

# White Paper: *The Importance of Reporting Community Impact in Institutions of Higher Learning*

## Determining & Measuring Impact

Community impact in higher education has its basis in the many and varied synergistic interactions that occur between a school and its environment as it pursues its educational mission. During these interactions, resources are exchanged in a way that benefits both the school and the community. It is important for the college or university to measure the benefits to the educational process and to the community in these exchanges. It is also vital that schools quantify the resources (financial and human) that are expended and received in the process. These assessments are needed to ensure that the school is fulfilling its mission and that it continues to receive support from its communities and maintains its academic credentials.

Some of these measurements are already well-developed. Economic impact analysis evaluates the financial effects of an organization's expenditures for payroll, purchases and taxes disbursed in the surrounding community. Assessments of student outcomes from curriculum-based instruction (e.g. learning, development, and employment) are typical of all educational institutions of higher learning. Although these measures are crucial, they do not distinguish a college or university from other community organizations or other schools. So what distinguishes one institution of higher learning from other community organizations and schools?

The nature, scope and extent of your community impact is the distinguishing dimension—the programs and services provided to and for your communities. Both the value of benefits to communities and the expense to the school to provide these benefits are of importance. The dollar value of a particular community impact is often difficult to determine. Value is typically expressed in statistical, rather than dollar terms—i.e. a positive change in a metric of interest. The cost of providing the service is easier to compute and can be used in three ways: as an approximation of the dollar value of the service, to determine efficiency of the service (relating expense to the rate of change in a valued metric), and as a benchmark of the school's level of effort to serve a community.

## Conceptualizing Community Program & Service Domains

A way to conceptualize the domain of these programs and services is to consider the different communities and their interactions in the educational environment. There are **four general communities** in the educational arena: campus, academic, local/global, and mission-specific. The *campus* community includes students, faculty, and staff. Closely related to campus life is the *academic* community that represents the various learned societies for each academic discipline and educational association. The geographic area surrounding the school, and also the wider world, constitutes *the local/global* community. Many schools will also be closely involved with a particular audience based on their *specific mission*—for example, religiously-affiliated schools with their sponsoring congregation and land grant schools with the agricultural community. Some examples of programs that represent ways institutions impact these four communities are listed below. The list is intended to be a representative sample and should not be considered exhaustive and complete.

- **Scholarly Research** (Campus + Academic)
  - These programs support the scholarly production and dissemination of knowledge by the campus community, including student research. Research that is community or mission-specific is reported in other categories.
    - Assistantships & Fellowships
    - Publications & Presentations
    - Conferences
    - Lectures, Seminars, & Workshops
    - Sabbaticals & Educational Leave
    - Institutes, Centers & Programs
- **Community Services** (Campus + Local/Global)
  - These programs are provided to the community at-large. Typically, they are related to the educational mission of the school. For example, a performing arts center is a cultural resource for the community while also functioning as a laboratory and venue for the school's theater program. This category also includes institutional capabilities/resources that are made available to the community (e.g. consultation and facilities).
    - Arts & Culture
    - Community Relations
    - Economic Development
    - Environmental Programs
    - Facilities Sharing
    - Information, News & Entertainment
    - International Programs
    - Public Policy Advocacy
- **Community Social Services** (Campus + Local/Global)
  - These non-academic programs and services are offered by the campus to address specific needs in the community. Often these services overlap with campus services, e.g. a campus fitness center that offers programs to the community.
    - Health & Wellness
    - Disaster Recovery
    - Counseling
    - Mentoring
    - Public Safety
- **Campus Services** (Campus + Local/Global)
  - The school provides these campus programs and services to relieve the burden to the surrounding community. This includes health and wellness programs, housing, etc. The community benefit is measured based on the cost of providing the service less any fees or reimbursements. Typically housing and meals, for example, operate at a net surplus so these would not provide a quantifiable community benefit. Institutions of higher learning also serve the community in reducing the burden of education through fundraising (direct appeals, grants, etc.) to provide institutional financial aid/scholarships.
    - Diversity Programs
    - Financial Aid
    - Fundraising
    - Health & Wellness
    - Housing & Board

