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## *A City-Campus Engagement Theory From, and For, Practice*

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## A City-Campus Engagement Theory From, and For, Practice\*<sup>1</sup>

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*This article tells a story of practice, a story of theory, and how each informs and transforms the other through a two-way flow of people and knowledge from a city to a campus and back again. By reflecting with fellow participants on the events and outcomes of a sustained city-campus partnership, the author introduces a theory of engagement from and for practice, and strategies such as investing in human relationships and using instruments-for-action.*

It seems to me that for the first time in nearly half a century, institutions of higher learning are not collectively caught up in some urgent national endeavor. Still, our outstanding universities and colleges remain, in my opinion, among the greatest sources of hope for intellectual and civic progress in this country. I'm convinced that for this hope to be fulfilled, the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems. (Boyer, 1996, p. 11)

Since 1999, hundreds of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) students have unknowingly advanced Boyer's call by connecting the rich resources of one of the world's most powerful universities with the small and impoverished city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, located 30 miles north of campus. In this article, I share what I have learned while observing and participating in the partnership known as MIT@Lawrence, and "challenge the epistemology built into the modern research university" (Schön, 1995, p. 27).

This article, like my own intellectual journey, begins with a story of practice. In the first part of the article, the data, which I collected over a period of more than seven years, come from a variety of sources, including course syllabi and assignments, student theses and dissertations, meeting notes and transcripts, organizational reports, funding proposals, books, newspapers, journal articles, and personal interviews, as well as my own personal reflections,<sup>2</sup> and draw on participant voices<sup>3</sup> focused on thoughts and feelings about the partnership's history, evolution, and aspirations. In the second part I present an engagement theory, and in the third part I present strategies for practicing engagement. Each of the second and third parts relies primarily on data gathered during the 2008-09 academic year through the more

than 40 reflective interviews students conducted with MIT@Lawrence participants, past and present, as well as data from a series of reflection exercises completed by student participants.<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on reflective practice contributes to what the late Donald Schön, M.I.T. professor of Urban Studies and Education from 1968 to 1997, called the "battle of snails" in which participant voices represent small, but vital movements toward "the new scholarship":

All of us who live in research universities are bound up in technical rationality regardless of our personal attitudes toward it, because it is built into the institutional arrangements—the formal and informal rules and norms—that govern such processes as the screening of candidates for tenure and promotion. Even liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and other institutions of higher education appear to be subject to the influence of technical rationality by a kind of echo effect or by imitation. Hence, introducing the new scholarship into institutions of higher education means becoming involved in an epistemological battle. It is a battle of snails, proceeding so slowly that you have to look very carefully in order to see it is going on. But it is happening nonetheless. (1995, p. 32)

In short, this article tells a story of practice, but also a story of theory, and how each informs and transforms the other through a two-way flow of people and knowledge from the city to the campus and back again. It also makes the case for a new epistemology—reciprocal knowledge—knowledge development and real learning on both sides, achieved through a diverse, dynamic, and complex network of human relationships.

### Our Story of Practice

What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing. *Aristotle*

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The first part of this article is organized into five chronological episodes, each ranging from one to four years, and in it introduce some of the faculty, students, staff, civic leaders, and residents who comprised the partnership between M.I.T. and the city of Lawrence. Over the course of a decade, these partners collaborated to analyze complex problems, implement new ideas, and, in so doing, began to develop a new epistemology. The details of this story of practice represent a foundation for the theory and strategies to follow.

*Following Families, Following Alumnae*  
(2002-2003)

In January 2002, during my first week as a tenure-track assistant professor in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, I attended a talk given by Kristen Harol who had been invited to campus to share the work underway by Lawrence CommunityWorks, a community development corporation that she and two other M.I.T. alumnae—Jessica Andors and Tamar Kotelchuck—had recently reinvigorated. These alumnae had engaged with the people of Lawrence, a former mill town on the Merrimack River, during an economic development course they had taken together (J. Andors, K. Harol, & T. Kotelchuck, personal communication, July 12, 2006). By June 1999, with Masters of City Planning degrees in hand, Kristen, Jessica, and Tamar were working in Lawrence. Though they had planned to immediately apply the economic and community development theories they had studied at M.I.T., they discovered—by going house-to-house, knocking on doors, and talking with families—that parents in Lawrence wanted a summer program for their children. So they began to lead trips to the zoo and other activities with the children in the North Common neighborhood—a poor, Latino neighborhood adjacent to the mill district. By following the parents' advice, Kristen, Jessica, and Tamar earned the trust and respect of the neighborhood families; these relationships gave them the credibility they later needed to develop large-scale projects for the city.

During her talk, Kristen described Lawrence as the last and grandest textile city built by the Essex Company, one of America's first corporations. Once a planned utopia and the American solution to England's own neglected textile cities, the core of Lawrence, made up of dams, canals, boardinghouses, and several textile mills, was built in three busy years, from 1845 to 1848. For nearly seven decades, Lawrence, "the immigrant city," employed successive waves of newcomers in the mills (Cole, 1963). Kristen, whose grandfather had sold shoes on Essex Street, told the audience presently how there was a vibrant population of newcomers, mostly Latino,

transforming the city, creating a thriving commercial corridor with new bodegas and clubs in the once retail- and theatre-lined downtown. She also noted that Lawrence was one of the poorest cities in the nation, with home ownership rates less than half the national average, unemployment rates two times higher than the state average, a legacy of environmental contamination, and an average high school graduation rate of about 44% (Hoyt, 2005a). "We should work together to return the investment," she concluded, explaining that the Essex Company that had designed and built Lawrence had invested its massive profits, not in Lawrence, but in prominent rooted institutions that are the lifeblood of New England today, including the Boston Public Library, the Boston Athenaeum, Massachusetts General Hospital, and M.I.T.

