

ATTRACTING A GENERATION OF CHANGEMAKERS TO THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA BY SUSTAINING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

by Jocelyn Roof

Many researchers fear COVID-19 will result in the shuttering of thousands of colleges and universities across the United States, as schools face steep revenue shortfalls and plummeting enrollment numbers (Bruni, Hartocollis & Levin, Kline). While large, public research universities have a bigger safety net than smaller private schools (Hobson & Hagan), the fact remains that business as usual will not be sufficient to ensure the longevity of higher education institutions like the University of Iowa (UI), especially as divestment from the Iowa state legislature creates increasing dependence on tuition dollars (University-Wide Budgeted Revenues FY2020).

During summer 2020, I conducted informal interviews with community-engaged students, staff and administrators working on community engagement, faculty who have taught community-engaged courses, and community organizations who have partnered with the UI on various engaged courses or projects throughout the years. These conversations allowed for a fuller understanding of the scope of community engagement at the UI, and presented a few clear and unified perspectives:

1. Students crave the opportunity to build meaningful connections with community members and to take ownership of projects they find useful and constructive in building a better world and serving others.
2. Staff are eager to support community-engaged initiatives and have the expertise to do so effectively, but are lacking coordination across departments and divisions due to the lack of a centralized office, unclear boundaries as to who is responsible for maintaining and creating connections with external partners, and ever-changing institutional budget priorities and capabilities.
3. Faculty want to do community-engaged teaching, but not all are adequately trained or incentivized to do so, meaning community partners' needs are not consistently met across various departments and divisions. It is important to note, however, that many faculty do have longstanding, successful, reciprocal partnerships with community groups.
4. Community partners vary in their views toward UI collaboration – while performance/arts venues (like the Englert and FilmScene) tend to have strong and healthy ties with certain divisions and departments, more service-based groups (like the Domestic Violence Intervention Program) tend to have a more varied and non-reciprocal relationship with UI entities. It seems that the more concrete, clear, and realistic the expectations are and the earlier the community partner is brought on to the project, the more successful the engagement endeavor.

In order to survive both the pandemic and revenue loss from shrinking enrollment, the UI must act now to center its mission in civic engagement and community service and set itself apart from its competitors. Expanding engagement staff and funding, strengthening ties to local nonprofits and community partners, and packaging community engagement and service learning as a core part of the Hawkeye experience will make the UI a destination university that Generation Z actively seeks out.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

I conducted virtual, informal interviews with students, staff, faculty, and community members using Zoom video conferencing software. The interviews typically lasted about thirty minutes, and I generally started out by asking the basic nature of the person's relationship to the University of Iowa and their involvements in the community, and I let them guide the conversation from there.

The five students I spoke to have been engaged in various community engaged activities throughout their time at the UI, from Hawkeye Service Breaks to Student United Way to the various nonprofit and service organizations in the Iowa City area. Students' perspectives seemed largely in line with the GenZ studies – they are service-oriented, craving connection, and wanting to make a difference in the world. I asked them about how they became involved with their community engagement, what they feel it added to their college experience, and the nature of their relationships with permanent residents of Iowa City not affiliated with the UI. I learned the following:

- Students mainly became involved with community engagement through chance, not design. They were recommended organizations by older students, took a class without knowing there was an engaged component, or happened to Google service opportunities on their own.
- Students all said they felt their community engaged experiences added to their college experience and gave them a broader view of the world and stronger sense of connection and purpose in Iowa City.

- Students struggled to name a mentor in the area who was not affiliated with the University of Iowa. Even students who worked closely with community members felt that their connections were somewhat superficial.

I also met with Director of Engagement Nick Benson, Associate Director of Leadership, Service, and Civic Engagement Ian Van Anden, and Vice President for Student Life Sarah Hansen to gain their perspectives on how the current status of community engagement at the UI. Currently, there are many branches of the university all working on engagement in different facets. Nick Benson and the Office of Engagement manage many partnerships with various towns and groups across Iowa, in order to pair them with various faculty members interested in doing community-engaged work with their classes. Ian Van Anden and the Leadership, Service, and Civic Engagement Office aim to connect students more directly with volunteer opportunities. The office has two AmeriCorps Vistas who focus on helping the food pantry and clothing closet on campus and providing one-on-one advising on volunteer opportunities in the community. These offices have distinctly different purposes yet overlap in their mission to provide civic engagement opportunities for students. I learned the following:

- Support for research and engagement has not been consistently prioritized, which has made it difficult to sustain relationships with community partners.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD, continued

- Staff, faculty, and administrators at the UI who do engagement work are not in frequent communication nor collaboration with one another, making it difficult for anyone to know the full scope of the UI's impact across the state, nation, and world.
- The lack of a centralized place for engaged work to occur makes it difficult for outsiders or community members to approach partnerships, meaning if they do not have a personal connection at the UI they may be overlooked for various opportunities.

