

# A Qualitative Examination of University 'Engagement' through the Lens of Business Executives

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## ABSTRACT

The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education and at least 311 Universities recognize the value of community engagement for universities. By definition, this engagement is intended to be mutually beneficial for all constituents. However, there is limited research with regard to the alignment of perspectives on the value of engagement across constituents. This paper finds that business executives do not perceive the university as receiving 'value' from its engagement activities. Further research is called for to examine whether such a perception is a widespread phenomenon, as this has an important bearing on a university's strategic planning process

Keywords: *community engagement, business executives, strategic planning, laddering technique, hierarchical value map*

## INTRODUCTION

The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, established by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in 1973, published a classification of institutions of higher education so as to facilitate the study of higher education. This classification has become de rigueur in academic and non-academic discourse. Despite four rounds of updates to the classification system, no natural home was to be found for a certain university-characteristic - special commitments to the area of community engagement (McCormick and Zhao 2005). It was only in 2006 that this area of higher education found due representation in the hallowed Carnegie classification with the introduction of the category: "institutions of community engagement."

The Carnegie Foundation has defined community engagement in broad terms as "the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Driscoll 2008, p. 39). This definition encompasses Curricular Engagement and Outreach, and Curricular Partnerships as the two main categories of engagement. In 2010, 115 Universities and Colleges attained the engagement classification, which combined with the 196 institutions that received this classification by 2008 represent about 4.6 percent of all Colleges and Universities.

Should this be interpreted as indicating that all 311 institutions have mutually beneficial exchanges of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity? By definition, the Carnegie Foundation and these Universities and Colleges believe so. This belief is supported by the growing number of Universities' centers dedicated to outreach and engagement and the inclusion of "engagement" as a central part of strategic planning at the University level (e.g., Fitzgerald and Zimmerman 2005). However, as highlighted by Zuiches, et.al (2008), and Driscoll (2008), there is a critical deficit of knowledge regarding the perspectives of community constituents on the engagement activities of universities. The focus on documentation related to institutional culture, commitment, support, and evidence of engagement as well as the use of engagement in higher-education-strategic-planning have fostered university-centric descriptions of community engagement. This paper examines the perspectives of business executives involved in activities and experiences surrounding university engagement and raises a number of issues for

assuring robust, systematic assessments of institutional engagement with communities.

Just as there is a recognition in marketing research of the importance of understanding customers' perspectives of business tactics and strategies (e.g., Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner; 1998, Overby, Gardial, and Woodruff; 2004), we argue that it is critical to understand the perspectives of community engagement held by community constituents. Without a balanced perspective, it is extremely likely that planning and support for engagement initiatives will result in inefficiencies and reduce the effectiveness which such activities have, not only in benefiting a community, but also in benefiting institutions of higher learning. Particularly when resources are limited, it is critical that engagement programs work smart and remain truly reflective of their intended purpose. Our focus in this direction involves a qualitative study of business executives' perceptions of engagement and its value.

The literature on community engagement and outreach is growing in popularity and in detail. Most recently, a new journal - *The Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* - published out of the University of Alabama is completely dedicated to this topic. Whereas efforts such as this encourage advances in research quality and breadth in this area, our review of the broad area of study suggests that most of the focus in the extant literature remains on the actions and perceptions of engagement from faculty and students perspectives. For example, it tends to focus on specific pedagogy, such as service learning (e.g., Schwartz and Fontenot, 2007) and student perceptions of engagement-related pedagogy (e.g., Bove and Davies 2009). Improving the pedagogical nature of engagement is extremely valuable, as is our understanding of student perceptions of such activities. However, that is only a portion of what defines engagement. Engagement should, as stated previously, be mutually beneficial to all partners. Thus, the gap in research related to the effectiveness and equitable nature of partnerships across all constituents (McLean and Behringer 2008) is troubling.

This paper focuses on understanding business executives' perspectives because they are likely to have experience with several forms of engagement and they represent a large segment of community constituents, particularly for Colleges of Business.

Recalling the intention of the voluntary classification system used by the Carnegie Foundation, Universities that seek to qualify under Curricular Engagement must describe:

"teaching, learning, scholarly activities that engage faculty, students and the community in mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration, address community-identified needs, deepen students' civic and academic learning, enhance the well-being of the community, and enrich the scholarship of the institution" (Driscoll 2008, p. 30).

To qualify under Outreach and Partnerships, universities must describe

"two related approaches to community engagement: first, the provision of institutional resources for community use in ways that benefit both the campus and the community and second, collaborations and faculty scholarship that constituted a beneficial exchange, exploration, discovery, and application of knowledge, information and resources" (Driscoll 2008, p. 30).

This is a lot to do, and there is concern regarding the effort at assessing engagement, as voiced by Driscoll (2008). In particular, Driscoll highlights the need for improved assessment involving the evaluation of the community's need for and perceptions of the institution's engagement. This paper represents a first step in addressing such concerns and encouraging additional research on assessing the alignment of multiple perspectives of engagement.

