Do University Communications About Campus-Community Partnerships Reflect Core Engagement Principles?

Christy Kayser Arrazattee
Marybeth Lima
Lisa Lundy
Louisiana State University

With service-learning and campus-community engagement gaining a foothold in the landscape of higher education, a growing number of university public affairs offices are charged with communicating about this work. Few studies have examined how community-engaged institutions of higher education represent campus-community partnerships through their public communications. This article describes a quantitative and qualitative analysis of Web site content and publications focused on how relationships with community partners as well as the portrayal of community partners are represented by six universities nationally recognized for their community engagement efforts. Results showed that though these universities are recognized for exemplary community-engaged work, a majority of their public communications fail to represent partnerships in ways consistent with the core principles of reciprocity and valuing of community partners that are central to campus-community partnerships. To address this issue, a guide to best practices regarding communicating campus-community engagement is provided.

University offices of public relations and public affairs are charged with university communications to external audiences (Anctil, 2008; Pulley, 2003). This is a tall order because the staff in these offices, while communication experts, may lack a deep and subtle understanding of specific initiatives on campus. Might this be true of their understanding of campus-community engagement? After all, campus-community engagement as it is currently practiced, with its insistence on reciprocal and mutually-valuing relationships between the campus and community, is very different than the traditional service practice in the past by universities and that is often familiar to those outside the current efforts. Given that subscribing to the principles of good practice in campus-community partnerships is critical to the success of this work (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Eby, 1998; Sandy & Holland, 2006), it is important that university messages about this work align with these principles too.

While campus-community engagement professionals attempt to accomplish awareness of their work through various means, such as producing their own publicity and maintaining their own Web sites, at the same time, centralized marketing and public relations professionals at universities are responsible for communicating with university stakeholders. In many higher education institutions, responsibility for communications often resides in and is overseen by a centralized marketing office (Anctil, 2008; Pulley, 2003), leaving the job of capturing the nature of campus-community partnerships to individuals with communications backgrounds, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the partnership principles of the engagement movement. Thus, while the campus-community partnerships at an institution may in fact be reciprocal and reflective of community partner valuing, are partnerships represented as such in the university’s official communications? If not, this may cause potential detriment to both the understanding of community engagement on campus as well as to relationships with community partners. Non-reciprocal representations of campus-community partnerships can alienate community partners serving an important role in the educational process, can perpetuate the idea of “helpless” communities needing assistance from the outside to be successful, and can reinforce the very notions that engagement activities such as service-learning aim to dispel.

Anctil (2008) describes a marketing office’s overall responsibility as understanding the “product, defining the central message, and creating memorable images that an audience can associate with the particular college or university” (p. 90). The higher education marketing literature describes how marketing offices must communicate to members of the institution about what the institutional priorities are, rather than using a two-way communication process between university personnel and the marketing office to craft a message that satisfies the needs of both parties.
Arrazattee et al.

strategic plan, learning objectives)…needs to exist

purpose (e.g. a mission statement, program priorities,

tions suggest that a “clear sense of identity and

42

of what Muthiah & Reeser (2000) describe as

Milardo, 1982). Relationships with integrity consist

sue diverse activities (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002;

involved in diverse interactions, evolve beyond the

integrity. Relationships are closer when partners are

relationships having high degrees of closeness, equity, and

“transformational,” with transformational relation-

shions, facilitate the partnership. In addition to transactional

and transformational relationships, Clayton and col-

leagues (2010) added the exploitive category:

exploitive relationships lack closeness, equity, and

ity because they possess unrewarding or harm-

ful outcomes and are not satisfying to one or both

persons, even if they are maintained” (Clayton,

Best Practices in Campus-Community

Partnerships

There is an extensive body of literature identifying

best practices for reciprocal campus-community

partnerships. Much of the research has been devel-

oped through analogizing service-learning to close

dyadic relationships. Bringle, Clayton, and Price

(2009) assert that a true partnership has three specif-

ic qualities: closeness, integrity, and equity. Levels of

closeness range from “unaware of the other party” to

“transformational,” with transformational relation-

ships having high degrees of closeness, equity, and

ity. Relationships are closer when partners are

involved in diverse interactions, evolve beyond the

original project, identify additional projects, and pur-

sue diverse activities (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Milardo, 1982). Relationships with integrity consist

of what Muthiah & Reeser (2000) describe as

“deeply held, internally coherent values” and “sug-

suggest a vision of what a transformed world might look

like” (as cited in Bringle, Officer, Grim, & Hatcher,

2009, p. 53). The concept of equity elaborates on the

ideas of interdependency, bilateral influence, and col-

laborative decision-making (Morton, 1997). Equitable partnerships are those in which both par-

ties view the interactions as fair, even if inputs and

outputs are qualitatively and quantitatively unequal

(Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

Walshok’s studies on early self-disclosure in rela-

relationships suggest that a “clear sense of identity and

purpose (e.g. a mission statement, program priorities,

strategic plan, learning objectives)…needs to exist

and be effectively communicated to the other party”

