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Town–gown relationships: Exploring university–community engagement from the perspective of community members

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Abstract

An increasing number of colleges and universities have developed strategies for community engagement. The engagement, however, has been one-sided in that colleges and universities send students, faculty, and staff members out into the community. The current investigation sought to further broaden the definition of community engagement by exploring the benefits that can be accrued by a university when community members are encouraged to explore the cultural, intellectual, athletic, and artistic benefits that are provided in college and university campuses.

The results showed that community members who have attended a campus event in the past six months had a significantly more favorable impression of the university than those who had not attended an event. The implications for town–gown relations are discussed, the applicability of these findings to public relations practice generally are explored, and the limitations to the current investigation are offered.

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Historically, town–gown relations have been a source of difficulty, frustration and annoyance for both the town and the university. The division between a city and a university can be traced to medieval times, when the desire to be in the city but not of it was based upon a perceived need to patrol the morals of students. Many in the university believed the city was a sink of iniquity and any students living unsupervised were certain to "fall foul to its evil ways" (Brockliss, 2000, p. 165). Today, however, many colleges and universities recognize the benefits of being engaged in the community and have attempted to integrate the university into the community. Because the notion a seamless community and university has increased in popularity, the purpose of the current investigation is to explore university engagement in the community and suggest expanding the ways in which community engagement is operationalized.

1. The university separated from the community

Because many early universities in the United States were developed for educating members of the ministry, the linkage between a university and the community often was made through religion (Mayfield, 2001). The strength of that

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connection however, was rather tenuous because many in the university felt that the community was morally corrupt and believed that education should take place apart from the city in a more rural idyll (Brockliss, 2000). As a result of this concern, universities often developed policies that insured that students were "protected" from the community, effectively separating the university from its surrounding neighborhood.

In theory, the passage of the 1862 Morrill Act (in which land grant colleges were established) should have strengthened the interconnectedness of the university and community. Under the provisions of the act, each state was granted 30,000 acres of federal land for each Congressional representative; altogether 69 land grant schools initially were founded (Land grant college Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 2004). By law, land grant colleges were required to provide public service in return for federal aid. Instead of developing a mutually beneficial relationship, however, many universities viewed the community as a "client" and focused their efforts on fulfilling contractual responsibilities so as to ensure the flow of federal dollars. Over the time, many universities began viewing the towns in which they were located as obligations rather than relational partners.

The split between the town and the university further developed during the period from 1945 to 1990 when the vast majority of American universities adopted the campus model (McGirr, Kull, & Enns, 2003). Oftentimes universities became analogous to self-sufficient "cities" where students could eat, sleep, be entertained, and have nearly all their needs met without ever leaving the borders of campus. Because students would rarely leave campus, many universities developed an invisible barrier at the edge of campus (McGirr et al., 2003).

Another factor that has exacerbated town–gown tensions has focused on the frustration that many within municipal government experience because they see commercially viable real estate that remains untaxed as a result of the nonprofit status of the university. To address the lack of real estate taxes, many colleges and universities have developed PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) and SILOT (services in lieu of taxes) programs (Steinkamp, 1998). Although these programs have been helpful, they do not approximate the amount of revenue that could be generated through real estate taxes and an increasing number of "budget-strapped towns have grown wary of providing services to institutions that are immune to local zoning regulations and absolved from paying taxes" (Steinkamp, 1998, p. 24).

2. The university engaged in the community

Although town–gown relations historically have been strained, a number of colleges and universities recently have tried to find common ground with the community and develop programs that engage the community. Mayfield (2001) suggests that engaged universities are better able to (a) integrate the teaching, research, and service functions of the institution, (b) fulfill the function of the academy in society, and (c) if necessary, deflect criticism that universities take public support but ignore the concerns of the community. Moreover, in a time of cost cutting and shrinking resources, integrating the university and the town as a unified entity makes sound economic sense.

