

Champions

BY DAVID J. WEERTS

How trustees connect campus and community, boost institutional engagement, and serve the public good.

In today's uncertain political and financial landscape, colleges and universities are thinking more deeply about their relationships with their communities and the public. Rising costs of college and skepticism about higher education's broader contributions to society trigger questions about whether it's even worth the investment. Due to these and other forces, many institutions are taking active steps to become more responsive to the needs of their communities and stakeholders. Board members play an important role in helping their institutions think about their civic commitments, since many serve not just to support the institutions themselves, but also to promote the greater good. As influential community leaders and philanthropists, board members are ideally placed to support their campuses in identifying and leveraging opportunities to make lasting contributions to their regions, becoming more productively engaged in addressing societal challenges in ways that promote student success. This can better position their campuses for long-term financial health and to make a meaningful impact in the world.



TAKEAWAYS

- 1 As influential community leaders and philanthropists, board members are ideally placed to support their campuses in identifying and leveraging opportunities to make lasting contributions to their regions.
- 2 Board members and their presidents are wise to consider how engagement can be leveraged as a strategy to promote student success, improve scholarly impact, and broaden financial support.
- 3 Through community engagement, institutions can amplify their value to their region and broader public stakeholders while achieving important gains in student learning, research, and resource development.

Complex social, political, and economic challenges give urgency to colleges and universities being active partners in addressing society's most pressing problems. Board members across all sectors can draw on their own passions and civic commitments to help their institutions find their distinctive niche in serving broader societal purposes, going beyond traditional notions of service, and more deeply engaging in community.

Rethinking the Three-Legged Stool of Engagement

A common question posed by many higher education leaders, including board members, is whether engagement differs in any significant way from traditional service to community. Is engagement just an updated new term for service or outreach? The nuances lie in the directionality of the relationship (one-way versus two-way) and whether such relationships yield mutual benefits. For example, a biology faculty member who gives a talk at a nonprofit organization about improving water quality in the local river is conducting outreach or service. This activity is unidirectional and largely a benefit to the community,

not the professor. Alternatively, that same biology faculty member who aligns her teaching and research with the interests of community partners (for example, nonprofit leaders, neighborhood associations, the department of natural resources) may do so in a way that improves water quality in the river, enhances student learning, and advances her own research agenda. Practical examples include a service-learning course that joins biology students with a nonprofit organization to organize river clean-up efforts, or community-based scholarship that engages partners in posing research questions, interpreting data, and designing solutions to improve river quality. This integrated approach is an example of engagement since it involves a two-way relationship with community partners for mutual benefit.

Engagement upends the way board and faculty members and college leaders might think about the well-known three-legged stool metaphor used to describe higher education's tripartite mission of teaching, research, and service. In the first example, the faculty member is involved in an activity that is supported by the leg of service and separate from the legs of teaching and research. In the latter example, community needs become the platform that all three legs of the stool support: water quality in the river becomes the lens through which the faculty member develops her approach to teaching, research, and service.

Trustees play important roles in helping campus leadership develop strategies to bolster institutional performance related to student success, scholarly impact, and campus financial health. Community engagement helps institutions achieve these goals. For example, in the domain of teaching and learning, Professor George Kuh and his colleagues at Indiana University point to service-learning as a high-impact practice that stimulates student involvement in educationally purposeful activities. It is known to facilitate the integration of the student into the academic and social life of the campus, and thus promote student retention and persistence. In an era of performance funding and heightened accountability, engaged teaching practices

such as service-learning can help campuses bolster their performance on these metrics.

Engaged scholarship has widespread benefits to the institution, the individual scholar, and the broader community. When conducted in a rigorous way, community-engaged research results in high-quality scholarship that contributes to society and expands opportunities for funding. For example, the National Science Foundation requires grantees to demonstrate the "broader impacts" of their work. Scholars who conduct engaged research improve the likelihood that their research will leverage grant funding and be useful in practical ways.

