“There are a lot of walls in this city. But the thickest one, the tallest one, the historically fortified one is between the university and us locals.”

The quote from a city resident stung — but interviews with nonprofit organizations and businesses in our community echoed this message. This sentiment is not uncommon. The separation between town and gown is felt in many ‘college towns’ across the nation.

As a public institution of higher education our mandate includes support of our many constituencies. Lean economic times reinforce this commitment as we participate in solutions to address multiplying community needs. How then to approach this separation?

Many universities address this issue by promoting greater community engagement by both faculty and students. Although engagement is a good way to increase interaction between the university and the community, there are challenges to developing initiatives that are mutually beneficial. The most common pitfall is that community outreach activities are done in ways that are inconsequential or irrelevant at best, making future interaction problematic.

For example, campus-community relationships may be jeopardized if initiatives are couched as charity. The charity model can inadvertently promote the perception of a distance between a group of magnanimous “haves” affiliated with the campus and needy “have nots” — recipients of well-intentioned service efforts.
In addition, requiring college students to “do” service in the community (e.g. work in soup kitchens) may reinforce students’ narrow perceptions that the population they are serving is somehow essentially different from themselves. This experience, then, does little if the aim is transformational learning. Working with those who have different perspectives, with issues that are complicated and sometimes controversial, must be carefully crafted and choreographed to avoid making efforts asymmetrical.

To strengthen campus-community relationships, a collaborative balance among people and organizations involved in engagement activities is key. Community members should initiate and/or contribute to the identification of needs and the design of initiatives to address those needs. Academics with subject expertise and research skills may contribute accurate data on community issues to assist community representatives in the selection of approaches.

Regardless of the array of skills available or the needs being addressed, we have found that the most powerful experiences are ones characterized by the formation of a community of learners — a group of people who create and disseminate information in the pursuit of a shared objective.

For example, a community of learners forms when a community member or organization brings an issue to the table, or a faculty or staff member learns of a need in the community. Conversations around the issue generate ideas about ways to address the need(s). A course or courses with related content are identified.

Faculty willing to participate with the community partner link community engagement activities to their course learning objectives. For example, if the need is additional help in the city's soup kitchen, a professor, together with the community partner, would not only describe the need to the college students, but also present the broader social dynamics that underlie the need.

Students would study the issues related to hunger, unemployment, poverty, etc. in real and important ways. The students would then work with community members to implement solutions that may reach well beyond serving food a few hours a week during the semester. The learning process happens both on campus and off, in the classroom and in the community, among students, community members and faculty. Not only does this interaction build relationships between community and campus, it teaches everyone involved the value of life-long learning and community engagement.

At our university, this model of community engagement as a community of learners, developed over time. In 2008, an initiative began with a small group of interested faculty who believed community engagement could be a powerful force, not only for our students, but also for addressing community needs. We began to identify those professors who enhanced student learning through collaborative partnerships with the community.

The ultimate goal of the community engagement experience was to involve students in efforts to make a positive difference in communities. We named this type of community engagement experiences within coursework, Academic Community Engagement (ACE) and designated these courses on the class schedule with the initials ACE. The designation was connected to the professor, not the course, so teaching a community engaged course was purely voluntary and students could choose whether or not to take an ACE course.

As the positive results of these courses were reported (i.e. increased student interest in the course, better attendance, higher teaching evaluations), as more professors began using their community engagement experiences as a basis for publications and presentations, more faculty members became

interested in adopting the pedagogy. ACE course count has grown from 16 identified courses in 2010 to approximately 400 in any given academic year. This initiative has been welcomed by the university administration and included in the university’s faculty evaluation system.

After several years of assessing data from faculty, students, and community partners, we find these ACE courses do create real dialog between organizations and businesses and for truly bringing town and gown resources and expertise together.

If this model for engagement (the development of a community of learners) is adopted, community engagement courses are able to effect change, to help bring walls down so that campus and community intermingle in free comings and goings — so that university and community expertise and resources can mix to improve the quality of life in our communities and on our campuses. Academic Community Engagement can build bridges between town and gown by inviting both into a broader community of learners working together for the public good.

Dr. Richard Eglsaer is provost and vice president of Academic Affairs at Sam Houston State University.
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