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FROM RANDOM INTERACTIONS TO INTENTIONAL AGENDAS:
CURATING A COMMUNITY-ENGAGED IDENTITY AND IMAGE THROUGH DATA

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'ALIGNING INSTITUTIONAL EFFORTS WITH A COMMUNITY-ENGAGED APPROACH ENABLES INSTITUTIONS TO SEND A CLEAR AND DISTINCT MESSAGE ABOUT THEIR RELEVANCE IN AND IMPORTANCE TO LOCAL, NATIONAL, AND GLOBAL COMMUNITIES.'

A New Frontier

We are in an era of declining public confidence and financial resources committed to funding higher education.[1] Now more than ever, institutions must demonstrate how they are fulfilling their missions and strategically aligning their efforts to address key institutional and community priorities. While innovations in recruitment, enrollment management, and advancement have provided institutions with new ways to combat financial challenges, they often send a scattered message about who the institution claims to be.[2]

Community Engagement as a Strategy

Institutions that prioritize community engagement and devote resources to its pursuit are finding great success in leveraging their assets and expertise to overcome these challenges.[3] Higher education has long held a special place in American society, expanding public knowledge, creating tomorrow's leaders, and advancing social consciousness. Over the last few decades the ways in which faculty, staff, and students engage with their communities has diversified, providing clear illustrations of how partnerships can enrich student academic success and faculty research. Aligning institutional efforts with a community-engaged approach enables institutions to send a clear and distinct message about their relevance in and importance to local, national, and global communities.

From Scattered Stars to Constellations

Institutions often struggle with comprehensively understanding and articulating their engagement and positioning themselves as an engaged institution.[4] Efforts to serve and partner with community remain perceived as individual endeavors; bright stars that are fueled by committed faculty, staff, or students. It can be overwhelming to look up into the sky and try to make meaning of its vastness - much like your own institutions. But, with the right tools and resources - like maps and telescopes - those individual stars can be organized into constellations, solar systems, and galaxies. A more intentional and coordinated landscape emerges, revealing the connections and coordinates necessary to better understand the universe.

It is imperative, now more than ever, that institutions find ways to organize their disparate engagement efforts into more cohesive and comprehensive landscapes that can be used to achieve their vision and mission. To do so requires clear visibility, the right tools, and most importantly, the right strategy.

The Spectrum of Engagement

As higher education's relationship with community continues to grow and evolve, institutions need to better understand and distinguish the various ways they engage with community. Knowledge of the methods and means by which institutions and their faculty, staff, and students, engage is essential to improving practice and deepening community impact. To accomplish this, it is important to define community engagement and identify how it differs from public service (e.g. volunteerism).

In higher education, community engagement is both:

- A general umbrella term for many types of involvement
- A specific concept with distinct definitions

Community engagement, as a specific concept, was coined by the Carnegie Foundation and describes collaborations 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.[5]

As an umbrella term, community engagement encompasses various methods by which institutions apply their resources (e.g. knowledge and expertise, political position) to address and solve issues facing communities. This approach advances the idea that involvement with community can take a variety of forms.

Public Service, which falls under the umbrella of community engagement, describes activities that employ a more unilateral and unidirectional approach where the institution provides service to the public (volunteer service hours, access to services/facilities, hosting special events).[6]

These various forms of engagement exist on a **spectrum**. It is important to note that what is most key to distinguishing public service and community engagement is **process**.[7] The same activity can be considered public service or engagement depending on how it is implemented.

'AS HIGHER EDUCATION'S RELATIONSHIP WITH COMMUNITY CONTINUES TO GROW AND EVOLVE, INSTITUTIONS NEED TO BETTER UNDERSTAND AND DISTINGUISH THE VARIOUS WAYS THEY ENGAGE WITH COMMUNITY.'

PUBLIC SERVICE

Transactional

One-way delivery

Service **to**, **for**, or **on** community

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Transformational

Reciprocal exchange of knowledge

Work done in partnership **with** community

'INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY TO MONITOR AND ASSESS ENGAGED ACTIVITIES IS NOT YET COMMONPLACE.'

From Reactive to Proactive

As institutions work to better articulate their engagement, it is increasingly clear that the types of data currently collected (number of hours, number of students, number of courses, etc.) do not support a robust and comprehensive story about the work faculty, staff, and students are conducting in and with communities.[8]

It is more important than ever to collect data that reinforce, document, and support the full spectrum of community engagement work that higher education institutions enact toward fulfillment of their missions and visions. However, institutional capacity to monitor and assess engaged activities is not yet commonplace.

Current data collection efforts around engagement often reflect an ad hoc, piecemeal approach, with faculty and staff responding as needed to requests for data from various stakeholders:

- Annual needs, such as external recognitions, surveys, or reports
- Episodic needs, such as accreditation (regional accrediting bodies) or the Carnegie Engagement Classification
- Unique needs, such as requests from legislature, the general public, the media, etc.

