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Involved Constituencies: Creating an External Support Network at a Metropolitan University

The interactive relationship that metropolitan universities have with their communities is a unique characteristic distinguishing them from other higher education institutions. When viewed as resources, the constituencies of metropolitan universities can be used to effectively communicate the quality of the institution and to garner new support. This article outlines steps to be taken by external relations professionals to create involved constituencies for their universities. The effective use of alumni in legislative efforts and the creation of constituencies around key issues at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock are discussed as case studies in accomplishing these goals.

The Environment

The impact of external forces is considered and weighed at some point in planning, budgeting, and operating any organization that relies on outside support. At metropolitan universities, however, environment takes on another value. George Johnson, president of George Mason University, called it an "others-centered" mindset—this awareness of and interaction with community that occurs at universities defining themselves as *interactive.*

In the years since the establishment of the model for urban and metropolitan universities, much

examination of the academic structures of these institutions has occurred. The changes needed in the reward and tenure systems, the recruitment and training of faculty in outreach methods, the redefining of scholarship to integrate service with teaching and research—these have been the discussions of the change that is occurring in metropolitan universities.

Little space has been given, however, to rethinking the work of external relations professionals at metropolitan universities to support the philosophy of interaction with community. While innovative approaches are being taken to restructure academically at metropolitan universities across the country and internationally, traditional approaches for fundraising, alumni relations, communications, and government relations are still the mainstay of most external relations structures at these same institutions. To illustrate simply, it is like a technology company that has created new Internet products but is solely utilizing print media to market those products.

The central role that environment plays at a metropolitan university speaks to the capacity of an external relations operation to become a key player in the process of integrating the university with the community. This article suggests a paradigm shift that should occur within administrative areas charged with advancement functions and outlines steps that can be taken to implement a new approach.

A Metropolitan University as an Open System

In organizational development terms, the higher education institution that has adopted a metropolitan university mission is an open system. The organization understands that its external environment impacts the very structure of its operation, as well as the strategic planning driving that operation. Far removed from the ivory tower, the environment in which metropolitan universities operate is one that includes considerable interface and integration with the constituencies they serve.

When J. D. Thompson wrote of the open system approach in 1967, he defined an organization with a central technical core and concentric layers that include units designed to support that core. The units, staff, and resources within those layers act to buffer the central operation from the uncertainties of the outside environment (e.g., economy and competition) These units serve to interpret between the core and the external environment, negotiating changes as the two react one to another. The staff of the units become *boundary spanners*—one foot in the organization, another in the outer environment. (Thompson, 1967, pp. 10-11).

There are two primary areas in which external relations staff at metropolitan universities are critical in the role of boundary spanner—information sharing and resource development:

Information Sharing

At metropolitan universities there is a keen, in fact purposeful, recognition of the community (the external environment). The interaction of the university with that community is central to the mission of a metropolitan university. Many metropolitan universities, including the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, have gone through strategic planning processes, driven either by the university or other leadership in the community, that examine the challenges of the community and plot a course for meeting them. These efforts seek to open the academic core of the university to the direction of a community with definite need for the resources within the core—such as faculty expertise, research, and education. As metropolitan universities seek to open the academic areas of their campuses to more frequent and deeper interaction with their constituencies, the units charged with external relations play an important role of interpreting—of strengthening the understanding and appreciation that flow between university and the community.

Resource Development

"To survive, organizations require resources. Typically, acquiring resources means the organization must interact with others who control those resources. In that sense, organizations depend on their environment" (Pffeffer and Salancik, 1978, p. 147). The concept of resource dependence as a reality in dealing with an external environment is a condition faced by any organization open to the influence of outside forces.

Unique Constituencies

Understanding the relationship between a metropolitan university and its external environment is not simply a matter of understanding the delineation of the two. There is a complexity in the constituencies of metropolitan universities. They are not clearly distinguishable one from another, but rather are multifaceted and often intertwined. They are involved in programs and activities of the university. Close proximity and open communications have their advantages but also at times provide obstacles.

Because of access, location, and a faculty with professional interests that take them into organizations and institutions outside the campus, it is not unusual to find strong awareness of individual university departments and programs in the community. Because of the value many metropolitan university alumni place on the education they received over the campus life they experienced while students, allegiance to

departments and/or individual faculty members is often stronger than loyalty to the institution itself.

