One OHIO: Engagement Ecosystem Work Group Executive Summary

Our Vision | OHIO has a thriving Engagement Ecosystem and institutional culture committed to collaboration and mutually beneficial partnerships that catalyze economic and community development that contribute to the vitality of the state of Ohio and Appalachian Region.

Our Values | The OHIO Engagement Ecosystem values reciprocity between the University and external partners; partnerships that are built from an asset-based approach; consistent and authentic communication; responsiveness to community priorities; and respecting equally the expertise and contributions of external partners and university partners.

Community Engagement Defined: “The collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.”

– Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

SUMMARY FINDINGS: THE DISJOINTED PRESENT STATE OF ENGAGEMENT IS DYSFUNCTIONAL

Engagement is central to all public higher education, yet OHIO lacks an institution-wide strategy and network to support it. OHIO has engagement units across the institution, but they are decentralized and siloed. This structure does not support collaboration and communication, resulting in:

1. Missed opportunities for expanding engagement in fund development;¹
2. Excluded, estranged or frustrated external stakeholders;² and
3. Discouragement and lack of recognition of community engaged faculty and administrators.²

OHIO remains in the critical mass and quality building stages and engagement is a conceptual priority not yet embedded as a central core of the institution.³

The current culture has led to a disjointed and dysfunctional engagement ecosystem, leading to reduced quality and quantity of engagement. Campus community members, including alumni living and working in the region, often perceive interactions with OHIO as frustrating, and have repeatedly communicated their desire for authentic and responsive engagement without avail. This is has led them to find other higher education institutions to meet their community's priorities. Lack of resources, transparency, commitment, and vision have become a reputational risk and has caused degradation of trust in OHIO as an anchor institution in campus communities.¹² This environment has allowed competing institutions to make significant inroads in communities surrounding our regional campuses and across the region.⁵

OHIO is lagging behind its peers in practicing evidence-based high impact practices in experiential and community engaged pedagogy, and there is inequitable access to opportunities for students, likely contributing to declining enrollment and retention.⁶ OHIO’s recruitment strategies fail to recognize the exponential value of students from the region. The Guarantee+ and BRICKS General Education Reform will demand an increased capacity across the institution for supporting experiential learning, including community engagement, internship, leadership, research, creative activity, and study away programs. Many regional campus students expect to complete their degrees and related requirements locally, online or in a hybrid, and therefore need greater access to experiential learning opportunities in their home communities.²⁴ Programs such as College Credit Plus are often identified as threats to the institution's bottom line instead of an opportunity to engage with local students, develop their sense of belonging to the Bobcat family, and thus be retained through graduation.⁷
EVIDENCE EXISTS THAT MEANINGFUL CHANGE IS JUSTIFIED AND WILL HAVE LASTING BENEFIT

"In 2005, Tulane University was nearly decimated by Hurricane Katrina. Following the storm, Tulane made deliberate steps to move engagement to the core of its identity by prioritizing civic learning, creating new centers, and enhancing old centers focused on community engagement. The move resulted in record numbers of applications to Tulane, doubling the number of applications prior to the storm." (Weerts, 2019, p. 16)

Strong evidence demonstrates that universities with sustained institutionalization of engagement (in their philosophy and mission, student and faculty support mechanisms, external stakeholder participation strategies, and institution-wide practices) outperform their peer institutions in scholarly activity, student enrollment and retention, and financial success. For all OHIO students there is curricular rationale for enhancing access to experiential learning. Research clearly demonstrates positive outcomes of engagement in three areas: persistence & retention, academics, and personal/social development. These outcomes are even more prevalent for minority and underrepresented populations, including students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.

These recommendations will allow OHIO to:

1. Recognize its weaknesses and strengths related to engagement; and
2. Realign engagement to better meet the needs of the region we serve.