- Safety & Security
- Scholarships
- Spiritual Services
- **Community Education** (Campus + Academic + Global/Local)
  - These educational programs, services and initiatives intentionally reach into the community to inform and to provide services.
    - Community-Based Research
    - Non-Degree Programs
    - Public Lectures, Seminars & Workshops
    - Not-for-Profit Internships & Externships
    - Service Learning
    - Student Teaching/Practicum
- **Mission-Specific Services** (Campus + Mission-Specific + Local/Global)
  - Programs in this category represent mission-specific initiatives directed to the campus or to the broader community that further the interests of a mission-specific community. This could include programs that promote the goals of the mission-specific community or provide institutional resources for that community.
    - Community Relations
    - Facilities Sharing
    - Information, News & Entertainment
    - International Programs
    - Public Policy Advocacy
    - Institutes & Centers

## **IMPORTANCE OF *REPORTING* COMMUNITY IMPACT**

The primary reasons for recording and reporting community impact are to retain the support of communities that provide resources to the school, to maintain academic credentials, and to institutionalize community engagement.

### **Retaining Community Support**

The expense of providing benefits is of particular importance to the local community who often provide substantial undesignated resources in support of the college or university. Area residents and private and public organizations provide financial and in-kind donations, free or reduced services, educational sites, etc. Local governments may provide free or reduced services and property tax relief as well. Quantifying the institution's costs and expenses of providing these important programs and services provides community members the opportunity to compare that figure with its direct investments in the school (and with the economic impact of the educational institution).

State and federal governments also provide direct funding of the educational enterprise. In addition, a majority of private institutions of higher learning are not-for-profit and enjoy state and federal income



tax exemption, lower rates on government bonds, subsidized mail service, etc. Much of this investment will be directed toward curriculum-based activities that generate productive members of society; however, governments (and their taxpayers) will also be interested in the community benefit that the college or university provides during this process—i.e. the extent that the school integrates community engagement with the educational enterprise as a strategic choice. As a not-for-profit organization, the institution is accountable to its broader community for the use of resources and should be able to quantifiably report their investment into the health and safety of the community in an amount equal to or greater than certain tax benefits they receive. Through an impact report an institution may clearly outline its level of stewardship. Foundations and individuals outside the local community may offer significant financial support. Although much of this may be designated for specific programs, these entities will also base funding decisions on the school's track record in efficiently converting resources into community benefits.

Some colleges and universities will have a special relationship with a particular set of constituents. These mission-specific communities may sustain the philosophical or theological foundation underlying a school's educational mission and/or provide financial and other resources. Such communities will often influence the schools' governance and policies, programs of study, student life, community relations, and areas of research and service—and expect an accounting for these activities to retain their support.

## **Maintaining Academic Credentials**

Scholarly research is already well-established as an important indicator of quality in higher education. And, the number and prestige of academic publications is typically tallied—at the least for the evaluation of individual faculty. Less likely to be reported is an estimation of the school's financial commitment to support research.

Accrediting bodies are also increasingly interested in the ways that institutions of higher learning integrate each school's unique mission into the educational process. Reporting community impact will be particularly important when community engagement is a key component of the school's mission.

## **Institutionalizing Community Engagement**

Tracking and reporting community impact is an essential part of engraining community service into a school's culture. Reporting must take place at academic unit and institutional levels to promote this acculturation. Community impact data can provide a comparison between—and incentive for—students, faculty, and staff; departments; and other colleges and universities. Being able to generate a comprehensive accounting of community impact activities and programs is a first step to planning for community impact. The reporting allows a school to interact more effectively with its constituents in assessing community needs. Where community engagement is a critical component of the school's mission, reporting provides feedback on the success of its strategies.

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