Likewise, business and government professionals who access the university for resources often respond to and have greater connection with departments and units they work with than they do with the university as a whole. Positive comments are made about the service received from departments or faculty members, sometimes with little or no recognition that the excellence displayed in one area speaks to the larger quality of the university.

The challenge for the external relations professional at a metropolitan university is to draw the relationships between these individual successes and the overall goals of the university. Providing the context in which constituencies understand the importance of the individual program with which they are familiar is a critical role for the staff of the advancement structure to play.

The positive nature of an involved constituency is the ability to interact frequently with donors, alumni, business, and government entities. Alumni bases of metropolitan universities typically consist of large numbers of graduates who stay in the area after completing school. Many financial supporters are from local industries and businesses with which the university is involved in partnership (e.g., consulting or training). Legislators and other elected officials often have professional and/or social associations with key university supporters. At metropolitan universities there is a blurring of the lines between stakeholder groups as well as between the university and the community.

So what does this mean for new approaches to advancement and external relations at metropolitan universities? A paradigm shift is required to change the perspective from "what we don't have that others have" to "how we are unique from other institutions and how that uniqueness is a positive." For example, metropolitan universities can be successful in external support efforts when they see value in their alumni bases not simply as fundraising resources, but also as human resources that can be utilized in educating other supporters about the university. The University of Arkansas at Little Rock has developed a comprehensive strategy that recognizes this uniqueness in its external relations operations.

University of Arkansas at Little Rock: A Holistic Approach

In 1987, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock began examining its efforts to succeed in acquiring support from the state legislature. In that analysis, it was determined that before a legislative strategy could be developed, an overall communi-

cations strategy for the campus needed to be developed. A public survey conducted for the university that year clearly indicated one thing: the public knew little about the university, but what they did know was positive. How to translate public support into increased state support became the most important issue in revitalizing the communications vehicles the university used.

By 1988, a new public affairs strategy for the university had been devised and set into motion. The new strategy had a few guiding principles:

- It should begin with things the campus could control;
- Building support on campus should receive at least as much attention as external efforts;
- Initial efforts should be considered the prelude to a major UALR public awareness effort.

The strategy did in fact outline a series of steps that could be taken immediately:

- Conduct a series of public affairs strategy sessions for faculty, staff, and students;
- Evaluate and revise (as needed) all existing campus communications pieces;
- Initiate a series of chancellor's breakfasts with stakeholders;
- Develop a proactive public information strategy;
- Create quality campus communications pieces;
- Launch a special effort to identify and publicize (internally and externally) UALR contributions to the community and the state;
- Initiate an external campus newsletter targeted to decision-makers on topics of interest to them;
- Develop and implement a strategy for more effective use of campus advisory groups;
- Work with the alumni association to develop a program for informing former students about campus needs and priorities and enlist their assistance in UALR's efforts;
- Compile a campus inventory of resources available to legislators and other key officials;
- Issue invitations to legislators to make presentations to classes;
- Target legislators for communicating UALR needs and priorities.

As the strategy was implemented, two major shifts occurred in the processes utilized by communications and government relations professionals at UALR. One, both internal and external audiences were not just identified for new communications efforts—they were involved in the actual strategy of communicating with the public as they had not been before (advisory groups, information networks). Two, a new side of UALR was targeted to be communicated to the public—the direct impact and service examples of faculty and students working in the community.

By 1991, the strategy was broadened to include efforts to communicate with and involve donor and alumni constituencies in addition to the governmental and general public constituencies that had been targeted in the prior effort. In doing so the university began a new approach with its constituencies—moving past communicating to educating and involving. The ultimate goal of the new approach became *investment in the university by its key audiences*. In fact, the broadened strategy included the recognition that the members of these audiences are stakeholders in the university. This redefinition implies a different relationship with these groups in terms of the support they give the university. More than a philanthropic effort, financial or other support by involved constituencies is evidence that they see the benefit to their organization or the community at large from investing in the university. Figure 1 illustrates the cycle through which constituencies move in becoming invested in the university.
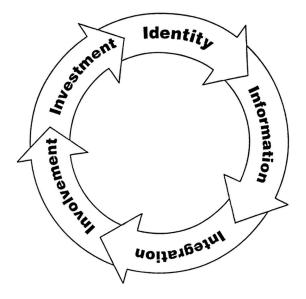

Figure 1. Cycles of Constituent Investment in the University

Each of these steps is important; moving to the next element of the cycle cannot occur until critical efforts are made at the current step.