Most importantly, however, there are clear reasons for improving the engagement culture:

A. These efforts directly align with President Nellis’ strategic goals;
B. These efforts are vital to maintaining OHIO’s place as an educational institution and leader in Regional Higher Education; and
C. There is significant return on investment can be gained.

OHIO has the power to improve the culture of engagement and rebuild trust in our brand throughout the region. Implementation will allow a future state that aligns with the national higher education best practices of respect for local efforts/organizations; responsiveness to community needs; transparency; access; coordination with local/regional organizations; commitment of resources; and academic neutrality/flexibility.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF INACTION: DECLINE IN REPUTATION, INFLUENCE, ACADEMIC SUCCESS, & REVENUE

National changes in competition, dynamics, and the value proposition of higher education make engagement essential. Relationships have eroded between OHIO and all its communities as the University has “pulled back” from engagement that would have helped maintain its position as a regional leader. It is only due to the efforts and commitment of Regional Deans, coordinating councils, advisory boards, faculty, and staff that this situation is not dramatically worse. However, with new restructuring/cost cutting measures, we can no longer rely on existing relationships to be maintained.

Because experiential learning and community engagement lack sustained institutionalization in the curriculum and in reward, promotion and tenure policies, OHIO risks continued decline in enrollment and retention, the loss of engaged faculty, and increased tension in town-gown relations. Regional Higher Education equates to over a quarter of all students at OHIO. If we are not investing time and talent in local communities, why should they care and invest in us? OHIO must demonstrate, not just say, that it is part of the community. The financial implications of inaction are enormous.

"When you make a commitment, you create hope. When you keep a commitment, you create trust."

Many issues of trust can be addressed, and confidence restored, but only if OHIO is willing to recommit to engage with regional communities, dialogue and communicate authentically, and provide support for engagement planning and activities.

Without implementation of these recommendations, OHIO can expect to continue to lose relevance within the region, lose ground towards achieving financial stability, and fail to attain the national standard of the Carnegie Foundation’s Community Engagement Classification, thus falling significantly behind peer institutions.
Our History with Community: the Case for a Renewed Focus on Engagement

OHIO is deeply rooted in community. John C. Baker, while in his first year, faced formidable challenges. One was establishing the first university branches by building upon the University’s existing evening division offerings. Created as a temporary emergency measure at the time, Baker anticipated access issues across geographic and personal boundaries would persist, and the university’s regional campuses would remain relevant for years to come. Under Vernon R. Alden’s leadership, the University assumed an activist role in regional development, carrying forward Baker’s vision. Because of the passionate commitment of the communities in which they were located, the branches have served the needs of the community and provided access to higher education. Now more than seven decades later, this structure of OHIO, a central campus in Athens and five regional university campuses, is well positioned to serve the region and its people through research, service, civil discourse, and higher learning.

In light of racial and socio-economic injustices, universities have set a focus on outreach and engagement to their communities with the intention of developing knowledge, policies and practices to enable community-engaged scholarship and to address troubling and pressing issues. Demonstrating relevance and defending costs are challenges most colleges and universities face today. Devoting time and attention to community engagement as an intentional way to shape a successful future for higher education is urgent and imperative. Addressing difficult social issues, and rediscovering the role of democracy, are at the heart of community-engaged scholarship. The campus and community can mutually benefit from grassroots leadership development. Meaningful research designed to benefit society and educating students to lead productive lives in our modern and diverse world, is the ultimate outcome of an engaged university. Indeed, community input and involvement are vital as higher education leaders make decisions about the future of their institutions.

While utilizing institutional resources to help solve social problems seems a welcomed and strategic move, unclear definitions and differing opinions about the purpose of campus-community engagement are commonplace and problematic. Still, the advantages of gathering feedback and intentionally setting a course for collaboration are evident. Such efforts can alleviate the current divide between state legislators and education leaders resulting from a lack of campus-community dialogue. While time consuming, organizational and community relations should involve an open dialogue approach. Ongoing campus-community conversations about the needs of the people, plans for the communities of the region, and the relevant resources of the institution that should be made available to address these needs, are a vital to the continued success of OHIO.

