

Building Meaningful Campus Community: Lesson from the Field

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The community, village-like orientation of the traditional university that flourished in the 1800s gave way in the 1900s to the multiversity, a “one-industry town” with many interests, specializations, and subpopulations (Kerr, 1995). Kerr (1995), who coined the term “multiversity” in 1963, described a multiversity as a fuzzy edged, inconsistent institution encompassing several related internal and external communities.

The varied, and sometimes differing interests of community members in a multiversity are often highlighted by the changing educational needs and demands of society. Issues such as: rising tuition costs, lack of financial resources, assessment, faculty productivity, and increased student diversity contribute to the fragmentation and departmentalization of the multiversity. The challenge is to create an institution that is connected with the external community and internally with the university. The challenge faced by colleges and universities is how to make the educational experiences of students coherent (Boyer, 1990). The question is how to create shared linkages to business and industry, society, while balancing research, service, and teaching with student experiences (Scott & Awbrey, 1993)? In short, how is a greater sense of campus community for students established (Boyer, 1990)?

Many colleges and universities support a number of student development programs that address the needs of its learning community. Many of these programs are aimed at orienting new students to the university, and retaining those students. In such a diverse student environment, it is easy for students to lose or fail to develop a strong sense of community and institutional identity. The University of Toledo’s divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs have developed collaborations between student life and academic experiences to enhance the student’s overall academic experience. The ultimate goal is to increase a student’s satisfaction with their learning experience. Studies and work of Astin (1993a; 1993b), Kuh and Whitt (1988), and Tinto (1987) have suggested that the more satisfied and involved a student is in college, the more likely the student will be academically successful and graduate (Eimers, 2001).

The purpose for the current discussion of campus community was to describe the challenges of fostering community and the role that campus culture plays in addressing that challenge. In doing so, the discussion provides an identification of a few student development programs that address the needs in a learning environment, communicate the elements that lead to the success of these programs, describe the institutional core strategies used for building community, and describe initiatives aimed at building

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community within specific student populations.

Culture and Context

Universities must move away from the highly specialized and isolated world in which they operate, towards a connected world where the mission of teaching, research, and service brings together the many disciplines, areas of knowledge, and diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, age, and ability that exist in today's universities. The movement towards creating a connected university and building community involves making systemic changes, "creating new interactions and intersections in the multidimensional, but fragmented, spaces of the Multiversity" (Scott & Awbrey, 1993, p. 39).

Culture is "the way we do things around here" (Deal, 1987, p. 56). The way things are done, however, is complex and includes components such as folklore, myth, taboo, magic rites, ceremonials, collective representations, saga, story, language, gestures, artifacts, traditions, rituals, and symbols (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Waller, 1932). Culture, as "collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups" (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, pp. 12-13) is learned and transmitted by the observation of individuals and groups (Deal, 1987). This culture is the framework through which students interpret the meaning of the events and actions they observe (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). This is especially important for new students.

Barriers to Building and Maintaining Community

A study of the social conditions found on America's college campuses, reported in the Carnegie Foundation's 1990 document *Campus Life: In Search of Community*, revealed the difficulty that exists on today's campuses of finding the common experiences that sustain a sense of community; the difficulty of bringing together students and faculty around a common cause. The study found several factors that appeared to work against achieving a sense of community including: student conduct, crime, racial tensions, sexual discrimination, and separation between in-class and out-of-class activities. Other researchers also have identified factors that present barriers to building community. Some of these factors include the type and size of an institution, values, faculty reward systems and student involvement (Astin, 1993a; Boyer, 1990; Carnegie Foundation, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Some of these factors are described below.

Size of institution. Some might wonder how a university community could exist given its many diverse and often fragmented campus constituencies. What commonalities exist, for instance, between students and custodial staff, between marginalized groups and the dominant majority, between the law school and the chemistry department (Schoenberg, 1992)? Large, complex universities have many academic and social divisions that often make the creation of common experiences difficult. These common experiences are necessary, however, in order to give meaning to the institution and to the student's academic experience (Carnegie, 1990). Research

shows that student community is more frequently lacking in large institutions, than in highly selective institutions and liberal arts colleges (Astin, 1993a; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, Andreas, Lyons, Strange, Krehbiel, & MacKay, 1991). In a study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA (Astin, 1993a), of the 50 institutions responding, that gave the lowest priority to developing community were primarily public and research institutions, characteristics common among larger universities.

