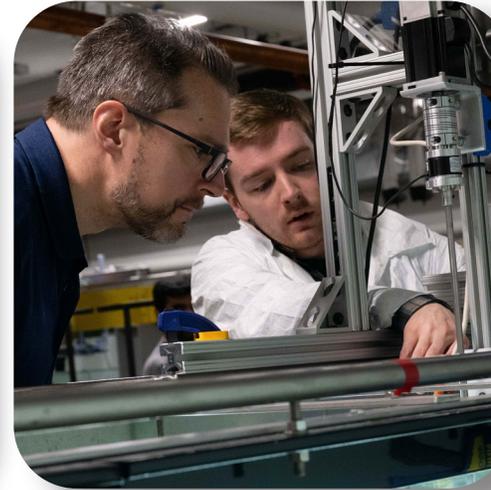




ASSOCIATION OF  
PUBLIC &  
LAND-GRANT  
UNIVERSITIES



# **APLU CSC AND CECE PLAYBOOK:**

**Deeply Engaging Communities and  
Communicating Shared Public Impact**

## OVERVIEW

In partnership with their communities, public and land-grant universities are major drivers of progress in their regions – tackling pressing local challenges, driving innovation, fueling job creation and economic growth, and promoting the health and wellbeing of their states, regions, and beyond. Yet given the extraordinarily vast array of work underway in partnership with their communities, institutions can struggle to effectively tell their stories and showcase the important role they play with communities promoting the common good.

This playbook, a collaboration between APLU’s Council on Strategic Communications and Commission on Economic and Community Engagement, aims to help institutions consider how they can best engage their communities for shared impact and more effectively demonstrate how this collective impact creates more vibrant, prosperous, and healthy communities.

### THE PLAYBOOK PROCEEDS IN THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS:

- A high-level overview of effective community and economic engagement practices.
- Structural and operational changes needed to effectively communicate an institution’s collective impact.
- Common pitfalls to avoid when communicating about community and economic impact.
- A brief checklist for mobilizing your institution around these engagement and communications practices.
- Examples of effective university communications around collective impact.

## EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

### ENGAGING CAMPUS COMMUNITY MEMBERS

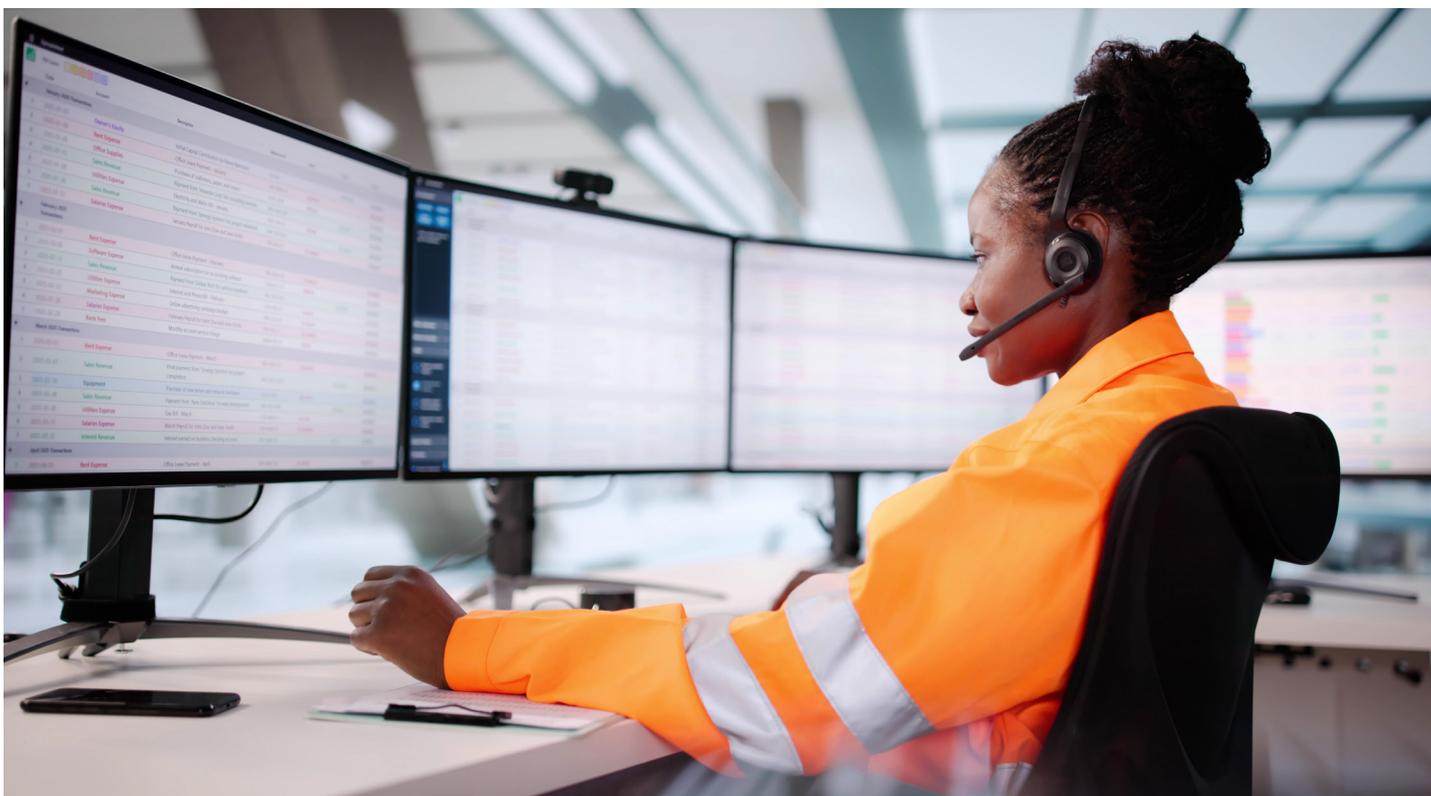
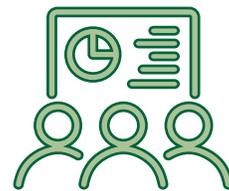
Engaging the appropriate members of the campus community is critical for public impact. The individuals on campus who should participate in engagement will vary according to the specific issue on which the university is collaborating with the community.



