

INTEGRATING ENGAGEMENT ACROSS ALL WE DO

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

JUNE 2023

BACKGROUND

As the state's 1862 land-grant university, Kansas State University has historically excelled in engaging its many internal and external stakeholders – including the engagement work taking place in every college daily, performed by thousands of faculty and staff across the institution, the statewide Kansas State Research and Extension network, and the work carried out by K-State's Office of Engagement, which connects Kansans and communities to the university's resources and expertise. K-State's mission-driven imperative for service and engagement represents a distinct differentiating factor relative to other higher education institutions in the state, which has helped to catalyze the growth and impact of a litany of engagement initiatives taking place at all levels of the university. It has also helped inform K-State receiving the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification – which, in 2010, helped position the university as one of only 61 public institutions to receive this engaged institution designation.

However, data and stakeholder input demonstrate that despite these many successful practices and acknowledgements of the university's commitment to engagement, there are significant opportunities for K-State to elevate its impact through service and engagement in a more integrated and aligned way. Oftentimes, internal stakeholders such as faculty, staff, or students approach engagement differently than their peers, including those in their same college or unit. This challenges the institution's ability to surface and leverage individual best practices for the betterment of the whole, while inconsistent or unequal approaches can yield inconsistent or unequal experiences among engagement recipients.

The issues are not due to a lack of ideas. The complex and decentralized nature of the institution leads to a scattered approach to resourcing these ideas or elevating them in a structured, coordinated way, where many internal stakeholders simply may not know where to start in advancing their idea or what the university's expectation is of them when it comes to service and engagement.

K-State has a clear opportunity to redefine, amplify, and integrate the university's approach to engagement, as well as the many ways in which the university effectively engages Kansans and communities and creates meaningful experiences for all those it serves. There are also numerous opportunities to engage with communities and partners beyond state lines that bring new investments and knowledge to Kansas, expand K-State's notoriety and presence nationally and internationally, and benefit the institution in other very tangible ways relative to student enrollment, research impact, and overall economic impact.

This becomes even more crucial in an environment where interest in higher education is notably declining, and many institutions are struggling to both generate and communicate a value proposition that counterbalances these broad trends.

Land-grant universities like K-State are arguably best positioned to change how people think and feel about higher education and present the most compelling case for the future of higher education, leaning aggressively into engaged research, engaged teaching, and engaged service as true and co-equal areas of focus that operate in close coordination with one another. This integrated focus will enable K-State to be holistic and highly impactful in all it does to serve others, while innovating and transforming historical models or approaches that must continually adapt to meet the ever-changing needs of the state, nation, and world – which, if done well, will pave the way for additional public support, interest, and funding to follow.

PROCESS

A task force comprising some of the university's leading voices and diverse perspectives was assembled to better understand the current state of engagement across the institution and identify opportunities to integrate engagement more fully across all facets of K-State.

TASK FORCE MEMBERS

- Jaime Menon, Extension State Leader for Community Vitality and Co-Coordinator of Kansas PRIDE, K-State Research & Extension, Task Force Co-Chair
- Tim Steffensmeier, Professor and Director, Office of Engagement, Mary Lynn and Warren Staley School of Leadership, Task Force Co-Chair
- Jason Bergtold, Professor, Agricultural Economics, College of Agriculture
- Adelaide Easter, Junior, Agricultural Economics, College of Agriculture
- Todd Gabbard, Associate Professor, Graduate Program Director and Associate Head, Architecture, College of Architecture, Planning & Design
- Karen Goos, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management, Office of Enrollment Management, Office of the Provost
- Vickie James, Council Coordinator, The Food and Farm Council of Riley County and the City of Manhattan, Kansas, K-State Alumni
- Katie Kingery-Page, Professor and Associate Dean of Students and Academic Services, College of Architecture, Planning & Design
- Mary Kohn, Professor, English, and Director, Chapman Center for Rural Studies, College of Arts & Sciences
- Kenny Lannou, Executive Associate Athletic Director for Communications, K-State Athletics
- Ron Orchard, Doctoral Student Leadership Communication, and Clinical Post Doc, College of Veterinary Medicine
- Cade Rensink, Professor, K-State Research & Extension, District Extension Officer, Central Kansas District-Salina
- Jeff Sheldon, Associate Director, Sunderland Foundation Innovation Lab, K-State Libraries
- Marshall Stewart, Senior Vice President for Executive Affairs, University Engagement, and Partnerships, and Chief of Staff, Office of the President
- Lisa Tatonetti, Professor, English, College of Arts & Sciences
- Jeff Tucker, Executive Director, Technology Development Institute, Carl R. Ice College of Engineering
- Amber Vennum, Associate Professor, Applied Human Sciences, College of Health & Human Sciences
- Susan Metzger, Associate Director for Agriculture and Extension and Director of KCARE, College of Agriculture, ex-officio

This task force met four times from February to April 2023, participating in extensive and in-depth discussions, reviewing data, analyzing best practices, defining the ideal future state for K-State, and developing ideas for bridging the gap between the university's current and future state.

