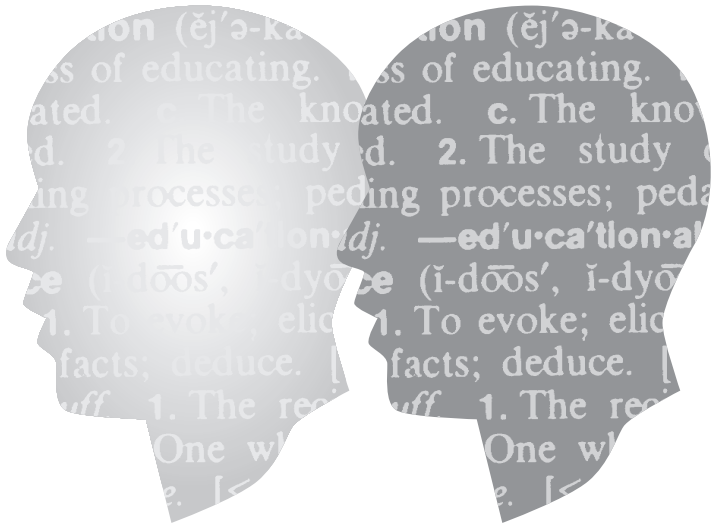


# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2008





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The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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# THE SCHOLARSHIP OF COMMUNITY PARTNER VOICE

By Sean Creighton

I was near the final stages of my doctoral program, determined to produce research that would make a meaningful contribution to the field of civic engagement in higher education. I was working with my mentor, Dr. Ned Sifferlen, retired president of Sinclair Community College, participating in a series of discussions with higher education leaders, and researching several civic initiatives and organizations, like Campus Compact, the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community at the University of Dayton, and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland. The discussions, research, and insights from the literature on civic engagement converged, creating a pathway to my “aha” moment.

On reflection, suddenly it seemed obvious that the scholarship on campus-community partnerships lacked a deep understanding of community-partner perspectives. I had read numerous, passing comments in articles that identified a lack of understanding of community partners. For instance, O’Meara and Kilmer in *Mapping Civic Engagement* concluded that, while there were many national efforts that engaged institutions in university-community partnerships, few of the initiatives really focused on building relationships with community partners, much less on projects that increased the civic capacity of those community organizations and the individuals they served. In the Pew Partnership for Civic Change’s publication *New Directions in Civic Engagement: University Avenue Meets Main Street*, one author noted that supporters of university-community partnerships “too often overlook the community’s perspective on the features of effective university engagement.” In another article, *Community Involvement in Partnerships with Educational Institutions, Medical Centers, and Utility Companies*, the researchers commented that “much of the literature on partnerships between anchor institutions and communities focus on the institutions rather than on the community perspective.” Wergin and Braskamp noted in their article *Forming Social Partnerships* from *The Responsive University: Restructuring for Higher Performance*, that “faculty members

often lack experiential knowledge of issues being addressed,” illustrating that faculty can learn from the surrounding community organizations.

Along with the insights from the literature, there was also the following pivotal moment during an ethnographic case study I was conducting. A group of students was developing a shared vision for local neighborhoods as part of a community-building project. During a public presentation of the shared vision, a community member stood and thanked the students for their work and commitment to strengthening the neighborhoods. He then asked, “What now? You’ve worked with us to develop the shared vision —how will you stay involved?”

The students replied that the semester was over and, essentially, their work was done. In that moment, I understood that the students did not realize the expectations community members had for sustained engagement. I had found my dissertation research question: *What do community organizations look*



*for (and expect) in a successful civic engagement partnership with higher education institutions?*

## Engaging the community partners

The finished dissertation is entitled *Community Partner Indicators of Engagement: An Action Research Study on Campus-Community Partnership*. The research design and process sought to understand the expectations, needs, desires, and perceptions of community organizations that had partnered with several colleges and universities in the Greater Dayton region of Ohio. The unique aspect of this study was that the indicators were generated by the community organizations participating as stakeholders in campus-community partnerships. The conversations with the participating community organization leaders were candid, raw, and real. I engaged participants in a collaborative process of critical inquiry that resulted in truth-telling sessions on how community organizations felt about their higher education partners. The study has made a relevant contribution to the scholarship on campus-community partnerships by giving voice to different perspectives of civic engagement.

The participants developed ten community-partner indicators of engagement to be used in negotiating and assessing their campus-community partnerships (download the complete Community Partner Indicators of Engagement at [www.soche.org/councils/scholarship.asp](http://www.soche.org/councils/scholarship.asp)). They did this



through a process that included individual interviews and multiple group conferencing sessions. To ensure the indicators reflected an accurate and fair representation of the community-partner perspectives, the participants reviewed the language at every stage of development.