A MODEL FOR OUR FUTURE: RECLAIMING OUR ROLE AS AN ANCHOR INSTITUTION

On the surface, Ohio University has all the characteristics of an anchor institution in Southeast Ohio, by virtue of size, reach, and longevity. Yet, we fail to consistently, strategically, and intentionally align institutional resources with the needs of our communities in a coordinated way. Now more than ever, as our region feels the impact of a global pandemic, the interdependence of the University and its communities is abundantly clear. The actualization of Ohio University as an anchor institution presents us with an enormous opportunity to emerge as a trusted, dynamic regional leader, and uplift Southeast Ohio—and its people—through mutually beneficial and intentional planning and partnership.

Anchor institutions are place-based entities such as universities or hospitals that are:

- Rooted in their local community by mission, invested capital, or relationships to customers, employees, residents and vendors.
- Able to engage in long term-planning in a manner that aligns their institutional interests with those of their local communities.
- Able and motivated to play a key role in improving the long-term wellbeing of the communities they serve by better aligning and deploying their institutional resources—such as hiring, purchasing, and investment—with the needs of those communities.

Adapted from “Anchor Institutions & Community Vitality: Strategic Framework”, Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, and “Anchor Assets”, CUMU & Democracy Collaborative.
Engagement Ecosystem Implementation Plan, June 2020

From June 2019 through June 2020, the One OHIO Engagement Ecosystem Work Group convened its members, interviewed Regional Deans, and conducted community listening sessions on regional campuses to develop the Engagement Ecosystem Implementation Plan (Appendix A), summarized below. This plan, if implemented, will support institutionalization that is sustained across all of One OHIO, including all regional campuses and the Athens campus.

I. Activate a Robust and Thriving Engagement Ecosystem

Priority | Develop a sustainable network structure to ensure all engagement entities plan and implement holistic strategies so that OHIO can collectively develop a system for rapid responses to stakeholder inquiries that is easily navigated by both internal and external stakeholders. Infrastructure and protocols are needed that enable OHIO to be an authentic partner. The Engagement Ecosystem must be:

- **Responsive** to the needs of the University and Community
- **Informed and Informing** at the University-wide level
- **Empowered** to make timely and appropriate decisions
- **Valued** by the University, Community, Region and State

**Action Steps**

1. Support the OHIO Engagement Ecosystem by formalizing a coordinating network that assists various constituencies in the implementation, advancement, and institutionalization of engagement on all OHIO campuses.

2. Improve connectivity within the Engagement Ecosystem through consistent data collection, shared comprehensive reporting, standardization of high quality and comprehension of engagement, and improved internal communication.

3. Formalize the Engagement Ecosystem through sustained institutionalization by explicitly integrating engagement in coordinating entities, strategic planning, and funding strategies.

**Impact** | Appropriately implemented and maintained, these recommendations will transition engagement from the margins to the center of the institution, resulting in authentic and genuine integration of engagement best practices in teaching, research, and service. This will elevate and strengthen existing engagement, enable leadership to appreciate the increased benefits of engagement, and maintain engagement as a core priority of institution and monitor related obligations.

II. Initiate Shift in Culture and Values

Priority | Foster a shift in culture and values to embrace engagement in the core of our identity to ensure that OHIO faculty, staff, students, and community partners understand the value of engagement, are supported and rewarded for engagement efforts, and feel personally valued as members of the Bobcat family.

**Action Steps**

1. Embed tangible value for engagement in OHIO policies for all faculty and staff to enhance and equalize knowledge and awareness, involvement and support, leadership, and incentives and rewards for engagement.

2. Open pathways that strengthen community partner voice and leadership including accessible internal leaders across the institution who are responsive to community priorities.