At the time, I was actively seeking a client for a seven-week course aimed at teaching undergraduate and graduate students of urban planning how to analyze data from the U.S. Census Bureau using a geographic information system. Inspired by Kristen's talk, the innovative planning and community development practice she described, and her vision for connecting city and campus, I met her in the hallway after her talk and agreed, by a handshake, to form a relationship with Lawrence CommunityWorks. By the end of the following semester, in November 2002, Lang Keyes, longtime M.I.T. professor and former community organizer in Boston's South End, encouraged me to formalize the partnership within the university by expanding the seven-week workshop to a full-semester, required service-learning practicum which we would co-teach. This would take time, I learned (Hoyt, 2005b). Meanwhile, the workshop was offered again in spring 2003 when we had two clients—Lawrence CommunityWorks (a resident-led organization dedicated to equitable development and economic justice) and Groundwork Lawrence (a nonprofit organization focusing on improving the physical environment then run by another M.I.T. alumna, Maggie Super Church). The M.I.T. alumnae, now a team of four, asked students to help them create a zoning overlay for the mill district. I worked with students to set up a Web-based neighborhood information system rich with data from both the U.S. Census Bureau and the City of Lawrence, while Kristen asked students to work with Lawrence teenagers to collect data about, and on, the actual streets. In November 2003, the Lawrence City Council—after a crowd of civic leaders, parents, and children filled City Hall—voted unanimously to approve the zoning overlay to permit housing in the historic mills. This early victory not only emboldened partnership participants, but also unleashed the redevelopment potential of the historic heart of Lawrence.

### *Increasing Community Voice (2004-2005)*

By January 2004, the workshop had become a required service-learning practicum in the Masters of City Planning curriculum at M.I.T.<sup>5</sup> When Lang and I invited Andre Leroux, a neighborhood planner at Lawrence CommunityWorks, to campus to approve our syllabus, the blueprint for advancing *our* five-year plan to build an expert-driven mapping system for Lawrence, Andre demanded that we work hand-in-hand with residents to collect data on the ground in addition to acquiring and analyzing administrative data sets for civic leaders. Wanting Andre and the alumnae to know that we respected their way of working in the community, Lang and I agreed. Practicum students serendipitously helped with the transition from a top-down to a bottom-up approach to data collection and relationship-building. A practicum student from Peru who had worked in New Delhi's slums, led a series of participatory meetings with Latina mothers and children teaching faculty and classmates the necessity of talking, listening, and singing to gather useful information. Other students taught us the importance of bringing the city to the campus by showing teenagers how to create maps of vacant properties in their neighborhood on campus computers. The partnership began to expand. As word spread at M.I.T. about the partnership, a graduate student in the Center for Real Estate with an interest in mill redevelopment asked me how to meet mill owners in Lawrence. She studied successful redevelopment projects in other cities and the Lawrence mill owners invited her to share her ideas with civic leaders, business owners, artists, parents, and teenagers (Clark, 2004).

My collaborator, Lang Keyes, encouraged me to make research out of the Lawrence work. Consistent with my doctoral training, I started with hard data, analyzing nearly 1,900 cities to create a typology for cities like Lawrence, and identified 151 small, impoverished American post-industrial cities. I invited people from 41 of these "forgotten"<sup>6</sup> cities (from eight states) to campus to teach us. Each week, throughout the fall 2004 and spring 2005 semesters, an array of city councilors, mayors, private developers, community activists, consultants, professors, and leaders of think tanks and foundations taught us that such cities can move forward by investing in people, especially new immigrants and youth disconnected from political structures who should be in the decision-making mainstream. Revitalizing these cities is especially difficult because they often suffer from inadequate governing capacity, a lack of civic engagement, and a chronically negative mindset. But, together, we learned how it can be done. Whether guided by residents, business leaders, gov-

### *A City-Campus Engagement Theory*

ernment, or nonprofit organizations, revitalization can be achieved by harnessing the resources of rooted institutions to improve communication across long-standing racial and class divisions, shift expectations, and articulate an inclusive and positive vision of the future (Hoyt & Leroux, 2007).

The academic calendar was a formidable foe; outside the university, people's lives are not lived in semesters. When a group of us, including my M.I.T. faculty collaborator, two M.I.T. alumnae working in Lawrence, Andre Leroux, and myself met at a restaurant in Cambridge to discuss the future of the partnership, Andre insisted that faculty find funding to ensure continuous engagement in Lawrence. Speaking on behalf of our primary partner, Lawrence CommunityWorks, he gave us an ultimatum: Either engage with the people of Lawrence year-round or disengage entirely. In my view, the latter was not a viable option as we had learned recently the devastating impact that foreclosures would have on Latino families and neighborhoods. It was urgent now to secure funding to support uninterrupted work with people in Lawrence. In response to Andre's ultimatum, a group of faculty applied for resources available through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Community Outreach Partnerships Centers (COPC) program. This funding would not only support continuous engagement, it also would help to "uncover and expose the practices of sub-prime lenders by finding, recording, and sharing resident stories" (Hoyt, 2005a). I felt that university faculty, staff, and students needed to learn more about and take action to mitigate the predatory lending and imminent foreclosure crisis in Lawrence.

While our funding proposal was under review, alumnae working in Lawrence pushed Lang Keyes and me to expand the partnership by connecting the fall 2005 practicum students with other rooted institutions in the city: Bread and Roses Housing, Inc., the Merrimack Valley Habitat for Humanity, and the City of Lawrence Office of Planning and Development. Together, faculty, students, civic leaders, and residents studied vacant property acquisition processes in Lawrence and other forgotten cities. By now, the people in Lawrence were no longer clients; they were friends. On a Saturday morning, I drove to Lawrence to deliver good news to one of the M.I.T. alumnae at her home. When she opened the door to find me standing on her porch with a bouquet of roses, Jessica exclaimed, "Does this mean we got the HUD grant?"

### *Encountering and Coping with Crises (2006)*

With funding from HUD, more M.I.T. students, faculty, and staff joined the partnership—now dubbed MIT@Lawrence—along with a cadre of civic leaders representing rooted institutions in

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Lawrence. By January 2006, though we had detailed project plans and skilled students eager to act, we found ourselves at a stage of stabilizing and trying to cope with the mishaps that serious human relationships inevitably create. A series of creative failures ensued. Through no fault of its own, one group of graduate students in the M.I.T. Sloan School of Management disappointed the Lawrence Higher Education Resource Center, a new partner in Lawrence. A doctoral student in the M.I.T. Media Lab who spent his afternoons with teenagers from Movement City, a nonprofit organization for youth in Lawrence, ran into “security and privacy” issues as he launched a neighborhood news system they had helped him design (Burd, 2007). One student had to learn to be patient with civic leaders too busy with pressing problems to meet with her or return her e-mail and phone messages. Another student, who had worked with shelter-bound survivors of domestic violence, met resistance from residents when she proposed to “give a voice” to those who had become victims of predatory lending. And another student, who had conducted action-research as an undergraduate at Cornell University, made numerous trips to Lawrence, but failed to find a committed partner (Schwieger, 2008).

