



## best practices

### **Gearing Up for Community Service: Overcoming Informational Barriers**

Lawrence Mankin  
Professor of Public Affairs  
Arizona State University

**M**ore than twenty-five years stand between the Carnegie Commission Report, "The Campus and the City" (1972) and the Kellogg Commission's recently released report, "Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution" (National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges 1999). Both are significant calls for higher education's involvement in the community. Neither casts any doubt about the wisdom of such involvement nor do they diminish the significant organizational challenge such involvement provides to higher education.

Institutions of higher education are complex organizations: generally, the larger the college or university, the greater is its degree of organization complexity. The larger the institution's size and the greater its unit specialization, the more formidable are the barriers to sharing information and to internal and external collaboration. Add to these barriers the decentralized nature of colleges and universities, and another is apparent: information residing at the unit level is not known to institutional officers. For some purposes this makes little difference, but for institutions wanting to create or enhance their community presence, the lack of information regarding the community or a unit's partnership or involvement in a community is dysfunctional. This dysfunction is the manifestation of unit knowledge but institutional ignorance. It reflects a concern of the Kellogg Commission (1999) of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing, which is harmful to a university or college's image. Even more detrimental, however, is the failure of the institution to capitalize on its information and investment in community work.

Lacking a centralized database of community partnerships contributes to atomization of outreach activities rather than to collaborative community efforts across academic units. It hinders the connection of local community members with academic units having experience and expertise in areas for which they need

---

assistance. The Kellogg Commission (1999) notes it is not easy for outsiders to negotiate the structure of institutions of higher education. Colleges and universities have many points of access (e.g., individual faculty member, academic department, dean's office, vice president's office, president's office, etc.) that provide hit-and-

---

**...[f]aculty  
engaged in  
community work  
gain insights and  
knowledge into the  
community's  
political,  
sociological, and  
economic  
dynamics.**

---

miss opportunities for people seeking assistance. Central administration may be able to assist local groups by putting them in contact with faculty. In the absence of a centralized database, locating faculty who have the requisite expertise and engage in community work can be a cumbersome process. While sometimes successful, the searches may disclose a faculty person or two rather than a complete listing of faculty members appropriately suited for the project.

It is difficult for faculty at middle-size to large institutions of higher education to know what is

occurring in academic units outside of their discipline. Yet, faculty engaged in community work gain insights and knowledge into the community's political, sociological, and economic dynamics. This information could prove useful to faculty from other disciplines who are considering community-partnership projects, as well as to institutional strategic planners. A centralized database could assist in minimizing disjointed university or college efforts in the community, facilitating collaborative efforts by faculty from different disciplines, and maximizing the impact of the institutional resources invested in the community.

Having a centralized database of community partnerships or projects is not a novel idea. The Carnegie Commission Report of 1972 reported that colleges and universities were "... cataloging their various educational, public service, and research activities that have urban orientations in order to demonstrate to the public the strength of their commitment" (p. 15). Although institutions of higher education maintained community-project inventories more than twenty-five years ago, academia has a mixed situation today: some maintain centralized databases, while others do not. Universities and colleges often discover the databases have a limited utility as an institutional resource and only scratch at the potential of what can be done with such information. As public-information vehicles, these inventories can serve as the basis for further development in imaginative ways.

Some universities place inventories on their web pages. There, a visitor can find listings of projects that include a narrative description and a contact person. However, they are rarely linked to other information to provide the viewer with a more complete

---

picture of the extent of the activity; therefore, these web inventories possess limited value as a planning tool. They do, however, provide faculty and the public with information about the nature of the university's involvement in a community and, thus, can assist in bringing together individuals of similar interests. The use of the Internet opens up vistas to opportunities heretofore unrealized. The next generation of inventories can more fully serve as a planning, linking, and public-information tool.

The development of geographic information systems (GIS) and the Internet provides a different and dynamic method by which inventories can be organized. Instead of listing data, maps serve as the data-organizing vehicle. Superimposed on a map of the community are graphic representations — often dots or icons — representing college or university projects within the community. By clicking on the image, a description of the project appears on the screen, often accompanied by photos and hyperlinks to audio, video, or other reports about the project. A hyperlink e-mail address can be provided for the contact person.

GIS — computer mapping of data and information — can be part of a college or university web page. Various tools can be incorporated into the system so that more customized information can be obtained. Menus can be developed that allow a visitor to display projects by college, activity (e.g., education, conservation, planning, etc.), city, partner (e.g., a business or nonprofit organization), or a combination of two or more of these variables (e.g., by college, activity, and partner or college, partner, and city). For example, one might choose under Colleges, the "College of Architecture;" under Activity, "Planning;" and under Partner, "Habitat for Humanity;" and only dots or icons that conform to this combination appear on the map. Alternatively, a visitor could display on the map only the projects of certain academic units, such as an education college and a social-work department, for the purpose of determining if there are related projects that might provide an opportunity for partnership between the units.

