



Bridging Social Divides in College Towns

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Higher education is now considered more essential to success than at any point in our nation's history. Yet as ever more young people enter colleges and universities, they often find themselves living in settings where they feel detached from the surrounding community and where tensions with long-term residents can lead to mutual distrust and negative blowups.

Divisions in college towns can inflict long-term harm. Because students usually attend college during a formative stage for civic attitudes, negative experiences in college communities can undercut future participation in American democracy. How can universities work with people in surrounding college towns to address the inevitable conflicts that happen when students and long-term residents live side by side? Finding constructive solutions matters not only for the affected communities, but also for the future civic engagement of college graduates.

College Town Troubles

Conflicts between universities and surrounding residents are neither new nor surprising. Some tensions are rooted in the fact that colleges and universities are usually non-profit institutions exempt from local property taxes, even though the surrounding municipalities have to support extra services and infrastructure to accommodate their institutions of higher education. The extra costs can be understandably irritating, especially if community taxpayers do not believe colleges provide offsetting tangible benefits to the larger community.

Beyond this fiscal divide, challenges arise from the contrasting lifestyles of long-term locals and transient students. With students regularly moving off-campus to rent houses or apartments in residential neighborhoods, long-term residents and public officials have to deal with an ever-changing array of young neighbors who live very different lives than most of them do. Complaints about raucous behavior, lack of respect, and degradation of housing may dominate the agendas of town meetings. Lack of regular contact and communication can leave community stakeholders and students with inaccurate, stereotypically negative opinions about one another.

Opportunities for Learning and Positive Engagement

But what if we were to view the diverse make-up of college towns not as a problem to be endured but as an opportunity? In Orono, the home of the University of Maine, students in Professor Glover's Engaged Policy Studies seminar spent the last academic year doing empirical research on underlying town-gown tensions, working in close collaboration with the Orono town planner and manager, the town council, and university administrators. This "service-learning" course gave students hands-on opportunities to do meaningful policy research about issues that matter in the local community, working collaboratively with community partners.

At the start of the seminar, Orono was debating a temporary moratorium on the conversion of single-family homes into student rentals. Also up for discussion was a possible "student home ordinance" to require rentals to students to remain a certain distance apart from one another. Proponents of this idea claimed that student renters were causing severe disruptions for long-term residents, with many Orono neighborhoods nearing a "tipping point" where their character would be so fundamentally changed that they would no longer be attractive to homebuyers.

To learn about the issues at stake – and identify possible solutions – seminar students devoted the academic year to surveying the attitudes of hundreds of students and town residents and conducting one-on-one interviews with university and community stakeholders. Their research findings reveal the importance of ongoing, two-way engagement between students and Orono residents and set the stage for constructive

municipal policies and university initiatives.

Probing the Town-Gown Divide

Student researchers found complexities in Orono life that have not been well understood and point toward more constructive solutions than proposals previously on the table.

- The idea that influxes of student renters lead to “tipping points” in neighborhoods proves to be problematic. In results from surveys and interviews, negative perceptions of student behavior are unrelated to whether residents live in neighborhoods with a high or low density of student renters. What is more, most residents report positive interactions with students.
- Many negative behaviors attributed to students may actually be due to failures in the upkeep of property that are the responsibility of landlords.
- Students moving into the community often feel ill-prepared to sign leases and lack basic understandings of their rights and obligations as tenants. Guidance they hope to get from the university is often missing or inadequate – which suggests an obvious area for improvement.
- Most Orono residents do not know whom to contact at the university about problems with student neighbors, and thus turn to the police by default. Residents and students seem unaware that the university's code for proper student conduct applies off as well as on campus.
- Both residents and students lament a paucity of opportunities for neighborly communication and express support for social events and “neighborhood ambassador” programs that could build mutual understanding and head off problems proactively.

Activating Students to Bridge Social Divides

As we have discovered, engaged students who feel passionately about community issues can advance understanding of town-gown issues and provide communities like Orono with openings to turn challenges into improvements. To be sure, projects such as ours require thoughtful and willing students, faculty, and community partners. Service-learning is demanding and may not work for everyone or to address every issue. But it can make an immediate difference for a university community, while also enriching student preparation for engaged citizenship in later life. As other college towns try to beat back apathy and distrust, we believe our seminar shows one constructive way forward.

Research and data for this brief were drawn from “Confronting the Challenges of Studentification in Residential Orono Neighborhoods,” a University of Maine collaborative project with the town of Orono, 2014-15.