

UNIVERSITIES AND COMMUNITIES: THE NEED FOR A REAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract

Strategic partnerships between universities and intelligent communities are essential for addressing rapid, profound societal changes. Communities benefit from access to educated human capital, research, and global connections, while universities gain relevance through community integration and real-world applications. Such alliances must move beyond superficial collaborations, requiring visionary leadership and shared goals. Universities can drive innovation, foster trust, and facilitate international connections, but the under-utilization of their potential persists.

By redefining roles, embracing agility, and leveraging technology, universities and communities can build strategic partnerships and jointly achieve sustainable development and resilience, outperforming those who neglect these critical partnerships.

Keywords: universities, communities, change, strategic advantage, strategic partnership.

1. Introduction. The need for change

People have been talking about change for a long time: since Antiquity various authors have referred to the subject from different positions, ranging from enthusiasm to rejection; in no way is a discussion of change new or original. Toeffler describes in 1970 a 'future shock' which represents 'the dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future' (p. 11).

What characterizes change today? Two key elements:

- the depth of change which refers to areas as diverse as the impact of technology, changes in organizational and community culture, or the characteristics of leadership processes;
- rapidity, mainly driven by the rapid evolution of technology, which imposes a pace of change that is difficult to predict and difficult to control.

The combination of these two factors means that today's society is faced with complex choices about the meaning of the future. Creative and robust responses are needed to meet these challenges. The idea presented in this article is that one such response is a strategic alliance between intelligent communities and universities. This alliance can bring major benefits for both partners. For communities, access to educated human capital, advanced research, knowledge, internationalization. For universities organic connection with the community, involvement in living labs of significant scale, participation in community development, access to data and case studies. The combined response of universities and intelligent communities can be much stronger, of substance, correlated with environmental changes. To realize such a partnership, however, requires a new strategic paradigm in terms of universities working with local and national communities. We are not only talking here about tactical and operational aspects but about a new vision that includes an organic and structural collaboration of the two partners for strategic success.

Universities are, by their nature, organizations that connect directly with evolution, change and the people who make things change for the better. Universities, on the other hand, are increasingly massive and complicated entities, insufficiently available to be flexible and adaptable quickly.

Modern communities are, more than ever before, dependent on attracting the people they need, depending on the specifics of their local economy. For a local or national community, one of the greatest possible catastrophes is the loss of human capital capable of providing vitality and attractiveness. An important strategic factor is the fact that competition between local, regional, national communities is extremely tough at the moment, similar to the private sector. Intelligent communities are able to attract these resources (at the expense of other competitors) and the main resource they are fighting for is the human resource. The quiet and passive existence of local communities run by leaders interested only in day-to-day management and operational efficiency is a thing of the past. Losing this tough competition means deficiencies that can condemn the community to lack of development in the medium and long term. Recovery from this strategic failure may be difficult or impossible.

Universities today are a gold mine for organizations and communities; they can provide educated human capital, technological advancement and a coherent perspective on the future. Universities have always been a source of competitive advantage for communities; today they are becoming a source of strategic advantage (referring not only to competitors but also to a multitude of strategically relevant factors) for intelligent communities. Intelligent communities are those communities that are able to do three essential things: (1) understand what is happening around them; (2) learn from environmental developments, and (3) to rapidly adapt their internal functioning and connection with the environment according to the first two points—it is essential that they take a pro-active approach in this adaptation. Few communities today possess all three attributes and this is extremely dangerous in a world where change is profound and rapid.

It is quite possible that without an intelligent connection between the community and its environment, even when it is functioning well and thriving, it may be taken by surprise by the massive and sudden changes coming from outside. In this case, communities are very vulnerable and prosperity built up over long periods of time can be adversely affected in a very short period of time. Prosperity and success can bring unresponsiveness, complacency and lack of understanding about the present and the future. Operational excellence is useless without the right strategic choices.

Strategic advantage refers to:

- A better connection with the environment and its specific changes from political to cultural or technological;
- Better connection with strategically relevant actors (customers, stakeholders, decision makers, internal human capital, partners);
- Coherent development of the community's internal capabilities (from their identification to their maximum utilization); and
- An increased capacity to perform in a tough and complex competitive market.

2. The university—community partnership

The smart university—communities relationship must become truly strategic, providing structural impact over long periods of time. It does not just mean the traditional, formal and, in some cases, superficial connection, but signifies a solid partnership aiming at fundamental and long-term change. The partnership cannot be strong without the serious involvement of both participants, based on their specific characteristics.

What can universities offer in this strategic connection:

- Attraction and retention of diverse resources: knowledge, technological, financial, but especially in terms of educated human capital. Successful economic/technological hubs are often connected with university areas that drive and support them.
- Universities are an essential factor for community vitality (along with connectivity, young population, prosperity, association and participation, cultural life, quality events, a valuable business community, a high-performing administration), without which local entities can stagnate and depress.

