

## ***Evolution of a Social Media–Driven Campus–Community Partnership: Collaborative Learning at The Knowledge Café***

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### **Abstract**

This article describes an early-stage collaborative partnership between a local community foundation and a regional campus of a major university to increase dialogue on the strategic importance and practical execution of advanced social media best practices for small- to medium-sized businesses. Started through a grant won by the author, an interactive program was established as The Knowledge Café. This program includes a series of participative lectures and discussions on advanced social media applications, guest speakers addressing relevant topics, and a community-driven wiki where participants can share their expertise. The origination of the partnership and the evolutionary pathway traveled to date are described, along with data and key learnings generated during the first 2 years of operation. Possibilities for future changes in structure and activities to expand the offerings of The Knowledge Café provide an indication of how the campus–community partnership should continue to grow with time.

*Keywords:* social media, community partnership, interactive learning

### **Introduction**

**L**ike other states in the “rust belt,” Ohio has lost a large number of manufacturing jobs over the past 20 years. Community-based nonprofits, either with or without assistance from local government, are working to help residents reestablish gainful employment in fields not associated with traditional heavy industry. Numerous new business incubators are offering basic workshops and skill-based training on financing, managing a workforce, marketing products and/or services, and similar contemporary business topics. Participation by local residents tends to be robust. In addition to those who have lost manufacturing jobs, attendees include local residents who may be underemployed or are otherwise seeking to improve their job skills. Programming is advertised in a variety of ways, including via social media channels, with sessions typically held at local community centers and other public venues. Basic social media techniques appropriate for

business are covered to complement fundamental business skills, but advanced social media training for business owners has been unavailable. Topics that could be added to drive increased business success include constructing a content-driven social media site, strategically scheduling timely updates and other communications, and applying web analytics and other advanced processes that help business owners understand user demographics.

Concurrently, the regional campuses of Miami University (Hamilton and Middletown) are seeking new ways to engage the communities that they serve, either through programs between the university as a whole and the communities or through the individual efforts of faculty members who seek to establish and champion mutually beneficial partnerships as part of their community service efforts. Applying the assessment rubric for institutionalizing community engagement in higher education developed by Furco, Weerts, Burton, and Kent (2009), the institution as a whole is probably best described as on the cusp of transitioning from the critical mass building category to the quality building category of the rubric for each of Furco et al.'s five dimensions. Although much work remains to achieve true institutionalization of community engagement, there are strong examples of success on an individual project level and good general awareness of the benefits that can be realized from true collaborative partnerships.

The regional campuses have a long tradition of serving the educational needs of their local communities and offer a broad range of 2-year and 4-year degree plans that are rigorous in their design but also tailored to the local and regional job markets. University involvement in the types of workshops described above is, however, without precedent. The student population at the regional campuses includes traditional students who enter the institution right out of high school, older adult students who are returning to school to broaden their skill base and/or advance their careers, and part-time students who may not be interested in a degree but would like to master a specific new area of special interest to them. Faculty undertake a combination of teaching, service, and scholarly research activities with strong encouragement to develop their engagement within the local community, where collaborative projects are acknowledged and supported.

The purpose of this article is to describe the design, implementation, and first 2 years of execution of a campus–community partnership to provide training to current and prospective small business owners on the theory and practice of business-focused social media technologies. These are technologies that could help drive

business growth beyond what is possible through more traditional business practices, such as those described in the aforementioned preexisting community workshops. Specific social media–driven examples include building loyal user groups for the products and/or services of the business, joining and maintaining a presence in thought-leader panels, appropriately handling customer service issues online, effectively blending original content and curated content from other authors to form a cohesive website, linking multiple social media platforms together to deliver a consistent message in a timely manner, and so on. Mastering these types of activities moves business practitioners from casual social media use to a more professional skill set that can augment their competitiveness in the online business community.

The partnership described throughout the text is a dynamic one that started very simply between one business faculty member with a strong interest in social media theory and application and the executive director of a local community foundation seeking new programs to help stimulate economic growth within a business environment under transition. As will be noted throughout, the nature of the partnership, along with the actual participants within the partnership, went through several noticeable transitions before achieving the stable format that will drive sustainability through time. To place the partnership into perspective, discussions of the initial learnings from the partnership and plans for maintaining program momentum in subsequent years are included.

## **Background**

### **Campus–Community Partnerships**

Campus–community partnerships come in a variety of shapes and forms that serve to link organizations in pursuit of common learning and mutual benefit. As noted by Curwood, Munger, Mitchell, Mackeigan, and Farrar (2011), partnerships of this kind tend to be hard work and also tend to involve blending together different personal styles, cultures, locations, and other parameters that can result in complex working relationships. To the degree that a partnership can be carefully defined ahead of time, with a detailed understanding of what will be achieved, the probability of success is enhanced for those who will participate and contribute on an ongoing basis (*p. 16*).

In general terms, campus–community partnerships are often classified as community service-learning (CSL) or community-

based research (CBR; *Curwood et al., 2011; Gray & MacRae, 2012; Hoyt, 2010*). Where the CSL model is followed, “an educational approach that integrates service in the community with intentional learning activities” (*Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning, 2006, p. 1; Curwood et al., 2011, p. 15*) frequently results in a mixture of roles with some participants driving the programming and other participants limiting their involvement to absorbing the knowledge offered. The CBR model represents a generally more straightforward partnership situation where “knowledge production” occurs by all involved parties (*Nyden, 2009, pp. 9–10*). This collaborative effort results in all participants both generating and receiving new knowledge. At Miami University, the CSL model is the most logical and popular approach taken when instructors of undergraduate coursework seek to add service-learning projects or activities to the curriculum. Faculty teaching graduate-level courses are more likely to follow the CBR model, thereby incorporating a two-way sharing of knowledge between students and participants from the greater community.

