

For Better and For Worse: Understanding Optimal Campus– Community Relationships through the Lens of Marriage

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Abstract

Borrowing from marital research literature, a four-square matrix constructed from the twin dimensions of effort and comfort levels is used to describe a typology of campus and community associations. Results from a study using the Optimal College Town Assessment to measure community member perceptions on town–gown relationships are presented next, followed by a discussion of a mobilization cycle that situates such assessment efforts inside of an engagement strategy for establishing harmonious campus and community partnerships.

During a marriage ceremony, couples typically take turns stating traditional vows to remain together “for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health.” While this ritualized pledge often ends with the statement “until death do us part,” in practice only about half of all marital vows end with one spouse’s mortal demise. That is because modern marriage is based on the premise of free choice. And while it takes two individuals to give their consent in order to get married, it takes only one partner to terminate the marital relationship.

The relationships that exist between institutions of higher learning and the communities that surround them resemble marriages in some striking ways. As will be discussed later in this paper, the relative health of those relationships seems to rest on some of the same factors that create strong marriages. That being said, town–gown associations differ from modern marital relationships in two very profound ways. First, campuses and communities are better described as an “arranged marriage” in which the partners seemingly had no choice but to be together. Second, and relatedly, divorce is not a realistic option for the town–gown partners.

The objective of the present paper is to utilize the metaphor of marriage in order to advance a discussion of how to best understand the characteristics of an optimal relationship between campus and community partners. Following a brief overview of the town–gown literature, recent efforts to conceptualize and measure the quality of relationships maintained between municipalities and the colleges and universities that exist in their midst is reviewed. Finally, various activities undertaken as a series of logically organized steps designed to influence the relative health of the town–gown relationship are discussed.

Town–Gown Literature

Attention paid to campus–community relationships is on the rise, as evidenced by a number of recent books on town–gown topics (Fox 2014; Gumprecht 2008; Kemp 2013). However, the literature seems to indicate a bit of mystery regarding the current state of affairs between institutions of higher learning and the municipalities that surround them. On the one hand, the glass is seen as “half empty” by some. For instance, Bruning, McGrew, and Cooper (2006) stated that “historically, town–gown relations have been a source of difficulty, frustration, and annoyance for both the town and the university” (125). Others, on the other hand, see the glass as more “half full.” One example of this latter way of thinking is Fox (2014), who noted that “there is an important need to identify common issues and approaches . . . associated with having the college or university present. Communities without a postsecondary institution simply do not have this as a factor in their galaxy of community issues, wants, needs, and opportunities. Most wish they did!” (103).

Whether one adopts a more optimistic or pessimistic viewpoint on this subject matter would seem to align closely with the quality of the relationships that are experienced between campus and community representatives. Until recently, however, there has been precious little consideration given to clarifying what exactly constitutes the optimal town–gown relationship. The present paper reviews some of the more recent work being conducted in this area, with the expressed intent of illuminating some of the key factors that contribute to more optimal interactions between institutions of higher learning and the municipalities that surround them.

The Marital Metaphor: A Brief Overview of the Town–Gown Typology

The metaphor of marriage specifically and the image of interpersonal relationships more generally have been applied to town–gown relationships in previous writings, with the earliest identified reference coming from Hill (1994). A decade later, Bringle and Hatcher (2002) discussed campus–community partnerships in interpersonal relationship terms, with special emphasis on phases (initiation, development, maintenance, dissolution) and dynamics (exchanges, equity, power) that helped to define those relationships. Most recently, Bringle and colleagues (Clayton et al. 2010) have sought to better define certain qualities of *partnerships* that can arise within the multiple interacting dyadic relationships that exist in service learning and civic engagement activities.

Adapting early work done by Cuber and Haroff (1965) on marital quality research, Gavazzi, Fox, and Martin (2014) asserted that two distinct yet related conceptual dimensions can be used to describe the quality of campus–community exchanges. The first dimension pertains to the level of comfort that higher education personnel and

community stakeholders experience inside of their relationship, while the second dimension centers involves the level of effort required to maintain the present state of the town-gown relationship. By combining the comfort and effort dimensions (see Figure 1), four types of relationships are used to describe the characteristics of campus–community interaction: harmonious, traditional, conflicted, and devitalized.

Figure 1. A Four-Square Typology of Town-Gown Relationships

The *harmonious* type—relationships consisting of higher comfort levels and higher effort levels—is the most optimal form of town–gown relationship as described by Gavazzi, Fox, and Martin (2014). In marriages, harmonious couples tend to report the highest satisfaction levels, owing in large part to the fact that they contain partners who are working together in ways that define and enhance their relationship with one another. Similarly, harmonious town–gown relationships are defined by the relatively high amount of activity that is directed toward the pursuit of goals that are of shared benefit to the campus and community.