Students taking the 2006 practicum experienced adversity as well. Even a graduate student with a background in engineering and a knack for computerized mapping, who had done an extended internship with residents, struggled to maintain stable relationships with people in Lawrence. When he led a group of practicum students in informing Lawrence City Council’s President and a State Senator at a public meeting that the vacant property disposition process in Lawrence violated state law, M.I.T.’s burgeoning relationship with the City’s Office of Planning and Development was damaged.

Gradually, what appeared to be failure began transforming into success. Though the semester was officially over, the Lawrence City Council’s President asked the class to present their recommendations to the City of Lawrence Housing Committee. Soon after the student presentation, the Lawrence City Council voted to eliminate the Real Property Task Force—an important victory for Lawrence’s nonprofit housing developers who wanted a more streamlined and transparent vacant property disposition process.

*Following Civic Leaders, Following Students*  
(2007)

By January 2007, relationships began to stabilize and collaboration between the people inside and outside the University resulted in production of useful knowledge. For example, a student introduced

Damon Rich, an architect-in-residence in M.I.T.’s Center for Advanced Visual Studies, to victims of foreclosure in Lawrence, and together they produced a widely disseminated film, *Predatory Tales*, in which people in Lawrence manipulated puppets to demonstrate, in English and Spanish, how to avoid becoming victims of predatory lenders and losing their homes to foreclosure. (Hoyt et al., 2007).

Students began initiating their own projects: An M.I.T. student repaired a tattered relationship by connecting the Lawrence Higher Education Resource Center with the student-led M.I.T. Educational Studies Program, resulting in 63 teenagers from Lawrence High School riding the bus to campus every Sunday for free SAT tutoring. Another student, after taking the 2006 practicum, convened an educators’ summit in Lawrence during the summer; there she met the principal of the Lawrence Family Development Charter School and introduced her to Eric Klopfer, professor and head of M.I.T.’s Teacher Education Program. Professor Klopfer’s team acquired new computers and new software for eighth-grade students to test in Lawrence, while the charter school transported 55 eighth-graders to campus monthly to conduct experiments with faculty, staff, and students at the M.I.T. Museum, the Edgerton Center, and the Toy Lab. As this initiative grew, it became known as Lawrence@MIT.

Students found multiple points of entry into the partnership. For example, a student who had built homes for Habitat for Humanity, won a fellowship to work in Lawrence studying mortgage delinquency patterns for Merrimack Valley Habitat for Humanity; he also took and emerged as a leader in the fall 2007 practicum. An M.I.T. undergraduate first taught Lawrence teenagers on Sundays and later took the 2007 practicum to help families facing recurring floods and foreclosures in the Arlington neighborhood. Another student, now in her second year as the practicum teaching assistant, worked during the winter break to finalize and deposit the practicum report, written in both English and Spanish, in the Lawrence Public Library.

The city-campus partnership became part of a larger learning network in which ideas and practice interacted and were enhanced to produce local and state-wide policy outcomes. In 2007, the city councilors, mayors, private developers, community activists, consultants, professors, and leaders of think tanks and foundations who had taught us in 2004 and 2005 about revitalizing forgotten cities, gathered on M.I.T.’s campus. With a new cohort of students, we brainstormed a state-level action agenda. Subsequent to the co-production of two complementary national policy reports highlighting the need to invest public dollars in “forgotten” cities, Tina Brooks, Massachusetts’ Housing Undersecretary and M.I.T.

alumna, attended our last convening on campus where she announced the availability of new planning grants for revitalizing small cities throughout the state.

### *Broadening the Partnership (2008-2009)*

January 2008 marked a turning point for MIT@Lawrence as students organized and ran the partnership's first retreat where we elected three students to function as managers. We had begun moving toward a next stage in which conversations between people inside and outside the university are continuous, fluid, and maintained by the potency of enduring human relationships. For example, under the leadership of another student, who had worked as a seventh- and eighth-grade science teacher in Camden, New Jersey, Lawrence@MIT expanded as participants won scholarships to participate in M.I.T.'s Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) summer program. The partnership began reaching into every corner of M.I.T. as student volunteers, staff, and faculty from the Chemistry, Physics, Biology, and Civil Engineering departments as well as the Solar Electric Vehicle Team, the GAMBIT Lab, and Spanish House worked on projects with eighth-graders from the charter school.

By 2009, we were beginning to complete a full circle with our practice. We had unleashed the mill district's redevelopment potential with the passage of a zoning overlay in 2003 and, as an alliance of civic leaders, residents, students, and faculty, were now working to convert the mill complex, known as Union Crossing, into a green neighborhood of apartments, stores, childcare facilities, parks, and playgrounds. When my faculty colleague, Lang Keyes retired, Ezra Glenn, former Director of the City of Lawrence Community Development Department, co-taught the 2009 practicum with me. Also, a former community organizer from Lawrence enrolled at M.I.T. and introduced fellow students to our friends in Lawrence.

It became increasingly difficult to negotiate all that was happening without some kind of coordinating structure. To create a space for students, staff, and faculty participating in MIT@Lawrence to meet regularly to build camaraderie, share information and strategies, and develop a relevant theory of practice, I implemented a course called *Theories From, and For, Practice*. Enrolled students and I co-crafted the syllabus. We rotated agenda-setting, facilitation, note-taking, and time-keeping responsibilities. Students organized and ran advisory committee meetings in Lawrence, giving civic leaders and residents an opportunity to evaluate current and planned future collaborations. We also used the course to reflect, both individually and collectively, on our practice in Lawrence. I worked with several students to co-

ate the story of the partnership, in the form of a documentary, by helping past and present MIT@Lawrence participants reflect on their involvement (Hoyt, Dougherty, Leavy-Sperounis, Martin, Mills, & Sisk, 2009). Together, we began to formulate an engagement theory and also identified strategies from, and for, the practice of engagement.

