

Policy Brief: Susquehanna University Community Liaisons

Overview

After conducting 115 interviews with the residents of Selinsgrove and hosting a community forum to discuss the issues between Susquehanna University and the town of Selinsgrove, the apparent source of concerns that the residents of Selinsgrove described is the lack of communication between SU and the town. Many residents, especially business owners are frustrated over not knowing what events are happening on Susquehanna's campus that are open to the public. The residents are also largely unaware of all the great things that SU already does for the community, such as the countless volunteer hours completed by SU students each semester. Residents and business owners want more information about campus activities and student accomplishments so that they feel as though they are given adequate opportunity to be a part of the SU community. However, the lack of communication is not one-sided. Susquehanna University students would also like to know more about the town of Selinsgrove. By seeking out more feedback about the wants and needs of local businesses and residents, Susquehanna University will be able to contribute more to the Selinsgrove community and build a stronger relationship with the borough. Another ideal outcome is for this improvement of communication to increase the interest SU students have in the downtown businesses.

There is a lot to be gained by improving communication between Susquehanna University and Selinsgrove. There are Selinsgrove residents who have a bad perception of Susquehanna because the campus seems closed off from the town. This could be fixed if SU reached out to the community more often to show that it is a welcoming and open campus. The residents of Selinsgrove want to receive information about free events and activities that SU has to offer. Students would also benefit from better advertisement of Selinsgrove's events. Local businesses could gain more direct contact with SU students and could learn how to better suit the desires of college students, whether that be through changes to store hours, prices, or products. Having a continuous line of communication would help to create volunteer opportunities and establish student internships with local businesses.

The lack of communication between the town of Selinsgrove and Susquehanna University should not be ignored because this is an area for improvement that will consequently address a lot of the smaller issues that have been caused by this disconnect. In order to improve the SU-Selinsgrove relationship, a group of SU student workers, known as "Susquehanna University Community Liaisons" (SUCL), will serve as a single point of contact for local community members to inform them of campus events, encourage local businesses to better market themselves to students, attend community forums, assist community partners in search of volunteers, and advertise local activities and events to students.

Background

Susquehanna University and the Selinsgrove residents feel there is a lack of communication from both institutions. This issue became noticeable when SU administration chose to no longer allow off campus housing. Susquehanna University saw this as a positive way to keep their community happy and reduce conflict between students and residents. However, business owners and residents noticed once the students left the downtown area, there

was a downfall in student foot traffic in their businesses, as well as less knowledge of university activities. Since then Susquehanna University has further frustrated local businesses by no longer creating market street scavenger hunts for first year students which would introduce them to our town and promote local business. This loss of student revenue would be felt by business owners since the average Selinsgrove resident makes between \$50,000-\$75,000 with a larger majority's income being much lower than the average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In addition, many small business owners felt they lacked information on events occurring on campus that would be beneficial to them. In previous years they had received calendars detailing events or had a contact person they could call. These issues were repeatedly brought forth in the interviews with residents and at the community forum that students sat in on.

Likewise, many residents have no idea what the university or students do to benefit their town. The most common misrepresentation is that the university does nothing to financially benefit the town. SU pays taxes on its newer buildings and donates yearly financial gifts to the town, police department, fire department and other local resources. In addition, according to our interviews, 41.8% of residents could not name an organization that Susquehanna students volunteer at; when in fact Susquehanna University students provide 25,000 hours of community service in the local area. This number is substantial since more than half of residents interviewed revealed that they themselves are not involved with any volunteer organizations. SU's commitment to their third pillar, "serve," is so strong that it is nationally recognized. In 2016, Susquehanna's Make A Difference Day (MADD) was one of eleven programs in the US to receive a national recognition for a commitment to service. The prize included a grant of \$10,000 for future service events (Susquehanna, 2019).

There is now a push to remove the old "town and gown" structure and implement a more open and cohesive community. This would make residents feel comfortable coming onto campus for events and students would be more willing to explore the downtown. The way in which this goal can be reached is through a stronger communication channel.

Recommendation

In order to address the problem of the lack of communication between Susquehanna University and the Selinsgrove community, our recommendation involves creating a university program called the Susquehanna University Community Liaisons, also known by the nifty acronym: "SUCL." SUCL would incorporate Susquehanna University paid student interns, who will mainly work to collect and relay information in the community back to the university to improve communication channels. Ideally, the Susquehanna University Community Liaisons will be a part of the David '69 and Sharon Johnson Center for Civic Engagement (JCCE), which partners with local and regional organizations that focus on community service, social and global justice, and sustainability. This center is able to provide support for these organizations by getting them in contact with Susquehanna University students that are willing to participate in one-time volunteer opportunities, short-term projects or long-term work. JCCE's work in the community makes its office a prime candidate to adopt the SUCL program, since they will directly benefit from the information that the liaisons will gather.

One huge issue that has hampered the communication between Susquehanna University and the Selinsgrove townsfolk is that many people do not know much about the events that are

taking place on campus and are generally unaware of the contributions that the university makes in the community. Therefore, one assignment for SUCL will be to attend Selinsgrove community and business meetings and events as representatives of Susquehanna University. Some community meeting examples include borough meetings, “Assembly Required” meetings and local initiatives, such as Selinsgrove Projects, Inc. At these meetings, the liaisons would take notes on the issues that the townsfolk bring up and relay them back to Susquehanna University, so that university staff can focus their efforts in the community more accurately and efficiently. Therefore, during these community meetings, they will also provide basic information about Susquehanna University’s community services that the townsfolk may not be aware of, which might help resolve their issues. Not only will the presence of the liaisons at these community meetings enhance the communication between Selinsgrove citizens and the university, but it also shows that Susquehanna University and the student body are willing to be a part of the community.

