

Families and Communities Together (FACT) Coalition: Evolution of a University-Wide Engagement Model

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Abstract

A university-wide coalition at Michigan State University called Families and Communities Together (FACT) offers a model for university-community engagement that is responsive to increasing public demand for relevance in higher education through a novel institutional arrangement that drives scholarship, catalyzes multidisciplinary collaboration, and addresses pressing social issues and community needs. In implementing this model, the coalition is working through challenges and issues related to effective community engagement, such as identifying new avenues for linking faculty and communities, supporting diverse outreach methods, addressing faculty rewards and incentives, maintaining long-term institutional commitment, and developing meaningful roles for communities that sustain their involvement. This article examines how the coalition is addressing these issues and offers our lessons learned from putting this engagement vision into practice.

Land-grant universities historically have shared a strong legacy of applied research, outreach, and extension. The agricultural model, in particular, has been successful in linking cutting-edge, problem-oriented research with industry needs through a process that is informed and directed both by scientific advances and stakeholder input. At Michigan State University (MSU), we wanted to create a similar integration of university functions in the areas of family and community studies—an initiative that could dismantle departmental silos and invest in multidisciplinary scholarship as well as bridge the gap between university research on children and families and the extension programs that are delivered to the people of Michigan.

The timing was right—beginning in the early 1990s, MSU's administrative leadership initiated institution-wide efforts that aimed to formally embed a definition of outreach scholarship into university procedures, policies, and programs. Informed by the pioneering work of Ernest Boyer and others, these efforts to foster a

“scholarship of engagement” not only were responsive to the public demand for relevance and accountability in higher education, but also purposefully worked in tandem with the Kellogg Commission’s consensus about engaged institutions (*Fear and Sandmann 2001; Simon 1999; Lerner and Simon 1998; Kellogg Commission 1999*).

In 1998, within this climate of exploring approaches to discovery, learning, and engagement with communities, Michigan State University launched a coalition called Families and Communities Together (FACT). The coalition was formed with a three-part mission to foster and support research, information, and collaboration for children, youth, and family work. From its inception, it was a dynamic process that required the establishment of a cross-campus collaborative effort, an integration of community and faculty needs, and continual evolution and refinement. This article discusses the evolution of the coalition and the lessons learned along the way—how FACT offers a viable model of engagement in higher education as well as how it reveals the challenges and gaps that still need to be bridged in order to fulfill the vision of an engaged university.

A New Model of Engagement

The FACT Coalition at MSU was designed to address community needs through innovative multidisciplinary research, outreach, and engagement. Built on the premise that strong science and effective community engagement go hand in hand (*Lerner and Simon 1998; Fitzgerald 2000*), FACT promotes partnerships with diverse sectors such as philanthropy, education, business, and government to generate children, youth, and family research and outreach that is applied to community problems and shaped by specific community needs. The coalition is a multidisciplinary and multifunctional program that challenges and informs knowledge and best practices about children, youth, and families.

The coalition supports and promotes innovative approaches to science and to understanding families—generating knowledge

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that is relevant and valid and that benefits, challenges and informs the community. When new questions arise in the community and are connected to MSU research, we have an opportunity to drive scholarship and help children and families. FACT recognizes that human behavior is complex and that by building work teams across colleges we are able to integrate knowledge from different disciplines to best serve the community and address its concerns (*Younglove-Webb, Abdalla, and Thurow 1999*).

FACT encourages campus-community collaboration by strategically investing in competitive and targeted grants, and disseminating information on research and funding for children, youth, and family work. To focus the coalition's efforts and direct its resources, the FACT Advisory Board targets three Areas of Distinction (AoD). Our current focus areas are:

1. youth development: communities and schools;
2. family engagement and community vitality; and
3. children, youth, and nutrition.

Multidisciplinary teams and community partners who play a significant role in the design and implementation of projects lead most projects.

FACT has unique features that distinguish it from traditional grant programs or outreach efforts. These features have created new opportunities for partnerships at MSU.

Shared ownership and commitment: One of FACT's unique features is that we are a cross-campus coalition, not based in any one unit or department. This allows for shared credit, ownership, and commitment across the university. Guided by key university administrators, deans, faculty, extension staff, and community partners, the coalition is a high-profile hub that champions and funds collaborative research efforts; involves research, outreach, and extension functions of the university; and provides needed focus for engagement efforts. Although we are not akin to interdisciplinary centers or similar units that house and coordinate research (*Lerner and Miller 1998*), we partner and work actively with them. As a collaborative, university-wide entity, FACT is able to build on and leverage the important work of such institutes, centers, and academic departments for everyone's mutual benefit. This approach is proving to be more effective in that the funds invested in the coalition go directly to programmatic and operational support for engagement—rather than for building infrastructure.