Beginning in the early 1990s, colleges and universities began to recognize the problems of a university that was separate from the community and took steps to strengthen town–gown relationships and engage the community. In general, two strategies have emerged. The strategy adopted by most universities focuses on increasing student access to community resources. When using this approach, engagement has taken the form of student teaching, internships, and volunteer opportunities. Universities have benefited from this exchange because student participants in community service and service learning experiences are learning valuable "real world" lessons and acquiring skills that complement classroom learning, introduce civic responsibility, and provide leadership experiences. Communities, likewise, have benefited from the time and talent expended by students (Bonsall, Harris, & Marczak, 2002).

A second strategy for improving town–gown relations has focused on supporting efforts that link the town and the college/university to a common destiny by enhancing the physical assets of the institution while concurrently preserving the heritage of the community (Steinkamp, 1998). Mullins and Gilderbloom (2002) reported that those universities that have developed community partnerships often have provided expertise (technical assistance, mediation expertise, and leadership training), economic development (job training, housing, secondary education), and enhancements to quality of life (public safety, education, and providing social and recreational programs).

Although the research reviewed shows that a number of colleges and universities in the United States have engaged the communities in which they operate, that engagement has tended to be rather one-sided. Most colleges and universities conceptualize of engagement as focused on providing either (a) students with experiences in the community or (b) providing university expertise to the community. However, a third form of engagement exists that has not been explored extensively. Specifically, research should examine engagement from a community member's perspective and determine

what benefits are accrued when members of the community are provided access to a university. Thus, the following hypotheses are presented:

H₁. Those individuals who attend an event at a university will regard that university more positively on relational evaluations.

H₂. Those individuals who have attended an event at the university will be more likely to indicate that the university is an asset to the community.

3. Methods

In order to examine a town–gown relationship, it was necessary to secure the cooperation of the president of a university and the mayor of the community in which the university was located. The lead author presented a research proposal to a president and a mayor, and both parties agreed to support the project. This particular university and community were chosen because: (a) they have a long-standing relationship (the university was located in the community in 1876), (b) both the university and the community are "small" enough that the president and the mayor interact on a semi-regular basis, (c) the community is a suburb located within a major metropolitan mid-western city and is in close proximity to points of interest (and thus not the only source of cultural, intellectual, athletic, and artistic activity), (d) the community has an active city government that is quick to respond to resident needs, and (e) the town–gown relationship historically has been strained.

A 42-question survey was created to examine (a) resident attitudes toward the university that was located in the community (eight questions), and (b) resident perceptions of the relationship they have with local government (34 questions). A mailed survey technique was used to collect data. A systematic sampling strategy with a random start was used to determine the residences that were surveyed. The population of resident addresses (a total of 7216) was obtained from the city water department because it supplies water to all residences. A total of 800 surveys were mailed and 226 were returned, providing a response rate of slightly more than 28%. Thirty-two of the 226 returned surveys were missing responses to the questions examined in this investigation, and thus were removed from consideration. As a result, 194 surveys were used in the *t*-test and cross-tab analyses.

Residents were asked to indicate their level of agreement, on a one to seven scale that was anchored from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with single-item statements that examined whether the respondent felt the university was trustworthy (I feel I can trust University Name to do what it says it will do), open (University Name is open about its plans for the future), willing to invest in the community (University Name seems to invest in the community), and committed to the community (University Name does not see its interests and the community's interests as the same). Respondents also were asked if they felt that the university was a positive asset for the community, whether they had attended an event in the past six months (e.g., a musical performance, athletic event, theatre show, etc.), and if they knew the religious affiliation of the university. Finally, an open-ended question asking the respondents "what is 'one thing' you would like to see the university do?" also was asked.

