

# Institutionalizing University-Community Engagement

By Esther Letven, John Ostheimer, and Anne Statham

## **Abstract**

*The University of Wisconsin-Parkside has been transforming itself into an engaged university. This paper explains the regional context, steps taken to bring about change, linkage between committed leadership and institutionalization of change, and the resulting institutional structures. Key to the process was a working team that visited every academic and service department to uncover the extent of existing engagement and the barriers to further engagement. Currently, the campus is trying to follow up on this process.*

The University of Wisconsin System (UW-Parkside) is transforming itself into an engaged university. We describe the setting that led to that effort and the steps we have taken to bring about change. The linkage between the commitment of leadership and institutionalization of change is explained, and the institutional structures are described. Then, we describe a method used to strengthen engagement among faculty and the crucial role of a working team that visited every academic department and service unit. Through this process, we were able to uncover the extent of existing engagement and the barriers to further development. The paper concludes with steps to follow up on the recommendations of the department visiting team, hopefully suggesting ways other campuses may approach this issue.

## **Rationale For An Engaged University Model**

UW-Parkside is a young, largely commuter campus. In the mid-1990s, as we approached our fourth decade, a sense of urgency prevailed. We had lost about five percent of our budget to state-mandated cutbacks, and an enrollment downturn offered the likelihood of further penury. Ironically, the prospects for growth should have been excellent, given the size and vitality of our regional community. However, an environmental scan revealed that people of the region had no clear perception of what UW-Parkside is, despite the fact that our alumni living in the region easily outnumber those of any other higher education institution. Even our own students, faculty and staff shared a weak perception of the campus' mission. We knew we had to reverse that image if we were to address critical challenges effectively.

On the surface, we faced a severe enrollment/revenue challenge. But the real problems were deeper within our constituent regional community. Besides the direct dampening effects on enrollment, our weak connection was costing us non-traditional students, who represent an increasing share of the growth for higher education in the future.

Our weak regional image was not (totally) our own fault. UW-Parkside is the only Wisconsin public regional comprehensive university that is not clearly identified with one city. All of the other nine are located in, “owned” by, and usually named for their city. Located between rival cities, Racine and Kenosha, UW-Parkside faced an uphill battle from the start to establish a clear image of community connection. Nevertheless, excuses must be put to one side: it was now or never!

To regain positive momentum for our campus, we knew we must demonstrate to our regional community that our campus is an active and constructive *participant*, and that we are an eager and useful partner. If these efforts succeeded, our image would improve, we would be viewed positively by citizens (and potential students), and our enrollment would grow. Besides, we knew that community engagement would produce excellent opportunities for active learning and productive research; pedagogically and academically, it was the right thing to do.