Establishing an Identity

This step, of creating an image, is where most organizations, including universities, begin in interacting with their consumers or audiences. Many, however, do not move past this level; it is at this stage that interest in the university is created. If marketing and communications strategies work here, a connection is made with the constituencies and they are enticed to learn more. There is limited direct interaction with audiences during this stage. Communication comes in the form of publications, correspondence, or media coverage.

Sharing Information

After constituencies are engaged through efforts to heighten their awareness of the campus, substance has to follow the image. If a campus can consistently prove that its perceived image matches reality, the trust and belief that the university is a quality organization worth being involved with will be enhanced. This consistency occurs through sharing of information—facts and data about the institution, profiles of students and faculty in the media, and anecdotal examples of the university's impact on the community in communications pieces or even informally by word-of-mouth.

Integrating with the Campus

Segments of audiences and even individual members of audiences are focused on at this stage. The aim during this period of activity is to "put a face with the name" of the university. Such integration reaffirms the quality of the institution shown in the information that constituencies have been provided previously. Activities such as informational lunches, tours, or appointment to campus advisory boards can be useful in creating more direct contact,with individuals in the community becoming intrigued about programs of the university. Key members of constituency groups at this stage begin developing a real understanding about the university and can begin to be useful in communicating their knowledge to others in the community.

Involving Constituencies in University Processes

This stage of the constituency investment cycle is a turning point. It requires the university to see members of the external environment as part of the institution, not apart from it. As a manager of an advancement unit would view their staff or

budget, constituencies come to be viewed as an extension of those resources. Persons from external organizations who have shown support and who have been informed through other activities can be utilized to serve on task forces, participate in a special event, or use influence they may have with other external groups that impact the university.

Investing in the University

At the last stage of this cycle, constituencies have been moved from outside the university to some degree of internal knowledge of or involvement with the university. If trust has been built by sharing good information and using their time wisely, constituencies become invested in the university and are committed—whether alumni, legislator, or business person—to helping support the institution.

The most effective method that UALR staff have used to date in moving this overall strategy to implementation is the practice of organizing constituencies around particular issues. Three specific examples of this practice are:

- the UALR Capitol Corps;
- the university's involvement in efforts to create support for revital-
  ization of the downtown area of Little Rock and North Little Rock; and
- a communications strategy for a UALR study of the problem-stricken
  Little Rock School District.

The first example is an ongoing, dynamic effort primarily involving alumni; the second was an intensive effort that included garnering legislative and local electorate support; the third was the creation of a context for the community to see a metropolitan university in action.

Capitol Corps

In 1990, as a result of the new public affairs strategy of the university, advancement staff members researched and analyzed the use of an advocacy network composed primarily of alumni in achieving the goals of the university in the legislature. At that time the university discovered that a few states and a few university systems in other states were using advocacy groups in legislative efforts, especially in reacting to budget reductions for higher education by state governments. Working with the alumni association, UALR organized the Capitol Corps as a proactive measure—to create an informed group of supporters for the institution in the event that they would need to be called into action. The president of the association became the coordinator of the

Capitol Corps, and relying on government relations staff of the university for legislative information, organized a group of about twenty alumni and friends of the institution in time for the 1991 session of the legislature. The Capitol Corps now has been in operation during four legislative sessions (the Arkansas General Assembly meets every two years). When issues arise in the legislature that are of interest to the university, corps members write, phone, or otherwise contact legislative delegates who are their acquaintances. The use of the corps has broadened to that of a feedback mechanism for the university in hearing from and communicating to the community on critical issues. The administration often calls upon individual corps members to share concerns, ask for potential community reaction to a university action, and keep them apprised of issues as they arise.

The River Project

For the past decade community leaders in central Arkansas have attempted to create support for the revitalization of the downtown area and the construction of an arena complex and conference facilities. While prior efforts to gain public support for such initiatives failed, in 1994 the River Project was launched, including the arena construction, renovation of warehouse buildings for a River Market (a downtown shopping and dining area), and expansion of existing convention space in the downtown area. This initiative differed somewhat from previous efforts in that it proposed building the arena across the Arkansas River, in the adjacent city of North Little Rock. In essence the initiative provided an opportunity for the two cities, and other communities in central Arkansas, to propose a plan that would enhance the overall economy of the central region of the state.

The university, led by the metropolitan university philosophy of its chancellor, Charles Hathaway, saw its role clearly in this community effort—to act as a vital community partner and to call for unity on the River Project plan by the communities in central Arkansas. Early in the process of creating support for the project, university leaders publicly stated their commitment and began working among civic groups and other influence circles on the issue. In the legislative session of 1995, university staff worked with other organizations to plan and implement a strategy for acquiring state funding for the River Project.

