St. Cloud State University Community Engagement Vision and Implementation Plan

Introduction

Community engagement is central to the academic and strategic action planning process that St. Cloud State University has been undergoing since 2008. In the coming years, to more clearly define our institutional identity, St. Cloud State will among other themes concentrate on “Character that reflects our region.” By developing and offering an array of programs that reflect the character of our region, we also commit to meeting the needs of our broader community. It is formal recognition that in serving as a “steward of place”, we are interdependently linked with our communities and function as both learners and teachers in addressing the opportunities and challenges before us, now and in the future. As one of the four pillars, community engagement serves as a framework to assist in aligning and positioning institutional commitments, goals and resources to achieve the vision and mission of the University. Because community engagement takes so many different forms and involves so many different constituencies, this plan provides an overarching framework for other strategic planning efforts, such as scholarship, technology, diversity and international visioning.

As part of the University’s objective of institutionalizing our commitment to community engagement, the University President convened a workgroup to focus on these issues. The group's charge was to develop an action plan for expanding our engagement within the Central Minnesota region and a community engagement model that will guide and focus SCSU’s work with the community. The following report delineates how the group arrived at a working definition for community engagement, while also explaining the rationale for the importance of community engagement and recommending implementation strategies for realizing our vision of an engaged institution.

Community Engagement Definition
Community engagement is an explicit and intentional institutional commitment to engage in partnerships with communities and constituencies, locally, regionally, and internationally, with
the goal of enhancing the quality of life for all. This commitment is based on respect for the expertise, knowledge and needs of everyone involved.

- It includes partnerships and collaborations that are relational in an ethos of learning and working together to serve each other and to solve shared issues.
- It includes engagement connected to classes and independent of academic instruction, all of which deepens students’ commitment to community, civic engagement and life-long active learning.
- It involves university and community in scholarship through knowledge exchange, discovery and implementation, recognizing and honoring the interdependency between university and community and community and university.
- It involves partnerships and collaborations in the broadest sense of the term community, locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

Work Group Background Research and Sources
To be able to answer what community engagement would look like at St. Cloud State University and what St. Cloud State University would look like as a result of noticeably engaging with community, this document draws on local and national research, scholarly documents and specific implications of a framework for our university and communities. To achieve the latter, the work group recognized the need to learn from various stakeholders and constituencies about their perspectives on what community engagement means now and what it might look like in the future. Thus, to gather input, focus groups and interviews were held on and off-campus to secure feedback from internal and external constituent groups regarding the breadth, depth, and perceptions surrounding community engagement at the University and in the community.

Venture Allies was contracted in the spring of 2009 to conduct interviews with faculty and staff engaged in community outreach and research as well as with community leaders, organizations, residents and businesses. This work built on the community visioning sessions held at the Civic Center by the work group in March 2008. We wanted to know what the St. Cloud community sees as its needs for engaging with SCSU in relation to issues of community strengths, education, environment, economics, social issues, arts & culture, global connections, sustainability, and other identified topics. We designed these sessions around three questions:
1. What do people want to preserve in the community?
2. What do people want to create in the community?
3. What do people want to change in the community?

The sessions along with other information gathering from our “internal and external communities” added perspective and appreciation for how we, as a university, are being understood. It also demonstrated more receptiveness from St. Cloud State to the community’s voices in articulating the ideal nature of the relationship between campus and community.

To further solidify our understanding of community engagement, members of the work group contacted institutions of higher learning that have institutionalized community engagement as an operational value and had received the Elective Classification for Community Engagement from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Other resources utilized in this work were information from Campus Compact, Bruce Hendersen’s *Teaching at the People’s University*, Ernest Boyer’s applied scholarship in *Scholarship Reconsidered*, and documents and reports from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, such as *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*.

**Rationale**

*Conceptual Framework*
During the visioning session at the St. Cloud Civic Center, certain themes recurred throughout the discussions. Many participants voiced the need for mutual accessibility, accountability, flexibility, intentionality, consistency and sustainability in our work together as a university and as a community. In their diversity and complexity, these six terms frame an intentional structure for the engaged work of community and university, rooted in the understanding of and appreciation for our interconnectedness and grounded in our shared goal of quality of life for all. These principles create a system, which is emergent, responsive, creative, synergistic, symbiotic and reflective. Their absence or presence can serve as indicators of levels of mutuality. Because
of their relational nature they perform an integrating function between and among community partners, including the university.

