

The Tie That Binds: Leadership and Liberal Arts Institutions' Civic Engagement Commitment in Rural Communities

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Abstract

Community boundary spanners create ties that bind the campus and its surrounding region for reciprocal relationships. Using community boundary spanning literature as a conceptual framework, this study went beyond existing research on public and 4-year comprehensive universities to examine how university leadership at rural, private liberal arts institutions can more deeply integrate civic engagement into institutional priorities and be more responsive to community needs. A qualitative multicase study was conducted to explore how leaders of rural, private liberal arts institutions and their community partners view civic engagement relative to the college's mission. The study examined university leaders' and community stakeholders' perceptions of civic engagement at 5 liberal arts institutions in the Bonner Scholars Program network. The conceptual framework in Weerts (2005) and Weerts and Sandmann (2010) was developed into a foundation for university leaders at liberal arts institutions to embed and develop community engagement into their institutions' culture and ethos.

Introduction

In private liberal arts institutions, leaders who can connect and unite campus with community to strengthen the surrounding area are community boundary spanners. Boundary spanners navigate poverty and local challenges to strengthen quality of life, improve access to resources, and build upon reciprocal partnerships (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Previous research has examined the roles of boundary spanners; however, it has done so from the perspectives of the institutional roles or university partners (Weerts, 2005; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) conceptual framework of community boundary spanners focused on individuals within the institution who played key connecting roles for its community outreach. The themes in this study expanded the conceptual framework beyond individuals to include the college as a boundary spanner within its community. This study looked at private liberal arts colleges as institutional boundary spanners that

connect their campuses and communities through partnerships, resources, and quality of life.

The Research Design

The study was guided by five research questions focused on mission, action, and motivation: (1) How does institutional leadership inform community partners' perceptions about institutional commitment to civic engagement? In turn, how do the community partners' perceptions of community needs inform institutional leadership in civic engagement? (2) How does the university's leadership keep the college involved through civic engagement? (3) How has including community engagement in the strategic documents helped the institution? (4) How does university leadership utilize community engagement as a leadership strategy? (5) What motivates university leaders to integrate civic engagement into their leadership?

Through qualitative case study research, a "bounded system" was explored by involving multiple forms of content (*Creswell, 1998, p. 61*). In this study, the Bonner Foundation network of schools was selected because these colleges and universities had a willingness and capacity to implement community engagement; in addition, as an aspect of participation in the Bonner Scholars Program, their campuses had a civically driven leadership development model. To explore how university leaders and their community partners perceived civic engagement and how institutional artifacts related to such perceptions, interviews were conducted, and various university documents were analyzed. From each of the five universities, three leaders at each institution ($n = 15$) and two of each institution's community partners ($n = 10$) were interviewed for a total of 25 interviews. To gain a deeper understanding of the leaders' perception of civic engagement, the strategic plan, mission, vision, and financial documents of their institutions were analyzed. This use of multiple sources in the case study enabled triangulation and further validation of the data explored (*Yin, 2009*).

Findings

This research study provided three primary findings about the role of liberal arts colleges as community boundary spanners through engagement for their surrounding rural communities. First, the college's leadership for civic engagement was evident in the strategic documents and actions of college leaders. However, it was not evident through the overall financial budget documents.

The leaders' personal motivations along with institutional mission affected the college's role as a community boundary spanner. Second, the college as a resource for its surrounding community served an important boundary spanning role for building partnerships. Finally, the college's leadership as a cultural and educational venue added to the quality of life in its surrounding rural community.

Private liberal arts institutions have a unique opportunity for engaged leadership that collectively strengthens campus and community and develops students as global, civically invested citizens. Three thematic findings emerged from the data: college leadership for civic engagement, college as community resource, and college leadership for community quality of life. These themes capture the role an institution and its leadership play in civic engagement.

College Leadership for Civic Engagement

In Weerts (2005), Weerts and Sandmann (2010), and this study, civic engagement is defined by relevance not to the college's mission but to partnership with the community that strengthens it equally with the college. In other words, the benefit is not slanted toward the campus or improving students but toward uplifting the community as well. In the cases studied, community partners all saw the colleges and their leaders as positively impacting their community. In every case, the students were the tangible example of the college's commitment, though community partners gave examples of presidents' personal investment of time locally through their presence. Liberal arts institutions must clearly define their own brand of education that prepares students to be responsible, successful citizens in a larger education landscape. The change in the financial landscape has also led to a need for innovative leadership, planning, and action. Each president asked why civic engagement should be a top priority amidst competing needs. They emphasized how critical the "why civic engagement?" question is rather than "how is civic engagement institutionalized?" for presidents today who must decide where their institution invests its financial, strategic, and political capital. This research provides five examples of engagement in a rural liberal arts setting. It highlights the unique challenges for rural communities.

