PUBLIC PURPOSE, RENEWED

Future-Leading Engagement in Higher Education

Association of Public & Land-grant Universities

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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IMPACT STATEMENT Future-leading engaged universities catalyze transformative change across many places: the regions they call home, the nation, and across the globe. These transformative changes are driven by deep community partnerships, pioneering innovation, and a relentless focus on meaningful impact. By embedding engagement into their core mission, these institutions not only redefine excellence in teaching, research, and service, but also create innovative solutions to the world's most pressing challenges. Through collaboration, discovery, and accountability, they shape a future where higher education leads boldly in service to society.

LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

MAY 2026

To the Members and Partners of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and to the Broader Higher Education Community:

It has been 25 years since the Kellogg Commission first challenged public and land-grant universities to redefine their relationship with society through engagement that advances the public good. That landmark report inspired a generation of leaders to align teaching, research, and service with the needs of communities. Today, higher education again faces a pivotal moment. Questions of public trust, value, and accountability call our institutions to lead with purpose and transparency.

In that spirit, the Commission on Economic and Community Engagement convened a working group to revisit the Kellogg Commission's vision and to examine how far higher education has progressed in fulfilling its public mission. *Public Purpose, Renewed: Future-Leading Engagement in Higher Education* is the result of that work. The report offers evidence of progress over two decades, documents the cultural and structural reforms that have elevated engagement to an institutional priority, and identifies the conditions necessary for universities to remain trusted partners in strengthening our nation.

The chapters of this report draw on a systematic review of scholarly literature, institutional self-studies, and interviews with national and system leaders. Together, they illustrate how engagement has matured from individual projects to coordinated, evidence-based institutional strategies that sustain impact over time. Each chapter concludes with recommendations that call on campus, system, and association leaders to deepen collaboration, improve alignment of structures and incentives, and strengthen public accountability.

We intend this report to be both a reflection and a guide. It is an invitation to higher education leaders to assess their own institutions' readiness to lead in partnership with the communities they serve. We hope these findings and recommendations will inform dialogue across campuses and networks, and inspire renewed commitment to higher education's enduring public purpose.

We extend our gratitude to the members of the *Public Purpose, Renewed* working group and to the many colleagues whose insight shaped this report. Their dedication to advancing engagement as a defining feature of public and land-grant universities made this work possible.

Sincerely,

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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More than two decades after the landmark 1999 Kellogg Commission report called on public and land-grant universities to reimagine their role in society, higher education once again stands at the crossroads of rising societal expectations and transformative opportunity. *Public Purpose, Renewed: Future-Leading Engagement in Higher Education* revisits the 1999 call to action and redefines it for a new era—when engagement is not an initiative, but a defining identity of public and land-grant universities. This report charts a path for committed institutions to lead with bold engagement, deep partnerships, and innovation-driven purpose.

The 1999 Kellogg Commission called on public and land-grant universities to become more responsively connected to the needs of their communities by integrating engagement into their core functions of teaching, research, and service, outlining a three-pronged agenda for the "engaged institution":

1. **BE ORGANIZED TO RESPOND** to the needs of today's students and tomorrow's, not yesterday's;
2. **ENRICH STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES** by bringing research and engagement into the curriculum and offering practical opportunities for students to prepare for the world they will enter;
3. **PUT ITS CRITICAL RESOURCES—KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE—TO WORK** on the problems that the communities it serves face."

The 1999 report challenged public and land-grant universities to redefine their relationship with society as active collaborators rather than as distant purveyors of knowledge. The report acknowledged public frustration with higher education, a lack of coordination, and too much focus on outreach, rather than true engagement with communities of interest. The Commission's vision positioned engagement not as a peripheral activity, but as an essential mode of scholarship and institutional identity. It envisioned a future where universities would

not only educate but also listen, respond, and co-create solutions with their communities. Their recommendations were broad and institutional, targeting commitment beyond Extension, incorporating engagement into the curriculum, urging leaders to champion engagement, and calling for investment and policy changes that support reward and incentive structures.

Two Decades of Progress

Transformative change began to emerge and gained traction in an explosion of peer-reviewed articles, community-focused media campaigns, professional meetings, national associations, and more. The early post-Kellogg years were characterized by the creation of new networks, recognitions, and offices—laying the groundwork for engagement to be seen as legitimate and institutionally supported. By 2015, these structures had become more common. And by 2024, engagement was both more visible and structurally embedded. Universities are investing in systems that sustain engagement over time, moving from a few "great projects" led by individuals toward focused, institution-wide commitments. The growth in scholarly literature further underscores the integration of engagement into the academic mission, challenging outdated distinctions between "real" scholarship and community-based work (Byrne, 2006; Van Egeren, 2015).

The progress since 1999 has been significant. Engagement is now a recognized part of the mission of public higher education, supported by a rich network of organizations, a growing scholarly literature, and institutional structures that sustain it. Even so, the most salient circumstance facing higher education today is the decline in public trust in institutions, with open questioning of the societal value of higher education and the return on investment for our broader publics and our students. We find ourselves asking, "How must public and land-grant universities adapt to meet rising expectations for relevance, responsiveness, accountability, and real-world impact? And what are the most forward-looking institutions doing to stay grounded in public purpose while driving innovation that matters?"

Public Purpose, Renewed responds to these questions by first revisiting the challenges raised in 1999 and then examining the state of engagement today, across public sentiment, institutional progress, and the systems and associations that undergird our institutions. Insights are drawn from the academic research literature, institutional self-studies on community engagement, and interviews with national organizations and university system offices. Each chapter offers recommendations for higher education leaders, engagement professionals, and other professionals supporting institutions.

Understanding Engagement Today

Public Purpose, Renewed begins by detailing the progress made since the 1999 report, drawing upon evidence from broad and diversified stakeholders to examine the evolution of public trust, value, and impact with higher education since the Commission's 1999 call to action. We then examine the role of engagement in restoring and sustaining trust and ensuring higher education's contributions to societal value and return on investment. By reviewing the state of engagement at APLU institutions from 1999 to 2024, the report highlights the ways in which engaged scholarship has moved from the margins of academic legitimacy to an increasingly recognized field of inquiry, with peer-reviewed journals, special issues, and citation networks documenting both conceptual and applied work.

As evidence that higher education is listening to messages from a continuum of stakeholders, Chapter 1 features a systematic review of the peer-reviewed academic literature related to public trust, value, and return on investment with regard to higher education from 2000 to 2025. Findings revealed that higher education has embraced its public purpose by positioning community engagement in the core of institutional planning, anticipating workforce and talent needs, reimagining alumni as community connectors, and fostering adaptive leadership rooted in shared accountability.

To further exemplify the current state of engagement in public and land-grant institutions, Chapter 2 offers a thematic analysis of institutional reforms documented via classification and designation reports from universities that have earned both the Carnegie Foundation's

Community Engagement Elective Classification and the Innovation and Economic Prosperity designation. These documents provide a window into how future-leading institutions are formalizing and measuring their engagement commitments, further anchoring universities and communities as mutually beneficial partners.

Chapter 3 provides insights drawn from interviews with leaders from national organizations and university system offices who are committed to engagement. Their perspectives form a common agenda that reveals higher education's role in strengthening public trust, value, and return on investment when viewed through a broader architecture of engagement and cross-sector alliances.

Leading the Future: Imperatives for Public and Land-grant Universities

Cumulatively, the chapters demonstrate the many ways in which universities are place-based, publicly accountable institutions that are responsive to and co-created with the communities they serve—advancing social mobility, sustainability, and prosperity through intentional, measurable engagement. By looking to these exemplars, *Public Purpose, Renewed* suggests that future-leading, engaged universities share a set of characteristics:

STRATEGIC, TRUST-CENTERED ENGAGEMENT. Future-leading engaged universities reflect institutional alignment to making positive public impact through their mission, strategic plans, and leadership priorities. Their guiding principles are grounded in accountability, transparency, and responsiveness. Their policymaking processes ensure institutional decisions align with community interests and fiscal responsibility.

DEMONSTRATED PUBLIC VALUE. Future-leading engaged universities position their institutions as collaborative and dependable problem solvers that promote reciprocal partnerships and translational research—mobilizing alumni, faculty, staff, and students to serve as ambassadors for change in partnership with community stakeholders. To build trust and ensure the broader public knows of their efforts, engaged institutions broadcast success stories from community-partnered initiatives that resonate with policymakers and key community stakeholders.

DATA-INFORMED CULTURES TOWARD CONTINUOUS IMPACT. Future-leading engaged universities ensure they are making continuous public impact by committing to ethical data gathering processes, improving access to evidence-based resources, and communicating transparently through data-sharing on factors that community stakeholders feel are relevant and influential.

COLLABORATIVE AND ADAPTIVE INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITIES. Future-leading engaged universities embed themselves deeply into their local/regional context, reflecting and reinforcing their place-based identity through community-strengthening infrastructure and community-informed initiatives that are responsive to the economic, evolving market, and workforce realities relevant to the places they serve.

Renewing Trust and Demonstrating Public Impact

What this report clearly lays out is that through education, we are creating affordable degree pathways, reimagining curricula, and preparing students not just for jobs, but for lives of purpose and civic responsibility. Through research, we are tackling society's most urgent challenges—from strengthening national security through cyber and defense innovation, identifying root causes of and treatment options for chronic diseases, and ensuring health and affordable food supply to boosting economic competitiveness through growth in advanced manufacturing and supply chain resiliency — while training the next generation of scientists, innovators, and problem solvers. And through service, we are forging deep, reciprocal partnerships with communities, co-creating solutions that reflect shared values and mutual respect.

Today, universities are documenting their public impact, aligning their missions with community needs, and demonstrating their value in ways that are visible, verifiable, and vital. In today's world, where public trust is fragile, value is scrutinized, and return on investment (ROI) is demanded, higher education must go further. To meet this moment, public and land-grant institutions should:

1. Restore **TRUST** by enhancing transparency in decision-making, embracing intellectual diversity, and demonstrating responsiveness to community needs.
2. Deliver **VALUE** by aligning academic programs with workforce and societal demands, while preserving the liberal arts and civic education as pillars of democratic life.
3. Maximize **ROI** by tracking and communicating both economic and social outcomes—showing how public investment in higher education drives economic growth, strengthens American innovation, and delivers real value to taxpayers and communities.

These are not abstract ideals—they are actionable imperatives. They require universities to be both excellent and engaged, both accountable and aspirational. And they demand a renewed social compact—one in which higher education is not only a pathway to personal advancement but a partner in building a more prosperous and resilient society. Higher education is not perfect, nor immune to critique. But it is evolving. It is engaging. And it is proving—through its partnerships, its policies, and its people—that it remains one of the most powerful engines of public good in American life.

Public Purpose, Renewed offers a resource to public higher education leaders and to the sector broadly by providing the necessary contextual understanding to articulate and deepen the role of future-leading engaged universities in achieving their public purpose. In a time when public trust in higher education hangs in the balance, a new era is rising—one in which universities can cement their roles not just as institutions of learning, but as engines of innovation and community transformation. *Public Purpose, Renewed: Future-Leading Engagement in Higher Education* is our call to lead that future—boldly, collaboratively, and unapologetically in service to society.

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OVERVIEW

Public Purpose, Renewed draws from academic literature, institutional self-studies, and interviews with leaders across university systems and national organizations. This report provides an integrated view of how engagement has become a defining element of institutional identity and a guide for the next era of public good leadership.

INTRODUCTION: WHERE ARE WE NOW? presents a comprehensive look at the APLU engagement landscape from 1999-2024, as spurred by the Kellogg Commission Report "Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution." This scan demonstrates how this challenge for universities to move beyond one-way outreach and embrace reciprocal partnerships with communities has been accepted, expanded, and enhanced.

CHAPTER 1 presents a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2000 and 2025 that examines public trust, value, and return on investment in higher education. It documents how engagement has moved from the margins of institutional life to a central mechanism for demonstrating public purpose and accountability. The chapter concludes with recommendations (page 21) for higher education leaders and scholars focused on improving transparency, aligning engagement with workforce and societal needs, and grounding institutional decision-making in shared accountability and evidence.

CHAPTER 2 analyzes institutional reforms documented in reports from universities that have earned both the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities' Innovation and Economic Prosperity designation. It reveals how leading institutions are moving from individual projects to coordinated impact agendas, embracing their roles as public problem solvers, and measuring and communicating impact beyond outputs and activities. The chapter ends with recommendations (page 44) for institutional and system leaders on creating aligned structures, incentive systems, and evaluation frameworks that ensure engagement is sustained as a long-term institutional priority.

CHAPTER 3 draws on interviews with leaders from national organizations and university system offices committed to engagement. Their collective insights highlight a common agenda for strengthening public trust, value, and return on investment through collaboration across institutions, associations, and sectors. The chapter concludes with recommendations (page 71) for national and system-level organizations to improve coordination, share data and evaluation practices, and advance a unified voice for engagement as a defining feature of higher education's public mission.

INTRODUCTION
Where are We Now?
Scanning the APLU Engagement Landscape, 1999–2024

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Public universities were established by state governments to provide affordable, high-quality education to residents, often with a mission to serve the public good. The land-grant system, first formalized through the Morrill Act of 1862, expanded this mission by funding institutions focused on agriculture, mechanical arts, and military science—fields critical to national development. Over time, public and land-grant institutions have become engines of social mobility, economic growth, and civic engagement across generations of students while simultaneously responding to the evolving needs of their states and communities.

In 1996, a pivotal gathering of university presidents and chancellors sparked a bold reimagining of higher education's role in society. A series of six influential reports addressing the most pressing challenges facing public and land-grant universities emerged. While the early reports focused on student access and experience, the third—released in 1999—shifted the conversation toward community engagement. Titled *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution*, this report urged universities to move beyond one-way outreach and embrace reciprocal partnerships with communities. As the report stated: "By engagement the Commission envisions partnerships, two-way streets defined by mutual respect among the partners for what each brings to the table. An institution that responds to these imperatives can properly be called what the Kellogg Commission has come to think of as an 'engaged institution.'"

This seminal report, issued by what was then the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), positioned engagement not as a peripheral activity but as an essential mode of scholarship and institutional identity. The Kellogg report recognized

that although higher education institutions, especially public and land-grant universities, expressed commitments to benefit society, they were often disconnected from the public, prone to unintentionally or intentionally exploiting power differences, and structurally challenged to build effective partnerships to create meaningful impact through research, teaching, and application of knowledge.

Their call to action challenged public and land-grant universities to redefine their relationship with society as active collaborators rather than as distant purveyors of knowledge. It envisioned a future where universities would not only educate but also listen, respond, and co-create solutions with their communities.

Two and a half decades later, we continue to hear questions about the value of universities in advancing tangible societal change. But institutionally driven engagement has evolved substantially during this period. In 1999, higher education leaders took a hard look at what universities needed to do to better realize their public missions. In 2015, a scan was conducted of APLU institutions located in the U.S. and the supportive ecosystem of national networks and organizations to depict the status of institutional engagement and changes in the context that supports engagement since the 1999 report. And in 2024, we revisited the same institutions to examine what had changed over the past decade.

The State of Engagement in 2015

A 2015 scan (Van Egeren, 2015), disseminated through an infographic (Figure 1), offered a snapshot of the position of engagement in U.S. public universities 15 years after the release of the Kellogg Report. At that point, engagement had moved beyond the pilot phase—institutions often had at least some visible structures or programs in place—but it was still uneven in its prominence and integration.

One section of the scan, labeled "Where Are We Now," examined the percentage of the 204 institutions analyzed for which various indicators of institutional investment in engagement were evident on their websites. For example, nearly half of APLU member institutions (46%) explicitly referenced outreach or engagement in their mission or vision statements or core goals, indicating a significant degree of institutional recognition. About one in four (23%) featured the words "outreach," "engagement," or "partnerships" on the main university landing page, placing these ideas in a visible position for external audiences.

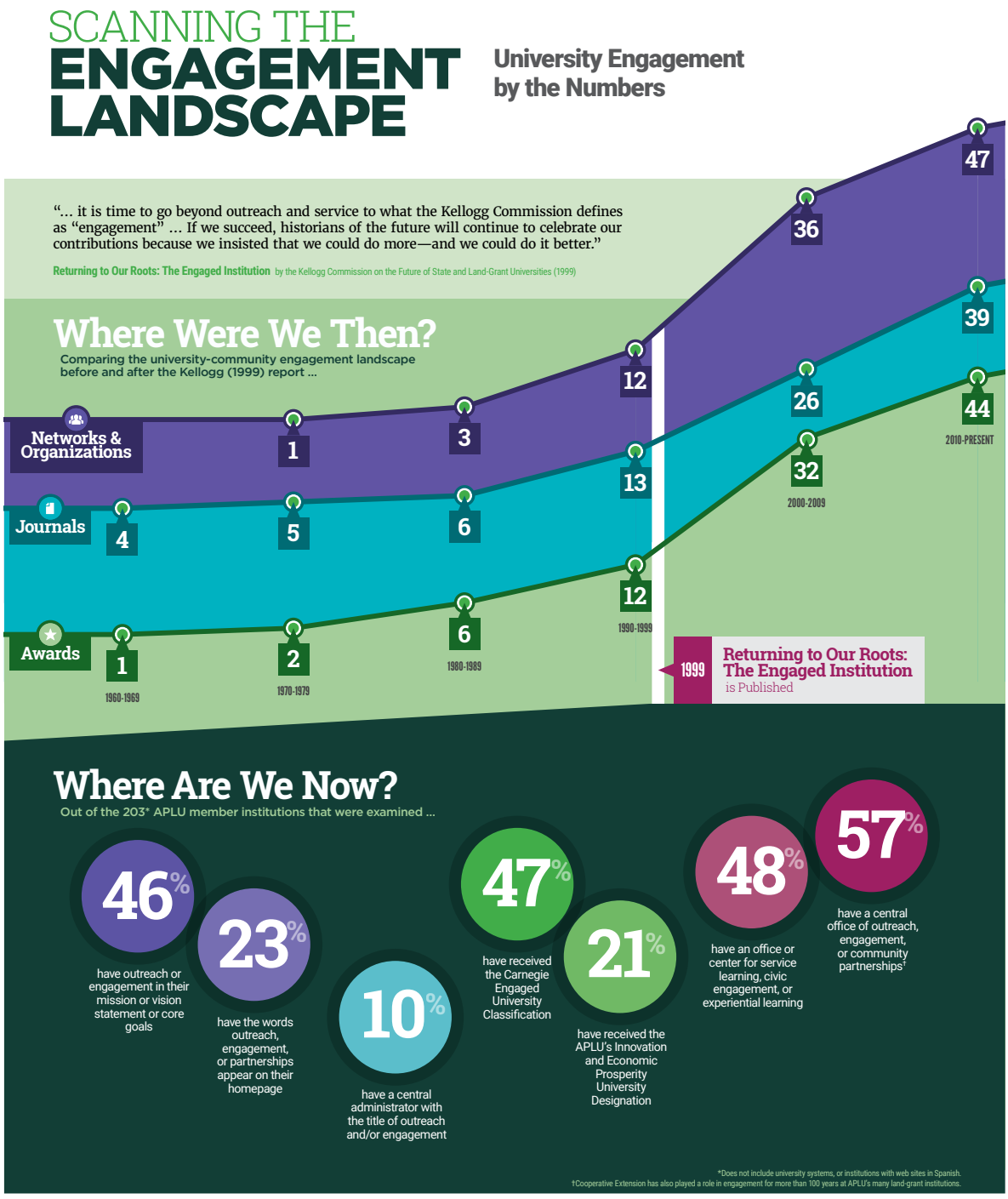
Similarly, structural commitments varied. Almost half (47%) had earned the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, and 21% had achieved APLU's Innovations & Economic Prosperity University designation. In contrast, just 10% of institutions had a central administrator (e.g., vice provost, assistant vice president, chief engagement officer) with "outreach" and/or "engagement" in their title, suggesting that leadership roles dedicated to engagement were still relatively rare. Institutions were more likely to have established offices or centers for service learning, civic engagement, or experiential learning (48%) or a central office for outreach, engagement, or community partnerships (57%).

The scan also examined changes since the 1999 Kellogg Commission report in the broader engagement ecosystem that supports higher education. This ecosystem includes professional networks and organizations in which engaged scholars can participate, scholarly journals that encourage or focus on outreach, engagement, and science communication that may form viable opportunities to publish work that may not fit within disciplinary journals, and national or international awards recognizing publicly engaged work. These data showed an increase prior to the 1999 report and a sharp uptick since the report was published. For example, the number of networks and organizations, journals, and awards at the time of the Kellogg Report was around 12; by 2015, 40 to 50 of each were identified. This engagement ecosystem offered institutions—and their faculty, staff, and students—more opportunities to learn from one another and to have their engagement work recognized by peers.

The findings illustrate increasing integration of engagement into institutional infrastructure by 2015. Engagement was gaining legitimacy and visibility, but it had not yet become a universal, deeply embedded element of institutional identity across public higher education.

Between 1999 and 2015, community engagement began to move from the margins to the infrastructure of public universities—taking root as a foundation for deeper, more transformative work ahead.

Figure 1. Scanning the Engagement Landscape, 2015



The State of Engagement a Decade Later

In 2024, the exercise was repeated with the 203 APLU U.S. institutions that were available. Table 1 shows the changes over the decade. In the process, some of the 2015 data were clarified and recategorized. Most notably, close inspection revealed that many of the units classified as central public engagement offices in 2015 were better categorized as centers for engaged learning or service learning; the percentage of institutions identified as having central public engagement offices decreased from 57% to 24%, while the percentage identified as having community-engaged learning offices increased from 48% to 61%. The revision reinforced the supposition that universities are more likely to invest in student-focused engagement, and indeed that community-engaged learning offices can be a first step to launching more comprehensive engaged scholarship support units.

One of the clearest shifts from 2015 to 2024 is the degree to which engagement, including but extending beyond Extension for those with Extension services, has been embedded in the core identity of public universities. In 2015, nearly half (46%) of the institutions referenced engagement in strategic plans or mission statements, but by 2024, 83% did so. Interestingly, however, engagement-related language appeared slightly less frequently on homepages (23% in 2015 vs 20% in 2024). We believe that institutions have chosen to emphasize student recruitment on their landing pages; it is unclear whether the infrequency of information about public engagement on institution homepages presents a barrier to individuals seeking that information.

Table 1.

