

University of Minnesota, Morris
Civic Action Plan
March 1, 2017

Introduction

Minnesota Campus Compact has challenged its member campuses to “go bold” in planning their next steps for civic engagement. At the University of Minnesota, Morris, we believe we have already built significant campus-community partnerships to address a myriad of challenges, though much of our recent work focuses on three: the integration of Spanish-speaking newcomers into our small, rural community; preparing the region for the current and growing impacts of climate change; and, finally, rewriting the rural narrative by growing arts, culture, and entrepreneurship.

Our plan focuses on five primary goals: 1) strengthening our current initiatives by streamlining the work of the three outreach units on the campus; 2) through an intentional and inclusive assessment process, determine faculty, staff, student, and community investment in our current initiatives, as well as community needs and interests that might lead to new initiatives; 3) ensure that our initiatives--long-standing and emerging--are truly inclusive of all those in our diverse student body and university and broader community; 4) better align our institutional practices and assessment efforts with campus-wide student learning outcomes; and 5) more intentionally assess the effects of our work on the campus and broader community by researching and adopting best practices in the community development and community-based learning fields.

Background

The University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) has a unique role and history in West Central Minnesota. Our mission highlights community engagement explicitly, noting that our institution is “preparing its students to be global citizens who value and pursue intellectual growth, civic engagement, intercultural competence, and environmental stewardship.” The mission also focuses on our public, land grant mission: “As a public land-grant institution, UMM is a center for education, culture, and research for the region, nation, and world.”

UMM’s land originally housed an American Indian boarding school, first administered by the Sisters of Mercy order of the Catholic Church and later by the United States Government. The school closed in 1909, and the campus was transferred to the State of Minnesota with the stipulation that American Indian students “shall at all times be admitted to such school free of charge for tuition,” a policy still honored.

In 1910 the University of Minnesota established the West Central School of Agriculture (WCSA) on the Morris campus, which educated area high school students in a boarding school environment until 1963. In the late 1950s when the University of Minnesota announced that agricultural schools would be phased out, a grassroots citizens movement convinced the Minnesota Legislature that creating a distinct public liberal arts college within the University of

Minnesota system on the Morris campus would be a good investment for the state. In 1960, UMM opened its doors and began fulfilling its institutional vision to be an affordable, undergraduate, intentionally small, residential, public liberal arts college.

With an enrollment of approximately 1,900 students, more than 25% of the campus' student population includes students of color and American Indian students. The campus intentionally welcomes and supports first-generation and low income students and aims to provide a private school-equivalent education for a low cost.

The Morris community is unique in a number of ways. The seat of Stevens County, Morris is home not only to UMM, but to the Southwest Regional Development Partnership, the West Central Research and Outreach Center, and a U of M Extension office. In addition, Morris houses unique, large companies that employ a diverse workforce, including a rapidly growing Latino community. The community includes many locally owned businesses, cooperatives, and non-profits, with the highest number of non-profits per capita of any county in Minnesota. UMM and the City of Morris are national leaders in green initiatives, including wind energy, biomass energy, and local, sustainable food projects.

This university's mission is enacted in numerous ways across campus and the community, but much of the campus' community engagement work is centered on the second floor of the Welcome Center. UMM's Welcome Center (opened in January 2010) created a gateway for community members and visitors to connect with the campus. The second floor co-locates UMM's outreach units: The Center for Small Towns, the Office of Community Engagement, and the Office of Sustainability. While the campus is home to many other campus-community partnerships, we have intentionally focused our planning efforts on integrating the work of these offices to better coordinate how we build and maintain partnerships and assess the impacts of our work.

The Office of Community Engagement (OCE) coordinates UMM's academic service-learning program, as well as 12 work-study and volunteer community engagement programs. The Office of Sustainability (OOS) collaborates with campus and community to advance a vision for West Central Minnesota as a model of sustainability principles, practice and excellence, including a goal of making the campus carbon neutral by 2020. The Center for Small Towns (CST) assists communities by mobilizing UMM student interns to implement community projects. CST also brokers resources within the University system to provide applied research, data analysis, and consultation for small towns.

