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UNIVERSITIES BEYOND CAMPUS: CREATING LASTING IMPACT THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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When we think of a university, we think of lecture halls, libraries, laboratories, and students moving from one class to another. But a university cannot be defined by its buildings. Its impact must reach beyond the campus gates. It is found in a school where students are exposed to new opportunities. You can feel it in a community when the residents are learning new things. It can be a training ground for an entrepreneur learning how to run a small business. It can help a family make smarter financial decisions. That is the deeper meaning of community engagement.

Universities provide society with the knowledge it always needs. Lecturers have expertise. Researchers invent new ideas. Students bring energy and creativity. Professional staff bring organisational capacity. Linking these resources to real community needs transforms education into a meaningful endeavour beyond mere academic exercises. It is a force driving the development of society. UNESCO recognises community engagement and social responsibility as key drivers of the contribution of higher education to lifelong learning. It highlights the crucial role played by higher education institutions in community engagement and regional and local development. That means the university's duty doesn't end when a student leaves the classroom. Sometimes the most meaningful learning begins when you leave the classroom.



Enrol in a basic financial literacy program. Budgeting may appear to be a straightforward concept for a college student. But for a young person getting his first pay cheque, for a family trying to make ends meet, or for a small business owner struggling with cash flow, knowing basic financial principles can make a huge difference. The same is true for online literacy, entrepreneurship, sustainability, leadership and a host of other areas. When the knowledge in the university is translated into something people can understand and use, it becomes powerful. This is why students should not be seen merely as participants in community programs. They are to be considered partners in creating impact.

When students go into communities, they see realities that are not always in textbooks. They meet people who have had different experiences. Their problems are not easily solved. They learn to listen before they offer solutions and learn that good community work requires patience, empathy and

respect. In this way, students gain qualities that will be useful to them throughout their professional lives. A student teacher of financial literacy can become a better communicator. Students can learn to be leaders by working with kids. When a student participates in an environmental project, he may develop a stronger sense of responsibility. A group working with a community entrepreneur may find theory much more meaningful as they see its real-life consequences. Community engagement is thus a two-way learning process. The university teaches knowledge. Experience given by the community. They both learn.

But meaningful engagement is more than just organising an event, taking photos, and moving on. A successful community program should start with a simple question, "What does the community actually want?" The answer may not be the one the university wants to hear. That's why listening is essential. Universities should design programs 'with' communities, rather than designing programs 'for' communities. Community members should have a voice in what the problems are, help develop solutions, and help evaluate the results. This is a transition from charity to partnership. It also increases the sustainability of projects. A one-day program can create a flash of enthusiasm. An ongoing partnership makes for sustainable change.

Universities can partner with schools, industry, non-governmental organisations, local authorities and community leaders to create initiatives that meet real needs. Each partner has different strengths. The university offers knowledge. Industry provides practical experience and resources. Community organisations contain local knowledge. Students bring enthusiasm and lots of creativity. Working together, they can accomplish far more than any one organization could on its own. It also poses another important question: "How should universities measure community impact?" Maybe better questions are, 'Did the participants learn anything useful?', 'Did they change their behaviour?', 'Did they get more confident?', 'Did a small business get better?', and 'Did the students become more socially responsible?'. These outcomes are more difficult to measure, but they truly represent the meaning of impact.



Similarly, in its recent work on the transformation of higher education, UNESCO stresses the role of universities in responding to complex societal challenges through teaching, research and engagement with society. In the final analysis, the university of the future ought not to be an institution divorced from society. It must be part of society. Its research must be responsive to real-world challenges. Its students should have the opportunity to serve and learn in communities. The lecturers should be able to spread knowledge beyond the academic circles. Its partnerships should benefit both sides with opportunities for growth. When knowledge is outside the classroom, education is a different matter. A lecture turns into a conversation. A student turns into a contributor. A community member joins as a partner. And a university is more than a place of learning; it is a catalyst for positive change.

Higher education is therefore not only measured by examination results, graduation statistics or publications in research. It is also in the lives it touches with its knowledge. Because when education goes beyond the gates of the campus, everyone gets a chance to learn. And when everyone can learn, society has the opportunity to grow.