

Reflections on the Community Engagement Unconference: Helping All Hoosiers Win

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The Community Engagement Unconference was a validating and encouraging experience for me. I have been involved in community engagement throughout my entire IU career, but often I feel rather isolated in this work. Our university is so large, and we receive so much information that we are overwhelmed and lost when we try to connect with others who are doing community engagement. The Unconference gave us the opportunity to find our fellows. It was lovely to see and hear from others who are doing incredible and inspiring things in communities across the state.

I appreciated hearing from administrators, faculty, staff, and students who are facing similar challenges, but even more, I loved hearing about their strategies, best practices, and resources.

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Some put names to things I had experienced but never named myself. One of these was “cultural humility,” a term that resonated deeply with me as a fundamental value we must incorporate into every community engagement initiative. Back in my undergraduate days, community engagement was a very different animal; we approached with a “we-can-fix-your-problems” mentality. Thankfully, we know better now. We cannot go into a community with a deficit mentality, assuming we know what it needs. We must go in to “listen and listen again,” asking questions not only about the community’s needs, but also about its strengths.

Another invaluable aspect of the Unconference was the openness and creativity it encouraged. Rather than stodgily defending their “territory” or their “discipline,” faculty were offering new, groundbreaking ideas to tackle big problems without being constrained by traditional notions of academia. campuses, and across the state. We have so much to offer our students, our state, our nation, and our world. Staying married to how things have always been done will limit us to a future that is no better than our past. I was greatly heartened to hear faculty and administrators voicing innovative ideas to collaborate across departments, across campuses, and across the state.

Finally, I was energized by talking to people who are just as passionate as I am about making real change. Our university provides us with so many resources and opportunities to address serious issues like educational inequality, healthcare access, food deserts, climate change, water pollution, and racial injustice.

We still face many challenges in supporting and assessing our work. High-impact practices, such as service learning and community-based projects, require more time, energy, and emotional investment than the traditional lecture-discussion-test mode of teaching; the substantial work we put in is difficult to reflect in our annual reviews or promotion and tenure dossiers. Still, I left the Unconference feeling optimistic about where we are going as a university and what we can accomplish. After 23 years working with students on community-based research and service projects, I am more hopeful than ever that this work is valued and valuable, and our students will use their experiences to make a better future for all of us.

All of our campuses – from Bloomington to Indianapolis, from South Bend to Kokomo – have experience, expertise, and energy that we can use toward making all our communities stronger, healthier, and more prosperous. Working together, we can accomplish so much more to help all Hoosiers, not just those of us wearing red and white.