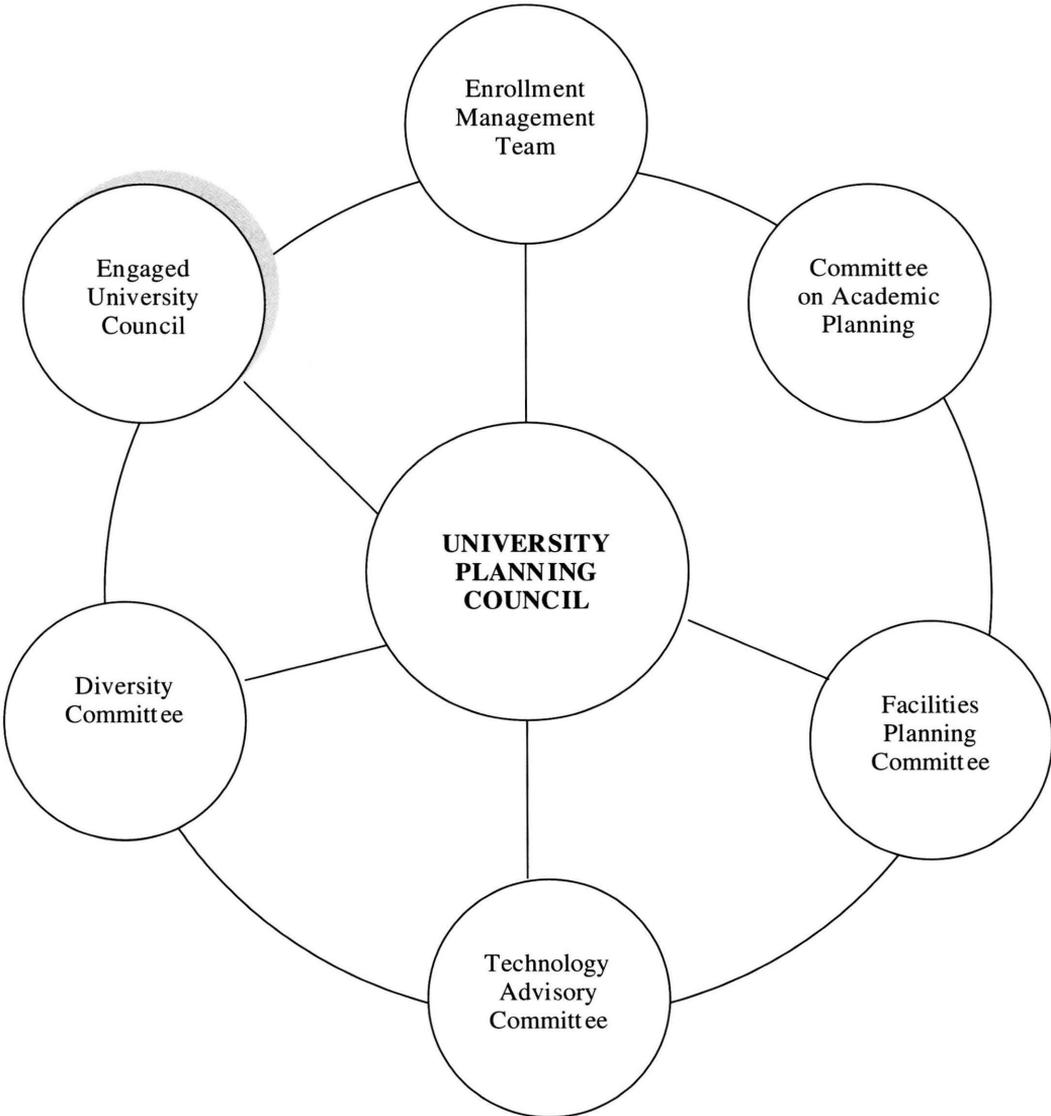
The campus’ precarious situation brought about its first try at comprehensive strategic planning. Several teams were charged with specific aspects of the planning process and reported to a University Planning Council (UPC). The new chancellor arrived (summer 1998) just as the campus completed this major strategic planning effort. Chancellor John P. Keating soon became co-chair of the University Planning Council created to monitor the implementation of the strategic plan and to serve as a campus-wide forum for discussion of campus issues. The UPC is at the center of an ongoing planning and implementation process that includes six major committees, each focusing on one of the central aspects of the University’s mission and objectives (See Graphic 1). The Engaged University Council provides the core institutional planning impetus for systematic community engagement.

## **Acknowledging the Starting Point**

More than a year of preparation paved the way for the Engaged University Council’s emergence in 1999. As a 1997 recipient of a HUD-funded Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC), UW-Parkside was forging new relationships in the surrounding communities. Through the COPC, several faculty and their students were working on projects to revitalize two central city neighborhoods. Until the summer of 1998, this project was one of many isolated and individual efforts connecting the University and its surrounding communities. To stimulate a broader campus dialogue about community engagement, the COPC project directors held a campus conversation at the Wingspread Conference Center within the first week of the newly appointed Chancellor’s arrival. Jack Keating, with strong credentials in community involvement from his experiences in Washington and Alaska, attended the Wingspread gathering and

**Graphic 1**

**UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-PARKSIDE PLANNING STRUCTURE**



articulated his commitment to an engaged university to the assembled faculty, staff, and students. His message ignited the ensuing work of defining and implementing an engaged university.