Percent of Institutions Identified with Indicators of Institutional Engagement

INDICATOR	2015[a]	2024
Engagement or outreach present in mission, vision, goals	46%	83%
"Outreach" or "engagement" appears on the main institutional homepage or as a button/dropdown on the main page menu	23%	20%
Received Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement	47%	59%
Received APLU Innovations in Economic Prosperity designation	21%	40%
Chief engagement officer (e.g., vice, associate, or assistant vice provost or president)	10%	19%
Central office for community engagement or outreach, community partnerships, engaged scholarship	24%	37%
Central office or center for community-engaged, service, or experiential learning	61%	76%

[a] Reflects categorization changes from the original 2015 infographic.

By 2024, global recognitions, expanding scholarly outlets, and growing professional networks signaled the adoption of community-engaged scholarship within public universities.

Institutions have also demonstrated greater interest—and effectiveness—in obtaining outside evidence of their institutional engagement. The premier "accreditation" recognition for engaged institutions is the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement. As of 2015, 47% of institutions had achieved the classification, while by 2024, 59% had. APLU's recognition for economic and community development, the Innovations & Economy Prosperity (IEP) designation, is related to community engagement; in addition to demonstrating innovation and talent, place-based development forms a core pillar of the IEP.

Organizational investments in central support for engagement and outreach also increased over the decade. Investments into community-engaged learning offices increased even further, from 61% in 2015 to 76% in 2024, while the percentage of institutions with central public engagement offices that expanded supports beyond undergraduate learning increased from 24% to 37%. This deepening integration signals a shift from seeing engagement as a programmatic choice to recognizing it as part of the university's defining responsibilities. The prominence of engagement in official documents and communications shapes not only public perception but also internal culture, influencing how faculty, staff, and students understand their role in advancing the university's mission, while expansion of central supports empowers faculty, staff, and students by developing their ability to do the work rather than relying on the capacity-constrained efforts of specific units—thus creating the potential for large-scale institutional impact.

Finally, the national and international ecosystem that supports university-community engaged scholarship has continued to grow. Although it would not be reasonable to expect the indicators to continue to expand at the rapid pace evident in the decade or so after the Kellogg Report, the number of opportunities and outlets available to connect and share engaged work

is substantially larger compared to just 10 years ago. In 2015, we identified 47 professional networks and organizations, 39 journals, and 44 national and international awards initiated; by 2024, we discovered 76 networks and organizations, 56 journals, and 59 awards. The data confirm that the ecosystem supporting engagement is broader and more interconnected than at any previous time. The number of national and international networks, associations, and coalitions explicitly devoted to engagement gives institutions and their faculty, staff, and students access to shared learning, collective advocacy, and collaborative project opportunities. Many universities now hold memberships in multiple engagement-focused networks, allowing them to draw on sector-wide resources while contributing to a shared knowledge base. Concurrently, engagement scholarship has moved from the margins of academic legitimacy to an increasingly recognized field of inquiry, with peer-reviewed journals, special issues, and citation networks documenting both conceptual and applied work. This growth not only reflects increasing academic interest but also reinforces engagement's standing as a form of scholarship with rigorous standards and assessable outcomes.

Looking Ahead

The story emerging from the 2024 scan is one of maturation. Even with this maturation, questions remain about how public and land-grant universities can demonstrate their relevance and value amidst shifting expectations for higher education. *Public Purpose, Renewed* explores these questions by drawing on a wide range of evidence to understand how engagement has evolved and what the next era of institutional public purpose requires.

CHAPTER 1
Earning Trust and Delivering Value
A Systematic Review of Higher Education's

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In this chapter, in response to the call to action from the 1999 Kellogg Commission's report, we focus on the landscape of public trust, value, and return on investment through a community-engaged research lens. In particular, the commission identified several pressing challenges: "(a) the public is frustrated by higher education's lack of responsiveness to their needs, (b) higher education is not well organized to bring solutions to local problems in an organized manner, (c) enrollment pressures exist with increased demands on affordability, and (d) there is a growing emphasis on accountability and productivity particularly in response to national and international challenges."

To deliver the most rigorous analysis of higher education in relation to public trust, value, and return on investment, we chose to complete an evidence-based systematic review of these concepts, encompassing only peer-reviewed journal articles (78,638 academic publications) in the English language from January 2000 to March 2025. Our aim for this analysis was to answer this question: **"WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OR COMMUNITY TRUST, VALUE, AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT WITH INSTITUTES OF HIGHER LEARNING?"** To be included, articles could not be student or faculty-centric; they must have included community insight or perceptions on trust, value, and/or return on investment. For readers who would like a more complete review of the methodology, see the Methodology and PRISMA for each search in Appendix A.

Here's what the search uncovered:

- The first search, focused on public value, populated 20,096 articles. After applying our inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Appendix A), 23 were selected for full review.
- The second search focused on public trust and returned 20,218 articles. Of those, 20 met the criteria for analysis. The analysis on trust was conducted with support from a team in Australia who had recently conducted a search on public trust (Le & Law, 2023).

- The third search, focused on return on investment, found 38,324 articles, with 30 meeting the inclusion standards.

In total, 73 studies were analyzed.

How to Maximize the Use of This Chapter

Though this chapter may read like an academic article, we hope public and land-grant university leaders will share its findings with those within their institutions or system offices who are working to build public trust, value, and return on investment with community partners. Our aim is to get administrators, faculty, staff, and students thinking about how our institutions and system offices show up in each of the subthemes—and how we might use the examples shared throughout this chapter to build stronger trust, demonstrate value, and increase return on investment with our community partners. To ease the reading of this chapter, all 73 studies are organized into themes, highlighting exemplars that show how higher education is enhancing public trust, value, and return on investment. For a consolidated snapshot of the findings and recommendations from the systematic review, see the Scheme in Appendix B.

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Trust and Value

Trust

In recent years, public and community trust in higher education has wavered, fueled by questions about transparency and institutional expertise in addressing real-world needs. Research from the systematic review on public trust reveals four sub-themes (e.g., Place-based and Asset-focused Institutions, Educational Leadership, Anchored in Evidence, and Alumni as Bridges) in how institutions of higher education can and are combating low levels of relational trust between themselves and their communities (see Appendix B Scheme). These themes underscore the importance of intentional, evidence-based engagement strategies that are rooted in local context and sustained through authentic relationships.

Place-based and Asset-focused Institutions

By addressing community needs through programs that support economic, social, and educational development, institutions demonstrate a long-term commitment to authentic and trusted university-community partnerships built on shared decision-making and mutual benefit. Impellizeri and Lee (2021) compared the presence of supports and services across the Federal Promise Neighborhoods Grant—a place-based initiative that utilizes anchor institutions as support for community organizations in areas of need, focusing on academic improvement, health and wellness, workforce development, and family support efforts aimed at community revitalization. Impellizeri and Lee (2021) found that regardless of the type of institution (e.g., academic, non-profit, tribal nation) or focus of the initiative (i.e., health and wellness versus technology access), anchor institutions operate as trustworthy partners and mediating forces behind place-based change that is yielding improvement across communities.

University boundary spanners are individuals who connect universities and communities and work to navigate the intersection of academia and community engagement, helping facilitate a trusted collaboration between local organizations and universities to align priorities. Boundary spanners play a key role in centering beneficiaries' needs and fostering collaboration that integrates both university and community perspectives (Payne et al., 2024). This beneficiary-centric approach challenges the resource-based view of value creation by moving beyond traditional models, which often prioritize institutional goals and resources over community impact, to recognize community members as stakeholders at the center of engagement efforts that emphasize community knowledge and co-creation of knowledge (Cooley, 2022). Place-based education integrates varying worldviews and senses of place into the curriculum, creating increased knowledge, engagement, and meaning within a broader society.

Educational Leadership

To build and sustain public trust, higher education institutions prioritize authentic communication, mutual respect, and inclusive, long-term engagement strategies. Universities' traditional structures have been historically characterized by hierarchies, detailed policies, and bureaucratic processes that may make it difficult to address community needs. However, future-leading engaged institutions and their educational leadership are moving toward more horizontal, empowered, organic structures with flexibility, transparency, and ethical responsiveness (Olson et al., 2023). Universities identified in this sub-theme create and reinforce a culture of mission, shared values, consensus-building, and meaningful dialogue transmitted through active engagement and communication with communities (Hermanowicz, 2024; Voss & Kumar, 2013).

Transparent communication methods—such as proactively disclosing campus climate survey results and actively addressing campus concerns that may have community impact (e.g., sexual misconduct, hazing, freedom of speech and open inquiry, and substance abuse on campus)—are a key way that educational leaders are enhancing institutional credibility and accountability (Frerichs et al., 2017; Hermanowicz, 2024; Olson et al., 2023). Transparent communication highlights the effectiveness of educational leadership, especially in times of crisis (e.g., COVID-19, high-profile events). Transparent communication and leadership inform real policy changes and demonstrate accountability. For example, crisis plans and ethics committees that infuse community-shared values and ethical principles (e.g., accuracy and transparency, deliberative dialog, safety, and an ethic of care) navigate and ease potential tensions with the public when crises occur (Fisher Liu et al., 2021). Policy improvements made through collaboration that engages communities and prioritizes community needs like capacity-building and resource-stability create avenues for sustainable university-community relationships.

Explicitly addressing stakeholder perspectives and working to unify divergent priorities and goals through transparent communication has been shown to be important in developing trust and successful community-university partnerships (Frerichs et al., 2017). Additionally, when higher education institutions actively engage with their audiences through public platforms such as social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube), they create university brands that are seen as authentic and trustworthy (Voss & Kumar, 2013).

Anchored in Evidence

Findings associated with this sub-theme emphasize the value of creating transparent and collaborative pathways for public access to knowledge and research-based evidence, helping address perceptions of ideological bias and strengthening mutual understanding. The connection between lack of access to trustworthy knowledge and emotionality has encroached into higher education; there are clear trends in the replacement of traditional repositories of scholarly knowledge (i.e., peer-reviewed scholarship and critical thinking associated with library-sourced materials) with alternative sources of information like social media. The reliance on social media for knowledge has increased the scrutiny of research experts and mainstream science (Mohammed et al., 2024) and, for those audiences, reduced the need to discern whether content requires validity or evidence to support its truthfulness.

Higher education practitioners are finding diminishing trust in their expertise, and this shift is not only creating difficulty in obtaining information literacy (Lenker, 2023) but also calling into question if researchers consider whether their findings are understandable to the broader non-academic community or whether work from their labs can bridge the gap between academic discovery and real-world application through translational research (Lenker, 2022; Mohammed et al., 2024).

Both universities and industries struggle to balance maintaining open access to research with managing intellectual property concerns. The need to protect sometimes limits public engagement and access to evidence-based findings, even for universities' own alumni, who could benefit from access to research (following graduation) that sustains their connection to the university and offers up-to-date knowledge in their field. This theme highlights universities' need to rethink how they communicate expertise to and advance knowledge for their community stakeholders.

Universities are increasingly adopting open access practices, committing to long-term partnerships, and translating research in ways that align academic knowledge with public need.

To foster greater public involvement in university research, universities are increasingly embracing models that expand access to research and data (e.g., removing paywalls on research and articles) and encourage research outside the silos of specific academic disciplines (Friedman et al., 2023) in ways that benefit society and are conducted in partnership with their communities.

Additionally, universities are committing to long-term relationships with community partners, rather than project-based interventions, to ensure that trust is sustained over time. Cultivating better long-term relationships involves the investment of time, resources, responsibility, and reward (Barnett et al., 2010). For example, Seidel et al. (2023) illustrate how video storytelling in a 14-year initiative at Rutgers University enhanced public engagement by humanizing scientists and making evidence from their work more relatable. Such efforts not only foster science literacy but also reinforce public confidence in the university's societal role by providing a model of "showing rather than telling" about research findings (Seidel et al., 2023).

Furthermore, translational research bridges the gap between academic discovery and real-world application, accelerating the movement of knowledge from theory to practice. Universities must demonstrate a commitment to addressing the needs of students and local communities, rather than appearing to act in self-interest (Suntornpithug & Todorovic, 2015). Hawkins et al. (2020) found that stakeholders believe the relevance of university research is a pressing concern, and the value of practical contributions may bridge the gap between academia and practice. By fostering mutual trust through negotiation and communication, higher education institutions can strengthen knowledge transfer, innovation, and collaboration with the private sector, which can ultimately benefit communities at large through economic development and state or federal policy change.

Through a series of trust-building processes between the Doermer School of Business and the local entrepreneur and business community, innovative and collaborative developments at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) increased resource utilization and knowledge transfer projects, which ultimately increased the institution's reputation and interest in cooperation throughout local and regional communities (Suntornpithug & Todorovic, 2015). Translational research can strengthen public trust in academic institutions, promote more effective solutions, and contribute to sustainable development by supporting research goals addressing pressing societal challenges (Payne et al., 2024).

Alumni as Bridges

Relationships and trust are central to cultivating and sustaining support for higher education (Garvey & Drezner, 2013). Alumni trust is strongly tied to philanthropic giving, which accounted for almost $18 billion in 2016 to institutions across higher education (Drezner et al. 2020). Alumni develop trust—or distrust—of their alma maters based on public discourse and personal perceptions of an institution's policies, particularly around spending (Drezner et al., 2020). Their relationship with the university relies on dependable and ethical financial practices and genuine engagement (Drezner et al., 2020; Garvey & Drezner, 2013). Alumni who share commonalities (through previous student clubs or via a mutual neighborhood or community, for example (Garvey & Drezner, 2013; Luney, 2022)) benefit from targeted strategies that foster authentic relationships, belonging, and institutional accountability. By emphasizing ethical governance and open communication, universities showed they could deepen community relationships, enhance legitimacy, and support long-term institutional and societal goals.

Public trust in higher education is closely tied to how well institutions recognize and respond to the experiences and needs of their students and communities. When universities acknowledge the unique challenges faced by different groups and actively engage with their stories and strategies for success, they help build more authentic and lasting relationships.

Researchers underscore the importance of relevant curricula, responsive policies, and meaningful engagement efforts that reflect real-world experiences. Initiatives that address specific community needs and incorporate local knowledge can help restore trust by demonstrating a commitment to practical relevance and mutual benefit. For example, Garvey and Drezner (2013) found that when advancement staff built genuine connections with alumni and showed an understanding of their backgrounds and values, those alumni were more likely to feel personally invested in the institution—leading to increased giving and volunteerism.

Value

The public perception of the value of higher education has shifted over the last 20 years, driven by social and economic concerns such as the cost of tuition, skepticism over the practicality of some academic majors, and the need for a wider shift toward skills-based learning and alternatives to traditional academic programs/pathways (Snyder, 2007). Communities continuously stress the importance of higher education's commitment to broader social missions of building civic responsibility and engagement. In response to their requests, higher education institutions are working to invest in ways to better respond to community needs. Emphasizing the idea that the value of higher education extends beyond financial returns to include societal, cultural, and environmental benefits, this category reflects five sub-themes: Economic Development, Fairness, Access to Resources, Institutional Identity, and Institutional Responsibility.

Economic Development

Higher education institutions play a critical role in regional economic and workforce development (Achenreiner et al., 2019; Salvador & Harmon, 2013). Universities, employers, and communities have been shown to collaboratively address talent shortages, strengthen workforce pipelines, and retain local talent by aligning educational programs with regional economic needs, providing clear pathways to careers (Franklin, 2010). Franklin (2010) presents six land-grant institutions (Michigan State University, Purdue University, Virginia Tech, University of Georgia, University of Minnesota, and the University of Missouri) as exemplars of how higher education can support entrepreneurship, industry partnerships, and job training through strategic outreach and collaboration with policymakers and businesses. For example, Virginia Tech utilizes applied research to build programs and support infrastructure that result in new employment and bolster the workforce with key competencies. Achenreiner et al. (2019) showcase this with the example of Midwestern business schools (e.g., University of Missouri, University of Michigan, University of

Wisconsin) that serve as key connectors between education and employment by expanding internships, hosting career fairs, and directly engaging with businesses to better prepare students for local labor markets.

The ongoing need of communities and employers to attract and retain educated people "offers higher education institutions an opportunity to strengthen connections with both by establishing regional talent pipelines and demonstrating the value educational institutions can add to taxpayers and the local economy" (Achenreiner et al., 2019, 615). Business schools are evolving to remain relevant in a rapidly changing global economy, moving from a "product" focus (graduating students) to a "service" focus, supporting ongoing professional development (Salvador & Harmon, 2020); strengthening ties with industry by listening to their needs and integrating their feedback into curricula; and encouraging faculty to pursue research with direct, practical business applications. These institutions also push accreditation agencies to value lifelong learning and community impact, not just degree program quality, and adapting to online learning and other digital innovations to meet the evolving expectations of students and industries. Salvador and Harmon (2020) argue that business schools face a critical inflection point and must embrace innovation and collaboration with the business community to reduce their risk of becoming obsolete. The future lies in rethinking their mission, prioritizing lifelong learning, and aligning research and curricula with real-world industry challenges.

As economic conditions and workforce demands evolve, public universities are increasingly aligning academic expertise with regional development and long-term economic needs.

Fairness

Higher education institutions enhance their public value not only through economic development but also by advancing community engagement and fairness through socio-ecological lenses (Castillo & Roberts, 2024). Universities and communities are motivated by shared interests: communities seek access to expertise and resources, while institutions pursue stakeholder legitimacy and real-world impact.

The Indiana GEAR UP Program, for example, focuses on increasing the rate of college-going among students living in low-income neighborhoods through community-university partnerships. The program solicits community stakeholder perspectives and incorporates them into the creation of community-level interventions, which are then harnessed in university postsecondary planning designed to reach wider audiences, and—ultimately—increase enrollment (Jenkins & Bolshakova, 2024). Recognizing barriers like community isolation and lack of facilities has led to mechanisms that increase awareness of the value of STEM, which in turn creates strong opportunities to narrow educational gaps (Kerr et al., 2018).

Arizona State University (ASU) recognized the importance of parents guiding students toward university education. To address the challenges of education in the state (i.e., low-income populations, English proficiency, lack of funding and after-school resources, and high school graduation rates), ASU created the American Dream Academy to create an understanding and instill the value of high school and college education (Perilla, 2011). Similarly, Chapman et al. (2018) find that families in their sample prioritize colleges offering strong support systems and familiar connections to community experiences and environments—further reinforcing the value of community-rooted institutional practices.

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Closeness & Familiarity with Higher Education

A community's proximity and familiarity with higher education significantly influence how it perceives the value of public and land-grant institutions. Lack of closeness to a campus or familiarity with a college or university can undermine the perceived value of higher education (Park et al. 2021). However, expanding locally relevant opportunities—such as invitations to engage with two-year, four-year, online, and continuing education—helps improve community satisfaction and restore trust in higher education's purpose (Park et al. 2021; Schejbal & Wilson 2008). Park (2021) finds that rural residents living near two-year colleges or satellite campuses report greater satisfaction with their communities and a stronger belief in the value of education, whereas those in education deserts often see college as less relevant. These perceptions are shaped not just by availability, but by broader cultural and systemic factors that can influence economic well-being.

Providing information about the value of higher education allows community members to make decisions that balance current values and norms with viable options for pursuing higher education (Snyder, 2007). Schejbal and Wilson (2008) argue that although universities face pressure to justify their economic impact, their broader roles in community enrichment, civic engagement, and lifelong learning are equally vital. Institutions like the University of Wisconsin Extension (UWEX) exemplify how continuing education can serve communities by promoting adult learning, community well-being, and practical applications of university knowledge. Additionally, surveying older individuals about specific community needs and priorities aided the creation of classroom-to-community programming at the University of Nebraska (Masters & Holley, 2011). These studies highlight the need for education reform, community education, and policy interventions to address challenges and promote higher education as a viable and accessible path for learners.

Institutional Identity

The public perception of higher education is significantly influenced by how universities engage with social issues, institutional culture, and community values (Ashby-King, 2023). The culture of public and land-grant universities extends beyond internal dynamics to shape how external stakeholders view and support institutions. Those with clearly defined missions and visible societal contributions are more likely to garner alumni donations, increased enrollment, and external funding (Toma et al., 2005). In times of crisis or social unrest, universities that localized issues by focusing on community values and implemented substantive changes—like policy reforms and increased support for crisis-aligned initiatives—were seen as more credible than those offering only symbolic gestures (Ashby-

The culture of public and land-grant universities—made visible through engagement—shapes how external stakeholders perceive institutional relevance.

King, 2023). Maksin and Bucher (2023) echo this in their examination of the implications for universities working with local communities on projects that reckon with harmful college archival materials. When the authors moved from institution-based, campus-wide conversations to de-centered community working groups, they created environments where diverse perspectives could have authentic and community-valued conversations about systemic issues and the future of university-community relationships.

Increasingly, universities also serve as mediators in civic discourse. Research on public deliberation centers, including those affiliated with the National Issues Forums (NIF) Network and Network for Collaborative Governance (UNCG), demonstrates that higher education institutions (HEIs) enhance democracy and civic engagement by facilitating structured, inclusive dialogue on public issues (Carcasson, 2011). Through impartiality and neutrality, these centers help communities navigate divisive topics and provide students with critical thinking skills and experiential learning opportunities. Overall, institutions that align internal culture with external engagement build stronger public trust and institutional loyalty, essentially enabling communities to identify with an institution (Toma et al., 2005).

Institutional Responsibility

Strong institutional leadership, clear organizational structures, and explicit faculty and staff training in reciprocity and community collaboration are crucial to fostering sustainable and mutually beneficial partnerships (Weerts, 2010). The integration of value-based sustainability initiatives within higher education has strengthened public perceptions of universities as socially responsible institutions that provide societal benefits to communities (Payne et al., 2024). How institutions of higher education disclose and report their non-economic impacts creates avenues to show accountability and credibility. Although most data on the impact and

value of higher education comes from indicators such as funding and research expenditures, measures of public benefit and social value also need to be communicated and accessible to stakeholders (Castillo et al., 2024).

Despite challenges such as limited funding, inconsistent institutional commitment from stakeholders, and stakeholder disinterest—particularly from municipal authorities and businesses—universities have the potential and responsibility to lead sustainable development across economic, environmental, and social domains (Filho et al., 2019). Effective engagement requires institutionalizing sustainability efforts through formal structures (e.g., connections to national or international networks, NGOs, and governments) in tandem with curricula updates and research agendas (e.g., exchange programs, joint degrees, civic engagement and liberal arts programs (Kliewer et al., 2016)) that foster robust collaborations with local initiatives (e.g., schools, local businesses).