Board members and their presidents are wise to consider how engagement can be leveraged as a strategy to promote student success, improve scholarly impact, broaden financial support, and make visible contributions to their regions. Trustees are ideally placed to help institutions identify engagement opportunities through which to accomplish retention, enrollment management, and fundraising goals. Campus leaders must work with board leadership to bring such discussions to the forefront. In developing this strategy, it is important to consider deep questions about institutional mission, culture, and campus identity. An underlying question guiding this work should be, "Who are we as an institution, and how should we carry out our civic mission?"

Engagement and Campus Civic Identity

Community engagement is most likely to garner internal and external support when it matches an institution's historic and contemporary view of itself and the way that partners view the campus. The late Burton Clark, a prominent sociologist in the 1970s, coined the term "organizational saga," which refers to how some institutions carry a deeply held identity, story, and ordering of values. One of the most prominent examples of saga in the context of community engagement is the Wisconsin Idea. This Progressive Era concept laid a foundation for how University of Wisconsin (UW) campuses would come to understand their relationship with the people

of Wisconsin. Guided by this moralistic vision that UW would contribute to building a good society, UW faculty worked closely with citizens and public leaders to develop social policy, create agricultural innovations (such as shifting from the declining wheat-growing industry to the burgeoning dairy industry), and facilitate democratic decision making. Over the past five years, political changes in Wisconsin have tested the fabric of the Wisconsin Idea. The key tenets remain vital, however, and give meaning to how UW institutions and their stakeholders make sense of their place in the state and the broader world. Today, the University of Wisconsin-Madison has expanded the localized notion of the Wisconsin Idea to one of global significance, for

instance in the formation of an academic partnership that benefits the Chinese and American dairy industries.

Recently, Indiana University, UCLA, and the University of Minnesota have adopted “Grand Challenges” initiatives that align teaching and scholarship to solve complex problems such as depression, food and water security, and climate change. These institutions are drawing on their research prowess to engage communities around the world in addressing long-standing social and economic problems.

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Institutions in other sectors have also found their unique niche in expressing their engagement agendas. Regional public institutions and private universities embedded in cities have been especially attuned to the unique role they play in serving their communities. After Hurricane Katrina, Tulane University overhauled its curriculum to focus on rebuilding

New Orleans and has since become one of the nation’s top community-engaged universities. Among its curricular innovations, Tulane prioritized civic learning and launched the Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching. In rebranding itself, Tulane’s website read, “Giving back to the

How Engagement Promotes Resource Development

In my research, I have learned that, under certain conditions, public university leaders successfully leverage engagement as a competitive strategy to bolster political and financial support for their institutions. Such leaders position their engagement agendas in ways that differentiate their institutions from others in their state or region. In doing so, they draw on their unique institutional strengths and regional assets to better establish themselves as a key regional or state resource.

Beyond garnering taxpayer funds, engagement provides a means to involve a new generation of alumni and donors who are focused on community revitalization and social change as the basis for their philanthropy. For example, Portland State University (PSU) used the tagline “Let Knowledge Serve the City” in a mid-2000s capital campaign, positioning itself as a community resource worthy of philanthropic support outside its alumni base. Of 27 donors who gave \$1 million or more, only four were PSU graduates; the rest were individuals from the community and local organizations. (PSU Research by M.N. Langseth and C.S. McVeety.)

community isn’t just a slogan at Tulane—it is part of our DNA.” The institution’s focus on community revitalization has resulted in a surge of applications from energetic students who want to play a role in rebuilding the city.

In sum, institutions must draw on their unique sagas, cultures, or places to determine how best to express their engagement agendas. For this work to be successful, it must meaningfully connect to how an institution sees itself and its societal commitments. Trustees can help campus leaders make sense of these roles as they relate to the expectations of internal and external stakeholders.



Augsburg College in Minneapolis (founded 150 years ago as Augsburg Seminary) is nationally acclaimed as a leading community-engaged institution, bolstered by its theological heritage, immigrant sensibility, moral commitment to accessible education, and its “saga as an urban settlement,” according to President Paul Pribbenow.

Board members have embraced the strategic value of Augsburg’s commitment to engagement. For instance, programs such as Public Achievement—an internationally acclaimed youth civic organizing model—make it a natural place to recruit diverse students from underrepresented backgrounds. Board members have also given to the institution at historical levels, part of their deep commitment to Augsburg’s focus on civic purposes.

