledo, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, and Pennsylvania State University. All three of his alma maters have honored him for his work in education. In May 2013, Harris received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from Widener University in recognition of his many accomplishments.

He oversaw the establishment of the Chester Higher Education Council, which supports the College Access Center of Delaware County, and under his leadership Widener opened the Widener Partnership Charter School, the state’s first university-based charter school. Last year, he co-authored a book “Academic Leadership and Governance in Higher Education” that was published by Stylus and was on their higher education best sellers list.