# Outreach and Engagement: Building and Sustaining Learning Communities in Higher Education

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## Abstract

Three universities are fostering leaders committed to (1) defining models of outreach scholarship, (2) building a network of leaders who can learn from each other, and (3) creating an outreach culture at their respective institutions. Using an integrated approach to supporting this learning community, these universities are documenting and sharing models of outreach scholarship in a partnership for change.

## Introduction

The new economy and rapid diffusion of communication and information technologies is dramatically changing how we work and learn. As universities seek to reinvent themselves and become engaged in different ways, they are grappling with new strategies for learning. In order to be responsive, universities must embrace a vision of learning and learning organizations that includes the creation of learning communities.

How do universities become responsive to the needs of today's and tomorrow's students and communities? How can outreach organizations prepare their faculty and staff to become more engaged? Three universities have joined in a partnership intended to create cultural changes within the academy that will increasingly allow their universities to better extend the university's knowledge and expertise to solve the problems that face their local communities. In collaboration, these institutions have developed an integrated approach to supporting workplace or organizational learning by using informal peer-to-peer learning, formal learning activities, and online support systems. This organizational learning model includes formal and informal learning activities on topics that cross organizational and institutional boundaries: topics of interest to university and community partners, as well as faculty and staff. These topics address the needs of a variety of functional areas within the institution, including continuing education and distance education, cooperative extension, public broadcasting, public affairs, technology transfer and other outreach-related areas. Topics also address needs

related to the scholarship of engagement, building and sustaining partnerships, and supporting faculty engagement activities. They also encompass models of engagement that include conducting needs assessments when working with diverse populations, and using appropriate program development and evaluation models. The content and design of this learner support system are accessible to novices and experts and are intended to accelerate learning, create greater boundary-spanning capabilities, design more effective transfer of knowledge, and produce more collaborative problem solving.

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***Translating community learning into organizational change: How can institutions create an outreach culture?*** A dynamic, visible outreach culture must be present to optimize the institution's outreach and engagement strategies. Ryan *(1998)* has outlined the key elements of an outreach culture. These elements include: (1) an articulated vision and mission, (2) institutional champion(s), (3) a developed communication plan and coordination between outreach units, (4) faculty involvement, (5) financial supports, rewards, and recognition systems, (6) a process for documenting and reporting scholarship and outreach activities, and (7) an evaluation process to measure the quality and impact of outreach services. The authors would add an eighth element that emerged from the experiences of developing this cross-institutional learning community. Creating a culture of outreach or engagement can be enhanced by establishing and fostering learning communities that support the organizational culture and institutional change. Complex institutional issues (common among many universities and colleges) can be mastered only by tapping the collective intelligence of a network of leaders and peers through learning communities.

***Models of Engagement: What have we learned?*** The three partner institutions, while starting from different points, have each developed a customized approach to organizational change and have implemented learning communities within their respective institutions. Fostering a learning community across the three institutions has had a positive impact on the development and coordination of key institutional competencies that focus on (1) the process of defining outreach scholarship, (2) the development and coordination of

key constituent groups within the institution, and (3) creating and supporting an outreach culture.

***Learning Communities—Three case studies:*** A learning community at the University of Wisconsin–Extension developed The Wisconsin Idea *(1997)*, which provides a guide to documenting and evaluating excellence in outreach scholarship at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. This model defines outreach as involving the creation, integration, transfer, and application of knowledge for the direct benefit of external audiences. Outreach scholarship, in this model, is considered high quality when there is evidence that the scholarship has resulted in significant outcomes. Quality outreach scholarship is characterized by efforts to bridge gaps between theory and real-world needs, issues, or concerns. The Wisconsin Idea has been adopted by universities across the United States as they begin to define an approach to documenting and evaluating outreach scholarship within their institutions.

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The Pennsylvania State University established a learning community in 1998 that focused on developing a definition of outreach scholarship. This Penn State learning community developed a multi-dimensional model of outreach scholarship titled University Scholarship and Criteria for Outreach and Performance Evaluation or *UniSCOPE (2000)*. The model consists of five dimensions: (1) the forms of scholarship: teaching, research, and service; (2) the functions of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and education; (3) the types of scholarly teaching, research, and service; (4) the media for delivery of scholarship; and (5) the audiences of scholarship. This learning community was intended to provide a foundation on which scholars of all disciplines and professions could build a structure for identifying, recognizing, and rewarding specific types of scholarship in their fields and to create an equitable system for recognizing the full range of scholarship in the twenty-first century—thus engaging society in making life better.

