In the midst of the cataclysmic change affecting all of higher education, one factor remains constant, especially for a college located in a rural environment: the importance of positive community relations.

Still, the imperatives of positive community engagement can be overlooked when a president is confronting challenges as varied as academic relevancy, external mandates, shrinking budgets, and intense competition for a dwindling number of students. In the case of a rural institution (loosely defined here as institutions located in a community with a population of 9,000 or less and that is at least two hours from any major metropolitan area), these challenges face not only the college, but the community as well. It is vital to understand that the lives and fortunes of a rural community are undeniably entwined with the college itself; if the college is not achieving its goals, then the region suffers by extension. Therefore, establishing and sustaining positive community relations must be institutional and presidential priorities at rural institutions.

The first and most important component of community outreach is that the incoming president understands that he/she represents to both the campus and community the potential for change. Depending on the campus environment and the attitudes of the community, that change can be a point of dread (“Will I lose my job?” or “Will this new president fit into our community?”) or anticipation (“We’re looking forward to a new and exciting future” or “The community will benefit from his/her background and experiences”). As a result, the campus and community will already have developed certain perceptions of how the new president will conduct him/herself, based on rumor or the ubiquitous Internet search.

Certain realities also confront higher education in a rural community. For example, the connections between the community and the campus are entwined with the rhythms and history of the region, because often a rural institution owes its existence to a group of community leaders who actively petitioned state legislatures to establish a college in their community. As a result, families’ lives are interwoven with the college in multiple ways—
through working on campus or attending classes—and often cross multiple generations. Almost universally, rural colleges are considered a part of—and are often expected to aggressively commit to—ongoing economic development initiatives in order to improve the economic and cultural lives of the region’s residents and, by extension, to create an environment as supportive for students as possible. As a result, everyone in the community usually has a definite opinion about the college and its place in the region.

However, it is vitally important to remember that every community has its challenges, and these challenges will filter into the life of the local college. Issues facing rural communities run the gamut from drugs and crime to anemic economies, dwindling resources, and decreasing population. It is important for any new president to be aware that every community has its leaders and its private citizens committed to preserving and improving their community. As a result, these community leaders will have strong feelings about the role of the college in addressing their challenges.

Effectiveness as a new president of a rural institution must be preceded first by learning as much as possible not only about institutional climate, but also about the community and region. This can be accomplished through a variety of methods, including:

- Studying the history of the community;
- Developing a working knowledge of the region’s economic base and the college’s contribution to local economic development initiatives;
- Becoming acquainted with the local, state and national leaders who represent the region;
- Making contact with the alumni association to learn more about influential alumni in the region;
- Perusing the local newspaper for indicators of how the community views the college;
- Identifying the extent of community outreach done by the outgoing president; and
- Visiting the community in advance of officially taking the reins of the presidency.

To develop positive community relations, the president should immediately engage with his/her executive team and campus leaders (both formal and those considered to be “thought leaders”) to solicit their opinions. How do they perceive community outreach? How has the college contributed to economic development? What are students’ opinions about the community? What academic programs are currently engaged with community partnerships?

The importance of immediate presidential visibility in the community cannot be overstated, be it frequenting local establishments, eating at local restaurants, or celebrating the community and its attributes. Wear institutionally-branded clothing often and proudly. Reach out to local legislators, search out and connect with local alumni and leading citizens, make linkages with other local and regional post-secondary institutions, and engage with as many community organizations as possible—governmental, civic, special-interest.

Ultimately, solid community relations are built on trust. The president must show a genuine interest in and willingness to participate in local traditions; otherwise, the community will realize very quickly that efforts at engagement are without substance or veracity.

In tandem with the importance of engaging on a personal level with the community is the implementation of community-friendly communications venues. Transparency is the single most important attribute a new president can bring to a campus, especially if there is the unsettledness—both good and bad—that comes with change. For example, a new president can immediately implement a technology-based venue (e.g., Twitter, blogging, Instagram) or write a regular article for the local media—to begin connecting with the broader community—with a focus on celebrating the achievements of faculty, staff and students. Key partners in this regard will be local and regional media outlets. Make immediate connections with their representatives to discuss issues of mutual concern.

However, no community outreach initiative will be fully successful if it disregards or diminishes the true reason for the college’s existence—to provide students the best possible education. Ultimately, outreach efforts that are based on the centrality of the student will develop a symbiotic relationship: how the resources of the college can be brought to bear to assist the community, and how the community can create a welcoming environment that will support the efforts of the college to provide students the type of education they need to be successful.

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