Values. Values are an important component of institutional culture, and, therefore, greatly influence attempts to develop community. Values are the culture's widely held beliefs that may be espoused, but not lived (Kuh et al., 1991). The values of egalitarianism, activism, community, and involvement (Kuh et al., 1991), when both espoused and lived by an institution help in the building of that institution's community. Community building can become problematic, however, when values that are espoused, such as community and collaboration, conflict with the actual lived values of the institution; for instance, rewarding individual scholarship to the exclusion of collaborative scholarship.

Higher education communities exist within the larger societal communities of towns, states, and the nation. The values of those communities, therefore, are woven into an institution's culture and may conflict with its efforts at community building. For example, the societal value and support of individual aspirations has long been a force affecting America's higher education (Kerr, 1991) and the societal value of materialism is on the rise, as evidenced in national surveys of first year college students (Astin, 1993a). These values, when combined with the value of individualism, endorsed in the Bill of Rights, and the value of competition, essential to the effective functioning of a capitalistic economy, have the potential to work against society's community supporting values such as "generosity, fairness, patriotism, social responsibility, and respect for the rights of others" (Astin, 1993a, p. 5). Astin (1993a) pointed out that instead of producing the strength of community often found in highly competitive groups or institutions such as athletic teams, these values reinforce fragmentation and isolation and result in the development of barriers to building campus communities.

Faculty reward systems. Faculty members have a significant influence on student satisfaction and development, an influence that is second only to peer group influence (Astin, 1993b; Kuh et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The reward structure for faculty, however, emphasizes research and scholarship over activities that connect them with students outside of the classroom.

As a consequence, faculty, particularly junior faculty, spend little time with undergraduate students and in university service, direct avenues to maintaining a sense of campus community. Without spending time together, people cannot develop the relationships and understanding needed to establish and maintain a sense of community (Kuh et al., p. 16, 1991).

Lack of student involvement. Student outcomes research consistently shows that the level of student involvement greatly impacts the quality of a student's educational experience. Research by Kuh et al. (1991), for instance, shows that involved students

are more positive about their college experience; more positively influenced with regard to social integration and institutional commitment; more satisfied with their social life, living environment and academic major, and have higher self-esteem than students who are not involved. Low levels of student involvement, such as limited socializing among students, limited interaction of students outside of class, and student apathy, tend not only to negatively impact the quality of a student's educational experience, but also can lead to a lack of student success (Astin, 1993a).

Strategies for Building and Maintaining Community

Where the lack of common experiences can limit an institution's ability to develop community, attention to institutional values as well as the mission and philosophy can enhance community-building activities (Kuh et al., 1991). Establishing effective community building strategies begins with identifying the values, characteristics, and factors that define healthy campus communities. The Carnegie Foundation, when it reported on the status of community on college campuses in 1990, set the stage for several subsequent research reports and articles addressing community. The report suggested that certain values are essential to the development and maintenance of learning communities and proposed that those communities be purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative.

The values of care and purposefulness along with the characteristics of diversity and shared culture become evident in the programs and strategies identified by Brown (1991) as directly influencing the participation and success of minority students. These programs and strategies include financial aid, a multicultural environment, academic retention programs, and faculty sensitization. The University of Toledo identified four areas of focus for community building initiatives and programs that reflected several of those values, characteristics, and factors. Values such as openness, purposefulness, and caring, exist beside characteristics of diversity, shared culture, and teamwork.

Multiple strategies related to building community have been included in the current discussion. These include increasing access and diversity, developing effective retention programs, expanding leadership opportunities, encouraging collaboration between schools and community, and conducting assessments.

Increasing access and diversity. As many students are trying to assert themselves as leaders, many students are simply trying to get in. Gaining access may become more difficult, however, as affirmative action is challenged and financial aid programs for special populations are restructured. As the population becomes older and more diverse, this changing demographic provides higher education with "both a distinctive responsibility and a precedent-setting challenge" (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1995, p. xvi) to commit itself to the nurturance of diversity. Finding a balance between developing a sense of community and appreciating differences presents a distinctive challenge for all campus constituencies (Kuh et al., 1991). The potential exists for conflict among these values and beliefs. These conflicts must be addressed in order to effectively build community and allow all students the

opportunity to succeed.

Developing effective retention programs. Colleges and universities must provide increased access to their campuses, and must foster a learning environment where students are given the opportunity to succeed. Persistence in college is a process of social and intellectual integration that leads to the development of competent community members. Social integration relates to involvement with peers, faculty, and university activities, while academic integration relates to academic performance, involvement with curriculum, and contact with faculty and staff (Tinto, 1987). When universities create a community that supports effective social and academic integration, students are more likely to invest in the community and persist. One strategy for creating and maintaining a learning community that supports persistence is the development of retention programs. Retention programs in their various forms can help colleges and universities fulfill a commitment to ensure the success of all students. Effective retention programs focus on providing students with both positive social and academic experiences.