(cited in Bringle & Hatcher, 2002, p. 507; Torres &

Schaffer, 2000). Part of this process is having visible

and easily accessible structures—“enabling mecha-

nisms”—that, applied to campus-community engage-

ment, facilitate the community’s ability to communi-

cate and connect with the campus (Hollander,

Saltmarsh, & Zlotkowski, 2001; Walshok, 1999).

Although campus-community partnerships are

rooted in the concept of mutually beneficial exchange, those relationships based only on simple exchange are characterized by Enos and Morton (2003) as a transactional exchange/partnership based on each partner focusing on its own short-term gains. This differs from a transformational relationship, a more open-ended relationship in which both parties are open to the partnership’s evolution, continuous assessment of their own identities and vision, and working within a system specifically designed to facilitate the partnership. In addition to transactional and transformational relationships, Clayton and col-

leagues (2010) added the exploitive category:

exploitive relationships lack closeness, equity, and

ity because they possess unrewarding or harm-

ful outcomes and are not satisfying to one or both

persons, even if they are maintained” (Clayton,

The Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale (TRES) was developed to measure the extent that a relationship demonstrates characteristics associated with being exploitive, transactional, or trans-

formational (Clayton et al., 2010). TRES was developed from literature describing transformational and trans-

actional relationships (Enos & Morton, 2003) and interpersonal relationships literature as applied to campus-community partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). TRES measures nine key attributes: outcomes, common goals, decision-making, resources, conflict management, identity formation, power, significance, and satisfaction/change for the better.

Clayton (2010) speaks to the “power of little words” that indicate the extent of “with-ness” in part-

nerships, and the positions of partners as co-educators and co-generators of knowledge. Academics

involved in community engagement must take care to approach social issues in coordination with commu-

nity, rather than applying their specialized expertise

“to” or “on” the community (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). In a similar vein, the word “help” connotes non-reciprocal partnerships; consider this statement from Remen (1999):

Serving is different from helping. Helping is not a

relationship between equals. A helper may see oth-

ers as weaker than they are, needier than they are, and people often feel this inequality. The danger in

helping is that we may inadvertently take away
from people more than we could ever give them; we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity or even wholeness. (para. 3)

Words also matter in the ways that they can divide us and confuse communication. A number of terms are used to describe campus-community work—“community engagement,” “civic engagement,” “outreach,” “service,” and “service-learning” (Holland, 2000; Saltmarsh et al., 2009)—that can lead to confusion amongst university parties. In addition, it is likely that there is also a difference in language that occurs between university partners and community partners. For example, while university partners, e.g., faculty, likely use the words identified above, more traditional terms such as “volunteerism” and “service hours” may be more commonly used by community partners.

Given the above review, there were two objectives of this study: (a) to examine the ways in which university communications represent community engagement and campus-community partnerships, and (b) to compile a list of innovative practices and recommendations for producing communications that reflect reciprocity and the valuing of community partners in campus-community engagement.

Method

This study used textual analysis (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999)—a method used by communication researchers to describe the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in texts—to review the Web sites of six higher education institutions receiving the nation’s two highest distinctions for community engagement—the Presidential Award from the President’s Community Service Honor Roll and the elective Community Engagement Classification by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012a; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2011a). Each university’s Web site content, including navigational structure, Web site copy, and news coverage of campus-community partnerships, was analyzed for indicators of reciprocity and valuing of community partners drawn from the campus-community engagement literature: (a) ease of community partner access to university resources (Hollander et al., 2001); (b) a clear sense of community partner identities (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2006; Torres & Schaffer, 2000; Walshok, 1999); (c) evidence of mutually beneficial exchange (Bringle & Hatcher); (d) description of transformational relationships (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Bringle, Clayton et al., 2009; Bringle & Hatcher; Bringle, Officer et al., 2009; Clayton et al., 2010, Enos & Morton, 2003; Muthiah & Reeser, 2000); and (e) use of collaborative language (Clayton, 2010; Saltmarsh et al., 2009).