The following findings and recommendations represent a summary of this task force's work, submitted for the university's consideration as key inputs to K-State's future through its next strategic plan.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

ESTABLISH CLEAR AND CONSISTENT UNIVERSITY POSITION ON ENGAGEMENT

K-State has long emphasized and prioritized engagement across the institution, leading to numerous successes and untold community impact. It now has an opportunity to bring these impacts together as not only examples, but expectations the university has for all faculty, staff, and students in how they engage with one another and the world around K-State. This starts with clearly defining and communicating the university's position on engagement as a coequal area of focus to research and teaching, where all internal stakeholders see the value and imperative to participate in engagement activities. K-State must also be intentional about defining engagement both conceptually and practically, as well as connecting the university's many lanes or models of engagement to this shared definition and expectation. With this clarity in hand, K-State can more intentionally work with faculty, staff, and students to elevate their work and maximize the meaningful impact they collectively have and experiences they share with all those the university serves and supports.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

SHORT-TERM (0-3 YEARS)

- Create and define a shared university definition for the spectrum of engagement activities across the university's land-grant mission
- Develop university-wide engagement principles focused on impact and experiences
- Map and inventory engagement assets across the university and other Kansas Board of Regents institutions
- Establish a comprehensive system to track, support, and coordinate engagement across the university and KSRE
- Create communications materials underscoring the university's posture and definition for engagement and incorporate into all new faculty, staff, KSRE, and student training and provide employees with incentives to utilize the training
- Establish robust communications strategy and structure for surveying and communicating K-State's engagement activities
- Embed engagement definition into faculty handbook and all other university materials or policies involving engagement
- Recognize and reward engaged research, teaching, and service as components of faculty and staff evaluations
- Establish consistent university-wide approach to coordinated engagement placemaking (i.e., leveraging events and gatherings to benefit colleges, units, and affiliates)
- Foster a culture of interdisciplinary engagement to reinforce that engagement is valuable and provide rewards to support current and new activities

LONGER-TERM (4-7+ YEARS)

- Develop clear pathways and expectations for student participation in engagement activities
- Establish interdisciplinary innovation funding pool with funds for engagement grants
- Organize collaborative, transdisciplinary engagement groups among colleges to facilitate knowledge sharing and identify best practices for engagement-focused curriculum design
- Establish central, physical space and purpose-driven facility for interacting with the community, engaging in applied work, and embracing interdisciplinary engagement activities
- Work with other Kansas educational institutions (e.g., K-12 schools, community colleges, technical schools, and four-year universities) to develop engagement-oriented curriculum with understood transfer capabilities
- Develop and resource innovation center to serve as an annual outreach cohort that includes faculty, staff, and KSRE serving as “engagement fellows” within the center
- Establish centers as major cross-college, transdisciplinary collaborations founded on the integration of service, education, research, and economic development

FULLY INTEGRATE ENGAGEMENT ACROSS ALL FACETS OF THE UNIVERSITY

One of the challenges to K-State maximizing its output and impact in engagement inherently involves the university’s highly decentralized structure. This can generate benefits in some areas but challenge others, particularly when a coordinated approach to expertise pooling, resource utilization, and knowledge transfer is necessary to generate impactful, meaningful end-user experiences. This is particularly true at the intersection of engagement and education, where physical proximity to higher education is often one of the greatest barriers to enrollment and where a distinct focus on proactive engagement and deploying resources beyond the university’s traditional campuses can serve as an important recruitment and retention strategy for both traditional and non-traditional students alike, in addition to engagement and service.

The university must leverage existing capacity, successes, and structures to internally facilitate stronger integration of engagement practices across the institution, and externally, establish a more coordinated, visible, and resourced approach to engagement across the institution. That is not to suggest one office or college should be the sole conduit for engaging with external partners. Instead, K-State must identify the structure and ways it can most effectively communicate the university’s shared mandate and expectation for engagement, align approaches and activities across colleges and units, and distribute or coordinate resources in a manner that benefits both the broader university and state of Kansas. In turn, all colleges and units must be willing and active partners in the university’s coordinated engagement activities, recognizing the whole of K-State engagement is truly greater than the sum of its parts.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

SHORT-TERM (0-3 YEARS)

- Re-envision and establish the Office of Engagement as the university’s central unit for coordinating engagement activities
- Establish university-wide committee to serve as a clearinghouse for engagement activities across the university, with representation from colleges, units, departments, programs, KSRE, Athletics, the Alumni Association, the KSU Foundation, and any unit or function where engagement or outreach is part of their core mission
- Identify and place engagement ambassadors in each college to disseminate resources and coordinate across colleges

- Hold annual orientation and provide college-specific training for faculty and staff involving university engagement
- Expand internal and external access to engagement projects, partners, and areas of faculty and staff expertise
- Formalize network of faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community partners interested in participating in engagement activities
- Fully integrate K-State 105 into university engagement activities and programs

