Thank you President Rosenberg, Provost Wartzok, and members of the faculty. I am enormously pleased and honored to be addressing Florida International University’s 2012 Faculty Convocation on the topic of university-community engagement.

In the twenty-first century, universities have been increasingly identified as the most influential institution in advanced societies. They possess enormous resources (most significantly human resources), play a leading role in developing and transmitting new discoveries, educating societal leaders, and in large measure shape the schooling system. As anchor institutions, community colleges, colleges, and universities (public as well as private) all play crucial, multi-faceted roles in their communities and surrounding regions, including in education, research, service, housing and real estate development, employment, job training, purchasing, business and technology incubation, and cultural development. Moreover, as numerous communities have experienced capital flight, institutions of higher education have remained as critical sources of stability.

Given the increased recognition of the university’s powerful and comprehensive societal impacts, it is not surprising that there has been a substantive and public re-emergence of engaged scholarship, with leading academics and university presidents making the intellectual case. That argument, simply stated, is that higher educational institutions, particularly urban universities,
would better fulfill their core academic functions, including advancing knowledge and learning, if they increasingly focused on improving conditions in their cities and local communities. More broadly, a higher education civic engagement movement has developed to better educate students for democratic citizenship and to improve schooling and the quality of life across the United States, and even globally. Service-learning, community-based participatory research, volunteer projects, institutional investment and support are some of the means that have been used to create mutually-beneficial partnerships designed to make a profound difference in the community and on the campus.

Campus Compact, a national coalition of community college, college, and university presidents dedicated to civic engagement, exemplifies this trend, growing from three institutional members in 1985 to nearly 1200 today, approximately a quarter of all higher educational institutions in the United States. In a 2011 Campus Compact survey, responding institutions reported that 98% have at least one partnership with a community-based organization; more specifically, 95% have partnerships with K-12 schools, 82% with faith-based organizations, and 69% with government agencies. With 94% offering service-learning courses, these campuses also reported that 37% of their students were engaged in service, service-learning or civic engagement activities in 2010-2011.

What accounts for the significantly increased and increasing engagement of higher educational institutions with their communities?

After 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the end of the Cold War, societal attention increasingly turned from international to national and local concerns, including the state of the American city. Moreover, the combination of external pressure from government, foundations, and public opinion in general, as well as enlightened self-interest,
spurred American universities to recognize that they could, indeed must, function simultaneously as universal and local institutions of higher education—instiutions not only in but of and for their local communities. More specifically, by the 1990s, universities were increasingly unable to avoid the problems of their local ecological communities, including crime, violence, and physical deterioration.

Colleges and universities are place-based institutions deeply affected by their local environment and surroundings. The future of higher educational institutions and their communities and cities are intertwined. As such, they have a strong economic stake in the health of their surrounding communities and—due to the scale and scope of their operations—the resources to make a genuine difference. Because they can make a difference in the lives of their neighbors, colleges and universities have a moral and ethical responsibility to contribute to the quality of life in their communities.

At this time, moreover, when public colleges and universities in particular are facing serious and severe strain resulting from large-scale, significant cutbacks in governmental funding particularly at the state level, they are also under increased scrutiny by government to demonstrate that they are serving the public good. “Community benefit” has becoming an essential component of funding appeals to many donors and foundations, as well as governmental agencies. Simply put, higher education understands more fully than ever that it is in its enlightened self-interest to be civically engaged with their communities.

Over the past two decades, the academic benefits of community engagement have also been illustrated in practice—and the intellectual case for engagement effectively made by leading scholars and educators, including Ernest Boyer, John Gardner, Derek Bok, and Penn’s president Amy Gutmann. That case can be briefly summarized as follows: When institutions of higher
education give very high priority to actively solving real-world problems in their communities, a much greater likelihood exists that they will significantly advance learning, research, teaching, and service and thereby simultaneously reduce barriers to the development of mutually beneficial, higher education-community partnerships. More specifically, by focusing on solving universal problems that are manifested in their local communities (such as poverty, poor schooling, inadequate healthcare), institutions of higher education will generate knowledge that is both nationally and globally significant and be better able to realize what I view as their primary mission of contributing to a healthy democratic society.

The history of American colleges and universities, I believe, strongly supports my claim that the democratic mission is, and should be, the primary mission for U.S. higher education.

In 1749, Benjamin Franklin described the purposes and curriculum of the "Academy of Philadelphia," later named the University of Pennsylvania, "as consisting in an Inclination join’d with an Ability to serve Mankind, one’s Country, Friends and Family." While Franklin founded Penn as a secular institution to educate students in a variety of fields, the other colonial colleges were largely created to educate ministers and religiously orthodox men capable of creating good communities built on religious denominational principles. Specifically, Harvard (Congregationalist), William and Mary (Anglican), Yale (Congregationalist), Princeton (Presbyterian), Columbia (Anglican), Brown (Baptist), Rutgers (Dutch Reformed), Dartmouth (Congregationalist) were all created with religiously based service as a central purpose.