Filho et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of coordinated partnerships and dedicated resources to ensure the long-term impact of university-community sustainability initiatives. The University of Florida's locally supported foodservice framework, for example, aligns campus operations with regional food systems, reinforcing public trust through visible commitments to sustainability and local economic resilience (Campbell et al., 2023).

Similarly, the University of Vermont's commitment to a sustainability-envisioning process exemplifies how community-driven planning can bolster a university's reputation and foster institutional trust. By engaging more than 1,500 stakeholders in the development of a long-term charter focused on carbon neutrality, green spaces, and local food sourcing, UVM successfully built broad-based support across campus-community groups, although priorities varied by stakeholder (Pollock et al., 2019). The initiative prioritized human, social, built, and natural capital—emphasizing systems-thinking, interdisciplinary learning, affordability, eco-friendly infrastructure, and environmental sustainability. Pollock et al. (2019) conclude that while high consensus can be achieved, sustained institutional engagement and resource allocation are crucial for moving beyond fragmented projects. Collectively, these efforts demonstrate how universities can enhance their societal role and public value through collaborative, policy-supported sustainability programs that reflect community needs and foster long-term regional development.

Return on Investment

Higher education is widely recognized as a key driver of economic, social, and community development. While much of the discourse on ROI in higher education focuses on individual earnings, it is equally important to assess its broader public and community-level impacts. Findings synthesized from multiple studies within the systematic review explored how higher education institutions generate positive ROI for society by increasing tax revenues, reducing public expenditures, driving workforce development, fostering community revitalization, and promoting social well-being. The returns from education exceed those of most other forms of investment, making it one of the most effective tools for national development (Rouse, 2017). This section highlights four sub-themes: Economic ROI, Social Gain, Social and Human Capital, and Knowledge Economy.

Economic ROI

Universities are in overdrive to ensure inputs to their system (e.g., infrastructure, research funding, human capital, and time) create positive outputs that include job generation, increased salaries, institutional investment, regional development, and increased tax revenues (Gemechu et al., 2022; Trostel, 2007). Reddick and Ponomariov (2023) highlight the variability in ROI across different types of institutions, noting that factors such as public vs. private status, research intensity, teaching quality (as a proxy for faculty salary), and student body significantly impact financial outcomes for an institution and its students. Institutional characteristics—such as access to research funding and alumni networks—also affect graduate success, underscoring the need for universities to balance growth with quality to ensure strong ROI for students.

The relationship between higher education and workforce outcomes emphasizes the need for data-driven decision-making to measure the ROI of education attainment (Mullin, 2012). Enhancing data-sharing agreements between educational institutions, government agencies, and employers and developing standardized workforce metrics that account for factors beyond initial job placement, such as career growth and long-term earnings, provide a more comprehensive picture of workforce outcomes. Mullin encourages states to participate in national longitudinal workforce databases, ensuring that student employment outcomes are tracked across regions. Education should not be evaluated solely on enrollment numbers but also on its ability to produce successful workforce outcomes. Additionally, strategic financial aid policies can support degree completion and maximize long-term outcomes (Rouse, 2017). Trostel (2007) further quantifies the public return on investment in higher education,

Public and economic value becomes more visible when universities align with local workforce needs.

showing that college-educated individuals contribute more in tax revenues and rely less on public assistance, making higher education fiscally beneficial for governments, communities, and their economies. These economic gains support the argument for sustained or increased public funding for public and land-grant institutions.

Finally, Conzelmann et al. (2023) introduce new metrics to measure the geographic labor markets served by colleges, noting that migration patterns (e.g., dispersal of alumni) significantly impact the economic returns on public investment in higher education. States that retain college graduates benefit more from their investments, underscoring the need to align community and state educational and workforce strategies. Similarly, Crellin et al. (2012) show that the societal and financial benefits of increased college attainment vary by state, depending on economic structures and tax policies. To maximize returns, states must customize education investments alongside job-creation strategies in high-skill sectors (e.g., health care, IT). Collectively, these findings reinforce that public investment in higher education is essential but must be strategic and tailored to local and demographic needs.

Social Gain

Education provides broad economic, social, and nonmarket benefits that justify strong public investment, particularly through its role in advancing and strengthening democratic governance (McMahon, 2006). McMahon (2006) argues that higher education is underfunded relative to its social value, and that increased public financing enhances economic efficiency, reduces inequality, and promotes social stability. Education is not merely a private good—it is a social investment with substantial societal returns.

Investments with Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) such as HBCUs, HSIs, TCUs, and AANAPISIs, provide significant economic, cultural, and social benefits (Crazy Bull & Guillory, 2018). These institutions play a crucial role in developing broader opportunities

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that allow students to have unique educational experiences across academic and community landscapes. Attentiveness to learners at these universities promotes a variety of employment prospects, salary gains, and investment growth. The focus on these factors ultimately helps reduce wealth gaps, which in turn strengthens U.S. economic competitiveness (Gasman et al. 2017). For example, TCUs are improving student degree completion and producing scholars who contribute to knowledge creation, as well as promote economic and entrepreneurial development in their own communities (Crazy Bull & Guillory, 2018).

Averett and Dalessandro (2001) found that education returns are strong. Associate degrees and two-year institutions increase wage-based ROI by approximately 12–14%. However, bachelor's degrees offer the most consistent long-term investment across educational pathways. Similarly, Robles (2008) emphasized the role of education in promoting wealth accumulation and intergenerational social gains. To stimulate wealth opportunities, Johnson (2010) and Appiah (2013) identified the social rate of return in higher education and recommended support measures with clear strategies for financial aid, career counseling, and mentorship to help close these gaps.

Human and Social Capital

Communities grappling with economic decline, social disintegration, and environmental degradation require more integrated redevelopment strategies that move beyond the traditional divide between place-based (infrastructure) and people-focused (human capital) approaches. Psacharopoulos' (2006) extensive analysis of the economic, social, and policy implications of investing in education discusses how education functions as an investment in human capital. This research points to higher education returns at both individual and societal levels. Further attention is given to how public policy can optimize these returns. Investing in education (through state and federal funding) is essential for long-term economic growth, social stability, and civic engagement. Public policies should work to ensure the maximum societal benefits of education funding.

Breton (2013) demonstrates that investment in human capital is crucial for economic growth, especially in regions with lower education levels. Education enhances productivity, fosters economic resilience, and promotes social stability, making it a key lever for national development and policy planning. Higher education contributes to personal and social returns on investment through an emphasis on graduate employability and career development (Healy et al., 2022). Additionally, remote education and employment opportunities present transformative potential for isolated communities (Denkenberger et al., 2015). Denkenberger et al. (2015) argue that economic stagnation is fueled by limited job opportunities and low educational attainment. However, advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and broadband infrastructure enable residents to access higher education and remote careers without leaving their communities (Denkenberger et al., 2015). Remote education offers a strong financial return for communities—often exceeding 20% annually—with short payback periods for careers in software development, finance, and computer science (Denkenberger et al., 2015). These pathways support economic resilience, local spending, and the formation of professional networks.

Socially Responsible Investment (SRI) and Community Investment Strategies—such as channeling funds into local projects through dedicated financial institutions—can revitalize distressed areas while ensuring financial and social returns (Lamore et al., 2006). Lamore et al. (2006) emphasize that universities can use their financial assets to stimulate local economic growth, advocating for strategic investment policies that integrate sustainable development, social capital, and community engagement. These approaches not only boost local economies but also foster long-term resilience and prosperity. Are et al. (2018) argue that academic institutions play a pivotal role by aligning training programs with national and

regional needs to improve workforce outcomes. They can also maximize return on investment by creating funding models that prioritize stakeholder satisfaction and financial savings.

Regional Public Universities (RPUs) and state-based investments in higher education also play critical roles in driving community prosperity. Orphan and McClure (2022) argue that RPUs act as anchor institutions whose value extends beyond individual ROI to include workforce development, civic engagement, and cultural enrichment. By aligning their campus operations and programs with regional needs, RPUs elevate local communities' human and social capital through education, training, and economic activity that typically keeps talent and jobs in the region.

Higher education functions as human and social capital, producing returns through workforce participation, economic resilience, and social stability.

Education financing must be recognized as an investment rather than a form of consumption. McMahon (2015) presents a framework that includes both monetary and non-monetary returns, highlighting the chronic underfunding of higher education despite its high economic and societal benefits. Increased public education funding is critical to correcting underinvestment and ensuring long-term fiscal health. Emerson and McGough (2018) explore why low-income areas continue to underinvest in education despite its high returns, proposing that misinformed beliefs, rather than economic constraints, perpetuate a cycle of low educational attainment and poor growth. Their adaptive learning model suggests that providing accurate information about educational ROI and implementing community-wide interventions are more effective in reshaping perceptions and increasing schooling rates than financial incentives alone.

Takács' (2024) research defends the economic and civic relevance of liberal arts education, which is often undervalued in funding decisions due to a lack of clear economic framing. Despite being overshadowed by professional and technical programs, liberal arts education yields significant returns for students, taxpayers, and local communities. For example,

Takács found at the College of Staten Island (CSI) that for every $1 of public money spent on a liberal arts education, taxpayers received $2 in return with an annual ROI of 6%. The liberal arts play a crucial role in cultivating critical thinking, civic responsibility, and democratic engagement—benefits that extend beyond individual graduates to the broader public. The experience at CSI demonstrates how liberal arts education supports regional workforce development while enhancing social cohesion, promoting opportunities for students to prepare for careers in rapidly changing labor markets. Takács calls on higher education leaders to communicate more effectively the dual financial and civic value of liberal arts programs to policymakers and funders, ensuring their continued relevance in an evolving educational landscape.

Knowledge Economy

With the balancing act between public good and commercial opportunity intensifying, policymakers and university leaders often argue that economies rely on the smooth exchange of knowledge between public and private sectors. Supporters of the shift toward knowledge commercialization, particularly in public institutions, also stress that finding new revenue streams is essential for surviving ongoing budget cuts and fiscal pressures. At the same time, many view academic research markets as tools for democratizing science, making it more accessible to the public and improving the flow of technologies that benefit community well-being (Nickolai et al., 2012). This evolving landscape has pushed universities into a process of institutional boundary-spanning work, where the traditional lines between knowledge production, student learning, and public service are increasingly blurred by market-driven priorities (Nickolai et al., 2012). As Nicolai et al. (2012) explain, this boundary work requires hybrid strategies that "seek to recombine the goal of creating basic knowledge with profit maximization in knowledge production, democratic training and accountability metrics in student learning, and the public good with economic gain in the social charter" (206).

One example of such hybrid strategies can be found in the evolution of business education and corporate training, which are shifting toward more collaborative and strategic learning partnerships. This shift emphasizes the growing importance of knowledge management and lifelong learning. An Educonsulting (EC) model (Dunn et al., 2005), for example, provides a framework designed to integrate higher education with business organizations through strategic partnerships. By aligning academic research, teaching, and consulting with the needs of local and regional businesses, EC helps generate sustainable competitive advantages. Such models challenge traditional business schools to remain adaptive and relevant, ensuring that education meets the dynamic demands of today's economy. As businesses increasingly

prioritize collaboratively designed learning programs over traditional degree offerings, universities have a unique opportunity to deliver practical, strategic education that benefits both sectors (Dunn et al., 2005). Universities and businesses must work together to ensure education remains practical and strategic. Companies that invest in collaboratively designed learning programs gain a sustainable competitive edge (Dunn et al., 2005).

Beyond educational models, universities are also leveraging advanced research infrastructure and technology transfer to strengthen their competitive edge. High-performance computing (HPC), for instance, plays a pivotal role in scientific discovery, faculty recruitment, student training, and securing research grants. Purdue University's investment in HPC, despite substantial capital and operational costs, has paid off by attracting millions of dollars in external research funding and supporting regional economic growth (Smith, 2024). Studies show that HPC infrastructure not only boosts institutional research reputations but also increases the production of Ph.D. graduates and the recruitment of top-tier faculty. By coupling investment in cutting-edge technology with expert personnel, universities maximize their ROI, positioning themselves as global research leaders.

Building on the measurable returns from HPC investments, universities can further amplify their innovation ecosystem by engaging in strategic technology transfer initiatives and public-private partnerships. Ford et al. (2008) underscore the significance of federally funded programs like the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology

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Transfer (STTR) initiatives, which facilitate the commercialization of university research by fostering collaboration among academia, industry, and government. These programs ensure that scientific discoveries supported by public investment translate into real-world products and services with economic and social benefits. To maximize ROI, universities should refine commercialization strategies, align institutional incentives with faculty innovation, and address barriers that inhibit collaboration. As both Smith (2024) and Ford et al. (2008) demonstrate, institutional competitiveness and societal impact are heightened when universities integrate research infrastructure with translational partnerships that support innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic development.

Complementing these innovation and knowledge-transfer efforts, social entrepreneurship is a critical domain through which higher education can demonstrate long-term ROI for both communities and institutions. This happens through public problem-solving and human capital. Huster et al. (2016) highlight the potential of university-led initiatives like the Global Social Entrepreneurship Competition (GSEC), which trains students to launch social enterprises that address global health and economic challenges. These Social Entrepreneurship Competitions (SECs) promote a "double bottom line" model that blends financial viability with social impact. The study emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, mentorship, and global engagement in fostering student-led innovation. Together, these approaches illustrate how universities can cultivate both economic resilience and social good by blending business principles with social impact goals to address pressing global challenges, such as poverty, health disparities, and economic development, reinforcing the broader value of higher education through innovation and entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

Over the past 25 years, significant progress has been made in addressing the challenges outlined by the Kellogg Commission. To further strengthen the promise of public and land-grant institutions as engines of public trust, value, and return on investment, we must renew our public purpose. This chapter's recommendations—drawn from a rigorous systematic review—highlight strategic priorities: embedding community engagement at the core of institutional planning, anticipating workforce and talent needs, reimagining alumni as community connectors, and fostering adaptive leadership rooted in shared accountability. Together, these actions will help further resilient, responsive institutions that serve not just their students and faculty, but the broader communities they are meant to uplift.

Recommendations

Great strides have been made over the past two and a half decades in meeting the challenges laid out by the Kellogg Commission's 1999 report. To further strengthen engaged institutions' partnerships with community stakeholders via public trust, value, and return on investment, these recommendations, anchored in findings from the systematic review, are offered:

1. Public and land-grant institutions should center community engagement and trust at a strategic level, beyond collaboration on initiatives, to build shared strategic plans and **value propositions.**
    b. Shared governance is commonly referred to as an intra-institutional process; in this instance, it should be extended to community-university councils—sharing research findings and policy actions, along with opportunities for place-based education and programming.
    c. Participatory policymaking should be considered to co-create deliberate processes that ensure community voices and institutional decisions are synced; the aim is to enhance institutional accountability and responsiveness.
2. Public and land-grant institutions must be continuously nimble to ensure they are ahead of talent pipeline needs and workforce trends.
    d. To maximize **public return on investment,** talent pathways and partnerships with community industries, the military, community colleges, and universities are necessary to remove educational barriers and maximize social mobility opportunities.
    e. Attention must be paid to degree-completion and workforce-alignment policies.
    f. Attention is needed to promote remote education and career-access learning for harder-to-reach communities.
3. Public and land-grant institutions should strengthen and re-envision relationships with their greatest capital—their alumni—as engagement ambassadors for their community.
    g. Alumni engagement can include an alumni recruitment strategy or post-graduation training credential to deploy alumni **as trust builders** within their community.
    h. Affinity groups (e.g., alumni of the Agribusiness Club or First-Generation Student Club) may facilitate quick-response teams to field institutional-community requests for engagement.

4. Public and land-grant institutions must ensure that teams for **public trust, value, and return on investment** interface with one another by fostering co-responsive and co-adaptive leadership with their organizational cultures.
    i. Attention to local, state, and national policies and funding decisions influences all stakeholders. Knowing how to collaborate and unite on decisions that can empower university-community partnerships is essential to the growth and sustainability of the ecosystem.
    b. A focus on value-based initiatives can reinforce credibility and transparency, including increased commitments for translational research.
    c. Agile responsiveness to innovation ecosystems is essential to grow efficient and effective place-based community investments in research infrastructure, entrepreneurship, and economic growth.

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For References and Appendices see page 100.

CHAPTER 2
From Roots to Reform
How Universities Embody the Idea of a Future-leading, Engaged University

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In a time when public trust in higher education is being tested, future-leading engaged universities are stepping forward as engines of opportunity, innovation, and community transformation. Building on the foundational vision of the 1999 Kellogg Commission, this chapter explores how public and land-grant institutions are reimagining their structures, policies, and practices to embed engagement into the very DNA of the university. Through strategic reforms and cultural shifts, public and land-grant institutions are not merely responding to societal needs, they are helping to define what it means to lead with public purpose in the 21st century.

This chapter captures and synthesizes efforts that extend beyond integrating community engagement into faculty work, instead positioning engagement as a central, organizing principle for the institution. At a time when public expectations for accountability and impact continue to rise, the work of leading institutions offers both a proof of concept and a roadmap. Through structural, cultural, and strategic changes, many public and land-grant universities have moved beyond symbolic commitments and episodic programming to institutionalize engagement in enduring ways. By highlighting their efforts, we make visible the hard-earned lessons and innovations that can guide campuses seeking to deepen their commitment to public impact.

To examine these practices, we conducted a focused review of institutions recognized nationally for their leadership in community engagement: those holding the American Council on Education's Carnegie Community Engagement Classification and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) designation. These recognitions align with the Kellogg Commission's 1999 call for the deep integration of engagement across teaching, research, and service. They also reflect a contemporary emphasis on institutional responsiveness and contributions to regional vitality—core themes in the original report's vision of public purpose.

Recognizing Institutional Engagement and Responsiveness

The Carnegie Foundation Elective Classification for Community Engagement was first introduced in 2006, and has resided within the American Council on Education since 2022. The Carnegie Foundation defines Community Engagement as: 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. The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good. Institutions submit a comprehensive review of their community engagement efforts using a pre-defined application framework. https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/elective-classifications/community-engagement/

APLU is home to the Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) Program. The IEP designation "help[s] higher education institutions strengthen their strategy and practices in economic and community development by working with on-campus (faculty, staff, leadership, and students) and off-campus (businesses, local and state government, communities, and others) stakeholders to complete a rigorous self-study of their economic engagement enterprise that allows them to identify their strengths and areas of growth and improvement in economic engagement…with the goal of strengthening their ecosystem that maximizes their institution's economic and societal impact." The designation is achieved by an institution conducting a rigorous self-study, documenting its holistic economic engagement, which the IEP program defines as having three parts:

Talent and workforce development

Innovation, entrepreneurship, and technology-based economic development

Place development through public service, outreach, extension, and community engagement

https://www.aplu.org/IEP

The pool for this focused review consisted of 51 Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) member institutions that have achieved *both* the Carnegie Community Engagement (CE) Classification and IEP designation, ensuring an emphasis on public and land-grant universities with demonstrated leadership in engagement. The most recent Carnegie CE Classification application for each of these institutions (ranging from 2015 through 2020) was reviewed (a total of 1,613 pages of qualitative information), restricting the analysis to the 45 that gave permission for their data to be used for research purposes. Five common restructuring themes were identified:

1. Streamlining public access to institutional resources, partnerships, and expertise
2. Scaling from individual projects to institution-wide impact
3. Positioning the university as a community problem solver
4. Measuring, reporting, and communicating public impact beyond activities and outputs
5. Continually enhancing internal policy conditions for community engagement

We then used AI to isolate salient examples from within the Carnegie applications that best illustrated these themes and member-checked each exemplar for accuracy. In some instances, these initiatives have concluded or evolved since the time of the institution's Carnegie application submission, but all provide compelling examples of how leading public universities have met and extended the recommendations of the 1999 Kellogg report to advance new models of public responsiveness, relevance, and long-term institutional accountability.

Streamlining Public Access to Institutional Resources, Partnership, and Expertise

Future-leading engaged universities are reimagining how external stakeholders access institutional resources, expertise, and partnerships, moving beyond fragmented systems to create clear, coordinated pathways.

For many community members, public officials, and industry leaders, navigating large, decentralized institutions can be daunting. Without a clear point of entry, external partners often face misdirection and delays when their inquiries land in the wrong office or go unanswered. In the absence of intentional access strategies, universities tend to focus on improving the institution's coordination for traditional stakeholders such as students, researchers, and funders (Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008), while community groups or intermediary entities (such as trade groups) are left on the margins. In addition to making access difficult for these constituencies, this may also result in some community partners feeling overwhelmed or overburdened when multiple units within a university simultaneously, but disjointedly, reach out to collaborate.

This challenge is the result of the proliferation of engagement efforts across campuses since the Kellogg Report. The Carnegie Foundation's Classification for Community Engagement points to a significant number of institutions where engagement is now "deep and pervasive" (Eckel, Hill, Green, & Mallon, as cited in Saltmarsh & Johnson, 2020), occurring across the university's many workstreams. In decentralized institutions, engagements are often distributed across colleges, schools, and units, each with its own entry points.

The complexity of these environments has fueled the rise of "boundary spanning roles" (Weerts & Sandmann, 2016), sometimes known as community engagement professionals (Dostilio, 2017), along with many community-engaged centers or offices. In these settings, where engagement has proliferated and where engagement professionals and structures are distributed throughout the institution, without careful coordination, decentralization risks confusing or even discouraging external partners. While engagement center directors often serve as the most visible community engagement professional, the work of building centrality is a broader institutional strategy, not a singular role.

Operationalizing a plan for more coordinated community access requires deliberate and inclusive approaches to ensure that points of access are not only available but also easily navigable.

To address this, future-leading universities are designing streamlined entry points, responsive referral pathways, and coordinated internal systems that simplify the community's access to university partnerships, expertise, or resources. These systems are logistical tools, but more importantly, they are trust-building mechanisms that foster continuity and reinforce the university's public mission.

Operationalizing a plan for more coordinated community access requires deliberate and inclusive approaches to ensure that points of access are not only available but also easily navigable. Drawing from Alter's (2005) concept of "enabling platforms," future-leading universities intentionally weave decentralized efforts into integrated systems that lower barriers, create relational continuity, and strengthen the overall capacity for engagement.

Effective access systems do more than direct traffic; they recognize the contributions of community partners and sustain relationships over time. Research shows that when community engagement efforts overlook these relational dimensions, they risk being perceived as transactional or superficial (Jacobson, Butterill, & Goering, 2004). Streamlined access structures must therefore be paired with strategies that validate community input, nurture ongoing interaction, and contribute meaningfully to a university's public mission. Several universities exemplify this evolution.

