

## **Creating a Culture of Outreach and Partnerships**

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The American Council on Education (ACE) (2022) defines community engagement as a “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.” ACE further describes the purpose of such engagement to “enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.” Currently 357 U.S. universities hold an Elective Classification for Community Engagement, recognizing an institution’s commitment to building impactful external partnerships. While departments throughout the institution make this possible, the engagement of departments and their faculty may vary depending on many factors. In this paper, I will share the work of The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) College of Fine Arts Outreach and Arts Entrepreneurship Committee. In creating this group of internal and external stakeholders, we held an initial meeting to identify research and curricular connections to the university and institutions outside of the university. The responses from the participants of this initial meeting, the next steps, and possible generalizations to other institutions will be offered in this paper.

UTRGV is a public university with a Fall 2022 enrollment of over 32,000 students. Holding an Elective Classification for Community Engagement, the institution is distinct in that it is a distributed campus with facilities throughout the four counties making up the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas. In 2015 UTRGV was created from the two legacy institutions of UT Pan American in Edinburg and UT Brownsville, approximately 65 miles from each other. The College of Fine Arts (CFA) is made up of five schools/departments with music, theatre, dance, visual art and design, and creative writing on the

Edinburg campus and music and visual art and design on the Brownsville campus. The distributed campus model allows UTRGV to fulfill its mission to “serves [sic] the Rio Grande Valley” (The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, 2022).

While being an outward facing institution is at the core of UTRGV, our faculty, like those of university faculty across the U.S., have large pressures on their time between their teaching, research/creative activity, and service obligations. Although the backbone of the Arts is public engagement through performance, exhibitions, and publications, there was a need to create a structure to support the public work of faculty and students and create pathways of sustainability. I began as Dean of the College of Fine Arts in July 2022 and, like many academic leaders in a new position and new community, invested a large amount of time meeting leaders of Arts organizations throughout the Rio Grande Valley. Through this experience, I learned of the rich cultural resources of the Rio Grande Valley and the desire among organizations to partner with our college.

In response, I founded the Council of Outreach and Arts Entrepreneurship to build partnerships between the university and external arts, education, and industry organizations within and without the fine arts to grow participation in the Arts and the arts economy in the Rio Grande Valley and to connect students to these partnerships. Additionally, the Council works with the institution’s career center in connecting students in the fine arts with professional careers within and without the fine arts through interdisciplinary applications, entrepreneurial skill building, and internships. While the Career Center is a key partner in connecting graduates with careers, the Council plays a vital role from the academic side of the institution in creating career opportunities.

The work of this council began in October 2022 when our college hosted 15 Arts organizations throughout the Rio Grande Valley. Additionally, College of Fine Arts faculty and faculty outside of the college from such disciplines as anthropology, social work, education, and business attended this inaugural meeting of the Council. The goals of this meeting were to:

- Introduce faculty to leaders of external Arts organizations.
- Explore Arts and interdisciplinary partnerships within and without the institution.
- Identify obstacles to creating partnerships and the solutions to overcoming these obstacles.
- Solicit priorities for the college to provide financial support in building external partnerships.

Partnerships require equal investment and benefit for the partnering institutions. This begins with providing spaces for prospective partners to communicate directly with each other so that needs and resources for all partners are clearly understood.

To achieve these goals, we asked meeting participants to complete an introductory worksheet whose content varied depending upon their stakeholder category (i.e., faculty internal to the college, faculty external to the college, and leaders external to the institution). In this introduction, participants shared their mission and/or focus area, past collaborations, and goals for future collaborations.

Participants used these worksheets to focus the first table exercise, which was for them to introduce themselves and their work to each other in groups of four to six.

Recognizing that financial support and incentives are necessary to facilitate successful partnerships, participants were asked to provide feedback on a proposed college-funded mini-grant to support faculty and students in engaging in outreach and partnership activities, first as individuals and then at their tables. Meeting participants provided positive feedback for the proposed mini-grant criteria with no edits or additions:

- Provide students with career development learning outcomes and job experience through internships and field work.
- Provide undergraduate and graduate research opportunities in partnership with external organizations.
- Develop interdisciplinary curriculum between CFA and other UTRGV colleges.

- Support faculty research and creative activity that involves students in partnership with external organizations.
- Identify partners to match CFA support through external, grants, fellowships, and paid internships.

The call for proposals has been sent out to the faculty for review in March 2023. This initial cohort of proposals will allow the committee to look more closely at how internal funding can be used to support activities and lead to greater external funding.

In addition to this activity, the table participants examined obstacles and the support needed to overcome those obstacles in creating partnerships. Stakeholders external to the university identified time and scheduling/calendar alignment conflicts as the greatest obstacles. Stakeholders internal to the university identified time, faculty and student burn out, lack of knowledge of available interdisciplinary and partnership opportunities, high faculty and department head service opportunities, and institutional policies, such as evaluation, as obstacles to community engagement.

Stakeholders external to the university identified many areas of support to overcome these obstacles. As Arts groups need space for performance and exhibition, one participant suggested that the university consistently dedicate a time every semester for facilities to be available to external groups for use. Because the Rio Grande Valley is made up many municipalities ranging from 5,000 to 150,000 citizens, another participant suggested that the university facilitate partnerships that cross city boundaries, seeking grant funding for the entire Valley. Stakeholders external to the university also identified investment in communication and marketing for Arts events and transportation for pre-college students to attend on-campus performances and exhibitions.

