

Strengthening Diversity through Community and Civic Engagement: Sustaining the Student-Institution- Community Relationship

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Abstract

Structuring an environment to support learning through engagement can enrich the learning experience; can allow for scholarship opportunities; and can support development within the region. Structuring an environment to support learning through engagement can support the university achieving its mission. How? Effectively implementing a program of engagement throughout the learning environment suggests that the university has an infrastructure in place to support the institutionalization. This infrastructure for learning through engagement must support not only student learning and faculty scholarship, but also address the specific needs of the partnering organizations.

An engaged university has a thoughtful, purposeful and sustainable relationship with the external community through the discovery and application of knowledge, through the exchange of information and expertise, and through sharing of resources—to the benefit of all parties to the relationship. An integrated program of community engagement will benefit the students, the faculty and staff, the institution, and the community. However, the benefits are predicated in large part on the ability of the community and academic partners in the engagement to sustain the initiatives throughout the routine activities of the institution.

Community and civic engagement has a rich history in providing foundations for educational pedagogies. Be it applied education, experiential education, community-based education, cooperative education, field education, inter-professional education, problem-based learning, servant-leadership or service learning, linking the education mission of the institution to the greater community is the *raison detre* of many colleges and universities. Community and civic engagement has provided foundations for research as well. Action research, community participatory research and population-based research have provided faculty the outlet—and in many cases the funding—to address issues that improve the quality of life in the community in which the institution resides.

Engaging the Students

For students, the university must make a compelling case for engagement in order for the students to internalize the experience. To the extent that students have been conditioned to believe that their academic experience is a partnership with the faculty and the textbook and is restricted to the classroom they must be reoriented to a different learning environment. Community and civic engagement is not conducted in a lecture format with multiple-choice exams. Community and civic engagement requires the students to synthesize material from many disciplines and apply it to a specific activity. The students need to understand what it is they are to bring to the experience and what they are expected to take away from the experience.

Clearly, making the engagement part of the degree requirement would get the students to attend. The larger question is: How do we get the students to engage? The approaches taken to engage students in their learning will be as different as the programs and the faculty participating in the programs. However, the ways to motivate the students may share the following characteristics:

- ***Enlightened self interest.*** Many applications for graduate school or professional school require students to describe any engagement initiatives in which they have participated. Absent the service experience facilitated through engaged learning, the application will be lacking.
- ***Sustaining-obtaining professional certifications.*** Additionally, several certification programs require students to have community-based experience to become certified and to maintain the certification. Community-based experience as part of the engaged learning curriculum enhances the value of the educational experience and affords the students the opportunity to satisfy the requirement efficiently and effectively.
- ***Becoming part of a larger group.*** Engagement provides the students an opportunity for socialization and allows the students to establish a great connection to the university and the community which could benefit all three for years to come. Engaged students are more likely to be engaged citizens post-graduation. Engaged students are more likely to continue to support the institution with time, money and additional engagement opportunities through an active alumni association. The networking opportunities as a result of engagement can tie the student more closely to his/her discipline, can lead to the student securing a professional to serve as their mentor, and can lead to full-time employment in his/her chosen field. Networking is an excellent way for students to get a better sense of “a day in the life” in regard to possible career choices, allowing students to get a better sense of whether this career is right for them.

Engaging the Faculty

The benefits that accrue to faculty participating in engagement initiatives extend to the traditional three-legs-of-the-stool—teaching, research and service. Connecting the community to the curriculum will enrich the learning environment and can make for a more lasting impact of teaching. Experiential learning still requires the faculty to plan, to administer, and to evaluate the students; however, by collaborating with the community partner the planning, administering and evaluating processes can be enhanced.