In particular, this paper investigates the values which an understudied segment of community constituents ascribe to Universities' community engagement efforts. Do they view engagement as beneficial to universities, students, businesses, communities, and faculty? What do they view as the most relevant means of engagement? Next, we present the methodological approach to our exploratory study and the initial results of this study. Finally, conclusions and directions for future research are outlined.

## METHODOLOGY

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative approach was adopted. Specifically, in-depth interviews following a laddering technique (Reynolds and Gutman; 1988) were utilized. This technique makes for the "drilling down" into executives' perceptions and helps elicit a means-ends portrait of their views on engagement (Gutman; 1982).

A purposeful sampling technique was employed in order to obtain views from executives who have complementary experiences with student and university engagement (Strauss and Corbin; 1990). Interviewees were chosen based on different histories of engagement with their local Universities, but similar levels of involvement in their respective communities. The Universities considered in this study are classified as both Curricular Engagement

and Outreach and Partnership Universities.

A brief description of the executives whose perspectives are considered is provided, followed by the results.

Executive Representative A is a male President and CEO of a Mid-Western-based organization which manages several businesses with a global presence. He is also a board member of several private, for-profit organizations in his area. His hometown has both a public University and a private University, and he is on the board of advisors for the College of Business of the public University. He has extensive experience engaging with college students through internships and co-op programs.

Executive Representative B is a male President and founder of a construction company in a town near a large Southern city. He is also an executive board member of multiple regional business and cultural organizations. His town has a private University, and he has extensive knowledge of the University's engagement efforts. Though he has worked with University students on different political and cultural projects in his region, in his own business he has never engaged with students through internships or co-op programs.

Each executive volunteered to participate in a phone interview regarding his views on engagement. Prior to the interviews, the researchers agreed on the initial question to be asked, "What do you understand about engagement?" From there, the interviews were structured so as to allow the interviewee to pursue issues unique to the particular interview. After the initial question, interviewers were directed to type all that is heard and to encourage additional information by probing participants' answers in an ordered fashion, with questions such as, "What is involved in ..." or "Why is that important?"

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

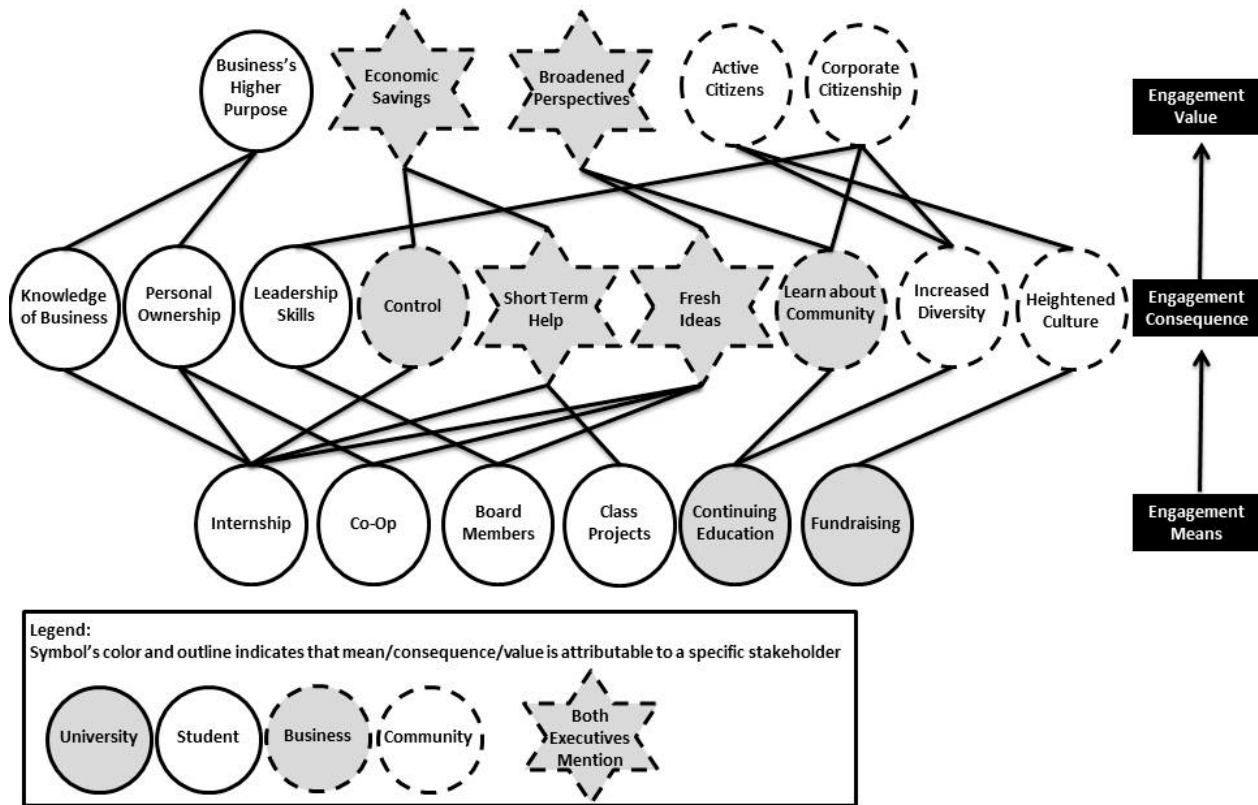
The results are presented in two phases. First, the data are reduced to a list of key characteristics of engagement (i.e. types of engagement), consequences of engagement, and the perceived value of engagement (see, Table 1). Second, a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM) which connects these elements of our data reduction according to how they were communicated in the in-depth interviews is developed and presented. Data reduction and the mapping of the data were done by two trained evaluators, based on transcripts of the interviews. For this sample, evaluators' work was compared for agreement, and terms and connections that are shown are those for which there was complete agreement. Though some researchers using this methodology include a middle step of producing an implication matrix (Reynolds and Gutman 1988), that step is not presented in this analysis.