The *traditional* type—a combination of higher comfort levels and lower effort levels—is thought to be the default state of affairs for most campuses and communities according to Gavazzi, Fox, and Martin (2014). While traditional couples report modest satisfaction levels, the partners typically have little contact with one another and often lead very separate lives. This is a marriage of convenience, also described as “passive congenial” by Cuber and Haroff (1965). The hallmark of the traditional town–gown relationship is the way that university and community representatives operate in largely autonomous fashion, often ignoring each other as they pursue their own individual goals.

The *conflicted* type reflects relationships that are comprised of lower comfort levels and higher effort levels. Cuber and Haroff (1965) employed the term “conflict habituated” as a way of describing these less than satisfactory marriages that are defined by persistent fighting between the partners. Lots of energy is expended on issues that seem to be beyond the reach of the partners to resolve. In corresponding fashion, conflicted town–gown relationships are marked by ongoing quarrels, often about chronic issues such as land use (Sungu-Eryilmaz 2009) and student misbehavior (Fox 2012).

Finally, the *devitalized* type—a combination of low comfort levels and low effort levels—is used by Gavazzi, Fox, and Martin (2014) to describe relationships with the least amount of overall satisfaction. In marriages, devitalized couples report high levels of disappointment along with the sense that something was “lost” along the way. This sentiment underlies the notion that all devitalized relationships formerly reflected qualities of the other relationship types. As applied to town–gown associations, some campuses and communities that once were locked in combat simply give up on each other and refuse to communicate at all. Alternatively, a devitalized relationship can come about when hopes of a harmonious relationship are dashed repeatedly by the failure of one or both partners to follow through on promises and assurances.

Development and Piloting of the Optimal College Town Assessment

Gavazzi and Fox (2014) recently reported on the development of the Optimal College Town Assessment (OCTA), a measure that operationalized and quantified the four-square conceptual scheme offered by Gavazzi, Fox, and Martin (2014). The OCTA was designed to evaluate perceptions of campus–community relationships as the combination of effort and comfort levels, capturing participants’ direct personal experiences of these two dimensions as well as their opinions about overall community sensitivities. On the campus side of the equation, the measurement of effort and comfort levels examines the relative contributions of each of four campus representatives: students, faculty, leaders/administrative staff, and members of the board of trustees. Reciprocally, the OCTA taps into the relative contributions of four main groups of community representatives: business owners, non-profit organization leaders, government officials, and local school district administrators and teachers.

A number of interesting findings were reported by Gavazzi and Fox (2014) from the analysis of data gathered from a sample of community members living and working in three municipalities surrounding a Midwestern regional university. First and foremost, perceptions of effort and comfort were significantly related to one another. That is to say, greater contact between campus and community members on the whole was associated with increased satisfaction inside of the town–gown relationship. Additionally, proximity played a prominent role in the amount of effort and comfort reported by community members who participated in the pilot study. Simply put, when community members were geographically closer to the campus, they reported significantly higher levels of both activity and comfort inside of their relationships with campus representatives.

Gavazzi and Fox (2014) also presented findings regarding some interesting group differences. For example, in a sub-sample of community members who had supplied information about their type of employment, the reports of perceived comfort levels were found to be highest among business owners, followed by non-profit leaders, and then educators. As well, results indicated that community residents consistently reported the most contact and greatest comfort levels with students from the campus, providing some evidence that the student body may serve as a key connecting point between the campus and the community.

The Town–Gown Relationship Mobilization Cycle

The use of an assessment tool such as the OCTA takes the guesswork out of understanding the quality of the town–gown relationship by providing a standardized way of examining effort and comfort levels between and among various campus and community stakeholders. This sort of activity serves to create a baseline data-gathering strategy that can be repeated over time in order to mark progress in the development and maintenance of more positive and productive collaborations among higher education and municipal representatives.