- Contrary to what many public decision-makers believe, universities not only have to respond to the demands of society, as they can do much more: they can create change and build new perspectives, ambitious and unprecedented strategic paradigms, new ‘utopias’ for the future. Bouckaert (2020, p. 81) believes that they must become an integral part of social science research tools. To see the university as a factory that responds mechanistically to operational demands is to ignore the greatest strategic advantage it can bring.
- The university is a local actor interested in the prosperity of the community in which it lives; while other actors (more or less vocal) may leave at any time in search of immediate opportunities, the university remains, and sometimes it is the only one that keeps communities alive and prevents their collapse. It has the advantage of often knowing the problems and characteristics of the communities where it works because it is an important member of them.
- The university possesses (if it is seen as a strategic partner) the integrated knowledge that enables it to stimulate profound change for the better in communities. Our team’s involvement in strategic local development projects has in various cases had impressive results. We have worked in diverse cases: large, medium and small cities, thriving or less developed rural communities. In cases where there has been open and serious cooperation the impact of strategic planning has been obvious and, in some cases, spectacular. However, local or national decision-makers (too) often ignore this resource and prefer to work exclusively with large consultancy firms that often provide them with only thousands of colorful pages that disappear as soon as the contract is finished. In a nationwide survey we found that less than 5% of local governments had worked in strategic planning processes with universities. The rest relied on private consulting firms, even when there was a university with significant capacity in their own community.
- Often the university is the actor that enjoys a high degree of trust in the community, which enables it to stimulate dialog, communication and participation even among groups with little traditional interest in these things. We have encountered in our research and strategic development work situations where the university has acted as a successful facilitator between groups that have not traditionally cooperated; or situations where the university has facilitated communication between local actors who had no links although they were in great need of each other (and this has happened, to our surprise, not only in large communities with significant populations but also in small towns where we would have expected local interaction to be much greater).
- The university can connect communities internationally quickly and at a spectacular level. By its very nature it connects easily with diverse university communities, and from this one can imagine various sophisticated connections, including 4 ways cooperation (diverse universities and communities working together internationally). Internationalization capacities are essential for universities and communities today because knowledge and development cannot be limited within local or national administrative boundaries. Isolation leads to a lack of understanding and strategic perspective for communities, and this is an unacceptable strategic error in today’s world.

- The university can help local decision-makers (public and private) to develop organizational and administrative structures that are more agile, responsive to change, high-performing, able to realistically assess their performance and based on modern leadership models.

Many of these arguments seem obvious and clear. Yet the university – community connection is under-utilized and public and private decision-makers often tend to perceive the university in a limited perspective. Often universities and their communities just co-exist without attempting at least a decent cooperation beyond the day-to-day existence, a cooperation that strategically benefits both partners. Local or national government seeks help from organizations with little connection to the community; business builds partnerships with external collaborators in areas where the university has expertise; local groups face difficulties in areas where the university can play a positive determining role. Moving to a strategic level requires intelligent leaders with major cooperation and communication skills.

To have a successful partnership, universities need to assess their own actions and perspectives. We cannot ask others to value us without investing heavily in our own strategic development at various levels:

- Defining the role of universities in modern society: what does teaching, research, societal engagement mean today? How do we define success and performance? All these questions are linked to the broader endeavor of redefining the strategic paradigm in which the university of the future places itself. Things should not be changed simply for the desire to change at any cost, just as reform is not always necessary. Often preserving the status quo is the best choice. However, a discussion about what we want from universities in the near future and how we understand their strategic role is inevitable.
- Adjusting management and leadership models in universities. The strategic perspective needs to be complemented by major adjustments in management and organizational culture. Leadership quality is equally important for intelligent universities and communities. On the one hand, we cannot imagine the universities of the future without high-performing leadership; on the other hand, it is hard to ask others for managerial performance that you cannot implement within your own academic community.
- A pro-active attitude in connecting with environmental and societal developments. The university does not have the luxury of waiting and treating change in its environment with superficiality, aloofness and relaxation. This type of approach is extremely dangerous, not only because it can leave it vulnerable to external shocks but also because it eliminates its strategic role as a promoter of change in society.
- Internationalization as a strategic component (not just another added activity). Although it has long been seen as an interesting but ancillary activity for universities, internationalization is becoming an essential activity today, because international isolation automatically means a major diminution of strategic capacities for development and survival.
- Connecting intelligently with the relevant human capital (students, professors, researchers, administrative staff, partners) which must be the main driver of university

performance. People relevant to the university have significantly changing expectations, perceptions and motivations that need to be better understood. In a recent research conducted by our team on the attractiveness of private organizations for students and employees the results were very interesting: the most important indicator for attractiveness is the ability of organizations to provide life-work balance. People want a type of job that is meaningful and provides a meaningful type of job satisfaction; the work provides opportunities for learning, professional and personal development; the quality of leadership is essential and is a major motivator/motivating factor. These elements may only be a representation of momentary changes caused by the pandemic. But they may also represent a major shift in the identity of the new generation, for whom work has a different proportion and importance; this does not mean that work is no longer important to them or that there is low productivity but that they do not give such a high proportion to work in their overall identity.

- The rapid and organic integration of technology that refers to diverse and complex levels: the development of technologies through applied research, connecting teaching with new opportunities offered by technologies such as artificial intelligence, access of human capital to technologies that stimulate performance, analyzing the ethical aspects of technology use, etc.
- Developing professional consulting capabilities, as universities are often lacking interest in this area or are poorly able to offer professional services able to respond to market demands. Keeping the university in the classic ivory tower is a risky choice.

Communities and universities that understand the immense value of this strategic partnership will have much to gain. Those who only talk about it will continually wonder why they fail to perform. Those who ignore it will be in for unpleasant surprises.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can note that intelligent communities and universities need to consider a strategic partnership capable of helping them better meet the challenges of the future. The success of this partnership depends on different factors: leadership, communication capacity, cooperation skills, definition of common interests, but above all on understanding the new strategic paradigms that define today's world.

It is very likely that in the near future we will see major development differences between communities, where the difference will be made by the existence of this type of strategic partnership.

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