Ease of access to the university was operationalized through the “enabling mechanisms” present on university Web sites, which included such items as information specifically geared toward community partners, contact information for establishing partnerships with the university, and feedback forms for established partners. A clear sense of the identity of a community partner was established if communications referring to campus-community partnerships included the community partner’s name as well as more in-depth details about the partner’s mission, needs, strengths, goals, and other identifying descriptors. Evidence of mutually beneficial exchange was present if communications referring to campus-community partnerships described benefit to community as well as campus partners.

To determine if partnerships were represented in a transformational nature, Web sites were analyzed for indication of closeness, equity, integrity, as well as attributes included in the TRES model (Berscheid et al., 1989; Bringle, Clayton et al., 2009; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Bringle, Officer et al., 2009; Clayton et al., 2010, Enos & Morton, 2003; Muthiah & Reeser, 2000). Specifically, closeness was indicated by diverse projects or project evolution, equity was represented by descriptions of collaborative decision-making or interdependency, and integrity was indicated by description of a shared vision. Content was also analyzed for evidence of shared power and resource contribution. Evidence of collaborative language was present if there were descriptions of the university working “with” the community rather than “helping” or doing “for” the community. If an article contained evidence of collaborative language (i.e., “working with”) but also mentioned “helping” or “doing for” the community, the article was not considered as using collaborative language; this approach set a high standard for achieving collaborative language, which is important because words matter (Clayton, 2010; Remen, 1999; Saltmarsh et al., 2009).

The Universities

The specific universities for this study were selected from the 2012 and 2010 Presidential Award recipients cross-referenced with the universities receiving the Carnegie Engagement Classification in 2008 or later. (There was not a 2011 Honor Roll due to a change in how Honor Roll years were organized). Only six universities satisfied these two criteria and therefore comprised the sample for this study (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2011b; Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012b). Table 1 describes select
demographics of each university. Five of the 6 universities profiled were private and one was public; collectively, the universities represented a variety of institutional sizes, geographic regions, and religious affiliations. Because this analysis identifies weaknesses in communication structures at these specific institutions, the names of the universities and some identifying features have been withheld.

To receive both the Honor Roll’s Presidential Award and the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, universities must demonstrate an institution-wide commitment to and understanding of reciprocal campus-community relations as well as a clear valuing of community partners (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2011a; Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012a). Based on these requirements, if communications from universities that have been recognized as excelling in these areas did not reflect reciprocity or the valuing of community partners, the neglect lay with the communications and not the partnerships. Further, if analysis revealed a lack of reciprocity and community partner valuing indicators in communications, it would be revealing as to the growth needed in this area by even the most exemplary community-engaged universities.

Content

The lead author of this article analyzed the six university Web sites during April and May of 2012. Every effort was made to be objective, to have an open mind, and to not bias the reading of the material and the analysis thereof. We have confidence that if other reviewers were involved they would have come away with a similar analysis. That said, we all have our respective biases that we bring to any research project (Johnson, 1997).

Review of a Web site began on the university’s homepage, where functions such as “search,” “about us,” and “a to z” were used to identify content and departments relevant to community engagement so as to investigate community-engaged program- and office-specific Web pages. In addition to reviewing the Web site navigation, content analyzed included news archives, feature stories, university (online) publications, and Web page copy. The nomenclature of “main page” will be used throughout this article to describe prominent subpages of a university’s homepage, such as “about us” pages describing history, mission, and points of distinction about the university. This study analyzed articles written between January 2008 and May 2012, as all six universities received their Carnegie Community Engagement classification and Presidential Award in 2008 or later and would be more likely to demonstrate community partner valuing as well as reciprocal relationships in their communications during this time period. Content was deemed relevant to community engagement if it related to the “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities,” especially as related to service initiatives (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of