**Impact** | OHIO is an anchor institution celebrating and advocating for the region. Engagement is embedded as a central value and practice among leadership, personnel, students, and alumni. OHIO is widely known as an engaged institution, meeting and exceeding national standards and peer institutions. The region's communities thrive.
III. Strengthen Meaningful and Equitable Student Engagement

Priority | Prioritize expansion and access to experiential and community engaged learning for all students to improve enrollment, retention, and student success on all campuses.

Action Steps

1. Expand and sustain capacity for supporting student awareness, opportunities, leadership, and incentives and awards for experiential and community engaged learning in curricular and co-curricular activities.

2. Consolidate and expand access to experiential learning software to regional campuses, including platforms for opportunity matching, tracking, and assessment.

Impact | Students on all campuses experience equity in experiential learning and community engaged curricular and co-curricular opportunities, leading to increased enrollment, academic success, persistence and retention, and personal and social outcomes. Experiential and engagement data sets and evaluations are universal and accessible, allowing for accurate tracking and management.

IV. Practice Authentic Community Relations and Advocacy

Priority | It is paramount that 1) OHIO leadership is present and visible in our communities and advocate for the region with elected officials, 2) OHIO communicate and maintain open dialogue between the community and university that is transparent, authentic, genuine, meaningful, and results in alignment of university interests with community-identified priorities; and 3) OHIO revise business policies that restrict engagement with campus communities.

Action Steps

1. Meaningfully engage with communities across the region through authentic interactions and transparent, ongoing communication that consistently demonstrates OHIO’s commitment to its communities to create sustained institutionalization of community partner awareness, mutual understanding, and community partner voice and leadership.

2. Affirm OHIO’s support for our region through internal budgetary allocations dedicated to supporting institutional engagement with community, and revise business operations as an anchor institution to align with local economic and community development agendas through hiring, purchasing, and procurement that will satisfy the requirements of the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification and support our region.

Impact | OHIO is valued as a meaningful asset by campus communities and the region. The institutional foundations exist to effectively support student, staff, and faculty efforts in contributing to the region’s vitality through ethical and localized community and economic development. Communication and dialogue are built on the value and practice of reciprocity transparency. Communities are equal and respected partners that directly contribute to the success of the University. Enrollment of regional students, philanthropic engagement, and regional engagement partners increase over time.

Conclusion

The region’s communities remain eager for partnership. There is a small but mighty number of staff and faculty that can act as engagement ambassadors. Students and alumni from the region yearn for their voices and experiences to inform the future of their alma mater. Importantly, there are multiple examples of universities that have traveled this path before us, providing replicable models. Further, resources exist to assist OHIO in becoming an anchor institution, a model demonstrated to strengthen an institution’s standing, increase engagement, and resulting in meaningful impacts for communities. We anticipate resources will be needed over time to support professional development for leadership, faculty and staff; experiential and community engagement platforms; and engagement ecosystem support and coordination.

The impact overall of these recommendations will result in:

1) an increase in student success, retention, persistence, and completion
2) improved relations and support from elected officials at the state and federal level, campus communities, and alumni
3) strengthened and elevated standing of OHIO as a public higher education institution.
Work Group Members: Laurie Lach, co-chair, Mary Nally, co-chair

Stephanie Burcham  
Lisa Cohen  
Sarah Davis  
Barb Harrison  
Tom Hodson  
Elizabeth Jones  
Kevin King  
Courtney Lefebvre  
Don Moore  
Matt Roberts

Attached Appendices:

A. Engagement Ecosystem Explained  
B. Ecosystem Work Plan  
C. Regional Campus Scope of Work/Staffing  
D. Recommendations Outside of EEWG Scope  
E. Carnegie Classification Application Outline  
F. Assessment Rubric for Institutionalizing Community Engagement in Higher Education. University of Minnesota.  
G. EE Work Group SWOT Analysis  
H. Listening Session Summaries  
I. Regional Dean Interview Summary

Endnotes