“It is about intentionality and integration,” said Pribbenow. “We are going to be clear, we are going to name this as a board, and then we are going to make sure it gets integrated in everything we do. If this work is just nice to do and not essential, it is never going to have the kind of impact that we’ve seen here.”

Strategic Discussions about Community Engagement

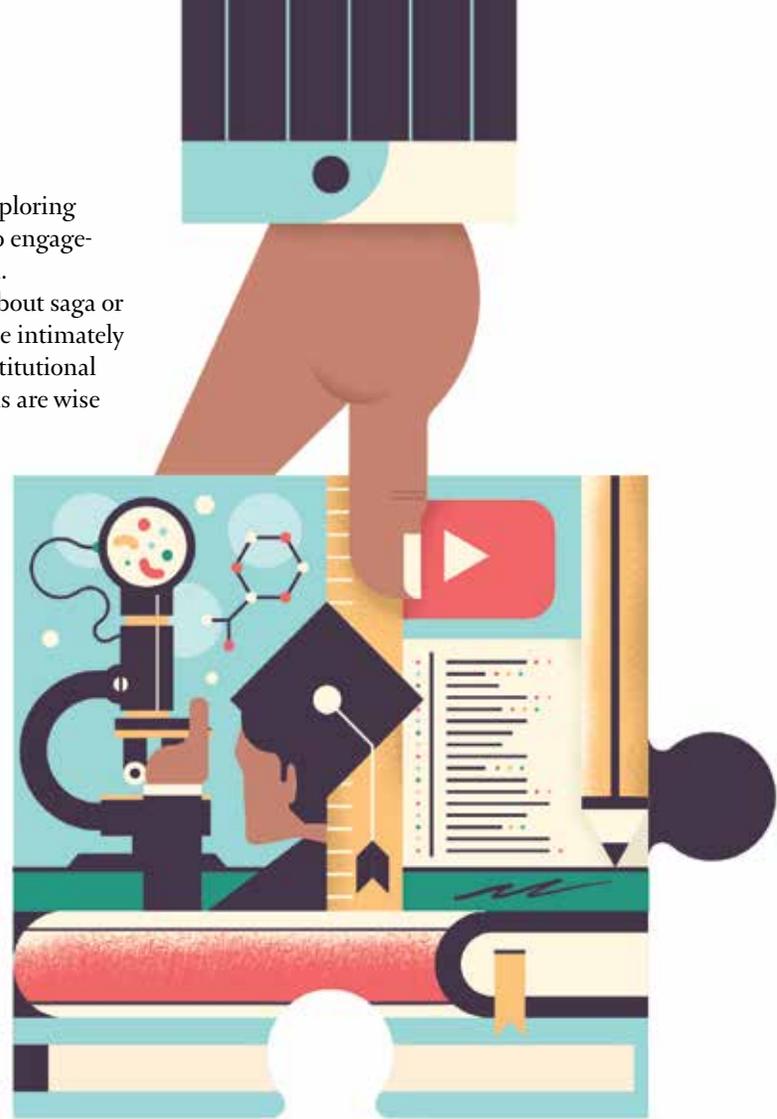
Introducing questions about civic purpose provides a means to engage the board in intentional reflection about an institution’s deepest aspirations. Five key themes may guide these discussions. They are institutional identity/saga, place, performance, resources, and image and value proposition.

Institutional Identity. While not all institutions have a robust saga to drive their engagement agendas, every institution has a unique organizational identity from which to start a conversation. Underlying questions such as, “Who are we as an institution, and how should we act?” promote deep reflection about mission, the enduring legacies of founders, campus culture, and institutional strengths. Prompting questions about campus identity and saga is an important place

for boards to start in exploring opportunities related to engagement and civic mission.

Place. Questions about saga or institutional identity are intimately connected to place. Institutional leaders and their boards are wise to consider how their communities shape the way they understand themselves and their role in the region. Board members and campus leaders must be especially attuned to demographic changes in dynamic communities and how these changes shape institutional purposes. In this light, an institutional leader must consider how his or her campus might be a community resource to navigate these changes. As bridge builders outside the academy, board members are uniquely equipped to help campus leaders explore local assets from which to build an engagement agenda. Economic, social, and cultural assets must be considered in positioning the institution in distinctive ways. Put simply, invoking key questions about “place” is critical to promoting generative and strategic thinking about an institution’s future.