Collectively, we believe we have been bold by addressing a range of challenges and establishing and nurturing partnerships with a broad range of community organizations. Together, our offices have mobilized 762 students and 60 faculty and staff in partnerships with 100 partnering agencies and 2,000 individual community members on projects in the 2015-2016 academic year. We are tackling specific challenges in the region through community-based research and direct action, including but not limited to the integration of Spanish-speaking newcomers in the community, preparing the region for the current and growing impacts of

climate change, and rewriting the rural narrative by growing arts, culture, and entrepreneurship. We provide data and analysis for small communities to make better informed decisions about infrastructure and business investment.

UMM has won significant recognition and awards for the community engagement efforts of its faculty, staff, and students, including the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, the President's Award for Community Service, the Carter Partnership Award, the Second Nature Climate Leadership Award, the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education Student Leadership Award, the U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon School Award for Post-Secondary Institutions, and the Environmental Initiative Award for Community Action.

Since co-locating in 2010, our units have been developing strategies to work more closely together. For instance, we host an annual retreat for all of our student leaders, and we have collaborated on projects that began as academic service-learning projects and continued as internships funded by CST.

However, we believe we can better coordinate our efforts to maximize our impact in Stevens County. Our plan focuses on ways to strengthen our existing initiatives through better collaboration among our units and more collaboration with a broader range of stakeholders. We are aware that while our partnerships touch much of the community, many community members are not engaged and may not be aware of UMM's civic mission. We are also aware that, despite a high level of student and faculty engagement, there are students and faculty who are not aware of the partnerships in which they could be involved. We are not certain of the reasons for lack of engagement among some potential stakeholders.

We hope to learn from stakeholders and potential stakeholders how we might strengthen existing partnerships and build new partnerships to address critical community issues and engage more people. Working more closely together--and more inclusively across the campus and community--is especially important at a time when rural communities are extremely divided politically, and campus-community relationships in rural communities have the potential to be strained.

Our plan includes three projects, outlined below:

I. Focus Groups

Overview: We will host focus groups to determine how to improve current initiatives and to begin new, reciprocal initiatives. Participants will include students, community members, and faculty/staff who are currently engaged to assess how they view current partnerships, as well as students, faculty/staff, and community members who are not currently engaged, particularly demographic groups whose voices may not always be clearly heard.

UMM Goals:

- 1) Through an intentional and inclusive assessment process, determine faculty, staff, student, and community investment in our current initiatives, as well as community needs and interests that might lead to new initiatives;
- 2) Ensure that our initiatives--long-standing and emerging--are truly inclusive of all those in our diverse student body and university and broader community

Campus Compact Goals:

The focus groups will help us to “empower our students, faculty, staff, and community partners to co-create mutually respectful partnerships in pursuit of a just, equitable, and sustainable future for communities beyond the campus--nearby and around the world.” As we review our current and potential initiatives, we will determine how we might invite leadership from all facets of campus and community.

We will involve students in all aspects of the focus groups, including developing focus group questions, recruiting participants, facilitation, notetaking, and participation, thus helping to “prepare our students for lives of engaged citizenship, with the motivation and capacity to deliberate, act, and lead in pursuit of the public good.”

As our focus groups will focus on discussing regional needs and assets, we hope to use the data collected to “embrace our responsibilities as place-based institutions, contributing to the health and strength of our communities--economically, socially, environmentally, educationally, and politically.”

Process and Timeline

- **Spring 2017:** Develop focus group questions with input from campus committees and assessment experts on our campus.
- **Fall 2017:** Train researchers and facilitators who will be involved in the project. Recruit focus group participants. Host focus groups.
- **Spring 2018:** Continue to host focus groups. Analyze focus group data and share results widely.

Note: This timeline may shift as the campus is about to embark upon a strategic planning process. The timeline for the strategic planning process has not yet been determined. We are prepared to make changes to the timeline to align with broader strategic planning efforts on campus.

II. Stakeholder Convening

Overview: We will host a stakeholder convening to share focus group data and determine an action plan. We will invite key stakeholders, including campus and community leaders, to a gathering of stakeholders and potential stakeholders. At this convening, we will share the data analysis and outcomes from focus groups. We hope to facilitate an open, honest dialogue about what community needs we are not addressing, as well as ways current initiatives leave people out. We will discuss the reasons some stakeholders are deeply engaged and others are not. We

will also explore how to use these data to strengthen current partnerships and initiatives, as well as building new potential partnerships and initiatives.