Service to society and fulfilling America’s democratic mission were the founding purposes of the land-grant universities. Established by the Morrill Act of 1862, land grant colleges and universities were designed to spread education, advance democracy, and improve
the mechanical, agricultural, and military sciences. The spirit of the Morrill Act was perhaps best expressed at the University of Wisconsin, which designed programs around the educational needs of adult citizens across the state.

In 1912, Charles McCarthy, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin and the first legislative reference librarian in the United States, coined the phrase “The Wisconsin Idea” to describe a concept that had been in practice for a number of years. The Wisconsin Idea’s goal was to make “the boundaries of the university…the boundaries of the state.” When asked what accounted for the great progressive reforms that spread across the Midwest in the first two decades of the 20th century, Charles McCarthy replied, “a combination of soil and seminar.” McCarthy’s answer captures the essence of the Wisconsin Idea—focusing academic resources on improving the life of the farmer and the lives of citizens across the entire state.

The urban research universities founded in the late 19th century also made service to community and society their central goal. In 1876, Daniel Coit Gilman in his inaugural address as the first president of Johns Hopkins, America’s first modern research university, expressed the hope that universities should “make for less misery among the poor, less ignorance in the schools, less bigotry in the temple, less suffering in the hospitals, less fraud in business, less folly in politics.” Following Gilman’s lead, the abiding belief in the democratic purposes of the American research university echoed throughout higher education at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1899, the University of Chicago’s first president, William Rainey Harper, characterized the university as the “prophet of democracy” and its “to-be-expected deliverer.” And in 1908, Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard proclaimed: “At bottom most of the American institutions of higher education are filled with the democratic spirit of serviceableness.
Teachers and students alike are profoundly moved by the desire to serve the democratic community.”

Simply put, strengthening democracy at the expense of old social hierarchies served as the central mission for the development of the American research university, including both land-grant institutions and urban universities, such as Hopkins, Chicago, Columbia and Penn.

As the statements from presidents Gilman and Harper indicate, the idea that universities have the potential to be powerful resources for solving highly complex urban problems is also longstanding. That idea inspired both Paul Ylvisaker’s speech in 1958, calling for the development of urban experiment stations modeled after the work of agricultural land grants, and Robert Wood’s plan for Urban Observatories. Under the leadership of John Gardner, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare provided hundreds of millions of dollars, as did the Ford Foundation, to universities to develop projects and programs with their cities and communities. Unfortunately, these funds did not produce the desired result. Treating urban engagement as a mere add-on, colleges and universities applied little, if any, effort to changing their core teaching and research functions. They resisted making the internal changes needed to work effectively with government, foundations, and other organizations and contribute to the improvement of their local communities and cities. The crisis of the American city also had not yet caught up to urban universities.

As discussed, colleges and universities are being increasingly pressured to act, but in order for them to act effectively, they must overcome the burdens of history and tradition. In particular, they need to overcome the fragmentation of disciplines, overspecialization, and division between and among the arts and sciences and professions that are particularly characteristic of all major research universities. These departmental and disciplinary divisions
have served to increase the isolation of universities from society. A 1982 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report entitled *The University and the Community* noted, “Communities have problems, universities have departments.” Beyond being a criticism of universities, that statement neatly indicates a major reason why universities have not contributed as they should. Quite simply, their unintegrated, fragmented, internally conflictual structure and organization work against understanding and helping to solve highly complex human and societal problems.

So what is to be done? To help answer that question, I turn to the great American pragmatic philosopher John Dewey and one of his most significant propositions: “Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community.” Democracy, Dewey emphasized, has to be built on face-to-face interactions in which human beings work together cooperatively to solve the ongoing problems of life. In effect, I am updating Dewey and advocating this proposition: *Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the engaged neighborly college or university and its local community partners.*

The benefits of a local community focus for college and university civic engagement programs are manifold. Ongoing, continuous, interaction is facilitated through work in an easily accessible location. Relationships of trust, so essential for effective partnerships and effective learning, are also built through day-to-day work on problems and issues of mutual concern. In addition, the local community provides a convenient setting in which a number of service-learning courses, community-based research courses, and related courses in different disciplines can work together on a complex problem to produce substantive results. Work in a university’s local community, since it facilitates interaction across schools and disciplines, can also create interdisciplinary learning opportunities. And finally, the local community is a democratic real-
world learning site in which community members and academics can pragmatically determine whether the work is making a real difference, and whether both the neighborhood and the higher education institution are better as a result of common efforts.

To Dewey, knowledge and learning are most effective when human beings work collaboratively to solve specific, strategic, real-world problems. “Thinking,” he wrote, “begins in. . . a forked-road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which poses alternatives.” As noted earlier, a focus on universal problems (such as poverty, unequal health care, substandard housing, hunger, and inadequate, unequal education) as they are manifested locally is, in my judgment, the best way to apply Dewey’s brilliant proposition in practice. To support that position, I turn to the example I know best—Penn’s work with West Philadelphia, a largely disadvantaged area of approximately 200,000 people.