The result of the visioning session therefore was not only an idea-product, but even more importantly it was a process of thinking together with our community partners, which led to a new understanding of “community.” By this, we mean, the ways in which the University and our community are organically and also dynamically linked, and how complex problems grounded in a shared vision can be approached through coordinated efforts and combined strengths. The guiding principle for community engagement is that planning for the campus should encompass the community and in turn, that planning for the community should encompass the campus. From this collective wisdom emerges a frame of reference for shared stewardship of place and a vision which is specific to the region, as well as globally relevant.

**Practical Realities**

As a public and regional university, community engagement is a means to live into and live up to our commitments. This requires us to be accessible and adaptable in reciprocal relationships that effectively respond to our constituents and the local, region and global community to address societal needs. This work done with an ethic of care, responsiveness and respect will build on our strengths and characterize our university as an institution that values and is dedicated to the well-being of our community and region.

The future success of our university and community depends upon our ability to engage with community in meaningful and focused ways building an environment of synergistic successes and achievements for community and university. The collective resources of St. Cloud State University and the broader community can significantly contribute to the social, economic and cultural development of the region if done in sustained partnership with greater intentionality and focus. By building and strengthening reciprocal relationships, there is an increased awareness of the opportunities and the value of these partnerships to all stakeholders. Through this work together, there is an emerging understanding and value of what each contributes now and can contribute to the well-being of the whole region as well as globally.
The knowledge and understanding gained between campus and community will assist in continuing to make our teaching, research, and service more relevant and competitive. Community engagement, community-based service, community-based scholarship, and active experiential learning will strengthen the institution’s value for all constituents. This communicates to students, their families and others what an education at St. Cloud State University means as it prepares graduates for life and work. Research shows that community-based learning contributes positively to student retention and enrollment because students quickly establish meaningful relationships on- and off-campus. Furthermore, students are able to deepen their understanding of self and gain confidence in their pursuit of innovative and creative ideas, applications and contributions. It improves student satisfaction with college because engagement has a positive impact through the hands-on application of academic learning, thus making it more likely that they will graduate.

Our capacity to be competitive and relevant is intricately linked to the ability of the university and community to thrive together in the future. The knowledge and understanding gained through these reciprocal relationships expands our ability to seek and apply innovative strategies to solve problems, to apply existing and new knowledge in service to and in collaboration with various communities. The relationships provide rich learning laboratories for students, faculty and staff in partnership with various stakeholders. These laboratories enhance student progress and development through experiential and applied learning, and create opportunities for scholarship and creative activities.

Public engagement sharpens our ability to communicate to others our mission. Moreover, it provides an articulated framework for our successes and contributions to be recognized, celebrated and rewarded by our constituents. As our commitment to community becomes more visible, there will be a deeper understanding and familiarity with St. Cloud State University, a rich appreciation for the contributions and value of the university to the region and community, and enhanced pride and ownership in the educational enterprise, outreach, partnerships and service embedded in the institution.
This body of work will increase our value as a worthy state investment and role model for others our ability to be accountable to our stakeholders. This can only be realized with the involvement and investment of community and university together in partnership.

**Vision**

St. Cloud State University as a **publicly engaged institution** will be dedicated to mutually beneficial interactions with our communities and other external constituencies and stakeholders through the development, exchange, and application of knowledge, information, and expertise dedicated to realizing quality of life for all. The indicators of a publically engaged university are:

- **Place-related**: St. Cloud State University is embedded within the community and region in which it is located. Exercising “stewardship of place” does not mean limiting our worldview, but rather it means pursuing our mission in a manner that has meaning to our neighbors and communities, locally, nationally and globally.

- **Interactive**: St. Cloud State University will function both as a teacher and learner, recognizing in the spirit of the work that there is much to be learned and much to be gained in partnership. Depending on needs, expertise and interest, campus or community members can initiate and lead projects. The collaborations will be built and sustained through mutual trust and respect, and intentional communication and responsiveness.