- **Curriculum development.** External involvement can impact curriculum development and accreditation and can provide a large pool of professionals to serve as guest speakers, team-teachers and adjuncts. An adjunct pool is essential to support emerging programs for which a ready supply of full-time faculty is unavailable or for which program demand is too uncertain to commit full-time resources.
- **Recruiting and retention.** The enhanced program visibility can support recruiting and retention strategies. These strategies are developed to recruit and retain faculty as well as students. Highly visible programs have the advantage of recruiting faculty, staff and students that are more likely to be a better fit to the program than are less visible programs.
- **Funding.** Involving the external community in scholarship can lead to funding to support the research and provide manpower to collect and analyze data, and, in some cases, can be the laboratory where the research is conducted. The networking that accompanies engagement opportunities can also produce consulting arrangements both for fee and for experience.
- **Sustaining-obtaining professional certification.** Depending on the discipline, community engagement is a requirement to maintain a certification. This requirement can be efficiently satisfied within the context of the teaching role.
- **Enlightened self-interest.** In addition, community engagement can be included as evidence of teaching, research and service success for promotion and tenure decisions. For this to work, engagement activities have to be recognized and valued in the promotion and tenure process. Furthermore, to the extent that engagement is factored into the promotion and tenure decision, resource considerations become paramount.

The impact that community and civic engagement has had on scholarship can be seen as an increased focus on qualitative research, an increased emphasis on applied research, an increased incidence of action research, and an increased attention on issues of social action and social justice. Community and civic engagement has impacted service as well. There is a greater integration of the needs identified in the community into the learning objectives for the engagement initiative. Furthermore, community and civic engagement has broadened applied learning opportunities and has provided a wider range of professional work settings.

Engaging the Institution

Engagement is a highly visible activity that can position the university as a significant member of the larger community.

- **Enlightened self-interest.** Community engagement initiatives demonstrate return-on-investment for legislators who can help to increase state funding or, during tougher economic times, minimize or eliminate any pressure to cut the state subsidy to higher education.
- **Recruiting and retention of students.** Increased public awareness that results from engagement keeps the university top-of-mind for influencers: parents, teachers, guidance counselors, etc. Engagement can be an effective enrollment management strategy for graduate and undergraduate students.
- **Better education/preparation of students.** For example, in health professions and business education:
 - 1) The impact that community and civic engagement has had on the health professions education vis-à-vis diversity include:
 - a. The students report increased interaction with diverse patient populations.
 - b. The students report a greater willingness to work in urban communities and with minority cultures.
 - c. The students report greater confidence in their ability to be effective with patients from different cultures (Cauley 2001).
 - 2) Further evidence that communities and civic engagement is integral to the preparation of students has been identified by the Accounting Education Change Commission. They identified competencies required for all students graduating with an intention of having a career in accounting to be:
 - a. An understanding of the flow of events in history and the different cultures in today's world.
 - b. Ability to interact with diverse groups of people and at the highest levels of intellectual exchange.
 - c. A sense of the breadth of ideas, issues and contrasting economic, political and social forces in the world.
 - d. Experience in making value judgments (Sundem 1999).

These are just one of the many examples of disciplinary standards that demonstrate a valuing of the kinds of skills fostered through civic engagement activities. Clearly, there can be little doubt that a coordinated civic engagement program would benefit the university in the pursuit of its strategic plan by addressing all three of its goals: to enhance our distinctive learning experience to recruit and retain a diversity of students; to expand our partnerships through external funding and collaborative scholarship; and to extend our engagement with government, business and non-profits to focus on emerging areas of need.

- ***Recruiting and retention of faculty and staff.*** Enhanced visibility is an important component of a recruiting and retention strategy for faculty and staff. The quality of an institution is a direct result of the quality of the inputs: faculty, students, staff and programs. In order to successfully recruit and retain the best, awareness of the institution in the greater community is an imperative.
- ***Community and economic development.*** The success of any university can be predicated on the success of the community in which it resides. By being engaged with and in the community in addressing community needs, the university strengthens itself along with the community.

