

Community Engagement

Numbers

"High tuition costs were cited by 84 percent of those who said the higher education system was going in the wrong direction, and 65 percent said students weren't getting the skills they need for the workplace" ([Seltzer](#)).

"In a Gallup poll, 56 percent of the respondents said they had 'Some or Very Little' confidence in higher education. Among Republican ('or leaning') respondents, that number was 67 percent, as opposed to 43 percent among Democratic ('or leaning') respondents" ([Jaschik](#)).

Insights

"Connections with outside parties and surrounding communities will become ever more critical. Tomorrow's regional public university will need to build connections with school districts, community colleges, employers, policy makers, governments, associations and other outside entities like corporations. Doing so will enable it to bolster local communities, better integrate knowledge and career pipelines, and strengthen its own financial standing in a time of constrained state funding" ([Seltzer](#)).

"Regional public universities often serve as providers of the best jobs in their communities and the places local residents can turn to in order to catch a play or watch a college basketball game. This makes them both vitally important and politically popular. Threats to close, combine or otherwise weaken them draw passionate opposition" ([Seltzer](#)).

"They tend to be one of the largest purchasers of services or goods, and so the areas' fortunes are tied to them" (McClure, quoted in [Seltzer](#)).

"Community engagement describes the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Saltmarsh).

Introduction

To be successful in community engagement, a regional institution must have a strong presence in its community. According to AASCU, state colleges and universities educate more than 40 percent of the nation's college students, including countless men and women who go on to local, regional, and national leadership. Still, for too many prospective students and their parents, our institutions are only stepping stones or backup plans. Having spent my entire academic career at such institutions, I know the personal attention and outstanding opportunities we provide for students. I know the highly capable and dedicated faculty and staff who teach, mentor, and nurture these students. I know what we have done and what we are capable of doing.

Communicating our value—in multiple senses of the word—should be a priority for all of us, particularly at a time when "college debt" is a ubiquitous phrase in the media and polls show declining confidence in higher education. Regional public institutions can use multiple approaches, such as speakers' bureaus and lifelong learning programs, to elevate their profiles. They also should cultivate constructive relationships and partnerships with K-12 schools, non-profits, and business communities throughout their regions. After all, regional institutions already play a pivotal role in serving graduates of the public schools and educating the future and current workforce for nonprofits and businesses. Service-learning projects, internships, and community-based research, furthermore, are win-win relationships that serve community partners while providing authentic learning experiences for students and research opportunities for faculty.

Chancellors play a pivotal role in community engagement. For external audiences, they embody their institutions, tell their stories, and help citizens recognize the value that their institutions bring to their regions. For their own faculty and staff colleagues, they convey the needs of their region and champion the role of their institutions as "stewards of place."

Below are a few examples of initiatives and strategies that my own institution and others are using to promote community engagement.

Initiatives and Strategies

Corporate Partnerships: Educating the workforce has long been a role for regional universities. One promising approach to meeting this demand is to forge partnerships with regional employers. Such partnerships serve not only the employers (by preparing their future employees), but also our institutions (by growing enrollment), the region (by promoting economic health and development), and, most importantly, students (by enhancing their job prospects and their chances for success on the job). IU Kokomo, for example, delivers an MBA program for a cohort of employees at Fiat Chrysler plants in the region and has begun exploring similar partnerships with other regional employers.

"As a core principle--there is a flow of knowledge, information and benefits in both directions between the University and community partners" (Saltmarsh).

"Reciprocity is what defines and distinguishes engagement: It defines relationships between those in the university and those outside the university that are grounded in the qualities of mutual respect, shared authority, and co-creation of goals and outcomes" (Saltmarsh).

"The public wants universities to be more involved in their educational, economic and cultural development. SCUs are in the best position to engage the public in those ways. While the pre-World War Two period was the era of the liberal arts college, and the post-World War Two period belonged to the research university, perhaps the first half of the twenty-first century will be the era of the SCUs" (Henderson).

In "The Akron Model: The University as an Engine for Economic Growth," Luis Proenza "argued that a university should not be an ivory tower but rather an open source of knowledge and a connector among the public and private entities and that it should, and could, drive growth for the region it served" ([Van Agtmael and Bakker](#)).

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Learn for Life: IU Kokomo has begun packaging some of its cultural events, such as concerts and lectures, as part of a series for lifelong learning. We are marketing this program to alumni and community members, including a large travel club sponsored by a local bank. We hope to add some lectures by our faculty. This program promises to help us elevate our profile as an institution of exceptional scholars and teachers while also helping us in the area of friend raising. As a frequent lecturer myself (on Edgar Allan Poe, Thomas Wolfe, the Lewis and Clark expedition, and other areas of expertise), I have experience and a keen interest in this kind of initiative.

Speakers' Bureau: We have revived this venue for connecting our faculty with members of the community and have begun promoting it directly to the local schools. Connecting schoolchildren with our professors can promote both enrollment and student success, since our professors are highly accessible and dynamic. My hope is that meeting them and experiencing their teaching will help to reduce anxiety among students, particularly first-generation students who may not know what to expect in college.

Tomorrow's Teachers: In this growing partnership, IU Kokomo sends resident faculty from the School of Education into local schools to teach college-level classes to high school students who aspire to become teachers. The program serves both the students, who get a head start on their college education, and school districts, which need teachers and can hope to attract these same individuals to work in their schools after they earn their degrees.

Service-Learning: Our Design Center connects local nonprofits with our art students, who provide logos, brochures, and other quality products at no charge. Our next step is to expand this kind of service to include various other types of consulting by our business, hospitality and tourism, computer science, and other students. This initiative will combine service learning and community engagement in a way that serves the community in meaningful ways while providing experiential education to our students and elevating our profile in the region.

Summer Camps: I have collaborated with several faculty colleagues to expand the number of our summer camps. Over the past two years, we have offered new camps in humanities, sustainability, and health care. Next summer, we plan to offer a career exploration camp, which can serve high school students by exposing them to promising career opportunities while also building our potential enrollment pool.

Bibliography

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