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Empowering communities: The unseen benefits of higher education engagement

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Abstract

Community Engagement is a strategic process carried over an identified group sharing common interest, or affiliated together by geographical area, or similar ideology. It is a collaboration of such a group, in general termed as community, to identify and solve the issues and challenges disturbing the peaceful living and environment. The association of the term 'community' with 'engagement' implies the extension of horizons to serve, changing the focus from person-centred concept to a group oriented service. It includes in itself the alliances for incorporating inclusiveness and ensures engagement practices addresses the diversity that exists in the frame of any community. Higher educational institutions serve as centres for knowledge sharing and skill development. They accommodate a good number of subject experts serving various disciplines and a massive group of learners who aim to explore the world by working to achieve expertise in streams of their interest and growth. Community engagement in higher educational institutions is often considered as an additional task to enforce social service. This misconception needs to be waved off. This paper is an attempt to understand community engagement and the benefits of community engagement for its various stakeholders.

Keywords: Community, community engagement, higher educational institutions

Introductions

“Coming together is the beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”

– Henry Ford

Community Engagement in Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) is conceptualized as a process of working together with people connected to the institution either by geographical location, common interest, or similar conditions to cater to the needs for the well-being of the people closely related. HEIs can ensure their contribution to the community through professional guidance in areas of community concerns. It can help by providing essential resources and facilities for communities with active collaboration to attain mutually beneficial outcomes.

In order to understand the concept of engagement, it remains fundamental to understand how community has been defined. This will pave the way to determine various modes of engagement which can be used to bring about the progress. Scholars claim to have hundred or more definitions of 'community'.

What is a Community?

Etienne Wenger opines that “community is about working together as a practice”. The concept of community has been defined as, “a place, as in a territory or place-based community where people have something in common or there is a shared geography” (p.84; Bray, 2020) ^[4]. Another way to understand community is gaining insights about the community of interest, it is about people sharing similar characteristics other than locality. People are connected through common characteristics like religious beliefs, occupation, and origin of ethnicity. Tonie related the concept of community with that of a group which share common bonds around customs, beliefs or goals. Bartle encompassed community as “essentially a collection of human individuals organised as a socio-cultural system within six dimensions relevant to community and culture. These dimensions include: (i) technological, (ii) economic, (iii) political, (iv) institutional (social), (v) aesthetic-value and (vi) belief-

conceptual” (p.85, Bray, 2020) [4]

The definition of community is made based on its construct. To define community one needs to not only look into its historical perspective but also consider the geographical and ideological background from which it emerged.

Maciver and Page (1959) [13] opine that “a community is wherever the members of any group, small or large, live together in such a way that they share, not this or that particular interest, but the basic condition of common life, we call such a group a community”.

Robert Bellah (1986) [2] mentions community as “a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it.”

Foundation for Community Encouragement defines community as “a group of two or more people who have been able to accept and transcend their differences regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds (social, spiritual, educational, ethnic, economic, political, etc.). This enables them to communicate effectively and openly and to work together toward goals identified as being for their common good.”

Bryon Munon (1968) [10] put forth his definition as “A community is a relatively self-sufficient population, residing in a limited geographic area, bound together by feelings of unity and interdependency.”

Farrington and Pine (1997) [6] define a community as a “group of people lined by a communications structure supporting discussion and collective action.” (Malathi, 2010) [9]

To comprehend community engagement with clarity, it remains essential to understand how one defines the term community. The participants of community engagement needs to know how individuals perceive their identity and associations, build relationships, and create communities.

What is Community Engagement?

Engagement of the community not only remains difficult to define but also difficult to implement and measure. For it involves, individual comprehending the objective of the initiative, owns a sense of responsibility, remains committed to the process and the results and continuously works towards achieving the goals. The goals of community engagement are “to build trust, enlist new resources and allies, create better communication, and improve overall health outcomes as successful projects evolve into lasting collaborations” (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Community Engagement is essentially based on the principles of the community organization. The highly determined, just, unbiased organization looking forward towards collaboration and empowerment can execute true results of community engagement.