Previous paragraphs have already demonstrated how civic engagement activities aid learning and increase students' commitment to service and their engagement as citizens. A coordinated program would further enhance those outcomes by acting as a gateway through which the university and the community can gain easy access to each other and by enabling the university to increase the quantity and the quality of engagement opportunities. These enhancements have been clear as Wright State University works to operationalize its mission to "be a catalyst for educational excellence in the Miami Valley, meeting the need for an educated citizenry dedicated to lifelong learning and service" (Wright State University 2006).

Engaging the Community

A community of engaged citizens is stronger than a community whose citizens are not engaged.

- Community engagement creates broader participation in addressing community-wide concerns.
- The university can fill the role of the "honest broker" and can facilitate discussions and forums of community interest.
- Better awareness of resources and priorities across the community will allow for more effective use of community resources. An aware community can better prioritize and deploy its resources, can minimize redundant resources, can capitalize on resource latency, and can avoid gaps in services.
- An engaged community will maintain an inventory of skills and expertise to enhance its ability to attract economic activity. Additionally, this inventory is useful during tougher economic times when businesses are leaving the area and the workers have to be absorbed elsewhere in the system.
- The success of any community is predicated on the success of the people and organizations that live there.

Community agencies and the community at large also benefit when they partner with university students, faculty and staff.

- Partnerships with the university can help community non-profit organizations shore up their limited resources. Grant-funding organizations look favorably on the university's longevity and financial stability as lending strength to the community agencies whose life spans may be shorter and whose resources are more limited. In addition, hours committed to community agencies by university faculty, students and staff can generate in-kind contributions from grant-funding organizations.
- University students, faculty and staff provide a workforce able to address needs that community organizations cannot tackle due to limited resources (Ferrari and Worrall 2000).
- Some programs have reported that students and faculty are able to help people in the community locate and gain access to social programs and resources they had not previously been able to obtain (Jorge 2003).
- The university provides community agencies with access to new technologies, the professional expertise of its faculty, and educational opportunities (Zlotkowski 2006).
- Finally, the community profits from the development of an active citizenry that is better prepared to tackle existing and impending problems (Ferrari and Worrall 2000).

Administrative Oversight

The administrative oversight for community engagement that is implemented at Wright State University is designed to enhance the relationships of all stakeholders: students, faculty, staff, institution, and community partners. While honoring the engagement activities already being undertaken at the university and respecting the autonomy of the students, faculty and programs, the administrative oversight supports greater quality and increased opportunities for engagement so that faculty, staff and students are viewed as good citizens of the community and that connecting to the larger community becomes part of the institutional identity. (Wright State University Community and Civic Engagement Task Force, 2006).

Wright State University has embraced this type of administrative oversight in many programs. For example, Writing Across the Curriculum, University Honors Program, Center for Healthy Communities, and the University Diversity Advisory Council are each examples of integrated decentralization—respect for the autonomy of the faculty, students and programs along with a consistent experience for all participants. These programs share two characteristics—the activities occur at the people level and the coordination occurs at the university level. As a result, the “university brand” is stamped on each experience; however, the experience is unique for each participant.

The Community and Civic Engagement Task Force at Wright State University concluded that any administrative oversight that includes (in no particular order) the following characteristics supports this kind of integrated decentralization:

