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## Validating Institutional Commitment to Outreach at Land-Grant Universities: Listening to the Voices of Community Partners

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## Validating Institutional Commitment to Outreach at Land-Grant Universities: Listening to the Voices of Community Partners

### Abstract

The need for public understanding and awareness of the value of university Extension and outreach is at an all-time high due to flattening Extension budgets and recent criticisms about higher education's commitment to public service. Drawing on interviews from community partners in three states, this article examines how community partners formulate their perceptions about an institution's commitment to its outreach mission. Community partners form their opinions about institutional commitment to engagement through a combination of three factors: language and symbolic actions of campus leadership, personal experiences with faculty and staff, and success in navigating the complex structures of the university.

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## Introduction

The need for public understanding and awareness of the value of university Extension and outreach is at an all-time high. During the past decade, a confluence of factors has created the "perfect storm" that has threatened the future of public support for outreach and Extension. Ominous clouds began rolling in when the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Colleges declared in 1996 that the public perception of higher education institutions is that they are "arrogant, out-of-touch, and unresponsive to the needs of society" (NASULGC, 1996). Darkening the skies have been other stinging critiques of the modern land-grant institution suggesting that university outreach and public service "is poorly focused and not well internalized in the value system of the modern university," (Bonnen, 1998).

These stormy images have only been compounded by the struggling economy, which has placed intense pressure on state and county governments and has led policymakers to question whether Extension and outreach services should be supported by public money or by user fees (Kalambokidis, 2004). Consequently, many institutions have considered new ways to cut costs or generate revenues in their Extension programs, as federal money appropriated for university Extension programs has remained flat (Hebel, 2002).

To weather the storm, national groups such as the National Association for State Universities and Land Grant College (NASULGC) Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) have convened to broaden traditional Extension programs with the aim of promoting university-wide engagement and more deeply connecting with community partners (NASULGC, 2002). A renewed emphasis on building community partnerships is gaining ground as evidenced by ECOP's call for "engagement with communities and organizations through open, flexible and expanded partnerships that share resources, respond to needs and expectations, and recognize and honor contributions," (NASULGC, 2002).

A central concern to community engagement, however, is the issue of effectively measuring how institutions are succeeding in their efforts to build mutually beneficial relationships with community partners. Often, the voices of community partners are left out of this evaluation process and neglected when considering policies and strategies to foster institutional engagement.

This issue is the primary focus of this article.

## **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of the study reported here is to examine community perspectives on community-university engagement, specifically how community members form their opinions about whether an institution is committed to public engagement. This study addresses one research question: How do community partners validate whether universities are committed to outreach and engagement? In this article, the word "community" refers to geographical regions within states linked by common experiences and concerns (Anderson & Jayakumar, 2002).

## **Methods/Procedures**

The research question in this study is addressed through a multi-case study of three land-grant universities that have historically been active leaders in outreach: the University of Illinois at Urbana/ Champaign (UIUC), the University of Georgia (UGA), and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW). Fifty interviews were conducted with campus and community leaders involved in Extension and outreach in the above states. For the purposes of answering the research question proposed this article, interview data will be limited to those representing community perspectives.

## **Sampling and Coding Strategy**

A referral type sampling method, called snowball sampling (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992), was used in this study to select community engagement sites and guide data collection throughout the study. This technique calls for identifying a first round of interviewees who are then asked to recommend others to be interviewed, and so on. Following this sequence, the campus provost and chief outreach officers overseeing outreach programs at the three institutions were interviewed to shed light on two outreach efforts underway on their campus that were typical of their institution's commitment to engagement. These administrators then provided names of the appropriate leaders of these programs to interview, who in turn provided names of community leaders to interview about these partnerships.

The coding measures used in this study were also guided by the work of Bogdan and Bicklen (1992). First, I searched through my initial data for regularities, patterns, and general topics my data cover. Second, I recorded words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns. Third, I recorded these phrases or codes as they emerged during my data collection. Finally, I created indicators to match related data in my field notes.