The Office of Partnerships serves as North Carolina State University's (NC State) central hub, matching business and community needs with university expertise, research, and talent. Through a highly coordinated structure, the office provides coordination across partnership support functions—including agreements, intellectual property protection, and conflict-of-interest management, among others—helping make the process transparent and business-friendly. In addition, NC State's Partnership Portal website offers external stakeholders a clear point of entry, allowing them to propose projects, search for expertise, and receive tailored assistance.

Importantly, NC State's model recognizes that successful engagement also depends on personal connections between faculty and external organizations. To foster these organic relationships, the Office of Partnerships positions itself as a supportive partner to faculty and external partners, helping manage and scale collaborations so they are strategic for both the individual researcher and the university. Their philosophy blends cross-university coordination with win-win relationship cultivation: internal partnerships are strengthened in order to enable more effective external partnerships. In addition, NC State's Centennial Campus, which houses more than 70 corporate, government, and nonprofit partners, exemplifies their commitment to immersive, co-located collaboration. Through these strategies, NC State reduces barriers to access, strengthens engagement at every level, and accelerates economic and societal impact.

Virginia Tech's LINK: Center for Advancing Industry Partnerships functions as a dedicated hub for connecting corporate and industry partners with the university's research, faculty expertise, and innovation assets. Through dedicated relationship managers, LINK works directly with external organizations to identify opportunities and coordinate engagement across the institution. This streamlined, industry-facing approach simplifies the experience for corporate stakeholders, while ensuring that internal structures are aligned to respond efficiently and strategically. By bridging institutional capacity with external demand, LINK reinforces Virginia Tech's role as a response- and innovation-driven partner in regional and national development.

Public universities that prioritize streamlined access for community engagement are not merely enhancing operational efficiency; they are fulfilling their fundamental mission to serve the public good. By creating enabling platforms that integrate relational trust-building, resource recognition, and sustained support, universities are expanding the meaning of public engagement. As societal expectations for relevance, agility, and impact continue to grow, universities that streamline access to and coordination of their engagement systems will be best positioned to deepen partnerships, amplify public impact, and sustain their role as essential civic institutions.

Scaling from Individual Projects to Institution-wide Impact

Future-leading engaged universities are not only supporting individual projects; they are strategically convening broad sets of inputs to generate coordinated, large-scale community impact. Rather than relying on scattered or episodic initiatives, these public and land-grant institutions are intentionally mobilizing faculty, staff, students, and external collaborators through coordinated, cross-campus strategies. This shift reflects a deeper institutional commitment: to scale impact not by multiplying projects, but by aligning structures, resources, and relationships in service to long-term, community-defined outcomes. Whether through issue-based initiatives, place-based partnerships, cross-sector coalitions, or connected engagement ecosystems, these universities are demonstrating how engagement can become a unifying force—reshaping institutional identity and amplifying public value.

This shift reflects a more intentional and strategic orientation in which institutions organize efforts around shared public goals. In many of these institutions, coordinating infrastructures are evolving from supporting stand-alone programs to facilitating institution-wide collaboration. As Saltmarsh (2016) describes, "organizationally, this more distributed,

emergent infrastructure approximates the establishment of an organizational unit that aligns with 'collective impact theory' (Kania & Kramer, 2011) … [facilitating] multiple stakeholders all working on a single problem simultaneously" (p. xii).

Recent public and land-grant applications to the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement demonstrate that institutions are coordinating institutional-level impact in four distinct ways: a) organizing around a shared societal issue, b) anchoring in a specific place, c) advancing multi-sector partnerships, and d) building distributed ecosystems aligned toward public impact goals. The following section illustrates these strategies in practice, with examples from institutions that are moving beyond supporting engagement to becoming organized by it.

Institutions achieve scale not by multiplying projects, but by organizing engagement around shared issues and places.

Issue-based Initiatives

Some universities scale engagement by focusing on complex societal issues that demand interdisciplinary responses. Boise State University, for example, launched the Resource Nexus for Sustainability (RNS) initiative, which coordinates teams of faculty, staff, and students across disciplines to pursue sustainability challenges. Organized around sub-teams focused on community engagement, benchmarking, and asset mapping, RNS institutionalizes engagement through leadership roles, external funding pursuits, and shared infrastructure. Boise State's Resource Nexus for Sustainability exemplifies how issue-based initiatives can serve as scalable engagement infrastructure. It has transformed sustainability from a niche interest into a central organizing principle.

Place-based Engagement

Some institutions make long-term commitments to defined geographic communities, organizing cross-campus engagement around place. The University of Georgia's Archway Partnership exemplifies this approach by embedding university expertise within specific

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Georgia communities to address locally identified priorities. Each Archway community is supported by a full-time UGA faculty member—an Archway Professional—who facilitates collaboration between local leaders and a wide array of university resources. These efforts draw on expertise from multiple UGA units, including Public Service and Outreach, Cooperative Extension, the Carl Vinson Institute of Government, the Small Business Development Center, the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development, and faculty from UGA's academic colleges. By coordinating contributions from across these diverse offices, the Archway Partnership transforms isolated projects into long-term, place-based engagement strategies that reflect both local priorities and UGA's public mission.

The University of Pittsburgh's Neighborhood Commitments initiative offers a national model for deep, place-based engagement. Rather than treating partnerships as isolated projects, Pitt made decades-long, often quarter-century commitments to specific neighborhoods, anchored by the establishment of Community Engagement Centers (CECs). These centers serve as trusted hubs, strategically involving the contributions of all Pitt's schools and centers and aligning them with community-identified priorities. Pitt's approach recognizes that place-based engagement requires more than presence; it demands a deep understanding of a neighborhood's history, assets, challenges, and opportunities. Supported by dedicated staff and governance structures, this approach builds on local strengths, fosters shared leadership, and embeds engagement into the university's core functions—transforming it from project-based outreach to a permanent, interdisciplinary infrastructure that creates a vehicle for sustained impact.

Cross-sector Partnerships

Some institutions act as backbones or conveners in collective impact efforts, intentionally structuring engagement to include partners from multiple sectors. Northern Illinois University (NIU) provides a compelling example of a university acting as a backbone in cross-sector collective impact efforts. Through its Division of Outreach, Engagement, and Regional Development (OERD), NIU plays a central role in initiatives like the Illinois 60 by 25 Network, which aimed to ensure that 60% of adults in Illinois hold a postsecondary credential by 2025. OERD staff support this and other initiatives by facilitating collaboration among public, private, and nonprofit partners, acting as strategic conveners and capacity-builders. NIU's cross-sector initiatives also include the Northern Illinois Regional P-20 Network and the Rural Communities Initiative, where Strategic Doing and collective impact frameworks are used to shift from problem-focused discussions to opportunity-based, action-oriented strategies.

Ecosystem Development

A smaller number of institutions create distributed engagement ecosystems such as networks of centers, initiatives, and partners aligned toward long-term impact goals. Colorado State University has developed interdisciplinary research hubs focused on grand challenges like energy, infectious disease, and sustainability. These hubs function as engagement ecosystems, linking academic units with external collaborators in dynamic, adaptive networks. They enable both high-impact research and broad-based public engagement across organizational boundaries.

Colorado State demonstrates how ecosystem development can scale engagement without over-centralizing it. The hubs and interdisciplinary centers act as connective tissue across departments and with external stakeholders, fostering collaboration toward societal impact goals. This networked model supports innovation while preserving flexibility, making it well-suited to adapt to changing community and research needs.

Scaling impact is not about replicating projects across units. Rather, it is about reorganizing the institution for public purpose. Future-leading universities achieve this by choosing structures that naturally draw diverse actors into alignment. Whether driven by shared issues, commitments to place, collaborative governance, or infrastructural ecosystems, these approaches create the conditions for scale, allowing public and land-grant institutions to live more fully in their public missions, respond more meaningfully to community-identified needs, and achieve greater community impact.

Positioning the Engaged University as a Public Problem Solver

In recent years, universities have sought to redefine their societal role, not only as centers of learning and discovery, but as capable, responsive partners in solving complex public challenges. The most future-leading institutions are not simply engaging with communities; they are structuring themselves, their narratives, and their programs in ways that position them as problem solvers the public can trust. This section highlights four key strategies that describe institutions working to be agile and collaborative actors in public problem-solving.

Structuring for Publicly Salient Issues

One of the clearest ways institutions position themselves as public problem solvers is by organizing their work around issues that matter deeply to the communities they serve. This often takes the form of initiatives that are framed not by academic disciplines but by real-world problems.

The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) offers a compelling example through its Grand Challenges initiative. Specifically, its Thriving in a Hotter Los Angeles project aims to transition the region to 100% renewable energy and local water by 2050, while protecting biodiversity and enhancing quality of life. This effort has engaged 77 faculty members, spanned 48 departments, and was developed in collaboration with nonprofit, government, and corporate partners. As the university explains, this work was "a collaboration between UCLA and nonprofit, government and corporate stakeholders… for the Los Angeles region to use exclusively renewable energy and local water by 2050."

Among the most fully developed examples of institution-wide coordination for public problem-solving is Kansas State University's K-State 105 initiative. As a core element of the university's Economic Prosperity Plan and its Next-Gen K-State strategic framework, K-State 105 represents a comprehensive and statewide model for fostering economic growth and community well-being across all 105 Kansas counties. K-State 105, launched with $10M in funding over two years by the state of Kansas, has activated the university's full breadth of research, education, and outreach through its longstanding K-State Research and Extension network. The initiative has supported entrepreneurship, technical assistance, and workforce development while forging multi-sector partnerships with other universities, state agencies, nonprofits, and businesses. These efforts were not ad hoc—they were designed to align the university's internal capacities and external collaborations toward the shared public goal of statewide economic vitality.

The K-State 105 initiative produced a proof of concept of what higher education alongside business and community partners can accomplish. What distinguished K-State 105 is the way it has transformed the institution from a provider of services into a structured public problem solver. It has integrated higher education resources into the everyday lives of Kansans, connecting innovation and expertise to place-based needs and ensuring that all communities—rural, urban, and in-between—can participate in and benefit from the university's mission. Building on the success of K-State 105, the University is embedding K-State's economic development efforts into the External Engagement office. This cabinet-level office includes Extension, Corporate Engagement, University Engagement, and other units that drive economic prosperity across Kansas and beyond.

By structuring engagement in this way—framed around pressing challenges and built-in collaboration with the public—these institutions signal their readiness to act as civic partners, not just academic observers.

Public problem-solving is reinforced when students are positioned as contributors to real-world solutions.

Aligning Student Engagement with Public Problem-solving

While many institutions offer service-learning or volunteer opportunities, future-leading universities go further by embedding students into institutional and community-based problem-solving infrastructures. These universities position students as active contributors to real-world solutions, integrating them into collaborative projects that address societal needs.

Florida International University (FIU) exemplifies this model through its FIU in Washington, D.C. initiative. The experience engages students in meaningful career opportunity-focused "fly-ins" (3–5-day experiences) at the FIU DC center. These experiences are aligned with exercises, such as hackathons, focused on issues of public concern correlated with FIU's home community of Miami, Florida. Topics have included health, environmental resilience, infrastructure, economic diversification, and attracting investment through commercialization, among others. Through these experiences, FIU students are directly involved with actionable ways to impact national, state, and local dialogue about public issues and find paths where, no matter their major or program of study, they can impactfully contribute. This program typically involves upward of 500 students per year (including 100 full-semester interns).

At the University of Mississippi's M Partner program, students collaborate with faculty members and local government or nonprofit partners on municipally identified challenges. With M Partner as the backbone organization, these multidisciplinary projects scaffold to address societal needs within and across partner communities. M Partner has completed nearly 170 projects and engaged more than 60 faculty/staff and more than 1,100 students and VISTA members in statewide partnerships. M Partner is an affiliate of the Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities Network (EPIC-N), a global network of universities who use EPIC-N's model to engage students in public problem-solving.

These approaches position students as co-creators of public solutions and reinforce the institution's role as a training ground for the next generation of civic leaders.

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Language of Public Problem-solving

The way an institution talks about itself also plays a powerful role in shaping public perception. Some universities are adopting explicit language in their strategic plans, websites, and public communications that present them as responsive partners in addressing community-defined issues.

The University of South Florida (USF) offers a clear example. Across its institutional materials, USF consistently refers to itself as "a crucial and reliable partner addressing critical societal challenges," citing education, health care, housing, sustainability, and emergency management as key areas of engagement. This language does more than inform; it positions the university as a stable civic actor whose impact extends beyond the campus.

Arizona State University (ASU) takes this even further, incorporating public problem-solving language into multimedia storytelling and institutional branding. ASU describes its outreach strategy as one that "inspires internal and external stakeholders to be a part of the solution," framing engagement as a collaborative endeavor with shared responsibility for outcomes. This narrative work helps institutions move beyond the perception of engagement as goodwill and instead establishes their role as civic problem solvers committed to tangible public value.

Conducting Listening Tours and Community Convenings

Leading institutions understand that to become legitimate partners in public problem-solving, they must engage in sustained, intentional listening to identify the issues that matter most to their communities.

California State University, Northridge (CSUN) offers multiple examples of this practice. Through the guiding principles of CSUN's Road Ahead strategic plan, and informed by the CSU Graduation Initiative 2025, the university organized multiple opportunities to join forces with neighborhood councils, city officials, and nonprofit organizations to identify a shared set of priorities, goals, and vision for community well-being in the San Fernando Valley and the greater Los Angeles area. The university also engaged in a two-year process of reconnecting with more than 800 community partners and offered needs assessments to those organizations interested in further developing partnerships and projects.

Additionally, in coordination with the Valley Economic Alliance, CSUN hosts an annual "Our Region, Our Future" summit, a regional convening that brought together more than 600 entrepreneurs, city departments, and major contractors. The goal was to help small businesses grow by directly engaging them in dialogue with potential partners and decision-makers. These events demonstrate how listening and convening can be both strategic and catalytic for community-focused impact.

In a similar approach, the University of Wyoming hosted 10 statewide listening sessions as part of its strategic planning process. These sessions, attended by both internal and external stakeholders, helped shape the university's engagement agenda and amplified regional voices in institutional decision-making.

As these examples show, positioning a university as a partner in public problem-solving involves more than programming. It requires intentional choices about structure, student roles, language, and listening. Institutions that organize their work around community-identified challenges, frame students as agents of public good, use language that reinforces civic purpose, and embed listening into their practice are fundamentally reshaping how they are perceived and received. These strategies mark a shift from engagement as something universities do to a deeper identity of who they are: trusted, responsive partners in building a better future.

Measuring, Reporting, and Communicating Public Impact Beyond Activities and Outputs

As universities strive to fulfill their role as public-serving institutions, future-leading institutions must move beyond tracking and reporting outputs toward measuring and communicating genuine impacts. Decades of evaluation practice, both within higher education and across the broader social sector, reveal that counting activities such as volunteer hours, partnerships formed, or students involved provides, at best, a proxy for investments in public value. While outputs reflect activity, outcomes capture the actual changes experienced by individuals, organizations, or communities as a result of those activities. It is outcomes such as improved health, increased educational attainment, or enhanced economic opportunity that ultimately lead to meaningful, measurable impact that boosts public trust and demonstrates a positive return on investment in higher education.

Wanjiru and Liu's (2021) meta-analysis of university-community engagement evaluation demonstrates that focusing solely on university-centered outputs risks missing the deeper question of whether communities themselves experience meaningful, positive change. Carpenter's (2011) review of student projects in public administration further illustrates that much of higher education's assessment infrastructure remains focused on student development and institutional processes, often through self-reported or partner-perception data, rather than direct evaluations of changes in community conditions. Meanwhile, evidence from the broader social sector, such as Lynch-Cerullo and Cooney's (2011) study of the human services nonprofit sector, shows that organizations beyond higher education are navigating a similar evolution by moving from output reporting to outcomes-based accountability to sustain public trust and funding. Attempts to show broader impact are often measured by traditional metrics like jobs or dollars injected into a local, regional, or state economy. Traditional economic impact studies often focus narrowly on short-term outputs—such as institutional spending or job creation—without capturing broader, long-term public value. For example, while a university may report generating $1 billion in regional economic activity, such figures typically exclude outcomes like improved health, civic participation, or social mobility. As a result, these studies risk overstating institutional benefit while overlooking the deeper, community-centered impacts that define true public engagement (Pastor, Perez, and Fernandez de Guevara, 2013).

However, it is difficult to attribute the cause of changes in community conditions to a particular university engagement (Wanjiru and Liu, 2021). Changes in community conditions are often the result of multiple efforts happening across various levels of implementation, including policy effects, intra-community efforts, and broad economic and social dynamics.

Understanding a university's community impact requires a nuanced approach that situates its contributions alongside other change efforts.

A focus on documenting impact over outputs is being called for by many public and private funders, community constituents, and people within higher education. The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification emphasizes the importance of systematic, ongoing assessment mechanisms that go beyond documenting activities to meaningfully evaluate both outputs and outcomes, with a particular focus on using results to improve institutional practices across teaching, research, and service (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2024). Similarly, APLU's Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) designation challenges universities to demonstrate reciprocal, asset-based engagement and to measure not only their activities but also the shared impacts on community conditions (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2025). Together, these scholarly and institutional perspectives argue that for universities to credibly position themselves as essential partners in addressing societal challenges, they must adopt rigorous, community-centered frameworks for evaluation that capture not only what institutions do, but what difference they help to make in the lives of the people and communities they serve.

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Impact-oriented Measurement

Several universities provide emerging examples of sophisticated, impact-oriented approaches to measurement. The University of California, Riverside (UCR) offers a strong case of systematically measuring contributions to regional educational attainment and economic prosperity. As a founding member of the Growing Inland Achievement (GIA) collaborative, UCR participates in regional efforts to track indicators such as college degree attainment rates, reductions in educational opportunity gaps, and employment outcomes for historically underserved populations. GIA, supported by multiple institutions across the Inland area, coordinates longitudinal data collection to assess systemic change. In addition, UCR's Entrepreneurial Proof of Concept and Innovation Center (EPIC) tracks the impacts of university-supported small business development by measuring businesses launched or stabilized, jobs created, capital raised, and revenue growth. These data are gathered through regional economic dashboards, participant surveys, and entrepreneurial outcome-tracking.

Similarly, as the only R1 institution in Northwest Ohio, the University of Toledo (UT) exemplifies an institution intentionally embedding community revitalization and regional development into its mission and measuring the tangible impacts. UT set strategic priorities for regional innovation and economic development and provided academic leadership to major regional initiatives on solar and nuclear energy, glass innovation, Great Lakes water quality, community health, manufacturing revitalization, and workforce development. Over 72% of recent bachelor's degree recipients from the University were employed in their fields with more than one-third holding positions within the Toledo Metropolitan area. In addition, there were 1,325 engineering co-op placements in industry in FY24. The University of Toledo led the writing team behind a $31.3 M award from the State of Ohio for the establishment of the Northwest Ohio Glass Innovation Hub (involving Owens-Illinois, Owens-Corning, NSG/Pilkinton, Libbey Glass, and First Solar), and is the lead in the U.S. Department of Energy's

Universities demonstrate public impact by measuring outcomes that reflect changes in community and regional conditions.

CdTe Consortium focused on securing the domestic solar energy industry. UT uses economic impact studies, community partner surveys, and longitudinal tracking of regional economic indicators to assess how its engagement activities contribute to the broader economic revitalization of Toledo and surrounding areas.

The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) demonstrates another strong model, particularly in the health and education sectors. UAB's Center for Clinical and Translational Science (CCTS) and Minority Health & Health Equity Research Center coordinate measurement efforts that track reductions in chronic disease rates, improvements in preventive health behaviors, increases in access to care, and educational attainment gains in underserved neighborhoods. Data collection methods include community-based health surveys, longitudinal epidemiological studies, and program evaluations conducted in collaboration with local school districts and public health agencies. Importantly, UAB also integrates direct community feedback into its evaluation processes, ensuring that assessments reflect both quantitative outcomes and the lived experiences of community members. Through these examples, it becomes clear that future-leading universities demonstrate a commitment to evaluating not just institutional performance but societal contribution.

Communicating Public Impact

As universities deepen their efforts to measure community impact, an equally critical challenge lies in how those impacts are communicated. Future-leading institutions recognize that demonstrating value to external stakeholders requires more than reporting activities or institutional growth. It demands the deliberate communication of tangible community outcomes that show measurable improvements in social, economic, and civic conditions.

Clemson University exemplifies this evolution in public impact communication. Rather than emphasizing activities or institutional prestige, Clemson foregrounds outcomes through independently conducted economic impact studies by the Strom Thurmond Institute's Regional Economics Analysis Laboratory, which quantifies how its Public Service Activities, such as Cooperative Extension and enterprise campuses, generate job creation, income growth, and local tax revenues across South Carolina. Clemson's Cooperative Extension Service further promotes community-level impacts by publicly documenting improvements in agricultural practices, youth development, and food safety, emphasizing behavioral and systemic changes, rather than participation counts. Beyond reporting mechanisms, Clemson integrates community impact narratives into legislative advocacy, consistently tying budget requests and public communications directly to tangible benefits for the state's citizens,

such as workforce development pipelines and rural revitalization. Through this coordinated strategy, Clemson demonstrates how universities can highlight community outcomes, rather than institutional achievements, as the centerpiece of public communication.

The University of Central Florida (UCF) similarly demonstrates how an institution can center public value in its external communications. UCF employs a combination of independent economic analyses, partner-driven storytelling, and strategic public relations to frame its engagement work as an engine of societal benefit. The Florida High Tech Corridor Council provides hundreds of millions of dollars in economic impact and creates thousands of jobs across the region. UCF's Center for Community Schools highlights achievements in strengthening graduation rates and helping children and families thrive, while UCF RESTORES' success treating PTSD has helped veterans, military personnel, first responders, and others lead healthier, more fulfilling lives. The university integrates these findings into legislative-relations and public-messaging campaigns, ensuring that narratives of community well-being, rather than institutional scale alone, are at the heart of its public story. In doing so, UCF models how consistent emphasis on community outcomes can strengthen a university's social compact with its region.