---

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>Undergraduate Instructional Program</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Student Population Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution 1</td>
<td>4-year or above</td>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>Balanced arts &amp; sciences/professions</td>
<td>Master’s L</td>
<td>Private not-for-profit</td>
<td>4,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution 2</td>
<td>4-year or above</td>
<td>Jesuit Catholic</td>
<td>Balanced arts &amp; sciences/professions</td>
<td>Research University</td>
<td>Private not-for-profit</td>
<td>15,879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution 3</td>
<td>4-year or above</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Balanced arts &amp; sciences/professions</td>
<td>Research University</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>16,884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution 4</td>
<td>4-year or above</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Arts &amp; sciences plus professions</td>
<td>Master’s L</td>
<td>Private not-for-profit</td>
<td>3,294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution 5</td>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>Jesuit Catholic</td>
<td>Balanced arts &amp; sciences/professions</td>
<td>Master’s L</td>
<td>Private not-for-profit</td>
<td>7,751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution 6</td>
<td>4 year</td>
<td>Catholic Marianist</td>
<td>Balanced arts &amp; sciences/professions</td>
<td>Master’s L</td>
<td>Private not-for-profit</td>
<td>3,893</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: From Institution Profiles, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2012c).*
Teaching, 2011a). One hundred and ten news articles—news archives, feature stories, and university (online) publications at these six universities—were identified as meeting this definition.

Content on university main pages were deemed “university-level” communications created by the university’s communication office, and content on the Web sites of individual departments/offices dedicated to campus-community engagement were assumed to be created by their respective staff. Each of the six universities had multiple departments responsible for coordinating community engagement initiatives, and thus 14 department-specific Web sites were included in the analysis.

Results

The results are divided into the five areas of investigation: (a) ease of community partner access to university resources through Web sites; (b) clear sense of community partner identities; (c) evidence of mutually beneficial exchange; (d) description of transformational relationships; and (e) use of collaborative language.

Community Partner Access

Although best practices suggest engaged universities provide standardized access for community partners and encourage feedback and involvement (Hollander et al., 2001), it was clear from analyzing the six universities’ Web sites that there were many barriers for community partners to gain access to the university’s resources. The traditional Web site design of the universities in this study indicated little consideration of community partners as a university stakeholder for accessing the institution’s relevant university departments or resources. Web sites were geared toward specific audiences—“Potential (or Future) Students,” “Parents and Family,” “Current Students,” and “Alumni”—but none included “Community Partners” as a specific stakeholder audience. Institutions providing information on the ‘Contact Us’ page about whom to contact for specific inquiries did not supply information regarding how community organizations could partner with the institution or reach the offices involved with campus-community partnerships.

The use of Web site search functions was also problematic for reaching campus-community engagement people. Search functions did not produce viable results for searches using language familiar to community partners such as “volunteer” and “community service;” searches for such terms produced wide-ranging and confusing results, with pages upon pages of links to news releases, random department Web sites, initiatives, and listings of volunteer opportunities for students. Searches using the word “engagement,” a term more often used by campus constituencies than nonprofit organization staff, often yielded results pertaining to student engagement with the campus community or engagement with course content but not community engagement. “Outreach” yielded limited and irrelevant results. In campus directories on main Web pages, community engagement offices were listed (alphabetically) by the names of the offices, which would not be user-friendly if one didn’t know the name of the office(s) on campus concerned with campus-community partnerships.

Community partner access was better on the specific Web sites for offices dedicated to campus-community engagement, suggesting easier accessibility for partners who know the name of the engagement office or who happen to navigate to the correct Web page. However, 2 of the 6 universities (33%) did not provide clear direction to community partners on the university Web sites or the Web sites for the specific community engagement initiatives. Seven of 14 community engagement offices’ Web sites (50%) provided guidance to community partners about how to connect with engagement initiatives, e.g., enroll as an internship site or recruit volunteers for a service project, and six of the office Web sites (43%) offered mechanisms through which community partners could communicate or provide feedback. The most common way Web sites accomplished two-way communication was through a form to submit service opportunities; one Web site also offered a form partners could use to report incidents. One innovative example described a program inviting community partners to be destinations in a community partner tour for new faculty during the fall semester, thereby allowing selected partners to share extensive information about their agencies to a number of university contacts.

One university had a subunit of the public affairs office focused on community relations that maintained a page primarily dedicated to serving as a resource for the community. It included a comprehensive list of events open to the community, a “speaker bureau” page listing university personnel available to visit area clubs or local schools, a page on which visitors could sign up for an e-newsletter which published information about events or projects that involved the community, and a page providing links to the various university departments involved in community engagement. While this page was a strong effort to connect with the community and the only one of its kind in the six universities analyzed in this study, there was nothing on the university’s main pages that directed community partners to this page.

Community Partner Identities

Including the identity of community partners in a university communication is an important way to
acknowledge partners, their contributions, the sharing of power with them, and the equal priority of each partner’s needs. This study found that the names of community partners were included in 70 of the news articles about campus-community partnerships (64%), but, surprisingly, 40 articles (36%) did not identify the community partner by name (see Figure 1). Articles that excluded the community partner’s name talked about student service in general terms without naming the partner organization, e.g., “collected canned goods for a food pantry” or “read with elementary school children.”

