

Creating Synergy between Learning and Service: A University Responds to the Needs of Students and Community

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Abstract

A convergence of internal and external factors has challenged the institutional identity of Indiana State University and presented an opportunity for strategic evolution toward a campus better able to address student learning and serve the needs of the community and region. External drivers, such as fiscal shortfalls, declining population, and a re-envisioning of the roles of state institutions by the legislature, have compelled ISU to examine the academic and demographic composition of its enrollment base and to refocus its mission. Results from the National Survey of Student Engagement suggested that, despite long-standing perceptions of student academic preparation held by faculty and administrators, and supported by entrance data, ISU undergraduates were not adequately challenged within the existing system. In this article, we discuss how ISU decided to address student needs and constraints imposed by the state through a concerted program of experiential learning and community engagement.

Background: Overview

Institutions of higher education tend to follow trajectories that are determined by consensual strategic planning and allocation of resources, even while being shaped and diverted by a host of external factors. Recent discussions among intellectual leaders and policymakers in education have broadened the conception of the role and obligation of universities in relation to their home state and region (*Votruba et al. 2002*). This re-envisioning of the university's role has occurred against the backdrop of a series of budgetary jolts to the national and state economies. Consequently, universities have been encouraged to reflect upon the educational and fiscal successes of all aspects of their operating mission and function. More important, universities have been tasked with benefiting the populations and economies of the regions they serve (*Reilly 2004*).

Beginning in 2004 and continuing as an ongoing self-examination, Indiana State University has taken a series of measures to refocus its energy on a synthesis of student-learning experiences and community engagement. Institutional planners have attempted to structure these initiatives around long-standing strengths and priorities of Indiana State University, including faculty dedication to innovative and reflective pedagogy and a strong commitment to internships and professional practice opportunities for students. In this article, we describe how traditional institutional strengths were harnessed to serve a new core of objectives attuned to our evolving student body and the needs of western Indiana. In particular we discuss efforts to assess and sustain the effectiveness of the implementation of these initiatives.

ISU's Traditional Institutional Context

Indiana State University was initially established in Terre Haute in 1865 as Indiana State Normal School, with the preparation of teachers as its primary mission. The institution has since evolved into a residential, doctoral-degree-granting university, offering instruction at the associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. While quality teaching has remained the core value of ISU and its faculty, ISU's classification as a Carnegie doctoral research-intensive university, alongside its proliferation of graduate programs, has produced and sustained a vigorous suite of research programs and initiatives. For most of its tenure, the university has focused on providing relatively low-cost, high-quality education to a student body with special economic needs and entrance scores of reflecting a wide range of academic ability.

More recently, and because of ISU's position as a state university and the anchor of public higher education in western Indiana, faculty and administrators have come to recognize their responsibility to provide wider intellectual stewardship to the region and state. In response to changing views of the contribution of higher education, as well as new relationships forged between representatives of the institution and community partners, ISU has grown its commitment to a curriculum that is responsive to external demand, applied research that addresses state and community needs, and a robust program of public service and experiential learning opportunities.

The needs of the traditional ISU undergraduate student formed the foundation of ISU's original mission of accessibility. These students frequently have been first-generation university

students, often hailing from the immediate geographical region. By most measures of student performance and preparation, including preliminary coursework, high school grade point average, high school class rank, and SAT scores, the average enrollee has been below state averages. ISU average SAT scores, for instance, have been below the fiftieth percentile for well over ten years. These performance factors clearly positioned freshmen in a category of students that required an effective transitional period as they entered the university system.

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In addition, traditional students at ISU came from households where economic considerations, including geographical proximity to the physical campus, were paramount in their initial selection of university. At ISU, the stability of the economic status of the student has been shown statistically to be strongly related to academic success, including likelihood of being retained and of graduating.

Interestingly, given the apparent preparatory obstacles faced by incoming ISU students, surveys of student opinion reveal that students feel they are not adequately challenged by the academic programs and courses in which they enroll. In particular, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results from 2004 indicate that both freshmen and seniors felt significantly less challenged by examinations than did their peer respondents at other institutions. Thus despite quantitative data suggesting that our students are not as well-prepared as students at peer institutions, student perception holds that the intellectual environment at ISU could be enhanced.

In concert with data on academic challenge, ISU student responses to the 2004 NSSE indicated that 80 percent of juniors and seniors intended to participate in learning experiences that placed them in the field, laboratory, and community. Such forms of pedagogy have long been lauded in the education literature as particularly effective modes of course delivery. This combined message about academic challenge and learning experiences, sent directly from students, suggested to institutional planners a qualitative and quantitative change to the stated institutional

vision and approach that would draw us more closely in line with changes occurring in the state and nation.