While assessing the current level of actual community involvement, we discovered a full range of activities from volunteering to class projects to cultural programs to institutional partnerships. But in spite of existing efforts, there was no institutional coordination or publicity, and hence no perception of involvement, either by members of the external community, or even by our own faculty or staff, and few rewards were offered to those participating. It was obvious that willingness to apply the engagement model would vary between academic departments, and in that sense, we were prepared for the fact of enclaves of engagement. We also knew that some centralized effort was needed because the commitment of top leadership would turn the image of disengagement around, both on and off campus. A coordinated effort would be the only way to effectively collect information on our current engagement, as well as to organize for increasing connections with the community. But in spite of the need for some centralization, it would be faculty and staff and their academic and service departments who needed to make the *real* changes.

Recognizing that many individual community-based activities existed, an effort was made to assemble a status report. This assessment led to a compendium of activities that surprised even the skeptics. The compendium's introductory letter by Chancellor Keating acknowledged the existing community connections and pledged "to continue our efforts to be a university that is fully engaged in the region it serves." Published in spring 1999, the compendium, *Building New Partnerships for Learning*, became a benchmark against which we will measure future progress.

Involving the campus in the national conversation about engaged universities continued during the period following Wingspread. Faculty and staff were sent as teams to national conferences, speakers were brought to campus, and the Kellogg report, *Returning to our Roots: The Engaged Institution*, was widely circulated throughout the campus. The Teaching Center featured brown bag lunches on community-based learning, stimulating dialogue about curricular change and student learning outcomes. Small grants were available for faculty to initiate community projects. The faculty Senate opened the door for community involvement as a consideration in tenure and promotion decisions. The Chancellor's challenge to the campus to become a more engaged institution was being met with action.

# **Organizing For Action Through The Engaged University Council**

In the spring of 1999, the Engaged University Council (EUC) was appointed as one of the key planning mechanisms, reporting to the Planning Council. The EUC is a broadly representative group charged with coordinating the efforts of the University to develop and extend relationships with our community, and to ultimately enhance the educational experience of our students.

By using work groups, the EUC has already accomplished the following:

- A mission statement for UW-Parkside as an Engaged University
- Sponsorship of speakers from Portland State and the Campus Compact
- Assessment of current and recent community activities of faculty and teaching academic staff by a Department Visiting Team
- Support for establishment of an Institute for Community-Based Learning (ICBL)
- Development of a certificate program in Community-Based Learning
- A recommendation to join the Campus Compact, a national organization supporting service learning
- A Student Leadership team
- A Draft report on engagement for the campus' North Central Association accreditation self-study