Search engines also can be employed to assist users in locating community partnerships. Tools that permit zooming in or out of an area can provide greater detail or a greater overview of an area. Demographic overlays (e.g., income level or high-school dropout rates by neighborhoods in a community) can be employed so a visitor can see where an institution's projects are located in relation to these dimensions.

Utilizing GIS for displaying inventories provides a clear advantage over a listing of projects. By reviewing listings, one cannot see the relationship to other college or university projects conducted in the same geographic area. If known, such partnerships may suggest others, and have a greater impact in the area. Furthermore, GIS enhances planning. The layering of material that is made possible by GIS technology can lead to insights about a project or area more quickly than would be the case by looking at listings.

---

Therefore GIS provides a "text-plus" vehicle for thinking about projects and geographical areas.

Community-service activities can be conducted on campus. For example, a business college may issue reports about the local economy, or a theater department may conduct a children's workshop. The web page can provide a simple drop-down menu for reports, and another one for on-campus, community-oriented activities. If programs are numerous, menus can be organized by units or colleges. Including information about campus-based activities gives a fuller picture of an institution's outreach.

Internet travelers use computers with different capabilities for displaying graphics; therefore, institutions of higher education may opt for having two versions of the inventory on the Internet: one utilizing GIS, the other text-based. A continual decrease in the cost of new computers with graphics capability necessary for full access to the world wide web suggests that a text-based versions of inventories should be short-lived. Search engines also can be incorporated to facilitate the finding of information about a community project or partnership.

Having a map-or text-based inventory of community projects will facilitate the sharing of information to on- and off-campus communities. However, community members must be aware of the presence of such information on the Internet and, therefore, publicity must be generated to ensure public awareness.

By making information about community projects readily available, the following benefits can accrue to institutions of higher education:

- greater awareness by on- and off-campus communities of university-community partnerships and outreach activities.
- assistance in establishing partnerships among faculty, staff, and students who have similar research, teaching, and service interests. An on-campus community has little knowledge of the institution's projects conducted in the community.
- assistance in fostering communication between off-campus groups and faculty, staff, students, and administrators who have similar interests that could lead to partnerships.
- assistance to the central administration in strategic planning of community projects. This is especially true when utilizing a GIS-based inventory. By locating community projects graphically on a map, a university or college can determine the nature of the projects in which it is involved and their locations, as well as areas that lack academic-community attention.
- provision of a rapid, information-retrieval system for university or college personnel who need to respond to others (e.g., legislators, community leaders, representatives of organized community groups, etc.) about the institution's community projects or outreach.
- assistance to institutional advancement in its work in community, legislative, and alumni relations, and development (fund

---

raising) by having information about community projects easily accessible.

As institutions of higher education gear up for increased activity within their communities, they need information systems that not only assist significant public-relations work but also allow them to capitalize on accumulated data in strategic plans, fostered partnerships, and increased outputs from investments in community projects. Information systems of this nature are desirable, essential, and within the capacity of today's colleges and universities. ■

### Acknowledgments

Deep appreciation is extended to John Babb, Bryon Powers, Jana Fry, Elizabeth Burns, and the other faculty and staff at Arizona State University who participated in a pilot project led to this article.

### References

- Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. 1972. *The Campus and the City*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 15.
- National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. 1999. *Returning to our roots: The engaged institution*. Report of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, 25, 47.

### About the Author

Lawrence D. Mankin (Ph.D., University of Illinois) is a professor of Public Affairs and director of the Master of Public Administration program at Arizona State University. He has written articles on arts policy, public administration, public personnel management, and organizational theory. He served as assistant to the president for administration (1984-1990) and as special assistant to the president (1990-1998) of Arizona State University. Prior to serving in these capacities, he was an assistant dean of the Graduate College at Arizona State University. Disabled Student Resources of Arizona State University named Mankin Administrator of the Year in 1991.

Mankin is a past president of both the Arizona chapter of the American Society for Public Administration and the Arizona chapter of the International Public Personnel Management Association. He has served on the boards of Goodwill Industries of Central Arizona, the Merit System Board of the City of Mesa, Valley of the Sun Communities in the Schools, and the Arizona Forum. He also was a member of the Government Relations Committee of the Phoenix Symphony.

Mankin received his Ph.D. and master of arts degrees in political science from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana and his bachelors of business administration degree with a major in public administration from the City College of New York.