Outside the university curriculum, faculty are strongly encouraged to interact with community members, organizations, or other institutions to provide service or scholarly research programming for the betterment of both parties. However, in actuality, such interactions are far less common than the curriculum-driven CSL and CBR interactions. The rarity of such extracurricular interactions reflects a number of factors, chief of which is the absence of mechanisms for the university to appropriately acknowledge and reward time devoted to community partnerships.

Where community interactions and partnerships tend to flourish, success occurs in a win-win format that recognizes how each side can add value and how each side has new knowledge to gain. Hoyt (2010) referred to the resulting partnerships as achieving a state of “sustained engagement” where “people inside and outside the university engage in an evolutionary continuum between the ever present themes of practice and knowledge; they seek to overcome, rather than reinforce, the false dichotomy between the two” (p. 82). Although both parties readily see the advantages of blending the latest academic theories with practical, real-world relevance, it is most often up to individual faculty members or small groups of like-minded faculty to initiate community contacts off campus. Community members can find it difficult, if not impossible, to navigate the hierarchy of the university well enough to reach individuals with the time, interest, and expertise that they seek. Where faculty are able to recognize the opportunities within

the community and initiate the engagement, the pathway forward often can be clearer, although still not always straightforward.

Clifford and Petrescu (2012) profess that making community partnerships sustainable and beneficial in the long run involves the concepts of trust and authenticity on the part of both parties. These concepts cannot be fulfilled instantaneously, but can be built up over time through internal efforts (relationships, organizational dynamics, and culture within the university), external efforts (relationships and dynamics of the community, power and resource imbalances, and community identity), and personal efforts (psychology, competencies, and career issues of the faculty). Moreover, the parties must subscribe to the belief that engaging the community, maintaining a core commitment to learning, and carefully articulating these beliefs across organizational lines will lead to maximum improvements for the community as a whole.

## Understanding the Community in Context

Arguably, communities will be more willing to look at opportunities to partner with local universities if the communities lack sufficient resources to execute growth and improvement projects on their own. Universities, however, often struggle to find the resources for financial participation in community projects. Thus, the expertise of individual faculty members, departments, or even multidisciplinary teams can be vital for communities seeking new ways to approach civic needs. Researchers Lambert-Pennington, Reardon, and Robinson (2011) describe in detail one successful example of a campus–community partnership based on a university contributing no financial resources, but offering the expertise of a number of faculty to the City of Memphis, Tennessee. The partnership, involving both students and faculty from multiple departments at the University of Memphis, provided technical expertise, strategic planning, project management, and executional support for a major revitalization of a South Memphis neighborhood. Numerous issues relevant to the “urban core” of a large city were collaboratively addressed in an interdisciplinary approach that, while layered in complexity, ultimately was more successful than what a partnership with a single faculty member or even a single department could provide (*pp.* 62–63).

Public communications—speeches, newsletters, press releases, and so on—by university faculty and administrators involved in campus–community partnerships constitute another essential determinant in whether or not such partnerships are viewed posi-

tively. It is intriguing to note that this is often independent of the degree of success achieved through the partnership. Community partners, the public at large, and faculty within the university seek these outward and visible signs that the university places a high value on the process of community engagement. Arrazattee, Lima, and Lundy (2013) noted that one of the most frequent concerns centers on whether or not the community partners are cast in a light that may make them seem “needy” or indicate that they are being “helped” by the university (p. 47). Where the goal is to establish effective two-way, mutually collaborative partnerships, this connotation is counterproductive and should be addressed through properly structured communications. Unfortunately, unless carefully controlled, the varying communications styles of different departments in a given university can lead to one partnership being viewed very positively while another struggles to gain traction. Community engagement offices, with staff who are carefully trained to handle primary public communications regarding partnerships, can be an effective aid to individual faculty and/or departments in minimizing the chance of upsetting community partners through improper or unintentionally offensive language (p. 48).

As a faculty member at Miami University, this author has firsthand experience in working within a university system that places a high value on engaging the surrounding communities in true collaborative partnerships that involve combinations of service and scholarship. On the regional campuses of Hamilton and Middletown where my primary activities are centered, the annual faculty evaluation criteria have been restructured to place service ahead of scholarship/research (although still behind teaching) in terms of importance. Support from the administration is readily available to help facilitate community engagement. This support includes not only tangible resources and the commitment of time to conduct partnership-based work, but also the specific language used to communicate, internally, with faculty regarding these project efforts. O’Meara, Louder, and Hodges (2013) examined a theory on power and agency in organizations reported earlier by Lawrence (2008), finding that it provided a good explanation for how faculty react to administration communications regarding partnerships with the community. The authors use the term “episodic power” to classify targeted communications encouraging community engagement by members of the faculty. Such communications, especially when coupled with recognition of significant community partnerships and the individuals driving them, were

recognized as a key driving force to increase participation by faculty. The effect was pronounced for tenure-track faculty, who often need to make difficult choices about the projects and activities that will be most worthwhile in an already crowded pretenure agenda (O'Meara *et al.*, 2013).