## An Engagement Theory

We should think about practice as a setting not only for the application of knowledge but for its generation. We should ask not only how practitioners can better apply the results of academic research, but what kinds of knowing are already embedded in competent practice. (Schön, 1995, p. 29)

This second part of the article introduces a nascent theory of engagement. Co-developed through systematic reflection on a decade of practice by an array of MIT@Lawrence participants, this theory seeks to integrate thought and action through a continuum of five stages. For each stage, ranging from pseudo- to sustained engagement, I identify institutional opportunities that allowed the stage to emerge while highlighting associated implications for the practice of democratic engagement. The stages below present engagement as a progression from a technocratic to a democratic way of knowing. In practice, learning occurred in each stage, and people—depending on their prior experience and motivations—entered, navigated, and exited the respective stages on their own terms. Therefore, none of the stages should be understood as superior to another. Rather, each is vital to our understanding of why people choose to participate in city-campus partnerships and how people and partnerships, as a result, evolve.

### *Stage One: Pseudo-Engagement*

In the pseudo-engagement stage of engagement—where I myself began—people inside a university perceive cities as laboratories for learning. In 2002 and 2003, I collected hard data in Lawrence—clean, measurable facts, to analyze and teach in an academic approach that Ernest Lynton (1994, p. 87) described as “the persistent misconception of a unidirectional flow of knowledge, from the locus of research to the place of application.” I imagined a one-way street whereby the faculty, staff, and students at M.I.T. gave expert advice to clients needing our expertise. During this stage, I had no expectation of sustained involvement, but I did intend to help solve real world problems by objectively studying the people living and working in Lawrence.

There were two institutional conditions allowing this stage of engagement to emerge: A group of faculty, many of whom had worked with Donald Schön,

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continued to question M.I.T.'s prevailing epistemology, and faculty were given considerable latitude in shaping their teaching agendas. The combination of these two unique conditions not only made it possible for the M.I.T. alumnae to work with the people of Lawrence while studying at M.I.T., but also allowed me to design a workshop connecting the alumnae in Lawrence to the next cohort of students advancing through the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. Schön's new epistemology, whereby practitioner knowledge is valued in the academy, also explains why faculty had maintained strong personal relationships with the alumnae. Many faculty valued the ability of our alumnae to solve complex problems outside the academy and frequently invited them to campus to reflect on their practice with students. In turn, the practice of democratic engagement was advanced because the alumnae, who were motivated to continue a relationship with M.I.T. in order to bring resources to Lawrence, possessed a first-hand understanding of how and under what conditions students could contribute to the city's renewal. They also knew that launching a common enterprise of learning in the practice of doing would require ongoing faculty involvement and that I, as a new faculty member, would benefit from the support they could give in planning and coordinating the workshop I needed to teach. Their working knowledge of both sides, the civic and academic cultures, allowed partnership participants to achieve victories early on, enhancing solidarity and contributing to our mutual interest in continuing the partnership.

For me—and my professional experience as a scholar is not unique—an institutional barrier to moving beyond pseudo-engagement loomed large. As a tenure-track assistant professor in a research university, no harm was done to my career by teaching a workshop in partnership with the people of Lawrence. However, colleagues, both near and far, urged me to resist integrating these relationships into my research. I took their advice and kept my research apart from my teaching and service. Sacrificing the reward of tenure was not a risk I was willing to take in this early stage of engagement.

### *Stage Two: Tentative Engagement*

Next, I moved from pseudo- to tentative engagement as knowledge began to flow in non-traditional directions, from outside to inside the University. By teaching the Lawrence practicum and inviting people from forgotten cities to campus to teach us in 2004 and 2005, I slowly began to integrate my teaching and research. Before I launched my research on forgotten cities, my understanding of such cities was limited to what I was learning by teaching the Lawrence practicum. My research on forgotten cities

helped me to understand Lawrence as belonging to a class of cities. I began to teach practicum students that Lawrence belongs to a class of small, post-industrial cities characterized by particular challenges and strengths. This led me to giving talks in class comparing and contrasting Lawrence's history with the history of other "forgotten cities" such as Reading, Pennsylvania and Youngstown, Ohio. Also, through the practicum as well as student theses, we began interviewing civic leaders and residents in other cities (namely Flint, Michigan and Oakland, California) to deepen our understanding (of vacant property disposition and asset-building by way of individual development accounts) in Lawrence. That is, we began studying strategies used in cities outside Lawrence and applying them in Lawrence.

In this stage, linking city and campus also involved expanding the partnership in the city and across the campus. I no longer kept the people of Lawrence at arm's length; we were now working and learning hand-in-hand.

Institutionally, several opportunities permitted this stage of engagement. First, the department's core curriculum was revamped and now included, among the many changes, the addition of several practica. The Lawrence practicum, which materialized during this time, deeply embedded the relationship between people inside and outside the university in practice by creating a continuous point of entry for faculty, staff, and students into the city as well as residents and civic leaders into the classroom. Additionally, the department supported the burgeoning partnership with its own financial resources. The department head at that time, for example, assigned \$25,000 in funding to bring engaged scholars to campus to share their knowledge of forgotten cities; he also supported our funding application to HUD by promising more than \$300,000 in matching funds (Vale, 2005). The executive leadership, too, "whole-heartedly endorsed" the partnership. In a letter supporting our application to HUD, M.I.T.'s Chancellor, Phillip Clay, explained, "We are happy to provide financial and human resources, work to make the program activities part of M.I.T.'s on-going mission, and cultivate a climate that rewards faculty work in neighborhoods by including it in decisions affecting rank, tenure, and promotion" (Clay, 2005). These shifts in curriculum and resource allocation enhanced the practice of democratic engagement by creating additional opportunities for dialogue among people inside and outside the university. For example, through the practicum, we learned to integrate academic and community knowledge on such subjects as collective asset-building through matched savings programs (Alexander, Canepa, Pauls, Rice, Port, & Weisner, 2004). By bringing engaged scholars to campus, we developed a concep-

tual framework for understanding the history, unique challenges, and untapped potential of forgotten cities like Lawrence (Hoyt & Leroux, 2007).