The Challenges: State Blueprint, Terre Haute/Vigo County Needs

In November 2004, the Subcommittee on Higher Education of the Indiana State Legislature submitted a report to the Indiana Government Efficiency Commission that noted “severe competition by institutions pursuing the same missions and the same students” (Reilly 2004, ii). As a solution, the subcommittee proposed a new distribution of academic responsibility and resources within the state. Three tiers of higher education within the existing system were proposed. On one end of the spectrum were the research-intensive universities, whose role would remain essentially unchanged. These institutions, Indiana University and Purdue University, would hold primary responsibility for educating graduate students and conducting, and procuring funding for, research programs. It was suggested that this tier of institution would now provide only elite-level undergraduate education, and thus might experience a modest decline in undergraduate population as a result. At the other end of the spectrum was the traditional undergraduate access mission, which would now become the sole province of the rapidly developing community college system, led by Ivy Tech State College. This tier would expect the largest influx of students, and a corresponding sustained growth in state budget allocation.

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In the middle tier, Indiana State University, alongside Ball State, was asked to fulfill a more versatile role. These research-intensive universities would sustain some graduate programs and attendant research, while strengthening the caliber of undergraduate education (moving away from academic access, in the case of ISU). In addition, the research conducted on these campuses was expected to be largely applied, and overwhelmingly devoted to regional concerns, particularly economic development. A form of stewardship of place was implied in the proposed connectedness between university mission and goals and regional needs.

Although these universities could expect some gains from high-end academic enrollments (from students no longer competitive to enter IU and Purdue), they would be more than offset by losses to the growing access tier (Ivy Tech). ISU in particular has already experienced flat or declining enrollments for the past four years. The change of ISU's mission to that of a less access-oriented campus would effectively further marginalize enrollment.

For ISU, regional and community issues loom large, providing to students and faculty a host of points of entry for positive intervention through engagement and for purposes of teaching and research. The city of Terre Haute has experienced significant population and economic decline over the past few decades due to its shift from an agricultural and industrial to a service-based economy. In addition, the community is challenged by poverty and illiteracy rates higher than the state average. The unemployment rate for Vigo County is 14 percent higher than the statewide rate of 5.1 percent.

Compounding these economic factors, the county population has declined by more than 7 percent during the past two decades. Literacy is a significant concern, with one in four adults in the community lacking basic literacy skills. There are also significant health and housing problems in the area, coupled to environmental concerns and sporadic problems with methamphetamine production and usage. It was with these elements in mind—the traditional ISU student, the proposals of the Commission for Higher Education, the many and varied needs of Terre Haute and surrounding counties, and the real need to revitalize undergraduate enrollments—that planners began to craft a new strategic vision for the university.

The Initiatives: Self-Examination and Consensus

Beginning in the fall semester 2002 in advance of the decisions of the Commission for Higher Education, and then continuing through winter retreat and planning sessions in 2003, 2004, and 2005, the campus community assembled to determine how to best serve our students while meeting the challenges posed by the needs of the community and declining enrollment. Representatives from all campus constituencies (students, faculty, administrators, and staff) participated in the initial phase of discussion in 2003/2004, in which a new campus identity was formulated by consensus. ISU would focus its efforts on active forms of pedagogy—experiential learning—which would be embodied and showcased most directly in courses that engaged community topics. Campus

discussants came to these foci—experiential learning and community engagement—through four key realizations. First, both elements were effective means of enlivening and enhancing student learning. Second, both would strengthen university ties to the city and region. Third, data showed that ISU students actively sought these experiences (suggesting this strategy as a recruitment and retention tool). Finally, experiential learning and community engagement were currently a substantial component of existing faculty teaching and research activity, so a basis of resources and expertise already existed within the university. In addition, the foci complemented one another, as community subjects provided a natural outlet for experiential forms of pedagogy, a living laboratory in the immediate environment.

Over the course of the next academic year, University President Lloyd Benjamin III assembled task forces to better articulate the vision behind the initiatives and to develop implementation strategies and timelines. Committees met and developed recommendations for the better establishment of experiential learning and community engagement as areas in which ISU would achieve prominence regionally and nationally. In addition, measures were drafted to recognize and reward distinctive programs and scholars, units and individuals whose exceptional performance reflected an exemplary contribution and alignment to the university mission.

The centerpiece and outcome of these discussions is the Alliance for Excellence through Engagement and Experience (the Alliance). This entity, a coalescence of allied centers and offices, is devoted to the promotion of the experiential learning and community engagement agenda. It is responsible for coordination of activity and personnel, sharing and distribution of resources (particularly fellowship funding for faculty), and improved communication.

Programs and Elements

Key programs and offices, both newly developed and continuing, collaborate in contributing to the university's focus on experiential learning and community engagement. A list of these entities follows, with descriptions of their roles in furthering the institution's mission.