Based on the interviews, means of engagement are identified as being student-centered or as incorporating the greater University. With regard to engagement with the University as a whole, the interviewees included the use of classrooms for community meetings, non-credit instruction from faculty, and the efforts of spouses of administrators to lead community fundraising campaigns. This finding is consistent with what the Carnegie Foundation requests for proof of Curricular Engagement and Outreach and Partnerships. However, though not shown in Figure 1 (below), Executive A did not identify any means of engagement which correspond to Outreach and Partnership expectations for Universities.

Table 1: Summary Content for Engagement Activities

Code	Means of Engagement (with Students)	Code	Means of Engagement (with University)	Code	Consequences of Engagement (for Student)	Code	Consequences of Engagement (for Community)
01	Internship	05	Continuing Education	07	Personal ownership	10	Heighten Culture
02	Co-Op	06	Fundraising	08	Knowledge of business	11	Increase Diversity
03	Members of Community Boards			09	Leadership Skills		
04	Class Projects						
Code	Consequences of Engagement (for Business)	Code	Value of Engagement (for Student)	Code	Value of Engagement (for Business)	Code	Value of Engagement (for Community)
12	Fresh ideas	16	See Higher purpose of business	17	Economic savings	20	Active Citizens
13	Short-term help			18	Broadens Perspectives		
14	Control			19	Corporate Citizenship		
15	Learn about Community						

The executives' perceived consequences and eventual value of these means of engagement related to three different constituents: (1) students, (2) businesses, and (3) the community. The chain of interactions among the means, consequences, and values shown in Table 1 are represented in the means-ends value hierarchical map, shown in Figure 1. Though three constituents were identified, Figure 1 reflects our finding that the constituencies are not necessarily viewed as completely independent of one another with regard to their tendency to create value for one another. Themes which were present in both interviews are marked as "stars" in the Figure. Themes marked as "circles" were unique to one interviewee.



**Figure 1: Executives’ Means-End Engagement Value Hierarchy**

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper, consistent with the definition of community engagement, sets out to encourage a more holistic study of community engagement. To act as a catalyst, we present the initial results of ongoing research into the alignment of perspectives across constituents regarding community engagement and outreach at universities. Some limitations are clear. Foremost among them is the small sample of executives. This issue is being addressed as the researchers continue to pursue this area of research. Nonetheless, there are some interesting conclusions and directions for future research that arise from this paper.

First, it is significant to note that neither of these executives listed their respective university partner as a recipient of value in the engagement relationship. If this finding is shown to be more common across communities, it brings into question whether engagement initiatives among universities are truly “mutually beneficial.” Further research may find that the burden of implementing truly reciprocal partnerships rests with the university. Perhaps, at least with regard to businesses, community partners lack the mechanisms necessary to impart value-adding contributions to a university partner. Clearly, they can exert value, and the executives in this sample valued engagement because of what it provides to students and to the community. However, the universities were not particularly identified as value-recipients in these discussions. Thus there appears to be significant promise for future research that explores the dynamics of individual and institutional benefits from community engagement.

Second, the in-depth interviews, even from a small purposive sample, reveal that the number of common themes mentioned by these executives was limited (i.e. 4 out of 20 total themes matched). These results suggest that there may be multiple segments of constituencies among the broader base of business executives, and surely among the greater population of community constituents. Though perhaps intuitive, it is interesting to note that agreement was only in terms of the consequences and value of engagement to business. Future research should investigate whether segments of constituents are best understood by their focus on their position in the community or some other aspect. Similarly, it would be interesting to see if differences among the perceived value of engagement relate to differences in the willingness to engage.

Finally, it is clear that executives’ views on engagement are multidimensional. As universities continue to include community and engagement initiatives in their strategic planning, one should be cognizant of the

multidimensional nature of engagement and outreach. In particular, universities and scholars ought to consider the alignment of community partners' perspectives, students' perspectives, faculty perspectives, and administrator perspectives in the planning process.

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