Yet institutional barriers to engagement persisted. The flow of people between the city and campus was not continuous; faculty, staff and students at M.I.T. were, in effect, engaged in Lawrence at their own convenience. Our empowered friends demanded more, which put me—as a young scholar seeking tenure—in a particularly difficult position. Scholars who face such crossroads, however, have options. For example, many decide to conform to traditional academic standards for the purpose of achieving tenure, postponing, in effect, their calling as engaged scholars. I chose to frame the challenge as a dilemma: Career or calling? Should I subscribe to the dominant epistemology at M.I.T. by conducting the type of research commonly rewarded or explore Schön's epistemology by joining the people of Lawrence in learning to solve pressing economic and social problems and risk my career at M.I.T.?

#### *Stage Three: Stable Engagement*

Stable engagement is characterized by tension between creativity and failure. In 2006, as the partnership continued to expand, I had to make hard choices about how to spend my time. Though the HUD grant increased the perceived legitimacy of the partnership to some, a number of colleagues in the department viewed my engagement with the people of Lawrence as a form of service—an activity at odds with and diverting my attention from research. During this stage, however, I was learning to arrange my research, teaching, and service to overlap. I began to see these traditionally walled off domains as inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing modes of inquiry. But, still, I struggled to find ways to connect and balance my time among them.

This stage was possible because M.I.T. is a culture that encourages faculty, staff, and students to collaborate, explore, and innovate. New relationships formed as a steady flow of people from different departments, laboratories, and centers from M.I.T. began interacting with business owners, public officials, and community activists in Lawrence. Some relationships were unproductive, while some immediately resulted in useful ideas and products. We learned in this stage that many relationships had to fail before they began to flourish. As participants took risks, some relationships were damaged and achievements were delayed. But, learning resulted nevertheless, especially when participants reflected on their actions. In this stage, we came to appreciate first-hand John Dewey's assertion, "...failure is not mere failure. It is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from

his successes" (Dewey, in Boydston, 2008, p. 206).

Moving gradually from tentative to stable engagement was also possible because M.I.T. students are motivated to realize the Institute's motto, *Mens et Manus* (Mind and Hand). In this stage, they started figuring out and teaching me how to establish continuous engagement with people outside the university by creatively sequencing such curricular artifacts as courses, fellowships, internships, and theses; together, we learned the importance of an exchange of people, resources, and ideas over time between the city and the campus. What we now call "a commitment to continuity" means that people inside the university are dedicated to the practice of democratic engagement in so far as they are willing to adapt the academic culture to respond to the demands of civic culture. The kind of risks and compromises that occur in this stage require trust among participants; such relationships are built one day at a time.

By the end of this stage, I had decided to follow Schön's call for a new epistemology. As the director of a rapidly growing partnership, I found it necessary to work closely with dozens of participants on both sides. The daily management of MIT@Lawrence was daunting and consumed much of my attention and energy. Colleagues who understood the scope and depth of our work began warning me against spending too much time with the people of Lawrence, but the partnership had come to life in this stage and I was in the center of it. My promotion to associate professor without tenure was fast-approaching and traditional research publications, I sensed, might be viewed more favorably than the scholarship we were producing through our engagement. An abrupt departure from the partnership, however, was not a reasonable option for me at this stage. I felt responsible for holding the collaboration together.

#### *Stage Four: Authentic Engagement*

In the fourth stage, authentic engagement, practice and ideas flowed, were fed back, and improved within a complex and dynamic system of relationships. Here, a city was no longer simply a lab under a microscope (a viewpoint characteristic of pseudo-engagement), but a living partnership between a university and a city for the purpose of reciprocal knowledge. A "commitment to continuity" had been achieved, and people were creating lasting relationships and building knowledge together over time. In this stage, my research, teaching, and professional service were integrated and interacting in new ways. For example, I incorporated my research on matched savings programs as an economic revitalization strategy into the practicum and supervised student theses aimed at improving and expanding such programs in Lawrence.

Authentic engagement emerged, in part, due to



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several institutional conditions. M.I.T. recognizes and rewards faculty professional service and gives students substantial latitude in shaping their own intellectual agendas. By the start of this stage, I had received M.I.T.'s Martin Luther King Jr. Leadership Award for directing the MIT@Lawrence Partnership and M.I.T.—for its service to the people of Lawrence—had been named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll by the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation. These and other forms of acknowledgment encouraged participants, especially students, to think more boldly and creatively about their work. Now, students had mastered the art of engaging with the people of Lawrence by using different curricular artifacts to connect their work and were regularly contributing to existing bodies of knowledge. For example, Cindy Wu used her Master's thesis to engage with the people of Lawrence in 2006 and 2007 to build on Lawrence CommunityWorks' idea of neighborhood revitalization through resident-led matched savings programs. As Cindy entered the partnership, she benefited from the investigations and relationships that other students previously had forged. For example, the six students taking the 2004 practicum researched the use and potential use of matched savings programs for increasing home ownership opportunities in the North Common neighborhood. In 2005, an M.I.T. student used her thesis to investigate matched savings programs in other cities, building on the work done by practicum students. This collaborative intellectual process spanned a period of more than three years and involved faculty, staff, and students at M.I.T. and Washington University in St. Louis as well as civic leaders and residents in Lawrence, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; and Oakland, California (Alexander et al., 2004; Boddie et al., 2004; Rice, 2005; Wu, 2007).

By the end of this stage, tenured colleagues in my department had voted unanimously to support my case for promotion to associate professor without tenure. With my tenure review on the horizon, I decided to reconfigure the career-or-calling dilemma by asking, How can I restructure the partnership such that it will be sustained if key participants, including myself, exit? Because students, both present and former, were the driving force behind MIT@Lawrence and many faculty colleagues were busy with sustained partnerships of their own—from New Orleans to Beijing—I kept returning to the idea of shifting the partnership from a faculty-led to a student-led enterprise. A fundamental operational change of this sort would require me to lead an extensive and collaborative decision-making process. This experiment had promise in that it seemed to offer a responsible solution to an unrelenting problem.