Consistently including partner identity is prudent for the university to do. In addition to being good journalism, from a public relations standpoint, including partner identity opens up opportunities for new stakeholder connections, such as the community partner’s supporters and affiliates. Although main pages of the universities did not always provide a clear sense of the university’s key partners, 13 of the 14 engagement office Web sites (93%) identified its community partners in some way. The engagement office Web sites provided direct links to community partner organizations’ Web sites, published regular profiles of community partners, and indicated partner site locations.

Four of the 6 universities’ main pages (67%) described their communities as ideal locations for learning and touted the university’s accomplishments in community engagement. On university homepages, community partner identity was most commonly represented by describing the university’s city or town as the context or setting for the university and the latter’s teaching and learning objectives.

There were numerous examples of innovative practice in terms of partner identity on the part of individual engagement offices and the universities. One university published a newsletter for the surrounding community regarding engagement initiatives; each issue profiled a community partner. Another practice was a guide to service opportunities and organizations that had been co-created by that university’s three engagement offices; the guide, available electronically, was accessible through a link from all three of that university’s engagement offices’ Web sites. Through the e-recruiting tool, community partners controlled the information in the database and had the choice of either having students contact them directly or go through one of the three engagement centers.

Articles demonstrated different levels of identification for community partners. There were articles that identified only the name of the community partner; others described the partner’s mission, while others gave more in-depth descriptions of the partner’s history, demographics, challenges, and strengths. Overall, 8 of the 110 articles (7%) describing campus-community partnerships explained the mission of the community partner. Only six articles (5%) provided background information about the circumstances and systemic causes contributing to the needs of the partner’s respective clientele.

**Mutually Beneficial Exchange**

According to best practice guidelines, campus-community partnerships that are sustainable, successful, and ethical are based on reciprocity and mutual benefits (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Furthermore, partnerships are to be developed with each partner’s identified needs as well as available resources and assets in mind. The concept of mutual benefits is central to campus-community engagement.

This study found that the idea of campus-community partnerships being mutually beneficial was not
present on any of the six universities’ main pages but was present on 12 of the 14 community engagement office Web sites (86%). Three community engagement office Web sites (21%) stated the importance of mutual benefits, but had other web content that did not communicate the idea of mutual benefits. Specifically, service descriptions were framed as charity, with community partners being the primary or exclusive beneficiary.

Additionally, these engagement office Web sites lacked information to ensure that service activities actually served a community-identified need. One site in particular had a major omission: throughout the site there were quotes from university partners about how the service was benefitting the community but not concomitant testimony from a community partner.

Evidence of mutual benefits was present in approximately half of the articles analyzed (n = 58 or 53%). When evidence of benefits was included, which was true across all six universities, articles described university benefits such as increased learning of course content, leadership opportunities, awareness of social justice issues, critical thinking, cultural competency, self-awareness, and citizenship.

Description of Transformational Relationships

To demonstrate evidence of transformational relationships, content had to articulate one or more of the following: collaborative decision-making or planning, interdependency between course and community partner, shared vision, external resource allocation by partners, evolution of the partnership, diverse projects, or shared power. Evidence of transformative partnerships was found in two universities’ main pages (33%), 2 of 14 community engagement office Web sites (29%), and 30 of 110 (27%) articles.

The idea of co-teaching was the most prevalent indicator of transformational relationships, more evident on the Web pages of specific engagement offices than on the university Web pages. The one indicator of transformational relationships present on one university’s main page was a description of the surrounding community as a co-teacher. Another university acknowledged community expertise by offering classes taught by community members as well as opportunities for community members to access and participate in the sharing of knowledge through listservs and online discussion boards, though this innovation lies outside campus-community partnerships. This university’s engagement office also described shared power with its community, further demonstrating this concept by listing shared bylaws governing the campus-community partnership and describing how activities are supported by funds and resources contributed by both community and university partners. One university engagement office described its collaborations as non-hierarchical, indicating that its different community-based initiatives were supported financially and logistically by multiple partner organizations and describing community listening sessions, planning sessions, and a conference for campus and community participants.

Only 30 articles describing campus-community partnerships (27%) included evidence of transformational relationships while 80 (73%) did not. While other indicators of reciprocity and partner valuing in this study evidenced a balance between the number of articles that included the indicators and those that did not, with regard to evidence of transformational relationships, three of the universities had a balanced approach but the other three universities had none or virtually no evidence of transformational relationships in any of their articles. The most common indicator of transformational relationships in articles was a description of collaborative planning, with 15 articles (14%) including that information. The next most prevalent indicator was diverse projects, which was included in 11 of the articles (10%).