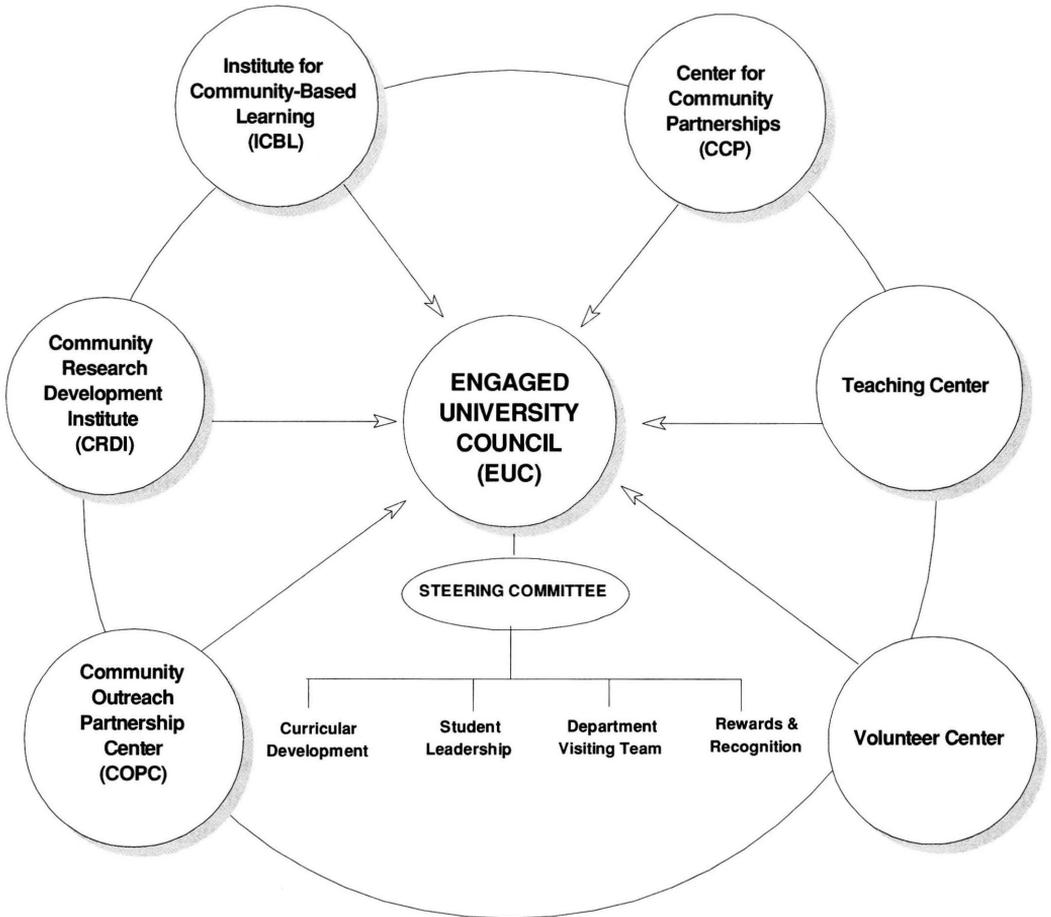
Since the EUC's structured membership numbers nearly 35 people representing all the relevant community-involved departments and units, the work is done in smaller subgroups. A steering committee oversees the progress of the task groups and develops the agenda for the EUC. Additionally, subgroups have worked on curriculum, student roles, and rewards and recognition. Centers and institutes support the campus engagement efforts.

## **Structures to Support Campus Engagement**

Several centers and institutes are in place to work with the EUC by supporting community engagement through partnership development, teaching methodology and curriculum, volunteering, research, and grant writing. While they are described individually, many are closely coupled with overlapping staff. Several are new entities established in the last couple of years (See Graphic 2).

## Graphic 2

### STRUCTURES TO SUPPORT CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT



- ***Center for Community Partnerships (CCP)***  
The CCP offers life-long learning programs through partnerships between the campus and community, including continuing education programs, youth programs, professional development, cultural programs, community research services, small business counseling and start-up assistance, and programs for retirees. Embedded in the CCP is a part-time community-based grant writer and community-service grants for students working on community projects.
- ***Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC)***  
The COPC is a HUD-funded project to connect the resources of the University with revitalization efforts in central city neighborhoods. Having completed a three-year cycle, the COPC is now focusing its efforts in two areas as part of a HUD New Directions grant. The two focus areas are housing and workforce/ economic development.
- ***Community Research Development Institute (CRDI)***  
The CRDI provides data collection, analysis, and consultation services to schools, local governments, non-profit organizations, and businesses. The services include research design and delivery, focus group services, and program evaluation and consultation. Community research needs are matched with the appropriate delivery system, including faculty consultants, course projects that are community-based, internships, and/or projects for the student research associates team.
- ***Institute for Community-Based Learning (ICBL)***  
The ICBL supports faculty who are engaging their students in community-based learning projects, including curriculum development and implementation of a certificate in Community-Based Learning. The ICBL also coordinates faculty incentive grants and works with the Teaching Center on faculty development, including a Faculty Associates Group.
- ***Teaching Center***  
The Teaching Center offers faculty/staff development programs such as brown bag lunches, workshops, and conferences. Student learning through community-based learning projects was a major theme during the past two years.
- ***Volunteer Center***  
The Volunteer Center coordinates the placement of student volunteers in community non-profit organizations. It also supports a Student Outreach Club and an emerging student leadership group that is advocating for community-based learning.

