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## Community Outreach & the University: Creating New Partnerships

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### Abstract (summary)

In order to effectively implement a community outreach plan, it is important to define the "community." Students, faculty, administrators, and staff organizations form what is referred to as the "internal" community. Community groups, leaders, alumni, and governmental officials are some examples of the "external" community. In the process, it is important to investigate the "hot issues" in each of the communities that relate or should relate to the university. Student-sponsored community projects are an example of how one can identify the "hot issues." Students who interface with the external community have immediate access to problems or issues faced by groups. Discussing the projects with students provides insight into the needs of the community and provides ideas on how the university can be responsive.

### Full Text

Community Outreach & the University: Creating New Partnerships.

The function of community outreach is a new focus for many educational institutions. The establishment of a community outreach function at the University of California, Los Angeles, was a response by the University to the dramatic changes in its demographics.

The approach to community outreach is usually dictated by the mission of the institution. A careful interpretation of the mission vis a vis community needs is part of the evolutionary process towards developing innovative and effective programs. These programs can include facilitating communication between the university and the community, the disseminating of information, building university partnerships with the community through the sponsorship of programs, and participating at community events -- all are elements of community outreach.

The role of facilitating the relationship and examining issues between the university and the community can truly be a challenge. On one side there might be an institution with an entrenched establishment that is rather inflexible and requires updating as new groups become involved with the university. On the other side, there might be community representatives who have their suspicions about the university or have never seen themselves as having a significant relationship with the university. The function of community outreach is to balance these two realities by introducing new programming ideas and proposals that will open up the campus to new segments of the public through community participation. The goal is for both sides to be responsive about the redefinition of roles and involvement in university matters.

In order to effectively implement a community outreach plan, it is important to define the "community." Students, faculty, administrators, and staff organizations form what is referred to as the "internal" community. Community groups, leaders, alumni, and governmental officials are some examples of the "external" community. In the process, it is important to investigate the "hot issues" in each of the communities that relate or should relate to the university. Student-sponsored community projects are an example of how one can identify the "hot issues." Students who interface with the external community have immediate access to problems or issues faced by groups. Discussing the projects with students provides insight into the needs of the community and provides ideas on how the university can be responsive.

As "hot issues" are identified, it is necessary to create effective mechanisms that can handle, process, and make recommendations to university decision-makers. It is important to establish a consulting body of leaders of high integrity and good reputation for fairness and support of the community and the university. The recruitment of members who will participate needs to involve those who are concerned about the university and the community and who believe that their professional involvement will result in positive changes. In turn, the university needs to be open to recommendations, to share information, and to be willing to introduce change.

Criticisms have sometimes arisen from the perception that consulting bodies of community leaders are mere "buffers" for the university. This criticism often stems from selecting only community representatives with prior affiliation to the university. Community involvement and concern for issues having an impact on the community have not been an important criteria in the search for "community representatives." This perspective is slowly changing as universities undergo dramatic changes in their student-body composition and look towards relying on this same student population for future volunteers and monetary support. A consulting body that cares about the community but also has some affiliation with the university can only enhance ways in which the university treats community-based issues.

It is important to note that community outreach means working with the consulting body in a collaborative way. The word "outreach" indicates that community representatives will be able to offer suggestions and strategies that could have an impact on the educational institution. It is also an opportunity to demystify the way a university operates and to create community partnerships in university matters.

The dissemination of information from the university to the community should extend farther than consulting bodies. The university's resources are tremendous, and yet one source of information hardly utilized is the faculty. There are faculty members who are involved in the community via their research and/or personal involvement in community-based issues. Community outreach in this area should direct its efforts toward facilitating greater interaction between the faculty and the community. A "Faculty to the Community" program is an opportunity to schedule a presentation for faculty members to visit a community-based organization and to share information about their research and how it relates to the work of the organization. There are faculty members who work on campus already exemplifies their concern for the community. Community outreach takes their commitment a step further into the community. Partnerships with the community have to be established by keeping in mind that outreach programming must meet the mission of the university balanced against the interests of the communities being served. There are many organizations that are working towards the improvement of education in the community. An example is the increased parental participation and awareness via leadership programs. Various organizations sponsor programs to inform parents about educational opportunities and their role in the process of their children's education. Working with these groups allows the university to explore joint programming activities that will result in providing access to a campus, visibly personifying a campus, and conveying a sense of caring about the future of their children. It is never too late for the community to reap the benefits of an education.

The university's urgent message is that parents are shareholders in the university and in their children's education.

While it is important to continue outreach efforts via programs and activities, it is also important to build community relationships in advance in order to mediate issues that become pressing to both the university and the community. Attending events and visibly supporting activities in the community are opportunities to get at the pulse of the community and build positive relationships from which to draw in the future.

The reality facing anyone performing a community outreach function is the clash between the expectations of the university and those of the community. The job ahead is to get at the sore points, tackling the conflicts and issues of the day so that they can be resolved. The task is by no means an easy one, yet it is exciting to be involved at the leading edge, to influence a new sense of direction for the university with the promise of facilitating solutions for the relationship.

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