### *Stage Five: Sustained Engagement*

The climactic stage of sustained engagement is reached when the partnership gains power through the mutual accrual of knowledge, influencing local and regional policies and city-campus relationships toward real social change. In 2008, people began entering the partnership through different portals, some created for them and others created by themselves. Individual levels of participation intensified, waned, and intensified again, according to the problems-at-hand as well as the ability and desire of individuals to co-craft solutions. Students now led the partnership. Programs not only survived but thrived as participants on both sides entered and even exited the partnership. Individuals and groups frequently reflected on their practice and recalibrated their actions accordingly. A new theory of engagement was co-developed.

In sustained engagement, people inside and outside the university engage in an evolutionary continuum between the ever present themes of practice and knowledge; they seek to overcome, rather than reinforce, the false dichotomy between the two. Here, perhaps only in small ways at first, the university's view of knowledge begins to shift away from the dominant epistemology, illustrated in the following quote by Schön related to the dilemma of rigor or relevance, and toward a new epistemology of reciprocal knowledge.

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the use of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowlands, problems are messy and confusing and incapable of technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or to society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner is confronted with a choice. Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to his standards of rigor, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems where he cannot be rigorous in any way he knows how to describe? (1995, p. 28)

In sustained engagement, Schön's practitioner need not choose the "high ground" or the "swamp of important problems" because a new epistemology, with new standards of rigor, begins to emerge as people inside the university recognize the need to develop participatory methods of knowledge production on questions of economic, social, physical, and cul-

tural revival. The once distinct boundary between people in the city and people on campus is blurred and easily penetrated. Solving problems and generating ideas are no longer separate tasks taken on by two separate sides.

This stage was achieved because M.I.T. grants each department tremendous freedom with regard to resource allocation and faculty oversight. The department head at the time exceeded his earlier financial commitment by awarding student participants with aid, in the form of tuition and stipends, which motivated students to begin managing and guiding the partnership. He also allowed me to create a new year-round course to foster reflective practice among participants and hired the City of Lawrence Community Development Director to assist with teaching the Lawrence practicum. This stage reflects co-leadership amongst faculty, administrators, and students for guiding the university's commitment of resources and infrastructure to support the partnership.

Student-led city-campus engagement has profound implications for the practice of democracy, especially as linkages to such rooted institutions as public schools are established. Jeff Beam, a graduate student from Louisville, Kentucky, who was continuously engaged with the people of Lawrence while studying at M.I.T., insightfully reflected,

M.I.T.'s long-term engagement can give Lawrence residents, especially the youth, an understanding of the Institute as more than a place for cutting-edge science. They experience M.I.T.'s dedication to *Mens et Manus* firsthand, the practical application of education, or what we call reflective practice. Lawrence youth begin to understand M.I.T. not just as a place that could possibly contribute to their well-being, but as a place to which they can contribute through participation and even matriculation.

Tenured faculty, embedded in institutional cultures dominated by technical rationality, hold the exclusive power to incrementally enlarge the customary paradigm of knowledge generation in higher education by using reward systems such as tenure to assign value to new forms of scholarship. A group of tenured colleagues at M.I.T. will soon decide whether to solicit external letters to evaluate the scholarship I have produced since 2002. This is a chance for these colleagues to decide whether or not to choose to perceive my tenure case as an opportunity to reignite a productive conversation, among faculty both inside and outside our department, about the promises and consequences of introducing the new scholarship into institutions of higher education. The battle of snails is worth fighting. Every scholar can make a difference.

## Strategies from, and for, Engagement

It's obvious that the problems of urban life are enormously complex; there are no simple solutions. I'm almost embarrassed to mention it as a problem because it is so enormously complex, but we live in cities. They determine the future of this country. And I find it ironic that universities which focused with such energy on rural America a century ago have never focused with equal urgency on our cities. (Boyer, 1996, p. 19)

This portion of the article presents two strategies from, and for, the practice of engagement that evolved during M.I.T.'s partnership with the City of Lawrence. Creative, co-generated strategies are necessary to overcome the cultural and structural barriers within the academy that actively detach scholars from society. Said another way, a theory of engagement needs corresponding strategies that can be shared with and used by people who want to learn how to create lasting city-campus partnerships that bring together civic leaders, residents, faculty, and students in transforming a city. I call these strategies "investing in human relationships" and "using instruments-for-action."

### *Investing in Human Relationships*

People are central to the idea of engagement; therefore, human actions and interactions, in the form of stories, have provided the scaffolding for this article. In developing mutually beneficial human relationships between city and campus, we encountered a number of impediments. To begin, M.I.T.'s academic culture promotes a hierarchical system of relationships, while the civic leaders and residents in Lawrence are experimenting with the idea of "network organizing"—a horizontal system of relationships whereby collective action is valued above individual achievement. In moving from pseudo- to sustained engagement, we learned from the Director of Lawrence CommunityWorks and other Lawrence civic leaders how to connect people to each other and to opportunities "to step into public life—from the neighborhood group to the City Council—in a way that feels safe, fun, and productive" (Traynor, 2008; Traynor & Andors, 2005). Our work, over time, began to mirror their work in revitalizing Lawrence, once a forgotten city, as we learned that healthy communities are the aggregate of reciprocally advantageous human relationships.

In pseudo-engagement, we learned that human relationships matter. For nearly two decades, M.I.T. faculty and students studied Lawrence from a distance; their involvement with the people of Lawrence was fundamentally one-sided (Hoyt, 2005b). The relation-

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ship between people on both sides, however, shifted dramatically when the alumnae decided to work in Lawrence after graduation. MIT@Lawrence was not a chance event. Kristen, an M.I.T. alumna, had a familial relationship with the city, and she convinced her friends to work and live there; and their personal ties to M.I.T. helped to sustain the city-campus partnership. People inside and outside a university with an interest in engagement should look for meaningful relationships among people. Are there university alumni working or living in the city? Were university faculty, staff, or students born or raised in the city?

The importance of trust emerged as a central tenet during tentative engagement. In practice, faculty followed civic leaders and students who were following residents. We trusted that civic leaders and residents had a deep understanding of the city—its history, politics, and vision for revival; we trusted that students had acquired relevant knowledge and experience from working in other contexts that allowed them to apply their knowledge and skill in Lawrence. Engaged faculty can lead city-campus partnerships by example by taking the risk of placing their trust in others. Students, civic leaders, and residents are eager to engage and have much to teach.