The coded areas represented the main themes or factors learned in the study and appear as headings for the findings section of this article. I collected interview data until I reached saturation, the point where the information one receives becomes redundant (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992). Interview protocol stemmed from the study's conceptual framework and is provided in Appendix A.

## **Engagement Initiatives Studied**

Of the six partnerships studied, data from three community partnerships will be discussed in this article: UW Villager Mall project, Clarke County School District--UGA--Athens Clarke County (ACC) Partnership, and the Office for Mathematics, Science and Technology Education (MSTE) at UIUC.

First, UGA's 5-year partnership with Athens-Clarke County schools was developed in 2001 to establish at-risk schools as community learning centers "where leadership, resources, and accountability are shared among all the partners, parents, and most importantly, students," (Collaborating for Success, 2001). A wide range of school administrators, community partners, and UGA faculty, staff, and students collaborate in problem solving through action teams that address curriculum, community and parent involvement, educator preparation, and other components of education.

Second, in Madison, Wisconsin, the UW joined a group of neighborhood associations called the "South Metropolitan Planning Council" (SMPC) to improve quality of life on South Park Street, an area of the city troubled by significant urban problems related to lack of affordable housing and persistent poverty. In 1998, the UW made a 5-year commitment to lease space in the Park Street Villager Mall to play a role in training the community, providing expertise and resources to build capacity in neighborhoods, and mobilizing community teams to work on key issues such as housing and transportation. The initiative involves a large group of community partners and UW faculty, staff, and students.

Third, the University of Illinois' MSTE program was established in 1993 to support technology-based teaching and learning at the K-16 level. Over a 10-year period, the MSTE program has evolved into "a set of communities and networks of practice that use advanced technologies to further education reform, particularly in mathematics, science and technology education" (Reese, 2002). Innovative Web-based modules provide standards-based, technology-intensive math and science instruction for students, teachers, and faculty at all levels. The MSTE Web site receives over 100,000 hits per month to access its programs. The program is guided by an advisory board consisting of UIUC faculty, staff, and K-16 teachers and administrators who assist in program design.

# Factors Affecting Institutional Commitment to Outreach and Engagement

Before the findings of the study can be presented, it is important to outline the conceptual framework that guides this analysis. The literature suggests that a number of factors are important to explaining institutional commitment to outreach and that the true test of understanding campus commitment to public service is to investigate the organizational attributes of the university that characterize its outreach activities (Holland, 1997). A review of literature suggests that five factors affect institutional commitment to outreach, and this study tests whether these factors are useful for understanding how community partners form their opinion about institutional commitment to outreach.

1. **Leadership.** Numerous studies cite institutional leadership as a key factor predicting institutional commitment to outreach and engagement (Maurrasse, 2001; Walshok, 1999; Ward, 1996; Votruba, 1996; Zlotkowski, 1998).
2. **Organizational structure.** Studies suggest that centralized outreach structures or those housed in a president's office are more effective than decentralized structures because they help research universities track, coordinate, and communicate its service to the state and local communities (Weerts, 2002; Weibel & Lieber, 1998). Outside of the institution, community partners need access to "entry points" where they can obtain information about opportunities for collaboration with university partners (Lynton & Elman, 1987). Structure is also important at the community level, as community participation in the leadership--shared governance, shared staff positions, and committee work--is negotiated and restructured among partners (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000).
3. **Faculty and staff involvement.** It is known that a strong core of committed faculty and staff is essential to institutionalizing values of service (Zlotkowski, 1998) and that their commitment is shaped by organizational rewards and mechanisms that promote or inhibit their participation.
4. **Institutional culture.** The cultural aspects of faculty and staff and their ability to work with community members and among disciplines are critical. It is known that faculty are typically socialized to advance restrictive definitions of research and promotion that inhibit community-based work (Dickson, Gallacher, Longden & Bartlett, 1985) and consequently relegate community partners to the role of passive participants, not partners in discovery (Corrigan, 2000).
5. **Internal and external communication.** Studies suggest that strong centralized communications--supported by a centralized database of service activities--can promote campus collaboration in developing outreach programs and reduce duplication of activities (Mankin, 2000). Campus publications that target external stakeholders and articulate the service aspects of their universities can also serve to advance the institution's public relations efforts (Holland, 1997).