For each indicator, the participants developed associated effective and ineffective descriptors. For example, the participants discussed extensively their experience with service-learning programs, which resulted in the indicator *usefulness of service learning*. While service learning was revered in the literature and was becoming a commonly adopted pedagogy, the participants in the study exposed a different perspective on service learning. While they supported its impact on student learning and development, they also perceived serious issues and “felt used by service-learning programs.” One participant from a small nonprofit that serves teenagers drew nods from the others when she said:

Yesterday when I got back to the office ... one of my staff came in and said they got sixteen calls from interns—students from University B. It was a class of social workers. They came to class and were given a list of agencies to call for a 32-hour placement ... my assistant called the professor and said, “Stop it.” ... That’s just rude and lazy on the part of the faculty. There’s no preparation for the students or advanced discussion with the agencies. While we want to assist, we cannot do 32-hour placements ... we need to do police background checks on anyone that works in our programs.

Another participant from an organization that worked with women added that the universities rarely reimburse the community partners for the cost of the background checks, which adds a financial burden to the community partner. Yet another participant from a social service agency identified student entitlement as a common problem, adding:

The students, especially the undergraduate students, come in and they have this entitlement ... and I know this from my own children, who are very successful, but they do have this certain entitlement mentality and, for better or for worse, whatever the generation is called, I think that’s part of it.

There were positive comments as well from participants regarding the relationships, and the importance of building relationships with faculty to ensure a valuable experience for students:

What I see working for me is the relationship I have with University B. But, it’s Professor A and not the university ... he calls me and says, “I’ve got this student who’s great in community building and that’s all she wants to do” ... and



then I get a call from Professor B, who's a wonderful individual, and she hand picks students for us. So, it's truly those relationships, then, that begin to work, in terms of understanding what's expected and the matching that we talk about ... those are personal relationships with individuals who know the agency, who know what we do, who know the quality of supervision and the kind of supervision that's available, and the university is kind of almost out of the picture.

In developing the indicators, participants tried to balance their experiences to portray a constructive perspective. For example, the indicator *usefulness of service learning* detailed the positive and the negative descriptors:

INDICATOR	EFFECTIVE	INEFFECTIVE
Usefulness of Service Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandates fair distribution of service-learning placements to all neighborhoods that are part of the community</li> <li>• Organizes a system for instructing students about service and for coordinating effective placement in cooperation with community partner</li> <li>• Provides helpful and typically low-cost labor by undergraduate students</li> <li>• Provides graduate student expertise to address community-partner needs and share new academic knowledge with community-partner staff</li> <li>• Views students as role models for the constituencies being served by community partner</li> <li>• Hires students to become employees of the community partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discriminates against providing student service in areas based on race, class, and safety concerns</li> <li>• Permits sense of student entitlement</li> <li>• Fails to recognize that under-prepared undergraduate students tax community partner personnel, placing an increased strain on the infrastructure</li> <li>• Shifts service-learning purpose from community-centered to student-centered</li> <li>• Treats community partners as merely a laboratory</li> <li>• Depends on community partner excessively, resulting in too many students calling for interviews, information, and placement</li> </ul>

*Participants felt "disrespected" by higher education partners, expressing the opinion that higher education had an "elitist attitude."*

During the study, the participants discussed in detail their feelings about relationships with local colleges and universities and, in particular, faculty. Participants felt "disrespected" by higher education partners, expressing the opinion that higher education had an "elitist attitude." The participants recognized that faculty and higher education leaders might not have intentionally sought to create ill will or instill negative feelings in their community partners. In fact, these feelings "may stem from a misunderstanding between differing professional cultures," a participant commented. Consequently, they saw the remedy being a process that engages campuses and their community partners in discussions that alleviate feelings of mistrust, disrespect, and inferiority.



Further, the participants viewed institutions of higher education as well funded, powerful, and uniquely situated community assets that had significant leverage. In comparison, the participants viewed their own organizations as similarly critical assets to the community, yet struggling, in some cases, to survive. The participants expected higher education to help address community-wide issues more overtly. As one participant said:

It is like you have these huge institutions that are viewed as great community assets, but as a university and as an institution, they don't see any part of that role. Yes, they make in-kind contributions, but they do not truly apply their knowledge, research, and financial leverage to broader community initiatives. They think, "We're a university ... by nature of being a university, we are giving to the community." That is not enough.

