Uncovering Salient Issues Through the Eyes of Campus and Community Members

Colleen Greer, Donna Pawlowski, Debbie Guelda
Bemidji State University
1500 Birchmont Drive, Bemidji, MN 56601
dguelda@bemidjistate.edu

Introduction
Bemidji State University signed a formal agreement with MN Campus Compact April, 2016. Since that time, we have moved forward with our 6-year plan by first assessing perceptions of the BSU and community of Bemidji relationship with a combination of surveys and focus groups. By understanding current perceptions, wants, and needs across campus and in the community, we can work towards building rewarding relationships that benefit members of the university and the community in which we live.

Campus Methods
In Fall 2017 a survey instrument was distributed across campus and provided to all relevant parties. The anonymous survey, using a 5-point Likert scale, asked perceptions of community involvement by BSU. Example questions include:

- Would you describe BSU as a campus that is engaged in our community?
- Have you implemented community engagement in your work at BSU?
- Do you think there is support for community engagement in teaching, scholarship at BSU?
- Do you believe institutional leadership and support exists for community engagement?
- Do you believe community engagement is currently an essential component of education and scholarship?
- Do you believe that community engaged scholarship is valued at BSU?
- Do you think student awareness of community involvement exists at BSU?
- Do you think there is support for student involvement in community engagement?

Abstract
Important political and social issues surround our campuses and local communities, which become the focus of many problem-solving initiatives. But how do we determine which issues to choose? Or which issues are most salient? Often the dominant voices are heard, and others are muted. Thus, it is important to create opportunities and spaces for voices to be invited, and issues to be identified. This presentation provides an overview of a process plan to uncover issues, as seen through the eyes of our campus members and community partners. We will share results and lessons learned from our data gathering. We invite participants to tell their stories, to perhaps find commonalities across communities, and identify potential collaboration of problem solving.

Community Partner Methods
In Spring 2018 five focus groups were formed each containing 8-11 representatives of the following areas:
1. Community service
2. Healthcare
3. Education
4. Business
5. Media

During late Spring 2018 individual focus groups and BSU conversation facilitators will gather to identify overarching themes of existing and potential community engagement. The following questions will serve to initiate conversations:

- What is your understanding of community engagement?
- What is your perception of partnership between BSU and the community?
- What do you see as important topics or salient issues?
- How might partnerships with BSU address these?
- Are you engaging in any partnerships now/have you in the past?
- In what capacity do you have a partnership with BSU?
- What has the impact of this partnership been within your organization or what you have observed?
- In order to increase community engagement within your organization, are there opportunities for connections/partnerships/etc.?
- What do you see as your role in building connections?
- Would your organization be interested in developing partnerships with BSU?
- How would you like to see partnership building with BSU develop?

Identified Salient Issues – BSU
- Community involvement occurs but university coordination is absent.
- A campus-wide culture and focus for community engagement does not exist.
- Opportunities for community engagement are present but not clear nor easily accessed.