Investing in collaborative research: FACT supports a university-wide competitive grant process that requires faculty to build an interdisciplinary research team and demonstrate shared responsibility with a community-based partner. FACT projects have created novel pairings between faculty from diverse departments and colleges and have focused on a variety of child and family issues such as kinship care, youth asset development, nutrition and health,

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neighborhood revitalization, and violence prevention. A research effort on kinship care, for example, paired faculty from the School of Social Work and the College of Nursing, as well as key community organizations. The initial pilot study has led to the growth of a long-term project on kinship care as well as the development of a statewide kinship care resource center sustained with government and foundation funding.

In addition to our grant program, the coalition sponsors other activities that call on faculty to be involved in research and outreach in different ways than they might be in their own departments. For example, faculty are invited to participate in panels, self-directed work groups, learning communities, and other pursuits that both encourage scholarship and promote partnerships with communities. Bringing faculty from different disciplines together around an issue has encouraged them to re-examine traditional methods and explore innovative research approaches.

Information and access: FACT supports a communications system that works as an outlet for disseminating research, bringing partners together, advancing scholarship, and raising awareness. Through quarterly newsletters, e-mail discussion lists, a new magazine/webzine and a Web site (<http://www.fact.msu.edu>), FACT serves as a source of information on research, best practices, and policy issues as well as a point of access to university resources. By targeting diverse audiences, from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to the general public, FACT is raising the visibility of children, youth, and family work, recognizing faculty accomplishments, and promoting a collaborative spirit on campus and with community partners. By sharing stories about this type of research,

we are helping to increase recognition of how university knowledge is contributing to the well-being of the state.

Co-sponsorship: FACT is sponsored by a unique collaboration of three units on campus that brings the strengths of each to support the integration of research, outreach, and extension. Funding for the FACT Coalition is provided by the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station (MAES), MSU Extension (MSUE), and the Office of the Provost. This successful co-sponsorship builds on each unit's strengths—such as MAES's focus on generating research for family and community well-being, MSUE's statewide network of science-based, educational programs and informational resources, and the provost's institutional commitment to research and outreach scholarship (high standards of scholarship that address critical societal

needs; *Simon, 1999*). The collaboration has supported multidisciplinary projects that integrate research, outreach and extension in unique ways.

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FACT-initiated projects have generated cutting-edge research published by faculty in peer-reviewed publications; expanded into large, multiyear programs supported by local, private, or governmental resources; and produced knowledge that has shaped local decision making and impacted public policy. In

its four years of operation, FACT has awarded over \$1,400,000 to 61 projects based in 62 out of 83 Michigan counties as well as 11 statewide initiatives. FACT projects have supported the work of over 134 MSU faculty and extension specialists from 10 colleges and 38 departments across campus as well as 46 community partners.

Issues Related To Effective Community Engagement

As FACT has grown and evolved over the past four years, we have learned much from the successes and struggles of implementing a university-wide model of engagement. The coalition is working through diverse challenges and issues related to effective community engagement. Some of these include: identifying new avenues for linking faculty and communities, supporting diverse outreach methods, addressing faculty rewards and incentives, and maintaining long-term

institutional commitment. This section examines how the coalition is addressing these issues and offer our lessons learned from putting this engagement vision into practice.

Identifying new avenues for linking faculty and communities:

To fulfill the goals of effective community engagement, we need intentional processes for linking communities and faculty (Mackinnon-Lewis and Frabutt 2001; Holland 1999; Ukaga et al. 2002). FACT functions as a broker to connect faculty across departments and the university with communities. Through our efforts, we are identifying concrete processes that need to be integrated into an engagement model such as building networks, disseminating information, and encouraging a collaborative approach to research.

By sponsoring work groups, facilitating learning communities, and convening forums, we are encouraging faculty, extension staff on campus and throughout the state, and professionals from nonprofits, government agencies, and community organizations to build partnerships and networks. We also stress the importance of communications, making information available and providing forums for dialogue around an issue. Through multiple outlets, including events, publications, and technology-based forums, we are creating opportunities for faculty and communities to interact and exchange ideas. For example, FACT hosted a "Dialogue with Foundations" in 2000 that brought together over two hundred researchers, practitioners, and leaders from philanthropy to exchange ideas about forming partnerships that focus on children and families. Involving presenters from key foundations in the state, the event offered an opportunity for faculty and philanthropic leaders to engage with and learn from each other. Also, by translating research-based information for diverse audiences, we are ensuring continuity and follow-through with projects as well as access to university expertise.

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Although FACT encourages a collaborative, co-learning approach to research, we also recognize the appropriateness of using the "expert" model in certain situations. The coalition has attempted to support diverse mechanisms that allow for shared learning and discovery as well as more directed delivery of expertise. For example, to address the pressing problem of obesity in Michigan, FACT

brought together faculty and extension experts in the areas of nutrition, pediatrics, health, and physical activity to collect data about obesity in the state, share their knowledge, and identify concrete actions and policies involving schools, the state, and other partners.