I met virtually with two faculty members who shared their experience with teaching community-engaged courses and asked them how they became involved with that work. They personally feel connected to the community partners and groups they serve and began their projects because of those causes or because they had personal connections with community members running those programs. Through these interviews I also learned of the Obermann Center's Graduate Fellowship program, which is an exemplar way for graduate students to gain training and skills in creating community partnerships successfully. However, it seemed that the training was not very widespread, and only some students were aware of it. I learned the following:

- There is not a top-down message of support for community-engaged coursework, so many faculty see it as too much work or do not know if they will be supported or recognized for their efforts.
- There is not a centralized place nor formal process for faculty to go to find resources or support on how to teach community engaged courses.
- There is not a current count of how many community-engaged courses are taught at the UI, or a way to tag them on MyUI so students know they exist.

I met with two community partners who had unique perspectives and pathways to engagement with the UI. One partner is a local nonprofit which assists community members in distressful situations, while the other is a performance venue. These two groups had functionally different partnerships, as the former largely partnered with the School of Social Work and courses which promoted community service hours while the latter partnered with student groups such as SCOPE, KRUI, and University Lecture Committee as well as several business and marketing courses. Because one was more service-oriented and the other more business-oriented, the two experiences of partnership were fairly different. Service-oriented organizations may face various personnel limitations and strapped budgets, while business-oriented performance and artistic venues may be more financially stable, so they have more flexibility and "resume-building" opportunities for students.

- Service-oriented groups need for community partnership to be mutually planned and reciprocally beneficial; while business-oriented groups can take a more transactional approach. A homeless shelter may need student volunteers to help coordinate a donation drive, for example, while a performance venue may wish to hire students for a graphic design project to promote an upcoming event or festival.
- Without a preexisting connection to the UI, community partners have no direct pathway to engagement due to the lack of centralization and prioritization across campus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Much can be improved about the way the UI does community engagement. Here are some initial recommendations:

1. The UI must be intentional about partnerships and deliberate in the recruitment and retention of relationships with individuals in the community.
2. The UI must take a concrete stance on civic engagement and community service, emphatically proclaiming from the top-down that it is a main priority and marketing the student experience accordingly to potential new Hawkeyes.
3. The UI must fully support engagement efforts by committing funding for multiple staff members dedicated to developing, researching, and sustaining relationships with the community; and these staff should ideally work out of a centralized office which all engagement is filtered through.

I looked to several model institutions to create these recommendations and drew from the expertise of the individuals on our campus and in our community, as they will be the ones adopting any changes to the status quo.

In order to expand engagement opportunities to more students, the UI must create and sustain more community partnerships. To do this will take staff, support, and coordination.

Staff are needed to seek out and actively maintain relationships with community partners at a local, state, and national level, as well as to track those commitments and ensure they are followed through on. This could look many ways – there could be a centralized space on campus, similar to the former Office of Outreach and Engagement,

where staff are located who can execute this work. Or, the network already engaged in this work could come together more frequently to share information about commitments, partnerships, and perhaps have a virtual landing space in the form of a website where community partners can come and request the type of engagement they are seeking.

Support, in both language and funds, is necessary to get any initiative off the ground. Support of engagement work looks like ensuring that every faculty member on campus knows how to go about planning an engaged course, and who to connect to either in the virtual space or physical office. Support also comes in financially, with dedicated recurring funds that go toward the staff that cultivate partnerships. Support also means emphatically proclaiming the importance of engaged work and making it a priority for staff, faculty, administrators, and students. This could mean encouraging the Path Forward Engagement committee to look to model institutions and programs, such as the Stanford Pathways Program or the Do Good Institute at Maryland.

Coordination is key – the people on campus who already engage in service and engagement are doing good work, but they need to be recognized for their work, in public ways that let other UI community members, prospective students, and potential community partners know that this work is happening. A website should be maintained that boasts the partnerships and engagement opportunities that exist at the UI, and this should be mentioned at Orientation Programs and recruitment days at high schools around the state, nation, and world.

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