- ***Well-defined communication plan.*** Housed within this function is the responsibility of communicating across campus and throughout the external community the nature and scope of engagement activities and capabilities. The external community might grow to view this function as the “front door” to the university. Internally, faculty, staff and students might see this structure as the logical first step when considering any engagement initiative.
- ***Mechanism to capture value.*** Working in concert with all participants in an engagement initiative, the return on investment must be measured and assessed. Moreover, the information gathered through the measurement activity must be captured and disseminated across the university, as well as into the community. What should be measured? When and how should measurement occur? Who does the measuring? What level of detail is appropriate for the analysis? These questions, as well as others, need to be addressed if a meaningful analysis is to be conducted. Furthermore, an *annual* report of engagement should be published. In each report, a limited number of initiatives should be subject to a much deeper analysis, the report of many of the remaining initiatives being limited to such items as the names of the participants, the nature of the project, the number of hours dedicated to the project, and so on. A process that captures value does not have to be difficult. For example, integration of a service learning project planning worksheet, a pre- and post-test assessment of student experiences, and feedback forms for the faculty, students and community partners are readily implemented tools. Employing these kinds of techniques the value of the engagement experience to all participants can be monitored, calculated where appropriate, and assessed.
- ***Standard definitions of engagement.*** The engagement of teaching, the engagement of scholarship, and the engagement of service must be standardized before monitoring can occur and messaging can be effective, and criteria for community partners must be developed. Standardization of the definitions will facilitate the institutionalization of engagement in performance evaluation and promotion and tenure decisions where appropriate. Of course, if engagement is to become part of the promotion and tenure process, it is imperative that department and college bylaws reflect the significance of engagement.
- ***Resources to provide technical assistance.*** Helping the faculty and staff maintain best practices with regard to managing the engagement initiatives requires the resources of time, money and people. Technical assistance can be extended to include such information as outlets for research, opportunities for grants, and venues for presentations.
- ***Inventory and assessment of engagement activities.*** A regular inventory of activities which documents the close correlation of these activities with university mission and

outcome measures is critical for sustaining engaged learning institution-wide (Wright State University Community and Civic Engagement Task Force, 2006).

Carefully determining effective civic engagement and demonstrating clear impact in areas of value to all partners is also a critical step toward building strong relationships between institutions of higher education and their community partners. Research on civic engagement has led to the development of widely recognized indicators of engagement for colleges and universities and best practices that serve to guide higher education (Campus Compact 2002; 2003; 2004). However, perceptions of community partners about what is important to successful and effective partnerships are essential, even though they are not deeply researched, nor broadly disseminated (Cruz and Giles 2000). The recently developed Community Partner Indicators of Engagement (Creighton 2006) is a tool that will be useful in this arena as well.

The Community Partner Indicators of Engagement are grounded in local realities having been researched and developed in collaboration with Dayton-based community organizations from the health and wellness sector. The participants in the study provided a candid view of their positive and negative experiences working with local universities. The research serves to inform higher education of the community partner perspective, providing effective and ineffective descriptors for ten key indicators: (1) mission compatibility, (2) equitable treatment, (3) mutual commitment, (4) clarity of expectations and roles, (5) effectiveness of communication, (6) usefulness of service-learning, (7) relevance of research, (8) sustainability, (9) synergy, and (10) mutually beneficial exchanges. The ten indicators reflect community partner expectations, thus helping universities that establish civic engagement activities to better understand the positions of their respective community partners. This deepened understanding enables universities to make informed decisions that increase the chances of successful partnerships. Hence, these indicators are pertinent and valuable information for Wright State as it goes forward with developing and measuring its community and civic engagement programs (Wright State University Community and Civic Engagement Task Force, 2006).