LONGER-TERM (4-7+ YEARS)

- Develop long-term funding model and structure for the Office of Engagement and college-level engagement resources
- Create more formal and structured scholarly engagement connections with K-State 105 and KSRE
- Design a university engagement training academy for faculty, staff, and community partners in partnership with the Teaching and Learning Center
- Coordinate with colleges, units, and KSRE to develop “engagement parks” and experiment stations for connecting faculty, staff, and units with the surrounding counties and community (university/KSRE/community conduit)
- Invest in and support communities of practice
- Emphasize engagement best practices knowledge sharing through university-wide conferences, workshops, and other measures
- Establish off-campus engagement satellite locations to better meet and engage community partners “where they are”

TRANSFORM AND ELEVATE K-STATE’S COMMUNITY, ECONOMIC, AND TRIBAL CONNECTIONS AND IMPACT ACROSS ALL 105 COUNTIES

As the state’s 1862 land-grant university, K-State has unique standing in Kansas as the only university with a presence in all 105 counties. K-State Research and Extension (Extension) serves as the hub and infrastructure for this statewide network, working with colleges and university partners to connecting crucial, objective information generated by K-State researchers with county needs for more than 100 years. As with any entity that has existed for more than a century, K-State has an important opportunity to both reimagine how university resources and programs align with rapidly evolving community needs and more deeply integrate engagement-focused units and functions like KSRE across the fabric of the institution.

This means recognizing the changing landscape and demographics of the state of Kansas requires different expertise and guidance from K-State than it did decades ago – from generational turnover among family-owned farms and the rise of precision agriculture to family and community needs that extend well beyond the university’s traditional areas of focus. It also means continually prioritizing and elevating K-State’s focus on tribal communities and relationships throughout the state and beyond. In turn, the university must rethink how it organizes and resources community engagement activities across colleges and units to best meet these needs. Additionally, units like KSRE inherently focused on engagement must reinvent and transform as nimble, agile partners to the communities they serve – constantly meeting county needs and anticipating how K-State can deliver real-time value that elevates all residents, communities, and economies. In many ways, K-State can serve as the enabling partner for other higher education institutions in the state that, like K-State, are creating knowledge but have limited footprints and mechanisms to fully deploy it statewide.

It also means, at the university level, elevating the prominence of this statewide focus on community impact that must be similarly prioritized by all colleges and units – regardless of focus or discipline. Such priorities and structures will build more consistency in how the university leverages resources like KSRE to benefit the state and establish expectations for how

faculty, staff, and students support the integral components of K-State's mission focused on service, engagement, and Extension.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

SHORT-TERM (0-3 YEARS)

- Assess the feasibility and benefits of elevating KSRE to a more university-level unit and scope
- Conduct regular, holistic needs assessments of all 105 counties to identify ways K-State can best meet or support local needs
- Establish portal for community partners or residents to submit problems in need of solutions K-State can develop
- Promote clearer and more consistent communication pathways among faculty, staff, and students relative to community needs
- Identify ways to maintain and create meaningful partnerships with Haskell University as the state's 1994 land-grant university
- Expand Extension specialists to support university engagement activities and better connect university research with community needs
- Build greater knowledge among K-State faculty, staff, and Extension agents about community engagement programs, services, and opportunities
- Establish clear processes for forming partnerships among faculty and staff, KSRE, and other community engagement resources
- Provide every academic department with a direct connection and conduit to KSRE
- Brand all KSRE offices as part of a unified brand with K-State ("a K-State office in all 105 counties")
- Leverage KSRE in coordination with local and state partners to spur community broadband adoption, including advocating for end users and developing educational programs that can build the current and future broadband workforce

LONGER-TERM (4-7+ YEARS)

- Leverage county Extension offices as partners in connecting local communities and empowering local agents with K-State recruitment and admissions resources
- Establish model for linking or reconnecting K-State students with their communities through KSRE
- Implement re-envisioned model for KSRE based on feasibility assessment and statewide/county needs
- Integrate innovation across KSRE to reinforce local KSRE offices as cutting-edge operations
- Identify opportunities to leverage existing facilities and other educational institutions as satellite innovation, engagement, and education centers

SUCCESS DEFINED

The task force identified a number of prospective metrics to monitor the success of these priority recommendations and the outcomes they are designed to generate for the institution, including the following:

- Economic impact in individual communities and across the state
- Listening to and meeting community needs
- Being the go-to partner and convener for statewide engagement
- Expanded opportunities for K-State faculty, staff, and students participating in engagement
- Mechanisms to assess and recognize engagement work
- Broad, integrated expectation of engagement for all K-State employees and students
- Number of Extension appointments (agents and specialists) hired and retained
- Responsiveness of specialists and faculty to Extension agent and community partner requests
- Community awareness of K-State programs, partnerships, and pathways for connecting with experts