

A Fine Balance: Community Engagement and the Poise of a Metropolitan University

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Abstract

Leaders in an effectively engaged metropolitan university understand, agree on, and invest in thoughtfully chosen outreach commitments. The effective pursuit of such commitments requires also a balance among expectations, behaviors, and practices not always compatible. While outreach thrives on initiative, coordination is critical. Individuals energized by personal commitments must, nevertheless, serve an institutional vision. Though success often embodies the acceptance of risks, costs require careful and continuing scrutiny. Institutions that manage such balances well are most likely to succeed.

By definition, a metropolitan university is engaged with its community. The question is, how effectively?

As many of the presentations at the 2007 conference of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities indicated, community engagement that expresses a commitment to the public promise of urban and metropolitan universities will characteristically present several related characteristics.¹

First, the university's engagement must represent a response to community needs that are both substantive and broadly recognized as important. Yet "demand responsive" engagement is not sufficient. Universities that come closest to fulfilling their public promise must also be in some sense "demand creative." That is, by attending closely to their communities, metropolitan and urban universities identify and define many of the needs they may help to address.

Second, the engagement must express and further the educational priorities of the university. While universities offer many important services to the community, they serve their community most powerfully by offering the opportunities that higher education and productive scholarship make available. An element common to several of the presentations at the CUMU conference was the affirmation of documented gains in student learning accomplished through engagement.

¹ The author expresses his appreciation to the panelists whose conference presentation prompted this paper: Dr. Patricia Book, Vice President for Regional Development, Dr. Gregg Andrews, Dean of the Tuscarawas Campus, and Dr. Wanda Thomas, Dean of the Trumbull Campus, all of Kent State University.

Third, engagement with the community must offer good value for money; to be effective, that is, it must also be efficient. From the identification of issues through the development of objectives to the analysis of outcomes, engagement requires continuing, clear-headed scrutiny as rigorous as that required by any research or instructional initiative. Pursuit of the public promise, often through the leveraging of public funds, demands no less.

Finally, the commitment to community engagement must be adaptable. Just as a scientist will find value in negative findings that require the modification of a hypothesis, so, too, will universities rigorous about outcomes discover merit in evidence that an assumption may not be well founded, that an undertaking may be unlikely to yield appropriate results, or that a priority may be on the point of becoming superseded by some other more pressing need.

Taken together, these four fairly obvious criteria for effective community engagement require much of metropolitan universities. Those that most fully fulfill the public promise will be alert to emerging needs and opportunities, sufficiently agile to respond to them expeditiously, attentive to the ratio of costs and benefits, and able to adapt to changing circumstances.

In order to remain alert, agile, attentive, and adaptable, however, the leaders of an effectively engaged university must not only understand, agree on, and invest in well-chosen commitments, they must also manage a distinctive and precarious balance among expectations, behaviors, and practices that can on occasion appear incompatible—or at least not entirely complementary. For instance, effective institutional outreach thrives on entrepreneurship and initiative, but the coordination of outreach efforts in the service of a shared vision is no less critical. Moreover, engagement invariably demands considerable personal commitment on the part of individuals involved, but that commitment must serve consistently a broader institutional vision. Additionally, success in community engagement almost always embodies the acceptance of some judiciously chosen risks, but the status of such risks and the costs they may entail require careful, continuing scrutiny. The balance required among these elements cannot be taken for granted.

An overriding question suggested by many of the CUMU conference presentations, then, might be by what strategies do urban and metropolitan universities achieve the balance that supports their continued effectiveness, their emergence as exemplars in the pursuit of the public interest?

Analysis of the approach developed by one particularly complex institution, Kent State University, may offer some insights into principles that may be evident, but not nearly so conspicuous, within the approaches to engagement sustained by more compact institutions. If any university campus might be examined to observe the tension between accountability and risk-taking, between initiative and coordination, or between communication and autonomy, the kind of macrocosm that Kent State

presents may make any such tensions—and the ways in which they may be managed—more visible to the naked eye.

In brief, Kent State, singular for an eight-campus regional network that reaches all corners of Ohio's northeast quadrant, must manage both daily and for the long term a delicate balance between entrepreneurship on its individual campuses and the maintenance of a coordinated system-wide approach to regional engagement. That balance, which must constantly be adjusted according to community needs and university circumstances, reflects the recognition that the eight campuses of northeast Ohio constitute one university, a university that must follow clear, coherent priorities for community engagement. Hence, university leadership must play a key role in identifying and articulating the goals, standards, and expectations of the university's engagement with a community stretching from Lake Erie to the Ohio River.