4. Results

The respondents overwhelmingly felt the university was an asset to the community, with 90% indicating they thought the university was a positive asset, 4% indicating it was not, and 6% reporting they were uncertain. Sixty-five percent of the respondents had not attended an event on campus within the past six months; 35% had. Sixty-six percent of the respondents knew the religious affiliation of the university; 34% did not. Finally, 78 people responded to the open-ended question "What is 'one thing' you would like to see the university do?" The results showed that respondents wanted the university to "invite" them onto campus (41%), provide more parking for students (19%), work on mutually beneficial projects with the city (11%), better manage student rentals (5%), partner with the community in children's outreach activities (5%), update the campus (5%), quit buying houses (5%), and pay more taxes (5%). Four percent of the responses were other, miscellaneous suggestions.

The first hypothesis suggested that individuals who had attended an event on campus were more likely to regard the university positively on the relational dimensions of trust, openness, investment, and commitment. The results showed that a significant difference exists between those who have been on campus and those who have not based upon the

Table 1
Mean scores, number of respondents, and standard deviations

	Trust	Openness	Interests	Investment
Attended an event				
M	5.55	5.30	4.23	5.28
N	67	67	67	67
S.D.	1.43	1.31	1.74	1.29
Did not attend an event				
M	5.00	4.83	4.22	4.64
N	127	127	127	127
S.D.	1.43	1.35	1.71	1.55

Table 2
Cross tabulation results

	Attended an event	Not attended an event
University is a positive asset (N)	69	117
University is not a positive asset (N)	1	4
Uncertain as to whether university is an asset (N)	2	11

issues of trust (t (193) = 2.67, $p < .01$), openness (t (189) = 2.60, $p < .01$), and investment (t (195) = 2.94, $p < .01$). See Table 1 for the mean, number of respondents in each cell, and standard deviations for each of the issues examined.

The second hypothesis suggested that those individuals who have attended an event at the university would be more likely to indicate that the university was an asset to the community. A cross-tabulation (see Table 2) was computed. The results showed that of the 18 respondents who felt the university was not an asset or were uncertain, 15 (83%) had not attended an event on campus within the past six months. Moreover, of the 72 respondents who had attended a campus event, 69 (96%) felt the university was an asset to the community.

5. Discussion

Conventional wisdom and a fair amount of historical evidence suggest that familiarity between town and university breeds contempt. Because town–gown relations often have been strained, many universities have reacted to the difficulties by isolating the university from the surrounding community, in effect eliminating the need to manage the town–gown relationship. Increasingly, however, universities and communities are required to cooperate, and some forward-thinking institutions are recognizing the benefits that can be accrued when the two entities collaborate. Most often, community engagement has focused on sending students and faculty into the community. The results from the current investigation suggest that an additional technique for engagement should be incorporated into university outreach programs so that community members experience the benefits attendant to having a university in the community.

Community engagement is a buzzword in many university circles. Increasingly, curricular and co-curricular activities are designed to engage students in the community as a part of the undergraduate educational experience. Almost exclusively, student engagement has involved sending students of the university out into the community. Very few institutions have, however, thought of engagement in terms of asking members of the community onto campus, sharing university resources with the town, and encouraging community members to view the institution in the same way that the university views the community—that is, as a source of intellectual and experiential abundance. The results from this investigation show that a significant difference exists between respondents who have and have not attended an event on campus, suggesting that a relatively low cost, highly effective technique for enhancing town–gown relations may involve simply encouraging resident attendance at public events that are sponsored by the institution. These data suggest that this relationship-building strategy is mutually beneficial because (a) community members attend events that are of interest to them, and (b) the attendees have a more favorable impression of the institution as a result.

If universities are interested in building effective town–gown relationships, community members must be encouraged to explore the campus cultural, intellectual, athletic, and artistic opportunities that are available. It is important to note

that many colleges and universities offer these types of opportunities at reduced or no cost. Encouraging community members to attend these events should not appreciably increase the cost of hosting the event to the university and will help some community members experience the immediate, tangible benefits that are provided by a university. In order to be effective and avoid cynicism from the public, however, it is critical that the university develop this type of program on a regular, ongoing basis rather than only when the institution seeks approval from or action by the community. Moreover, although encouraging community attendance/involvement probably will have some minimal staffing and/or budgetary implications, it is critical that universities adopt this type of approach as a part of a comprehensive town–gown relationship-building program.