Successful campus initiatives often include working with engagement offices, centers or institutes on campus with expertise in a given area, university committees working on a particular issue, commercialization offices, entrepreneurship accelerators, Extension offices, public policy programs, arts and culture groups on campus, offices of military affairs, offices of rural engagement, the faculty senate, media influencers, and diaspora groups.

## ENGAGING THE BROADER COMMUNITY

As with on-campus engagements, who to engage externally necessarily depends on the issue area. When identifying and tackling a community or industry problem, universities often partner with local government officials, alumni groups, local business advocacy groups, industry-specific associations, nonprofits, social service agencies, local congregations, 4-H and master gardener programs, and diaspora groups.



## PARTNERING WITH COMMUNITIES TO ADDRESS SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

Listening through existing channels, including institutional leaders serving on boards of local government committees, non-profits, state economic development agencies, and examining established local community plans around workforce and economic development provides a strong starting point for identifying issues with which your institution can help.



Additionally, the university can provide data-gathering resources that community groups often express a need for and identify promising practices to engage a community early in the problem identification and solving process for greater shared impact.

There are also many potential external partnerships common across institution types and contexts. This includes engaging workforce development, lifelong learning, health care, agriculture, and social services groups as well as cultural and urban planning organizations. Directly partnering with the community – including through town halls, listening sessions, focus groups, and surveys – provides important avenues for defining institutional engagement priorities.



Many institutions also find strong, lasting partnerships with the public around disaster response planning, environmental planning, and supporting access to affordable housing and local economic growth. Additionally, partnering with industry and employers to upskill employees through training bootcamps or micro-credentials can give an institution the opportunity to build enduring connections with members of their community who may never otherwise interact with the institution.

Opportunities for engagement can also arise quickly and organically, such as helping a community recover from a natural disaster or address a major public health challenge. To facilitate greater impact, many institutions find it helpful to empower a core campus team to help address a rapidly emerging shared challenge.



Photo Courtesy of The Ohio State University

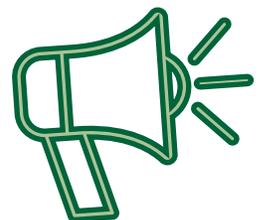
## OPERATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE STORYTELLING

There are many approaches institutions can take to put in place the structural and operational support systems needed to identify and effectively communicate about public impact.

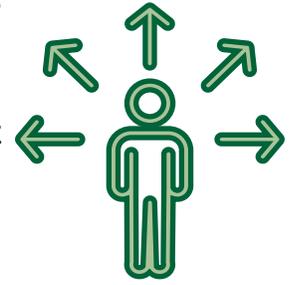
### SOME STRATEGIES APLU MEMBERS USE INCLUDE:

- Making robust and enduring community and economic impact a priority for the institution and its leadership, laying the foundation for strong storytelling.
- Holding an institution-wide communicators meeting regularly with college- or unit-level communicators to identify and elevate issues and community and economic impacts.
- Emphasizing people and places affected by university efforts in storytelling rather than the university itself.
- Clustering related efforts into a small number of recognizable storytelling categories that make the institution's impact narratives clear and cohesive, as the breadth of public-impact work at public universities often creates a fragmented story.
- Using multimedia (i.e. shortform videos and/or infographics) storytelling to reach new audiences, particularly in areas with limited local news media.
- Doing university roadshows across the state that are tailored to each community and gathering feedback from the community on how the university can address challenges and offer concrete follow-up steps the university will take – and deliver on them.
- Empowering ambassadors for your institution, including community engagement professionals and community partners to share their story with key fact sheets, talking points, social media copy, and images to tell the story of the university's impact.

