



Assessment Institute Insights

Assessment of Community Engagement: Moving Beyond Student Learning and Success

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Historically, assessment of community engagement has focused on student outcomes, both civic and disciplinary, at various levels of the institution (e.g., individual courses, co-curricular programming, program of study/accreditation, institutional surveys) with an overwhelming majority focused on student outcomes. Meanwhile, interest in assessment beyond student outcomes has grown and the Community Engagement track at the annual Assessment Institute in Indianapolis now serves as an outlet for innovative ideas, approaches, and dialogue related to assessment of community engagement more broadly.

Interests beyond student outcomes may be attributed, in part, to practitioners, scholars, and decision makers in higher education seeking more information regarding, but not limited to, the following: fidelity of high-impact practices, reciprocal partnerships with the community, supporting community-based or -engaged research, planning for strategic approaches to doing community-engaged work, and opportunities for campus awards and recognitions. Partnered with organizational change (e.g., new leadership or new strategic plans and subsequent reporting expectations), these inquiries have sparked conversations on college campuses about the role, value, and effectiveness of community engagement. The Community Engagement track at the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis seeks to strengthen the evidence of how higher education institutions' community-engaged activities, programs, pedagogies, and/or practices support their institution's mission, dem-

onstrate progress, and inform decision making.

Most notably, this movement to think beyond the assessment of student outcomes has led to a broader appreciation

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of what our higher education institutions do in collaboration with communities to address complex problems. The term community engagement includes activities beyond the curricular dimension of service-learning, including, but not limited to, the following: community-engaged research, technical assistance/expertise provided, economic development, educational pipeline programs, outreach programs and events, etc. This has expanded the need for the development and implementation of monitoring and tracking systems and processes that will ultimately enable campuses to assess, evaluate, and conduct research on their myriad community engagement activities. Stakeholders in community engagement are typically interested in things such as assessing community impact, calculating return on investment, evaluating partnerships for reciprocity, assessing alumni civic outcomes, assessing town-gown relationships, and much more.

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tors are increasingly taking a more comprehensive approach to capturing an array of activities and assessing how they relate to a variety of outcomes (e.g., Holton 2015).

Common Theme: Assessment of What? In Relation to Where?

As campuses adopt a broader definition of community engagement and the desire to articulate more about the impact of community engagement increases, greater attention is given to two key areas:

- Determining the level within the institution and/or community the community engagement activity is occurring (e.g., a curricular or co-curricular project, sustained partnership program, program of study) and
- Identifying applicable and meaningful outcomes for an activity at a given level.

It is impossible to consider community impact without acknowledging that context matters and that, ultimately, most campuses are fundamentally place-based (e.g., American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASCU] 2002). As such, organizational and community structures, resources, and stakeholders are

important factors to keep in mind during assessment. Campus context and ecosystems, therefore, are worthy of further discussions as the assessment of community engagement becomes more widespread.

Figure 1 illustrates the variety of levels and ways the assessment of community engagement is being recognized as well as the complexities involved in identifying appropriate and meaningful goals, objectives, and outcomes for that activity at that level. This illustration may be useful as campuses begin to develop a more comprehensive approach to tracking, monitoring, assessing, and evaluating the processes and outcomes of community engagement. This illustration is intended to help map what change was intended and what approach was taken across the various levels of an institution and its various communities.

Innovative Ideas from the Community Engagement Track

The following highlights some of the presentations from the Community Engagement Track at the Assessment Institute and may be useful for those

who are tasked with assessing community engagement on their campus.

Departmental/Academic Unit-Level Assessment

Colleagues from the University of Louisville outlined a process for academic units/departments to develop a strategic plan for community engagement. The strategic planning process may create opportunities for dialogue within units to explore what it means if community engagement is perceived as a strategy through which we achieve our institutional mission, goals, and/or vision, as opposed to being disconnected from these. Other campuses can learn from the challenges they encountered along the way as well as how they are aggregating the information to develop performance metrics for the campus.

Institutional-Level Assessment

The Personal and Social Responsibility Index (PSRI) is administered through Iowa State University and is used to assess student perceptions of campus climate as it relates to civic learning and predictors of student success. The Community Engagement Track's keynote

address by Robert Reason outlined how the PRSI utilizes college impact models to examine how student's experience along with the campus's learning environment (e.g., student subcultures, peer environment, and the institutional and community environment) influences civic learning and engagement.

