

Capitalizing on Community: Turning Community Relations into the Biggest Asset of a New Campus

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Abstract

Paying strategic attention to community relations creates political capital and philanthropic appeal, helping the urban university meet its objectives. The University of Washington, Tacoma, a ten-year-old campus, has turned community relations into its biggest asset and a key part of its academic success. Connecting the campus CEO to the community is vital, though community relations is the responsibility of the entire campus. In this essay, the authors describe community relations strategies for fundraising, facility development, and legislative advocacy.

Strong community relations between a campus and the community it serves can play a significant role in the success of that campus. Paying strategic attention to community relationships that create political capital and philanthropic appeal will build and support an important foundation for the university's long-term ability to meet its objectives. The University of Washington, Tacoma (UWT), by strategically committing itself to serving its community while fulfilling its academic mission, has turned community relations into its biggest political and philanthropic asset and a key component of its academic success. Other campuses should be able to adopt many of UWT's successful community-relations strategies for use in their own settings, and will find that these strategies are consistent with the integrated marketing model many campuses have already adopted with substantial success.

Campus History and a Snapshot of Successes Fostered by Community Relations

In 1990 the state of Washington established five new upper-division/graduate campuses, the University of Washington, Tacoma among them, to improve access to baccalaureate and master's degrees. Despite a high rate of high-school graduation among its residents, a strong community college system, and the presence of six public universities in the state, Washington still ranked very low on measures of access to upper-division (junior and senior year) and master's programs. To address this problem, which had enormous implications for economic and cultural development, the state legislature funded upper-division campuses in population centers across the state and mandated that the new campuses meet the particular needs in their individual service regions for accessible higher education. These campuses were designed to serve older, non-traditional, place- and time-bound, working adult students.

One of two new University of Washington campuses launched in the fall of 1990, UWT opened with a single academic program (liberal studies), 176 students, and a founding faculty of 13. Since then, UWT has added four other baccalaureate programs, five master's programs, a teacher certification program, and a curriculum in nonprofit management. A permanent campus opened in 1997. UWT now enrolls about 1,700 students. After ten years, the question of UWT's long-term future is open to debate. That is, how will UWT look in ten or 20 or 50 years? As the state's demands for higher education change, especially in relation to technology, the scope of UWT's mission may expand, but its mandate to serve regional needs will remain.

As an institution created to be responsive to community needs, a significant key to UWT's success in meeting its mission is community relations. Without a day-to-day working relationship between campus staff and city planning officials, construction and renovation of buildings could not have proceeded so smoothly. Without community advocacy for siting and funding the campus, and maintaining its development over multiple legislative sessions, political support could have gone elsewhere after the first phase was funded. Without active involvement in the campus by community "patrons," endowment support would not have passed the \$2.5 million milestone, and resources for student scholarships would be meager. Without involvement by faculty and students in local projects of every kind (including commercial and environmental, as well as social and civic), the campus would not have achieved such a solid impact on regional quality of life, and those engaged in academic pursuits would not be receiving such warm attention in the local press.

Without the public funding, political support, construction success, and private philanthropy made possible by strong community relations, no amount of national recruiting could attract the caliber of faculty to Tacoma that the UW tradition of excellence demands. Community relations are absolutely key, and after ten years of nurturing community relations in every arena, the symbiotic relationship between the UWT campus and its community has become arguably the most essential ingredient of the campus' identity.

It is no surprise, then, that UWT's service area, which includes the state's second-largest city, regards the campus as having been one of the major catalysts for revitalizing the downtown area and fueling a local economic boom. One can hardly attend a major event of the Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Board, Rotary, or other community groups in Tacoma without someone citing UWT as a major player in what is becoming a nationally significant economic development story. "UWT is the best thing that's happened to Tacoma in years," says community leader after community leader.

Campus-community relationships obviously exist in various forms and involve connections among many people. While numerous campuses have separate community relations offices focused on specific tasks, UWT's philosophy is that community relations is the responsibility of the entire campus. The campus CEO pays attention to the community relations element in many functions across the campus, with a special focus on the following three vital areas:

- Fundraising
- Development of capital facilities
- Legislative advocacy

As UWT reflects on its first ten years and the role the community has played in the development of the campus, lessons have been learned about establishing and maintaining effective partnerships that support both the campus and the community.