This reactivity overextends key social and political capital, resulting in reporting burnout and a lack of participation in data collection efforts. Institutions must support practitioners in being more intentional and strategic about the collection and use of community engagement data, which requires institutions to rethink how they:

- Leverage a clear, consistent, and robust data collection tool to centralize and organize disparate data across the institution
- Develop strong data collection practices (detailed timelines, communications plans, marketing efforts, technical assistance, data analysis, dissemination of results, etc.)

Proactively and systematically collecting data across the entire institution ultimately helps build a culture of community engagement. When done well, institutions can use engagement data to successfully increase understanding of and buy-in for engaged work, advocate for its recognition in promotion and tenure policies, and ultimately develop a broader acceptance of engagement as a key strategy for accomplishing institutional goals.
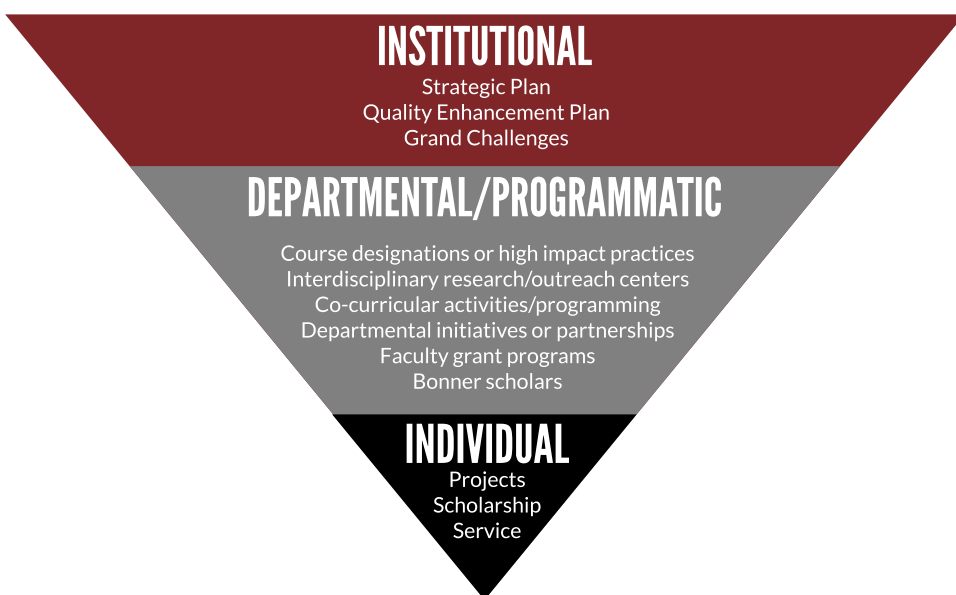
Capturing Comprehensive Data

As institutions consider the various types of data they can strategically collect to better understand their community engagement and impact, they must also reflect on where this data resides and how to best collect it. Many administrators mistakenly assume that there is a quick and simple "silver bullet" approach to finding such data on their campuses. But in reality, the decentralized nature of higher education makes it difficult to organize and coordinate efforts.

Expanding the Scope

Before identifying data needs, identify data goals. What questions need to be answered? What goals can this data help meet? Once there is a clear sense of scope, it is easier to start asking questions about what data will suffice and where on campus it lives. For example, if your institution seeks to understand the alternative scholarly outputs that engaged work might produce (such as exhibits or inventions), then searching for data in student affairs is likely to yield few results. Instead, consider building relationships with the sponsored research office, contracts and grants, or academic deans for research.

This essential shift in thinking requires administrators to maintain a holistic view of where engagement data lives across campus:

'MANY ADMINISTRATORS MISTAKENLY ASSUME THAT THERE IS A SIMPLE 'SILVER BULLET' APPROACH TO FINDING SUCH DATA ON THEIR CAMPUSES.'

INSTITUTIONAL
Strategic Plan
Quality Enhancement Plan
Grand Challenges

DEPARTMENTAL/PROGRAMMATIC

Course designations or high impact practices
Interdisciplinary research/outreach centers
Co-curricular activities/programming
Departmental initiatives or partnerships
Faculty grant programs
Bonner scholars

INDIVIDUAL
Projects
Scholarship
Service

Mapping exercises like this one help to paint a more realistic picture of the scope of data collection. This makes it easier to allocate resources and personnel time appropriately, and to set efforts up for success.

'[ENGAGEMENT DATA] PROVIDES A MEGAPHONE TO AMPLIFY MESSAGES ABOUT WHO THE INSTITUTION IS - ITS PURPOSE, ITS PRIORITIES, AND ITS STRENGTHS. '

Avoiding the Black Hole

A common pitfall in data collection efforts is to gather data and then never use it. While this is never the intention at the outset, it is often the result of an unclear understanding of what data should be collected, why it is important, or how it should be used.[9]

Advancing coordinated engagement initiatives poised to "move the needle" on topics of key institutional and community priority requires planning. The 80/20 rule applies in this context - 80% of an institution's time should be spent planning, listening, and iterating. Only once an institution feels confident that they can answer the "what," "why," and "how" questions should they spend the last 20% of their time actually collecting the data.

This is where institutions often veer off course, as many leaders have been convinced that engagement data matters, but they are not yet able to articulate its benefits.

