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Shared Gold: Mapping of Community Engagement

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Engaged universities and communities are a key focus for meaningful social transformation and addressing complex educational issues including access, research ethics, and business development (Cherlinitton et al., 2018). Universities throughout the nation are called not only to serve their academic community, but also the communities in which they are situated. In fact, ongoing revisions to the Higher Learning Commission’s accreditation criteria suggest that community engagement will serve as a primary means by which institutions of higher education will demonstrate their publicly-oriented missions and fulfill accreditation criteria number one (Higher Learning Commission, 2016).

Community engagement can be defined as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Carnege Foundation, 2018). Within the context of this project, community engagement includes curricular community engagement, co-curricular community engagement, outreach, partnerships, and volunteerism. All of these engagement activities make Western Michigan University more relevant to its stakeholders.

Western Michigan University enjoys the distinction of being one of 361 institutions of higher education classified by the Carnegie Foundation for Community Engagement and one of only 50 such institutions that also maintains the designation as a high research activity institution. Our university strategic plan, The Gold Standard 2020, has made community engagement a university-wide objective (cf. 3.3a.3.39). As part of the university’s commitment to community engagement, a team of over 20 faculty, staff, students, administrators, and community members created and implemented Shared Gold, Western Michigan University’s civic action plan.

This plan prioritizes the creation of a geo-map as a means by which we can visualize, search, and acknowledge our existing civic engagement. Mapping tools (including Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can assist universities and community partnerships by making the connections visible and more visceral (Jung, 2018), and encouraging interaction between multiple users for different purposes. This project attempts to realize the Shared Gold priority by developing a community engagement geo-map and establishing it as a tool that can be used, queried, showcased, and enhanced over time.

Methods

Beginning in the spring 2018 semester, a number of Shared Gold team members began executing a process to create Western Michigan University’s Community Engagement geo-map. This process involved the following seven steps:

1. Prototype geo-map design and displays, selecting one that best represents Western Michigan University’s community engagement work as captured through past data sets.
2. Identify discrete data points (both required and desired) needed to record and map various kinds of community engagement initiatives across curricular, co-curricular, outreach, volunteer, and partnerships arrangements.
3. Work with the Office of Institutional Research to identify potential leads on curricular community engagement initiatives during the FY 2017-18.
4. Approach Academic Affairs and Student Affairs administrators and staff at the unit level for assistance collecting data, following leads through electronic and in-person communication.
5. Expand requests for assistance to include other university divisions, areas, units, and programs, by using a “snowball” or convenience sampling method.
6. Clean data points, ensuring uniformity and completeness of entries wherever possible.
7. Plot data points on the geo-map, employing an iterative process that provides monthly map updates.
8. Code data points for activity type (curricular, co-curricular, volunteer) and partner type (industry, nonprofit, government).

Quantitative Results

600+
The number of community engagement initiatives already plotted on the Western Michigan University Community Engagement Map.

10,374
An initial number of discrete community engagement opportunities offered to Western Michigan University students FY 2017-18.

235,000
An early sum of community engagement hours invested in the Kalamazoo area and beyond by Western Michigan University students in FY 2017-18.

Conclusion

The mapping could be a great tool for students to search directly

Feeds into our Carnegie Foundation and HLC reporting nicely

Positive Experiences

A good way to be involved in the City of Kalamazoo master plan

References


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