

Council on Engagement and Outreach (CEO) Benchmarking Engagement Update - June 10, 2009

The APLU Council on Engagement and Outreach identified the need for mechanisms that create a better shared understanding of principles and practices of engagement in higher education. Council leadership has envisioned a web-based system to collect and provide public access to consistent information from APLU member institutions. The system would be consistent with previous national assessment efforts and existing tools and is organized around six broad dimensions of engagement:

- Institutional commitment to engagement
- Faculty and staff are involved in engagement and outreach activities
- Students are involved in engagement and outreach activities
- Institution is reciprocally engaged with diverse individuals and communities
- The impact and outcomes of engagement and outreach activities are assessed
- Resource/Revenue opportunities are generated through engagement and outreach activities

Twenty-five institutions agreed to pilot a system; sixteen institutions (shaded) responded to a request for feedback on a draft proposed structure and items for obtaining information on institutional engagement.

California Polytechnic State University	University of Connecticut
California State – Fullerton	University of Georgia
Clemson University	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Kansas State University	University of Kentucky
Michigan State University	University of Massachusetts Amherst
New Jersey Institute of Technology	University of New Hampshire
New Mexico State University	University of New Orleans
North Carolina State	University of North Texas
Northern Illinois University	University of Wisconsin-Extension
Ohio University	University of Wisconsin Milwaukee
Ohio State University	Virginia Tech
Oregon State University	Washington State University
Purdue University	

Brief Summary of Feedback

Many institutions indicated that a more detailed, comprehensive definition of Engagement is essential. Challenges related to definition are frequently expressed in comments on specific items, such as “what funds would be included within an *Institutional Engagement Budget*?” Another fundamental concern is the focus of the draft items on academic departments and faculty activities, with several institutions noting that non-academic units and professional staff are significantly involved in carrying out the institution’s engagement mission. Greater specification is needed regarding basic definitions and the scope of work that should be included.

Capturing information on faculty roles and rewards emerged as another area of significant concern. Policies for rewarding faculty exist at different institutional levels and are implemented in diverse (and perhaps inconsistent) ways by various departments or for specific faculty. It may be appropriate to have respondents specify the institutional level where certain policies and mechanisms exist. Feedback also reveals a tension between measuring and rewarding engagement as a separate area of faculty responsibility versus engagement as a quality or method that is suffused throughout the existing domains of teaching, research and service.

Many expressed a general concern as to whether a national system could transcend variation across institutions in the meaning and interpretation of the specific items. Such concerns were often linked to questions about overall goals and purposes, and some respondents doubted whether it was possible to create a viable system. Despite these concerns, the feedback received from pilot institutions reflected considerable institutional investment as well as a depth of insight. Most institutions view the initiative as potentially having significant value and expressed an interest in continued involvement.

Recommendations

Working Title: Higher Education Engagement Database - A national system and process for obtaining and communicating information on institutional engagement

The system should focus on collecting and disseminating information on key elements of institutional engagement. Institutions would use the system for self-assessment, sharing promising institutional practices, and contributing to conceptual identification and increasing specification.

Recommended system attributes:

- Concise, descriptive and quantitative information
- Readily accessed and easily reviewed
- Information obtained and updated at regular intervals
- Dynamic, interactive, evolving

Engagement in higher education is highly contextual and variable across institutions, but there is much to be gained by a common framework that would support consistent information and communication. With the leadership of CEO and the participation of APLU member institutions, this effort can advance by using the rich information contained in the feedback from the pilot institutions to revise the draft structure and items. The alternative is to conclude that engagement is simply too idiosyncratic across institutions for a national framework and database to have value.