In sum, future-leading engaged universities are reshaping how they demonstrate and communicate public impact. They are moving beyond counting activities and toward documenting meaningful contributions (i.e., well-being, economic vitality, and social change) within communities. Just as critically, they are telling these stories with intention, centering community outcomes in their public reports, advocacy, and strategic messaging. By adopting rigorous measurement frameworks and placing community benefit at the heart of their communications, institutions like Clemson University and the University of Central Florida offer a model for how universities can sustain public trust, fulfill their civic missions, and lead societal progress.

Continually Enhancing Policy Conditions for Community Engagement

Future-leading universities recognize that institutional policies—whether formal or informal—play a powerful role in shaping the conditions for community engagement. Among the most powerful enabling factors is institutional policy that explicitly makes the processes and products of engaged scholarship and innovation possible to enact and achieve. For years, engagement advocates have called for changes to tenure and promotion policies to better acknowledge engaged scholarship as a legitimate and rewardable form of faculty work. There are other policy levers that reduce friction surrounding engagement. While not universal, these changes and others are taking root at institutions that see policy revision as a strategic lever for cultural and structural alignment. These universities are continually scanning for and updating policies that can either enable or inhibit engaged teaching, research, and partnership. The examples that follow illustrate just a few of the many policy levers institutions can, and should, revisit as part of cultivating a truly engaged institution.

Faculty Evaluation

The 1999 Kellogg Commission report recommended that universities build into the faculty evaluation structure incentives and rewards for community engagement in both teaching and research. Institutional guidelines that integrate community engagement into teaching and research/scholarship help to align the incentive structure for faculty with the engagement mission.

While several studies of U.S. universities over the last 10 years have concluded that most faculty evaluation policies still consider community engagement as a service activity (Alperin et al., 2019; Bell and Lewis, 2022), a significant number of universities have begun to undertake revisions such as those called for in the Kellogg report, though the uptake is

uneven across the sector (Doberneck, 2022). Among those who have begun to make space for community engagement within their teaching and research standards, some have worked to implement policies or guidelines campus-wide, and others are at the individual academic unit or college level (Blanchard and Furco, 2021).

Institutional policies formally recognizing community-engaged work within evaluation and reward systems enables products of engaged scholarship and innovation.

Among those that have adopted institutional-level standards is East Carolina University (ECU). East Carolina University exemplifies how institutional policy reforms can fully embed community engagement into the faculty reward system. Through Part VIII of the ECU Faculty Manual, the university defines scholarship to include engagement and outreach, making community-engaged scholarship a recognized and rewarded component for all probationary, tenured, and eligible fixed-term faculty. This commitment is reinforced at the academic unit level, where department codes provide detailed criteria for evaluating engaged research alongside traditional scholarship. It is mapped in the university's institutional review board and pre-award grant management systems, whereby faculty can document their project as CE, align it with the county of implementation, and name community partners. ECU has also operationalized this vision by configuring its Faculty-180 reporting system to explicitly track and celebrate faculty achievements in community-based learning, engagement, and outreach—ensuring these contributions are visible, valued, and rewarded across the university.

Another standout example is found at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-Chapel Hill). Following a decade of strategic efforts, including the 2009 Task Force report and the 2016 Provost's Task Force, UNC-Chapel Hill defined engaged scholarship, differentiated it from service, and encouraged departments to revise their guidelines accordingly. Departments were required to establish standards for evaluating engaged scholarship's rigor and impact, and professional development resources were created for faculty and review committees. The university has institutionalized engagement through campus-wide

resources like updated CV templates, faculty training, and systematic review processes. UNC-Chapel Hill's strategic plan, Carolina Next, further elevates this commitment, calling for the explicit recognition of engaged scholarship in promotion and tenure policies and positioning community engagement as central to the university's mission and faculty success. These initiatives have made UNC- Chapel Hill a national exemplar in recognizing and rewarding publicly engaged academic work.

Intellectual Property/Tech Transfer

As universities deepen their engagement with industry and community collaborators, intellectual property (IP) considerations have become central to ensuring that innovation serves the public good. While many universities have a tech transfer/intellectual property office, an undue focus on monetization of IP can sometimes limit partnerships that have public benefits (Blancas et al., 2025) or even public involvement. Traditional tech transfer models often prioritize monetization, but future-leading institutions are expanding their approach, recognizing that the translation of research into innovation requires more than patents and licensing. It involves cultivating ecosystems where ideas can move from lab to market and social contexts through collaborative, community-informed pathways. These strategies reflect a broader shift from transactional IP management to a more flexible, mission-aligned model that values shared benefit and community impact. When working with industry and some other community partners, it is important to address legal questions related to intellectual property (IP), including patents, trade secrets, copyrights, etc.

Wichita State University has created an environment that allows such partnerships to thrive. Their success is enabled by flexible policies and a culture that allows for creative solutions that benefit both the university and its partners. Their process includes engaging early in the process with the principal investigator, identifying what IP will be created, and identifying what the university cares about versus what the partner cares about. This type of environment allows funding for research that also supports community partners and the community writ large.

Compensation and Procurement

Efforts started in 2023 by the Campus Compact and the Research Universities Civic Engagement Network (TRUCEN) identified that the process for compensating and paying partners can be complicated and have long lag times. These compensation practices can act as a barrier to current and future community engagement, as difficulty getting paid can damage relationships.

Through TRUCEN, a consortium of universities has begun to identify best practices that better enable community engagement and facilitate faster, easier payment of community partners.

Among the exemplars is the University of Minnesota (UMN). In 2021, the UMN's Office for Public Engagement convened a group of internal and external partners to examine challenges related to compensating community knowledge holders. The resulting report emphasized the critical role these partners play in university teaching and research collaborations. It identified key issues, including unclear benefits for community partners, inconsistent compensation practices, and the risk of marginalization.

The report recommended establishing dedicated funding pools, improving compensation systems, and honoring cultural knowledge systems to foster partnerships. In response, the University of Minnesota's Office for Public Engagement, in collaboration with central finance, developed comprehensive guidelines for compensating community partners. These guidelines

offer flexible payment options, including mechanisms for individuals without bank accounts and provisions for upfront payments—accommodating those partners who may face financial or time constraints.

While there has been much emphasis placed on tenure and promotion policy reform as a critical leverage point for ensuring positive conditions for community engagement, these examples provide additional policy reforms that are being pursued. At future-leading engaged universities, the conditions for community engagement are continually monitored and inhibitors resolved. Importantly, these policy revisions make space for the mechanisms of engagement, shared knowledge creation, diverse products and impacts, and integration of partners into the structures of the university to be achieved.

Conclusion: Institutional Reform as a Defining Feature of the Future-Leading Engaged University

The examples in this section illustrate a core insight: future-leading engaged universities are not merely running better programs or investing more in community partnerships; they are reconfiguring core structures, policies, and practices to align more closely with their public mission. In doing so, they are enacting the vision laid out in the 1999 *Returning to Our Roots* report, which called on public universities to "reassess what it means to be a university" and to "transform their institutional cultures so that engagement becomes an integral part of institutional functioning" (*Returning to Our Roots,* 1999, p. 19). These reforms move beyond creating conditions for individual projects or engaged scholars to succeed. They reflect carefully planned, institution-wide change designed to embed engagement into the very structures and systems of the university.

Institutional reform is defined by changes to core structures that embed engagement into everyday academic practice.

Across five domains—streamlining public access, scaling institutional impact, positioning the university as a public problem solver, measuring and communicating meaningful outcomes, and continually enhancing policy conditions—these institutions demonstrate that deep engagement requires systemic change. They show what it means to organize around community-defined priorities, create infrastructures that support long-term partnerships, and establish internal policies that reinforce, rather than resist, engaged practice.

This level of reform does not happen overnight. It requires strategic leadership, persistent alignment of systems and structures, and a campus-wide culture shift that centers relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. Yet the institutions profiled here prove that such transformation is not only possible, it is already underway. Their work offers more than inspiration; it offers a playbook. Other colleges and universities seeking to strengthen their engagement can learn from these strategic, intentional efforts to embed engagement into the DNA of the institution. As higher education continues to evolve in a complex and skeptical public environment, it is these institutions, the ones that pursue structural reform in service of public good, that will define what it means to be truly engaged.

Recommendations

For those institutions seeking greater public impact, examining the five organizing principles represented by the exemplars within this chapter can serve as a roadmap. The exemplars provide a clear indication that there are many ways to achieve the outcomes outlined within each of the five themes. The exact implementation that any one institution selects will differ from others based on context, institutional and community strengths, and the availability of human and financial resources. And yet, the aims remain clear:

1. Future-leading engaged institutions make it easy for public partners to access university resources, partnerships, and expertise.
2. Future-leading engaged institutions organize themselves to generate collective impact on issues of importance to the broader community.
3. Future-leading engaged institutions embrace and communicate their role as partners in public problem-solving.
4. Future-leading engaged institutions use nuanced tracking methods to document the impact of their engagement efforts, distinct from outputs, and communicate their impact in trustworthy, valuable, and meaningful ways to the broader public.
5. Future-leading engaged institutions continually monitor and, when necessary, change policy conditions to ensure that engagement is frictionless within their context.

Additionally, institutions need to expand on the set of activities considered engagement. Among the examples highlighted here, a considerable number might be interpreted as economic engagement activities. For those institutions where Extension is present, community outreach and economic development are often co-occurring. This is less often the case with engaged scholarship and more traditional economic engagement activities such as tech transfer and commercialization. In all but a few instances, public institutions that do not have Extension enterprises locate their community engagement infrastructure separately from economic development, and certainly from innovation and commercialization. The examples here indicate that when the lens of public impact is used, we see a world in which economic and community engagement are all considered part of the toolbox, regardless of where those units report.

As an example, the translation of research into innovation can involve cultivating ecosystems where ideas can move from lab to market through collaborative, community-informed pathways. This includes hosting pitch competitions and fireside chats with local stakeholders, engaging

students directly with inventors, and investing in innovation hubs that foster entrepreneurship and applied problem-solving. Another example would be leveraging an institution's particular research strengths (health and technology discovery) to drive innovation (biotechnology) that results in regional development of a particular industry segment (life sciences). The commercial entities spun up in and attracted to the region will require a stable talent base across a wide range of preparation paths, and this requires partnership with workforce development, career and technical schools, community college systems, and human service support providers to ensure a sustainable talent pathway is created. In these examples, economic and community engagement are connected to achieve significant results.

More thought leadership is required to help public and land-grant institutions conceptualize what is considered engagement and to maximize the contributions of social and economic engagement activities for greater public impact.

Finally, examples of engagement, like those offered within this chapter, gain significant momentum and sustainability when they are threaded through reports and communication with national organizations and university system offices. A mutually beneficial and systemic connectivity from institutions to national organizations and system offices widens the university-wide impact to one of organization- and system-wide impact. These broader structures not only amplify the impact of individual institutional efforts but offer a framework for scaling and sustaining transformative practices across campuses. By aligning with system offices and national bodies, institutions are better positioned to share resources, adopt proven models, and advocate for policy changes that reinforce value, impact, and innovation through engagement.

The next chapter focuses on university system offices and national associations' roles in engagement, highlighting the significant work that is happening at those levels. Connecting institutional reform with systems-level engagement can only serve to magnify the possibilities for higher education in renewing its public purpose.

For References and Appendices see page 116

CHAPTER 3
From Insight to Impact—Catalyzing System Stakeholders Toward Lasting Change

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In this chapter, we move beyond a focus on institutional reform to highlight the transformative potential of systems thinking in advancing sustainable change. We explore how engagement ecosystems—when intentionally designed—can serve as powerful frameworks for reimagining and reinforcing the public mission of higher education. Rather than existing as isolated initiatives, these ecosystems foster coordinated action, enabling institutions to build trust, recognize shared value, mobilize networks, and align efforts across diverse stakeholders.

We examine how leaders and practitioners are translating insight into impact by embedding engagement into the strategic fabric of higher education. This shift reflects a deeper commitment to long-term change—one that is adaptive, inclusive, and grounded in the collective capacity of systems to evolve and respond to emerging societal needs.

The future of higher education depends in part on the collective momentum of systems. The broader architecture of engagement includes university systems, national organizations, and cross-sector alliances. These actors are not peripheral; they are pivotal. They shape the conditions, set the standards, and scale the innovations that define what it means to lead with public purpose. Collectively, this work focuses on readying institutions of higher education to serve society through community-based, publicly engaged, and policy-relevant approaches that integrate the research, teaching, and service mission of higher education.

A growing number of systems are already in motion. Coordination is continuously increasing within universities, across multi-campus university systems, and among numerous national and international organizations supporting community engagement professionals, faculty, and students. For example, among APLU member institutions, nearly 40% have a central public engagement office, and 59% attained the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement. Less than 10 years earlier, these percentages were 9% and 24%, respectively (Dostilio et al., 2024).

Drawing from interviews with university system leaders and national engagement organizations, we examine two pathways for spotlighting the institutionalization of community engagement. The first focuses on national and international organizations dedicated to community engagement. The second examines a series of interviews conducted with multi-university system offices to discern the role of community engagement at the highest system level. Both paths provide insight into the strategies, structures, and shared commitments that enable system-level actors to drive transformational change across the higher education landscape.

Participation with national and international organizations enhances engagement by connecting institutions, systems, and practitioners into shared ecosystems.

First Systemic Pathway: National and International Organizations

Key insights, overarching themes, and elements of shared agendas emerged from conversations with leaders and representatives of various organizations deeply involved in advancing community engagement, public scholarship, and other high-impact practices across higher education and beyond.[1] Many of these organizations were formed after the 1999 Kellogg Commission Report (see Table 1 on page 117), *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution,* and their missions and activities strongly reflect the report's foundational recommendations. The organizations featured in this chapter are part of overlapping ecosystems (or ecotones) comprising individual institutions, public university systems, funders, and other national and international organizations, focused on:

a. research (i.e., Engagement Scholarship Consortium (ESC) and the International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement (IASLCE)),
b. convening leading community engagement scholars and practitioners (e.g., Academy of Community Engagement Scholarship (ACES),
c. National Academies, building coalitions that shape policies and communities of practice (i.e., APLU, Campus Compact, Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU))

d. promoting research translation and faculty recognition in higher education (i.e., Advancing Research Impact in Society (ARIS), Highly Integrative Basic and Responsive (HIBAR) Research Alliance, Promotion & Tenure–Innovation & Entrepreneurship (PTIE),
e. fostering public scholarship in arts, design, and humanities (i.e., Imagining America),
f. promoting the institutionalization of university community engagement, innovation, and economic development (i.e., APLU, Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement), and
g. organizing initiatives to support impactful research funding (i.e., The Pew Charitable Trusts).

Overarching Themes Among Organizations

The evolving field of community engagement and public scholarship in higher education is shaped by a growing network of organizations, leaders, and practitioners working to advance its visibility, legitimacy, and impact. As this work gains momentum, it is increasingly defined by shared commitments to collaboration and public purpose. Interviews with leaders from national and international organizations reveal a rich tapestry of efforts aimed at strengthening the field—efforts that not only reflect a deep dedication to community-engaged work but also illuminate the structural and cultural shifts needed to support it.

What follows are key themes that emerged from these conversations, offering insight into how the field is being defined and elevated, how reciprocal partnerships are being cultivated as a foundation for systemic change, and how persistent institutional barriers are being addressed to create more supportive environments for engaged scholarship.

Together, these insights reveal a field that is expanding in scope and deepening in complexity and ambition. As organizations work to define and elevate community-engaged scholarship, they are simultaneously addressing foundational principles, structural barriers, and strategic opportunities. From these efforts, several additional themes emerged that further illuminate the evolving landscape of engagement. These include the urgent need to measure and communicate impact, the power of collaboration and coalition-building, the challenges of navigating a shifting external environment, and the growing importance of global perspectives. Each of these dimensions reflects a shared commitment to advancing a more inclusive, responsive, and impactful vision for higher education's public mission.

Defining and Elevating the Field

A persistent theme throughout these interviews is the ongoing effort to define, legitimize, and elevate the diverse forms of community-engaged work within the academy. This ongoing effort is deeply rooted in the vision laid out by the 1999 Kellogg Commission Report, *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution*. That report called on higher education institutions—particularly public and land-grant universities—to recommit to their public purpose by becoming more responsive to societal needs and more connected to the communities they serve. It emphasized the importance of integrating engagement into the core functions of teaching, research, and service.

The work described here represents a direct and meaningful response to that call. Organizations like the Academy of Community Engagement Scholarship (ACES) were founded to provide recognition for individuals involved in community-engaged scholarship in a manner similar to national academies for other disciplines. According to Suzanne Morse Moomaw, ACES president and Chair of Urban and Environmental Planning at the University of Virginia, there is a shared concern among faculty and community partners that community engagement scholarship is too often perceived as "research light" and not valued comparably to traditional research methods. In response, organizations such as Imagining America (IA), the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE), ESC, and ACES have been steadfast in growing the body of research and evidence through annual conferences and professional development for engaged scholars, practitioners, and graduate students. A core goal of these organizations is

The community engagement field is reinforced through shared scholarly spaces defining standards, messaging, and demonstration of collective impact.

to "have a space for researchers, faculty members, and practitioners to share their research and their scholarship collectively," commented Rochelle Smarr, IARSLCE board chair. More recently, the National Academies has served as a powerful convener of leading community engagement scholars to bring further visibility to the field.

Organizations like ACES, ESC, IA, and IARSLCE are not only advancing the field—they are institutionalizing the values the Kellogg Report championed. By creating professional spaces, building scholarly infrastructure, and advocating for recognition of engaged work, these organizations are helping to fulfill the report's vision of a more inclusive, impactful, and publicly accountable academy.

Additionally, a significant effort is directed toward articulating the **value proposition** of community engagement and public scholarship to institutional leaders, faculty, and the broader public. This includes collecting and sharing stories of success (e.g., Imagining America), developing clear messaging that resonates with both academic and community audiences, and demonstrating the tangible impacts of this work on communities and societal challenges.

What makes this moment particularly important is that, more than two decades later, the foundational challenges identified in the Kellogg Report—such as the marginalization of engagement in academic reward systems and the undervaluing of community-based knowledge—persist. The current momentum reflects both progress and unfinished business. It underscores the need to continue building structures that support engagement as a legitimate and essential dimension of academic life, ensuring that the public mission of higher education is not only preserved, but fully realized.

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The Primacy of Mutually Beneficial and Reciprocal Partnerships

A fundamental principle emphasized across various organizations is the importance of building and sustaining mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships with communities. This involves moving beyond transactional relationships towards transformative collaborations that value the voices and expertise of community partners. The Kellogg Commission, which called for higher education transformation in 1999, envisioned truly engaged institutions—ones that collaborate with communities as equal partners in addressing society's most pressing challenges.

Our discussions highlight the need for a shift in power dynamics, ensuring that community needs and perspectives are central to the design, implementation, and evaluation of engaged work. Organizations like IARSLCE emphasize intentionality in honoring community partner voices and fostering reciprocal and trusted partnerships. By embedding reciprocity into the fabric of engagement ecosystems, university systems can catalyze deeper impact, strengthen public trust, and advance a more equitable vision of higher education's public mission.

Reciprocal partnerships are not only foundational to effective community engagement among organizations; they are also strategic levers for systemic transformation across higher education. When university systems embed reciprocity into their engagement frameworks, they create conditions for shared ownership, long-term collaboration, and scalable impact. These efforts enable systems to align institutional missions with community-defined priorities, ensuring that engagement partners are responsive and regenerative.

By fostering environments where community partners are co-designers of initiatives and co-authors of knowledge, systems can dismantle hierarchical models of engagement and replace them with networks of mutual accountability. This approach strengthens the legitimacy of higher education in the eyes of the public and enhances the capacity of both universities and communities to address complex societal challenges together. Systems can then serve as conveners and amplifiers of engagement in which their commitment to reciprocity becomes a defining feature of their leadership in advancing public value, trust, and return on investment.

Addressing Systemic Barriers within Higher Education

Significant attention is paid to the systemic barriers within higher education institutions that often impede the advancement and recognition of community engagement and public scholarship. A recurring challenge is the misalignment of reward structures, particularly promotion and tenure processes, with the time-intensive and collaborative nature of engaged work. Lorne Whitehead from the HIBAR Research Alliance shared, "We've held interviews with people at various levels of the promotion and tenure system, and most seem to agree that they're in favor of (this) research being fairly treated and yet it's not." National Science Foundation has funded initiatives like PTIE that are directly addressing this issue by facilitating nationwide conversations and developing recommendations for recognizing innovation and entrepreneurship in faculty evaluation. Rich G. Carter, PTIE's principal investigator, admits that "we recognize the majority of the change has to happen at the department and college level. And so, we're focusing our efforts on engaging at (that level). The second thing is that what we have found anecdotally … that promotion and tenure serve as a fulcrum for addressing all the challenges that faculty face in innovation entrepreneurship."

Campus Compact also emphasizes years of work around tenure, merit, support, and promotion to better support faculty who are advancing community engagement. Bobbie Laur, Campus Compact's president, asks, "How do we think about faculty being rewarded in doing this work…and what does it look like to support institutions, and supporting faculty and academic leaders particularly, advancing community engagement work?" There was overwhelming consensus among interviewees that to address systemic barriers to promotion and tenure, public and land-grant universities need to reshape internal funding strategies, research leave policies, and overall institutional cultures to value community engaged scholarship, teaching, and service. Without aligning faculty reward systems and integrating the work into the core academic mission of a university, the engaged institution as envisioned by the Kellogg Commission remains an aspiration rather than a reality.

Measuring Impact and Demonstrating Value

The ability to effectively measure and demonstrate the value of community engagement and public impact is identified as both a critical need and a significant challenge. Many organizations are grappling with the development of appropriate metrics for engagement success or ROI and assessment frameworks that go beyond traditional academic measures (e.g., publications) to capture the broader societal benefits of engaged work. Campus Compact acknowledges the historical challenge of data and impact storytelling, emphasizing the need to move beyond quantity-based measures to capture the qualitative and long-term rewards of community partnerships, as well as the vital importance of universities as a place for students to gain valuable skills in civic leadership and engagement.

Pew's work with funders focuses on rethinking impact measurement to better assess the outcomes of grantmaking in service to society. For example, they have led several initiatives, including the Impact Funders Forum, a funder collaborative involving over 80 philanthropies and public funding agencies, aimed at reducing the time between research results and policy, practice, and community impact. More recently, they gathered university leaders to create the Presidents and Chancellors Council on Public Impact Research to advance approaches for evaluating research impact, strengthening university partnerships with external entities, recognizing and rewarding a wide spectrum of research approaches, and providing training and tools for use-inspired research.