## Findings and Discussion: How Community Partners Form Their Opinions About Institutional Commitment to Outreach and Engagement

The data suggests that community partners validate institutional commitment to engagement by monitoring three important domains: the extent to which campus executives are visible and active in their support for community-university partnerships, the degree to which faculty and staff are "ready" to work with community partners, and the extent to which organizational structures housing outreach and engagement are welcoming and accessible to community members.

### Monitoring Signals from Campus Leaders

Community perceptions about institutional commitment to outreach and engagement--positive or negative--were greatly informed by the rhetoric and behaviors of top executives at each of the institutions. In the positive cases, community confidence in campus commitment to engagement was bolstered by high profile leaders who delivered public messages about opening an office, starting a new program, or rewording engagement activity. Community members looked to newspapers and public proclamations that declared the importance of the initiative and provided proof that it was part of an overall strategy to better connect with outside constituencies.

Evidence of commitment was often seen through the convening of events or public announcements. For example, one community partner in Madison observed, "There is a sense among us that commitment to this project runs deep. The Chancellor's Office has highlighted this initiative in a special event and the university can use this initiative to its credit." Similarly, at the UGA, a formal announcement by the dean of the School of Education with the local superintendent generated public attention about the newly formed university-school partnership and helped to legitimize this activity among community partners involved with the initiative.

However, community leaders who are heavily involved with these programs looked beyond public relations and more carefully monitored the actual behavior of these leaders. Throughout the case studies, astute community partners were keenly aware of the pressure faced by faculty and the institutions to stay focused on traditional research.

Community partners looked to the top ranks of the institution to get a sense of whether a long-term commitment to engagement was "for real" and whether these leaders played an active role in supporting faculty and staff who participated in this work. For example, in one case, community partners noticed that institutional leaders were applying pressure to transform an outreach program into a traditional research-oriented venture. This action raised questions among community partners about the validity of the community-based mission of the program and the "real" intentions of the institution.

More generally, community leaders observed whether campus leaders had an impact in changing institutional culture to be more community focused. One community member in Georgia summarized this point, "It took the Deans level leadership to change the culture--the feeling that they [faculty] were doing service work despite their real duties of research." Community members throughout the initiatives wondered about the effect that leadership turnover would have on these partnerships.

## **Attention to Faculty Attitudes and Behaviors**

Community partners form their opinion about the institutional commitment to engagement by examining whether faculty and staff have the appropriate attitudes, training, and social skills to work effectively with community partners. Throughout the case studies, there was evidence that faculty and staff can, at times, be either the best evidence of institutional commitment to outreach and engagement or the most damning evidence against it.

The cases of successful faculty and staff involvement with the community were primarily evident at the level of providing expertise and service to the community on a particular project, such as housing, transportation, or educational issues. As the ACC-UGA example demonstrated, faculty and staff made trips to the school and offered expertise and personal support in a way that "inspired success," as one community partner put it. Others alluded to the strong personal relationships that some faculty members have built with the community over time and how this affects the perception of the institution's commitment to engagement. As one community partner involved with the MSTE program pointed out,

They [MSTE staff] are good people who got into education for the right reasons and they are passionate and believe that their work will improve education. The partnership with MSTE works because they [MSTE staff] care about being successful for the kids versus protecting their own curriculum.