Supporting diverse avenues for engagement: Guided by the land-grant philosophy and the work of scholars like Boyer, Lerner, and Lynton, Michigan State University leadership identified the ways in which outreach scholarship is integral to the academic mission and how it cuts across the three pillars of teaching, service, and research (*Provost's Committee on University Outreach 1993*). Through this effort, MSU committed itself with renewed energy to upholding the idea that outreach scholarship depends on "faculty that are engaged, collectively and individually, in bringing their expertise to bear on societal problems" (*Simon 1999*).

Though FACT primarily invests in and supports the research vertex in this triangle, the full mission of the coalition is to bolster and catalyze all three areas. Through deliberate processes, FACT has recognized a rich diversity of protocols and methods for community engagement. Whereas faculty colleagues from medicine or engineering may be focused on clinical methods or technology transfer, those in social science might emphasize evaluation and assessment.

For example, FACT has supported several research projects on youth and violence prevention that have resulted in new knowledge. A music therapy project paired faculty from the School of Music and Psychology with extension programs to arrive at an approach for preventing disruptive behavior among adolescents. A work team has focused on juvenile justice and zero tolerance policies to arrive at conclusions about the effectiveness of federal and state legislation in reducing violence in schools.

Alongside these research projects, however, FACT also invests in efforts like Family Impact Seminars, which are a series of seminars and related briefing reports for policymakers on child and family issues. The seminars offer nonpartisan faculty expertise on issues identified by a legislative advisory committee. By providing a vehicle for disseminating information, this project goes a step beyond traditional research projects and also addresses the outreach and teaching components of engagement.

This illustrates an important point: because of the variety of scholarly approaches and outreach methods, any attempt to pigeon-hole engagement is problematic. FACT recognizes that the engagement model is a negotiated one, and that the most effective approach

is one that takes into account the local knowledge base, each partner's goals and perspectives, the disciplinary expertise that is brought to bear on the issues, and a definition of the problem that is shared by faculty and the community (*Fear and Sandmann 2001; Lerner and Miller 1998; Simon 1999*).

Addressing faculty rewards and incentives: Many barriers to faculty involvement in outreach scholarship are identified in the literature, including the lack of disciplinary recognition for "applied" or community-oriented work, the scarcity of resources for such work, the time it takes to build partnerships with communities, and limited institutional rewards and incentives (*Holland 1999; Keener 1999; Driscoll and Sandmann 2001; O'Meara 2002; Powers 2000; White and Wehlage 1995*). To assist faculty in overcoming these obstacles and to develop a recognition of the multidimensional nature of faculty outreach work, FACT invests in efforts that recognize outreach work as scholarship; provides resources for faculty to publish, pursue extramural grants, and advance their scholarly goals; and encourages junior faculty to participate in and learn from an RFP process that is modeled after national grant programs.

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An important part of these efforts is recognizing the needs for scholarly career advancement. Faculty must develop the skills and capacity to balance between the traditional academic front and their efforts with community partners, and at the same time produce work that advances their academic discipline. We have taken a two-pronged approach to meeting these faculty needs by integrating high standards of scholarship and grantsmanship into our program as well as by creating a grant process that can also provide a unique opportunity for professional development.

In our RFP process, we have instituted standards and procedures that are academically rigorous yet supportive of novice faculty needs. The program requires that the research team demonstrate scientific merit, that the project leaders include their scholarly credentials, that the team outline their plan for sustainability, and that the project include shared leadership and responsibility with communities. However, the process is user friendly, and includes forums for discussing research ideas, a searchable database for finding partners,

and access to other resources. We help to bolster junior faculty in their pursuit of further grants and in publishing results from their work; and, because we are a coalition, not a unit, we ensure that faculty receive recognition both within their departments and across campus.

In addition, we support innovation by appreciating a diverse range of methodologies, including clinical approaches, case studies, and experimental approaches. Though we continue to refine the grant program each year, we have been successful in creating a mechanism that is at once developmental and scholarly, and offers ample opportunities for co-learning with communities.

Maintaining long-term institutional commitment: Commitment to engagement at the highest level of the university and coalition building at the grassroots level are key factors in sustaining this model (Simon 1999; Keener 1999). The collaborative sponsorship of FACT and our concerted efforts to engage university deans, directors, and chairpersons in the coalition are critical to maintaining long-term commitment.

The central administration at the university has established new policies that create a climate supportive of engagement—one that integrates outreach scholarship into faculty and departmental roles and merit reviews as well as weaves a culture of engagement into the fabric of the university. Through strategic plans and processes, the central administration has committed to a new promise, that we will be an exemplary and engaged university—transforming and strengthening outreach partnerships.