While the participants held, in their own words, "a deep respect and appreciation for academic rigor," they also felt that higher education did not, also in their own words, "have a deep appreciation for practice and for application." There was an expressed concern from participants that "there's not a real intentionality to ensure that the academic knowledge is applied in a sustainable way in communities of need that will impact the quality of life." These experiences were reflected in several of the indicators, for example *relevance of research*:

*The participants commented that the long-term effectiveness of campus-community engagement would be significantly enhanced if higher education approached partnerships from a standpoint of equality.*

INDICATOR	EFFECTIVE	INEFFECTIVE
<p>Relevance of Research</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflects the priorities of the community partner’s research needs</li> <li>• Produces applicable research outcomes and trend data, increasing a community partner’s knowledge of its direct service to constituents</li> <li>• Provides research as a partnership, waiving overhead rates and associated fees</li> <li>• Partners on funding for research on community health and wellness that improves direct service programs regionally</li> <li>• Integrates existing models of practice and academic knowledge, enriching relevancy of both theoretical scholarship and direct service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Produces research that places stress on community partner infrastructure</li> <li>• Strains the already limited resources of the community partner through an exhaustive research process</li> <li>• Redirects substantial funds toward evaluation research that could otherwise support direct service programs</li> <li>• Impacts negatively a community partner’s constituency by charging for research when it could otherwise be provided in-kind</li> <li>• Perpetuates ignorance about a community partner’s constituency through shallow research</li> </ul>

The participants commented frequently that the long-term effectiveness of campus-community engagement would be significantly enhanced if higher education approached partnerships from a standpoint of equality. Unfortunately, they felt “ignored” by higher education, noting, “there has to be fair acknowledgement of the value of each partner.” Participants expressed their sincere gratitude toward campuses that included them in the entire process. For the participants, a productive process provides the opportunity to dialogue with peers, reflect on the meaning of effective campus-community partnerships, and agree on action steps that improve





campus-community relationships. In some cases, they felt that it was critical to make explicit from each perspective the purpose for forming the partnership and to spend substantial time working on communications. One participant thought the “whole key is getting everything in writing” and another believed that “you trust your partners, but you also make sure that everybody understands the ground rules. Once everybody understands the ground rules, you write them down.” One participant suggested creating a manifesto:

*One participant suggested: “We need a manifesto, a bill of rights, something that says we have come together, we have looked at partnerships, what we expect, and here it is.”*

We need a manifesto—a bill of rights; something that says we have come together, we have looked at partnerships, what we expect, and here it is. Now, we want you to be a partner, we want you to play, but we’ve got to be on equal footing or it does not equal a partnership. We want to make the partnership real, and it is not real now.

To ensure that faculty and administrators understood the importance of these observations, the participants decided it was necessary to develop the indicators *clarity of expectations and roles* and *effectiveness of communication*:

INDICATOR	EFFECTIVE	INEFFECTIVE
Clarity of Expectations and Roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outlines expectations and outcomes in writing, including specific check-in points to assess progress</li> <li>• Identifies and commits to equal sharing of resources</li> <li>• Provides explicit documentation necessary to sustain the process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fails to recognize that community partner has expectations</li> </ul>

INDICATOR	EFFECTIVE	INEFFECTIVE
Effectiveness of Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Values honesty, transparency, openness, and sustained communication</li> <li>• Identifies decision makers for achieving goals that are central to partnership</li> <li>• Develops personal relationships between participating individuals</li> <li>• Creates a forum for conversations between both parties to engage in a dialogue that helps establish mutualism</li> <li>• Communicates and adheres to best practices, resulting in improved collaboration and a better understanding of each other's needs, perspectives, and effect on the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignores community partner's opinions, creating a fundamental communication gap</li> <li>• Makes it difficult for community partner to determine with whom or what department to discuss and plan for partnerships</li> <li>• Operates in bureaucratic systems that prevent collaboration and/or make working together difficult, creating unwarranted interference, challenges, and barriers</li> </ul>

### Advocating for community partners

Too often, participants voiced a concern that there was a “fundamental communication gap” and that a “lack of understanding drives the universities’ inability to organize themselves to make better use of what we have to offer in the community.” One



participant said, “We need common forums where we can talk and arrive at some mutual understanding, and then drive some changes over

time.” Unsatisfied with merely developing the indicators of engagement, the participants moved on to creating solutions to several issues that emerged from the research process. This reflected the action-oriented nature of these leaders. One participant put it succinctly, “Alright, I guess I’ve been sitting here trying to figure out how this is all going to be perceived by the academic community. I believe this is a wonderful opportunity to bring resolutions about.” While another one echoed, “Well, maybe. I think, perhaps, there’s another section that talks about resolution ... (or) what we, as nonprofit leaders, would like to see happen.”