Measuring impact matters because it provides the evidence needed to validate, sustain, and scale community engagement and public scholarship. In doing so, it legitimizes the work by connecting rigorous academic products with socially relevant outcomes. Decision-makers are better able to allocate resources to maximize effectiveness. Communities and partners outside the university can clearly see how their collaborative efforts yield tangible results. And it shows them that if they participate, if they show up, if they share their time, talents, and other resources, the university will value these contributions. Thus, measuring impact helps improve trust, value, and return on investment across the higher education spectrum.

The Imperative of Collaboration and Coalition Building

Recognizing the complexity and interconnectedness of the challenges and opportunities in this field, practitioners emphasize the need for collaboration and coalition-building across various organizations, institutions, and sectors. Many organizations actively engage with other national and international groups with aligned missions. Founded in 1999 as part of a White House commission on the state of higher education, Imagining America has historically played a network-convening role, fostering relationships between different

engagement-focused networks. Erica Kohl-Arenas, Imagining America's faculty director, points out, "There is a unique role for the humanities in doing this connective work between universities and communities; compelling narratives, lived history, and public storytelling can help people to understand one another across different divides and to do meaningful, deep work together."

Groups such as ARIS and HIBAR Alliance aim to shift university cultures by fostering and promoting use-inspired research collaborations among scientists to close the gap between discovery and societal impact. Further, Pew explicitly convenes funders, higher education leaders, and practitioners to foster shared learning and action. This collaborative spirit is seen as essential for increasing return on investment, sharing best practices, and advocating for broader systemic change. Toward this end, the National Academies convened a workshop in June 2025 to discuss the importance of collaborative platforms in the land-grant system in fulfilling the public land-grant mission and building for long-term impact.

> When community engagement measurement aligns research, policy, and practice across collaborative networks, universities fulfil the public land-grant mission.

These coalitions help align research, policy, and practice by convening stakeholders, shaping agendas, and reinforcing the structural supports required for long-term change. Creating lasting impact requires more than isolated efforts—it depends on interconnected systems; in this context, coalitions function as strategic connectors, translating insight into coordinated action across the engagement ecosystem.

Navigating a Changing Landscape

The discussions with organization leaders reveal the dynamic and often challenging external environment in which engagement work takes place. They recognize factors such as federal directives, budget constraints within universities, declining public trust in higher education, and political polarization as significant influences. Organizations are adapting and seeking strategies to remain relevant and impactful in this evolving landscape. Campus Compact, for

example, is working in concert with advocates in Washington, D.C., to hold policy summits to address these challenges. In this environment, Campus Compact is actively collaborating with a wide range of partners, such as the Coalition for Service-Learning and PEN America, as well as higher education associations, such as The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the American Council on Education (ACE). Campus Compact President Bobbie Laur emphasized, "Any siloing or bifurcating [of] our work is a recipe for less funding and less movement. This is the time for all of us to figure out [what] each of us can do well and link arms." These examples underscore the need for agility, transparency, and coalition-building as universities and systems navigate a landscape shaped by financial pressures, shifting public expectations, and contested political terrain.

The Growing Importance of the Global Dimension

Several organizations highlight the increasing importance of international engagement and the need to incorporate a global perspective. IARSLCE originated with an international focus and continues to prioritize expanding its global engagement through conferences and affiliated networks. This includes developing a global research agenda for service-learning and community engagement based on regional gatherings that have taken place in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America. Their aim is to identify research questions that guide the field through comparative and regional research that improves

the rigor and quality of scholarship, while empirically documenting impact that takes into consideration regional differences. Similarly, ACES has expanded its reach beyond the United States and recognizes community-engagement scholarship happening internationally. Overall, the discussions with organizational leaders reveal a recognition that the articulation and practice of community engagement vary significantly across international contexts, necessitating an open and inclusive approach.

Ultimately, these organizations affirm their commitment to community engagement by fostering accountable, value-driven, and impactful partnerships with higher education. Through unified efforts and coalition-building, they demonstrate a collective dedication to the public good. By bringing their expertise into the university setting, they help cultivate reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationships that strengthen public trust and amplify the value of higher education. Equally important is gaining insight from university system offices on experiences and opportunities that unify their colleges' or universities' engagement efforts with public stakeholders.

The insights shared by these organizations underscore a critical inflection point for higher education. As institutions face growing demands for relevance, accountability, and public trust, community engagement offers a powerful pathway to reimagine their role in society. This work is not peripheral—it is central to the mission of higher education in a democratic society. By investing in reciprocal partnerships, rethinking impact, and addressing systemic barriers, colleges and universities can become more responsive to the needs of their communities and more effective in preparing students for civic and professional leadership. The collective efforts of these organizations demonstrate that meaningful change is not only possible—it is already underway. The challenge now is to scale and sustain this momentum, ensuring that engagement is not the work of a few, but a shared institutional priority that defines the future of higher education.

Engagement practices, ultimately, reflect regional context, while global networks shape common commitments, shared learning, and dedication to the public good.

Key Takeaways from National and International Organizations

- **A robust "engagement ecosystem"** exists at the national level, comprising professional organizations, funders, and advocacy group that provide expertise, professional development, and other resources to universities and individuals to build capacity for integrating community engagement into the research, teaching, and service mission of land-grant universities.
- **Universities partner with myriad external actors** to co-create solutions to complex social, economic, environmental, and health challenges. Successful partnerships are based on trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit.
- **Systematic barriers remain** that impede formal recognition of community engagement and public scholarship, especially in promotion and tenure. Changes to university polices and internal funding mechanisms, among other strategies, are required to foster a "culture of engagement."
- **Measuring the impact of community engagement** is vital to demonstrating value to the public. Metrics that capture the impactful narrative and long-term rewards of community partnerships are needed to validate, sustain, and scale university community engagement.
- **Strategic collaborations** among national and international organizations, as well as with universities, are needed in an ever-changing and resource-constrained environment. This will help increase return on investments, share best practices, and accelerate momentum toward institutional transformation that recognizes community engagement as vital to the core mission of land-grant universities.

Second Systemic Pathway: University Systems Offices

The second systemic series of discussions we held was with leaders within university systems' offices. To better understand community engagement at university system levels, interviews with representatives of APLU university system members were conducted in Spring 2025. The interviews aimed to answer several key questions: (a) How is community engagement defined at the university system level? (b) How is community engagement coordinated across institutions within the university system? (c) What are the main goals, priorities, and activities for community engagement at the system level? (d) What are some promising strategies or best practices to share with APLU membership? and (e) What challenges do university systems face with respect to community engagement?

One of the challenges in studying community engagement at the university system level was identifying the right person to contact. Key personnel responsible for community engagement may be embedded within a variety of departments, divisions, or roles with different titles. In some instances, there is no single individual tasked with this role. In conducting this study, we started at the president/chancellor level and then combed through system websites, organizational charts, and online personnel directories in our attempts to determine the appropriate contact person.

From a population of 25 university system members, representatives from eight systems responded to requests for interviews. Based on the number of campuses and students, findings from three large systems (University of California, The California State University System, The Texas A&M University System), three medium systems (Colorado State University System, University of Missouri System, University of Tennessee System) and two small systems (University of Alaska System, North Dakota University System) are included in this chapter. Table 2 below provides a snapshot of these systems.

Table 2: University Systems included in Study

University System	System Composition	Student Enrollment (Fall 2024)
University of California	10 campuses (9 urban, 1 rural), 6 academic health centers, 3 national laboratories, 1 Agriculture and Natural Resources division supporting research and outreach in every county	299,407
The California State University System	23 universities (8 major cities, 5 small/medium cities, 9 large towns, 1 small town), 7 off-campus centers	461,612
Colorado State University System	3 campuses (2 urban, 1 online), extension offices in every county	51,532
University of Missouri System	4 universities (3 urban, 1 rural), 1 health system, 1 extension division with offices in every county	68,165
University of Tennessee System	5 campuses (1 health science, 2 urban, 2 rural), 2 institutes (Agriculture with extension offices in every county, Public Service)	62,148
University of Alaska System	3 universities (2 urban— includes medical school and Institute of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Extension; 1 rural), 13 community campuses	27,823
North Dakota University System	11 institutions (5 urban— includes medical school and extension, 6 rural)	45,806
The Texas A&M University System	12 universities (5 urban, 5 medium, 5 rural); 8 state agencies; 10 research, teaching and service institutions; including 1890 and 1862 land grant and extension functions	164,905

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Thematic clusters from these interviews are captured below, followed by a common agenda that strengthens the systemic bond between engaged organizations and engaged university system offices.

Organizational Themes Among University Systems Offices

Defining and Elevating Community Engagement

Understanding and advancing community engagement at the system level matters because it enables university systems to act as strategic conveners and amplifiers of collective impact. By embracing a broad definition of engagement—one that reflects the voices of external partners and the unique strengths of individual campuses—systems can more effectively demonstrate their relevance to statewide priorities and public interests.

Community engagement at the system level, based on our interviews, is broadly defined to include a variety of external partners, such as non-governmental organizations, businesses, industry groups, state and local governments, civic organizations, elected officials, churches, and community leaders. Viewing community engagement through an all-encompassing lens allows university systems to demonstrate responsiveness and value to diverse stakeholder groups that represent statewide interests, such as state legislators, government officials, and key economic interests.

Because the mission of university systems is achieved at the individual campus level, nearly every university system included in this study also cited the importance of each university or entity within their system and called on them to define their own components of community engagement. These components are refined based on campus strengths, through scholarship, campus interests, and specific initiatives. This approach reflects an understanding that individual institutions, faculty, staff, and students have needs that can best be met through an array of actors who influence or can be impacted by external relations, community-engaged scholarship, learning, service, and constituency groups.

Among systems striving to coordinate community engagement, a core message is that engagement with stakeholders at the system level is strategic and varies depending on the purpose and interests of individual campuses, commonalities across multiple campuses, and goals of the system overall. System leaders aim to elevate the needs or impact of their institutions, showcasing the collective capacity of institutions within a system, and address issues of statewide relevance, such as workforce development or public health. Victoria Hirschberg, Assistant Vice President and Chief Economic Development Director with the University of Tennessee System, framed it in these terms: "As a publicly funded system that contains a land-grant institution and service mission, we are always looking to ensure that we are serving the state of Tennessee and Tennesseans. Serving industry is an essential priority. At the system level, our role is to bridge those stakeholder groups together in a more meaningful way." By elevating community engagement at the system level, key stakeholders such as legislators, industries, civic organizations, and others see their relationships with higher education strengthened. This approach reinforces trust, value, and return on investment and delivers on higher education's promises to serve the broader public good.

Economic and Workforce Development

Economic development and workforce development are at the center of most university systems' engagement work. At the system level, there is a strong emphasis on partnering with business, industry, and corporate sectors to advance workforce development and drive innovation through collaborative research. System-level thinking is essential for unlocking the full economic development potential of higher education. While individual campuses contribute meaningfully to local economies, university systems are uniquely positioned to coordinate efforts, align resources, and scale impact across regions and entire states.

These efforts aim to align university engagement with broader economic goals in accord with public values and fiscally informed decisions. This is particularly important in the current environment, in which the value of universities is being questioned. This commitment

allows universities to bring these stakeholders into the conversation as advocates, as well as demonstrating the role of universities in economic advancement beyond campus boundaries.

The North Dakota State University System has made workforce development a cornerstone of its community engagement efforts. Workforce development is a priority in the system, published in its governing body's (State Board of Higher Education) current strategic plan. As the institution develops its new strategic plan, *Envision 2035*, industry, higher education, and workforce leaders are teaming up "to gain insight on what higher education should focus on in the next decade and how to best serve students, employers and the overarching technological shift of society."[2]

Two of Texas A&M University System's six strategic imperatives link community engagement with economic and workforce development that meets the needs of the people of Texas. In 2023, the System consolidated five separate commercialization offices into one system-wide entity—Texas A&M Innovation. In addition to protecting intellectual property and expanding resources to accelerate commercialization, the institution seeks to increase inventor engagement through education and outreach, build industry partnerships, and support startups and entrepreneurial ventures.

By leveraging the collective strengths of their institutions—research capacity, workforce development programs, innovation hubs, and community partnerships—systems can respond more strategically to labor market needs, industry demands, and statewide economic priorities. This integrated approach allows systems to serve as powerful engines of inclusive growth, bridging the gap between higher education and economic opportunity. In doing so, they enhance the value proposition of public higher education and fulfill a vital role in shaping resilient, future-ready economies.

System-level coordination strengthens workforce alignment by linking campus strengths to statewide economic priorities.

Coordination and Synergies

Efforts are being made to connect universities (within their systems offices) with external entities to establish synergistic opportunities that result in meaningful impact across institutions and in the communities they serve. The capacity and form of this level of coordination varies widely. As previously described, nearly every system emphasizes the importance of engagement through the lens of its individual campuses. Systems offices recognize that it is the individual institutions that have ties to their local communities or to specific industries that align with their institutional niche.

While individual institutions carry most of the engagement responsibilities in their communities, more systems are recognizing the importance of unifying for the public good. For example, the University of California has a decentralized system whereby institutional engagement is led by each campus, yet efforts are underway to form a network of those involved in community engagement so they can work together. Uniquely among examples shared in this study, this effort was initially pushed and promoted by faculty and campus-based leadership, rather than a centralized office at the system level.

Systems are also investing in university resources to build the capacity of individual campuses and the overall system to work together through creation of roles like Vice Chancellor for Campus Collaboration, Deputy Chief Engagement Officer, and Vice President and Chief Economic Development Director. Some of these are newly created positions, while others involve changing the responsibilities of an existing position. The aim of these positions is to enhance collaboration and expand economic development and community engagement opportunities across campuses. The University of Missouri System has taken this a step further by asking each institution to formally identify an engagement leader, creating a system-level Deputy Chief Engagement Officer position to coordinate and facilitate collaboration across institutions, and providing seed funding at the campus and system level to support engagement efforts. Each institution had the flexibility to place the position and invest its seed funding wherever made most sense, based on institutional ecosystems, infrastructure in place, priorities, or other factors. Also unique to Missouri was the inclusion and integration of Cooperative Extension in engagement efforts.

There appears to be greater deference to local campuses on place-based elements of community engagement, such as local workforce needs and student service learning. Several systems mentioned that their local campuses were at the heart of their local communities. This localized strength supports broader system-wide strategies, such as student recruitment and regional economic alignment.

Broader engagement around (a) statewide and industry-level initiatives pertaining to economic and workforce development, and (b) demonstrating public value and the return on investment of universities are more likely to be coordinated at the system level. Individuals serving in system-level engagement roles who were interviewed for this study articulated that their job is to help coordinate, leverage, and elevate the strengths of individual campuses to create opportunities and improve effectiveness and impact. These individuals often have formal responsibilities for, or are housed in offices tasked with, government and external relations, economic development, and advocacy or stakeholder communications. These roles involve engaging government officials, industry leaders, and other key stakeholders to identify systemic needs; ensure that information is articulated back to university administrators, faculty, and staff; and communicate the collective value and impact of the university system and its campuses to those stakeholders.

The growing emphasis on system-level coordination reflects a maturing understanding of how higher education can act as a unified force for statewide impact. While the Kellogg Commission called for institutions to become more engaged with their communities, today's systems are expanding that vision by building infrastructure that connects campuses, aligns efforts, and amplifies collective value. This matters because the challenges facing states—such as workforce development, economic resilience, and public trust—are too complex for any single campus to address alone. By investing in roles, networks, and strategies that bridge local strengths

with system-wide goals, university systems are not only supporting their institutions—they are positioning themselves as strategic partners in shaping the future of their states. This shift from isolated engagement to coordinated, cross-campus collaboration marks a critical evolution in how the public mission of higher education is being realized at scale.

In summary, university systems aim to serve campuses, states, and industries equally, bridging these stakeholder groups in meaningful ways. Building networks across campuses, supporting reforms, and engaging with communities and industries are central activities. Listening to the voices of customers and collaborating with leaders, policymakers, and economic developers is essential for understanding systemic challenges and fostering sustainable solutions.

Strategic Goals and Capacity Building

Engaged university systems work to align their systems' strategic plans with those of their institutions, emphasizing shared objectives across their institutions' outreach, research elevation, and enrollment growth. Strategic plans act as guiding frameworks for system-wide initiatives. Priorities include fostering an engaged college culture and creating high-impact engagement opportunities for students. To increase public value and return on investment, systems' strategies include dedicated support for developing professionals and solutions that address issues that have been identified as important to industry, communities, and the state.

Engaged system office efforts are also directed at enhancing institutional capacity for community engagement among the universities, faculty, and staff within their systems. The University of California system is working to establish criteria for integrating community engagement into all its institutions' promotion and tenure processes. The University of Missouri System's Office of the President provided initial seed funding to cultivate institutional buy-in for community engagement. This was implemented through designated engagement leaders at each campus and the creation of a new Deputy Chief Engagement Officer position to provide system-level coordination. As this funding was phased out over a five-year timeline, individual campuses have continued to financially support and sustain those efforts.

A final feature that intersects with institutional and system offices' strategic efforts is the ability to convey messages to the public that garner trust, promote value, and highlight a return on investment. There is an attempt to standardize an understanding of engagement with elected officials to ensure consistent communication and collaboration between internal and external stakeholders. Tools like one-page flyers or fact sheets are used by the Colorado State University System to explain state-wide footprints and district-specific impacts. Having

Perception of return on investment is shaped by how clearly institutions interpret outcomes and communicate with partners and external stakeholders.

reliable data and evidence to demonstrate the value and ROI of community engagement is also essential to effective storytelling. One strategy employed by the University of Tennessee System, to accomplish this goal, was the creation of a Chief Economic Development Director position within the Division of Government Relations, Advocacy and Economic Development. The duties associated with this position have changed how the system engages with the state's economic development arm, embedding the university as an essential partner in the state's economic development priorities. It has also strengthened support for the university system by increasing stakeholder understanding of economic opportunity and impact. And it has helped bring economic development stakeholders into the conversation to advocate on the university system's behalf.

The themes emerging from interviews with nationally engaged organizations and university system offices reveal meaningful progress in strengthening stakeholder engagement. Yet, as individual institutions continue to develop their engagement infrastructure, there is a growing imperative for system-level leaders to build stronger cross-system connections—unifying their efforts to further strengthen higher education's collective impact on education, research, workforce development, and economic resilience. To shift public perception on trust, value, and return on investment, higher education must move beyond siloed, intra-institutional or intra-system initiatives and adopt systemic, strategic collaborations that advance a shared agenda and foster a cohesive national movement.

The strategic alignment of system-wide engagement efforts signals a pivotal shift in how public university systems are positioning themselves—not just as collections of campuses, but as unified, mission-driven engines for public good. By embedding engagement into strategic plans, investing in leadership roles, and building infrastructure that supports

collaboration across institutions, systems are laying the groundwork for a new model of the engaged university: one that is agile, accountable, and deeply connected to the economic and civic life of its state. This matters because the future of higher education's public mission depends on its ability to demonstrate relevance, build trust, and deliver measurable value at scale. As the Kellogg Commission envisioned, engagement must be central—not peripheral—to institutional identity. Today, system-level leadership is proving essential to making that vision real, not only by coordinating efforts but by catalyzing a national movement toward a more integrated, impactful, and future-ready higher education sector.

Key Takeaways for University Systems

- University systems play a critical role in **building networks across campuses and with industry, government, and other stakeholders.** While direct engagement with stakeholders at the system level is essential, creating opportunities to bring together campus and external stakeholders to support relationship-building is also important. This can also facilitate stronger system-based approaches to address community, state, and industry issues.
- University systems are uniquely positioned to build and **showcase the collective capacity of institutions across the system** to address issues of statewide relevance and to articulate overall impacts. This is a critical role for maintaining relevance and demonstrating the value of the overall higher education system. Aligning engagement strategies and activities with strategic plans further aids this effort.
- Because community engagement occurs at the campus/university level, as well as at the system level, it's important to have to **clearly defined expectations of respective roles,** and for those involved in engagement activities to communicate with each other and work together as needed for greater impact.

Toward a Common Agenda

Despite the diverse missions and foci of the represented organizations and university system offices, a common agenda for advancing community engagement and public scholarship emerges from these discussions. This agenda encompasses shared goals and priorities for strengthening the field and enhancing its impact.

Foster Transformation in Institutional Engagement

At the heart of this common agenda lies the imperative to drive institutional transformation within higher education to more fully embrace and support community engagement and public scholarship. This transformation involves significant shifts in how university systems operate. For instance, it requires rethinking incentive structures like tenure and promotion policies to recognize community-engaged scholarship. Organizational leaders indicate that changing promotion and tenure processes is seen as a key imperative to encourage different forms of impactful work. There's a recognition that the traditional academic reward system often runs counter to the methodologies, timelines, and structures needed for engaged work.

Organizations like PTIE are focusing on the "faculty life cycle," including advertising, hiring, position descriptions, workload, annual evaluations, and rewarding faculty who engage in innovation and entrepreneurship, recognizing promotion and tenure as a critical "fulcrum" for addressing challenges faculty face in these areas. The PTIE coalition is working with institutions to develop recommendations and guidance on these issues, recognizing that changes need to happen at various levels, including departments and colleges, especially where guidance is held at these levels, rather than centrally. PTIE is piloting approaches with institutions in the NSF's Accelerating Research Translation (ART) grant program, many of which see promotion and tenure as a "big lever" for success and a point of overlap with community-engaged research.

Similarly, The Pew Charitable Trusts is working with a council of university leaders to devise a roadmap for public impact research, aiming to make changes in funding structures, incentives, and institutional structures to maximize public impact. The effort to change promotion and tenure is seen as a significant opportunity. Organizations are starting to mobilize for change just by bringing together funders and university leaders to discuss these issues.

Another aspect of institutional transformation involves strengthening the support structures and resources available for engaged work. This includes developing institutional capacity. For Imagining America (IA), this means creating practical tools and resources that people can use to change relationships and understandings, turning research into actionable materials that are meaningful to the public. They are developing toolkits for various audiences, like an evaluation toolkit and a toolkit for graduate students.

The Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, which now includes 368 universities and colleges, carries a distinction signifying institutional transformation toward engagement. "Building Institutional Capacity for Engaged Research" was also the topic of a National Academies workshop in 2024. Some of the themes emerging from the workshop included increased integration of civic engagement, engaged research in undergraduate education, and funding models that support community-led organizations.

