“Colleges, Communities, and the Common Good”
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In 1831, 25-year-old Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville came to America in search of America. After nine months of exploration, he returned home to write Democracy in America, a classic often called the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America.

De Tocqueville's overriding impression was that democracy produced a powerful range of benefits for the citizens of the country: social, political, economic. He viewed as one of democracy's best by-products the tendency of Americans to form voluntary associations for the common good.

While de Tocqueville did not write explicitly about the relations of educational institutions with their surrounding communities, he surely would have viewed a vigorous, positive association of town and gown as a significant contribution to the common welfare.

It's not rocket science. I should say at the outset that positive college/community relations are also in the self-interest of all parties involved. Every college and community I know anything about are, in fact, “joined at the hip.” It requires only a little common sense to understand that an institution of higher learning has much to offer the surrounding community (cultural opportunities and economic stimulus, for example), and that the institution and its people will be better positioned to flourish when surrounded by the active good will of the community.

Four steps to success. So how does one promote a healthy college/community association? First you must be intentional. Good town-gown relations don't occur by accident.

The institution's leadership must make it clear that good community relations are a priority. This requires an investment of time; energy; and, sometimes, financial resources. Relationships with community members must be cultivated and nourished. Being a president or senior officer at a college or university requires one to be a citizen-leader. There are limits, of course, to performing one's role as a community citizen, but more often than not you need to say yes to the committee appointment and/or the invitation. Nothing conveys involvement and concern more than “being there.”

Second, communicate—through public statements, publications, press releases, and release of important college officers and faculty into the community. Reiterate that the college and the community are full partners and that the community's welfare, input and involvement are valued.

A small, but telling example of this is “This Week at Centre,” an ad we place in the local
newspaper each Sunday inviting townspeople to a host of campus events. These range from student-produced plays, to sports events, to lectures by Nobel laureates, to Broadway musicals at our Norton Center for the Arts.

While most of these activities are free, the ads are not. But they communicate to the community the richness of our offerings and our desire for them to participate. Community members tell us again and again how much they appreciate both the information and what the weekly invitation symbolizes.

Third, expect good—even brilliant—ideas to come from the community. It is critical that those of us involved in higher education never believe or act like we know it all. Truth be told, the academy has no corner on the good-idea market, and we need to announce this and be sure our neighbors are encouraged to bring their concepts, plans and dreams to us.

• Food for Thought. We invite community members to enjoy nourishment for the body and mind in this luncheon series featuring presentations by faculty and staff members. Topics range from the common good to how student life is changing, to the Virgin of Guadalupe and Che Guevara, to principles of leadership. These sessions give community members the opportunity to hear experts in their fields, engage in discussion and participate in the intellectual life of the college.

• The Declaration of Independence/Guinness Record Attempt. When Centre recently had an opportunity to host a rare original copy of the Declaration of Independence, we decided to involve the community in the widest possible way. A vigorous promotional campaign attracted more than 6,000 visitors from the community and state—many of them schoolchildren—to view the historic document. In addition, we organized a Guinness record attempt for continuous reading of the Declaration and other American documents. College and community members read for an uninterrupted 56 hours, 13 minutes to break the existing record of 52 hours. (The jury is still out on whether Guinness will certify the record, but the patriotic bonding and feelings of good will generated were surely of record-setting proportions.)

• The 2002 Kentucky Historic Preservation Conference. This three-day event hosted by the college attracted more than 500 attendees from around the state and country to hear noted preservationists and discuss how preservation can enhance a community's way of life. Again, it allowed the college to be a partner in an important discussion for the public good.

• The Morphing of Main Street. This summit sponsored by NewCities Foundation, the Kentucky League of Cities, and Kentucky Educational Television, and hosted by Centre focused on the future of America's heartland cities. Attended by mayors, city planners, and other officials from around Kentucky and nation, the three-day event conveyed our interest and involvement in not only the welfare and future of Danville but of small cities like it around the country. It was a powerful symbol of partnership between communities and an educational institution.

• The 2000 Vice Presidential Debate. Without question, this 2000 General election debate, which involved the college locking arms with the city's leadership, was the most meaningful and successful team effort I have ever witnessed. All of us
took the risk to dream big and execute without flaw. Having done this together, Centre and Danville have forged a bond that will last for years. Not that it won't need regular attention—it will—but the success we accomplished together made our community a place where anything is possible.

There you have it. As noted earlier, establishing good college-community relations isn't rocket science. It involves the time-honored principles of being intentional; communicating effectively and intentionally; looking for and expecting good ideas from all partners; and finding and creating occasions that have the power to unite and excite us.

The need for this kind of cooperation, inclusiveness and synergy is as enduring as the seasons. Now, when the democratic principles de Tocqueville so admired are under unprecedented attack, we must join together to empower and inspire our best mutual efforts for the common good of our institutions, our communities and our nation.

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