## **Establishing a New Campus–Community Partnership**

### **Identifying and Addressing an Opportunity**

For the past several years, I have been conducting research in the field of professional social media communications. My goals in this effort are twofold. First, I am studying the communications processes that successful online businesses use as part of their efforts to turn occasional website visitors into loyal customers. Second, I am working to identify specific social media technology skills and applications that can be effectively incorporated into business technology courses to substantially boost students' job skills for a market that relies heavily on electronic communications. This research frequently put me in contact with local and regional business owners—individuals that I looked to as sources of knowledge for dissemination in the classroom. Instead, I found a number of business owners who were eager to learn more about this research topic. Some had failed in their attempts to incorporate advanced social media work into their marketing or customer service plans; even more were unsure how to enter this arena at all.

My frequent and lengthy interactions with members of the local business community thus formed the seed of the campus–community partnership discussed in this article. The need for action was immediately clear, due to factors that included a limited local market that small- to medium-sized businesses would have to move beyond in order to grow and the lack of any available training programs covering advanced social media skills and best practices. From my conversations and an informal gap analysis of typical social media skills, it appeared that a combination of general training on how to use social media to increase market penetration, plus directed one-to-one coaching on business-specific applications, could make a difference in the marketplace success of small- to medium-sized businesses in the area served by the Miami University Middletown, Ohio, regional campus.



## Catching Up on Professional Social Media Use

Although it is probably not possible to formulate a universal definition for *professional social media use*, characteristics of professionalism online include communicating fact-based information for the benefit of a business or its constituents, handling transactions in an accurate and appropriate manner, dealing quickly with customer service issues, participating in thought-leader panels, offering products and services that are readily available to purchase, and writing op-ed pieces that clearly indicate the source of the writer's knowledge and opinion. The term *professional* is an essential differentiator when describing a business-appropriate social media presence since more casual use of the relevant technologies does not automatically yield professional conduct (Cleary, Ferguson, Jackson, & Watson, 2013). When executed well, however, professional social media applications follow many of the same fundamental best practices of business communications, management and leadership, and marketing found in general business guidelines (Kadam & Ayarekar, 2014; Schaupp & Belanger, 2014). For a business owner attempting to establish a viable online presence, navigating the published literature or the plethora of self-help books available can be unnecessarily complex or even self-defeating. Working to master the concepts in a partnership setting that allows experimentation and feedback reduces the barrier to entry (Kadam & Ayarekar, 2014).

Establishing and supporting a professional online presence is an endeavor that crosses industry lines. Coppock and Davis (2013) noted that scientists are relying on social media applications to share data and work on projects between laboratories. Social media influence extends to how papers are peer-reviewed and published as well. Cleary et al. (2013) observed a broad spectrum of applications relevant to the health care industry. Physicians use social media to share recent developments in treatment options. For patients, health care guidelines, tips for optimizing the use of medical services, and direct electronic communications with doctors all represent contemporary applications of social media. Mergel (2012) found that public agencies made frequent use of social media sites to disseminate information and/or provide access to government programs but that two-way communications between agencies and their constituents were lacking. According to Zorn, Grant, and Henderson (2013), not-for-profit agencies have many of the same challenges as agencies in the public sector, with resource mobilization to help achieve results being a key concern.



## Originating the Campus–Community Partnership

On June 1, 2014, I applied for a grant from the Middletown [Ohio] Community Foundation (MCF) under the heading of support for Quality Education and Human Needs, with the goal of initiating the partnership that would evolve into The Knowledge Café. MCF grants are highly competitive due to limited available funds and a variety of critical social needs affecting Middletown area residents. The application was therefore kept simple and straightforward, focusing on the delivery of a series of monthly lunch and learn activities, including presentations, book reviews, guest speakers, and panel discussions (*Baim, 2016*).

MCF funded the grant application, with funds set aside to cover a series of nine seminars to be delivered within the Miami University academic year of September 1, 2014, through June 1, 2015. At the outset, this potential partnership was in a highly formative stage and was driven by direct interactions of the faculty member (me) and the MCF executive director, who acted as both a customer for the proposed program offerings on behalf of the community at large and as a mentor and guide to what was a complex grant-writing and program execution process. It was, at this stage, definitely a partnership envisioned to perform service work for the community—a status that would change and evolve quickly with time.

The total amount received from the MCF represented a substantial fraction of the funds requested but was less than optimum for delivering the initial described programming. Observing the support from the MCF, the university administration stepped in to augment the funding received and support the full programming described in the grant application. The injection of university funding was highly welcome, but it complicated the fledgling partnership by adding another seat at the decision-making table. University administrators took an active interest in the program for its potential to evolve into new collaborative partnership opportunities over time. This potential future connection seemed entirely reasonable to me, and the increased interest from administrators was welcomed, given that this was my first foray into grant-funded community partnerships.

Discussions with the MCF and the administrators at Miami University Middletown revealed a dichotomy of thought regarding the best time of day to hold the seminars. Some preferred the original concept of lunchtime/early afternoon, and others favored

early evening sessions that could be attended after normal business hours. As a result, I volunteered to offer a total of 18 sessions, half scheduled at noon and half scheduled at 5:00 p.m. At the outset, it was not known which time would be preferable, and the option was left open to reduce the total number of sessions if one timeslot proved to be significantly more popular than the other. Note that at this point, the partnership was evolving, but it still consisted of a limited number of individuals (the Middletown Community Foundation, the Miami University administration, and the author) deciding what was to be offered to community members.

## Budget

The MCF funded the campus–community partnership at \$3,750 for the original nine sessions. This was 50% of my initial request of \$7,500, leaving a shortfall that presented some challenges for delivering not only the original nine sessions, but also nine additional sessions in a quality manner. To help reduce overall costs, the Miami University Middletown administration permitted the use of university meeting space for the sessions, a considerable savings to the partnership versus renting other suitable locations. I was also able to raise an additional \$500 in grant support from the Middletown Campus Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) to assist in covering miscellaneous expenses. Additional cost savings were achieved through reducing the scope of the refreshments offered and also through handling much of the advertising for the sessions personally. A copy of the finalized budget is included in Table 1.