University systems play a pivotal role in advancing institutional transformation by creating the conditions for community engagement and public scholarship to thrive. They do this by aligning incentive structures, investing in capacity-building, and fostering cross-campus collaboration. Systems also support transformation by equipping campuses with tools, funding, and leadership roles that embed engagement into institutional DNA. The institutions that lead in this space will not only fulfill their public mission—they will define what it means to be a 21st-century engaged university.

Unify Our Message and Tell Impactful Stories

A key element of the common agenda is strengthening impact storytelling. This involves effectively communicating the value and impact of engaged work through compelling narratives, data, and accessible formats for diverse audiences, including policymakers and the public. CUMU emphasizes the importance of telling the story of the work happening on their campuses to ensure that decisionmakers, voters, and community members understand the public purpose and transformative potential of higher education. They believe this work is happening at an impressive scale and presents an opportunity to tell that story well.

Success for APLU's future agenda necessitates developing a core messaging framework, telling stories about the work of APLU member institutions, and documenting the impact to drive progress. The hope is that universities articulate stories of impact and translate research and teaching outcomes in ways that have meaning for community stakeholders. This is seen as a way to remake what higher education is and rearticulate its value proposition.

A key aspect of telling impactful stories is the recognition given to institutions that demonstrate a commitment to investing in community engagement through regional and national awards program. For example, APLU and ESC have partnered to recognize exemplary programs and initiatives that celebrate the impact of faculty *and* their community partners. Each year, universities representing each of four regions (Northeast, North Central, South, West) are nominated to become regional finalists and are competitively selected for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Community Engagement Scholarship Award that is announced at ESC's annual conference. Recipients of the Kellogg Awards qualify as finalists for C. Peter Magrath Community Engagement Scholarship Award, awarded to a single university at APLU's annual meeting. More emphasis must be placed on recognizing community partners as shared thought leaders with academics, reducing hierarchies between institutions of higher learning and community collaborators. These collaborative successes should shine through local, regional, state, and national media as signals of higher education's effort to re-establish public trust and provide value-added contributions to their communities.

Build a Culture of Data-Informed Impact

While a focus on program and project evaluation is important, there is a recent turn toward building a culture of evaluation and collective impact at the institutional level. This is a nascent but growing focus of several universities, including the University of California-Davis, the University of Colorado-Boulder, and the University of Georgia. An important element of measuring impact is fostering continuous learning and improvement through systematic evaluation of engagement activities and their outcomes. Moving beyond traditional academic metrics to incorporate indicators that capture community benefits, social change, and other forms of public impact are some strategies. This effort also requires universities to hold themselves accountable when it comes to issues of public trust, return on investment, and the value that institutions of higher education provide to the communities they serve.

Meanwhile, national organizations are considering how to assess and measure the success of their own strategies. While some organizations track traditional metrics like report downloads, others are developing more complex measures that account for the

interconnected nature of change. Imagining America, for example, notes that it hasn't conducted a formal impact study on its effect on member campuses or in the field over time. However, it sees the biggest impact as the cultural work they do, creating spaces where people feel comfortable having difficult conversations and building community. PTIE tracks the adoption of its recommendations, recognizing that adoption varies across different institutions and levels. The National Academies Roundtable tracks metrics for different types of projects, acknowledging that it cannot directly measure changes in classrooms, but can focus on their reach and topics covered. There's a sense that following up on recommendations from consensus reports and convening subsequent discussions is a form of assessing the efficacy of their work.

A culture of impact is sustained when evaluation captures learning, adaptation, and interconnected change.

Promote Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing

Strengthening collaboration and knowledge-sharing is a clear consensus point. This includes working together within the field and across related sectors. Many sources emphasize the necessity of partnering with other organizations. ARIS believes "none of this work gets done without partners" at the individual, institutional, and national levels. It partners with national academies, scientific societies, and private foundations, recognizing that each brings different resources, whether funding, personnel, or connections. Partnerships bring more people to the table, leading to fresh ideas. For example, CUMU is intentionally partnering with other organizations aligned with their mission for events like their Anchor Learning Network Action Summit to avoid creating an echo chamber. Pew's work is fundamentally about convening and facilitating conversations among different constituents with a shared goal of research impacting society. It sees its role as coordinating with other funder groups and other organizations working in related spheres to avoid duplicating efforts and ensure efficiency.

Cross-fertilization between different universities is considered critical for facilitating culture change; taking collective steps can bring about a shift from the fear of being first to the fear of missing out. IA has also played a "network convening role," hosting events for networks to discuss shared work and information. IARSLCE emphasizes networking and sharing information. It aims to connect its members to the membership of international associations to create more international research opportunities, potentially leading to joint conferences in the future.

Collaborations, as well as various convenings, are an important way to disseminate research and resources. These involve developing and sharing findings, tools, and models of effective practice through various accessible channels. Imagining America's workbooks and conversation cards are cited as examples of useful tools. The National Academies publishes proceedings from workshops and reports. Pew is also planning to publish a funding practice lab to share lessons learned from their work with funders. The goal is to make information widely available and actionable.

Strengthening Communities through Engagement

Community engagement and public scholarship offer powerful tools for strengthening communities, expanding opportunity, and ensuring that all voices contribute to solving real-world challenges. A growing number of organizations are working to build partnerships that are inclusive, respectful, and focused on results. This includes ensuring that local leaders, businesses, and civic organizations are part of the conversation when universities work on issues like workforce development, education, and public health.

Groups like Imagining America are creating spaces for open dialogue—where people from different backgrounds and perspectives can come together to address tough issues with honesty and mutual respect. ACES is expanding its network to include a broader range of community voices, ensuring that engagement efforts reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. Pew's Impact Funders Forum is helping connect funders and researchers with those on the front lines of community problem-solving, asking important questions about how knowledge can be used more effectively to benefit more people. These efforts reflect a shared commitment to practical, community-driven solutions—with universities and communities working side by side to build stronger, more resilient futures.

The impact of these efforts is further amplified when university systems leverage their collective resources to engage with communities and stakeholder groups to identify critical needs and craft collaborative solutions. This approach has enabled the University of Missouri System to more effectively channel resources from across universities and its statewide Missouri Extension system to address important issues, such as broadband and mental health.

Navigating the Evolving Landscape and Advocating for Support

Finally, navigating the evolving landscape and advocating for support is part of the common agenda. This involves proactively addressing changes in higher education, national organizations, and society, and advocating for supportive policies and resources. CUMU sees the current moment as an opportunity to tell the story of higher education's public purpose at a time of uncertainty regarding funding and public perception. APLU notes that higher education is being reshaped by factors like public trust, funding changes, and globalization. It believes this is a moment for higher education to redefine itself and articulate its value proposition.

There is a need to demonstrate higher education's valuable role in community competitiveness and sustainable economic futures. APLU's former vice chair of the Commission of Economic and Community Engagement, Sharon Paynter, remarked that if we listen to the collective voices of individuals, associations, and campuses, as well as of the institutions and organizations engagement leaders are working with, "We come to a place where we're able to demonstrate that higher education plays a valuable and very important role in the competitiveness of communities to provide a long-term, sustainable economic future for the citizens [who] live there." Advocating for support requires articulating what the field is trying to achieve and effectively engaging other organizations to work toward shared successes. This entails building on trusted and meaningful partnerships between campuses, communities, system offices, national associations, and policymakers. This commitment requires us to reflect on how we communicate, ensure we are listening with respect, and respond with action. Through this shared commitment, we reaffirm higher education's public purpose and strengthen its role in shaping the future of engagement.

Conclusion

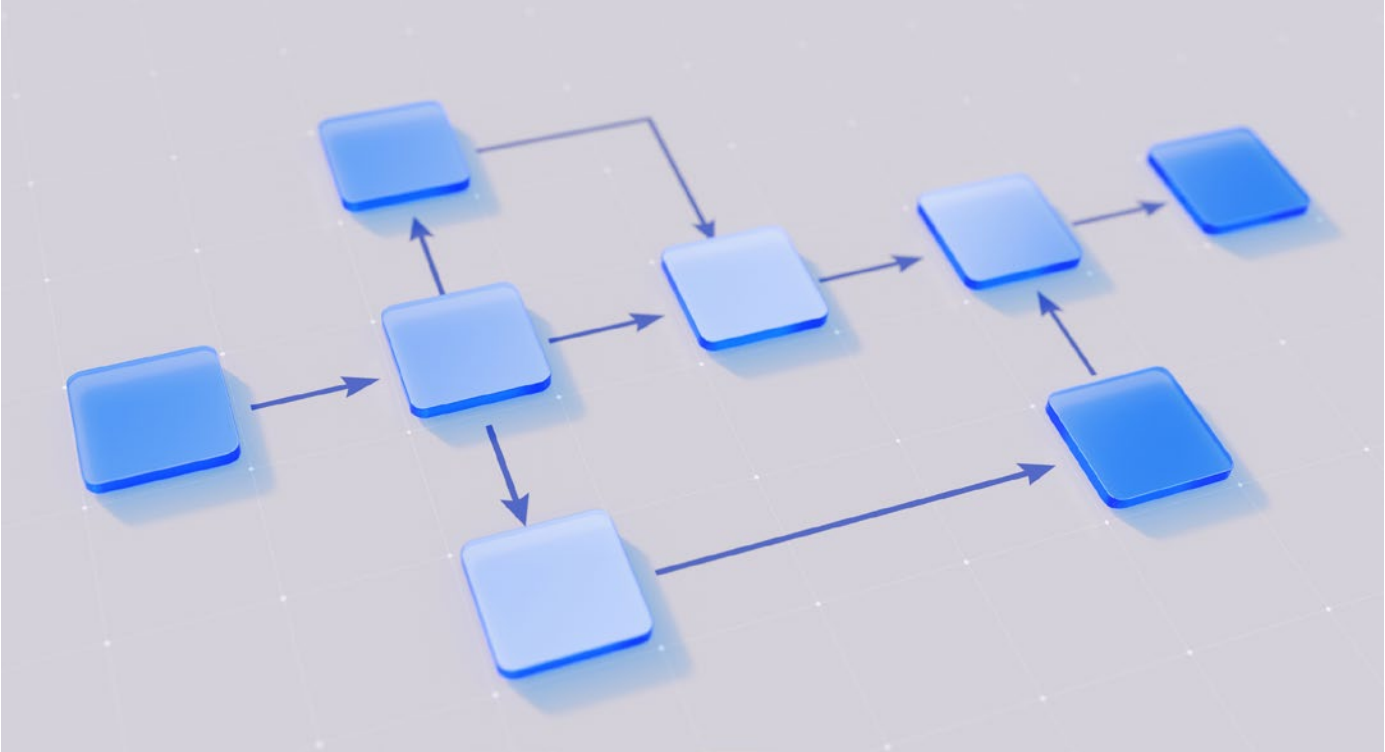
This chapter connects national/international organizations and university systems through a common agenda that advances the development of future-leading engaged institutions. This integration of systemic solutions affirms that meaningful, sustainable transformation in higher education cannot happen in isolation. There is great transformative potential for change through systemic connectivity with national organizations and university systems. These efforts require a shift from siloed efforts to intentionally interconnected systems that prioritize engagement as a core value and strategic imperative. By embracing systems thinking and cultivating engagement within and across systems, higher education can move toward a more responsive, valued, and trusted future. The path forward is unmistakable: our purpose rests in the power of the collective.

Recommendations for University Leadership

Consistent with themes discussed in previous chapters, these recommendations are drawn from interviews with both national/international organizations and university system leaders.

1. Tie a renewed public purpose to institutional commitments:
    a. Clearly articulate and communicate the public purposes and value of higher education, recognizing that economic, civic, and community engagement are integral to the institution's mission and vital for its long-term relevance and public trust.
    b. Embrace disruption as an opportunity to rethink and develop new models for the research enterprise that maximize public value and societal benefit.
    c. Prioritize system-level change that fosters inter-institutional and interdisciplinary collaboration to achieve comprehensive and lasting transformation in how universities engage with society.
4. Integrate and reward engaged scholarship and research impact:
    a. Reform promotion and tenure to recognize and reward engaged scholarship.
    b. Foster interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to solving real-world problems that surface through engagement efforts.
    c. Invest in engagement training and capacity building for faculty and staff.
    d. Empower internal advocates to effectively champion engaged scholarship and research impact.
    e. Explore ways to provide institutional supports in a coordinated fashion across an entire university system.
3. Address institutional barriers to create a culture of engagement:
    a. Cultivate open dialogue with communities and industry.
    b. Foster engagement across all functions, rather than in isolated centers or institutes.
    c. Continually educate executive leaders on the nuances of engaged work.
    d. Address power imbalances between researchers, industry, and community partners.
    e. Diversify funding for research impact initiatives beyond traditional sources, connecting engagement work to revenue streams where possible.

4. Champion intra-institutional and inter-institutional partnerships that have a collective impact:
    a. Cultivate and maintain authentic, long-term, reciprocal partnerships with community and external organizations.
    b. Coordinate activities across university systems.
    c. Actively seek and deepen collaborations with higher education associations with expertise in engaged research and teaching to demonstrate institutional commitment to collective impact.
5. Prioritize robust data collection, metric development, and evaluation to inform and measure the impact of engaged scholarship:
    a. Develop comprehensive metrics for internal and external outcomes.
    b. Invest in evaluation scholarship to study the efficacy of engaged research and community engagement.
    c. Establish benchmarks for the capacity to carry out engaged work.



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Chapter 1. References and Appendices

\+ Represents citations associated with Public Trust

* Represents citations associated with Public Value

$ Represents citations associated with Public Return on Investment

The references below are in alphabetical order and feature numbers corresponding to the Appendix B: Scheme.

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Chapter 1. Appendix A: Methodology

This systematic review explores the challenges denoted in the 1999 Commission's report, with particular attention to public trust, value, and return on investment with regard to higher education. Three researchers collaborated on a comprehensive literature search conducted using three databases: Scopus, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and EBSCO Education Research Complete.

Search terms included:

- **RETURN ON INVESTMENT:** (public OR community) (return AND on AND investment) AND ('higher AND education' OR university* OR college)
- **VALUE:** Community AND value AND ('higher AND education' OR university* OR college)
- **TRUST:** trust AND ('higher education' OR university* OR college). This segment of the search was conducted with the inclusion of the U.S. selected articles conducted by Le and Law (2023) and expanded upon to capture all articles through March 2025.

The predetermined inclusion criteria for the systematic review, included (a) peer-reviewed articles and reports published since 2000; (b) studies focused on trust-building strategies in university-community relationships OR community perceptions of the value of university trust-building, community value, OR public return on investment—economic and social; (c) empirical research, case studies, systematic reviews, and white papers; (d) North American examples; and (e) those written and published in the English language.

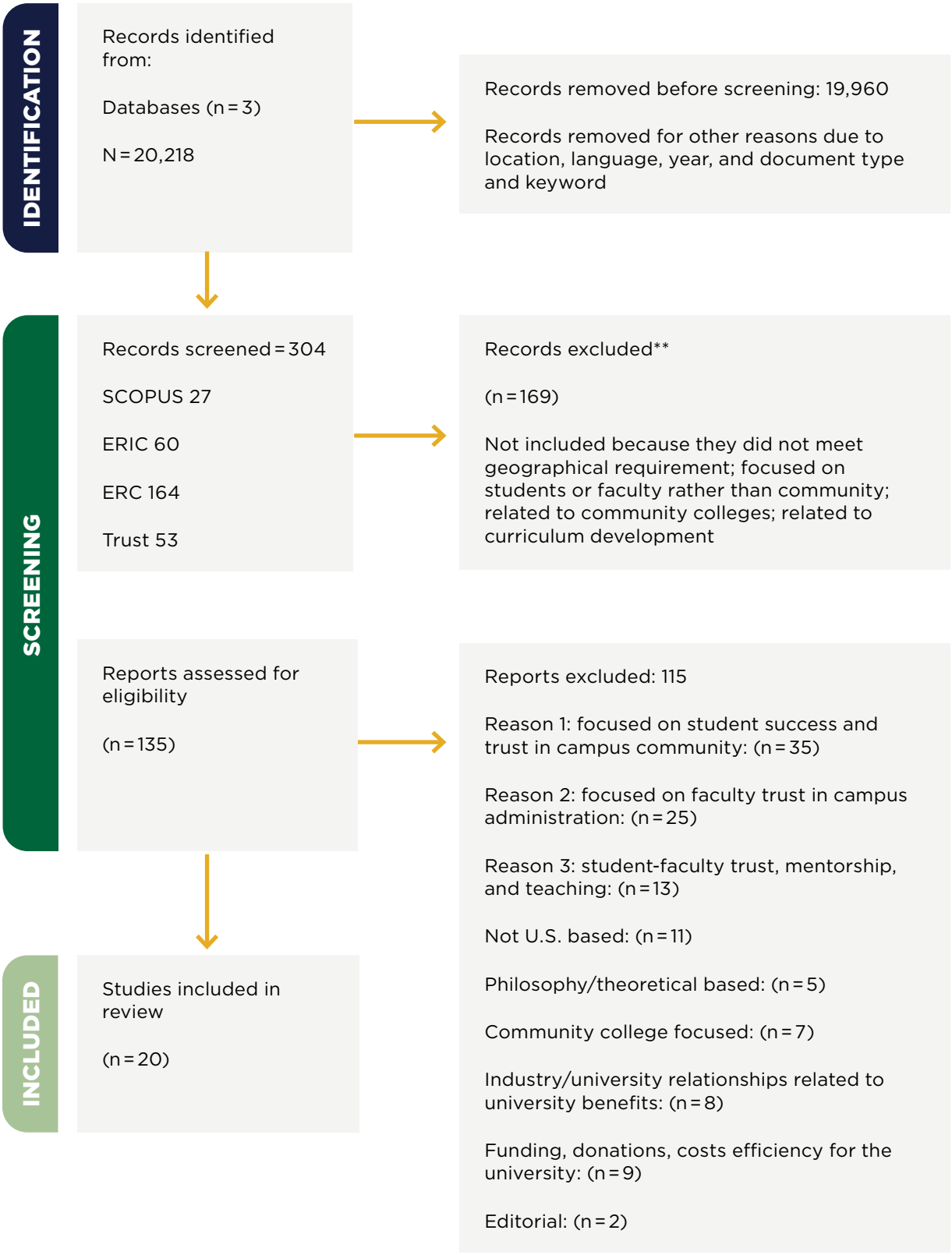
The exclusion criteria for the systematic review, included (a) opinion pieces and editorial articles without empirical data, (b) studies focused on primary/secondary education rather than higher education, (c) news or magazine pieces, and (d) research focusing solely on student or faculty retention or studies that focus only on university goals, branding, or student satisfaction, without assessing community perceptions on trust, value, or return on investment.

Based on the search terms related to **public value and higher education,** 20,096 articles populated through the three search engines. After reviewing the article titles and abstracts, and eliminating articles per inclusion and exclusion criteria, 23 articles remained for full analysis. A second search focused on **public trust and higher education.** This search resulted in 20, 218 articles, of which 20 articles met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Third, 38,324 articles populated for the search terms related to **public or community return**

on investment and higher education. From this search, 30 articles met the criteria for full analysis (see Figures 1-3, PRISMA for three constructs). The following section highlights the sub-themes that emerged within the themes of Trust, Value, and Return on Investment.

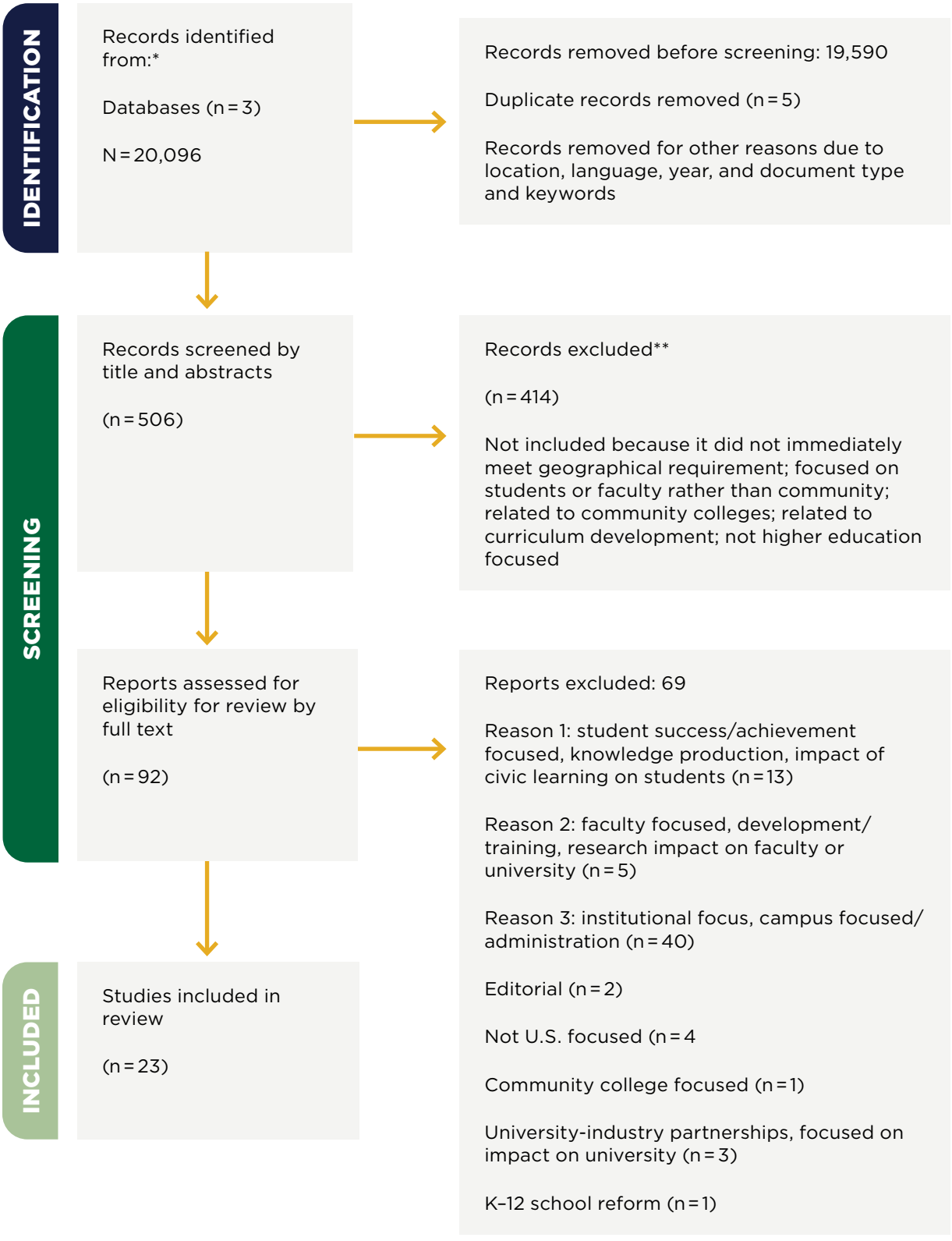
Thematic Analysis. Articles were synthesized thematically, based first on the larger themes of trust, value, and ROI, and then through recurring patterns related to barriers, strategies, and impacts. The iterative process created a broader set of sub-themes agreed on by all the researchers, based on in-depth discussions of the readings. Relevant data and key findings were compiled for all articles, and through continued discussions, the list of sub-themes was narrowed into a structured, concise set. Data was then extracted from each article to elicit its relationship to specific sub-themes.