There are thought to be a number of important activities that can take place both prior to and following such assessment efforts that can augment the understanding and enhancement of town–gown relationships. While these activities are interconnected, there is a logical sequencing that can provide valuable assistance in planning for and implementing an overall engagement strategy for campus and community partners. These activities are organized into a Town–Gown Relationship Mobilization Cycle as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The Town-Gown Relationship Mobilization Cycle

The first step of this process involves awareness-raising on both the campus and in the community and focuses on basic questions such as, “Where (and how) do we begin?” Here, the mobilization cycle is activated by increasing knowledge of and appreciation for the importance of focusing on the town–gown relationship itself. Of course, campus and community representatives will be all over the map in terms of readiness to focus on their relationships with one another. The common denominator, however, will be the recognition that the campus and community stand to gain much more by acting together than by standing apart. As Gavazzi, Fox, and Martin (2014) noted previously, there may need to be a “therapeutic” component to this type of work, especially for those campuses and communities with conflicted and devitalized relationship histories. Here, past disagreements and disappointments may need to be acknowledged by one or both parties before meaningful partnerships can be formulated. One particularly fitting framework for this sort of community conversation is that of Zehr (2002), whose work on restorative justice principles introduces a process of “healing the harm” that allows various parties to move beyond past grievances and toward more constructive engagement.

The second step involves coalition building, with particular attention paid to the identification of the primary campus and community stakeholders who will participate in various relationship-building activities. This phase of the mobilization cycle involves a determination of who will be targeted in local data gathering efforts, which should be strongly related to the partners that will be approached in order to get the amount of campus and community participation that is necessary to create a meaningful (and hopefully representative) sample. In parallel fashion, this step also should involve the recognition of intended audiences who will be asked to listen and respond to information generated throughout this process.

Data gathering represents the “middle ground” of the mobilization cycle. As the third step, it is preceded by activities designed to maximize access to key representatives on the campus and in the community. The ultimate success of this entire effort, however, rests on obtaining high quality data from the respondents themselves. Much of the work on the OCTA to date has been aimed at standardizing the field’s understanding of the quality of campus–community partnerships. The OCTA items are available for use by individuals who are interested in the assessment of town–gown relationships, and over time will allow users to compare and contrast findings across settings and institutions. At the same time, this quantitative approach ideally should be balanced with the collection of more qualitatively oriented information. This latter effort would

be especially important in terms of developing a better understanding of the idiosyncratic needs and wishes of individual campuses and communities as they seek to better interact with one another.

The fourth step of this process is centered on the interpretation of information that has been collected on the town-gown relationships. Here, the quantitative and qualitative data must be organized, analyzed, and reported on in some manner that is both understandable and immediately applicable to the intended audience of campus and community stakeholders. This phase of the mobilization cycle should involve the creation of relatively straightforward and easy-to-understand reports on sample demographics, methods, and results of interest to varied audiences. In addition, wherever possible, graphs and other visual aids should be employed alongside text descriptions of the information. Pictures are indeed worth a thousand words, especially for community stakeholders who typically are unfamiliar with research and evaluation jargon.

The fifth and final step involves an evidence-based call to action, answering the fundamental question, “Now what?” This last phase of the mobilization cycle focuses attention on the development of next steps in the process of engaging campus and community partners. One of the keys to success here is remaining data-driven; being led by facts (i.e., the survey results) instead of feelings (i.e., someone’s hunches, gut feelings, or recollections). On a related note, if the survey results end up raising as many questions as it answers, some further data-gathering may be in order. For example, perhaps a key constituent group was overlooked, resulting in the need for more quantitative data to be gathered from additional respondents. Alternatively, even more attention might be paid to the collection of more elaborate qualitative information that would help to flesh out the initial quantitative findings. In this latter case, the use of focus groups would be an especially effective means by which to gain a richer understanding of town-gown relationship characteristics and pressing issues.

Conclusion

This article began with a marital theme, and it is to the metaphor of marriage that we now return in conclusion. American journalist and author Mignon McLaughlin has been widely quoted as noting that “a successful marriage requires falling in love many times, always with the same person.” And like a fruitful marriage, a flourishing town-gown relationship will demand a lot of determination to keep seeing one’s partner as worth all of the work that is required to keep things moving in a positive direction. Of course, such work is predicated on the notion that higher education administrators and municipal leaders are fully up to the task of creating and maintaining healthy and mutually satisfying interactions with one another. This requires both the requisite skill set that can make the relationship work over time, as well as the desire to do so.

Beyond questions of aptitude and aspirations, however, town and gown partners often as not are uncertain about where they stand in their association with one another at any single point in time. In the movie *Rocky*, the story’s hero says to his girlfriend Adrian: “I got gaps, you got gaps. We fill each other’s gaps.” Essentially, the present paper has argued for a better understanding of how well campus and community partners are

seen as complementing one another. Stated slightly differently, the more intentional examination of the current state of a given town-gown relationship is thought to be the first best step toward the optimal enhancement of that collaboration at ever more harmonious levels.

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