6. Applicability of findings to public relations practice

Some of these results can be extrapolated beyond the specifics of this investigation and applied to the general practice of public relations. The first notion that can be generalized is that event sponsorship positively affects key public member attitudes toward the sponsoring organization. Many public relations practitioners have difficulty justifying expenditures on special events and often struggle when articulating the benefits provided by special event sponsorship. These results suggest, however, that individuals who attend events are more likely to view the organization positively. Although evaluation techniques such as clip counts and broadcast placements historically have been used to evaluate event sponsorships, these results demonstrate an additional benefit – that is, the enhancement of the relationship between the organization and the public – can be derived from event sponsorships. Moreover, developing a quantitative link between event attendance and attitudes toward and evaluations of an organization can help practitioners demonstrate how event sponsorships connect to organizational outcomes.

Secondly, these results have implications for the practice of community relations. Many organizations think of community relations in terms of what the organization can do in and/or for the community. Historically, community relations programs have been conceptualized of in terms of giving—that is, either the organization gives time, resources, or money to the community. These results, however, suggest that certain organizations may be benefited in important ways when they encourage key public members to make use of the organization's on-site resources. For example, certain organizations can offer community members (at reduced or no cost) access to assets such as meeting space or the use of on-site exercise facilities during off-peak times.

Although it is important to remember that organizations have a responsibility to employees and shareholders (and thus the "inviting in" of the community cannot displace/disadvantage these individuals), these results do suggest that organizations can be benefited when members of the community are encouraged to utilize institutional resources. Again, it seems these benefits could be provided at little or no cost to the organization.

A final way that the findings from this investigation should be applied to the general practice of public relations focuses on the techniques used for managing organization–public relationships. These results support Gronstedt's (1997) contention that publics are "active, interactive, and equal participants of an ongoing communication process" (p. 39). Because key public members have an expectation of equal participation, organizations that have strong community relations ties should adopt a dialogic approach (Kent & Taylor, 2002) to relationship management. Those organization members who deal with the public consistently should be empathic, skilled listeners who are able to identify the common ground that exists between the organization and the public. Although the use of a dialogic approach can be more time consuming than traditional approaches to public relations practice, the benefits far outweigh the costs and the results from this investigation suggest that building relationships through this type of approach can strengthen external relations and create situations where both organizational and community interests are advanced.

7. Limitations and future research

There are a number of limitations to the current investigation. First, only one university located in one city was investigated, which limits the generalizability of the results. Future research should be conducted at other institutions and in a variety of contexts to determine the ways in which community engagement may be different based upon the type of university, the setting, and the community involved. Additionally, only one city at one point in time was investigated, thus providing only a "snapshot" of the attitudes of community members toward the university.

Future research should track the actions of the university and the attitudes of the community members to more directly link relationship-building activity and relational outcomes. Moreover, a mailed survey was used in this investigation.

Although the response rate in the current investigation was acceptable, some care should be taken when interpreting these results. Finally, the issues of trust, investment, openness, and commitment were measured using single-item measures raising concerns about the reliability of these measures.

University leaders rarely think of the ways in which key public members can be benefited by providing access to the organization's physical resources, unless that access is accompanied by a fee. Historically, universities have focused on engaging the community through outreach—that is, sending individuals into the community. Although this technique certainly does provide benefit for both the university and the public, clearly more can be done.

The results from this investigation suggest that universities can be well-served by building community in a somewhat novel way—that is, by inviting the community to share in the resources of the university. Although many administrators may balk at this idea, these data suggest that the community can be benefited, the town–gown relationship strengthened, and ultimately, the university enhanced as a result. It is hoped that the results from this investigation will encourage more universities to open their doors to community members and help redefine community engagement as a process of not only sending out, but also inviting in.

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