

## Forward

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The Anchor Institutions Task Force (AITF) is pleased to present this important issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* on anchor institutions.

Founded in 2009, the AITF (<http://www.margainc.com/initiatives/aitf/>) develops and disseminates knowledge and functions as an advocacy and movement-building organization to create and advance democratic, mutually beneficial anchor institution–community partnerships. It functions as an ongoing think tank, developing long-term strategies and making the case for the crucial role of anchor institutions in economic and community development.

The AITF was founded through a national task force that was coordinated by the University of Pennsylvania on how the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) could increase its impact and strategically leverage anchor institutions to improve communities. A report, *Anchor Institutions as Partners in Building Successful Communities and Local Economies*, captures findings from this effort.

The initial group that composed this report became what is now the AITF, which has experienced extraordinary growth. The AITF is now an individual membership organization with over 200 members. Individuals can join if they agree with the following core values: collaboration and partnership; equity and social justice; democracy and democratic practice; and commitment to place and community.

Now coordinated by Marga Incorporated with assistance from the University of Pennsylvania's Netter Center for Community Partnerships (the Netter Center's Director, Ira Harkavy, serves as the AITF's Chair), the AITF has been highly productive, having held or co-sponsored multiple conferences, produced publications, and influenced thinking about the role of anchor institutions in transforming communities among members, funders, policy makers, and others.

We face a palpable need for strategies to identify and leverage reliable resources to maximize opportunities and reduce disparities. These strategies must be inclusive and promote extensive participation from as wide a cross-section of populations as possible. The startling inequities and persistent economic constraints

of our complex world are manifested in localities, where disparities have not only persisted, but widened in the face of a stubborn economic downturn.

Anchor institutions are organizations that are rooted and enduring in their communities, and thus offer a range of resources. These resources have often not been adequately harnessed to address pressing needs in surrounding neighborhoods, cities, and regions. Institutions of this nature, such as institutions of higher education, do not tend to leave, even in the face of extensive capital flight. Anchor institutions can come in many forms beyond colleges and universities, however, including medical centers, libraries, churches, museums, community foundations, and more.

Overall, the definition of anchor institutions continues to evolve. A part of the work of the AITF is to refine this definition. Although anchor institutions are potentially indispensable features in successful community improvement strategies, the idea of being “anchored” reflects only objective reality. Certainly, some institutions bring resources to their localities by their mere existence. However, the AITF encourages anchor institutions to take greater action—to transcend business as usual and deepen their local commitments. In our view, anchoring is more than being present; it is an active commitment to reducing disparities and engaging in mutually beneficial, democratic collaboration. Not all “anchored” institutions behave in this manner, but our goal is to dramatically expand the number of institutions that identify with their responsibility to their localities. Our hope is in the critical potential of anchor institutions, in all their variation, to stabilize and transform lives and livelihoods in localities.

Much of the energy over recent years to involve anchor institutions in addressing local matters has involved community colleges, colleges, and universities, and the AITF is an outgrowth of the emerging movement to engage institutions of higher education in mutually beneficial, democratic partnerships in order to improve the well-being of their localities and regions. The AITF seeks not only to strengthen the practice of anchor institution partnerships on the ground, but also to raise national and global awareness of the significance of leveraging these enduring local entities in addressing today’s myriad social and economic concerns.

As interest in the role of anchor institutions continues to grow, the field of organizations addressing this topic expands as well. AITF members reflect the range of institutions of higher education (public and private, community colleges, colleges, and universities)

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as well as different types of anchor institutions. In this regard, the AITF is uniquely functioning as a values-based movement organization that actively promotes the potential contributions of anchor institutions to communities, cities, regions, and society.

When the AITF announced a call for submissions to an issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* to our membership, within days we received 10 responses. This issue of the *Journal* emerges directly from the strong interest such a response reflects, and it captures the experiences, successes, and challenges of anchor institution–community partnerships as well as improving our knowledge of what it takes to create and sustain effective collaborative strategies.

The AITF is extremely appreciative to the *Journal* for this opportunity to bring the voices of some of our members together in this valuable collection. And special thanks also go to this issue's editors: Eugenie Birch, David Perry, and Henry Louis Taylor. All three of these editors are on the AITF's Steering Committee and demonstrated outstanding leadership in developing this issue. We hope that this issue will be an informative and compelling contribution to our thinking about the potential of anchor institutions, and especially colleges and universities, to strengthen communities.

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