- **Mutually Beneficial**: St. Cloud State University and its community will be responsive and accessible in working together to achieve mutual benefit for the community and university. We will engage in partnerships that are appropriate to our mission and academic strengths as well as the strengths of the community.

- **Integrated and Sustainable**: St. Cloud State University will infuse sustainable engagement throughout the campus and community by integrating engagement in student learning, scholarship and teaching, culture of practice and policies, professional development of faculty and staff, and pride and recognition of this work. (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2002)

Our challenge is to affect a cultural change not only at the university, but also in the community, so that investment in one also means investment in the other. By moving away from a solely
expert model toward genuine collaboration, learning and teaching become multi-directional, with expertise and initiative shared among and between campus and community partnerships. Only then will we be able to realize our commitment to prepare students for life and work and to ensure the sustainability of our institution within the context of a sustainable community.

Current Situation

Before moving to recommendations for institutionalizing and effectively realizing community engagement at St. Cloud State University and in the community, the list below is meant to give an impression of the current state of community engagement by providing some specific examples. Even though it is incomplete, if nothing else, the list does offer insight into institutional support for community engagement, and major trends, but also the decentralized nature of community engagement at SCSU. Because of this, there exists a lack of knowledge and understanding of what is currently taking place, thus, making it difficult to measure the impact of this work and fully articulate the activities and initiatives taking place. Lastly, it limits our ability to celebrate the on-going work and to more strategically focus on concentrated or identified themes or needs.

Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement

To further institutionalize our commitment to community engagement, St. Cloud State University submitted an application for the 2010 Community Engagement Classification, providing descriptions and examples of institutionalized community engagement that demonstrated alignment among mission, culture, leadership, resources and practices. We received notification in January of 2011 that St. Cloud State was selected. This classification has been in existence since 2005, when the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching announced a new elective classification for institutions that engage with community, indicating that community engagement was an integral part of the fabric of institutions of higher learning. SCSU now joins the 311 public and private institutions of higher learning in this Carnegie Elective Classification
Celebrate Connection: Showcasing Student and Community Collaboration

The development of this event which takes place at the end of the Fall and Spring academic semesters documents the growing importance and understanding of community engagement as the program now showcases a wide range of community engagement forms, such as field experiences, service learning, internships, volunteering and other community initiatives.

Community-Based Learning and Education Abroad

On several SCSU learning abroad programs such as Chile, Germany and South Africa, students are involved in service-learning projects or other projects that are focused on outreach and engagement in the community. St. Cloud State faculty and staff work with community partners abroad or faculty at participating institutions to develop a comprehensive and integrated experience that reflects the country.

Community-Based Research with Undergraduate and Graduate Students

The inclusion of undergraduate and graduate students in research is an emerging hallmark of St. Cloud State University. As such, many students are involved in community-based research projects. A few examples from the 2009-2010 academic year include the city of St. Cloud /MPCA contract to hire wastewater masters students for research on the “Upper Mississippi River Source Water Protection Project”, Exxon Mobil funding for “Experimental Investigation of Deep Water Reforms”, and a engineering research project regarding Formula Hybrid Race Car competitions.

Faculty Liaison for Service Learning

The position provides support for faculty and students in the area of service learning. This position assists faculty in the development and implementation of service learning courses as well as other civic engagement activities.

MN Campus Compact Membership

President Potter’s membership in this professional organization dedicated to service-learning and community engagement exemplifies our institutional commitment to those pedagogical principles.
**Regional Partnerships**

Community partnerships have resulted in new academic programs and opportunities to expand research and scholarship activities. For example, through involvement in the Science Initiative of Central Minnesota, SCSU faculty developed a new masters program in Regulatory Affairs and Services - a first of its kind in the nation.

St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud Technical and Community College, and the St. Cloud School District are working collaboratively to address the academic underachievement, low high school graduation rates, and poor college participation of underrepresented students in the St. Cloud area through the creation of the Center for Access & Opportunity. Research from this project shows that program participants are gaining immediate and intermediate benefits in terms of academic achievement, high-school completion and college attendance.

**Service Learning Advisory Committee**

This committee has spearheaded service-learning initiatives, but is also noteworthy because its membership not only includes faculty, staff and students, but also community members, thus modeling the principles of effective campus and community collaborations and partnerships.