Strategically, this means that the CEO should work to promote a campus climate and structure that fosters effective community-campus interaction. There are many ways a CEO can create structures to foster community relations. At UWT, the most formal community relations structure is a campus-community advisory committee. Quarterly meetings of this group, whose membership and focus has changed with campus needs over the years, always include activities to educate key community members about fundraising, capital facilities, and legislative issues, in addition to academic concerns. In setting the agenda for the group, the CEO invites discussion on vital issues as they arise, not after the fact. Campus directors present their own reports, rather than having the CEO do so on their behalf, thus building familiarity with the advisory committee. The group is not a policy-making committee, but the campus leadership listens and consults the community-based members often, involving them in the analysis of community needs, appealing to them for advocacy (and investment), and letting them know how valuable they are to advancing the mission of the campus.

Fundraising: Look to the Community for Your Donor Pool

Community relationships are dramatically more important to the success of new and small campus fundraising than to the development function of a long-established, traditional campus. To a great extent, the most important donor community for a new campus is the regional community, not the alumni community, as is often the case for more mature campuses. Moreover, though the functional elements of fundraising are no different for a growing, new campus than for any other institution, the strategies for securing support are distinctive.

Consider the profile of new campus alumni: UWT is typical of many new campuses in that it has a small pool of alumni, many of whom are just starting out in their careers. Given the youth of the campus and the demographic profile of the students enrolled, alumni are not (yet) a likely source from whom to expect major gifts. So, though alumni are encouraged to give to an annual fund and to be involved in alumni affairs, UWT's strongest donor-cultivation energies have been focused toward more mature donors with other reasons for caring about the campus and its success. To identify a donor pool, one must consider the mission of the campus and the added value that its existence brings to the community.

While there are unique aspects of UWT, it shares many of the traits common to newer metropolitan campuses nationwide. Like many cities that are home to new campuses, Tacoma is of medium size and has an economy slowly evolving from its manufacturing past to one that is knowledge-based and globally-oriented. Although two fine private colleges have deep roots in the area, the lack of proximate, affordable, public four-year education has contributed to a per capita rate of the population with bachelor's degrees that is less than half that found in Seattle, just 35 miles north. Finally, the developing campus is reviving a neglected section of downtown.

By communicating the public value of educating non-traditional students who will likely remain in Tacoma to potential donors concerned with the community's need for economic development and civic advancement, UWT has been able to attract support from civic leaders and community advocates, regardless of any loyalty they may feel to their own alma mater. Community donors give to UWT, and are likely to give to any new campus, because they can be convinced that the campus is not only transforming the lives of individuals, but also directly addressing important community needs. By articulating the connection between the mission of the campus and the needs of the community, the likelihood of success in major-gift fundraising is increased. (The size of UWT's endowment, more than \$2.5 million in early 2001, is astonishing for a small, new, public campus.)

Once a viable population of prospective donors is identified, the challenge becomes one of cultivation. The cultivation cycle is based on the classic development approach in higher education—a cycle that focuses on gathering background information about donor interests, involving them in action, and leading them to an investment in the campus.

In the new campus setting, gathering pertinent information about donors is especially critical. For example, a fundraising visit to the owner of a business can result in discovering information about its needs for employee placement, continuing education, curriculum competencies, and a myriad of other details that can link the institution and the business sector in shared action.

While a main campus must often invest in self-generated publicity to develop donor interest, new campuses can be effective in getting information to donors through inexpensive community visibility, publicity, and free media. Many potential donors are members of Rotary and other civic organizations. These are valuable venues for sharing updates on campus developments, new curricula, or building expansion. They also provide splendid opportunities for identifying and meeting new donors.

Feature articles in the daily paper can play a key role in providing information to the community-based donor. For a more selective target group, a quarterly compilation and public circulation of those stories is an effective cultivation device. In general, integrating the development message into broad publicity, student recruitment, legislative communications, and other publications is critical for the new campus.