At the same time, each of the university's eight campuses is highly distinctive, well adapted to the needs of the community it serves, and reliant on local support. Each serves a community that is *sui generis*. The small city of Kent regards itself as the home of Ohio's third largest university, with over thirty-three thousand students university-wide, and it depends heavily for its sustenance on the large residential "flagship" campus in its midst. Indeed, it is worth noting in this regard that Kent State is one of the few universities explicitly recognized by the Carnegie Corporation both for its "high research activity" and for its "community engagement, outreach and partnerships." The town of Salem, however, supports its own campus, through targeted giving, the assignment of civic resources, and the influence of political leaders and other opinion makers. My attempt on one occasion to encourage a supporter of the Salem campus to make a gift to that campus through the university foundation came to nothing. He would give directly to that campus—or not at all. In Ashtabula, when locals speak of "Kent State," they are likely to be referring not to the campus in Kent, but to their "own" campus on the shore of Lake Erie. In New Philadelphia, the heart of Tuscarawas County, the prominence of the regional campus dean is comparable to that of any other regional leader. In Warren, the Trumbull Campus provides training opportunities for law enforcement unavailable elsewhere within the eight-campus university and a widely-subscribed local health facility. The aforementioned Salem campus offers the university's only four-year program in radiology.

The close tie between campus and community is organizationally recognized in the appointment of a dean as an operating officer for each campus. The dean develops budget priorities, oversees the hiring of faculty, undertakes fundraising, and, most to the point for this paper, identifies and pursues opportunities for regional engagement. The university through this structure recognizes that regional campus deans may well be the first to recognize emerging needs of their campus' service area and that they must have the autonomy to respond quickly in some circumstances lest opportunities be lost.

Of course, something of the same kind of balance may be found within most universities. A provost assumes responsibility for the broad coherence of the

curriculum but respects the specialized expertise of deans and department chairs in the development of new programs and the closure of obsolete ones. Similarly, a provost may articulate a commitment to community engagement, while depending on the deans to carry it out in ways appropriate to their disciplines. But it may be safe to say that such balance is more easily maintained and appears less remarkable when everyone involved can more or less agree on the community at hand, when all budgets are components of a single account, and when the principals can gather by means of a short walk across campus. When the issue may be “Whose community?” such matters become more complicated.

The principles I would attribute in this regard to Kent State University can be clearly set forth. First, the university encourages the deans of its Kent campus and of its regional campuses to seek out and pursue opportunities for regional engagement, and they do, through a wide variety of on-campus services and facilities and off-campus efforts by faculty and students. Second, there must be at the same time an overall institutional commitment to well-managed, non-duplicative, and (above all) non-competitive engagement. The means of this balance include regular communications among the deans and between the deans and the university’s central administration. Third, there is a clear understanding among the deans regarding the boundaries that surround their respective service areas. Fourth, there appears to be at least tacit understanding of financial ranges that guide deans when consultation is not possible in the time available. Finally, there appears to be in practice a generous attitude towards “forgiveness” when “permission” cannot be sought in advance.

But how such principles operate in practice, and what they may suggest to metropolitan universities in general, may appear the more clearly through the consideration of a few specific instances.

The point of departure for a coherent and coordinated approach to community engagement on a broad scale is an agreed upon understanding of regional characteristics and shared needs. So far as Kent State is concerned, that understanding begins with an appreciation of the region, with its population of 4.5 million, as the fifteenth largest in the United States. While total employment stands at about 1.8 million workers, regional unemployment has hovered around 5 percent, considerably higher than the national average of 4.6 percent. These figures in themselves define an unavoidable priority for the region and the institutions serving it. Related to this issue are measures of specific economic indicators, most of which point to the region’s trailing the rest of the country in terms of economic recovery. While there is ample evidence of a transition from the state’s industrial base to an economy based more on service industries, medical care, and technology, there are also indications that this transition is not taking place quickly enough. One reason for the sluggishness appears to lie in a signal inconsistency that represents a prime concern: although the region can boast of a broad variety of higher education providers, from elite, highly selective private colleges and four public universities to regional campuses and community colleges, rates of educational attainment fall below the national average.

While these issues will strike many of those within metropolitan universities as familiar, the particular nature of this discrepancy, between institutional capacity and overall educational attainment, has mobilized both the state government in Ohio and its public universities. The emblematic expression of this mobilization, called the Third Frontier Initiative, seeks explicitly to align the strengths of certain industries with the resources of universities to promote the acceleration of technology-based economic development.

This initiative has called in particular on the region's public urban universities (the University of Akron, Cleveland State University, and Youngstown State University) and its metropolitan regional research university, Kent State, to join in the creation of a regional agenda for revitalization of the economy. Principally through a public forum known as "Voices and Choices," the universities have responded by using their expertise to inventory the region's strengths and challenges, to frame more clearly the aspirations for development, and to lead in proposing potential solutions in order of priority.