The learning community at the Ohio State University focused on involving the university's grassroots constituents in its movement toward an engaged university. This effort included those who were

involved with or could be involved with outreach activities: community members, administrators, faculty, staff, and students. An extensive leadership structure, consisting of a series of learning communities, has been developed to lead Ohio State's engagement efforts. An OSU CARES grants program has been established to progressively develop stronger relationships between OSU extension and other units on campus.

Each institution has used learning communities within the institution to create cultural change. Each learning community has necessarily struggled with similar institutional issues (lack of a supportive outreach culture, lack of promotion and tenure policies that reward faculty for participation and other organizational issues). Although the learning communities have started at different places and chosen different paths, each will continue to learn from the others'collective intelligence to change the culture within their institutions.

## Theoretical Framework

The typical model for workplace learning assumes that acquiring knowledge involves loading the learner with information—often within the context of formal education such as a face-to-face classroom. Today's knowledged workers learn less often individually, and more often through relationships and networks of social interaction. This learning is reinforced by group memberships that affirm and guide what the participant knows. Engaged universities will need to become proficient in developing support systems for community-based learning that complement the more traditional approaches to knowledge transfer. The models for engaged universities and community partnerships require group problem solving, reflection-in-action *(Schön 1995)*, and flexible, supported learning environments.

Wenger and Snyder *(2000)* note that there are a number of drivers of community-based learning. The drivers include: (1) the need for people and teams to coordinate and correspond (this interaction depends critically on social relationships); (2) the exchange of tacit knowledge (tacit knowledge is the most valuable knowledge and is not easily codified in documents or explained in formal settings); and, (3) the need for collective intelligence (most issues and fields of expertise are too complex to master alone and require a collective intelligence for problem solving).

Wenger and Snyder *(2000)* have found that learning communities differ from traditional learning structures in several key aspects:

(1) these communities must be continuously fostered to be effective; (2) they are maximized by the personal energies and the relationships of the members; (3) success depends on the members' passion for the topic—passion drives people to share and advance their collective knowledge; and (4) institutions must leverage the strategic role of the communities; that is, they must develop and coordinate key competencies that focus formal structures on customers and internal processes that impact service delivery. These findings imply that for a learning community to be effective the institutions and members involved in the learning community must create a change in both the individual practice and the institution's level of engagement.

## Methodology

The first national conference, Best Practices in Outreach Scholarship and Public Service, was offered in October 1999 at the Pennsylvania State University, with 385 participants from forty-one states representing seventy-five universities. The evaluation team designed a four-level plan *(Kirkpatrick 1988)* that included a needs assessment, participant reaction evaluation, a self-report of learning outcomes, and a postconference learning application evaluation. A second national conference (Outreach Scholarship: 2001—Learning, Discovery and Engagement, October 2001 at the Pennsylvania State University) served 254 participants from twenty-eight states representing fifty-six universities and community organizations. The evaluation method for this conference included a participant reaction evaluation and a self-report of learning outcomes. Subsequent to the second conference, an online learning support system was designed. (Evaluation data are not yet available on the outcomes of the online learning community at the time of this publication.) For the purposes of this discussion, the authors will focus on the methodology and findings of the first conference—these data created the baseline for subsequent service delivery to this learning community.

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Prior to the first conference, the needs assessment was implemented using a Web-based survey followed by a telephone reminder. Participants of a previous conference on a similar topic were interviewed. The respondents were central administration personnel from a midwestern university. The sample size was 150 with a 33 percent response rate.

At the first conference, two on-site evaluations (participant reaction and self-report of learning) were conducted online daily as well as at the conclusion of the conference. The sample size for the participant reaction evaluation was 350 with a 35 percent response rate (implemented on the first day of the conference). The sample size for the self-report of learning outcomes was 350 and the response rate increased over the three-day conference (35, 35, and 58% respectively)—a separate evaluation was implemented each day. The learning application evaluation was conducted three months after the conference via a written survey. The sample size for this evaluation was twenty-one with a response rate of 22 percent (in order to ensure an unbiased sample participants from the host institution were not surveyed).

## Findings

The data from the needs assessment provided the conference design team with valuable information about the demand for further learning opportunities, the reasons for participation, and the appropriate content for future conferences. At the time, there was no national conference that targeted this particular learning community—leadership from continuing education, cooperative extension, distance education, central administration, technology transfer, and government affairs, as well as members of local university communities. Respondents indicated that the themes most important to them included faculty issues, outreach culture, funding sources, technology, and developing competencies or best practices in outreach and public service.

The participant reaction survey collected data on the learners' reaction to their learning environment: conference design, logistics, and conference facilities. The data allowed the conference team to make immediate changes in the conference design. For example, a Web site was developed the first day of the conference to disseminate learning resources offered by key speakers. The data from the survey indicated that the participants wanted more time for informal information sharing among colleagues. These data are consistent with data reported by other outreach professionals

*(Childers 1993)*. Professionals often rate learning from their peers as one of the top reasons for participation in continuing education activities. These data were used for planning the 2001 conference and the online support system.