Stakeholders internal to the university identified the need to better align the goals of community engagement with faculty responsibilities and evaluation. Faculty suggested a course release for faculty engaged in significant engagement projects. Faculty also recommended that community

engagement be included in tenure and promotion standards, given similar weight to research achievements. Stakeholders internal to the university also identified the need for administration to better communicate university programs in support for community engagement opportunities.

This inaugural meeting ended with one final table exercise where we asked members to communicate any other issues related to community engagement and partnerships that were not addressed in our inaugural meeting. The analysis of the responses from all the table worksheets led us in three directions: 1. identify current college structures that could be expanded with little investment of time or funding to position the college as a leader in the growth of the Arts economy; 2. create an internship network; and 3. facilitate the formation of community engagement clusters.

In comparing the feedback from the meeting to the resources and infrastructure that we have in the college, we discovered that two areas where the university could be a valuable resource to our external partners was in the area of communications and facilities. Our college maintains the “UTRGV ARTS” website for all Arts activities that occur in the university, including not just College of Fine Arts events but also events from the Office of Student Life and other academic disciplines. By creating a system where external partners could communicate their events to our college communications and marketing staff, this tool, which includes a large subscription list for weekly email updates, could be extended to communicate Arts events of external groups throughout the Rio Grande Valley, including professional, non-profit, and educational public Arts events. Expanding the reach of UTRGV ARTS is not only beneficial to the external organizations but also to the institution, as those partnering organizations will send new patrons and donors to the site where they will learn about the university events.

The use of university facilities, vital for the Arts due to the specialized needs of concert halls, theatres, dance studios, and exhibition space, can also be another valuable resource for external partners. These spaces are in high demand by university stakeholders within and without the College of Fine Arts, so making time for use by external stakeholders can be challenging. Additionally, these spaces

typically need trained personnel to run the lights and sound and to ensure that safety measures are followed, so use of the space does cost money beyond utilities. The benefits to both the university and external partners, however, are significant so universities should create a pathway to overcome these challenges. One participant in our inaugural meeting suggested that a week be dedicated to an external stakeholder. If the stakeholder could align their performance needs during “down times” for university facility use, such as the beginning of the semester, between semesters, or summer, many collegiate performing arts programs would be able to make this work. The benefits to the university are also great, particularly if the stakeholder works with pre-college students who will be able to see the facilities and perhaps interact with university faculty and students.

Developing an internship network is another vital outcome of community engagement endeavors. In collaboration with the university career center, it is important that faculty connect, supervise, and mentor students as they engage in internships. In creating a sustainable internship network, our college has made connections with Arts organizations that are looking for support in areas for which they do not have resources, such as teaching lessons and workshops, providing clerical and reception support, and marketing. These needs align with our needs as a university to provide students with “real world” opportunities. Additionally, internships help university faculty and students stay connected with practitioners. This connection, along with a robust advisory group, can guide faculty decisions about future curricular offerings to stay relevant to student and industry needs.

One of the most challenging but greatest potential for return on investment is to create “clusters” that connect faculty with external partners to develop research and creative activity projects, outreach and educational opportunities, and grant funding. This work is being conducted by our college in the Spring 2023. Based on the inaugural meeting workshop responses, the college leadership team will be facilitating cluster meetings with the goal of developing such projects. At the end of the spring semester, the college will host an end-of-the-year reporting meeting where clusters will be invited to

report on their work to spark ideas among members. These clusters will be supported by the college through “mini-grants,” as described above to provide seed funding for start-up projects. The goal is that the external partner will also provide resources toward the project and that the start-up projects will provide the data and experience necessary to seek extramural funding to sustain the project.

Although what I have described above is specific to our process at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, there are a number of conclusions to be drawn that are generalizable to academic leaders who are leading this kind of work. First, the academic leader needs to invest in the time to get off-campus to build relationships and learn about the work in their community. Second, the academic leader needs to actively connect these relationships to faculty and students, facilitating partnerships. This can be done informally through one-on-one connections or through more formal structures, such as advisory committees or councils like I described in this paper. It is important to recognize that universities have an opportunity to bring people together. As non-profit organizations or municipalities that are in close proximity may feel that they are competing for the same, small resources, the university can be the neutral entity that brings these groups together. In a large geographic area made up of many organizations and municipalities like the Rio Grande Valley, there may only be a small number of universities (UTRGV is the only 4-year public university that has its main campus in the Valley). This “monopoly” is a great opportunity to use its expertise to be the hub of many spokes in the community.

Strong partnerships also call for investment from a variety of resources to establish and sustain projects. If institutions are committed to community engagement, internal funding has to be used to support the work of the faculty for both operations and personnel. This internal funding is likely to see significant return on investment in extramural funding, experiential learning for students, and supporting the community in which the university resides.

While funding is important, equally, if not more important, is time. Faculty cannot be asked to engage in community engagement on top of their teaching, research/creative activity, and service obligations. Instead, resources need to be found that allow the faculty the time to engage in this work through offering course releases or encouraging faculty to align their teaching, research/creative activity, and service obligations with community engagement. This only works if evaluation and tenure and promotion standards “reward” faculty for this alignment. Finally, universities typically have excellent facilities that are a great source for the engagement whether this is a concert hall, a laboratory, or a meeting space. The facilities and use of those facilities are an important resource that universities can use to make community engagement projects successful.

Partnerships must benefit all partnering institutions and must have investment and input from all participating institutions, but it also must have support of time and resources for the individuals who are doing the work. For university faculty, this may mean a revision of university policies, such as evaluation, so that faculty are appropriately recognized for doing this important work. Many universities across the United States want to be viewed as a public good, but the work is done by departmental faculty, so we as academic leaders need to provide the support and structures to fulfill that mission.

## References

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