College as Community Resource

The colleges were an inherent resource to the community, giving access to financial and human capacity. There was aware-

ness for both local residents and university leaders that community challenges existed. For community members, the college was a local resource for addressing these issues. One community partner described the institution's "willingness to have folks get out in the community and experience the community—that mindset . . . [as] a big plus for the community." Community partners articulated the college's role as collaborative partner, instigator, facilitator, and champion. There was clear appreciation for this role. Another community partner described "a mentoring program, tutoring program, teen program. . . . When I think of the college, I see it as a collaborative effort of education."

However, the institutions were not always seen positively as instigators of change. In two of the five cases, community partners described ways the perception of campus and community partnerships could be improved. One partner noted the tension between college students' interest in changing the community and its desire to make community-owned decisions. One community member described students' desire to make immediate changes in the community before it was ready; another member described the disparity between the campus and community. She acknowledged that despite the college's efforts, some members would always see the college as "different than" the community or as "unapproachable." However, students' service by providing on-campus programming for the community had broken down many of those barriers.

This study expands Weerts's (2005) framework by looking at the role of community as resource. Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) research looked at the role of university leaders and internal champions as community boundary spanners. This research expands the study to look at the college's role as boundary spanner and resource for economic and community growth in a rural context.

College Leadership for Community Quality of Life

Community partners and university leaders emphasized the role of the college as a venue for arts, culture, and enhanced community of life. The colleges' offerings of entertainment, education, and arts not accessible through other venues in the rural area strengthened quality of life. Though this topic was not inherent in the research questions, the colleges' role in community life was evident. This was an unexpected discovery given the research questions' focus toward civic engagement. The colleges provided access to cultural events and attracted students who brought differing

opinions and championed conversations about community change. For community partners, this access was a form of civic engagement and partnership between campus and community. One of the five cases focused its role on engagement through enhancing community quality of life. The college saw its role as a convener and connector of resources to enhance the surrounding downtown. This particular example linked to the president's leadership through his passion for urban design, community walkability, and locally driven quality of life. In that case, college leadership and community quality of life were intertwined. The college's strategic plan supported this linkage through an emphasis on developing the community around the college. The case raised questions about who benefits from the community development. Those interviewed spoke of the dual benefit of downtown development, though the strategic planning document emphasized its relation to the college's growth. Community quality of life builds on Weerts's (2005) and Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) frameworks given their emphasis on institutional leadership. This research expanded their studies by viewing civic engagement as community quality of life. It found connectivity between the rural placements of the communities studied and their proximity to liberal arts institutions.

Additionally, the study raised an important question about civic engagement for college presidents. The fourth question asked leaders to define their approach to civic engagement as a leadership strategy. This provided the most interesting dialogue in the interviews, for it led to a greater question for presidents and leaders. If presidents use civic engagement as a leadership strategy, they must ask why civic engagement is important. They must wrestle with why civic engagement deserves political and financial capital over other institutional priorities. Presidents and their institutions must define how civic engagement distinguishes their liberal arts curriculum from career-based preparation at 4-year public institutions. For some of the cases, engagement provided a tangible way liberal arts institutions could survive in an existing career-based higher education climate. This perspective shaped the vision for the college and its leadership strategy for continued growth.

Conclusion

Rural communities and their corresponding higher education institutions have a unique tie that binds their sustainability and growth. When the institution thrives, the community benefits and when the community thrives, the university and its students, faculty, and staff benefit. It is true that institutions cannot altruistically

support their communities without attention to their own survival and growth. Private liberal arts institutions are businesses that must sustain and increase their revenue in the face of competitive factors in the higher education marketplace. They must compete for students, faculty, and resources in an arena focused on career-driven preparation and readiness. However, case studies of private and public higher education institutions provide examples of win-win scenarios of the institution as a boundary spanner with its community through its role as college as leadership, college as community resource, and college leadership for community quality of life. The institution's leadership in the community, as carried out by the president, can serve as a collegewide boundary spanner when linked with the institutional mission and strategic direction.

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