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Outreach Scholarship Learning Community: Agenda of Change

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Abstract

Three universities are fostering leaders committed to (1) defining models of scholarship, (2) building a network of leaders that can learn from each other, and (3) creating an outreach culture. This three-way university partnership has established an annual conference and an online learning community to support a network of leaders. How have the needs of the members of this community changed over the years? This article provides a discussion of the changing needs of the members through an analysis of evaluation data.

Introduction

How do universities become responsive to the needs of today's and tomorrow's students and communities? How can outreach organizations prepare their faculty and staff to become more engaged? The 2002 Outreach Scholarship Conference: Catalyst for Change, focused on an agenda of moving beyond the dialogue of engagement to sharing tools and strategies for catalyzing change in higher education institutions, campus-community partnerships, and outreach programming.

Three universities, the Ohio State University, the Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Wisconsin—Extension, have joined in a partnership intended to catalyze change within the academy and change the face of outreach programming. In collaboration, these institutions have developed an integrated approach to supporting faculty, staff, and community members in building successful programs by sponsoring an annual conference and an online learning portal, Outreach Scholarship Online Learning Community (http://www.outreachscholarship.org). This learning model includes formal and informal learning activities on topics that cross organizational and institutional boundaries, such as topics of interest to university and community partners, as well as to faculty and staff. Topics address the needs of a variety of functional areas within the institution: continuing education and distance education, cooperative extension, public broadcasting, public affairs, technology transfer, and other outreach-related areas.

In 1999, the first Outreach Scholarship Conference was held at University Park, Pennsylvania. Three years later, the third conference in the series was held in Columbus, Ohio. How can institutions of higher education become catalysts for change? How have the issues and concerns of learning community members changed?

How Can Institutions Become Catalysts for Change? The theme of the 2002 conference charted a new direction for conference participants. With campus-community partnerships as a centerpiece of successful engagement strategies, the conference format was designed to include a focus on community members and community-based outreach. The conference included in-the-community sessions, highlighted successful campus community partnerships and included community leaders in plenary sessions.

With its focus clearly on learners and community members, the conference dialogue centered on issues of institutional responsiveness, accessibility, successful partnership models, and evaluating impact. To catalyze change in communities, institutions of higher education must have outreach organizations that are well integrated into the mission of the larger institution, while also being extended and accessible to the community and community partners. A strong outreach culture *(Ryan 1998)* and learning community of faculty, staff, and community members *(Childers 2002)* supports campus-community partners to work across boundaries to build partnerships that are successful and have impact.

"How can institutions of higher education become catalysts for change? How have the issues and concerns of learning community members changed?"

Creating a Learning Community: What Have We Learned? The outreach scholarship conference series grew from individual learning communities established at each partner institution. Like these three universities, many institutions have created learning communities as a focus for outreach scholarship and to initiate culture change. Each learning community has necessarily struggled with similar institutional issues, including building and sustaining successful community partnerships, creating learner-centered and partner-centered institutions, the lack of a supportive outreach culture, the lack of promotion and tenure policies that reward faculty for participation, and other organizational issues. The conference series

and the online learning community have been designed to link learning communities in institutions across the country together.

What have we learned from each other? This can be answered in part by evaluating the experiences of the participants in the learning community and listening to their suggestions on (1) how to improve the scholarship of engagement and (2) how others can be encouraged to share their experiences in outreach programming.

Methodology

The first national conference, Best Practices in Outreach Scholarship and Public Service, was offered in October 1999 at the Pennsylvania State University, with 385 participants from 41 U.S. states representing 75 universities. The evaluation team designed a four-level assessment plan *(Kirkpatrick 1998)* that included a needs assessment, a participant reaction evaluation, a self-report of learning outcomes, and a post-conference learning application evaluation.

A second national conference was offered (Outreach Scholarship: 2001—Learning, Discovery and Engagement, October 2001 at the Pennsylvania State University). The second national conference served 254 participants from 28 U.S. states representing 56 universities and community organizations. The evaluation method for this conference included a participant reaction evaluation and a self-report of learning outcomes. Subsequent to the second conference, an online learning support system was designed.

"[M]any institutions have created learning communities as a focus for outreach scholarship and to initiate culture change."

The third national conference, Outreach Scholarship 2002: Catalyst for Change was offered at the Ohio State University and served 460 participants from 38 U.S. states representing 78 universities and community organizations. The evaluation method for this conference included a participant reaction evaluation delivered electronically after the conference via the Internet. For the purposes of this discussion, the data from the first and third conferences will be compared. Evaluation data are not yet available on the outcomes of the online learning community at the time of this writing.