## **Confronting the Real Issues — The Department Visiting Team**

In an effort to move the campus forward, the EUC embarked on a project designed to enlist the buy-in of the very units engagement depends on most—the front line academic departments and interdisciplinary programs. As on most campuses, we were dealing with the typical traditional notions of faculty roles—the primacy of research, the importance of lecture-dominated teaching. While we had a strong core of faculty who were already doing work in the community and/or engaging in experiential (less lecture-focused) teaching, these issues had to be confronted in a constructive way. We knew we needed to do two things with the departments and programs: (1) enlist and/or further solidify their work of community engagement and (2) connect them to resources that can support their efforts.

We had already completed a series of interviews with faculty known to be most engaged with the community, a wide variety of people from many different disciplines. These interviews revealed that community-involved faculty obtained a great deal of personal satisfaction from their involvement, but believed they received little in the way of professional recognition or rewards. Also, few of them had been able to connect their community involvement with their teaching in any substantive or consistent way. Since we are a small university with a relatively small budget and faculty, we must integrate engagement into the core of our ongoing activities. We could not afford to support it otherwise.

### ***Obtaining Buy-In***

To begin the process of obtaining campus-wide buy-in, we formed a team that visited every academic department and program on campus, usually during a regular department or program meeting. We asked three questions: (1) What are you currently doing in the community? (2) What would you like to do? (3) What sort of support do you need? The team was composed of representatives from campus units charged with relating to the community in various ways—Alumni Affairs, Office of Youth Programs, Volunteer Center, Credit Outreach, PK-12 Education Outreach, Continuing Education, Small Business Development Center, Community Research Development Institute—as well as several key faculty development programs and committees—Teaching Center, Institute for Community Based Learning, Committee for Academic Planning. At the same time we asked these questions, we hoped to be able to offer assistance with some of the outreach programs faculty were doing or planning.

In the beginning, many faculty at these meetings were suspicious that we were trying to impose an agenda on them. When they realized we were truly interested in what they were already doing or wanted to do and intended to insert this information into the campus planning process, these conversations became quite lively. We were overwhelmed by the level of involvement already shown by virtually all departments, the frustration they experienced at their inability to do more, and the ideas they had for

better campus support. Almost all departments reported some activity, many in a variety of categories. Efforts were spread among PK-12, corporate, non-profit, and government. Sometimes faculty members in the same department were active in all four categories. Sometimes one activity served a combination of these audiences.

### ***Suggested Actions***

Another consistent theme of our conversations was the overload experienced by those faculty most heavily involved in these activities. Their recommendations focused on ways the institution could lessen their workload, freeing them to concentrate more fully on parts of the programs no one else could do, such as direct instruction. The department discussions uncovered certain tasks that could be supported, such as managing relationships with the local PK-12 systems, helping with internships, and providing assistance in curriculum revisions. These needs led to suggestions for personnel additions, such as a PK-12 connections coordinator or specialized clerical support for community projects. A clear need emerged for more coordinated help with promotion of these activities in the community. Also, four specialized centers were suggested in different areas of the university. A fifth center for Science Education, already in existence, was suggested as a place to put additional resources.

Faculty also expressed frustration about current resource levels in other areas of the university. Charge-backs from one unit to another were a point of much concern. For example, the Music Department does many concerts and programs in the community. The charges for campus units to help them move equipment and instruments for these events are more than they can afford. Quite a few of these faculty reported renting or using their own trucks, and moving the equipment and instruments themselves. This left them feeling that the university did not support their work.