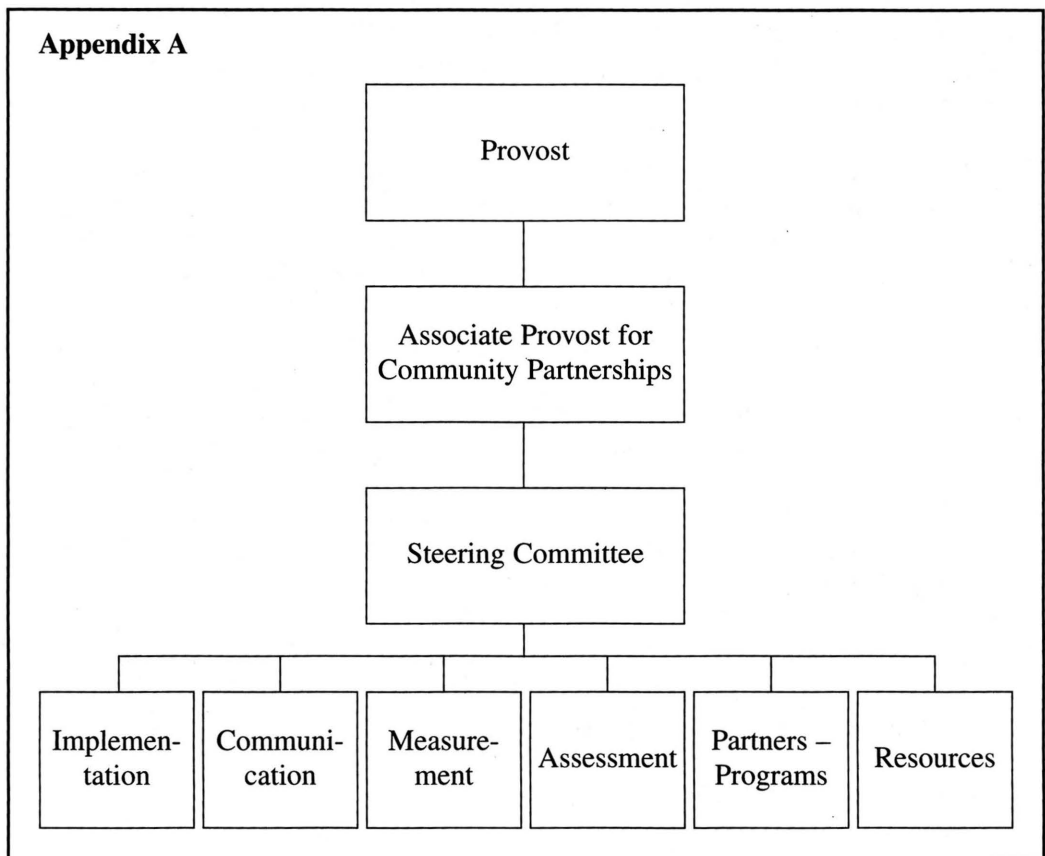
A Roadmap to Engagement: Wright State University as a Work in Progress

Wright State University is not unlike the majority of higher education institutions across the country—working to integrate multiple programs involving community/academic partnerships with the more recent language and methodologies of community and civic engagement that are now so much a part of the professional literature and an integral part of national accreditation and re-accreditation processes. The primary challenge at Wright State has been to continue to recognize and support a plethora of community and civic engagement efforts while continually working to institutionalize the model of integrated decentralization for long-term sustainability. What makes us unique in some regard is how we are taking this opportunity to re-brand the institution consistent with our realignment with respect to the strategic plan

and consistent with our mission. Under the leadership of the Office of the Provost, the Community and Civic Engagement Task Force was formed and met for one year. As a result of the work of the Task Force, a two-stage model for implementation of the integrated decentralization of community and civic engagement was begun, which is described below.

Phase 1: Organization

The task force recommended a two-phase approach to administrative oversight for the community and civic engagement function. The organization chart for Phase I, as shown in Appendix A, is an organic learning model that capitalizes on the engagement activity already occurring at Wright State University and leverages that success across campus. The real purpose of the first phase is to recommend a permanent model for the university's community and civic engagement programs.



Reporting directly to the Office of the Provost, a new position will be created to support the current strong but disparate engagement initiatives. For Phase 1 the title of Executive Director might be appropriate; however, Engagement Facilitator, Dean, Vice President or Associate Provost would be suitable alternatives. The title is less important, however, than the fact that the position will report directly to the Provost. The combination of title and reporting structure sends a strong message to both the

internal and external communities about the seriousness of purpose the university places on community and civic engagement. For the purpose of this paper, the Associate Provost for Community Partnerships will be used as a working title.