The results of the self-report of learning outcomes included data related to (1) the reasons for participation, obtained with an instrument adapted from earlier work in this area *(Childers 1993)*; (2) factors supporting or preventing implementation of outreach programs at the respondent's institution; (3) the top issues affecting faculty participation in outreach activities; and (4) demographic data. The issues most important to the audience related to the need for (1) techniques for creating or changing outreach culture, (2) benchmarking information, (3) promoting closer collaborations within the institution and across institutional boundaries, and (4) a forum for participants to exchange knowledge, insights, and experience in outreach and engagement.

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The learning application evaluation collected data on the participant's success in implementing ideas and strategies provided at the conference. When asked about their ability to apply their ideas within their institutional context, 68 percent responded that they had implemented ideas or strategies, while 32 percent of the respondents indicated that they had not applied the knowledge gained at the conference. Forty-eight percent of those participants (n = 24) who implemented change strategies rated the success of their implementation. Four respondents rated their implementation as highly successful. Eight conference participants rated it successful, two rated it unsuccessful, and ten respondents were still in the process of implementation at the time of the survey. Two participants did not respond to the question.

When asked about the barriers to implementing change within their institutions, respondents indicated a number of factors. These factors included: (1) the lack of promotion and tenure policies that supported faculty participation, (2) the lack of an outreach culture

within the institution, (3) an absence of leadership for outreach and engagement at the highest levels within the institution, and (4) a lack of power and/or time to implement change within their institutions.

Respondents were also asked how their institution defined outreach. The diversity of answers clearly indicates that there is a continuum of definitions of outreach and engagement within institutions and across institutions. Many institutions had no shared definition of outreach and engagement.

Participants were asked if they were collecting or planning to collect outcome data related to their change strategies. Thirty-two percent of those surveyed indicated that they were or would be collecting data; 38 percent were considering collecting data, 26 percent did not intend to collect data on change efforts, and 4 percent were undecided.

## Discussion

Assessment and evaluation are key to developing a strategy for creating and fostering learning communities. In this example, needs assessment data (1) established the feasibility of forming a learning community, (2) assisted in developing a participant-centered design, and (3) identified key issues to be explored by the learning community. The use of a formative evaluation strategy (participant reaction evaluation) that consists of evaluating the participants' conference experiences daily and making incremental changes in the instructional design, combined with the use of an online delivery methodology, has proven successful in building communication between participants and extending the community learning process. The self-report of learning outcomes, a summative evaluation approach, allowed the planners to understand the learners' outcomes and the institutional context for their transfer of learning.

The organizational context is a key factor contributing to individual and organizational learning. The evaluation found that many of the participants encountered similar barriers to implementing change and that the culture in many institutions was not supportive of outreach and engagement. In addition to the many factors directly affecting implementation of outreach activities, the fact that many institutions have yet to define outreach or the dimensions of outreach scholarship within their institution is another indicator of the need for a continued dialogue within and between institutions.

Faculty involvement is at the core of outreach and engagement. These evaluation data indicate that faculty involvement and the barriers to faculty involvement in outreach activities are key

concerns of outreach leaders. What affects their involvement? How can we create a culture that supports their involvement? More research is needed to answer these questions and others in order to help institutions shape their approach to outreach and engagement.

The creation of the online learning community to continue the dialogue of engagement is a component of an integrated strategy for supporting this learning community. How can distance education techniques be employed to support online learning communities? More research is also needed in this area. Are the reasons for participation in online communities similar to or different from the reasons for participation in face-to-face learning activities? The partnership institutions will continue to assess and evaluate the online learning community.

## Conclusions

Knowing the reasons for participation or why leaders participate in learning communities will be important in designing, marketing, and delivering learning activities, as well as evaluating the outcomes of this learning community. We know that leaders want to learn from each other, problem solve together, and build models for the future in a collaborative learning environment. The issues facing institutional leaders are complex and require a collective intelligence or learning community for problem solving or collaborative group learning. Informal forums for the exchange of knowledge, insights, and experience are a preferred method of learning among professionals and a major reason for participating in a learning community. More research is needed to determine 1) how professionals learn in learning communities, 2) how institutions can support learning communities, and 3) how learning communities can be used to support the culture of outreach and engagement.

The *Outreach Scholarship 2002 Conference: Catalyst for Change* will be held October 6-8, 2002, at The Ohio State University, Worthington, Ohio. For more information, contact Dr. Karen Bruns at bruns.1@osu.edu, visit www.outreachscholarship.org, or see the conference announcement on the back inside cover of this issue.

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