**Volunteer Connection**

The program plays a vital role in connecting community and university as a clearinghouse for information about community needs and volunteer opportunities, as well as a facilitator for community events. Review of data that documents the impact of volunteer service reflects the significant contributions that members of the university community make within the region.

**Welcome Center**

One of the key findings from the community-engagement visioning sessions was that the community did not understand how to access university services or resources or who, within the university, to contact for specific information, projects or programs. To address this need for a physical and virtual space to bring the university and community together, St. Cloud State
University created the St. Cloud State University Welcome Center, a front door for the community to the University, which opened in September 2010.

Wide Range of Experiential Learning Classes
In the fall 2010 student survey regarding community-based learning, data revealed that 700 students from 30 academic courses taught by 20 different instructors from all five colleges were engaged in experiential learning courses.

Implementation Strategies

The following goals and recommended steps will further serve to realize the community engagement vision.

I. Goal: Promote and foster reciprocal partnerships between community and university.

1. SCSU will be accessible, transparent, and accountable for our commitment to being a valued and equal partner. We will be dedicated to ensuring continued intentional dialogue, transparent decision making processes and the realization and appreciation of the co-educator role of our community partners. We will stay responsive to needs, emerging issues and trends within community.

2. SCSU will strategically sustain scholarly projects that improve our region, and the quality of life of its residents.

3. SCSU will provide comprehensive support for mutually beneficial partnership opportunities. We will work proactively with partners to identify needs and opportunities for academic engagement that capture institutional and community assets that are mutually enforcing and beneficial.

4. The community and SCSU will increase awareness to stakeholders of the opportunities and resources available through the institution and the community.
   a. In collaboration with the community, SCSU will offer seminars, lectures and programs that provide opportunities for sharing, discussing information on public issues and concerns.
b. In collaboration with the community, SCSU will create intentional and structured communication channels to enhance flow of information, initiatives and goals.

5. SCSU will actively participate in community and regional planning activities and initiatives.

6. SCSU will strategically address community engagement in international partnerships agreements.

II. Goal: Foster an institutional community engagement culture that integrates outreach and engagement throughout the university with identified outcomes.

1. Raise awareness and commitment to support, promote and celebrate outreach and engagement activities. Provide infrastructure for and recognize value of individual initiatives as well as institutional goals in this area.

2. Incorporate outreach and engagement in the university’s strategic plan and goals. Consider information regarding international partnerships, regional initiatives and community in the development of institutional goals and the planning processes.

3. Create the capacity within the institution to be effectively and consistently engaged with community.

4. Align community engagement with other campus priorities and initiatives, such as Community of Scholars Plan, International Vision and Plan, Diversity Plan, and Technology Plan, to achieve greater impact. Significant opportunities exist to develop collaborative internal practices that integrate initiatives into a more coherent community engagement frame.

5. Identify new opportunities for faculty, staff, students, departments and units to expand their outreach and engagement activities.

6. Promote the importance of community engagement in the educational experience of our undergraduate and graduate students and also for faculty and staff.

7. Work towards being recognized by our various constituencies for our commitment to provide students an education that prepares them to be civically engaged and life-long learners.
8. Embrace the rich variety of community engagement as conducted by scholars in various disciplines by fostering interdisciplinary projects which reflect the complexity of our global environment.

9. Reflect the importance of community engagement in the process of hiring, promotion and tenure.

10. Annually recognize and celebrate community and university accomplishments and partnerships.

11. Infuse community engagement into all aspects of University life and work.

12. Align all aspects of the organization to support well-defined community engagement outcomes. This includes but is not limited to decisions regarding personnel hiring processes, resource acquisition and financial allocation processes, protocols and policy development, recognition and reward processes, graduation requirements and curriculum development.

III. Goal: Promote engaged scholarship in service to our community.

1. Emphasize elements in the general education curriculum that educate and prepare students for their civic engagement responsibility.

2. Develop structures to support interdisciplinary, class and out of class efforts which foster community engagement.

3. Promote engaged scholarship through hiring, tenure and promotion practices. Align faculty and staff roles, positional responsibilities, recognition and rewards accordingly.

