

University Employees Who Live Locally: Bridging the Town-Gown Divide

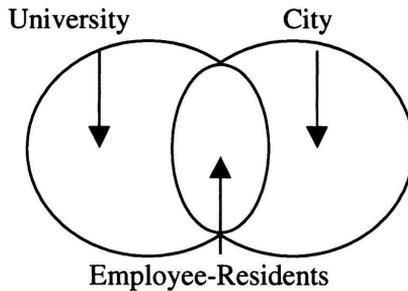
Marti Bombyk, Joseph Ohren, and Laura Shue

Abstract

Many universities conduct analyses of their economic impact, but few consider the possible roles that university employees who are residents of the university's host city can play in their diverse civic arenas. Based on a survey of Eastern Michigan University employees who live locally in Ypsilanti, the viewpoints of employee-residents are analyzed to indicate general issues in town-gown relations and to suggest improvements.

Employee-Residents as Experts

The employees of the university who live in the city around the campus can be regarded, but are often overlooked, as the embodiment of the city-university partnership. As illustrated in the Venn Diagram figure, they are the people in the center of the University-Community overlap.



Occupying this overlapping social terrain, employee-residents are presumably better informed about the university's assets than other community members and presumably care more about the quality of life in the city than other university employees. Employee-residents of the university tend to have stronger sensitivities about the university's public image and treatment of the city because they can see the connections between what the university does or does not do vis-à-vis their experience of community conditions. They also observe what the city does or does not do to improve the city's future. Employee-residents generally want to see both entities succeed. To a university, employee-residents can be a natural conduit for bridging the

town-gown disconnect; however, this relationship is rarely recognized as a resource for enhancing relationships between campus and community.

This study was undertaken at Eastern Michigan University to determine the views of university employee-residents toward town-gown relations and to obtain their opinions about ways the relationships could be improved between the campus and Ypsilanti. It includes a survey of satisfaction with city services to provide feedback to relevant city groups and officials. The survey also contained a separate return postcard so that employee-residents who have interest in university-city relations could identify themselves to the COPC team without compromising the anonymity of their completed surveys. Therefore, the survey was also a way to facilitate the objective of outreach to employee-residents for the purpose of future collaboration activities.

Research Methods

A citizen survey conducted by a university is similar to one that a local government might conduct to gather input from residents. Local governments typically seek community feedback for varied purposes:

- Accountability to citizens
- Reviewing performance audits
- Continuous improvement in service delivery
- Assessing customer service satisfaction
- Enhancing decision-making and planning
- Securing input on pressing policy issues
- Mapping areas for determining service goals
- Making decisions about changes in service levels

This survey was developed through a highly iterative process where dozens of city residents and city officials critiqued and revised several drafts over a period of one year. The process of designing the survey and the nature of the conversations it precipitated were in themselves an avenue of partnership building and collaboration. A major omission in the study was an assessment of local schools and the school system, and it is recommended that content on those topics be included in the future. The importance of schools emerged as a key finding, soon to be discussed.

In late Spring 2003, surveys were mailed to all 430 of the 1,895 full-time employees of Eastern Michigan University who lived in the city of Ypsilanti. They were asked to return the surveys anonymously in a return reply envelope, but were also given a separate postcard with which they could identify themselves if they wanted to learn more about the COPC project, receive a copy of the findings, and/or be given information about how to get in touch with their local neighborhood association.

No individual follow-ups were used to increase responses, although the university's campus-wide daily e-newsletter was used three times to remind those in the study to return the surveys. Seventy-four participants completed the survey, a response rate of 17%. This was slightly lower than the hoped-for 20% response rate for similar mailed

surveys and possibly reflects some methodological issues related to an employer-initiated effort.

Respondent Characteristics

Respondents were predominantly long-time residents of the city (mean is 21 years), homeowners (90% of respondents in a city with an overall owner occupied rate of only 30%), white (95% of respondents in a city that is approximately 20% nonwhite), and more likely to be faculty (approximately half of the respondents identified their positions at the university as full-time, tenure track faculty). As this set of characteristics suggests, the respondents are not demographically representative of the diversity reflected in the larger community, and it is not clear to what extent they are representative of the total population of residents who work for the university. However, the respondent profile of long-term home ownership and professional embeddedness with the university does qualitatively suggest that those who responded to the survey are serious stakeholders in both the city and the university, and they accepted the good faith proposition that their completed surveys might have a constructive role in improving the city-university relationships. Their stakeholder interests and civic concerns are also evident in their civic engagement, as noted below.

As a group, respondents are active in the community. Nearly all have attended numerous community events and celebrations—festivals and parades, for example. One in three regularly use neighborhood parks; nearly two-thirds can identify the name of their neighborhood association, and almost half have participated in a community organization in the past five years. Indeed, one in five report serving in a leadership capacity in such organizations. They volunteer in the schools, the food co-op, and their churches. They are active as block captains in their neighborhoods and as volunteers for community spruce-up activities.

General Findings

This is a case survey report of only one city-university dyad and cannot be empirically generalized to other city-university dyads. However, the findings presented here in some detail are of interest for two reasons. First, the report illustrates the nature and utility of information this type of survey can produce to help inform future citizen survey efforts. Second, the themes raised in this survey may be compared with other city-university dyads and resonant or dissonant findings can illuminate issues which are more universal rather than particularistic. For example, the “student ghetto”—neighborhoods near campus with high-density housing rented mostly by students—has been a historic factor in town-gown relations for most universities. Findings that hit on some universal themes have functional validity for the purpose of developing comparative analyses.

Overall quality of life. Overall, respondents were positive about the quality of the city as a place to live and to raise children. They generally had high regard for the quality of race relations in the city, although caution is advised with this finding; it represents

the perception of a predominantly white respondent pool. More than eight of ten respondents indicate that they either like (46%) or love (38%) living in the city.