1. Steering Committee

The organic learning can be seen as a function of the activities reporting through the Associate Provost for Community Partnerships. A steering committee consisting of twenty-five members reports to the Associate Provost. The membership includes six individuals from the dean and vice president ranks, six individuals representing strategic university-community partners, four members appointed by the Faculty Senate, four members appointed by the Staff Advisory Council, and four members appointed by Student Government. Initially, half of the members from each constituency serve a one-year term; the other half will serve a two-year term. At the end of the first year, those who rotate off are replaced with new members from the same constituency who from then on each serve two-year terms. Each year the university produces an annual report of community and civic engagement that is edited by the Steering Committee. The purpose of the Steering Committee is threefold.

First, the Steering Committee facilitates an ongoing campus conversation about community and civic engagement. This conversation helps the university settle on a generally accepted set of definitions for the variety of activities included under the umbrella of community and civic engagement. A common set of definitions is necessary to the development of reasonable expectations of and for engagement participants: students, faculty, staff and community partners.

Second, the members of the Steering Committee serve as resource people within their respective units. They are conduits through which information can flow to and from their units. And given the rotating nature of Steering Committee membership, within a relatively short period of time, every unit on campus has been represented on the Steering Committee meaning that every unit relatively quickly has a community and civic engagement resource person in house.

Third, members of the Steering Committee—the deans/vice presidents and community representatives—co-chair the sub-committees. Furthermore, the Steering Committee coordinates the activities of the sub-committees.

2. Sub-committees

The sub-committees are comprised of co-chairs from the steering committee, four faculty members appointed by Faculty Senate, four staff members appointed by the Staff Advisory Council, four community partners and four members appointed by Student Government. The sub-committees are the resource people for the campus as well as the larger community.

The functional areas addressed by the sub-committees include implementation, communication, measurement, assessment, partners/programs and resources. The members of the sub-committees endeavor to provide a process to better link the efforts

of the faculty, the staff, the students and the community to provide a more effective learning environment for the students/faculty/staff and a more effective service component for the community.

- Communication is essential for any program to succeed. What is going on? Who is doing it? How is it going? And the opportunity for a faculty, staff or student to be featured for effort is an all important element of a communications plan.
- Of course, for something to be communicated, something must be done. The implementation subcommittee helps faculty and staff to understand issues associated with taking students out of the classroom and placing them in the community. These issues include, but are not limited to, transportation, food, sexual harassment and workplace violence. Additionally, service objectives and learning objectives must also be determined. To the extent that faculty feel more comfortable creating learning objectives over service objectives, the university must provide access to information to help the faculty determine the service objectives.
- What to you measure? When do you measure? How do you measure? Who does the measurement? These are questions that must be addressed by any lead on an engagement initiative. This is of particular importance for service-learning projects where the faculty is attempting to use a project out of class in lieu of a classroom exercise to enhance learning. The faculty will obviously be interested if the learning objectives are being met.
- Once the data is collected via the measurement mechanism, the assessment of the experience can occur. Were the learning objectives met? Were the service objectives met? Could the experience be enhanced? Are there alternative ways to meet the service and learning objectives that are more effective? Again, the university feels a responsibility to assist the faculty and staff involved in community and civic engagement better assess their experiences.
- Identifying strategic partners that can provide a variety of experiences for the students campus wide is markedly different from identifying one-time partners. And the responsibility for the care and feeding of these partners resides with the university not the faculty. The partners/programs subcommittee will focus on helping the university sustain its relationship with the region, however that region may be defined.
- Resources—funding, publication, projects, etc.—to support the work of the faculty, staff and students are important to sustain the community and civic engagement initiatives moving forward.

The permanent structure is then determined from the learning that occurs during Phase 1. The duration of Phase 1 is indeterminate—it will take as long as it takes. To support the teaching mission of the university, the Center for Teaching and Learning was created. To support the scholarship mission of the university, Research and Sponsored Programs exists. A companion infrastructure to support the community and civic

engagement mission is absent. Phase 1 provides the necessary information to develop that infrastructure. Phase 2 is the implementation of community and civic engagement within that structure.

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