Overall Themes from Summer 2021 Community-Partner Workshop
at The University of Scranton
June 17, 2021 Meeting Notes

<u>**Community-Wide Priorities Discussed:**</u>

Affordable Housing – Multiple community-partners mentioned housing and related issues as a community need/priority. For example, rental prices have gone up, making it extremely difficult to find apartments that are suitable and affordable for clients. Factors that impact housing include federal policy, the pandemic (increased evictions), older housing stock, and rising prices as people move in from other areas.

Living Wage – Many people who are employed do not earn enough to sustain their housing (issues previously raised by the University of Scranton's Living Wage Study). Wages are somewhat stagnant in the area, exacerbated by the pandemic. Reimbursement rates received by businesses such as hospitals/medical facilities for jobs (e.g., CNA's) have not increased in decades, therefore the wages for these positions haven't grown/changed with the economy.

Matching Employers & Employees – Numerous challenges were raised regarding matching employers to employees and finding employees, especially in the current state of the pandemic. This connects back to living wage issues, including part vs. full-time positions, benefits, adequate time off, etc. - Issues are apparent on both sides. Employers struggle to find "dependable" employees with in-demand skills, however at the same time, those unemployed struggle to find good jobs that include important quality of life factors including proximity to housing, a living wage, benefits, paid time off, and jobs that match their skill sets/academic background/training/personal vocation.

Transportation – Workers may not live in areas where reliable, affordable public transportation is available to get to work, child care, etc. This creates a community barrier.

Pandemic Trauma – Collectively the entire world has and is still experiencing trauma. Even those "less" impacted by the pandemic are still overwhelmed, burnout, and stressed. It is important that we discover ways to address post-traumatic issues related to the pandemic experience and how it has impacted our community, particularly vulnerable populations including our aging population, and to identify ways to begin rebuilding a sense of community.

Digital Equity – The pandemic demonstrated that digital equity is a major issue both for education and the workforce. Online communication is a privileged communication and there is a clear digital divide that additionally disadvantages certain portions of the population.

Barriers to Accessing Services – Community members face challenges in accessing available services including translation services. Possible solutions include creating a directory of not-for-profits and social services in Scranton and providing this information via community organizations in multiple formats and languages.

University-Community Partnership Assessment Discussion:

Need for Face-to-Face Interaction – The move to remote interaction had a great and perhaps lasting impact on organizations and their service areas. Many people served by organizations have higher success/retention/impact when in-person. In-person volunteers and interns are necessary to keep operations moving forward. Collaborations benefit from one-on-one/in-person meetings, which foster unique innovation and allow ideas to be discussed by others in ways that online communication cannot capture.

Keep Zoom (Sometimes…) – In-person interactions tailored with Zoom is the preference for moving forward. Zoom helps provide recordings of events and trainings, can increase access for some populations, and helps facilitate communication where transportation is potentially burdensome (e.g., for meetings).

Need for Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Training and Community Conversations – Several community-partners identified a desire to cultivate more inclusive and equitable organizations and, in particular, are interested in providing better/stronger/more complete diversity, equity, and inclusion training for their staff as a part of professional development. Additionally, further conversations about race – especially responding to defensiveness among white people on topics of racism – are needed in our community.

Training/Workforce & Professional Development – Many non-profits and community organizations are seeking ways to further develop their current workforce with training and staff development opportunities and offering incentives to their employees. It would be beneficial to partner with higher education for such programming with employees. Additional suggestions included faculty going to partner sites to offer staff development opportunities.

Sustained engagement: Across higher education, students tend to step away from projects/placements once the semester is over. It is important to identify ways to keep sustained engagement with community-partners. Potential solutions could include keeping certain courses tied to specific placements, discussing community-needs with students and letting them know upfront the importance of sustained engagement, and trying to identify other methods to keep students engaged after the semester/course concludes.

Clearances Process and Scheduling Barriers – Partners identified some common barriers when partnering with the University, including the long timeline for obtaining correct clearances. It is important to maintain communication and provide accurate timelines for completing the process. Additionally, students' course times/schedules in related disciplines can conflict with the times of greatest community-partner need (e.g., for volunteers or internship/field placements) if it is possible to be mindful of this when creating course schedules.

Leveraging University Resources – The University of Scranton has the capacity to help address the needs of community organizations in a myriad of ways including helping to connect to translation services, capacity of running meetings/holding events, and through other collaborative partnerships. In the coming year, new opportunities can emerge as students and faculty and community partners are increasingly back to in-person interactions.