Prior to the first conference, the needs assessment was implemented using a Web-based survey followed by a telephone reminder. Past participants of a previous conference on a similar topic were

interviewed. The respondents were central administration personnel from a midwestern university. The potential respondent pool was 150 with a 33 percent response rate.

At the first conference two on-site evaluations (participant reaction and self-report of learning) were conducted online daily as well as at the conclusion of the conference. The potential respondent pools for the participant reaction evaluation were 350 for participant reaction evaluation and self-report of learning outcomes. Their report response rate was 35 percent (implemented on the first day of the conference). The potential respondent pool for the self-report of learning outcomes was 350 and the response rate increased over the three-day conference (a separate evaluation was implemented each day), with daily response rates of 35, 35, and 58 percent. The learning application evaluation was conducted three months after the conference via a written survey. The potential respondent pool for this evaluation was 215 with a response rate of 22 percent (participants from the host institution were not surveyed in order to ensure an unbiased sample).

At the third conference a Web-based survey was administered immediately following the last day of the conference. The potential respondent pool for the participant reaction evaluation was 385 (participants with e-mail addresses that could be accessed), with a 40 percent response rate (n=154).

Findings

The data from the needs assessment provided the conference design team with valuable information about the demand for further learning opportunities, the reasons for participation, and the appropriate content for future conferences. At the time of the launch of the first conference, there was no national conference that convened this particular learning community, that is, leadership from continuing education, cooperative extension, distance education, central administration, technology transfer, and government affairs, as well as members of local university communities. Themes most important to respondents included: faculty issues, outreach culture, funding sources, technology, and developing competencies or best practices in outreach and public service. By the time of the offering of the third conference, there were a number of regional and national conferences focusing on engagement, outreach scholarship, and involving faculty in outreach and engagement activities.

The participant reaction surveys collected data on the learners'

and conference facilities. The data allowed the conference team to make immediate changes in the conference design. The survey design captured the reasons for participation in the conference. These data are consistent with data reported by other outreach professionals *(Childers 1993)*.

"By the . . . third conference, there were a number of regional and national conferences focusing on engagement, outreach scholarship, and involving faculty in outreach and engagement activities."

The results of the self-report of learning outcomes administered after the 1999 conference included data related to: (1) factors supporting or preventing implementation of outreach programs at the respondent's institution, (2) the top issues facing faculty participation in outreach activities, and (3) demographic data. The issues most important to the audience at the time reflected the needs in four areas: (1) techniques for creating or changing an outreach culture, (2) benchmarking information, (3) promoting closer collaborations within the institution and across institutional boundaries, and (4) a forum for participants to exchange knowledge, insights, and experience in outreach and engagement.

The results of the participant reaction survey administered after the 2002 conference included data related to: (1) the structural issues impacting campus-community partnerships, (2) practical tools gained at the conference, (3) future learning needs, and (4) demographic data.

How have the issues and concerns of learning community members changed? A comparison of the data collected in 1999 and 2002 provides evidence of the changing dialogue of engagement and the changing needs of the participants in the learning community.

In 1999, when asked about the barriers to implementing change within their institutions, respondents indicated a number of factors. These factors included: (1) the lack of promotion and tenure policies that supported faculty participation, (2) the lack of an outreach culture within the institution, (3) an absence of leadership for outreach and engagement at the highest levels within the institution, and (4) a lack of power and/or time to implement change within their institutions. Respondents were also asked how their institution defined outreach. The diversity of answers provided clearly indicates that

there was a continuum of definitions of outreach and engagement within institutions and across institutions. Many institutions had no shared definition of outreach and engagement.

In 2002, participants were asked about the structural issues that impact campus community partnerships: responsiveness to the public, respectfulness of community partners, academic neutrality, accessibility, integration with university mission, and level of coordination of outreach activities. Table 1 reports the distribution of responses of the 154 respondents who answered the question on the post-conference survey, "How would you rate your college/university on the following?" (Community partners were asked to rate the institution with which they had the closest working relationship.)

At least 50 percent of the respondents rated all seven of the issues in Table 1 as "good" or "excellent" for their respective college or university. The highest-rated issues were "respecting partners" and "being responsive to the public served." The lowest-rated issues were "coordinating our outreach/engagement activities," and "being accessible."