4. Align community-based scholarship with the scholarship of discovery and knowledge.

5. Align the Community of Scholars vision and plan with community engagement implementation strategies and frames.

IV. Goal: Provide every student with active experiential learning experiences that intentionally integrate their learning both in and outside of the classroom.

1. Create an infrastructure that provides every student with an active experiential learning experience(s); curricular and co-curricular.
2. Create the framework so that every student will be provided the knowledge and skill set to be civically engaged. Experiences can range from applied research, service learning, volunteer activity, employment experiences and internships to name a few.

3. Provide assistance to increase service learning opportunities for students, including international service learning and opportunities with under-represented communities.

4. Create University student learning outcomes that address civic engagement and active engaged learning.

5. Incorporate institutional language into admission materials so students and their families understand the nature of student engagement at SCSU. This will be incorporated into intentionally created activities that begin when students are admitted through graduation so they understand and value an SCSU education and what it means for them in life and work.

V. Goal: Identify, maintain and foster shared technological resources among campus and community.

1. Centralize communication pathways to ensure user-friendly, efficient, equal access to campus and community-based shared resources and initiatives.

2. Apply emerging technologies to facilitate learning, communication and partnership activities.

3. Develop and maintain electronic inventory for on- and off-campus partnerships, facilities, social and curricular capital.

4. Develop the next generation of the “way-finder”. The “way-finder” currently located at the Welcome Center, will be expanded to other areas within and outside of the University. This technology serves as an interactive map to find campus information, buildings, directional maps, conduct people search and highlight events.

5. Re-design the St. Cloud State website with the perspective of external stakeholders and constituents so it is easier to access and navigate.

6. Establish a common system and database environment that provides partners access to information and resources.

7. Align aspects of the Technology plan with community engagement implementation strategies and frames.
VI. Goal: Create an institutional infrastructure to facilitate, support and enhance community engagement.

1. SCSU will create the network and mechanisms that encourage our ability to focus resources and expertise to best collaborate with the diverse communities in which we engage. This work will be done with experts in technology and communication to assure accessibility and flexibility of system.
2. Create a Community Engagement Council which brings together various campus and community constituents.
3. Create a position that has responsibility for facilitating the overall university community engagement work. This position should report to the President.
4. Build civic engagement responsibilities into various position responsibilities throughout the university organization infrastructure.
5. Create marketing materials which “brands” the community engagement experience at SCSU and in the community, emphasizing its value for community and campus.
6. Create a university clearinghouse as a resource for development of partnerships and to measure the impact.
7. Periodically evaluate and review current policies and procedures through the lense of enhancing and supporting community engaged activities. Some examples include contracting and purchasing procedures.
8. Evaluate and change, where possible, procedural, cultural and institutional barriers to effective community engagement.

VII. Goal: Develop the mechanisms and systems to assess the impact of community engagement.

1. Facilitate on-going feedback and conversations, and employ deliberate practices that gather community and university needs, and the purposeful examination and identification of priorities and needs, all done in relationships of trust and respect.
2. Develop systems and mechanisms to identify community engagement activities to assess impact, and to shape intentional practices in developing mutually beneficial relationships and partnerships.
3. Establish assessment practices that include, but not limited to the following: community perceptions of institutional engagement; tracking and recording of institution-wide engagement data; impact of engagement on faculty, staff and student learning, community and university; and ongoing feedback loops for assessing partnerships, new and existing.

4. Share the impact of these activities with internal and external stakeholders.

5. SCSU will acquire two technologies, Digital Measures and BEPress, which will systematically collect data on faculty scholarship and community service. These data collections and reporting tools will be used to measure levels of engagement and service, as well as create a searchable clearinghouse of faculty expertise in order to connect faculty with the community.

6. The Liberal Education Assessment Panels will have assessment plans for all goal areas, including Goal Area 9: Civic Engagement & Ethics. Data collected from the assessment process will be formative and be used to better understand student learning and development and to improve courses and curriculum.

Summary

For the community and university, this type of outreach and these kinds of partnerships lead to expertise, knowledge and understanding to the shared benefit of all. This work creates a synergy, which produces meaning and shared purpose with a common vision. The result is engaged scholarship within one interdependent learning community, with knowledge and understanding of what can be achieved in reciprocal relationships by all stakeholders.