Within this shared undertaking, however, the regional breadth of Kent State and its strengths in research and public engagement have mandated a particular role, one whose complexity necessarily mirrors the "fine balance" at issue. That is, with its seven regional campuses, Kent State is the one university in Northeast Ohio capable of advancing the regional development agenda both on a broad scale, as a single institution with significant core capacities, and on a local scale, as a network of eight campuses attuned to challenges and opportunities specific to the many different constituencies within the region.

It would be fair to suggest, for instance, that all of the initiatives undertaken by the dean of the Tuscarawas campus express the broad regional agenda developed through "Voices and Choices," but it would be no less true that the specific undertakings of the Tuscarawas campus have responded directly to local needs in ways perhaps not envisioned within the broad regional strategy.

That is in part because the needs of Tuscarawas County are even more pressing than those defined for the region as a whole. While the Appalachian foothills, the Amish farms, and the charmingly restored county seat may at first suggest a tranquil and reasonably prosperous way of life, the reality is different. The unemployment rate stands above 7 percent, and educational attainment lags far behind the national—and even the Ohio—average. Only 78 percent of the population holds a high school diploma, and only 12.3 percent have earned a college degree. In light of these statistics, it may not be surprising that the population is aging (the median age is 37.9) and economically challenged (the median household income is \$35,489). The challenge and the opportunity for higher education could hardly be more dramatic.

The Tuscarawas campus has responded, drawing on local support to increase both its capacity and the range of its offerings. Notably, those offerings, which include nineteen associate degree programs in the arts, science, applied business, applied science, and technical studies, now include, as well, seven baccalaureate degree programs. While the mission of the regional campuses was once thought to be one of

“feeding” associate degree students to four-year colleges and universities, the inability or unwillingness of place-bound students to make the transfer has become apparent with the result that regional campuses have expanded their opportunities for completion of the baccalaureate on-site.

Such expansion has not always been greeted with acclaim throughout the university. Enrollment concerns on the Kent campus, in particular, have prompted scrutiny of regional campus expansion, but in the realpolitik found within any university, the “fine balance” has in general favored the responsiveness of regional campuses to documented regional needs.

A result of such expansion for the Tuscarawas campus has been significant enrollment growth, indeed a doubling of campus enrollments within the past decade, to a current level of more than two thousand students. No less significant, however, has been the expansion of the campus’ engagement with its community. That has taken the form of more than four hundred programs offered to business and industry, of extensive contract training in such areas as computer skills, leadership, Six Sigma, and project management; of a “WIRED grant initiative” (offering a continuum of training leading to the digital technology workforce); of a Cyber Center encouraging early access in the schools to information technology; of offering assistance to small businesses through a dedicated development center (an SBDC); of the pursuit of economic partnerships, heralded by the development of a regional technology park; and of the coordination of many such efforts through an Advanced Technology and Workforce Development Center.

The campus’ Regional Technology Accelerator illustrates well the balance that characterizes an approach to regional development that is both entrepreneurial and well coordinated. On the one hand, the project aligns well with the overall goals of the agenda developed through the “Voices and Choices” project. By fostering the growth of new and existing technology companies in eastern Ohio, by offering resources of space and staff to emerging enterprises, and by leveraging the support of resource partners, it effectively expresses the outreach and engagement goals defined by the university leadership. Indeed, it reflects well on the university as a whole. On the other hand, the accelerator is an innovative, targeted response to needs and opportunities identified, addressed, and supported locally. While the Kent State “brand” is well appreciated in Tuscarawas County, it is the dean and his colleagues at the regional campus who have received, and no doubt deserve, the lion’s share of the credit.

The goals of the regional campuses express one side of this balance well. In the light of these goals, a campus may seek to become “a major contributor to the intellectual, social and cultural vitality of the region,” to “grow and change to meet the learning needs of the area it serves,” and to remain “a recognized partner in the ongoing economic development of the region.” Granted, there are certain encumbrances and inconsistencies that can arise from the campus’ role within a larger structure. Issues of great moment for the large residential campus, i.e., Kent, may be of only passing interest for one whose students are all commuters, i.e., Tuscarawas. Communications can be slower than desired, and responsiveness may on occasion not be all that is

wished for, but against these characteristics of most large organizations, the other side of the balance is one most effectively articulated by the dean, with his particular appreciation for the administrative support provided by the university in the form of human resources administration, architectural services, legal services, academic program development, research policies and priorities, and a coordinated approach to outreach. For Tuscarawas, the “fine balance” may waver a bit every now and then, but on the whole it appears to have served the campus, its region, and the university well for more than a decade of change.