The Capitol Corps was called into action and, combined with the efforts of numerous other business and civic organizations, helped secure $20 million in state funds for the project. The next phase was a local ballot issue for a sales tax to support the project. Again, the Capitol Corps worked to generate support for the project, and supporters of the university's athletic program organized postcard mailings, election

day efforts, and other activities to secure passage of the tax proposal. The proposal passed, the River Market is now in operation, and construction on the new arena and convention center expansion is scheduled to begin this year.

Little Rock School District Study

In 1993, UALR's chancellor kicked off a strategic planning process called UALR 2000 that engaged two to three community persons for every campus person involved. The year-long process resulted in a set of recommendations on how UALR should be more integrally involved in the direction and future of central Arkansas. One of those recommendations was that the university should become a convener of community discussion of critical issues.

Taking that charge in the last year, two significant efforts have been launched by the university to analyze key issues facing the community or state. One effort was a restructuring study of the Arkansas Department of Education conducted by teams of UALR faculty and staff and joined by professionals from the private sector. The second effort, and one more targeted at the Little Rock community, was a study of the financially and legally challenged Little Rock School District.

The problems surrounding Little Rock's public schools date back to 1957— with the integration of Central High School, which is now seen nationally and even internationally as one of the symbols of the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 60's. Thirty years later, desegregation problems still plague the district, and the schools have been under the federal court desegregation administration for a number of years. School superintendent turnover and financial concerns have created instability over the past decade; the general public has effectively been numbed to the problems facing the schools.

The university realized that the problem was a community issue, not a public school issue, and a group of eight faculty, led by the UALR provost, committed over a year to an in-depth analysis of all of the data surrounding the problems of the school district. Public surveys and interviews with community leaders were included in their work.

At the conclusion of the group's work, the staff of the external relations units of the campus were called upon to work with the faculty group in creating a communications strategy for releasing the findings of the study and calling for community action surrounding the report. From formatting the report, assisting in preparation of the provost's presentation to the media, and working with the faculty members of the task force to discuss the report and anticipate questions they would receive, the staff of the university's communications office became involved in identifying and interact-

ing with the critical constituencies that were to be affected by the study. Again, as in previous initiatives, staff of the university's advancement operations were involved because of their role as boundary spanners to facilitate the interaction between the university and the community on an issue of critical importance to both.

Conclusions

A metropolitan university that recognizes that involvement of its constituencies is a resource to be nurtured has much to gain from developing a comprehensive network through which to interact with the community. The development of such a network and the process for using it can and should take many different shapes, depending upon the unique characteristics of the environment of that institution. Specific methods that have worked, and are still under development, at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock may have little applicability to another metropolitan university.

But regardless of which metropolitan area a university is located in, there is one certainty shared by other institutions like it. The growing philosophy of the university to be directly involved in the life of its community provides a challenge for external relations professionals to support, highlight, and connect the campus's many strengths with community needs. It is the role of bringing substance to the image—of connecting perception to real faculty members and departments—of the university's place as community partner.

The strategy that each metropolitan university creates to fulfill this role requires three critical steps:

- *Commitment by the staff to the time it takes to create the investment by the community in the university.* The cycle of creating the invested constituency is really the process of creating trust. It requires careful attention to the interests of both the university and the outside constituency.
- *Involvement of the campus in these efforts.* After all, it is the work of faculty and departments that is applied to community problems. The best characterization of the role that advancement professionals and units play in linking the university with its external environment is that of facilitators.
- *Preparation and orientation of staff to be sources of knowledge— about the community and its needs and the resources of the campus.* To play the role of boundary spanner between the university and the community, advancement staff must possess an in-depth

knowledge of the programs in the various departments of the campus as well as of the expertise of individual faculty members. Conversely, they should be aware of and educated about current issues and needs of the community the university serves. Both the university and the community should be able to trust the staff of the advancement offices to have appropriate, current information from which to facilitate linkages between the two.

Metropolitan universities have a unique resource in the interactive relationship they have with their constituencies. With a true understanding of the community and its needs, a metropolitan university is positioned to apply the knowledge and scholarship of its faculty in very targeted ways. External relations structures at metropolitan universities, through effective involvement of constituencies, can be the mechanism by which that understanding is gained.

Suggested Readings

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