Gaining practical tools: The participants of the 2002 conference provided feedback on the practical tools that were gained from the conference. When asked to "list three practical tools that you gained from the Outreach Scholarship 2002 Conference that you plan to use," 111 respondents submitted lists.

The predominant theme of practical tools gained that respondents listed and stated that they planned to use from the Outreach Scholarship 2002 Conference fell into a category labeled models, innovations, tools, and examples for teaching/working with clientele. Three other major themes of tools gained by respondents were also identified: (1) evaluation and research techniques; (2) better understanding of outreach and engagement processes (e.g., how to integrate programs with other units or awareness of organization concerns); and (3) working with colleagues in other colleges/other states. Though not as predominant as the themes mentioned above, two additional themes could be identified: (1) theoretical and practical views of scholarship of engagement and (2) working with non-university partners/partnership strategies.

Sharing approaches to outreach and engagement: The participants of the 2002 conference also provided insight and input into how to better share approaches to outreach and engagement in the future. Of respondents, 76 submitted input to the question, "What else can be done to better share approaches to outreach and engagement in

Table 1. How would you rate your college/university on the following: (For Community Partners, please rate the institution with which you work the closest.)

Respondents selected from the following options:
1=Poor; 2=Fair; 3=Neutral; 4=Good; 5=Excellent

	1 Poor	2 Fair	3 Neutral	4 Good	5 Excellent
1. Being responsive to the public served	3% (4)	9% (14)	18% (28)	54% (82)	16% (24)
2. Respecting partners	1% (1)	10% (15)	18% (27)	57% (86)	15% (23)
3. Being academically neutral (i.e. being a neutral facilitator and source of factual information)	2% (3)	9% (14)	30% (45)	48% (72)	11% (16)
4. Being accessible	3% (5)	15% (23)	28% (42)	37% (56)	17% (25)
5. Integrating outreach/ engagement into the mission of the university.	4% (6)	15% (22)	23% (34)	39% (58)	20% (30)
6. Coordinating our outreach/engagement activities	7% (11)	18% (28)	24% (37)	35% (53)	15% (23)
7. Participating in resource partnerships	3% (4)	14% (22)	26% (40)	43% (66)	13% (20)

NOTE: *Percentage indicates total respondent ratio; actual number in parenthesis.*

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the future?" Of these, eighteen were classified as specific logistical suggestions for the improvement of future outreach conferences. Of the remaining comments, four primary themes were identified: (1) more information sharing through technology: electronic newsletters, teleconferences, Web sites, satellite, and via an online community; (2) more information sharing via traditional means: exchange programs, publications, tours, newsletters, awards, annual conferences, journals, and demonstrations; (3) sharing best practices or

innovations in outreach and engagement via teams or special interest groups; for example, cross-institutional grant projects or developing working groups across institutions to share ideas, successes, and failures; and (4) more involvement of community partners.

Other expressed views held less widely, on how to better share approaches to outreach and engagement, included the following trade-offs: less information about cooperative extension, less theory versus more hard examples, more involvement of university administration, more examples of integration of outreach and engagement into university systems, and more outreach and engagement issues versus outreach scholarship issues.

Improving scholarship: Sixty-nine of the post-conference survey respondents provided input for the question, "What can be done to improve the scholarship of outreach and engagement?" The most widely presented theme identified in response to this issue was a call for more rigor in research and paper presentations. Respondents wanted to see examples of scholarship from public service practice (research design, collecting data, reporting data). Three other predominant themes emerged as suggestions for improvements: (1) provide a clear definition and communication of scholarship of outreach and engagement; (2) involve additional stakeholders in conference presentations, such as established university researchers and faculty, two-year institution and high school faculty, and (3) circulate more information on journals, resources, and other forums related to outreach and engagement. Respondents suggested the establishment of a professional organization in connection with outreach and engagement. Other less predominant themes included the following suggestions: (1) more community involvement and participation and (2) examples of the integration of outreach and engagement into promotion and tenure systems.

"The online community shares information via searchable databases, chat rooms, threaded discussions, and online polling."

In 2002 the Outreach Scholarship Online Learning Community was launched. This online learning portal was designed to link the individual learning communities at institutions across the country. The online community shares information via searchable databases, chat rooms, threaded discussions, and online polling. Participants of the Outreach Scholarship Conference series can be members of the online community at no charge. Non-participants of the conference series

can join the learning community for a fee. As a part of the 2002 conference evaluation, participants were asked about their participation in the online learning community. As of the 2002 conference (three months after the launch of the online community), 13 percent of the survey respondents indicated that they had participated in the community. Of those respondents participating, 32% had participated in other online communities. Sixty-three percent of the respondents had participated in some distance education activity. Respondents indicated that technology was a needed and viable option for delivery of information to this learning community. (For more information about the *Outreach Scholarship Online Learning Community*, visit the site www.outreachreachscholarship.org or contact Jeri Childers at jyc4@outreach.psu.edu.)