Use of Collaborative Language

Descriptions of campus-community partnerships were generally not present on main university pages, which left little to be learned from these pages about the use of collaborative language. Only one of the six universities (17%) provided a collaborative description of its relationship with the community on its main pages, describing how it engaged “with” the community. Several of the main pages described how students will be molded into good citizens, but offered no indication that this would happen in tandem with community partners.

There was a striking difference between how campus-community partnerships were described in a university’s news articles versus in the university’s community engagement offices’ Web materials. Nearly half of the articles (n = 50) describing campus-community partnerships at the university level used language such as “for” or “to,” and the use of the word “help” was rampant. On the other hand, community engagement offices widely used collaborative language to describe community-engaged projects.

Articles most often used the word “help” or described doing “to” or “for” when they were describing activities with low-income or homeless individuals. While there were few examples of overt paternalism in most of the articles, it was noted that in articles describing such populations, words such as “needy” appeared or stereotypes were presented. The word “help” appeared in 18 article headlines (16%). Some communications describing campus-community partnerships were able to avoid hierarchical lan-
With a few exceptions, the community engagement offices used collaborative language to describe campus-community partnerships. Overall, community engagement offices described most partnerships as universities working “with” as opposed to “to” or “for” community partners and/or those the partners serve.

Discussion

Despite the huge advances in the campus-community engagement field, there is still a tendency, revealed in this study, for university communications to often frame and discuss university involvement in the community in ways that do not reflect the key tenets of reciprocity with and valuing of community partners. While engagement-specific offices at these six universities fared much better than the university-wide efforts to communicate campus-community partnerships that are reciprocal and valuing of community partners, we even found shortfalls in the communication efforts of these engagement offices’ Web-based communications. These results suggest that the institutionalization of community engagement has not yet advanced sufficiently to ensure that (a) care is taken to accurately portray and consider campus-community partnerships in all public campus communications, and (b) the concept of reciprocity and community partner valuing is understood at all levels in the institution. It also serves as a caution to community engagement professionals that the best intentions of reciprocity and partner valuing may be potentially (inadvertently) undermined by university communications.

The findings in this study show that although we talk about giving voice to the community and tearing down the university gates, even universities recognized for their campus-community engagement fall short in providing gateways for existing and prospective community partners on their Web pages. While it is possible that enabling mechanisms are in place to make the university accessible to the community through visitor centers, telephone operators, and others, it appears that similar considerations are not in place on university Web sites. As demonstrated by the Web site functions on the sites included in this study, universities recognize that Web sites are valuable tools for such matters as recruiting students and informing parents, but they are not being used to facilitate access for and promote engagement with community partners.

Although we found that evidence of transformational relationships in campus communications was relatively uncommon, this does not preclude the existence of transformational partnerships; after all, the indicators of transformational relationships are often back-end details that do not assist in defining or describing a partnership for public consumption. However, including this information should be something to which the community-engaged institution could aspire; such details reinforce the ideas of a bonafide partnership and demonstrate the university’s dedication to and valuing of transformative partnerships.

The fact that transformational relationships were the component of reciprocity least expressed in communications led us to further reflect on this topic. We believe that there are two factors at play with regard to the relative lack of evidence of transformational relationships in the communications analyzed in this study. First, transformational relationships are the hardest of the five components of reciprocity to achieve. A long-term, significant, sustained effort by campus and community are necessary to develop the resource base, trust, and synergy inherent in such partnerships. Not all partnerships reach this level of interdependency. For those partnerships that do, however, there is a second factor at play: descriptions of transformational relationships do not fit well into the short, reductionist model typical of mass communication. While narrative is the genre best suited to reporting on transformational relationships, mass communications tend to be equivalent to book reviews, with the true nature of a transformational relationship easily “lost in translation.” It would be in the university’s best interest to communicate this information; if we are going to tell our stories, it is best to tell them well.

