

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

By Jonathan Gibraltar

When the term “town/gown relations” is shared among AASCU’s membership, it often sends chills down the spines of member university presidents who envision grumpy neighbors and costly initiatives that may fall short of pleasing internal and external audiences. But, as regional comprehensive universities, it is our fundamental mission to enhance and support our communities, and we can do that best through community partnerships.

Below are the simple, yet successful, tenets my leadership team and I have enacted to strengthen our campus community and our regional connections.

Sometimes university and community needs overlap in beneficial ways. When I arrived at Frostburg State (Md.) nine years ago, I was well aware of the university’s reputation as a party school and knew I would combat that status through community partnerships. Our neighbors and elected officials were willing collaborators because Frostburg’s drinking problem was spilling over into their neighborhoods and yards. Together, we implemented both tried-and-true and innovative solutions, including providing options for property managers to share tenants’ noise violations, sponsoring meetings of allied law enforcement agencies, signing an MOU with the city for additional police presence in the university neighborhood, and sponsoring responsible beverage service training for bars and liquor stores. We are committed to making Frostburg safer for our students and more livable for local families.

And our efforts are working. In 2006, 54 percent of our students fell within the definition of binge drinkers and averaged 8.5 drinks per student per week, both statistics above national averages. I’m pleased to say our partnership with our community has moved us below the averages for binge drinking (41 percent on campus versus 43 percent nationally), reduced drinks per student, and decreased the number of calls I receive from neighbors. But like most campuses, we still have a long way to go before we can claim victory.

When focused on common goals, we can create great change. Appalachia is known for its scenic beauty and artistic roots. And we also have a reputation as a home for strip mines,

a depressed economy, and unhealthy residents. The university and community, aided by local and federal grant funding, are tackling these negatives head-on by converting mined land into an innovative five-acre greenhouse and shade house complex designed to train community members for high-quality jobs and produce local, organic food and tree seedlings.

Our dining halls and local restaurants have become farm-to-table dining establishments, local food insecurities are being addressed, Potomac basin flooding and acid mine drainage generation have been reduced, and we are reestablishing natural forested habitat on strip-mined lands.

Common projects can make you individually and collectively stronger. As is the new norm for regional, comprehensive universities, I’ve asked our local employers what skillsets their employees need and then worked with our faculty to build courses and degrees to meet those needs. Concurrently, we’ve asked our students when and how they can most easily take those classes to reach graduation. With this information, we’ve grown our online program over 13 times larger and boosted our placement rates in nursing, business and cyber security.

There are opportunities to live your mission and support the region’s history. The university houses and organizes an annual Appalachian Festival, which includes celebration of western Maryland’s history through film, music, dance, oral history, and accessible discussions of research conducted in and about our region. Participating in events that highlight our community’s roots has provided introductions to new partners and funders, and, as importantly, shown our local students that their history matters to the university and me.

The AASCU mission statement declares that our institutions are “dedicate[ed] to research and creativity that advances [our] regions’ economic progress and cultural development,” and I’m proud of the inroads my team and I have created towards this important goal for and with our community partnerships. **P**

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