### ***Demands on Existing Resources***

The demands that surfaced during these visits could well overtax the units on campus that could be most helpful to faculty. An implicit goal of the department visiting project was to begin a dialogue among units with close links to the community, so these units could explore how to work more closely together in supporting faculty involvement. By working together on department visits, such conversations did occur. After each visit, the team considered the needs that were mentioned and brainstormed how each unit might offer assistance. We sent a memo to every department chair or program director, listing these resources. The memo also listed the activities they had told us about and acknowledged the needs that could *not* be met by existing university resources.

Clearly, certain units within the university were listed more often than others as possible resources. The directors of these programs often expressed concern that they may not be able to meet such an increased demand. The Engaged University Council is now considering the recommendations and formulating a response that will be integrated into the university's planning process.

## **Actions Taken**

We have begun several processes designed to support faculty in their efforts at community engagement, to help them integrate it more fully into their other professional efforts. A small core of faculty has formed to become better versed in the pedagogy of teaching through community engagement, which we are calling Faculty Associates for Community-Based Learning. These faculty will act as mentors to others who are also interested. We have instituted a new certificate in community-based learning that will build in part on courses in our departments and programs that include such experiences. We have established an Institute for Community-Based Learning that works with the Teaching Center to help faculty deal with such barriers as the traditional semester structure, boundaries between disciplines that prevent us from addressing community issues as effectively as we might, the traditional faculty reward structure, the apparent disjuncture between community and student learning needs, and other issues that arise as faculty attempt to integrate community engagement into their teaching and research programs.

## **Institutionalizing Changes**

At this stage, the institution must respond to the needs heard during the department visits by identifying resources currently available and resources that can be identified and sought. If the problems that were identified are not made a priority and confronted by the institution in an organized way, successful community engagement will remain episodic and dependent on individual persistence and energy. Engagement must become embedded in the fabric of the institution.

To be effective, resource commitments must be focused on substantive areas of activity in which the university already has significant strength, especially those areas of particular significance to our region in which we have some strengths and a prospect of adding to those strengths. We will not be able to build successful engagement in *all* potential areas of activity. The problems of each area are different. Although these areas are not easy to categorize, the effort must be made because their distinctions may dictate approaches that will be more effective, and therefore more economical. The three areas of community/campus activity that are most developed are (1) connections with the public schools, (2) issues related to the sustainable development of our regional communities and the interactions between those communities and their natural/physical environment, and (3) the campus' contacts with business and industry.

1. Contacts with PK-12 public education are widespread across the campus, but disconnected. Many of the campus units involved would make more of their contacts if they had more support. It takes time, effort, and persistence to maintain smooth and productive contacts. The campus needs to develop one (possibly virtual) liaison office that is capable of sustaining an effective knowledge base, a "who's who" of the region's school personnel. Knowledge should be shared among the campus units that relate to PK-12 and a pool of funding should be ready to serve each unit that is faced with a mailing, event planning, or other expense.

2. A second realm of contact between campus and community involves issues of community development, inner city vitality, sustainable economic development, land use, environment, and pollution. These community connections are not as well developed as they are in PK-12, but they need to be built because of their significance to the region. A clearinghouse approach similar to the coordination we need for PK-12 may be the answer. In addition, departments may need help in developing curricular approaches if they are to add maximum value to students' learning. There are some significant successes already: our HUD/COPC grants have served as a basis for making these connections, helping the campus to enter the realm of community development, inner city vitality, brownfields development, etc. Also, our chancellor and provost have actively connected the campus to regional workforce development efforts by helping to build consortia that obtained state and federal resources for advanced technology education.
3. Finally, private sector ties are concentrated in the departments of the School of Business and Technology and in a few other departments not in that School, such as Biology and Sociology/Anthropology. The departments in Business and Technology have external connections that are already reasonably well organized through the School's effort to maintain a strong advisory committee and through the existing extensive contacts of faculty. Resources are less of a problem than for other areas of contact because of the capacity of private sector connections, if properly cultivated, to finance equipment and other costs.