**Table 1. Sessions Budget**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Budget</b>
Books	\$ 500
Advertising and speaker honoraria	\$1,000
Facility charges and a/v equipment	\$1,800
Supplies	\$ 450
Food	\$1,800
MCF total	\$3,750
Additional funds from CTL	\$ 500
Additional funds from University	\$1,800
Operating total	\$6,050

## Final Preparations—and a Change in Name

With a budget in place and deliverables clearly articulated between the executive director of the MCF, the Miami University Middletown administration, and me as the principal investigator/partner in the grant, final preparations turned to operational issues involving guest speaker commitments, reserving rooms, scheduling catering, and preparing advertising. At this point, it was decided to change the name of the partnership to better capture the interest of potential participants through the planned advertising campaign. The campus–community partnership was renamed “The Knowledge Café,” a name borrowed from the work of David Gurteen, a UK-based knowledge management consultant (*Gurteen, 2002*).

Although initial sessions of The Knowledge Café were constructed largely as lectures and presentations with relatively modest opportunities for participants to interact, it was also envisioned that sessions would evolve toward a conversation-based collaborative knowledge-sharing format that would encourage participants to become more engaged and, once optimized, result in participants generating and delivering substantial portions of the session content. This approach is consistent with research by Gasik (*2011*) on project knowledge management.

## Understanding Potential Participants’ Interests

Prior to the first session of The Knowledge Café on October 1, 2014, a brief survey was distributed to local business owners via chambers of commerce, local business incubators, and so on, asking for their suggestions on topics to cover, preferred time of day for sessions, and other logistical parameters. Multiple business-focused organizations were contacted, representing the City of Middletown and immediate or “first tier” suburbs surrounding the city. The survey was preapproved by the Miami University IRB as exempt from human subjects research review and other requirements due to the general, nonidentifying nature of the data collected. The collective mailing lists of all organizations that helped with the survey contained nearly 1,000 names, although there were numerous duplications. Unique names accounted for just over 600 individuals, 55 of whom returned completed surveys. The results obtained were used to guide the sessions. Note that engaging individuals from the community to provide input on content prior to holding any program sessions represents the first time that the community at large was engaged in the partnership. Although at

this point the true decision-making partners remained the author, the MCF, and the Miami University administration, and the programming did not originate with the community, administration of this survey signaled the first meaningful step in transitioning to a more collaborative partnership with the community at large.

“Pre-session” results indicated that approximately two thirds of community members responding to the survey (67%) would prefer the evening timeslot, with 22% favoring the afternoon timeslot and 11% stating that the topic of the session would drive their choice to attend. Community members cited a variety of reasons for wanting to attend The Knowledge Café, as illustrated in Figure 1.

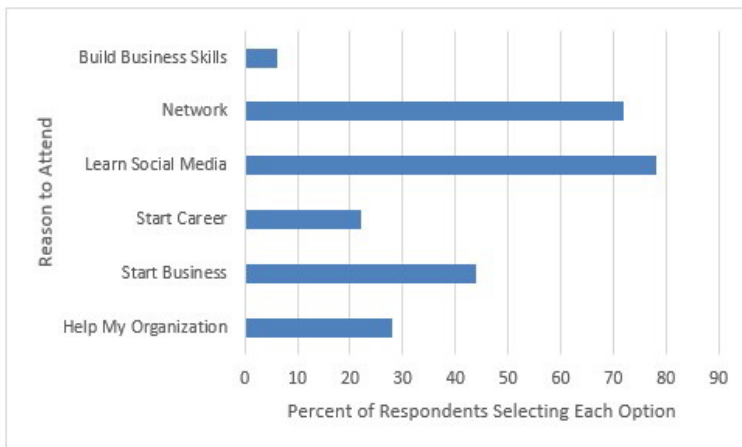


Figure 1. Interest in The Knowledge Café

## Advertising

Advertising for individual sessions of The Knowledge Café was produced by the author and consisted of a two-panel flyer that could be easily transmitted by e-mail or incorporated into websites or social media sites (Baim, 2016). The university provided supplemental advertising by including sessions of The Knowledge Café on electronic calendars and video monitors, as well as providing session details on the regional campus Facebook site. The MCF also ran copies of the flyers on its Facebook site. In the 2nd year of operation, additional paid advertising was included through actual Facebook ads; however, no supplemental increase in attendance could be attributed to these additional efforts. Across all advertising conducted, the Miami University event calendars and the MCF Facebook page were most frequently cited by participants as where they heard about The Knowledge Café.

## Operating The Knowledge Café

### Typical Session Schedule

A typical session schedule for The Knowledge Café included “opening the doors” 30 minutes before the scheduled start time so that participants could mingle and enjoy light refreshments. Sessions started with brief announcements about upcoming events, followed by an approximately 45-minute working session. After a short break to allow participants a chance to network with others, a second 45-minute working session was held, ending with time for a question-and-answer session and an open discussion. One feature especially appreciated by participants was the use of a “hard stop” at 2 hours so that they could schedule time out of the office or away from other responsibilities. In the majority of cases, session presenters furnished handouts or links to electronic materials so that attendees could actively participate in discussions without worrying about taking copious notes. Many sessions also involved “live” interactions on the Internet so that participants could view technologies operating in real time. In one instance of unforeseen community involvement, a presenter hosted a compare-and-contrast session on the live-streaming technologies Meerkat and Periscope only to have a number of uninvited internet guests crash the demonstration—it had not been set up in password-protected mode. Some of these “interlopers” actually ended up participating in the session and adding unexpected value.

