

Town Gown planning

Situation:

One of the most overlooked opportunities in any city that is home to a college is the relationship that can be leveraged to benefit both. But, too often these opportunities are overshadowed by the inherent challenges that come with the territory.

Colleges are often exempt from injecting tax revenue into city coffers, while at the same time requiring crucial services such as fire, police, emergency, trash removal, etc. Students are transient residents, who can be problematic in terms of misconduct due to alcohol abuse, vandalism, political activism, a general lack of community stewardship, etc. Further, in many cities there is a great socio-economic divide between “privileged students” and “townies” from lower economic means. These, and other issues, if not addressed in a purposeful manner, can lead to a contentious perspective on the part of the community, and a well-earned jaded perception.

On the other hand, colleges bring vibrancy to a community through the intellectual and creative capital of a learning environment, researchers, professors and students. The creative energy of the student body can be harnessed and leveraged in ways that imbue an authentic community spirit. A college can anchor a community and provide greater quality of life through arts, entertainment and sporting events.

And, consider that a city becomes a “four-year home” for students. The attractiveness of the destination and the experience students have in their interaction with a community create a perception that will last lifetimes. It pays great dividends for there to be a strong symbiotic relationship between city and college. There can be great economic value in the retention of students. And programs such as co-ops, internships and community involvement all reap rewards on both sides of the fence.

Approach:

Any effort to strengthen a town/gown relationship must begin with the understanding of the dynamics of the current relationship. This includes understanding the historical relationship, the mutual political environment, former programs, etc. Is the glass half empty or half full? How close to an optimal relationship currently exists?

In Steve Gavazzi’s book, The Optimal Town Gown Marriage, he cites four different typologies:

- 1) Harmonious – a relationship defined as high-effort on both sides, and an equally high comfort level. Both sides are heavily invested and as a result are both reaping the rewards.
- 2) Traditional – a relationship defined as low-effort on both sides, and an equally high comfort level. Neither side is particularly invested, but there is little conflict or reason to change.
- 3) Conflicted – a relationship defined as high-effort on one or both sides, but for whatever reason, conflicts exist either through an imbalance of effort, or ineffective execution.
- 4) Devitalized – a relationship defined as low-effort on both sides, and an equally low comfort level. Conflicts in the relationship exist, but there is no effort being made to address them

The typology that currently exists defines what approach needs employed.

Basic blueprint

The basic blueprint for moving forward, regardless of typology, needs to include the following:

- 1) Build a collaborative leadership model including key representatives from college and city. Ideally, this should include the College President and/or Provost and the City Mayor and/or City Manager, as well as other leaders such as board members, corporate/civic leaders, etc. In other words, include decision makers who can get things done, or empower others to do so.
 - a. Identify an Advisory Council and mobilize them as appropriate throughout the process.
- 2) Collectively, identify which typology currently exists and an understanding of why.
- 3) Conduct a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) to define the current landscape.
- 4) Take inventory of mutual assets, that if leveraged effectively, could benefit all parties.
- 5) Build engagement throughout the college and community and a greater sense of shared ownership regarding the potential. Remember, people support what they help create. Let people know what's in it for them.
- 6) Collaboratively, develop a strategic platform including the following:
 - a. Vision
 - b. Mission
 - c. Identify partners, for example:
 - i. Student life
 - ii. Student recruitment
 - iii. Alumni relations
 - iv. Community volunteerism
 - v. Corporate engagement
 - vi. Civic engagement
 - d. For each partner develop the following:
 - i. Desired outcome
 - ii. Goals
 - iii. Strategies
 - iv. Tactics
 - v. Measurement
 - e. Develop a master timeline – be realistic
- 7) Mobilize the team(s) who will bring the plan to life

Considerations

Building effective town/gown relationships are not easy. They require collective effort, perseverance, time, energy and other resources. The benefits are often easily understood, but the work can be as easily given up on.

Before beginning, take inventory to make sure there is a common understanding of the following:

- 1) There is common understanding of the work involved
- 2) There is commitment to apply the appropriate resources to ensuring program success
- 3) Both city and college pledge to maintain mutual respect for each other's agendas and challenges
- 4) Both city and college agree to step outside of their respective jobs and assume a broader role to support collective success