Building a System to Measure and Effectively Communicate ECU’s Outreach Initiatives and their Impact in the Community: From Phone tree to Online

Background

East Carolina University service mission includes providing leadership and engaging in partnerships supporting public education, health care and human services, cultural activities, and regional development. This mission relates to the UNC system strategic planning priority to expand the frontiers of knowledge through scholarship and research and stimulate economic development in North Carolina through basic and applied research, technology transfer, and outreach and engagement. ECU has a history of partnering with communities, businesses, and nonprofit organizations to provide much needed services through eastern North Carolina. ECU can be characterized as Boyer describes “a vigorous partner in search for answers to pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems” (p.2).

Introduction

This study looks at ECU’s reporting system of outreach initiatives and their impact in the community. ECU currently relies on a phone tree to gather information regarding outreach initiatives and their impact in the community. Reports are requested via phone and collected by the chancellor’s office. The information reported is used to complete UNC system reports and to justify funding requests. It is also used to inform the community, partners and stakeholders of community engagement and outreach initiatives during conferences, special events and/or via media releases. For the purposes of this study, we will look at the current reporting system which relies on an ad-hoc phone tree and propose a standardized online reporting system that will address current communication gaps. I will analyze the online reporting system websites of three universities and interview the program evaluation specialists at these universities. Research findings will enable ECU to create an effective online reporting system. University employees will be required to use the online system to report community engagement and outreach initiatives once it goes live.
Problem Statement

The university does not have a standardized reporting and evaluating system for community engagement projects. Furthermore, project reports are requested by phone on ad hoc basis. This is a problem for three reasons. First, the information lacks consistency in the types and amount of information reported. Second, reports are not gathered in a timely manner. Third, not all units within the university are required to report on their initiatives. Following are some difficulties that these problems cause:

- The value of the current initiative is not demonstrable to stakeholders.
- Lack of documentation makes it impossible to evaluate and/or improve programs.
- State public dollar investments are difficult to track and document.
- Individual units/departments are not always aware of engagement initiatives of other departments within the university. Unawareness can create duplication of programs and competition for research dollars. It also prevents interdisciplinary partnerships and best practices information/models.
- The public is not aware of the extent of the services the university provides.

Experts in the area of engagement, such as the Kellogg Foundation and Rubin, provide insight and recommendations for effective reporting strategies. The Kellogg Foundation report recommends that engagement activities be rigorously evaluated. This evaluation should encompass the formation of partnerships, the impact of service learning on the students, faculty commitment, institutional capacity, and the impact of the program on the community partners. Rubin explains, “Because partnerships are action-oriented, there is a powerful need to determine the extent to which they are productive vehicles for community capacity building and development and to allocate future resources accordingly” (p.10).

Research Question

What are the characteristics of an effective online reporting system?

Hypothesis
An analysis of websites focusing on community outreach reporting systems and interviews with program evaluation specialists will enable ECU to create an effective online reporting system that will address our current communication problems.

**Research Design**

The research is designed to analyze websites. It will incorporate qualitative and quantitative data. This study will analyze and assess three websites in order to identify the features that make an online reporting system effective. For the purposes of this study, websites will be considered communication artifacts. Campbell defines a workplace artifact as a physical specimen created within the normal course of activities in the workplace environment. She includes text, visuals and video tapes as samples of types of specimens (p. 538). The websites include text regarding communication within the organizations. These websites will be an excellent source of data for constructing answers. Therefore, the definition of artifacts will be extended to include websites.

Once the websites are analyzed, interviews of program evaluation specialists will be conducted. We will use Campbell definition of interviewing; a “conversation” between two or more people for the purposes of eliciting information (p.539), but for our purposes, the conversation will be electronic (e-conversation). The interviews will be conducted via e-mail. The interviews will be designed to gather descriptions of the following:

- events that influenced website design
- beliefs about the on-line reporting system
- motives for actions
- standards for action
- conscious reasons

The only universities using online reporting systems are land grant institutions that focus on extension services. Even though ECU is not a land grant institution, their experiences and websites can serve as models for effective reporting systems. Following is a list of the universities and websites we will analyze:

**Penn State**

Cooperative and Extension Program Evaluation Webpage

http://www.extension.psu.edu/evaluation/Default.html
Variables

- Participants: Program evaluation specialists who will be interviewed about program implementation, problems encountered, design decisions, issues that were overlooked that caused problems and resistance to the program.
- Documents Analyzed: Websites that will be analyzed according to content, format, appearance, visual display, search features and navigation. The approach for the analysis will be heuristic.

Outcomes

The outcomes of this study will demonstrate that online reporting systems are effective in communicating outreach activities and their impact in the community within an academic institution. This study will provide us with the characteristics of an effective online reporting system. The data we gather will help us design an effective online reporting system for ECU.

Key Terms

*Effective*: standardize procedure so the data is available whenever it is needed.

*On-line*: attached to or available through a central computer or computer network.

*Report*: document that under specified conditions records community outreach.

*Community Outreach*: University programs and activities that enable the university to partner with communities to provide them with a service.
Subsequent Research

Following the design of a website to serve as a reporting system of outreach initiatives and their impact in the community, a usability study of that website will be conducted.

Conclusion

The findings of this research will be used to propose and create an effective online reporting system for ECU. Results will be presented at the Outreach through Engagement Conference.
Bibliography


Website References

University of NC Website http://www.northcarolina.edu/content.php/home/facts.htm#priorities

ECU Website http://www.ecu.edu/ecu/ecumission.cf

Penn State Cooperative and Extension Program Evaluation Webpage http://www.extension.psu.edu/evaluation/Default.html

University of Wisconsin Extension Program Development and Evaluation Webpage http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdandc/evaluation/
Ohio State University Program development and Evaluation Tools

http://www.ag.ohio-state.edu/~pde/pdeprdev.htm