## Results

### Participant Demographics and Related Parameters

The Knowledge Café has received an enthusiastic response from the Miami community and surrounding areas, with virtually 100% of attendees indicating that they believed the sessions to be of value when polled on exit. Polls were conducted informally during the 1st and 2nd years of operation via a brief feedback form in session handout packets. Sessions varied in attendance based on a number of factors that included the time of day, the weather, other events scheduled the same day, and the topic selected. Attendance has averaged about 15 people per session. A graph of the attendance across the first 2 years of operation is provided in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Attendance at The Knowledge Café

The “kickoff” session materials, consisting of an introduction to the programming and a basic overview of social media technologies, were presented twice—on October 1, 2014, and October 15, 2014—to supply the same information at an evening session (October 1) and an afternoon session (October 15). The unusually low attendance at the October 15 session was not unexpected. During the first year of operation, attendance at evening sessions generally exceeded that of afternoon sessions, although afternoon attendance was actually more robust than initially expected, with many participants stating that taking an occasional “long lunch” for a session did not pose difficulties. Because of various scheduling constraints, sessions conducted after May 2015 and ongoing into the 2nd year of operation were all held during afternoon hours. Limiting sessions to this timeslot had no appreciable effect on attendance. A breakdown of the attendance from the initial sessions in October 2014 through May 2015 is provided in Figure 3.

Participants at The Knowledge Café represent a variety of perspectives. They range from small business owners and entrepreneurs (including retired businesspeople who have become entrepreneurs) to individuals from nonprofit agencies such as community foundations, churches, and educational institutions, as well as from governmental bodies. University students and faculty members round out a typical session. The relative percentages of these groupings of participants are shown in Figure 4.

During the first 2 years of operation, more than 80% of participants came from the greater Middletown area served by the MCF

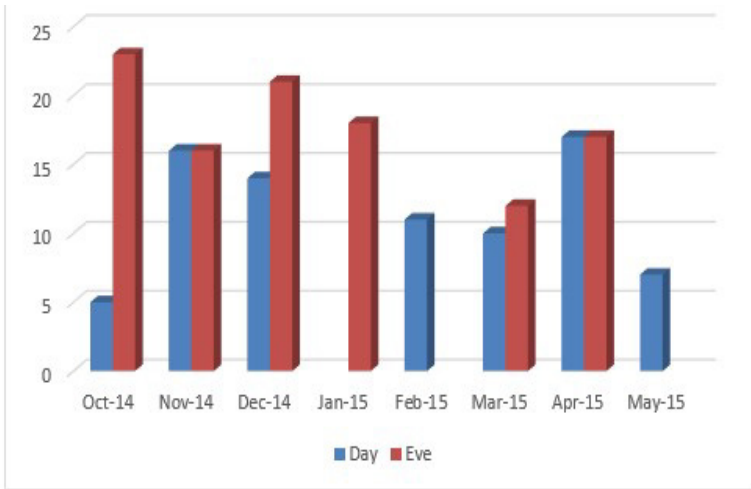


Figure 3. Attendance by Timeslot—Day Versus Evening

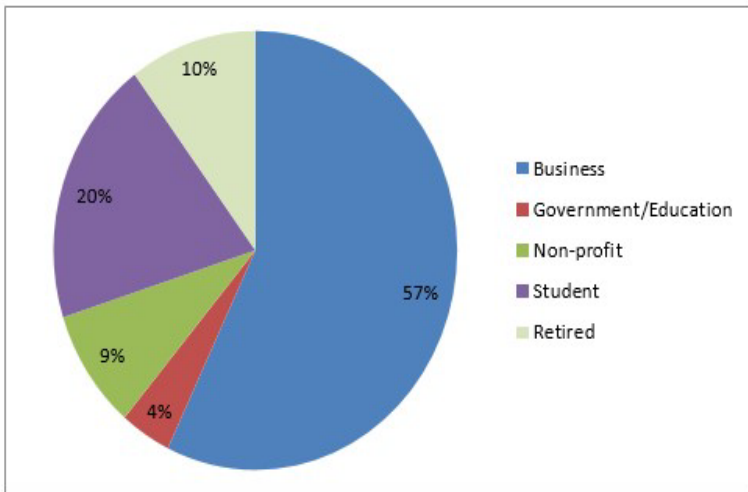


Figure 4. Breakdown of Attendees by Occupation

and Miami University Middletown. There was a near 50:50 ratio of male:female participation. Many of those in attendance tended to be frequent attendees, and they aligned very well with the target market segment described in the grant application for The Knowledge Café. Other individuals came when they saw a specific topic advertised that was of professional and/or personal interest. Some of these latter individuals, liking what they experienced, became regular or frequent attendees.