In the College of Arts and Sciences, some departments specifically asked for help in determining needs of the private sector. These departments want to connect more helpfully for both the businesses' and their students' sakes. Also, a few other Arts and Sciences departments said they realized their students needed skills that would make them employable in the private sector. The wishes of these departments will not be ignored. Thus, although private sector engagements are a less dominant part of the Engaged University Council efforts, we recognize that the private sector connections are of crucial importance in linking the campus and the community. In a sense, our current effort is designed to bring PK-12 and other public, non-profit sector contacts up to the level already achieved with the private sector by the School of Business and Technology and a few other units.

In all three of these areas of focus, attention must be given to several aspects of improvement. The institution must provide direct support in academic departments for the faculty and staff who are involved in community engagement projects. We can work with existing community agencies to obtain extramural funding, but if each "success" merely adds proportionally to the faculty member's workload, the time must come from teaching, which is self-defeating: the very faculty members who are succeeding are the same fine teachers who are needed to teach the array of courses that include outreach or community-based learning. Therefore, logistical support is needed, and our faculty and teaching staff must involve community members and even our own students in all

facets of the teaching and learning process. This will call for new models in which students and community members share responsibility for teaching and learning.

In addition, we must provide appropriate support and encouragement for those faculty and staff who are engaged with the community, and recognize their efforts so they can serve as models for others. It is up to faculty and teaching staff to change the formal curriculum, but they need support in doing so. Needed changes include the revamping of courses in many disciplines; launching the Community-Based Learning Certificate; coping with the limits of the semester system; increasing the proportion of student-centered, active learning that goes on in our courses; and building bridges between disciplines to facilitate interdisciplinary approaches. At this point, the Engaged University Council's leadership will propose a specific plan to address the recommendations that emerged from the report of the Department Visit Team, in turn helping these changes to happen.

## ***Conclusion***

Many universities find themselves in a situation resembling that of UW-Parkside in 1995. We had never convinced our two communities of our value. For other universities, the institutional identity problems may stem from different conditions. For example, two major university systems may be mandated by their state to cooperate in fielding a new campus in an underserved urban area. Or, more than one established institution may be forced to share a facility. For whatever the varied reasons, our example may be helpful for those who must take active steps, both on and off campus, to build community connections.

However, we have found that making the transition from episodic engagement to a full-blown campus-wide ethic is not an easy task. The challenges to institutionalization are significant, including limited resources, cultural hesitance to change, high teaching responsibilities, unresponsive reward structures, and support services that have "other commitments" and are disconnected from one another. There are several ways to avoid pitfalls:

1. Connect engagement with essential, core elements of the institution. People from all parts of the institution need to see it as relevant and useful to them. We connected it with enrollment, a basic survival issue for the institution.
2. Discuss the process openly, seek feedback from the leadership at all levels, and act on that feedback. Stay within the culture of consultation, faculty governance, etc. of the institution.
3. Include students in the planning. Do not assume that faculty's understanding and needs will be the same as students' needs and understanding.
4. Build on the strengths of the institution. We built on the fact that our students are

mostly commuters, living in the local communities, and likely to stay there when they graduate.

5. Look for win-win situations. Community, student, faculty, and institutional needs can often be met within the same framework, by the same project, with some creativity, attention and perseverance.

In spite of these possible pitfalls, the effort is worthwhile. In fact, it is essential! To some degree, our efforts to change may have been caused by our recognition of the campus' precarious situation; but the further we go, the more we recognize the benefits for faculty, staff, and most of all, our students. UW-Parkside will be an improved institution of higher learning as the transition to an engaged campus bears fruit.

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