In achieving stable engagement, we learned the necessity of a “commitment to continuity,” which is dependent on establishing and maintaining human relationships. For university faculty, staff, and students to genuinely participate in the burgeoning civic life of such cities as Lawrence, people inside the university cannot disappear during breaks or on weekends because conversations must continuously flow among participants. For people outside the university, this means making time to join classroom discussions, inviting people inside the university to public meetings and events, and keeping university faculty, staff, and students informed in real time as problems arise, decisions are made, and opportunities unfurl. Trusting relationships are built day-by-day, by showing up, again and again, talking with people and getting to know their histories, fears, and aspirations.

In authentic engagement an unencumbered flow of people, as well as ideas and practices, are moving back-and-forth, and in multiple directions. Here, faculty, staff, and students challenge the conventional epistemology of universities by cultivating connectivity with people in cities as participants. With each small action, they readily connect to, work with, and influence one another regardless of institutional rank or political power. As Eric Mackres, a graduate student at M.I.T., pointed out, such connectivity is laborious: “It is essential that the community sees us get our hands dirty down in the trenches. There is no better way to build trust and break down barriers of class in a partnership than working side by side for the

same thing.” Faculty, staff, and students must meet civic leaders and residents where they are by contributing to the civic life of the city in a variety of ways. Some students might engage for a single semester by providing much-needed technical assistance to a small nonprofit organization. Other students might engage for several years forming deep personal relationships with civic leaders and residents and affecting decisions at multiple levels of government. A range of interactions is vital and none is too small.

For several years, I had taken the lead on designing and teaching courses, writing grant applications, and negotiating new projects with civic leaders and residents. As the partnership expanded throughout the city and campus, however, this top-down management structure floundered. To improve linkages between the hierarchical structure of the university and the increasingly horizontal structure of the growing civic network in Lawrence, I decided to apply the idea of “network organizing” in the academy. Students were resistant, at first, because they expected faculty to lead the partnership. As students who had worked as community organizers and valued engagement, one-by-one, assumed leadership positions within the partnership and recruited new participants, relationships among people on both sides became more fluid, responsive, and resilient. Jeff Beam, a graduate student, observed, “The horizontal, student-run model is the right management idea for a loose-knit network such as ours, and it lessens the reliance on any one faculty member as the focal point.” Yet, a horizontal, democratic structure also requires a new role for faculty, who provide an anchor of permanence commensurate with the students’ transient journey of study. The new role for faculty of facilitating the democratic value of sharing leadership for public problem-solving with students (and community partners) also needs to be valued and supported by the university (Dzur, 2008). Investing in human relationships is a strategy that runs counter to the technocratic culture of many research universities. Simultaneously, human relationships, particularly those that are resilient and capable of thriving through adversity, are the most critical element for achieving sustained engagement.

#### *Using Instruments-for-Action*

The academic calendar is organized into semesters and breaks that disrupt continuous engagement with the outside world. Despite the problematic way in which academic structures partition engagement into periods of time incongruent with the incessant demands of practice, we gradually learned to view curricular artifacts as instruments for—rather than barriers to—action. By shifting our perspective, we explored and discovered new avenues for democratic

engagement. In moving from pseudo- to tentative engagement, for example, an elective workshop became a required practicum that created a regular connection by which people outside the university came to count on a group of students joining them “on the ground” for 15 weeks every year. Before a commitment to continuity is achieved, faculty might consider using required courses to develop working relationships with people outside the university. If both sides agree to engage over a period of three to five years, such courses may be used to accumulate knowledge about a particular problem, such as property rights (i.e., vacant property acquisition and disposition processes), over time. People outside the university may reciprocate by applying their own instruments-for-action to their relationships with faculty, staff, and students. For example, civic leaders may invite faculty to serve on related community boards or task forces. In principle, all participants may seek ways to build on previous work and knowledge, thus attaining higher goals for themselves as well as the conditions they aim to improve. After a commitment to continuity is achieved, people on both sides might look for instruments-for-action to structure or support engagement activities in the absence or scarcity of outside funding. For example, a student who wants to work with civic leaders or residents on a particular problem could consider using a course of independent study to bring interested parties together. Courses of independent study give faculty, students, and civic leaders the flexibility necessary to shape a shared agenda for learning from action while ensuring that students receive the rewards they need (i.e., course credits, mentorship, etc.). Additionally, many universities and colleges have internship and fellowship programs that may be used to maintain city-campus relations. These instruments are especially useful during summer and winter breaks when community-based organizations and local governments are short-staffed and students seek monetary compensation in exchange for their time.

Once engaged, students can seek opportunities to integrate their outside relationships with other faculty inside the academy. Increasingly, students engaged in MIT@Lawrence integrated academic knowledge and civic knowledge by selecting Lawrence as the focal point for writing assignments in courses (i.e., *Urban Labor Markets and Employment*, *Enabling an Energy Efficient Society*, *Media in Cultural Context*, etc.) taught by instructors who have no relationship with the city or the people of Lawrence. By initiating improbable interactions among faculty and civic leaders, students, in effect, expanded the partnership and uncovered a new instrument-for-action. For instance, civic leaders in Lawrence directly incorporated content from student writing assignments into federal stimulus

funding applications (Leavy-Sperounis, Mackres, & Marshall, 2009). In this case, civic leaders in Lawrence recognized the benefits of engagement and took action through instruments of their own, identifying M.I.T. as a partner and creating a budget line item for M.I.T. students in the funding application. As engagement is sustained, participants playfully investigate improbable instruments-for-action. For example, a number of universities and colleges require students to write a thesis or dissertation. These are particularly powerful instruments because, as a capstone project, they require a substantial amount of student time and energy; student work typically spans at least one semester, often two or more. Students with an interest in action-research might use their thesis or dissertation as a means for working closely with engaged faculty and civic leaders to identify, define, and solve pressing problems for which resources are limited. Such theses and dissertations may, in turn, facilitate new city-campus relationships while enriching students’ learning experiences. Moreover, theses and dissertations are published and archived in university libraries and are therefore available to the public. Engaged students, through their theses and dissertations, not only can work in collaboration with engaged faculty and civic leaders to make relevant contributions to society, but they also can aim to capsize conventional wisdom by offering new paradigms for advancing such ideals as equity, prosperity, and justice.