## Congruence of Final Program With Original Plan

Throughout the 2 years that The Knowledge Café has been in session, the subject matter of the presentations has remained true to the original intent of delivering materials of interest to new and prospective business owners on topics related to business innovation and the application of social media technologies. All sessions have taken the form of casual, interactive presentations that encourage audience participation not only through questions and answers, but also through contributing items of interest to the discussions. A complete listing of session dates, topics, and locations is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2. Session Topic by Date**

Date	Session Title	Location <sup>1</sup>
10/1/14	Social Media 101 -- Beginning topic	Campus Community Center 142
10/15/14	Scheduled twice as the "starter" sessions for the program	Verity Lodge
11/5/14	LinkedIn for Career Development and Business Applications	CCC142
11/19/14	Building Your Business Through eBay	Verity
12/3/14	Driving Social Media Success Through Engaging Content	CCC142
12/17/14	Driving Social Media Success Through Engaging Content	Verity
1/21/15	Social Media Mini-Sessions: Tools to Enhance Social Media Sites	CCC142
2/5/215	Unravel the Mystery of Twitter Theory and Practice	Verity
3/5/15	<i>The 2020 Workplace</i> by Jeanne Meister and Karie Willyerd	Verity
3/19/15	The Basics of Facebook	Verity
4/2/15	The Basics of Professional Blogging	Verity
4/16/15	Facebook Panel Discussion	Verity
4/30/15	Creating Video—The Art and the Science	Verity
5/14/15	Website Design for Business	Verity
5/28/15	The Basics of Professional Blogging Part Two: The Blogging Competition	Verity
6/11/15	<i>Outliers</i> by Malcolm Gladwell	Verity
6/25/15	Getting Started With Pinterest	Verity
9/10/15	Marketing 101: The Bare Essentials	Verity
9/22/15	Studio Workshop #1: Getting Creative	Verity

Date	Session Title	Location <sup>1</sup>
10/8/15	Automating for Productivity	Verity
10/29/15	Holiday Content for Social Media	Verity
11/12/15	AGILE Software and Project Management	Verity
11/17/15	Social and Personal Branding	Verity
12/1/15	Social Media Trends for 2016	Verity
12/15/15	Competitive Intelligence in Social Media	Verity
1/7/16	Facebook for Business	Verity
1/12/16	Make the Move to Live Streaming	Verity
2/18/16	Content Marketing Update	Verity
3/1/16	3D Printing for Small Businesses	Verity
3/22/16	Content Marketing Update Part B	Verity
3/29/16	LEAN Six Sigma for Small Businesses	Verity
4/7/16	Getting a Message Out to Your Community	Verity
4/21/16	Tips on Content Curation	Verity
5/5/16	Inspiring Creativity and Innovation	Verity
5/19/16	The Theoretical Basics of Analytics	Verity
6/21/16	Inspiring Creativity and Innovation	Verity

*Note: Both locations listed are on the same campus, approximately 200 yards apart.*

I delivered most of these sessions, although a variety of excellent guest speakers have contributed their expertise on specific subjects, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Guest Speakers**

Speaker	Topic and Session Date
Christian Sheehy, Xavier University	LinkedIn for business (11/5/14)
Heidi Beam, eBay Entrepreneur	Starting an eBay business (11/19/14)
Christian Sheehy, Lane Public Libraries	Facebook for business (3/19/15)
Ruth Orth, Miami University; Nancy Griffith, Mockingbird's Café; Duane Gordon, MCF; Christian Sheehy, Lane Public Libraries	Facebook experienced user panel (4/16/15)
Tom Mays, Business Technology (now Commerce) Department Assistant Professor	Creating Video—The Art and the Science (4/30/15)
Mark Lankford, Butler County Small Business Development Center	Website Design for Business (5/14/15)
Mary Kovach, Business Technology (now Commerce) Department Assistant Professor	AGILE Software and Project Management (11/12/15)
Lucinda Parmer, Business Technology (now Commerce) Department Assistant Professor	Facebook for Business (1/7/16)
Duane Gordon, Executive Director MCF and Jeff Kuznekoff, Communication Assistant Professor	Getting a Message Out to Your Community (4/7/16)
Andrew Wendt, Vice President CFR, Inc.	Tips on Content Curation (4/21/16)

## Discussion

During these first 2 years, operation of The Knowledge Café as a campus–community partnership has been a challenging but rewarding process as the partnership has grown and initial results have been generated. Originating The Knowledge Café; setting up all logistics such as advertising, facility readiness, and refreshments; and delivering the majority of the first program sessions largely fell to me as the grant recipient and key driver of the program. Thus one could logically argue that, at least at first, The Knowledge Café consisted predominantly of a program for the community rather than a partnership with the community. The growing popularity of The Knowledge Café, however, led to greater community engagement: Community members began to take on roles as guest speakers, expert panel participants, and so on.

This increased level of collaboration and engagement represents an important evolution of The Knowledge Café from a program that was initially driven, or “seeded,” by the efforts of a small

group of individuals to a program that is predominantly driven by the collective thoughts, ideas, and desires of the participants as a cohesive group. Plans for continued refinement of The Knowledge Café concept and program in succeeding years consistent with a fully developed community partnership are covered under “Future Work,” below. Even within the 1st year, when many aspects of the program were experimental, the value obtained by each party is worthy of note.

## **Value to Participants and the Community**

Throughout the first 2 years of The Knowledge Café, and increasingly as each year of operation drew to a close, comments were solicited from participants regarding their impressions of the program. As the partnership became more and more collaborative over time, recommendations for future sessions also increased, indicating a higher level of ownership and participation by attendees. Participants had opportunities to provide written feedback or sit down informally for one-to-one oral commenting. All comments received during the 1st year of operation were not solicited via a formal survey.

With over 200 participants involved during the 1st year alone, comments were overwhelmingly positive. Many remarks noted the value of the sessions for more than their technical content, as stated by Kay Y.:

I am a small business owner and have been a member of the [Business Technology] Advisory Council since 2012. The idea of using social networks for business was a new concept for me, but seemed very much in tune with what is happening in today’s business environment. I am attending her classes and am working on utilizing the ideas put forth so very well in class to broaden my business connections in LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram. The results have been amazing!

