

Gavazzi, S. M. (2016). *The optimal town–gown marriage: Taking campus–community outreach and engagement to the next level*. Charleston, SC: Author. 254 pp.

Review by James M. Shaeffer, Sr.

One of the ongoing challenges facing all higher education institutions is the town–gown relationship. Stephen Gavazzi, author of *The Optimal Town–Gown Marriage*, not only demonstrates his understanding of the importance of this relationship, but also displays his passion for creating the most effective, what he calls harmonious, relationship between the town and the gown.

Gavazzi, who has many years of experience as both a faculty member and director of a center at the main campus of The Ohio State University, draws on his experience as the dean and director of The Ohio State University at Mansfield regional campus to describe the trials and tribulations of developing a healthy and strong town–gown relationship.

In general, this book is intended to show the complexities of developing a strong and healthy town–gown relationship and, more importantly, demonstrate that the health of one is mutually dependent on the health of the other. To provide a new lens through which to look at this issue, the author draws on literature and research about marriage and suggests tools for gathering data that should drive the decision making in town–gown relationships.

Gavazzi opens the book (Chapter 2) describing his early days as the new dean and director of The Ohio State Mansfield. Despite understanding the importance of having a healthy and strong relationship between his campus and its local town, the relationship he inherited on his arrival in Mansfield was shrouded in mistrust and suspicion. He walks the reader through how, sometimes serendipitously, strong town–gown relationships are forged, using the example of how a major construction project positively affected both the university and the community. This often happens, as Gavazzi notes, if you see building an optimal town–gown relationship as “a full contact sport that requires continuous participation and maximum effort on the part of campus and community leaders” (p. 9).

In Chapter 3, the author provides a brief literature review of the research on town–gown relationships. He describes this research by using the metaphor of seeing the town–gown relationship as a

glass either half full or half empty. The literature trending toward a “glass half empty” perspective concentrates on what he calls edge/wedge issues—disagreements usually concentrated on land use and/or the misbehavior of students. Research finding the glass “half full” concentrates on the joint economic benefits enjoyed by the town and gown and celebrates the shared goals and benefits.

One of the unique aspects of the book is Gavazzi’s foray into using the marriage metaphor (Chapter 4) in defining the characteristics of a successful or unsuccessful town–gown relationship. The author draws on his previous work, as well as others’, in offering a town–gown typology that rests on a matrix of four quadrants, ranging from lower to higher effort and lower to higher comfort. Therefore a town–gown relationship may be considered devitalized (lower effort–lower comfort), conflicted (higher effort–lower comfort), traditional (lower effort–higher comfort), or harmonious (higher effort–higher comfort).

According to the author, most institutions find themselves in the “traditional” quadrant, what can be described as a passive relationship in which parties “live and let live” until something momentous happens. Due to the passive nature of the relationship, there may not be a solid foundation for responding to a major disruption, whether land use related or due to student behavior.

Harmonious town–gown relationships emerge when there is high comfort between the community and campus and where town and gown leaders are highly engaged. Gavazzi suggests that the “search for shared goals and objectives” is the initial stage in developing a harmonious town–gown relationship. Returning to the marriage metaphor, just as a happy marriage takes a great deal of work on the part of each partner, a harmonious town–gown relationship “takes a good deal of ongoing work, plain and simple.”

One of things that jeopardize a town–gown relationship is making decisions in the absence of data. In Chapters 4 and 5 the author provides a data-gathering tool, the Optimal College Town Assessment (OCTA), and a suggested mobilization cycle. The OCTA is a set of questions that elicit insights into community leaders’ perceptions regarding their relationships with various college members—from administrators to faculty to the governing board to students.

Gavazzi shares his initial findings from applying the tool on The Ohio State Mansfield regional campus. Readers may find Gavazzi’s description of how he administered the OCTA as well as his analysis helpful. Although the questions used in the OCTA may

not be generalizable to all town-gown situations—that is, they may need to be modified depending on the size of the institution and community—the overall use and analysis drives home the author’s major point that decisions and actions related to town and gown must be data driven.