Within the institution, data on engagement initiatives can inform a variety of programs and initiatives. For example, data helps institutions:[10]

- Recruit and retain diverse faculty, staff, and students, who are able to clearly envision how they can plug into existing efforts on topics that matter to them
- Provide examples of how community engagement is a high-impact approach to teaching, research, creative activities
- Reflect real stories of collaboration to assist advancement and development officers in raising funds
- Demonstrate the full spectrum of partnerships to the greater public to gain support and future partners
- Craft plans based on concrete data from key stakeholders across the institution and community
- Respond to requests for accountability from accreditors, legislatures, and other internal and external stakeholders

As capacity grows within communities to align efforts and resources, institutions have the opportunity to better position themselves as a collaborative and generative partner. Comprehensive data on engagement activities is fundamentally necessary to convene and connect stakeholders both within and beyond institutional walls. It provides a megaphone to amplify messages about who the institution is - its purpose, its priorities, and its strengths. And it encourages an invitation into dialogue about what has worked, what hasn't, and what a shared potential future could look like.

Case Study: Leveraging Engagement Data at IUPUI

The Office of Community Engagement at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) exists to support, promote, and recognize campus engagement with the community and to develop a strategic approach to community engagement at IUPUI.

IUPUI collects community engagement and public service data to inform decision-making surrounding their role as an anchor institution in Indianapolis and tell the story of IUPUI's research and creative activity, teaching and learning, and community engagement to advance the state of Indiana and the intellectual growth of its citizens. In support of these goals, it is critical to collect information on not only curricular-based community engagement projects and their partners/sites, but also data on public (engaged) scholarship, community-based research, outreach programs, community service activities, partnerships, and co-curricular activities that utilize community engagement principles, practices, or pedagogies.

IUPUI began using Collaboratory to track engagement data in 2017, and as been able leverage that data strategically:

Knowing where you are… and where you aren't

Using Collaboratory activities, IUPUI was able to create a community engagement map. It visualizes where, how and with whom they are involved and what issues they are partnering to address, and combines data from Collaboratory with local socioeconomic and demographic data to demonstrate alignment of university resources with local priorities and needs.

Highlighting often hidden identities

Leveraging Collaboratory's profiles, IUPUI developed a faculty scholars directory that highlights those on campus specifically working in and with the community. The directory helps build relationships and connections, and shifts the narrative that there is only one way to "do" engagement or that it is only done in disparate corners of the institution or by specific types of people.

Telling the story

Combining Collaboratory data with other key qualitative and quantitative data on engagement enabled IUPUI to develop story maps, which weave robust stories about how IUPUI is working to address key areas of community priority, such as K-12 education, or the Near Eastside Neighborhood.

"COLLABORATORY ENABLES US TO SYSTEMATICALLY TRACK ENGAGEMENT IN WAYS THAT ALIGN WITH OUR STRATEGIC PLAN AND ANALYZE THE INFORMATION TO ADVOCATE FOR INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE, DEVELOP STRATEGIC AND SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIPS, AND TELL A STORY OF HOW WE ARE WORKING IN COLLABORATION TO ADDRESS SOCIETAL ISSUES AND CONTRIBUTE TO A THRIVING COMMUNITY."

DR. KRISTIN NORRIS
DIRECTOR OF ASSESSMENT, IUPUI
OFFICE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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About the Authors

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Kristin is the Director of Research at HandsOn Connect Cloud Solutions, where she oversees research efforts to support, promote, and enhance the field of study related to community engagement and socially effective impact across all sectors. With over a decade of experience in higher education community engagement, she is a co-designer of Collaboratory (with Janke and Holland) and previously served as the Communications & Partnerships Manager at UNC Greensboro's Institute for Community & Economic Engagement. Kristin holds two masters degrees from UNCG - in Public Affairs, and in Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation.

Lauren Wendling

Lauren Wendling serves as the Collaboratory Customer Specialist at HandsOn Connect Cloud Solutions, working to ensure that all customers successfully implement and utilize Collaboratory software to tell their institutional story of community engagement. Prior to joining HandsOn, Lauren worked as a Graduate Assistant within the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Office of Community Engagement where she built capacity for and implemented Collaboratory software to gather information from across campus and the community to inform assessment, institutional decision-making, and to tell the story of IUPUI's collective impact. Lauren is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Higher Education and Student Affairs from Indiana University Bloomington.

About Collaboratory

Originating in 2010 from within the Institute for Community and Economic Engagement (ICEE) at UNC Greensboro, it was designed, initially, to serve UNCG's need to track, report and build awareness of hundreds of community engagement and public service activities and relationships for planning, reporting, and recognition purposes. Co-creators of Collaboratory are Emily Janke, Ph.D., Director of ICEE, Kristin Medlin, MPA, MS, now the Director of Research at HandsOn Connect, and ICEE senior scholar Barbara Holland, Ph.D. Now in its third iteration, Collaboratory is supported by HandsOn Connect and continues to grow and expand. Collaboratory continues to work closely with the creators, UNCG, and early adopters to inform the ongoing development of Collaboratory in a way that remains rooted in and committed to the principles of higher education community engagement.

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CONNECT
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