Clayton (2010) and others have taken the first step to raise awareness among practitioners on how community-engaged practitioners talk about community engagement. This present study demonstrates the need to take these conversations beyond publications geared toward fellow practitioners and raise awareness at the level of university administrators and public affairs staff. The ways in which universities speak about the work of campus-community engagement can convey the reciprocal nature of partnerships and whether

---

**Table 2**

*Examples of Collaborative Language*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partnered</th>
<th>Engaged</th>
<th>Provided support</th>
<th>Connected with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teamed up</td>
<td>Enhanced</td>
<td>Provided services</td>
<td>Joined forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>Served</td>
<td>Participated in</td>
<td>Enriched</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
intentionally or not, indicate how the university views its relationship with the community. Using language describing the university doing “to” or “on” the community versus working “with” the community supports the normative view of higher education institutions as experts “helping” “needy” communities. At universities that consider their community partners as co-educators and emphasize the importance of shared power with them, it is important that all external communications support and promote these ideas.

As the number of universities receiving the Carnegie engagement classification increases, there is no doubt that there is an understanding at these universities of the importance of reciprocal partnerships, which leads one to wonder why university communications do not succeed in portraying campus-community partnerships as reciprocal and valuing of community partners. A likely explanation is that communication professionals in higher education are approaching topics of community engagement from the traditional concept of service being primarily one-directional. Whereas engagement professionals advocate for service that addresses community-identified needs, promotes student learning, and is mutually beneficial, many people ascribe to the notion that all acts of service only benefit the community and those who are serving simply benefit by “giving back.” Communications professionals who consider service from both parties’ perspectives will more likely produce media that clearly details benefits to university and community partners.

An important task for higher education marketing and public relations offices is to communicate a consistent brand for the institution; branding is a strategy undertaken to ensure that stakeholders receive a cohesive and consistent message (Anctil, 2008). The analysis in this study demonstrates that, across all six award-winning universities, various offices even at the same institution disseminate diverging messages about engagement efforts. The incongruity of declaring oneself as an engaged university while producing communications that fail to convey reciprocity and valuing of community partners subverts an institution’s brand. University communications from any Web page—the University’s homepage or office-specific—are perceived as coming from the university, which highlights the importance of this topic to institution branding. Any and all communications can define how institutions are perceived. Brand consistency should be a compelling reason for an engaged university to create more communications evincing reciprocity with and valuing of community partners in campus-community engagement.

Based on this study’s findings, we have developed a set of recommendations by which campus communications can be more reflective of reciprocal, valued campus-community partnerships. These recommendations have been developed in conjunction with some of the nonprofit organization staff with which Louisiana State University regularly partners, and are intended for communication professionals and all others involved in communicating about campus-community partnerships.

1. **Develop a centralized campus Web site with resources for community partners.** The primary audience for such a Web site would include nonprofit partners (though if it is useful to your institution, it also could include corporate, governmental, and business partners as well). The three most important attributes of such a Web site are: (a) it can easily be found from the university homepage and through keyword searches using language customarily used by nonprofit staff, b) it delineates and defines the different ways to engage with the institution and leads prospective (and existing) partners to the correct contact for each initiative, and (c) it allows for two-way communication with partners interested in asking questions or providing feedback. Such a Web site would be developed with a mind to all of the different types of community engagement in which an institution is involved. If available, an institution’s application to the Carnegie Community Engagement classification would be useful in identifying the many and varied ways in which your institution engages with the community, including service-learning, community service, community-based research, internships/co-ops, tutoring, extension programs, training programs, continuing education, outreach, and library services.

2. **Whenever possible, identify community partners.** It is important to give credit to the other half of the partnerships for their time, effort, resources, and care to make that partnership successful. Consider how your communications can strengthen your partner and partnership, e.g., link to their Web site, draw attention to their achievements, and promote awareness of their cause. Our community partners expressed their desire to see their clients appropriately described in university-generated publicity; they viewed this approach as an opportunity to educate the public and dispel stereotypes about their respective clientele.

3. **Pay attention to the language you use to describe campus-community collaborations.** Avoid using the word “help” and describe the campus “working with” the community partner as opposed to doing something “to,” “for,” or “on” them. If you are not sure how to phrase something, a
sample of alternative language is available in Table 2. In addition to using collaborative language, be sure to credit the community partners for their contributions to the partnership.

4. **Tell the story from both the university and community perspectives.** Include in stories both the campus’ and the community’s rationale for engaging in the partnership. This approach will tell a more complete story for readers and will promote some of the central principles of campus-community engagement—that university efforts address a community-identified need, universities are important to their communities, and communities are important to their universities.

5. **Represent all aspects of the project as a joint effort.** This approach will help achieve some of the goals outlined above, but will also preclude portraying campus-community partnerships as something the campus “decided” to do, as opposed to a collaborative project based on mutual benefits and a shared vision. This will help convey the nature of a true partnership.