Responsiveness of city government. A particularly positive finding for this community is that the survey revealed that respondents believe that the city government is interested in their opinions, responsive to their concerns, and that they have opportunities to participate in discussions about issues that affect them.

Satisfaction with city services. Respondents were generally very satisfied with several city services, rating trash removal, water quality, community policing, and the general appearance of their neighborhoods 3.3 or higher on a four point scale. They were less satisfied (less than 2.9 on the four point scale) with roads, traffic patterns, and litter.

Town-gown strengths. The relationship between the city and university is viewed as offering a variety of opportunities for local residents. These include the cultural life offered by the university to the community, the partnerships with local schools, the opportunity to volunteer on city boards and commissions, community service opportunities for students, the ability to provide expertise to the community, and increased business in the local economy.

Town-gown challenges. At the same time, respondents recognize that the university poses several challenges for the community: “student ghettos” in the area surrounding the university; student parking and parties in residential areas; expansion of the university into surrounding residential neighborhoods; the tax-exempt status of the university imposes additional tax burdens on homeowners; boundary or “shared” areas of the city that need development; and public views or perceptions of the university vary with controversies in the media.

Strengthening Town-Gown Ties

Respondents offered a variety of suggestions for strengthening the relationship between the university and the community. Some involve development-related issues—referred to in the challenges above—while others build on the strengths or opportunities noted by residents. They include:

Development

- Develop a long term plan for the city and the university to achieve common goals;
- Build more student housing to relieve community housing pressures;
- Work on shared areas at the edge of campus that need development;
- Develop and support small businesses in downtown areas;
- Redevelop university properties and sell for profit to fund future projects; and
- Sponsor an art gallery downtown.

University services/events

- Advertise free university events more on the university radio station and with local print media;
- Welcome more community people to the library, recreation facilities, and student union;
- Provide free tickets to university sporting events and cultural events;
- Provide paid internships with community businesses;
- Continue to more visibly support community events and to engage students in the community;
- Be more community- and family-sensitive toward employees so they have time for balanced lives and can serve in the community;
- Provide scholarships to the university for local high school graduates; and
- Facilitate more outreach by local businesses to students.

University communications and engagement

- Improve neighborhood relations;
- Improve the quality of the schools and the school districts to attract more employee families to live in the city;
- Create a student ward for city council to give them a political voice so they'll be more active within the city; and
- Routinely seek resident input in university-community processes.

Discussion of Implications

Citizens who work for universities in their communities recognize they are stakeholders of both institutions. They also are aware of themselves as assets and resources for the community vis-à-vis the university. They manifest the same challenges to civic engagement as any other group—limited time, multiple demands—but in general are underutilized in the community and could probably be energized if supported. They see the potential of the university in the community, and the problems. They can act as citizen consultants for the university and as ambassadors of the university to the community.

Thus, from the perspective of both institutions there is an advantage in having employees live locally, especially in neighborhoods adjacent to campus. This provides more talent for the local community, infuses more of the university's payroll into the local economy, and limits demands for parking at the university. The question then becomes how to attract faculty and staff to live in the local community? The respondents in this study suggested that the family-friendly sensibility of a community and the quality of schools will be important determinants in whether faculty may want to live close to the university. Strategically planned city-university partnerships could be directed toward these objectives and other identified objectives.

The stature of the university both in the region and nationally will affect the economic fortune of the city, and the desirability of the city as a place to live, study, and/or work will affect the university's ability to attract quality employees and students. Both

institutions need to educate residents more on macro issues and social problem areas that manifest themselves at the local level but may be a reflection of larger political, social, and economic forces at work. Both institutions need to work on their respective images, and recognize that they are intertwined. Community forums may be important vehicles for communicating across constituencies and building collaborative agendas.

Applications and Directions

The survey was intended as a first step in linking the university and the community, via those residents who serve as “linking pins” between the two institutions. The next step is to communicate the findings of the survey, where appropriate, to a variety of audiences. For example:

- Administrators in various city departments
- Neighborhood associations across the community
- City Council and Mayor
- University Board of Regents
- University Relations Office
- Academic Affairs Division
- The respondents themselves

Another step in the process of building and reinforcing these linking pins is to bring respondents together to discuss findings. The survey provided only a limited opportunity to tap the ideas and insights of the group. Utilizing small group brainstorming could provide an opportunity for policy guidance relayed to officials in both the city and the university. It would allow them to get to know one another, to discover their collective assets, and to energize and direct their assets to some broader community work.

Other steps might also be taken to build and strengthen partnerships on this assets-based approach:

- Appoint more university employees living in the city to existing city boards and commissions;
- Appoint employee-residents to university advisory boards for different university units and departments;
- Encourage all university employees and students to shop locally;
- Encourage faculty to utilize service learning requirements in classes with placements in the city; and
- Encourage faculty to develop projects with community groups.

Conclusion

Citizen surveys are useful collaborative activities between universities and their host cities and can build mutual understanding. It is especially insightful to survey university employees who are local residents so as to give voice to their views on their mutual membership in both the university and the local community. Eagerness to listen and respond to the new information can promote progress in bridging the town-gown divide and reveal new partnership opportunities.

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Author Information

Drs. Bombyk and Ohren are on the faculty of EMU in Social Work and Political Science respectively, and are working with the City of Ypsilanti under a Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) grant. Ms. Shue is an Honors Undergraduate Assistant working under their supervision on various aspects of the COPC program.

Marti Bombyk
Professor of Social Work
Eastern Michigan University
333 Marshall
Ypsilanti, MI 48197
Telephone: 734-487-4173