Widely accepted definition of community engagement that includes in itself most of its fundamental essence states that: “the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for

changing policies, programs, and practices” (CDC, 1997, p 9 – published in CDC, Principles of Community Engagement Second Edition, 2011, p. 3). Community engagement can vary as per the need and the focus group, and associates in this process can include government and non- government organizations, institutions, or people interested. Partners in community engagement may work towards health improvement, research, social issues or policy making (Principles of Community Engagement, 2011).

The process of community engagement demands a clear understanding of the community under study and their common recurring issues. It also seeks an approachable body and constant communication. It provides regular opportunities to gather people’s views with continuous dialogue and work in uninterrupted partnership to arrive at local solutions (Walker, 2020) [12].

Why is Community Engagement needed?

Community engagement in the form of discussion before getting into implementation enhances awareness of all the participants, it provides them the opportunity to share their views and also provides a platform to collect advice and guidance of the experts from the community, and get benefitted of their experiences. Community engagement opens up many provisions on the project under implementation as it can help in knowing the unidentified areas of information essential for the work, generate new sources of revenue and financial supporters. The stakeholders circle expands with inclusion of individuals from diverse groups (Walker, 2020) [12]. Walker also mentions that when communities come together and involve themselves in the project from initiation to the overall process, the partners are expected to be more focussed towards the outcomes of this partnership, remain attentive towards bringing the desired change and also work towards maintaining the partnership for a longer period of time.

In order to ensure successful community engagement, all stakeholders must make every effort to understand the mindset of the target group, the community for whom the team is coming together on a single platform. It is aptly emphasized in the document, Principles of Community Engagement (2011), “Meaningful community participation extends beyond physical involvement to include generation of ideas, contributions to decision making, and sharing of responsibility” (p.13)

Role of Community Engagement in Higher Educational Institutions

Community engagement in higher educational institutions remains an essential feature for the students progress and community growth (Bhatnagar, 2020) [3]. Community engagement is presently being brought to practice in various institutions with an aim to foster service learning, gain practical knowledge. Institutional libraries can contribute to community engagement by being acknowledged and promoting knowledge sharing with all as a two-way process (Gruber, 2017) [7]. Jadhav (2016) [8] also asserts that community engagement in higher educational institutions as a reciprocity process that strengthens its participants. It emphasizes the need to gain benefits of this collaboration through the alignment of research with the needs of the society. Ogunsanya & Govender (2020) [11] made a crucial point with a special focus on institutionalizing community

engagement. Creating strong relationships with the community and sustaining it as an integral aspect of community- higher educational institutions is a tough job but it shall help to ensure the goals of community engagement.

Community engagement in higher educational institutions strengthens all its stakeholders in different ways (Bandy, 2011) ^[1]. A variety of benefits gained by the students, faculty members and the institution itself as well as those by the community are listed and discussed below.

Benefits of Community Engagement for Students

Community engagement and its various practices proves to be beneficial for the students with respect to a variety of dimensions. Few of the benefits are as discussed ahead.

Academic Benefits:

- Community engagement has a positive impact on academic learning. In many areas, theoretical knowledge can be well connected with practical applicability, thereby enhancing students' comprehension of certain complex topics with ease.
- It improves the capability of the student to correlate the knowledge gained to the 'real world'. Their capacities to learn, experience and make use of their learning, nourishes.
- The positive results of community engagement can be seen in various forms as unleashing complexity of comprehension, appropriate application of analysis and synthesis as required, profound ways of solving problems, and notable cognitive development.
- It helps students to find ways out of complex issues by clearing ambiguity of the situations.

Personal Benefits:

- Community engagement brings among students a greater sense of efficiency towards a task. It helps them enrich their personality, identity and boost in them the sense of moral responsibility. It also works towards spiritual development of the students.
- Community engagement also creates better interpersonal skills. It teaches collaboration, improves adaptability to surroundings, nurtures leadership quality, and also enhances communication skills contributing towards their personality development.