The FACT Coalition is an effort that benefits from and builds on this university climate. FACT projects and activities have led to substantial extramural grants and publications (both scholarship and practice), raised the visibility and prestige of children, youth, and family work at the university, and helped each of the sponsoring units (MAES, MSUE, and the Office of the Provost) to address their missions. We have also been successful in engaging faculty university-wide: in addition to funding the work of faculty across campus, we support a community of over a thousand participants, and host events that have involved hundreds of other partners.

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We have successfully leveraged an initial \$1,400,000 investment into over \$7,000,000 of external grants brought in through our activities. By documenting these results and establishing the effectiveness of this program, we are helping the university meet its goals and keep its promise of engagement.

Future Directions

In its four years of operation, FACT has learned some valuable lessons about translating the ideas and theories about engagement into effective practice. The process is a dynamic one. A key strength of the coalition is a lean infrastructure that seeks regular guidance from faculty, administrators, extension staff, and leaders in nonprofits, state agencies, and foundations. This allows FACT to be nimble and adaptive to new circumstances, as well as responsive to emerging issues and needs. As the coalition continues to evolve, we have identified some future directions.

Developing meaningful roles for communities that sustain their involvement: This involves helping communities understand the next steps they need to take in order to sustain their efforts (*Banach and Gregory 2001*). FACT has taken a proactive approach to building communities' capacity to participate in research, outreach, and funding opportunities, as well as to sustain their involvement past the limits of the grant period.

We are exploring funding partnerships with foundations in order to leverage and offer resources to communities seeking support for programs or services. In addition, we offer a point of access to the university and facilitate partnerships through technology and other information dissemination and exchange.

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Encouraging and mentoring junior faculty: We are exploring the idea of recruiting retired faculty in an advisory capacity in order to facilitate senior-junior mentorships. As we have discussed above, one of the challenges in addressing faculty rewards is in supporting junior faculty interest in outreach scholarship. Often with pressures

related to tenure stream appointments, junior faculty are over committed and may opt for more traditional approaches unless resources are offered to them.

We provide opportunities through outreach scholarship for disciplinary recognition. Not only do we set high standards for scholarship and grantsmanship in FACT activities, but we also offer extensive support that will help faculty develop the skills, networks, and experience to grow their academic pursuits. We emphasize academic quality and pair it with strong professional development opportunities that have helped to further junior faculty's academic goals, increasing their competitiveness for extramural grants and their avenues for publishing their work.

Facilitating the pursuit of long-term grants and the building of teams: In order to move our seed grants to the next level, as well as to build on initial partnerships, we will continue to help build research teams and assist them in their pursuit of resources to further their work. Through our searchable database, events, and staff interactions, we attempt to connect appropriate university expertise with community issues and needs as they arise. For example, by enlisting department chairs and unit directors as key liaisons, FACT is helping research teams build and strengthen faculty-community ties. The coalition has been instrumental in bringing certain partners together around an issue, and providing them with resources to build teams, publish papers, and pursue long-term grants.

Linking research with policy: FACT invests in efforts that help to bring faculty expertise and current research findings to the attention of policymakers. By testing various approaches, such as seminars, briefing reports, legislative visits, and meetings with agencies, FACT is helping to identify the most effective and appropriate ways to link research and practice with policy. By bridging the gap between the knowledge base on campus and the critical decisions made by policymakers, FACT will continue to inform policy and catalyze action on children, youth, and family issues.

Sustaining communications about university contributions: As higher education comes under increasing pressure to be relevant and to demonstrate its connectedness to the citizenry (Weerts 2000), it becomes more important to document and share stories of the substantive ways in which university resources benefit the community. FACT's communications efforts are geared toward sustaining attention to children, youth, family, and community issues and

creating a culture change on campus by maintaining the visibility of this work. We are also keen on making the best use of technology to connect partners, offer forums for ideas exchange, and build capacity among communities. FACT will continue to refine its role as a key point of access to university resources and research-based information. Through sustained communication, we are raising awareness of how university knowledge contributes to the well-being of the state, as well as enhancing our public reputation as an engaged university.

These future directions will help FACT to map an even clearer picture of the most effective strategies for sustaining a collaborative, university-wide model for engagement. As we have discussed above, this model is helping the university find creative ways to address issues such as faculty rewards, long-term institutional commitment, and developing meaningful, sustainable roles for communities. We have found that the unique features of the coalition (shared ownership across campus, the investments and requirements for collaborative research, the dissemination of information and access to university resources, and the coalition's co-sponsorship) are key factors in sustaining engagement efforts. With continued university commitment and deliberate evaluation of our efforts we expect to refine the coalition's work in order to be responsive to public needs and to demonstrate how the university can successfully contribute to the health and well-being of children and families in the state.

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