Involving donors who did not attend UWT requires special efforts to engender a strong sense of connection, belonging, and ownership. Creative approaches for involvement may lead donors to serve on advisory committees, guest lecture in business classes, serve on a committee for legislative advocacy, and help organize special events. Once donors are involved in the life of the campus and develop relationships with students and professors, they are but an “ask” away from significant investment.

Development of Capital Facilities

A developing campus community must stay connected to local government. A state-funded construction project as large as a university campus cannot go forward without opportunities for public comment. To reap the full financial, political, and even archi-

tectural potential of committed community support, however, it is best to involve community advocates throughout the process, from the original site selection decision to long-term master planning.

Involving the city in site selection for a new university campus increases the likelihood that the local government will be able to provide timely support for the construction process, as well as the long-term political support necessary for initial construction and ongoing development. The siting of a campus in an urban neighborhood can be a great boon to that neighborhood's economic and cultural development. As a result, city government can be very motivated to streamline the processes for siting, even to the point of waiving certain local code requirements. As a result of good relationships with city officials, campus representatives can make suggestions about the physical surroundings of the campus and know that these ideas will receive serious consideration by city leaders.

The UWT campus is a prime example of a cooperative venture between City of Tacoma officials (both elected and administrative) and officials of the University of Washington. Tacoma officials have lobbied aggressively with the state for ongoing physical development of the campus. Local economic development entities within the city, as well as the Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Merchants Association, and various development groups are well-represented in efforts to generate support for UWT at the state level. From the beginning, both the university and the city worked together to identify a campus location within Tacoma's boundaries that would meet the academic needs of the campus and provide an economic engine for the city to further its economic development.

Cities with older, established campuses sometimes forget the economic advantages of having a major university within their boundaries or close by. A newly-established campus brings vitality to the area, expands employment, and supports physical development, all of which provide amenities to the city and its surrounding area. While older campuses may face community pressure to limit university sprawl, newer campuses with a well-developed master planning process generate excitement and advocacy for community, campus, and economic development plans.

Connections between the campus and the city should not just be between the campus CEO and the city's mayor and city manager. Campus planning, facilities, and security managers should have working relationships with city planning, utility, and law enforcement staff. For example, UWT architects engaged in long-term master planning have maintained open relationships and regular communication with local planning staff.

The value to the university of such strong relationships extends far beyond the practical matters related to construction. For example, the campus will best be able to exert an influence on off-campus parking and transit policy if the campus has a continuous presence on local planning boards and committees. Students and student organizations should also be encouraged to participate on citizens committees involved with municipal transit and parking policy. In addition, a campus voice in a city's technology decisions can be important, both because the campus may rely on the infrastructure for distance learning, and also because available or planned infrastructure can be a key to developing technology curricula.

To promote economic development and enhance campus life, UWT made a commitment to developing retail spaces on campus, especially at the periphery of the campus where a transition occurs from academic use to the uses that characterize the surrounding urban neighborhoods. Developing leased retail space on campus is a good way to integrate the community into the campus and the campus into the community. Encouraging positive news and feature coverage of these retail businesses in the student newspaper, in campus publications, and in press releases to local media help keep the economic-development benefits of the campus visible, and demonstrate the partnership between the campus and the retail community in a tangible way.

Security must be a partnership between campus and community law enforcement if it is to be effective. Cities and campuses share an interest in creating a safe environment on and around the campus. When a campus is perceived to be unsafe, it may find itself having difficulty recruiting faculty, staff, and students because of fears about campus safety, especially after dark and on weekends. Since UWT is located in the heart of downtown Tacoma, the campus encourages frequent drive-throughs by local law enforcement and supports their presence on campus by providing shared office space with campus security staff. In some cases where the partnership with the local police jurisdiction is strong and convenient, campus security costs can be reduced by staffing the campus with well-trained, unarmed security staff rather than armed and licensed law enforcement officers.

Legislative Advocacy

Legislative funding is the lifeblood of a developing public university campus. In the case of a new campus that is part of a multi-campus university, a centralized system lobbying structure will probably already be in place. That structure, however, must balance all priorities across the system and may not be fully effective in making the case to the legislature for the needs of the new and much smaller campus. The new campus may find itself at a disadvantage in competing for funding if it is not able to make the voice of its own community heard in the legislative arena.