Institutional leaders prioritizing community and economic impact, and storytelling around it, is critical. University leaders can signal this work is a priority by emphasizing it in speeches, newsletters, columns, and other avenues. Institutional leaders may also find it helpful to charge someone with overseeing this work as a key responsibility of their role. Some institutions find that empowering more junior staff or faculty for this role can be a successful approach to filling this need and developing talent.



Resources needed to support effective storytelling include communications trainings for faculty that can be recorded and disseminated afterward, shared centrally available multimedia resources such as photos, core messaging and data about the institution's work and impact in the state, and integration of public impact work into the university's brand narrative.



Additionally, the central communications operation can incentivize more unit-level communications around community and economic impact by offering support such as copyediting and photography services for this work and how-to tool kits for social media usage (including tips and tricks for social copy, photo usage and hashtags). The central communications team can also provide unit-level communications teams with a framework for effective storytelling and social media campaigns in this area and can amplify unit-produced stories on university-level platforms.



Photo Courtesy of Eastern Tennessee State University

## Common Challenges or Pitfalls When Communicating Public Impact

There are several pitfalls to avoid when aiming to effectively communicate impact. These include using jargony language; getting overly specific in a way that obscures broad impacts; community relationships that are one-sided or transactional rather than collaborative and ongoing. Other challenges include ideating and co-creating complex partnerships amid public records requests; lack of clarity internally over who has primary responsibility for maintaining a relationship; inconsistent messaging across internal units that dilutes an institutional narrative, and lack of communications training for subject matter experts working in the community.

It's also imperative to be transparent with the community around the expected impacts of a partnership. A lack of authentic community voices in shaping university stories can erode trust. Even when trying to highlight community impact, institutions can sometimes overemphasize achievements – running the risk of falling into self-congratulatory messaging that feels disconnected from what matters to community partners.

# CHECKLIST FOR EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATING INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT

- ✓ **Secure senior leadership buy-in** and maintain their ongoing engagement in community and economic impact efforts.
- ✓ **Create standing collaborations** among offices such as engagement, research, and communications to foster greater awareness of the institution's many impacts and message alignment.
- ✓ **Identify and empower a leader** at the institution who is responsible for maintaining community and economic engagement and elevating impacts to other parts of the institution.
- ✓ **Develop a high-level core impact narrative** with simple language that's aligned with the institution's mission and strengths and distills the university's impact.
  - Crucially, a core impact narrative should use simple language with proof points that matter to the community (as opposed to internal stakeholders).
- ✓ **Create fact sheets** on key issue areas in the community and state that emphasize impacts that matter to communities (rather than highlighting the dollar amount of a grant to support work).
- ✓ **Develop storytelling frameworks** around this core narrative for unit communications offices that emphasize community voices and support, elevate, and reward this kind of authentic storytelling in unit and central communications offices. Whenever possible, make impacted community or industry voices and perspectives the centerpiece of storytelling (as opposed to members of campus).
  - Embed impact storytelling in annual reports, ongoing campaigns, and institutional branding.
- ✓ **Segment key stakeholder audiences** (e.g., community leaders, policymakers, alumni, media, etc.). Tailor messaging and define a channel strategy to effectively reach each group (e.g., newsletters, social platforms, local media, in-person forums).
- ✓ **Leverage community, industry, civic, and alumni networks** to amplify the institution's impact.
- ✓ **Land-grant institutions: train and partner with Extension** agents to highlight key points about the university in addition to the specific information they are trying to share with a constituent. It's also important to provide a feedback loop for Extension agents to share information back on community-identified needs and suggestions for collaboration with the university.

## Examples of Effective University Communications Around Collective Impact

- The University of Pittsburgh's [vital four roles framework](#).
- Indiana University [Bring on Tomorrow](#) campaign with community-based storytelling.
- UCLA's custom impact maps with key data for [local](#), [state](#), and [federal](#) districts.



### More About the Commission on Economic and Community Engagement

The Commission on Economic and Community Engagement is an APLU member body facilitated by APLU's Office of International, Community, and Economic Engagement. CECE convenes chief economic and community engagement officers from APLU member universities as well as presidents and chancellors, senior research officers, provosts, extension leaders, communications and government affairs officers, and other administrators who maintain responsibility for planning, executing, or communicating their institution's work in economic development and/or community engagement.



### More About the Council on Strategic Communications

APLU's Council on Strategic Communications is a network of senior communications and marketing leaders at public research universities. Through the interaction of its members, the Council works across institutions to build increased support for the value of public four-year research universities at the state and national levels. The Council serves as a home for members to:

- Discuss common challenges and opportunities
- Share and elevate best practices
- Build relationships with fellow higher education communications and marketing leaders

## THANK YOU TO

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