Others offered comments on the fostering of valuable networking opportunities between business individuals, university personnel, and not-for-profit agency members, such as remarks made by Jay S.:

There are two main reasons I have decided to avail myself of the opportunity to attend these sessions. The first is that I am the president of a small non-profit orga-

nization and I am looking at ways to use social media to enhance our organizations effectiveness, including the opportunity to do some networking with kindred spirits. The second reason is that I am a life-long learner and saw this as a way to continue my quest for mental growth. Dr. Baim has made me feel welcome and included in every session, from the initial greeting upon arrival, to asking pointed input during discussions, linking with others at breaks and invitations to stay after the formal activities to chat with the presenters or fellow attendees. I certainly hope these types of sessions can continue, especially using local presenters with real life experience.

Becoming fully engaged in the process of guiding, running, and learning from the sessions of The Knowledge Café led to interaction with others in the business community on other topics as well. In addition, participants frequently cited as positive aspects the casual but informative format of the sessions, the ability to interact on topic choices, and the knowledge contributed by local guest speakers. For example, Andy W. summarized:

Each session was a chance to learn from someone like yourself, and your guest speakers, who brought experience and insight to the topics presented. Like I explained to all of my co-workers who had the chance to attend a session, even if they only heard one tip, if they just learned one way to improve our social media or marketing efforts, the time spent would be more than worth it.

Regarding areas for improvement, participants indicated that they would like more opportunities to try out new technologies with expert guidance available to help put new knowledge into practice. Although the topic of bringing personal laptops to sessions was not broached during the inaugural year, doing so for hands-on sessions would add value for participants. Participants would also like to see more advanced topics introduced. Because they greatly valued the fundamentals explored within the 1st year, many participants hoped to be able to continue growing their knowledge through additional sessions in the future. Recording sessions for later playback has been discussed and is under consideration as well.

## Value to the Campus

In keeping with the goals of establishing a true two-way collaborative partnership between the campus and the community, Miami University Middletown has also benefited from The Knowledge Café. The campus has received a large amount of positive publicity from the program, including articles in the local press. The program has also brought numerous people to the campus who had not been there before, and many commented positively on the facilities and the other program opportunities that they learned about while on campus. The type of partnership described here broke new ground in terms of how it was established (through a community grant, but with high university involvement) and is already in discussion as a model for future projects. The key to getting the overall process started was tapping into prior relationships with local business owners and entrepreneurs, listening to their concerns, and seeking opportunities that, even if unidirectional at first, had the potential to quickly build into collaborative partnerships.

Through regularly interacting with a broad cross-section of industry, government, and not-for-profit agency individuals, I have gained insights on problems and challenges facing small- to medium-sized business owners that far exceed my original expectations. This firsthand knowledge is directly influencing lecture materials and assignments that I am using in my senior-level leadership and social media courses. In particular, the clear focus on issues related to contemporary workforces and improving the external marketing of businesses is helping me better prepare my students for their chosen career paths.

## Conformity to Best Practices

Returning briefly to the work of Arrazattee et al. (2013), it is helpful to assess how well the first 2 years of The Knowledge Café exemplified best practices for campus–community partnerships. Objective assessments using five interrelated parameters show strong initial success but also indicate that there is more work to be done.

**Community partner access.** As Arrazattee et al. (2013) described, there should be standardized access whereby community partners can make use of university resources and provide feedback. For The Knowledge Café, a collaborative wiki for knowledge sharing among all partners was set up and is presently in use. This type of platform was chosen because it allowed all participants to sign on and work together to iteratively develop the body of

knowledge stored for all to use. Website setup and access work is in process, but will need to be prioritized and completed to provide the level of integration required to fully meet best practice guidelines.

**Community partner identities.** Arrazattee et al. (2013) stress the importance of acknowledging partners and their contributions, as well as devoting equal priority to each partner's needs. The Knowledge Café has done an excellent job in this regard, with highly positive feedback received from all parties on the frequency and quality of such communications.

**Mutually beneficial exchange.** As noted by Arrazattee et al. (2013), reciprocity and mutual benefits are key to sustainability of campus–community partnerships. All partners to The Knowledge Café readily agree that benefits achieved during the 1st year of operation have been substantial and relevant to all parties involved in the partnership. That said, more emphasis has been placed to date on communicating the benefits to the community. This has been accomplished through articles for the press, additional advertising via handouts and flyers posted at businesses, and more frequent postings to both university and MCF social media pages. Although it could be argued that this was initially appropriate due to the heavier financial commitment of the community through the grant received, as the program continues it will be important to provide more information on how and what the campus is learning from the partnership.

**Description of transformational relationships.** Within this parameter, the greatest evidence regarding the program is in the subcategory of collaborative decision-making or planning as described by Arrazattee et al. (2013). From the first meetings with the Middletown Community Foundation, substantial collaborative planning has occurred to optimize the content and logistics of The Knowledge Café. The product offered to Middletown-area business individuals during the 1st year was initially a carefully crafted blend of ideas that had originated from both sides of the partnership table—including the Middletown Community Foundation, the Miami University administration, and the author. As has been discussed, however, the evolution of the partnership to one of true collaboration among all participants in The Knowledge Café has resulted in a transformation from working *for* or *in* the community to one of partnering *with* the community to achieve mutually agreed-upon benefits. It is clear that this level of collaboration will be necessary to sustain the partnership in subsequent years.



**Use of collaborative language.** Arrazattee et al. (2013) noted the importance of avoiding language that would represent one partner as in any way subservient to the other. In this area, The Knowledge Café has excelled and has drawn strong praise from both the campus and the community partners. Advertising and other communications have been formulated consistently to take an approach based on “let’s learn together and share our experiences to drive growth in our community.” The praise from community partners reflects their continuous involvement in all aspects of The Knowledge Café. The university’s positive reaction is at this point primarily based on the communications regarding the program sessions. As greater hands-on university involvement is anticipated for Year 3 through more faculty speaker participation, it will be important to track how perceptions may change.