Performance.



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Boards have fiduciary responsibilities and are called to provide strategic guidance about how institutions remain healthy and vibrant in the future. Engaged teaching, research, and creative work enhance an institution’s ability to improve on important metrics related to student success (retention, graduation rates) and scholarship (productivity, impact). Questions such as, “How can engaged teaching help our campus improve graduation rates?” or, “How might engaged scholarship leverage the resources of college and community partners to improve the impact of our research?” are important ones to consider.

Resources. As business leaders, active community members, and philanthropists, trustees are especially poised to help their

campuses think about how engagement could be positioned to promote resource development. Questions such as, “How might engagement be linked to our upcoming capital campaign?” or, “How might we align our assets with others in the region for mutual benefit?” could guide these discussions. Centering resource development on public priorities (for example, Grand Challenges) is one way to broaden the appeal of the institution’s work to multiple stakeholders. Considering resource development strategies through this broader lens disrupts traditional views about institutional advancement that are often campus-centric (focused on supporting campus priorities). Engaged institutions open new doors for prospect development as they become publicly centered (focused on supporting public/community priorities through teaching, research, service).

Image and Value Proposition.

Board members and campus leaders must consider strategic questions about how engagement might enhance their brand position and niche in the higher education marketplace. Organizational identity is not confined to understanding how internal stakeholders such as faculty, students, and board members understand an institution’s enduring features, but rather how external stakeholders such as prospective students, resource providers, and the general public make sense of what the institution values. Crafting a meaningful image related to an institution’s unique civic commitments can help distinguish a campus from others in the region or broader sector. Developing this impression or story has important implications for enrollment management, advancement, and the broader formation of public perception. In posing questions about engagement and strategic communications, boards can play an important role in helping campus leaders consider how civic identity contributes to image formation.

Moving Forward: Engagement as a Campus Conversation

Board members play a vital role in helping campus leaders position their

Questions for Boards

1 INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY

Who are we as an institution? Do we have an institutional narrative from which we derive meaning in relation to our community? What kind of civic identity should be nurtured given our distinctive mission, history, and culture? What unique assets or strengths does our campus possess to anchor an engagement agenda within this broader identity?

2 PLACE

How does our unique location influence the way we view ourselves and stakeholder expectations of us as an engaged campus? How do we best leverage our location to provide mutual benefit to our campus and the various communities we serve? What unique community assets are available to advance our engagement agenda?

3 PERFORMANCE

How does engagement help our campus achieve key outcomes related to student success (for example, retention and completion), scholarship (for example, quality and productivity), and overall community impact? How can engagement be positioned to ignite the passions of our faculty and students?

4 RESOURCES

In what ways might engagement be employed as a strategy to attract and sustain support (for example, grants, contracts, awards, donors, foundations, industry/political leaders)? What role could engagement play in a capital campaign?

5 IMAGE AND VALUE PROPOSITION

What is our institution’s “public good” value proposition and how do we leverage it for strategic benefit? Specifically, how does our engagement agenda differentiate us from other institutions and strengthen our market position? How is it part of our institutional saga or brand position? How do we tell the story to prospective students, alumni, and other key stakeholders?

institutions for future success. Through community engagement, institutions can amplify their value to their region and broader public stakeholders while achieving important gains in student learning, research, and resource development. As with any discussion about institutional values and curricular innovations, dialogues about community engagement must be conducted in collaboration with key members of the campus community, including faculty, staff, and student leaders. Doing so elevates the possibility of engagement becoming embedded into the campus culture. Board members who work closely with their campus and community partners to advance engagement are poised to cre-

ate vibrant campuses that achieve their greatest aspirations and have a significant impact in their communities and the broader society. ■

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T'SHIP LINKS: Julie Bourbon, “Partners in Progress: College, Community, and the Board’s Contribution,” January/February 2015. Sylvia Lovely, “How Boards Can Connect to Community,” November/December 2011.

OTHER RESOURCE: Carnegie Foundation Community Engagement Classification, www.nerche.org.