The other example of effective balance appears in the experience of the Trumbull Campus, which principally serves residents of Warren, greater Youngstown, and the Mahoning Valley. With approximately the same enrollment as Tuscarawas, Trumbull has tracked the needs of its distinct post-industrial region through the development of fourteen associate degree programs, twenty-one certificate programs, and eight baccalaureate programs.

Two fairly recent undertakings point to a particular engagement with the community. The first, a Police Academy, a Corrections Academy, and a program offering advanced training for police, respond to a need first articulated by the campus’ immediate community but, in fact, broadly based. Virtually an overnight success, the programs draw participants from much of Northeast Ohio. While not envisioned in the planning effort encompassing most of Northeast Ohio, the campus’ investment in law enforcement education has supported its enrollments, strengthened its partnerships with the larger community, and increased its visibility. The other is the outfitting of a community fitness center. Another response to pent-up community need, the center within a short time enrolled more than two thousand community members. Simply by drawing members of the community to the fitness center several times each week, the campus can only expand its regional recognition and influence.

As has been the case at Tuscarawas, moreover, the campus has continued to modify its programmatic mix to address the changing educational needs of its region. While initially conceived as largely a two-year “feeder” institution to the campus at Kent, the demographics of the student body (more than half non-traditional, many place-bound) have dictated a gradual shift in the balance between associate and baccalaureate programs, with the result that now those pursuing the baccalaureate degree outnumber associate degree students two-to-one.

Where the picture differs most dramatically lies in the particular circumstances of the Mahoning Valley. Once blessed with a strong industrial base, the region has observed a precipitous decline in its core industries, steel and automotive manufacturing. To refer to the economic growth of the region as “stagnant” would misrepresent an economy in continuing decline. The compelling characteristics of the region are its high unemployment rates and high poverty levels. Further complicating recovery efforts is one legacy of the industrial boom, the assumption that a high school education should be sufficient for a lifelong, generously remunerative career in steel production or manufacturing.

The Trumbull campus could hardly be better positioned for engagement with the serious needs of its community. It has built attractive and efficient facilities, it has gained the authority to offer a broad range of programs, and it has built a well-qualified and responsive faculty. To accomplish its purpose, however, it must first lead its region in the recognition that long-standing economic assumptions no longer hold. It must encourage more Trumbull county citizens to understand the value of higher education and to make use of the access that has been provided. That is why such programs as police training and a fitness center, which might otherwise appear ancillary, are in fact proving instrumental to a larger educational mission.

In addition, the campus has not overlooked opportunities for more direct interventions. By opening a regional technology park, the campus can offer support to firms that promise leadership in the transformation of the region's economy, and an Advanced Manufacturing Center on campus offers industry-based online training, an assessment center, a modular curriculum offering multiple entry points, and student internships.

Having found in the practical circumstances of leadership the occasion to reflect on issues of balance, the campus dean has expressed the view that only a full and accurate understanding of the local culture can support effective management of the fulcrum joining the autonomy (which she must exercise) and the authority of the centralized university (which she must acknowledge). It is within the context of managing this fulcrum that she finds room for the strategic and operational decisions required by her engagement with the community.

But, while sufficient, managing the fulcrum is not enough. Successful leadership of an engaged campus requires also the kinds of skills not always evident on a curriculum vitae. Negotiation of the relationship between the regional campus and the university requires also an understanding and management of relationships, an ability to understand and respond appropriate to different situations, a vision that allows for a strategic choice of winnable "battles," and, above all, the kind of intuition that offers guidance on when to stand firm and when to go along. One of the illustrations projected during the panel discussion that prompted this paper makes the point. It shows a young woman in business attire, stretching backwards to touch the floor without losing balance. From this precarious position, she advises, "remain connected—but flexible."

Altogether, this overview of a complex university managing its community outreach and engagement both regionally and locally may offer an instructive example of a managerial issue and principle that should be of broad interest. For, as observed above, a manager in any organization will inevitably confront the kinds of issues that leadership at Kent State manages every day. If such issues are viewed confrontationally, as an expression of irreconcilable tensions within the organization, there can be little hope of an effective pursuit of mission. A "tipping point" will present itself, and resolving the partition of different managerial perspectives will take precedence over the accomplishment of mission-related priorities. Examples of such dysfunction do not ordinarily make their way to the program of the CUMU

Conference, but they are not unknown within higher education. On the other hand, if those who share a commitment to the mission of community engagement and public purpose also respect the importance of a “fine balance” between entrepreneurship and coordination, initiative and accountability, and regional and local authority, the result can be the kind of coordinated, but often intensely local, accomplishments which Kent State University continues to offer its region and the communities it serves.

Author Information

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