The Alliance for Excellence through Engagement and Experience is an initiative coordinated through the Office of Academic Affairs and Center for Public Service and Community Engagement and supported by the Lilly Endowment's Initiative

to Recruit and Retain Intellectual Capital for Indiana Higher Education Institutions. It seeks to (1) attract and retain engaged students and faculty, (2) develop high-quality experiential learning opportunities across the curriculum, (3) support the university's efforts to work with the community on projects that will result in needed changes, and (4) build faculty excellence in the scholarship of teaching and engagement. The initiative builds upon existing centers that are strongly concerned with experiential learning: the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Center for Public Service and Community Engagement, and Instructional Research and Technology Services.

The goals of the Alliance are being met through several funded sub-programs:

Students are selected for the Undergraduate Mentee Program based on their record of academic excellence and community leadership. Mentee opportunities include working in faculty-directed research, community-based service and outreach experiences, and other faculty-guided professional opportunities such as joint publication and paper presentations.

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Faculty are selected through application and internal review for the Faculty Fellowship Program. Fellows have demonstrated interest in problem-based learning, a plan of study focusing on a key social, economic, or cultural issue, and a plan to engage students in research and strategy implementation. Grants are shared between the faculty member and her/his home department to encourage active departmental support.

The Center for Public Service and Community Engagement (CPSCE) was established in 2001 to serve as a “front door” to University resources. Under the umbrella of the Alliance, the CPSCE coordinates the university's outreach mission and community engagement activities, including service-learning and other types of community-based learning, economic development,

and community-based research. CPSCE staff work directly with external partners and ISU faculty, staff, and students to develop partnerships that advance the mission of the university and enhance the quality of life in the state and region. Four CPSCE initiatives are described in this section.

Focus Indiana is a five-year project, funded through the Lilly Endowment, aimed at the creation of career opportunities for ISU graduates. The project started in January 2004. Several initiatives are funded through Focus Indiana, including the appointment of an intern coordinator to the Career Center. One primary component of the project is providing scholarships to students completing internships in targeted geographic regions, including West-Central Indiana, social-entrepreneurial organizations, and entrepreneurial businesses. The Liberal Learning in Action program provides minors to faculty who create community-based experiences in courses. During the 2004-2005 academic year, 70 students received internship scholarships and 778 students participated in Liberal Learning in Action projects.

The CPSCE is a participant in two AmeriCorps-funded projects. The Midwest Campus Compact Citizen-Scholar Fellowship Program is a scholarship program that supports cohorts of predominately low-income and/or first-generation college students who have demonstrated academic abilities and a passion for community building through service and civic engagement. In 2005, the CPSCE received a Next Generation Planning Grant through the Indiana Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to create an AmeriCorps program in Terre Haute. The university serves as an intermediary organization for the program. During the 2005 summer term, twelve volunteers, including students and nonstudents, were placed with four nonprofit agencies in the community. A fully operational AmeriCorps program, Sycamore Service Corps, was implemented at ISU during the fall 2005 term. This program has placed forty members in a five-county region to provide service in the areas of education, public safety, human services, and the environment.

The CPSCE is also developing a Civic Leadership Certificate Program. This leadership program will be available to undergraduate fellows and other high-achieving students through an application process. The program will focus on developing a commitment to civic leadership and public service regardless of major or career choice, and will have a strong experiential focus.

Through a competitive application process, ISU juniors may be selected to participate in Real World 101, an intensive mentoring

experience with alumni during the spring break week. During spring 2005, five students participated in the Real World 101 pilot program. The students were from the Departments of Communication, Philosophy, Economics, and English and were placed with Downtown Terre Haute, Inc., United Way of the Wabash Valley, and the Family Self-Sufficiency Program of the Terre Haute Housing Authority. Participants in Real World 101 attended staff meetings, a local Rotary meeting, and a variety of other meetings with their mentors, completed a small project, and spent time in the office environment. The project will be continued in 2006 as a collaborative project between the College of Arts and Sciences and Focus Indiana.

Downtown Terre Haute (DTH), a local 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation and an affiliate of Indiana Main Street, physically relocated to the CPSCE during the spring 2005 term. At that time, the first DTH director was hired. The director's position is a full-time position, with 75 percent dedicated to DTH and 25 percent to coordinating downtown development activities of the university. During the first few months of this collaboration, the DTH director has mentored Real World 101 students, assisted with internship development, facilitated the university's involvement in a community festival, and assisted the College of Arts and Sciences in development of a community/campus symposium to discuss linking liberal education with civic engagement.

Members of the Alliance initiative are in the process of establishing the refereed *Journal for Experiential Learning and Community Engagement*. Currently, there are few publication outlets for scholars of student engagement, so this journal is intended to fill an important niche nationally as well as internationally. The journal will require an editor, designer, and subscription/distribution staff.