## **The Need for Longer Term Assessment**

Moving forward from the 1st year of operations, there is a need to formalize assessment of the longer term performance of The Knowledge Café in meeting the expectations of all parties involved. The assessments previously described by Arrazattee et al. (2013) will remain an important part of the process, but more extensive assessment will also be critical. Fortunately, the expectations of the community at large and of the primary funding partner, the Middletown Community Foundation, are congruent—both expect a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge on professional social media and business innovation topics that will assist local/regional business owners with the growth of their business enterprises. Such growth needs to be assessed in both quantitative terms (market penetration, new business achieved through web-based technologies, enhanced customer service and satisfaction, acceleration in hiring new staff, etc.) and in qualitative terms (receptivity to the format of the sessions, willingness to engage as an active participant, candid feedback on likes/dislikes, etc.) through a combination of research questionnaires and personal interviews.

From the points of view of the author as a faculty member and of the Miami University administration, a rigorous application of Furco’s assessment rubric will be appropriate (Furco et al., 2009). As the growth in The Knowledge Café is occurring concurrently with the university’s efforts to substantially increase community engagement, assessments conducted will most likely require a careful analysis of each of the five dimensions cited in the rubric. As noted in other work performed by Furco and Miller (2009), institutions may place varying degrees of emphasis on each of the five dimen-

sions. Understanding the current levels of emphasis and optimizing the community engagement process for future projects is likely to draw heavily from learnings at The Knowledge Café.

## **Guidelines for Launching Similar Efforts**

In my case, as champion, facilitator, and grant recipient of The Knowledge Café, I found that having an extensive background in working within the community at a variety of levels greatly assisted me in recognizing the opportunity to propose a collaborative partnership such as the one described here. As a business professor with a specialization in organization and leadership, I had often sought service-learning project opportunities for my students and had collaborated with local and regional governmental agencies on research studies involving customer satisfaction, identifying community needs and wants, and so on. Thus, I knew a lot of people in the area and was highly familiar with general community issues and concerns.

This prior knowledge was of great help in the ideation stages of the project, but the ultimate success of the effort reflects a willingness to meet with people, to negotiate across a spectrum of program possibilities, and to iterate the final product to one that all stakeholders can fully support. To that end, I found it extremely helpful to capture my own learnings and develop a set of guidelines to follow when future opportunities to collaborate with the community present themselves (*Baim, 2016*). For those who may seek to replicate this work or extend it in new directions, but who do not have an extensive community network in place, my advice would be to spend some time establishing a baseline understanding of the “pulse” of the community and, if possible, consider partnering with someone who can help with basic introductions and access to thought leaders on the engagement topic of interest.

## **Future Work**

The Knowledge Café generated strong excitement on both sides of the campus–community partnership with innovative programming, close attention to detail, and a willingness to listen to the needs and wants of participants in the 1st year of operation. As a result, the MCF renewed funding for a 2nd year, as did the Miami University Middletown administration. This ongoing support permitted The Knowledge Café to offer more advanced session topics, bring in more guest speakers, and encourage even greater collaborative interaction by participants in Year 2. That said, there

are numerous opportunities to increase the quality and relevance of sessions to participants now that a level of true collaborative learning has been achieved.

### **Moving Toward Year 3**

Continuing to increase participant engagement at all sessions will remain essential as The Knowledge Café programming moves forward. The intent is to move to a format that captures more of the operational spirit of a knowledge café as described by Gurteen (2002). These sessions will be called *studio workshops*, and they will afford participants the opportunity to work together to share knowledge, investigate technologies, and solve business problems of mutual interest. These efforts will be augmented by brief presentations on business-focused creative tools, including Edward deBono's *Six Thinking Hats* (1985), and mapping tools such as process mapping, mind mapping, and customer-journey mapping. Given these tools, participants will explore a process known as *adaptive expertise* to reach their business goals (Hatano & Ouro, 2003; Schwartz, Bransford, & Sears, 2005). Adaptive expertise is best practiced by individuals who can apply personal experiences to invent or adapt strategies for solving problems within a specific knowledge domain and then, ideally, transfer higher level learning from one domain to another.

Efforts will also be undertaken to enhance The Knowledge Café by incorporating broader participation by members of the university community through more traditional course-based community service-learning. Details are not yet established, but it is hoped that a campus-based partnership between two or more instructors in the fields of business, communications, and/or computer science could be created to bring additional value to The Knowledge Café. These instructors could engage their students as guest speakers on relevant technical and business topics, act as service-learning mentors or partners for the business participants in attendance, or even offer consulting to the studio workshop sessions proposed in Year 3. This type of effort has limitless potential for all parties involved.

It will be essential for individuals involved in The Knowledge Café campus–community partnership to identify and secure ongoing funding to support future years of operation. The MCF is extremely pleased with the success of the partnership and wants to stay involved as a key strategic partner, but MCF funding opportunities last no more than 2 to 3 years. This seed money is intended to help launch worthwhile programs within the community that will

then become established and either self-funding or funded with a permanent budget by another organization—such as the university in the case of The Knowledge Café. Due to the initial success of The Knowledge Café, coupled with the willingness of the participants to help the underlying campus–community partnership evolve over time, it is likely that ongoing funding will be obtained. To the extent that all partners can keep a strong focus on maintaining mutual benefits, the success of The Knowledge Café is likely to increase in the years to come.

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