Since 1985, the university has increasingly engaged in comprehensive and mutually beneficial university-community-school partnerships. Coordinated by the Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships more than 160 academically-based community service (ABCS) courses (Penn’s approach to service-learning) have been developed. ABCS courses integrate research, teaching, learning, and service around action-oriented, community problem-solving. Penn students work on improving local schools, spurring economic development on a neighborhood scale, and building strong community organizations. At the same time, they reflect on their service experience and its larger implications (e.g., why poverty, racism, and crime exist). In 2011-2012, more than 1600 Penn students (undergraduate, graduate, and professional) and 56 faculty members (from 20 departments across six of Penn’s 12 schools) were engaged in West Philadelphia through these courses. (This represents significant growth
since 1992, when three faculty members taught four ABCS courses to approximately 100 students.)

At the core of many, if not most, of Penn’s academically based community service courses are ongoing faculty action research projects. For example, in 1990, Professor and then-chair of the anthropology department Francis Johnston, revised his undergraduate seminar on medical anthropology to focus on community health in West Philadelphia. Over the past twenty-two years, students in this course, as well as Johnston’s other courses, have addressed the strategic problem of improving the health and nutrition of disadvantaged inner-city children by doing systematic in-depth research designed to understand and help improve the education and nutritional status of youth in West Philadelphia. Professor Johnston, whose work had previously largely concerned nutritional problems in Latin America, found that his seminars on West Philadelphia were not only more enjoyable to teach, but they also contributed to his own scholarly research.

To carry out the nutrition project, which in 2007 was named the Agatston Urban Nutrition Initiative (AUNI) thanks to a generous gift from Arthur and Sari Agatston, it is necessary for Penn undergraduates and public school students to collect, organize, and interpret a relatively large and complex body of data directly relevant to Johnston’s longstanding research interests. The data that he and the students have produced has become the main basis of a series of peer-reviewed articles and presentations at scientific meetings, as well as a book *The Obesity Culture*, which I co-authored with Professor Johnston. Currently, faculty members in political science, psychology, nursing, the Wharton School, as well as some of Johnston’s colleagues in anthropology, teach and have research projects connected to AUNI, which has become the Netter
Center’s largest project with over 20 full-time employees working in university-assisted community schools in West Philadelphia, as well as in other sections of the city.

The Netter Center has been working for over 20 years on the idea of university-assisted community schools. “Community schools” bring together multiple organizations and their resources to educate, activate, and serve not just students but all members of the community in which the school is located. This idea essentially extends and updates John Dewey’s theory that the neighborhood school can function as the core neighborhood institution—the one that provides comprehensive services, galvanizes other community institutions and groups, and helps solve the myriad problems communities confront in a rapidly changing world. Dewey recognized that if the neighborhood school were to function as a genuine community center, it would require additional human resources and support. But to my knowledge, he never identified universities as a key source of broadly based, sustained, comprehensive support for community schools. My colleagues and I emphasize “university-assisted” because we have become convinced that universities, indeed “higher eds” in general, are uniquely well-positioned to provide strategic, comprehensive and sustained support for community schools.

University-assisted community schools engage students, grades pre-K through 20, in real-world community problem-solving designed to have positive effects on neighborhoods and help develop active, participating citizens of a democratic society. University-assisted community school programs occur during the school day, after school, evenings, Saturdays, and summers. Penn students taking ABCS courses, work-study students, and student interns and volunteers provide vital support for these programs, serving as tutors, mentors, classroom fellows, or activity and project leaders. The Netter Center is working with a network of seven university-
assisted community schools in West Philadelphia, involving more than 4,000 K-12 children, youth, and their families each year.

It is essential to emphasize that the university-assisted community schools now being developed at Penn and elsewhere—such as Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, University at Buffalo, University of Maryland-Baltimore, and here at Florida International University—have a long way to go before they can fully mobilize the powerful, untapped resources of their own institutions and of their communities, including those found among individual neighbors and in local institutions (such as businesses, social service agencies, faith-based organizations, and hospitals). This will require, among other things, more effective coordination of governmental and nonprofit funding streams and services. How to conceive that organizational change—indeed organizational revolution—let alone bring it about, poses extraordinarily complex intellectual and social challenges. But as Dewey argued, working to solve complex, real-world problems is the best way to advance knowledge and learning, as well as the general capacity of individuals and institutions to do that work.

I contend, therefore, that American universities should give a high priority—arguably their highest priority—to solving the problems inherent in the organizational revolution I have sketched above. If universities were to do so, they would demonstrate in concrete practice their self-professed theoretical ability to simultaneously advance knowledge, learning, and societal well being. They would then satisfy the critical performance test proposed in 1994 by the president of the State University of New York at Buffalo, William R. Greiner, namely, that “the great universities of the twenty-first century will be judged by their ability to help solve our most urgent social problems.”
To conclude, I will once again quote from Penn’s founder Benjamin Franklin, who, in 1789, stigmatized tradition-based barriers to progress as being rooted in “an unaccountable prejudice in favor of ancient Customs and Habitudes.” By focusing on solving universal problems that are manifested in their local communities, institutions of higher learning will be better able to advance learning, research, teaching, and service, reduce “ancient customs and habitudes” impeding university-school-community partnerships, and accomplish what I view as their basic mission of helping American society more fully realize the democratic promise of America for each and every American.