Efforts to Assess and Sustain

Assessment measures for the strategic initiatives have been designed to monitor progress for purposes of administrative oversight as well as to demonstrate to the North Central Association Accrediting body that Indiana State University has achieved its goal of demonstrating excellence in community engagement and experiential learning. In addition, action steps related to the Lilly Foundation grant are assessed periodically throughout the year to enhance efforts to fulfill expectations stated in the grant.

In all, over seventy outcomes have been identified as stemming from successful achievement of the strategic initiatives. The process of setting the goals originated in the Strategic Planning Office with opportunity for feedback given to the Planning Committee. Final measures were decided by the president and the provost. Measures include increasing student academic credentials such as GPA, SAT, and Core 40 completion. Faculty reporting was used to assess number of experiential learning experiences, student involvement in external grants activity, and scholarship. Finally, university statistics were used to assess graduation and retention rates.

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The NSSE will be continually monitored to assess student involvement in internships, experiential learning and community engagement experiences, overall university experience, perception of academic challenge, and so on. Initial results

from the NSSE, which reflect the nascent development of the strategic initiatives, reveal limited progress. When considering the two-year change between 2003 and 2005 cohorts, NSSE scores for ISU first-year students indicate a 4 percent increase in the number of students who described themselves as able to “learn effectively on their own,” alongside a 3 percent increase in those reporting the ability to solve “complex, real-world problems” (based on students who responded “very much” or “quite a bit”). In addition, the number of students in the 2005 cohort indicating that they were contributing to the welfare of their community was 12 percent higher than in 2003. Scores from ISU seniors reflected a similar shift, with increases of 3 percent, 1 percent, and 3 percent respectively in the above categories. These changes, particularly the marked increase in contribution to community welfare noted by first-year students, are quite likely related to implementation of strategies by the Alliance.

Not all NSSE results were so clear (or positive) during this early stage of the implementation. While comparison of the 2003 and 2005 first-year student cohorts reveals a 6 percent increase in students attesting that they “worked harder than they thought they could” and a modest increase in the degree to which cohorts indicated that class work “challenged them,” the 2005 cohort also reported a 6 percent reduction in the amount of critical thinking

required of them and a 4 percent decline in their application of theory or concepts to practical problems in relation to the responses of their 2003 counterpart. Because the senior data mirror these results, and because these indicators measure aspects of the experiential learning process, further refinement of our implementation (and perhaps more specific survey instruments) are undoubtedly warranted.

The strategic initiatives have benefited from external funding obtained to support implementation. The key now is to ensure sustainability on two different levels. The first is the adoption of experiential learning and community engagement as working principles in scholarship and the culture at ISU. The university is encouraging this through requiring faculty and departments to discuss their efforts in furthering the strategic initiatives and recognizing those who do it particularly well. The university is also beginning to consider an internal marketing campaign to remind and encourage faculty to pursue opportunities in these two areas.

The second level of sustainability will be realized through the pursuit of funding to support fellowships, internships, and the journal after the Lilly Foundation grant is concluded. The university has included aspects of the strategic initiatives as possible priorities in its upcoming capital campaign. These initiatives will also be considered in future reallocations as the university attempts to redirect funds to support the strategic direction.

Conclusion

Indiana State University faces several challenges that require institutional change: declining enrollments, a need for better connectedness between university and community, and a changed role within the assembly of state institutions. These issues have framed the types of outcomes that are necessary for the university to continue to thrive and be a viable contributor to the intellectual capacity of Indiana. However, it has been up to planners to craft and realize a vision that holds to traditional strengths and phases while attracting more prepared and capable students.

Initiatives based on pedagogy and service, experiential learning and community engagement, were used to simultaneously create interesting, rigorous, and effective student experiences, while directly applying institutional resources to community issues. The Alliance for Excellence through Engagement and Experience was conceived to assemble centers and their like-minded personnel around the initiatives, in order to increase the

efficiency of their communication and function. Thus, all existing offices would maintain their current objectives and priorities, but where they touched on matters of student learning experiences and engagement of community, they would act in concert.

Our current attempts to assess the strength of planning and implementation are in the early stages, but have yielded mixed results. Future assessment will focus on addressing initial concerns shown by the NSSE data, and better refinement of the measures and instruments used for measurement.

The Alliance and the initiatives it supports are in their infancy, but the underlying interest in teaching and engagement at ISU is a sustained pulse that continues to form the foundation of our endeavors. By casting these long-standing strengths against our present challenges to reinvigorate enrollment and provide better stewardship to the community, we hope to establish ourselves as a premier institution in Indiana, linking undergraduate teaching to the service of the constituencies that support us.

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