However, the most obvious barriers to successful engagement in these case studies are centered in the governance of these partnerships and how skilled faculty and staff were in working with community partners to set up the partnerships. It was clear that power issues are continually negotiated throughout the formation of the partnerships and that trust may wax and wane during its formation. Evidence of conflict arose in two of the three partnerships related to the attitude of some faculty. Said one frustrated community member,

The university must do what they say they are doing . . . if this is an initiative of equals, act like equals. Turn off your cell phone. Don't take the call in front of all of us--if you are that important have someone else join us.

Similarly, use of language was important as some community partners smirked that the university typically lists "university" first when describing "university-community" partnerships, asserting that the institution often puts its agenda ahead of the community's agenda.

In sum, community partners were not just concerned about the availability of faculty and staff to work on community-based issues, but rather how effective they were in relating to people who were unlike themselves. The behavior of campus faculty and staff toward community partners sent a strong signal about whether the institution is serious about outreach and engagement, and more important, whether the campus is ready to take on this endeavor.

## **Breaking Through the Ivory Tower**

The complexity and size of the land-grant institutions also affected community perceptions about institutional commitment to outreach and engagement. In this study, community partners were skeptical about the ability of the campuses to effectively engage community partners due to the existence of impenetrable structures that impede access to the university.

Many of the community partners interviewed bemoaned the fact that institutions were very hard to tap into without having a contact on the inside. One community respondent summarized, "It is hard to get to know a place as complex as the UW. We often don't know what is available on campus to even ask for help." Said another who expressed frustration with the organizational structure of the decentralized nature of campus, "I felt like I was sent through this maze to the point that I almost lost interest [in participating in the program]. It is overwhelming in size and we

didn't know who to talk to first."

On the other hand, community partners in Georgia and Illinois noted the importance of a highly visible office that helped forge connections between community members and the institution. In Illinois, for example, community participation in UIUC programs was enhanced through the formal creation of the Partnership Illinois program facilitated by the Vice Chancellor for Public Engagement. One community member said, "We tried for two years for UIUC people to work with us and nobody would even talk to us. Our opportunities expanded when the Vice Chancellor [for Public Engagement] got involved."

Despite these successes, a central challenge to engagement is that outreach activities are happening far beyond the boundaries of a central administrative unit, even within the most centralized outreach structures. Consequently, the complex web of outreach and engagement programs makes it difficult to understand the breadth and depth of these activities, even at the highest levels of leadership. However, the three partnerships had success when community partners were given access to steering committees and other governing opportunities that engaged outside constituencies in policymaking. These opportunities were shown to be important organizational structures that signaled institutional commitment to engagement and sent a message to community partners that their input was important.

## **Conclusions and Implications: Validating Institutional Commitment to Engagement**

The conceptual framework outlined in this study pointed to five factors that are known to influence institutional commitment to outreach and engagement. Within this framework, this study suggests that community partners validate campus commitment to engagement through three primary domains: leadership, institutional culture, and organizational structure.

First, a key finding of this study is that leadership is not only important to supporting engagement at the campus level, but is also an important signaling mechanism to community partners about the degree to which a campus is committed to community issues. In other words, the study suggests that symbolic actions by university leaders are important to community partners' validation that outreach and engagement are a campus priority.

Second, the study suggests that one must go beyond observing the symbolic actions of campus leaders to explore the actual "substance" of engagement at the ground level. In other words, community partners must observe that symbolic commitment to engagement is actually transformed into action. This is evident when a faculty/staff culture has emerged that respects the participation of community partners. For example, community partners form opinions about campus commitment to engagement by asking questions such as: Do faculty and staff respect community members? Do they care about solving problems versus protecting their own method of doing things? Are they willing to listen to us?

Third, it is evident that leadership and culture change among faculty must be accompanied by welcoming organizational structures that facilitate entry into the institution and help provide a voice for community decision making on community-based problems. This issue was a challenge at each of the institutions in the study due to the size and complexity of the campuses. However, community partners noted that the establishment of these structures was not only a symbol of commitment, but spurred facilitation of a shared community-university agenda. Open structures promote access to the institution and allow for community voices to influence decision making on community-based problems.