Social Benefits:

- It connects the students, the responsible citizens of tomorrow in a profound manner. It helps in breaking the myths and stereotype notions that certain two different groups hold for each other. It fosters cultural understanding breaking the barriers created over the ages by unsocial elements of the society.
- It undoubtedly enhances a sense of social responsibility. It promotes national integrity and citizenship.
- The relation of the students with the community established through community engagement is likely to continue beyond time. The results of such practices are likely to sustain better community-citizen relationships.

Career Benefits:

- The connections established with the experts and professionals of the community during the course shall prove fruitful. It shall provide a platform for marking

and making visionary career selections. It broadens the learning canvas and scope of career opportunities.

- Improved academic learning through community connections and experiences makes students those involved par with others, hence more will be the chances of selection in careers of their choice. Communication skills and leadership skills curated in the process of community engagement is likely to make these students a preferable choice.
- Personal efficiency and sense of responsibility shall act as a source for career advancement.

Institution Relationship Benefits:

- It creates strong bonding between the student, faculty and the institutions. It improves the overall learning experience and leaves everlasting impressions on the students. It promotes endorsement of institutions by the students and helps students through endorsements from the institution.
- The student inculcates confidence and satisfaction with the institution's efforts for making efforts to provide real world learning experiences and making community engagement an integral part of the educational journey.
- This shall not only bring academic excellence but also increase the rate of graduation.

Benefits of Community Engagement for Faculty Members

- Faculty members who work towards implementing community engagement as a core element of the higher education system foremost benefit with a sense of satisfaction. Satisfaction gained by giving students an opportunity to excel and enrich their theoretical knowledge with practical exposure.
- It opens up new scopes of research, provides a way to reach the unreached and then help them overcome hindrances in pursuing higher education. A platform for research on current issues and challenges, offering intellectuals, policy makers an opportunity to explore the problems and work towards finding optimal solutions.
- It shall promote collaborations between faculties of different disciplines and also of various institutions. It will help to integrate and motivate multidisciplinary research ideas by establishing good relationships within departments, institutions and communities.
- It will encourage commitment among them not only to serve their students and institution but also work effectively for community development.
- Recognition and acknowledgement of the genuine efforts of faculty towards community engagement will yield better outcomes. Moreover, the faculty shall continue to serve with the best of their capacities, bringing laurels to self, institution and the society.

Benefits of Community Engagement for Higher Educational Institutions

- Higher educational institutions can prove to be the centers' of community engagement. As discussed earlier while discussing community engagement, it is a two way process. The more you contribute towards the community the more likely it becomes you gain out of

it. The better the relationship, the better are the outcomes and the benefits.

- The expansion of learning platforms with community partnership, by connecting with the experts and professionals improves academic growth. This increases the commitment of the educational institution towards curriculum.
- The connection established and learning opportunities captured through community engagement, grasps students attention and efficacy towards academic excellence. It proves helpful in maintaining quality of education, students and retaining students with the education process.

Benefits of Community Engagement for Community

- Community gets a provision to contribute and stay connected with the higher educational system. It opens avenues to serve their own younger lots who are the future of tomorrow. The experts and professionals connect and share their experiences informally to help the younger ones excel and prosper, benefitting them with contentment and solace of serving the budding talents.
- Community gains valuable human resources who have come together with a vision to identify the issues and challenges, analyse its various aspects and arrive at solutions.
- The young resources collaborating to learn, unlearn & explore various areas are filled with energy, passion and vision to help communities with their best capacities to draw a better tomorrow.
- The relationship between higher educational institutions and the community becomes stronger, deeper and better over time. This sustained relation can bring development for the involved parties, nation and the environment.

Conclusion

Community engagement is a very important area of national development. Many nations have developed largely by adopting and practicing community engagement in various educational organizations levels. Community engagement is not merely about serving the community; it carries along innumerable perks to all its stakeholders. The contribution of higher educational institutions can be of great assistance as the student group is the budding talent with novel ideas and creative approach. The faculty members are a hub of knowledge sharing who can hold the hand and guide their students to work diligently on novel ideas. Benefits of community engagement are expected to be more sumptuous than its drawbacks. Community engagement if practiced with efficiency and strategic planning can do wonders towards growth and development of its stakeholders and nation at large.

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