"Assessment and evaluation are key to developing a strategy for creating and fostering learning communities."

Discussion

Assessment and evaluation are key to developing a strategy for creating and fostering learning communities. In this example, needs assessment data collected prior to 1999 established the feasibility of forming a learning community. Ongoing conference evaluations in the form of participant reaction surveys assist in developing a participant-centered design and identifying key issues to be explored by the learning community.

In 1999, the evaluation focused on issues related to the organizational context of participants and the key factors impacting individual and organizational learning. The analysis of the evaluation data indicated that many of the participants shared similar barriers to implementing change and that the culture in many institutions was not supportive of outreach and engagement. In 2002, the evaluation focused on issues related to promoting closer collaborations within the institution and across institutional boundaries, fostering successful campus-community partnerships. The analysis of the data indicated that respondents felt that their respective institutions were "good" to "excellent" in all seven issues measured, but rated the institutions higher in respecting partners and being responsive to the public served than in being accessible and coordinating outreach and engagement activities.

Respondents stated that they gained and planned to use many tools from the 2002 conference. At the top of the list were: (1) models, innovations, tools, and examples for teaching or working with clientele, (2) evaluation and research techniques, (3) better understanding of outreach and engagement processes, and (4) working with colleagues in other colleges/other states.

Identifying areas of how to better share approaches to outreach and engagement, respondents suggested more use of electronic media, more use of traditional means of sharing information, exploring innovative ideas, and more involvement of community members.

Finally, specifically related to how to improve the scholarship of outreach and engagement, the predominant responses advocated were more rigor in outreach scholarship, more involvement of current research and teaching faculty not already involved in outreach and engagement activities, further clarification of the definition of scholarship of outreach and engagement, and the availability of more resources to those already participating in outreach and engagement activities.

"Faculty and staff engaged in outreach and engagement efforts must continue to seek opportunities to explore innovative ideas in electronic and in more traditional face-to-face methods."

How can we create a culture that supports outreach and engagement? How can we promote closer collaborations within the institution and across institutional boundaries—fostering successful campus-community partnerships? More research is needed to help institutions shape their institutional approach to outreach and engagement.

The creation of the online learning community continues the dialogue of engagement. It is one component of an integrated strategy for supporting this learning community. How can distance education techniques be employed to support online learning communities? More research is also needed in this area also.

Informal forums for the exchange of knowledge, insights, and experience are a preferred method of learning among professionals and a major reason for participating in a learning community. More research is needed to determine (1) how professionals learn in learning communities, (2) how institutions can support learning communities, and (3) how learning communities can be used to support the culture of outreach and engagement.

Conclusions

Progress is being realized in being responsive to the public served through outreach and engagement efforts as well as with other structural issues that impact campus community partnerships, but improvements are still possible. There was a thread of concern among respondents that the potential of community partners is not yet realized.

In 1999 one barrier to implementing change within institutions was the lack of promotion and tenure policies that supported faculty participation. Many respondents to the survey noted that more rigor is necessary in documenting scholarship; that is, sharing the results of outreach activities would benefit from examples of outreach scholarship that are shared broadly. Respondents also stated that a diverse mix of teaching and research faculty needed to be incorporated into outreach and engagement activities. Respondents now view promotion and tenure systems as barriers that can be overcome.

Conferences provide the opportunity to learn and use many new skills. Of particular note, the respondents to the post-conference survey of the 2002 conference stated that they learned new skills in: (1) models, innovations, and techniques or working with clientele, (2) evaluation and research methods, (3) better understanding of outreach and engagement processes, and (4) working with colleagues in other colleges or other states.

Faculty and staff engaged in outreach and engagement efforts must continue to seek opportunities to explore innovative ideas in electronic and in more traditional face-to-face methods.

The Outreach Scholarship 2003 Conference: Excellence Through Engagement will be held October 12–14, 2003, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. For more information, contact Greg Wise at greg.wise@uwex.edu or visit <http://www.outreachscholarship.org>. The Outreach Scholarship 2004 Conference will be held October 10–12, 2004, at the Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania. For more information, contact Jeri Childers at jyc4@outreach.psu.edu.

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