Department chairs are in a position to grant engaged faculty the freedom to use courses to create a space for city-campus participants to reflect on their practice. As we have seen in practice, engaged students may find multiple portals into a community by combining an array of instruments. Opportunities for students to work in partnership with civic leaders and residents, at home and abroad, may be plentiful, but there are fewer prospects within the walls of the academy for students to critically evaluate, document, and disseminate what they have learned from such experiences.

The full potential of such instruments has yet to be realized. While this article illuminates how curricular artifacts can be understood as instruments-for-action, it also suggests that we begin rethinking the purpose of other academic artifacts. Can journal articles and other publications function as instruments-for-action? What about promotion and tenure guidelines? Should scholarship be more widely defined? Does the documentary created to complement this article, *Sustained City-Campus Engagement: Reflections on Our Practice*, represent a form of scholarship?

### An Epistemology for Our Time

Knowledge does not move from the locus of research to the place of application, from schol-

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ar to practitioner, teacher to student, expert to client. It is everywhere fed back, constantly enhanced. We need to think of knowledge in an ecological fashion, recognizing the complex, multifaceted and multiply-connected system by means of which discovery, aggregation, synthesis, dissemination, and application are interconnected and interacting in a wide variety of ways. (Ernest Lynton, 1994, pp. 88-89)

Is reciprocal knowledge an idea whose time has come? Universities and colleges still functioning as ivory towers have a responsibility to respond to pressing needs of real people outside, not only for the people's sake but also for their own. Without practice, no theory can be tested; without theory, practice can be aimless and wasteful. Theories of practice that materialize from practice are more likely to be relevant and, therefore, capable of impacting, through their application, the crises affecting people's daily lives. Such theories should be tested, quickly, and improved through an ongoing dialogue among a diverse network of people inside and outside the academy.

An epistemology of reciprocal knowledge, realized through a two-way network of human relationships, allows faculty, students, civic leaders, and residents to experiment as they learn the norms and develop the values of democracy through sustained city-campus partnerships. For students, this means that writing assignments for courses as well as the theses and dissertations they complete to meet graduation requirements do not simply fill recycling bins or sit on library shelves. It means they earn specialized degrees, which help them to get jobs, while practicing good citizenship, mentoring, and being mentored by peers, faculty, and civic leaders. For people living and working in cities, it means that new and meaningful linkages develop between public schools and institutions of higher education for combating the drop out crisis in ways that improves the quality of life for individuals, families, neighborhoods, and society. It also means investing in civic life by participating in public meetings and community events. For faculty it means integrating research, teaching, and service in ways that not only are rewarded by promotion or tenure, but also lead to new discoveries and personal fulfillment. It also means learning to solve problems in the outside world as they arise, thus forging a "closer relationship between knowledge and social transformation" (Edwards, 2006). For higher education, it means conceiving of knowledge differently, rethinking how professionals are prepared in the academy and how knowledge generated by citizens is valued in the university; it also means adopting broader and more humanistic modes of scholarship and evolving into more nimble and responsive civic institutions. In response to an earlier iteration of this article, Maggie

Super Church, an M.I.T. alumna living and working in Lawrence, reflected:

The scholarly work produced by MIT@Lawrence students has consistently been among the most rigorous and empirically sound I've seen—with the added benefit that it is connected to real people and community needs. I would argue that the existence of these network relationships creates a unique space for students and faculty to conduct crisp, tightly focused research that is responsive to specific, on-the-ground problems happening in real time—something that is often missing from traditional planning practice. Particularly as the pace of change in cities continues to accelerate, there is a compelling argument to be made for research that is firmly grounded in current realities and incorporates new media tools to keep pace with a dynamic, rapidly evolving, and often volatile urban environment.

Now is not the time for protecting the status quo. We need an epistemology for our time. Will we begin "creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with one another" (Boyer, 1996, p. 251) and, in the process, reconfigure the relationship between institutions of higher education and society? In a speech at Notre Dame's 2009 commencement ceremony, President Barack Obama conveyed the necessity of working together and learning from one another by inviting graduates to make democratic engagement "a way of life." He explained,

It doesn't just improve your community, it makes you a part of your community. It breaks down walls. It fosters cooperation. And when that happens—when people set aside their differences, even for a moment, to work in common effort toward a common goal, when they struggle together, and sacrifice together, and learn from one another—then all things are possible.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A version of this article will appear in J. A. Saltmarsh & M. Hartley, Eds. (forthcoming 2011), *"To Serve a Larger Purpose: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education"*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

<sup>2</sup> I first combed through these data sources to construct our story of practice in the form of a detailed timeline available at <http://lawrencestory.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Through a series of meetings, I shared the timeline with a small group of students who later designed, conducted, and recorded face-to-face interviews with partnership participants, both in the city and on campus, to validate the facts that I provided and to contribute their own information and perspectives to the story. Simultaneously,

I presented the idea of sustained engagement to students and other city-campus partnership participants who helped to develop it through a course entitled, Theories From, and For, Practice I and II. Lastly, I distributed earlier drafts of this article to all of the participants referenced herein; most responded with keen insights, many of which I incorporated into the final version.

<sup>4</sup> See the 15-minute documentary, *Sustained City-Campus Engagement: Reflections on Our Practice*, which vividly portrays participants voices, available at [www.MITatLawrence.net](http://www.MITatLawrence.net).

<sup>5</sup> The Department of Urban Studies and Planning is somewhat unique in its approach to service-learning as evidenced by the criteria established for core practica that were added to the core curriculum in 2004. For more, see Hoyt, 2005b).

<sup>6</sup> Forgotten cities are defined by the following three criteria: old—cities with an industrial history, meaning they had a population of more than 5,000 inhabitants by 1880; small—cities with between 15,000 and 20,000 residents according to the 2000 U.S. Census; and poor—cities with a median household income of less than \$35,000 according to the 2000 Census. There are 151 cities in the country that satisfy these criteria, representing a total of 7.4 million people. For more, see Hoyt & Leroux (2007).

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