Expanding leadership opportunities. Leadership programs provide unique opportunities to blend classroom, social, and interpersonal activities into the teaching and learning functions of an institution. Providing leadership skills contributes to community by effectively allowing students and student groups to become involved in the shaping of the institutional culture. When students become involved, they share common experiences and experience greater levels of student success than those students who do not become involved (Kuh et al., 1991).

Encouraging collaboration between schools and community. Colleges and universities are integral parts of the larger communities in which they are located. The values of the surrounding community often are reflected in the institution through the types of students recruited and its workforce. Therefore, it is important to bring together the external and the campus community for common academic, intellectual and cultural pursuits. Education is the common thread that holds many communities together, yet the importance of building community coalitions as a means of improving access to higher education is often overlooked (Brown, 1991).

Conducting assessments. Assessment serves two purposes as it indicates if colleges and universities are achieving their intended outputs and it provides information that may be used by faculty and staff for improvement (Chafee & Sherr, 1992). As a strategy for community building, assessment plays a critical role because it provides information that can lead to the improvement of the teaching and learning process as well as the discovery of which policies, practices, and programs are effective and which could be more effective. A sound assessment program will allow institutions to develop effective policies, procedures, and practices that are congruent with the characteristics and needs of its community members, but are also consistent with the values and characteristics of a healthy community.

Building and Maintaining Community at The University of Toledo

At The University of Toledo, a metropolitan research university, collaboration, flexibility, and innovation are key elements of campus community building. Faculty, staff, and students have joined together to collaborate on the creation of an educational community that works toward the development of common experiences while appreciating differences and recognizing and respecting the importance of individual contributions. Another key element in campus community building has been a highly active student governance system that gives students a voice in assessing student needs and in presenting innovative options that take into account the varying needs of the student population. New and continuing areas of synergy between academic programs and student life programs are being facilitated regularly in an ongoing effort to establish a stronger sense of institutional identity among students.

The Division of Student Affairs, for example, adopted a vision that gave community building a central place in its daily organizational activities. This vision was reflected in the mission statement of the Division: “The University of Toledo will become the leading University in Ohio that students select and attend because of our student focus and our commitment to student learning.” The Division focused this vision in several programs that unite faculty colleagues and student organizations in building a community that supports and values its students. Some of these programs include Leadership UT, Freshman Aides, Student Advocate, UTOO, and Customer/Student Service Training.

In its efforts to build community throughout the institution, the University of Toledo’s Office of Academic Affairs has found four core strategies to be especially helpful. These strategies included: (a) empowerment of the student government by the faculty senate and the administration to be an active participant in addressing new and evolving student needs relating to academic support and student life matters; (b) well established programs within each of UT’s seven academic colleges that build community through academic support and student development programs and activities; (c) University and college colloquia, lectures, and symposia that facilitate a community of scholars among faculty and students and (d) the First Year Information Program, an orientation initiative designed to help entering students adjust to the campus community. Several institutional and college program initiatives contribute to these community-building efforts. These initiatives include the programs and services of the Center for Teaching Excellence to improve undergraduate instruction, the University College to advance adult learning programs, the Writing Across the Curriculum Program, the Professional Experience Program, the Study Abroad Program, and the University’s Tutoring Services initiatives.

Additionally, in keeping with UT’s interest in promoting student diversity, the University supports several initiatives aimed at building community for students of color. These programs provide a variety of academic support and student development opportunities and activities. The Toledo Excel Program and Toledo INROADS programs are two examples of initiatives aimed at building community for students of color.

The University of Toledo’s community building initiatives enhance community both

internally and externally. Their strength comes from the faculty and student collaboration that is strategically facilitated and encouraged in serving both student life and academic support needs. Programs most closely connected with the community building strategy of “expanding leadership opportunities” include: Honor’s Program, Leadership UT, and Freshman Aides.

Honor’s Program. The University Honor’s Program provides a small, liberal arts college environment for UT’s high-ability students. This is accomplished by providing Honor’s Program students with campus residential assignments in Academic House and with a wide variety of student enrichment opportunities that enhance community spirit in the learning process and with co-curricular activities.

Leadership UT. Leadership UT is a highly selective student leadership education program based upon the premise that leadership can be learned. The 50 incoming freshmen chosen to participate in the program engage in a progressive and successive leadership experience that encourages personal leadership growth during their career on campus. The program has been successful in producing “citizen leaders” who take significant leadership roles in student government, residence halls, volunteer organizations and numerous student groups.