Core Goals:

- 1) Through an intentional and inclusive assessment process, determine faculty, staff, student, and community investment in our current initiatives, as well as community needs and interests that might lead to new initiatives;
- 2) Ensure that our initiatives--long-standing and emerging--are truly inclusive of all those in our diverse student body and university and broader community

Campus Compact Goals:

We will involve students in all aspects of the convening, from participants to facilitators, thus helping to “prepare our students for lives of engaged citizenship, with the motivation and capacity to deliberate, act, and lead in pursuit of the public good.”

The convening with focus on “embrac[ing] our responsibilities as place-based institutions, contributing to the health and strength of our communities--economically, socially, environmentally, educationally, and politically.” We will discuss which community needs we have and have not addressed, why, and how we might improve existing and build new initiatives to better meet critical needs.

The convening will also challenge participants to keep social justice in mind as we discuss focus group results, with the goal of “harnessing the capacity of our institution--through research, teaching, partnerships, and institutional practice--to challenge the prevailing social and economic inequalities that threaten our democratic future.”

Process and Timeline:

- **Fall 2017:** Create a stakeholder convening committee to oversee logistics of stakeholder convening.
- **Spring 2018:** Plan stakeholder convening and send invitations.
- **Summer 2018:** Convene stakeholders.

III. Strengthening and Building Initiatives

Overview: Based on the outcomes of the focus groups and the stakeholder convening, we will determine how our core, existing initiatives might be strengthened through enhanced collaboration across our units. We will consider how to best involve and support diverse groups of community members, students, and faculty/staff as they engage in initiatives. We will also plan new, collaborative initiatives as needed. Improvement and implementation of initiatives will take place by utilizing service-learning classes, community-based research, and student

internships hosted by the engagement offices, with an eye toward integrating the work each of our offices coordinates around shared community outcomes.

We will also be more attentive to assessment of outcomes for students, faculty/staff, and students. Currently, we assess these outcomes by unit using outdated tools. Our campus is just beginning to explore campus-wide assessment of student learning. We will participate in a pilot project using the Association of American Colleges and Universities' VALUE rubrics to evaluate student reflection. Based on the outcomes of this pilot, we will adjust our student learning outcomes and assessment processes. We will also research develop assessment processes for faculty/staff and community based on best practices in the field of community development and community-based learning.

Core Goals:

- 1) strengthening our current initiatives by streamlining the work of the three outreach units on the campus;
- 2) better align our institutional practices and assessment efforts with campus-wide student learning outcomes;
- 3) more intentionally assess the effects of our work on the campus and broader community by researching and adopting best practices in the community development and community-based learning fields.

Campus Compact Goals:

By better aligning our work across units, and better aligning our assessment processes with campus-wide student learning outcomes, we hope to “foster an environment that consistently affirms the centrality of the public purposes of higher education by setting high expectations for members of the campus community to contribute to their achievement” and “harness the capacity of our institutions--through research, teaching, partnerships, and institutional practice--to challenge the prevailing social and economic inequalities that threaten our democratic future.”

Process and Timeline:

Spring 2017: Participate in the VALUE rubric pilot. Meet with the assessment of student learning committee.

Fall 2017: Review how each of our units assesses community needs, builds and coordinates initiatives, and assesses student, faculty, and community outcomes. Research best practices and other campus models. Research best practices in assessment in the community development and community-based learning fields.

Spring 2018: Review and create a new advisory model. Create a new protocol for how we, as a floor, will assess community needs and implement and assess initiatives. With support of experts in assessment, we will select or create tools to measure the impact of community engagement on:

1. campus student learning outcomes;

2. faculty engagement and impact of that engagement on teaching, research/creative work and service;
3. the impact of the initiatives on community.

Summer 2018: After reviewing focus group and convening results, finalize action plan for strengthening current and developing new initiatives.

Fall 2018: Integrate new models and assessment tools into our work.

Conclusion

This Civic Action Plan was co-developed by staff in the Center for Small Towns, Office of Community Engagement, and Office of Sustainability. Our intention was not to be exclusive, but rather to return to our mission statements and key initiatives and take a closer look in hopes that, in these challenging political and economic times, we could create a plan for better integrating and focusing our work. This plan aligns well with the transition in campus leadership that is occurring at this time, as well as the beginning of a new strategic planning process and the deepening of campus-wide assessment efforts. We believe that given where our institution and small, rural community are at this particular time, engaging in deep conversations and research amongst ourselves and with stakeholders is a bold plan. We look forward to the challenge!