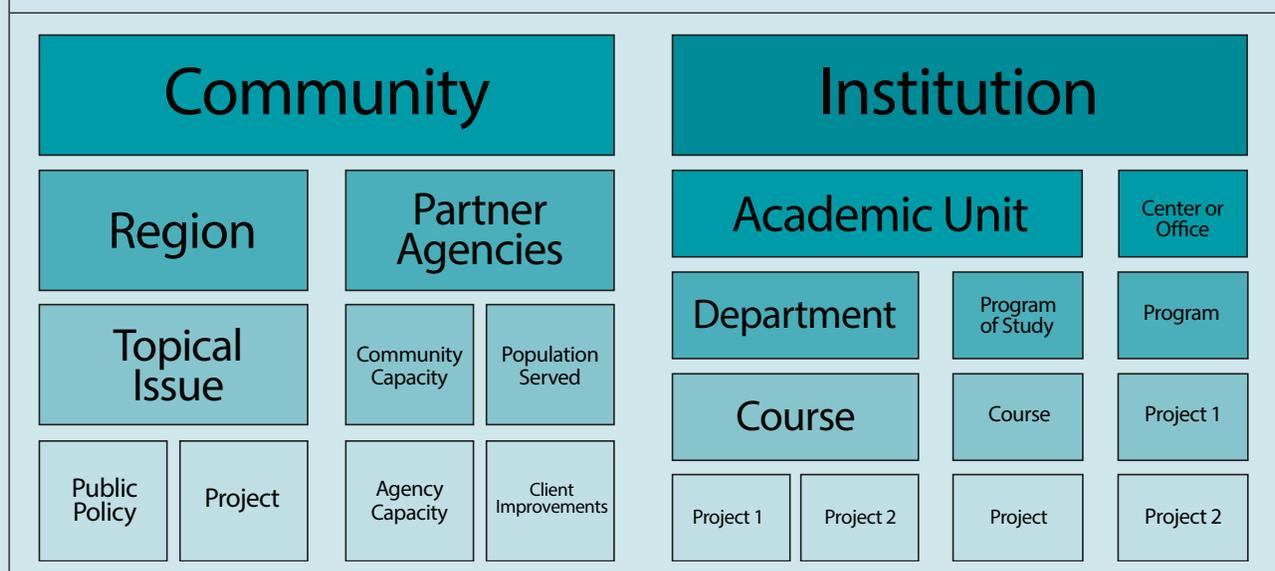
Combining Community and Institutional Assessment

The Optimal College Town Assessment (OCTA) (Gavazzi and Fox 2014) uses a measure of effort and comfort level to assess campus-community relationships. The tool may be useful for addressing issues and opportunities to foster improved relationships, greater collaboration, and other means of integrating the campus with its community.

On the Horizon

Community engagement is one strategy through which campuses achieve their institutional mission and goals, which means community engagement is connected to student learning and success, innovation and discovery, fundraising, recruitment of high-quality faculty and staff, di-

Figure 1. Levels of Assessment



Source: Norris et al. 2016

versity and inclusion initiatives, internationalization efforts, and so on. Consequently, when community engagement is seen as a strategy, as opposed to an output or disconnected activity, conversations ultimately lead to some very important questions: “What are we currently tracking and why?” “How do we intend to use the information?” “What do we need to know that we cannot currently answer given the information we have?” “What evidence do we have that community engagement is central to how we achieve our institutional mission and goals?” These questions suggest that in the short-term the assessment, tracking or monitoring, and evaluation of our institutions’ various community engagement activities will require new or deeper partnerships with institutional research and effectiveness offices/personnel. In the long term, those involved in community engagement will need to be more strategic and collaborative in assessing the impact of community engagement. ■

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Note

“Assessment Institute Insights” is a column featuring ideas, content, and re-

sources from the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis. Now the nation’s oldest and largest event focused exclusively on outcomes assessment in higher education, the Assessment Institute attracts some 1,000 participants from nearly all fifty states and several foreign countries. The Institute features special tracks in assessment related to community engagement, ePortfolios, faculty development, global learning, graduate/graduate professional education, high-impact practices, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), and student affairs programs and services. This year’s Institute will be held October 22–24, 2017, at the Indianapolis Marriott Downtown. More information about the Assessment Institute may be found at <http://assessmentinstitute.iupui.edu/>.

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From the States

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This is a contradiction that has yet to be fully resolved in either context.

There is much for us to learn from this cautionary tale. Perhaps the most important lesson is the perception in

conservative political circles that markets and market information can effectively replace thoughtful external quality review. In my view, this is not true, but the veracity of anything com-

mands startlingly little respect for the new Trump administration, so we may well see something similar here. ■

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NILOA Perspectives

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