In the next chapter (Chapter 6) the author provides a town-gown mobilization cycle that moves from awareness raising to coalition building to data gathering to interpreting information to evidence-based action. What is particularly helpful is the author’s use of his own experience at The Ohio State University at Mansfield as an example. It is informative to see how he marched through each of the steps and overcame obstacles as he gathered, analyzed, and used the data.

One of the tenets Gavazzi posits is the importance of intentional leadership from both the college and the community in developing a truly harmonious relationship. In Chapter 7, he interviews presidents as well as city managers to gather reflections on their personal experiences with town-gown relationships. Although the reader will find the excerpts from the interviews interesting and helpful, the point that Gavazzi raised early in the book, that building an optimal town-gown relationship is “a full contact sport that requires continuous participation and maximum effort on the part of campus and community leaders,” can be seen in nearly every interview. Like a good marriage, building and sustaining an optimal town-gown relationship takes time and energy on the part of both entities.

Bringing the reader full circle in Chapter 8, Gavazzi describes his experience attempting to improve the town-gown relationship at The Ohio State Mansfield. He walks the reader through the impact the various constituents, students, faculty, senior administrators, alumni, board members, business and industry leaders, governmental officials, nonprofit leaders, and other community members had on revitalizing and improving the town-gown relationship.

The remainder of this chapter is excerpts and commentary by the author from interviews with E. Gordon Gee, whom the author refers to as “the quintessential town-gown president.” There is no doubt that Gee is one of the academy’s great thought leaders, recognizing the importance of higher education institutions becoming engaged with the community. The quotes from Gee are not only instructive in terms of pursuing engagement with the community, but are also inspirational. Gee provides the quintessential examples

of intentional leadership in town–gown relationships. This quote seems to say it all:

At the end of the day, university presidents are relatively unimportant people within the university. But their efforts to set the tone and values of the place are the most important things that presidents do. And therefore it's important that students see a president that is excited about them and is excited about their engagement in the community. That is my calling, and my responsibility. (p. 203)

In the final chapter Gavazzi provides what he calls the Ten Commandments of Town–Gown Relationships, which is his attempt at developing a set of “emerging best practices for university and municipal leaders, generated as a result of combining the contents of this book with a thorough review of the town–gown literature” (p. 209). Another way to look at these practices is to view them as lessons learned by the author and others who strive to create harmonious town–gown relationships. The continuing salient points found throughout the book are the importance of making town–gown relations a high priority; carving out substantial time to make it a success; seeking mutually-beneficial results; and a willingness to make town–gown a full contact sport where we are always striving to make it a harmonious relationship.

One of the most appealing aspects of the book is the manner in which Gavazzi weaves his personal experience with town–gown relationships with the supporting literature as well as the interviews of campus and community leaders. The Optimal College Town Assessment (OCTA) tool is helpful and a good reminder of the need for data-driven decision making; however, it may need to be modified depending on the size of the institution and the community.

One surprising aspect of this book was its minimal mention of the research about community engagement performed by others and supported by organizations like the Engagement Scholarship Consortium, although Gavazzi does mention the consortium as an organization trying to enhance town–gown relationships. This is not a criticism of Gavazzi or the book; it is more an observation that there seems to be abundant research about engaged institutions and town–gown relationships, and that although one might expect these literatures to be complementary, they seem to be developing in isolation of one another.

Those immersed in the literature and activity of the engaged university will find Gavazzi's book interesting and helpful in terms of widening the lens when looking at town-gown relationships. In some ways, *The Optimal Town-Gown Marriage* could be used as a first step in looking for complementary issues in the engaged university and town-gown literature and research.

About the Reviewer

James M. Shaeffer, Sr. is the founding dean of the College of Continuing Education and Professional Development at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA, and has held leadership positions in outreach and engagement at multiple institutions. He holds a doctoral degree in teaching-learning processes from Northwestern University.