Some other common issues that were brought up by Selinsgrove business owners is the lack of knowledge about campus events, and that Susquehanna University students don’t frequent the many local stores and restaurants in town. Therefore, the liaisons will also attend the monthly local business owners’ meetings that are held in Selinsgrove by the Chamber of Commerce, in order to form better relationships with them. During these meetings, the liaisons will update them about a variety of Susquehanna University information, such as on-campus events. This way, local businesses can possibly sponsor upcoming events, which will improve their involvement in the university. The liaisons should also collect information about what local businesses are trying to do to increase student traffic downtown, in order to assist the creation of solutions that both benefit the university and community. Some solutions may include student discounts in their stores and restaurants, using flex dollars in downtown businesses, etc. Furthermore, if certain businesses need interns or student workers, the liaisons can take note and put them in contact with the appropriate services offered at Susquehanna University.

In addition to attending local meetings in person, the Susquehanna University Community Liaison program also has other tasks that can be done to enhance to communication between the university and the Selinsgrove community. From the Johnson Center for Civic Engagement office, SUCL will take calls and emails from community members, who may have not attended local meetings, and redirect their requests to the relevant representatives. For example, if a local organization requests student volunteers or interns, the liaisons will be able to direct them to a specific university department that suits their needs. SUCL will also inform the Selinsgrove community about upcoming university events on a broader scale through a variety of channels, such as social media, emails, printed out pamphlets, etc. Furthermore, it will also communicate local activities and events to the campus community through social media. This way both parties will be aware of each other’s events, which increases the likelihood that residents and students will actually attend them.

From a managerial standpoint, a possible staff member from the Johnson Center for Civic Engagement, who can serve as the director of the SUCL program, is coordinator Miranda Carrasquillo. Carrasquillo would organize the overall activities of the student liaisons, such as the events they should attend and determining what types of partnerships they should form with local organizations and businesses. She would be tasked with creating training programs that

teach SUCL student interns about how to interact with the Selinsgrove community, as well as the basic contributions that the university has done for the community and the services that are available, so that they can relay that information to the community. Next in the chain of command would be a Student Manager, who would assist Carrasquillo in organizing operational management tasks. Some tasks include executing training programs, creating work schedules that detail which student liaison has a certain task, and collecting information from the liaisons. Finally, the third part is the liaison team, which would work in the field and go to local community meetings to collect and relay information, which will be relayed back to Susquehanna University. Preferably this liaison team would be comprised of 3-6 interns, who would be paid, so that more students are motivated to apply. Some of the preferred majors for this team are business related, like Communications, Public Relations, Marketing, Business Administration, etc. Other majors that can be considered are Anthropology and Psychology, since they involve interacting and collecting information from people.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

The benefit derived from this project comes from the idea of the Community Liaison program being used as a focused communication program. The value of quality communication does not have a dollar amount usually tied to it, but the main affordance is time and frustration avoidance. With a large multidepartment institution such as Susquehanna University, there is much to gain from having a well-organized flow of communication within itself and within the town of Selinsgrove that it operates in. Well received communication also serves as one of the best forms of advertising when it comes to promoting events and activities being promoted by the university. Currently there are few events through the school that reach or even target the area around the school and that serves as a widely untapped market for events that rely on sponsorship, patronage, and volunteers. In a similar vein, the borough of Selinsgrove has events and programs that rely on the same resources of people in order to be successful and a strengthened partnership between town and gown would result in a much larger pool of talented bodies and creative minds. This diversification of talent also only serves to benefit both parties as they bring differing perspectives and skills to the table that would allow both the school to tackle and take on projects, they are currently unable to due to numbers and the same goes for the Selinsgrove community. This increased level of cooperation also greatly benefits the students as it allows local businesses to better target the student demographic with deals that get them active as patrons. The students as consumers would benefit greatly to deals catered to their price ranges and demands and in turn have better connections to the area and the school. Communication programs such as these have a majority of the value in the lasting impression that stays in people's minds. The greater than average personal connection that Susquehanna University students feel to their campus and this area is something to be admired and the best way to strengthen that is to help them build roots here that can help them grow to appreciate all that this area has to offer.

In order for this program to start up and be successful it will require both time and resources. First and foremost, there is the issue of the students of this university being in the area for only a fraction of the year and the town is here indefinitely. For something like this to take hold it has to be an ever-felt presence in some way that does not make the town feel like the

university is only interested in the area when its students are in term because the school is also here indefinitely. For this reason, the committee is going to require a full-time staffer to both look over the work of the students that would staff the program and conduct its operation in some capacity during the summer and winter seasons. This staffer would obviously require employment through the university if they were not already a school employee. Some other people that would be added to the university's payroll would be the students that make up the liaison team. These students, like other student employees, would require only a humble student wage through the school that can be supplemented through federal work study programs and other such grants and allowances. These employment costs make up the majority of monetary costs that would go into a project such as this; many of the other requirements would be of the students, staffer's, and individual program directors time and planning skills. Most of the required materials that relate to the direct operations of a program like this are already in the school's resource pool such as, computer hardware and software that are able to process and send resources and office space with infrastructure that allows for creative projects to flourish and benefit from the other department's services.

Sources

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