**Study Limitations and Future Research**

Although the current study’s findings reveal the challenges of communicating reciprocity in Web site communications at six universities highly regarded for their campus-community partnerships, one is cautioned to not use these findings to generalize about other universities’ communications. This is a study of just these six universities. A larger study would allow for broader generalizations about the state of university public relations vis-à-vis community engagement.

There are several potential areas of bias in this study. The study involved one reviewer of content; using more than one reviewer for content analysis may have reduced the chance of bias. We made the assumption that the universities under study did in fact have reciprocal partnerships based on receiving the Presidential Award and Carnegie elective classification, but there is the possibility that some of those universities’ partnerships may not be reciprocal. The conclusions made in this study about the uneven depiction of reciprocity in communications would be bolstered by knowing that the partnerships in the communications were actually reciprocal; this could be accomplished through community partner surveys or more in-depth information from university and community partners involved in the partnerships. Despite these possibilities for bias, we believe that the results yield useful insights into the ways in which campus-community partnerships are communicated and how to improve those communications.

In this study, communications were coded as reciprocal or not reciprocal. There is also a possibility that during coding, potential reciprocal communications were coded as non-reciprocal because of the high standard set for collaborative language. We realize that communications can be partly reciprocal. Additional studies could involve developing a rubric to assess the extent to which a communication articulates reciprocity between the campus and community entities, and could provide insight into specific components of reciprocity in terms of how well each component is communicated.

Future studies could examine the possibility of communications portraying campus-community collaborations as reciprocal when in fact they are not. Further studies could also provide more insight into factors that affect university communications’ portrayal of community partners. Research could be conducted on whether there is a correlation between a campus framing service as charity if the campus-community work is developed and managed by one kind of university office or another, or if there is a theme of paternalism in coverage of international projects in which there is a marked difference in culture, standard of living, and resources. Also, studies could investigate if there is a point in time in which university communications change from non-reciprocal representations to reciprocal, such as after receiving the Carnegie engagement classification or the introduction of a new university mission statement honoring engagement. Further research could examine how communications are handled across engaged universities; for example, whether communications are usually handled by public affairs or engagement offices, or if these offices work together to create communications, and if there are efforts to educate communicators about how to portray campus-community collaborations.

Perhaps this study may be thought of as a call to action for engaged universities. It would be prudent for all engaged universities to analyze their own university communications—general and department-specific—and identify areas for improvement. Universities would be contributing to the reciprocity principle by inviting community partners to suggest ways to improve university communications about campus-community partnerships. We recommend developing plans to regularly assess how campus-community partnerships are being represented in Web pages and other communication vehicles. Finally, we endorse having a mechanism in place to regularly educate new communications professionals to the concepts of reciprocity and community partner valuing as well as the best ways to represent campus-community partnerships in university communications.
Notes

The following people contributed helpful feedback during the development of this article: Judy Bethly, executive director, Volunteers in Public Schools (VIPS); Lorri Burgess, executive director, Baton Rouge Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation; and Sonya Gordon, public information officer, East Baton Rouge School System. We also thank Jan Shoemaker, former director of Louisiana State University’s (LSU) Center for Community Engagement, Learning, and Leadership, for her wisdom, guidance, and suggestions, and Nicole Dahmen, of LSU’s Manship School of Mass Communication, for her feedback and suggestions on preparing this article for publication.

References


Authors

CHRISTY KAYSER ARRAZATTEE (ckayser@lsu.edu) is the assistant director of the Center for Community Engagement, Learning, and Leadership (CCELL) at Louisiana State University (LSU). CCELL serves as LSU’s clearinghouse for service-learning pedagogy, community-engaged research, and community partnerships. Arrazattee holds an M.M.S. degree (Master of Mass Communication) from LSU.

MARYBETH LIMA (mlima1@lsu.edu) is the director of CCELL and the Cliff & Nancy Spanier Alumni Professor of Biological and Agricultural Engineering at LSU. She is co-editor of the book The Future of Service-Learning: New Solutions for Sustaining and Improving Practice (Stylus, 2009) and author of Building Playgrounds, Engaging Communities: Creating Safe and Happy Places for Children (LSU Press, 2013).

LISA LUNDY (llundy@lsu.edu) is an associate professor in the Manship School of Mass Communication at LSU, where she teaches public relations. She earned her PhD in 2004 from the University of Florida. She currently serves on the editorial board for the Journal of Applied Communications.