Chapter 1. Figure 1. Public Trust and Higher Education



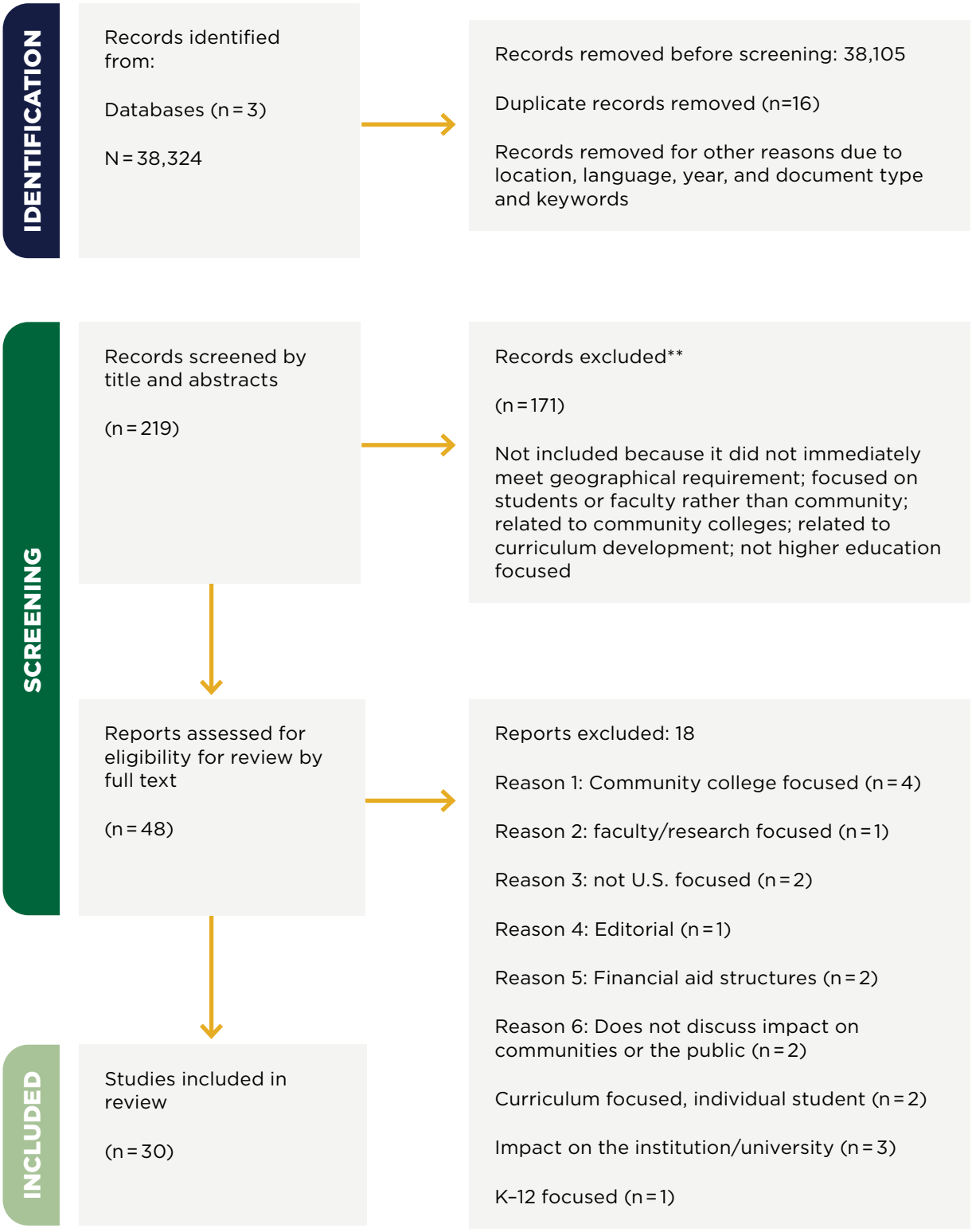
Diagrams were created using the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews.
Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

Chapter 1. Figure 2. Public Value and Higher Education



Diagrams were created using the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews.
Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

Chapter 1. Figure 3. Return on Investment and Higher Education



Diagrams were created using the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews.
Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

Chapter 1. Appendix B: Scheme

	Sub-Themes	Description/Definition of Sub-Theme	Key Findings	Recommended Action Steps Based on Findings/Key Strategies
Trust (n=20)	Place-based and Asset-focused Institutions (n=4)	Place-based and asset-focused institutions root their work in local context, honoring existing community strengths, and fostering mutual, long-term partnerships. Their approach shifts higher education from being seen as an isolated system to one that is responsive, embedded, and co-invested in the well-being of the region it serves.[18, 36, 54]	Place-based and asset-focused institutions are prioritizing authentic relationship building and long-term investments in relational trust, engaging communities as co-designers rather than focusing on top-down interventions.[18, 36]	University boundary spanners can enhance higher education community engagement by centering beneficiaries' needs in collaboration efforts. Effective institutions are partnering with communities in decision-making, recognizing and valuing local needs and knowledge.[54] Universities are incorporating Place-Based Education (PBE) models that value a student's local environment, culture, and community.[15] Anchor institutions as place-based organizations that have long-term commitments to their local communities, serve as lead agents in projects, focusing on community and regional needs such as education, health, and economic development efforts.[36]
	Educational Leadership (n=6)	Public trust (or mistrust) with universities often stems from perceived opaqueness in decision-making processes, particularly concerning funding, crisis management, and institutional priorities.[24, 27, 34, 51, 68, 71]	Universities can create and reinforce a culture focused on shared values, consensus-building, and meaningful dialogue instead of strict adherence to rigid policies and partisan agenda.[34, 51, 68, 71] Sustainable partnership strategies address divergent stakeholder perspectives explicitly, acknowledging community priorities Building trust with communities requires consistent engagement, transparency, and shared decision-making.[24]	Moving toward more horizontal, empowered, organic structures with flexibility, and ethical responsiveness.[51] Communication improvements and attention to collaborations that engage communities in policymaking are creating avenues for new relationships. Universities that publicly share and create climate survey results, research findings, and campus policy actions show a commitment to accountability, especially when the interactions are seen as authentic. Institutions that proactively address community needs and take concrete actions that include community input, ultimately strengthen trust.[27, 34, 68]
	Anchored in Evidence (n=7)	Public trust in higher education's expertise has been declining, in part due to shifts in how information is obtained (e.g., social media) and perceived elitism in academia.[42] Further, there is a growing disconnect between academic research and practical applications that address the needs of students and local communities, rather than appearing to act in self-interest.[48, 66]	Public engagement with academic research can be limited when universities struggle to balance access with intellectual property. Universities need to rethink how they communicate expertise and **advance open science and knowledge sharing,** as well as focusing on long term relationships and the mutual benefits of research.[7, 28, 32, 62, 66]	Expanding open access to data and research fosters greater public involvement in university research.[28] Moving away from project-based research toward long-term partnerships creates an opening for sustained practical applications but helps the public see scientists and academics in greater confidence.[7, 62] Additionally, translational research integrates both university and community perspectives, moving beyond traditional models of research that often prioritize institutional goals over community impact. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, this approach enhances the relevance, usability, and societal impact of research outcomes.[32, 66]

	Sub-Themes	Description/Definition of Sub-Theme	Key Findings	Recommended Action Steps Based on Findings/Key Strategies
Trust (n=20)	Alumni as Bridges (n=3)	Universities increasingly rely on alumni donations, making trust essential for institutional financial sustainability.[20, 29, 43]	Institutions proactively cultivate alumni trust by ensuring transparency in financial practices, explicitly demonstrating how donations are utilized. Tailored strategies to build trust with alumni from **marginalized groups** are critical due to varying trust levels across socio-demographic identities.[20, 29, 43]	Engagement requires intentional efforts by advancement staff to foster authentic and trusting relationships and address past experiences of exclusion. Acknowledging experiences and ways of knowing alumni's connections to their alma mater enhances the idea of personal investment which ultimately influences philanthropy and volunteering.[29] Universities should emphasize consistent, transparent, and ethical practices to maintain and enhance alumni trust and engagement over time.[20, 29]
Value (n=23)	Economic Development (n=3)	Universities are seen as engines of economic growth, particularly in rural and underserved regions.[1, 26, 61]	Higher education institutions, employers, and communities are collaborating to address regional workforce development challenges, strengthening talent pipelines and retaining young professionals.[1, 26]	Land grant universities are focusing on entrepreneurship, industry partnerships, and training, while business schools are evolving to tie community business needs to university curricula and training.[1, 26, 61]
	Social Equity (n=5)	Higher education institutions are valued for their efforts in enhancing community engagement and addressing social inequities.[37]	Communities value higher education not just as an economic tool but also as a means of social mobility and cultural inclusion. Mutual benefit clearly motivates partnerships, as communities seek access to university expertise and resources, while universities seek opportunities for real-world impact.[37]	Universities are working with community voices to create community relevant programming that focuses on college attainment and retention.[37, 39, 55] Additionally, providing information and aid to parents and families allows students to make decisions about pursing college education based on their own values and support systems.[9, 13]
	Access to Resources (n=4)	Education deserts and lack of access to university resources undermines the value of higher education, especially in rural and underserved areas.[53]	Perceptions of value are shaped by accessibility as well as broader cultural factors. Access to resources and locally relevant opportunities such as lifelong learning and continuing education extends the knowledge generated at universities into their communities.[53, 62, 65]	Access to various learning opportunities improves community satisfaction, while continuing education programs contribute significantly to adult learning, economic innovation, and community well-being, benefiting a diversified population.[45, 53, 62]

	Sub-Themes	Description/Definition of Sub-Theme	Key Findings	Recommended Action Steps Based on Findings/Key Strategies
Value (n=23)	Institutional Identity (n=4)	The perception of higher education is also shaped by how universities engage with communities on pressing social issues that influence institutional culture and ultimately drive community loyalty to the institution.[5]	Universities actively cultivate value through their alignment with local communities, which creates stronger engagement.[5, 44, 69]	Institutions with strong and clear public engagement strategies are more likely to receive higher levels of alumni donations, student enrollment, and external funding. Universities that clearly define their mission and communicate their societal contributions tend to maintain stronger ties with the public. [5, 44, 69] By developing strong, long-term partnerships with their regions, universities can help build innovation economies, support community growth, and enhance their public value.[69] Facilitating their role as places of mediation and civic engagement provides universities an opportunity to build on aspects of societal value.[11]
	Institutional Responsibility (n=7)	Institutions of higher education are increasingly serving as co-leaders in sustainability and social responsibility, which directly influences public perception and institutional value.[12, 72]	Higher education plays a central role in sustainable development through research, education, and community engagement. Their influence extends to economic, social, and environmental aspects of the regions where they operate.[24] Engagement by universities requires connecting efforts through formal networks of stakeholders, curricula and research, and locally relevant initiatives.[10, 23, 24, 56]	Institutions are aligning their operations with community values show a commitment to institutional responsibility in the context of community engagement. This helps universities recognize partnership barriers and opportunities that can foster collaboration toward shared long-term goals. An institution-wide analyses may strengthen community-engaged commitment and policy changes necessary to move beyond isolated projects. Value based initiatives strengthen institutional social responsibility and creates value that reinforce institutional accountability and credibility.[10, 23, 24, 54, 56]
ROI (n=30)	Economic ROI (n=8)	The rising student loan debt crisis has intensified scrutiny over the cost-benefit balance of higher education; thus, higher education is on overdrive to ensure inputs create positive outputs for stakeholders.[4, 58, 70]	Higher education remains a good investment, but institutional differences create major variations in ROI.58 Universities should balance growth with quality, ensuring that expansion does not compromise student financial outcomes. Education provides both private and social returns, making it a crucial area for public investment.[31] Colleges influence economic mobility not just through education but also through connections to labor markets. A strong connection between education and workforce success will ensure that public investments in higher education yield long-term economic and social benefits.[17, 49, 70]	Public investment in education should focus not only on access but also on completion and long-term workforce alignment.[31, 49] Strategic policies that support degree completion maximize long-term outcomes (i.e. Pell Grants).[60] Migration patterns significantly affect economic returns on investment. States that retain college graduates benefit more from their investments, underscoring the need to align community and state educational and workforce strategies.[14, 17]

	Sub-Themes	Description/Definition of Sub-Theme	Key Findings	Recommended Action Steps Based on Findings/Key Strategies
ROI (n=30)	Social Mobility (n=7)	Education delivers broad economic, social, and nonmarket benefits that justify strong public investment, particularly when considering its role in advancing and strengthening democratic governance.[46]	Education is underfunded relative to its true social value. Public financing of education is necessary to achieve economic efficiency, social stability, and equitable access; public education financing should prioritize accessibility and quality. Reduced income inequality and increases in social mobility strengthens democratic governance.[46] ROI of higher education for women and at Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), including Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) provide significant economic, social, and cultural benefits, but they remain underfunded compared to other higher education institutions.[2, 6, 12, 30, 38, 59]	Governments should communicate education's full benefits to ensure public support for sustained investment. Education is not just a private good but a social investment with broad economic, cultural, and societal benefits.[16, 46] Institutions must continue to work with policymakers to recognize the full range of nonmarket benefits when deciding education funding levels.[46]

	Sub-Themes	Description/Definition of Sub-Theme	Key Findings	Recommended Action Steps Based on Findings/Key Strategies
ROI (n=30)	Human and Social Capital (n=10)	Many communities face economic decline, social disintegration, and environmental challenges. Investment in human capital (skills, abilities, and knowledge enhanced through education and training) and social capital (networks of relationships that foster improved socioeconomic outcomes) help strengthen higher education's value in communities.[47, 52, 57]	A strategic investment policy that integrates sustainable development, social capital, and community investment is essential for revitalizing distressed communities and achieving economic, social, and environmental improvements makes communities more resilient and prosperous.[47, 57] If families underestimate the true returns to education, their decisions reinforce and perpetuate low investment in schooling. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle (or equilibrium) of low education and low economic growth. Providing accurate information about returns to education can help shift individuals' beliefs and encourage more investment from communities in higher education schooling.[8, 22] Academic institutions play a pivotal role in ROI by aligning training programs with national and regional needs to improve workforce outcomes.[3]	Socially Responsible Investment (SRI) and Community Investment (funding local projects through dedicated financial institutions) provide capital for redevelopment while ensuring financial returns. Investing in community-based institutions can generate both economic returns and significant social benefits. A new framework for evaluating education investments includes both monetary and non-monetary benefits. Education should be viewed as an investment rather than a cost, given its high economic and social returns.[41, 47] Regional Public Universities (RPUs) measurement as anchor institutions are needed in relation to economic, social, and cultural benefits beyond individual financial returns.[52] Policymakers must consider whether their tax structures maximize the financial benefits of an educated workforce. Investments in higher education should be paired with policies that promote job creation in high-skill sectors. Higher education institutions that align programs with regional workforce needs (e.g., healthcare, advanced manufacturing, education) and ensure graduates fill local labor shortages and enhance productivity should be incentivized. New measures of labor markets served by colleges and assessments of how migration patterns affect economic mobility and public investment returns are necessary.[33] Remote education and remote employment programs can provide sustainable career opportunities for individuals living in isolated communities.[19] Higher education leaders should communicate the dual financial and civic value of liberal arts programs to policymakers and funders, ensuring their continued relevance in an evolving educational landscape.[67]

	Sub-Themes	Description/Definition of Sub-Theme	Key Findings	Recommended Action Steps Based on Findings/Key Strategies
ROI (n=30)	Knowledge Economy (n=5)	Balancing knowledge exchange with economic needs propels higher education into reshaping the role of universities, leading to complex tensions between academic ideals and economic imperatives. It places a strong emphasis on blending innovation, human capital, and intellectual property as contributors to economic and social impacts.[50]	Universities are undergoing institutional boundary work, where the lines between knowledge production, student learning, and public service are increasingly blurred by market-driven priorities.[50] Traditional business education and corporate training need to evolve into more collaborative and strategic learning partnerships.[21, 35] Universities serve as incubators for faculty and student-led ventures. These startups often remain in the region, creating jobs and attracting investment capital. Tech transfer catalyzes regional innovation ecosystems (e.g., biotech corridors, energy hubs) that attract businesses and skilled workers to communities.[35] Many university-patented technologies directly improve public outcomes. Through engaged research and open innovation models, universities co-develop technologies with local governments, nonprofits, or citizens building capacity and trust.[25]	Universities need to ensure that market forces do not erode the core values of higher education, such as intellectual freedom, civic engagement, and social responsibility.[50] Universities and businesses must work together to ensure education remains practical and strategic. The model challenges traditional models to become more adaptive, flexible, and aligned with industry needs, ensuring that education remains relevant and impactful in a rapidly evolving economy. Educonsulting is a framework designed to integrate higher education with organizations through strategic partnerships-the aim is to align academic research, teaching, and consulting with the needs of industries to create a sustainable competitive advantage.[21, 35] High power computing is a critical research infrastructure used for scientific discovery, faculty recruitment, student training, and research grant acquisition that should match community needs and strengthen ROI.[64] Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) programs along with entrepreneurship competitions must be a focus for universities and communities to facilitate the commercialization of university research that strengthens community and economic ROI.[25]

Chapter 2. References

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Chapter 3. Table 1 and Endnotes

Chapter 3. Table 1. National Organizations Interviewed

	Mission and Purpose	Year Founded	Membership Profile
Academy of Community Engagement Scholarship (ACES)	Provides expertise to policymakers, institutions, and communities to address complex societal issues through higher education engagement.	2012	Composed of inducted leaders in community engagement scholarship from academia and community sectors.
Advancing Research Impact in Society (ARIS)	Builds capacity, advances scholarship, and grows partnerships to enhance the societal impact of research. ARIS' core offerings include its Broader Impacts certifications, organizational capacity-building programs, enhancing impact scholarship, and its annual Broader Impacts Summit.	Founded in 2014 as the National Alliance for Broader Impacts; reorganized as ARIS in 2018	More than 1,800 international members, including researchers, engagement professionals, and institutions globally
Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement	Recognizes institutional commitment to community engagement through a rigorous self-study and peer review process.	2005	Open to U.S. higher education institutions; participation is voluntary and based on application. As of January 2024, 368 U.S. colleges and universities and 62 APLU member institutions hold this classification.
APLU Commission on Economic and Community Engagement (CECE)	Promotes economic and community development through public research universities. Hosts an annual summer meeting for APLU member institutions.	CECE is part of APLU (founded 1887)	Includes senior university leaders from APLU member institutions focused on economic and community engagement.
Campus Compact	A national organization dedicated to higher education civic and community engagement. Its aim is to empower colleges and universities to advance their academic and civic missions by partnering with communities. Hosts educational programming, annual conference, and awards program.	1985	A coalition of colleges and universities, primarily in the U.S. In certain states, colleges and universities join Campus Compact through a state or regional affiliate office.

Chapter 3. Table 1. National Organizations Interviewed

	Mission and Purpose	Year Founded	Membership Profile
Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU)	A membership organization that supports urban and metropolitan universities in addressing the unique challenges and opportunities of their communities. Hosts an annual conference and a peer-reviewed journal.	1989	More than 115 member institutions located in urban and metropolitan areas worldwide.
Engagement Scholarship Consortium (ESC)	Enhances community capacity through engaged scholarship, addressing societal challenges and creating sustainable, mutually beneficial outcomes. Hosts educational programming, an annual meeting, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Community Engagement Scholarship Awards, which recognize four regional finalists for APLU's C. Peter Magrath Community Engagement Scholarship Award.	Began in 2001 as an annual meeting; incorporated in 2011	Composed of higher education institutions and individuals committed to engagement scholarship.
Highly Integrative Basic and Responsive (HIBAR) Research Alliance	Volunteer-driven organization that promotes research that is both academically rigorous and socially responsive, bridging basic and applied research.	2017	Includes universities, research institutions, and individuals committed to integrative research approaches.
Imagining America	Advances publicly engaged scholarship, arts, and design in higher education to address pressing social issues. Hosts an annual gathering and regional convenings, provides educational programming, sponsors fellowships, and organizes research projects.	1999	A consortium of more than 100 higher education institutions and community organizations.
International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE)	Promotes the development and dissemination of research on service-learning and community engagement. Hosts an annual research conference, educational programming, annual awards program, and a peer-reviewed journal	2005	Open to scholars, practitioners, and students globally interested in service-learning research.
National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) Standing Committee on Advancing Science Communication	Provides guidance and fosters research to improve science communication practices and policies. Hosts conferences, symposia, workshops, and other gatherings; publishes proceedings and peer-reviewed consensus reports.	Committee established in 2017 under NASEM, which was founded in 1863	A standing committee of NASEM composed of experts in science communication, policy, and public engagement.

Chapter 3. Table 1. National Organizations Interviewed

	Mission and Purpose	Year Founded	Membership Profile
Promotion & Tenure—Innovation & Entrepreneurship (PTIE)	Supports the inclusion of innovation and entrepreneurship in promotion and tenure policies in higher education.	2018	Coalition of academic leaders, faculty, and institutions advocating for higher education policy reform.
The Pew Charitable Trusts— Scientific Advancement	Supports scientific research and evidence-based policy to address pressing global challenges. Leads the Impact Funders Forum (a global funder collaborative aimed at closing the gap between research and impact) and the Presidents and Chancellors Council on Public Impact Research.	Pew Trusts founded in 1948; Scientific Advancement program active since early 2000s	National foundation that collaborates with scientists, institutions, and policymakers globally.

ENDNOTES

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