Strategically, the campus CEO must take the lead to create and maintain an appropriate locally based lobbying structure that encourages a variety of effective advocates from the community to influence the legislative process on behalf of the campus. This can be complicated, but over a number of legislative sessions UWT has developed a variety of effective lobbying strategies.

First, we established a community-based legislative council. While “official” campus representatives and university-wide lobbyists can present the case to legislators and have frequent contact with legislative committees and members, they may only have half the impact of a quick visit, phone call, or e-mail from a local bank president, a local first-grade teacher, a student, or an alum. Creating and managing an effective legislative lobbying effort through a legislative council that advocates on behalf of the campus’ legislative request can be a powerful force in acquiring much-needed resources for the campus. UWT’s legislative council chair is a citizen who has long been active in the region’s political scene; an individual recognized and highly respected by people in both political parties. She also sits on the campus advisory committee in order to link the activities of the two groups. She coordinates all of the council’s activities, which makes it truly community-based and community-managed rather than

a campus-run council of community supporters. The council is briefed on campus priorities, and council members are asked to comment on briefing materials that will be distributed to legislators and campus supporters.

Months before the beginning of the legislative session, UWT begins talking with local legislators. A detailed briefing book is produced, as well as a one-page summary of the capital, enrollment, and operating request. Legislators and their staffs appreciate briefing materials that are truly brief, in that they specify the funding request and provide short descriptions of key initiatives and priorities.

At UWT, because new construction needs are competing with statewide demand for other construction projects, adequate funding for capital construction has been the biggest legislative challenge. When legislative council members ask legislators to support UWT's building request, they emphasize that construction helps the campus do two vital things for the region: first, meet needs for a better educated workforce and society by creating and expanding academic programs and access to these programs; and second, fuel economic development by creating jobs and stimulating business development.

The legislative council is most influential at several key points in the legislative process. For example, when UWT's campus funding request is being considered by a key legislative committee and it is known that competing interests threaten that request, the legislative council chair sends an e-mail to the council and activates a coordinated, pre-planned response. Legislators immediately begin receiving calls, e-mails, and letters informing them of how important the requested funding is, not just to the campus itself, but also to the community. A second strategy for legislative advocacy is to engage students and alumni. UWT has encouraged its students to participate in the legislative process as part of their learning. Students become familiar with the request so they can offer testimony before legislative committees and talk to individual legislators. Students have organized petition drives and letter-writing campaigns to support the legislative request; legislators are often influenced by articulate support from students. In fact, they frequently report that students and alumni are the most effective spokespeople for the campus. Just last year, a graduate who is employed as a lobbyist volunteered to organize a sub-set of the legislative council for purposes of alumni lobbying. This individual helped identify a number of alumni who are informed about the campus funding request and are prepared to provide support at key points in the upcoming legislative session.

To be most effective, the legislative council should represent a broad geographic area and include alumni and students. If legislators perceive that only people from one city support the campus request, it allows them to partially discount community support as a narrow local interest. Eliciting broad support for the legislative request will also build interest in and commitment to the campus that will be valuable far beyond the legislative session.

Conclusion

Because there are so many mutual benefits to effective campus-community relations, one of the most important jobs of everyone on a new campus is to nurture community relationships and to take advantage of the positive community response to the founding

of a new campus. As the campus grows, it is important to maintain a campus culture that will encourage the fostering of new relationships with an ever-wider range of community agencies, schools, and institutions as well as the strengthening of existing partnerships. Many academic programs such as nursing, education, and social work will, by the very nature of the disciplines and the practicum experiences required of students, establish strong educational relationships with community institutions. As branch campuses meant to be responsive to the region, all programs should be encouraged to find creative ways to provide learning experiences in the community.

When newly established campuses commit themselves to serving their community as a means to fulfill their academic mission, they are likely to enjoy both short-term and long-term success. A young campus that nurtures its community connections can amass political capital, establish great philanthropic appeal, and enhance its ability to recruit and retain faculty, staff, and students.

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