Freshman Aides. The Freshman Aides program connects freshman students with upper class student leaders in Student Government. Each student aide becomes involved in various aspects of student government and becomes a problem solver for the student senate, student judicial council, and student government cabinet.

Two programs that demonstrate the collaboration of academic and student affairs in the building of community at UT are University College and the International House residence hall. These programs particularly connect with the strategy of “increasing access and diversity.”

University College. In 1995 the University significantly reorganized the University College to enhance the quality and delivery of academic programs to adult learners and to respond to off-campus educational interests in the Toledo area. The reorganized University College now includes the following divisions: the Adult Student Assistance Center, Distance Learning, Individualized and Special Programs, Continuing Education and Contract Education. This reorganization has increased the utilization of UT’s SeaGate Campus (a remote site) as an academic center for adult and part-time students.

The College’s Adult Student Assistance Center (ASAC) makes college more manageable for adult students by providing admission, advising and registration services in a “one-stop shop” context. The learning community for adult students is further enhanced by continuing education, special programs and individualized program offerings made available through University College.

International House residence hall. The University opened the International House residence hall during the fall quarter of 1995 to serve the needs of both domestic and international students. This state-of-the-art facility also serves as a site for international programs and activities, many of which are coordinated by the University’s Center for International Studies and Programs.

The community building strategy of “developing effective retention programs” is demonstrated through three program initiatives. These programs include the University

of Toledo Ongoing Orientation (UTOO), First Week, and Freshman Year Information (FYI).

UTOO. The University of Toledo On-going Orientation consists of academic advising during the summer, First Week UT, and a Freshman Year Information (FYI) course provided during the first semester at UT. The UTOO program connects incoming first year students with continuing students, faculty, and staff in a number of ways.

First week. First Week is a week of selected community building activities for all students that is planned and undertaken to ensure that UT begins community building at the earliest possible juncture in working with incoming freshmen. First Week concludes with a formal presentation by the University President and his cabinet, with continuing student leaders previewing the coming year. This activity enables student leaders on our campus to receive information about future undertakings and policies on programs at UT that are of direct interest to student leaders, students who will influence other students throughout the year. This common base of information allows the student community to have a comprehensive understanding of the campus and its planned activities for the year.

FYI. In the fall of 1994, the University implemented the First Year Information program to address student needs for fully utilizing UT services and programs and to promote undergraduate student retention. The FYI program was designed to increase student satisfaction, success, and ultimately student graduation. The program accomplishes these objectives through four university-wide efforts the New Student Assessment Program, a mandatory Student Orientation Course offered within each academic college, a Peer Mentoring Program, and Advising Programs for Student Educational Planning. Approximately 1,500 new students, enrolled in all undergraduate colleges, annually participate in the program.

While some program initiatives are clearly connected with one community building strategy, two programs at UT are representatives of multiple community building strategies. The Toledo Excel program and the INROADS program are designed to encourage collaboration between the University and the community and to increase access and diversity.

Toledo Excel. Fifty talented, high achieving eighth grade students are recruited annually from groups underrepresented in institutions of higher education, including African, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, Appalachian, and low-income students. A scholarship incentive program is available that assists students throughout high school, and awards scholarships that amount to the difference between State and Federal grants and the cost of tuition, fees and books at UT. Program activities encourage high academic performance, responsible citizenship, and cultural sensitivity.

INROADS. The mission of INROADS is to develop and place talented minority

youth in business and industry and prepare them for corporate and community leadership. Preference goes to Hispanic, African American and American Indian high school and college students with 3.0 or better grade point averages.

The final community building strategy of “conducting assessment” is represented in the UT Customer Student Service Training program

Customer/Student service training. The Division of Student Affairs has been at the forefront of providing customer service or student service training for its staff and the rest of the campus. Evaluation and assessment of office service goals have resulted in personnel job descriptions being rewritten to ensure service standards. This training and focus on customer service has resulted in campus-wide initiatives that recognize the common goals and purposes that lead to building a community with student service at its forefront.

Looking Toward the Future

While UT has instituted initiatives aimed at building community among its diverse student population, much work needs to be done on creating a learning community in which all students feel vested. As the University continues to pursue strategies for building community in the future, several objectives and initiatives appear to be in order: (a) There is a need for programs and activities that bring together traditional and non-traditional students; (b) Some of these programs and activities should encourage student and faculty dialogue in the tradition of a community of scholars; (c) Faculty and student governing bodies should work collaboratively in articulating the essential character of the institution; (d) More attention and innovation is needed in building community for part-time, evening, and adult students; and (e) Innovative approaches should be developed to help first year students adjust quicker to the University campus community.

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