After hearing these calls for improvements, we added a section to the document called “resolutions.” This final part of the research process turned the passion and voice of the participants into action to improve their relationships with higher education institutions. The seven resolutions included:

<b>RESOLUTIONS</b>	
<b>Community-Partner Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Form community-partner collaborative that develops policy, procedures, actions, and outcomes for higher education to adhere to when doing business with community partners; begin by exploring the concept of the collaborative by working with the Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education and Alliance of Executives</li> </ul>
<b>Memorandum of Understanding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish unified community-partner memorandum of understanding addressing community partner’s expectations and benefits, outlining meaningful expectations of student service, including quid pro quo for educational services rendered by community partner</li> </ul>
<b>Service Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create clearinghouse database that shares service-learning opportunities available to students and promotes fair distribution of student service throughout the entire community</li> </ul>
<b>Academic Research</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create clearinghouse database that promotes community partner’s specific research needs, consequently increasing relevancy of research</li> </ul>
<b>Partner Constituency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve faculty relations and student placement to help situate the dignity and humanity of the people being served by the community partners so future professionals will understand their value and worth and researchers will exhibit their humanness</li> </ul>
<b>Building Dialogue</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distribute Community-Partner Indicators of Engagement to faculty and nonprofit leaders, bringing them together to discuss gaps in perception and how the differences can be addressed; and/or program a conference on “What Makes Community Partnership Work?” in an effort to engage higher education in listening and understanding the community-partner perspective as well as establish a dialogue that bridges campus and community</li> </ul>
<b>Coeducation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Approach a nontraditional college/university to partner in the cocreation of a curriculum for a graduate degree program specifically designed for nonprofit leaders and coconstructed by community partners and higher education faculty</li> </ul>

These resolutions represented agreed-upon actions to address the key challenges that emerged from the process. The resolutions essentially provided steps for progressive changes aimed at improving civic partnerships between community partners and higher education. Specifically, they indicated the participants' willingness to give time, energy, and intellectual capacity to work collaboratively with one another and with higher education leaders. The resolutions reiterated the participants' belief in the value of civic engagement and campus-community partnerships. As much as the participants felt undervalued or misunderstood, they believed progress would only be achieved if they could work together with colleges and universities to address perceived challenges.

I came to this study firmly valuing colleges and universities that practice civic engagement over institutions that do not consider civic engagement as part of their mission, purpose, teaching, and research. As much as I wished that the results reinforced only positive perceptions of higher education's civic-engagement efforts, I had to remain faithful to the perspectives of the community partners. Hence, I shared the *Community Partner Indicators of Engagement* with the higher education community, believing campus leaders would accept the research and make improvements as a result. I promoted the findings to a broad network of leadership in higher education. When I presented the research at several conferences and submitted articles based on the research to a highly respected academic journal, I encountered new obstacles. While my dissertation chair and committee, as well as other respected authors and researchers in the field of civic engagement, applauded the work, other faculty questioned the results and the validity, wondering what types of organizations participated. At one conference, a person asked if I worked with religious organizations. Other scholars questioned the size of the sample and the overall research design; still others raised concerns regarding the role of the researcher and the jointly-derived results. Some even challenged whether action research was appropriate, saying it didn't provide a "theoretical framework."

I am not shaken by the reluctance of some to accept this research. The study raises legitimate concerns regarding civic engagement practices as perceived by community partners. Knowing that community organizations are vital local assets that have existed, in some cases, for as long as many of our nation's colleges and universities, it is, therefore, important to continue to



*It is important to continue to advocate for a deeper understanding of community partners.*

advocate for a deeper understanding of community partners. If higher education seeks to make long lasting, valuable contributions in their communities, then campus leaders must listen closely to their community partners. Kent Keith, editor of *The Responsive University: Restructuring for Higher Performance*, wrote in the conclusion, “it is when the activities of our colleges and universities are aligned with the highest-priority needs of society that we will have the greatest positive impact.” Such an alignment comes from a place of complete engagement. One of the community participants in this study similarly commented, “you’ve got to have, I think, some sort of commonality in your mission, or at least be complementary in your mission, for your partnership to be given a chance to succeed.” This notion is illustrated by the indicator *mission compatibility*, which states that an effective partnership “flourishes because of compatibility of missions, creating a meaningful and complementary intersect.”



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