As a whole, this study suggests that community partners are mostly concerned about the cultural change that underlies shifts in campus policies and structures to facilitate engagement. This is an important point because much of the literature on benchmarking engagement focuses on promotion and tenure, and organizational issues that enable faculty and staff to take on leadership roles in outreach and engagement (Holland, 1997).

An implication of this study is that policy and structural changes must be accompanied by a cultural "readiness" toward engagement. In other words, university partners must reshape their own thinking about what it means to be an engaged institution and prepare themselves to act in new ways that reflects this thinking. A cultural shift toward engagement could be institutionalized through campus training on community-based work or an academy or institute that prepares faculty and staff to take on outreach and engagement. Table 1 summarizes the study's findings and implications, and provides practical recommendations for incorporating the voices of community partners into policy decisions.

**Table 1.**  
Summary of Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

<b>Finding</b>	<b>Implications</b>	<b>Recommendations for Outreach and Extension Staff</b>
Community partners closely	Leaders at the executive	

monitor signals from institutional leaders to determine whether institutions are committed to outreach and engagement.	level have an important role in assuring community partners that outreach is sustainable, important, and valued within the institution.	Seek opportunities make campus leaders visible in communities through media, speeches, and personal communications with community leaders.
Community partners make decisions about the legitimacy of campus engagement by examining the attitudes and character of faculty and staff who are most involved with outreach programs.	A cultural shift must accompany policy and structural changes on campus to promote "readiness" for engagement among faculty and staff. Academic personnel must be properly trained and socialized to work with community partners.	Develop a campus-wide "Outreach and Engagement Academy" whereby campus staff are trained to work in the community. (See recommendations by NASULGC's Extension Commission on Organization and Policy.)
Community partners recognize an institution's commitment to engagement when structures exist that facilitate access to the institution, and allow community participation in governing community based partnerships.	Centralized and highly visible structures may help facilitate access into the institution. Governance of community-based programs is viewed as more legitimate when they include the views of community partners.	Work with campus leaders to build a high profile "front door" to campus that is easily accessible to community partners. Build campus-community governance structures that facilitate joint problem solving, community-based solutions, and develop trust with community partners.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

### Background about the partnership

*Describe the engagement initiative or partnership from your perspective.*

*What is the problem/issue the partnership is trying to address?*

*What was the process for creating the partnership?*

### Community perceptions of campus commitment to engagement

*What criteria do you use to evaluate the commitment of institution X on your community initiative?*

*What factors are most important to developing a productive working relationship with institution X?*

### Leadership

Tell me about the campus leadership of the initiative and their level of support for this initiative. Tell me about the community leadership of the initiative. How are they involved?

### Organizational Structure and Governance

What are the roles and responsibilities of the campus and community partners?

What is the structure of the partnership or initiative (in addition to roles, decision-making, accountability)?

How do you perceive the accessibility and coordination of service and outreach activities at institution X? Discuss examples that help you form your opinion.

### Faculty and Staff Involvement

Discuss your perceptions about faculty and student commitment to your activities.

To what degree are the problems, solutions, and definition of success with your partnership jointly defined by your organization and institution X?

### Institutional Culture

What sense do you have about whether the climate of institution X is supportive of working with your organization?



What do you perceive to be your impact or influence on the university? What is your sense of inclusion, respect and mutual trust?

Does the university demonstrate an understanding of your mission and expectations for the partnership? What has the university told you about their expectations? Discuss examples that help you form your opinion.

#### Internal and External Communication

Do you know how to get information or assistance on this project from institution X?

Has the institution properly publicized its activities and resources?

Have they made an effort to increase awareness of their resources and programs? Discuss examples of accessibility that help you form your opinion.

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