

“A Connected Community—Best Practices and Lessons Learned”
Oberlin Community Services
February 18, 2015
11:30 AM-1 PM

Panel Participants

Rebecca O. Bagley, Past President and CEO NorTech, OCS board member
Andrea Warren Hamos, Vice President and Senior Consultant, Academic Search, Inc.
Mary Olsen, Higher Education Business Solutions Specialist, IBM Corporation
Ian M. Steinberg, Business Development Executive, IBM Global Process Services
Linda Young, Business Development Executive, IBM Public Sector

Moderator: Cindy Andrews, Director of Oberlin Community Services

A broad cross-section of the Oberlin community turned out to listen to and participate in a panel discussion/Q&A about how Oberlin College and the town of Oberlin could strengthen their relationships and pursue best practices between higher education and local communities.

The first question focused on how to strengthen “town/gown” relationships. Panelists noted there were two aspects one should focus on: economic development and community development. The best schools create partnerships that have a fair “exchange rate” between campus and community institutions. A more problematic way to approach the issue is to have the school decide goals separately, which are then justified through the economic support the school provides the local community. It’s important to see the community/college relationship as a learning opportunity for the students, who can learn about community relationships and citizenship; this learning can begin as early as first-year orientation and extend to post-collegiate service learning. It was suggested that the campus has a social responsibility to make resources available to the community, especially for people who might not otherwise have access. It’s also important to get a broad cross-section of the community involved, creating a sense of volunteerism and responsibility. It was suggested that part of Oberlin’s Strategic Planning could be to determine the number of people in the community who take advantage of campus events, and expand that number. Engaging the Oberlin senior community—who take good advantage of Oberlin College’s opportunities—was also discussed.

Partnerships between higher education and the private sector was another topic of discussion. It was noted that the definition of “partnership” can shift depending on the specific community or set of circumstances. However, one constant should be a shared sense of values and goals; starting from such a place is better than trying to “sell” a relationship to the broader community. Discovering those shared values requires openness and safe discussion spaces from the start (saying “no” is as important as saying “yes”). This can’t be an “add-on”, but should infuse an organization and generate meaningful partnerships for everyone.

The next question was about identifying best practices. Every framework needs to be specific to that community needs—“so you know where yes and no are.” It’s important not to shy away from tough discussions or sensitive topics. A “shared governance” model is helpful for bringing people into conversations across different communities and generating a diverse amount of feedback (from students, faculty, staff, community organizations, townspeople, etc.). This can help to not only create better town/school relationships now, but in the future. Schools should avoid the “defensive stance” about what they already do well (this also applies to the government and private sector). Identify what makes sense for your specific organization or community, and build a “rewards system” for investments of students, faculty, etc. Integrating the values of multiple communities creates value within and beyond campus. At the same time, inviting too many people early on in the process can also create problems when decisions finally need to be made. Don’t be afraid to make decisions and drop people from the process if necessary.

The third question asked about possible models and examples for this kind of process. One panelist was impressed with Oberlin. Others mentioned The Carnegie Classifications, Campus Compact, Project Perseus, the Center for Public Polling & Political Studies, Lehigh University, Franklin & Marshall (both connected to John Frye), and other projects/programs engaged in bridging the community and the academy. Several noted their interest in pieces of various programs, with the common thread being those where schools were leaders and catalysts, rather than just “being along for the ride.”

The final question asked about the “secret” to successful collaborations (functioning as a call to action). It was again noted that it’s important to get diverse audiences involved early in the discussion, and to be open to all kinds of feedback. It’s important that “town/gown” is a partnership of equals. It’s valuable to create a common language—“meshing taxonomies”—so all parts of the town/campus community can speak with one another. Safe spaces within open discussions are good, so that no one gets hurt for expressing controversial opinions.

In the Q&A session, a variety of topics were addressed, including how to avoid a top-down approach to planning, being honest about community/institutional problems and not sweeping things under the rug, creating and maintaining institutional memory in a community with a great deal of transience/turn-over, and being open to “the Art of the Possible” when generating ideas.