



# **College Towns Offer Opportunities for Unique Partnerships Between DMOs and Universities**

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## INTRODUCTION

“Town and Gown” is a term describing the relationship between a university or college and the town, city or community in which it is located. By definition, “Town” and “Gown” are two distinct communities of a university town; “town” being the non-academic population and “gown” metonymically being the university community.

([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)).

“Historically, colleges and universities literally walled themselves off from their host communities.” (Rooney, “Town-Gown: A New Meaning for a New Economy - Campus Compact”) In fact, the term Town and Gown itself typically conjures up a scenario of tension between community and academic stakeholders for a variety of reasons. However, over the past twenty plus years, great strides have been made by both parties in order to better understand each other, embrace each other’s strengths, and better partner on a variety of ventures.

As with other partners, the relationship between a university and the destination marketing organization (DMO) for the city can come in a variety of forms. Some relationships can be one where the two entities work in unison on a variety of projects that welcome and host visitors - including new and returning students, staff and faculty, and family and friends. Likewise, others can be very disjointed; where the university and DMO have little or no communication in hosting and welcoming visitors. However, for those DMOs that identify themselves as a true “college town”, a strong partnership with their university is vital for the success of the tourism industry in their community.

In order to best articulate the Town-Gown relationship as related to DMOs, twelve DMO colleagues from across the United States have been identified and surveyed. Each DMO leader has provided their perspectives on their Town-Gown relationships; identifying the reasons for having a working relationship between the DMO and university, pointing out the challenges they face, and providing best practices for town and gown partnerships in order to help build or strengthen the DMO's relationship with the university. In addition, several of these respondents have also provided some unique partnership opportunities that they have encountered in their communities, which other DMOs may aspire to attempt in their own destinations. The research participants were:

Paul Arrigo, CDME - Visit Baton Rouge

Rob DeCleene, CDME - Visit South Bend Mishawaka

David Holder - Visit Syracuse

Chuck Jones - Visit Athens

Mike McAfee - Visit Bloomington

Cristy Morrison - Visit Stillwater

Travis Napper - Ruston Lincoln Parish CVB

Kim Phillips - Discover Denton

Amy Schneider - Go Columbia Mo

Elizabeth Taylor - Waco & The Heart of Texas

Julie Weeks - Ames CVB

Amy Zientek - Visit Lubbock

From their responses, several key factors for a strong partnership were developed, as well as some unique perspectives on opportunities that they utilized with their university. All of this could prove to be a learning tool for other “College Town” destinations.

## **MAIN FINDINGS / VIEWPOINTS**

Town and gown relations have evolved over the years. In the past, colleges and universities have isolated themselves from their host communities - sometimes literally walling themselves off from the municipality that surrounds them. Now, according to Kemp (“Town-Gown Relations by Roger L. Kemp - Emerging Local Government Leaders Network”, 2013), “Town and Gown officials are increasingly working together for the benefit of both of the groups they represent - the citizens as well as the students.” Similarly, the role of DMOs have also evolved from marketing the community for conventions to management of the entire destination. Thus the need for a strong relationship between the DMO and the university to assist in welcoming visitors and new students to our community. For those executives leading DMOs in a true “college town”, this provides its own set of opportunities and challenges.

In order to provide an accurate comparison and a set of best practice steps for working with the university in a destination for tourism development and promotion, the same set of four questions were asked of each of the twelve DMO executives:

1. What are your top three reasons for building a strong partnership with your university?

2. What are your top three challenges when working with the university in your community?
3. What are some key steps to build a strong partnership between your DMO and the university?
4. Please share any unique partnerships or joint ventures that you were able to accomplish with the university in your community.

### **Top Three Reasons:**

When asked for the top reasons for building and maintaining a strong relationship with the university in their town, the twelve DMO executives provided a variety of responses. Some felt that the university's brand aided in the destination marketing efforts, while others felt that the networking component that the university provided was important. However, three key factors for having a strong relationship with the university in your community emerged from all of the responses.

1. Resources
2. Attractions
3. Events

Probably the most important of the three were the resources that the university can provide for the destination. These resources can be sports and meeting facilities, faculty and staff leadership, and even students. According to Phillips (2015), by engaging students at the University of North Texas she is able to create "students that, when they leave college, will serve as ambassadors for not only their alma mater, but the community of Denton, Texas as well."

In addition, the majority of the respondents identified that a key role of the university in relation to destination marketing was that the university served as a major attraction. The culture of a “college town” makes these destinations even more attractive for visitors looking for that type of experience. Many of the DMOs claimed that the name or brand recognition that is identified with the university gave their destination credibility and stature. MacAfee (2015) states that “Indiana University is the most recession tough attraction in the state and is Bloomington’s largest asset.”

Lastly, the events that the university offers is another reason to building the relationship with the university. While the university provides a reason for the visitors to come - whether it is for a college sports event, graduation or student orientation - they have little knowledge or influence on the experience that their visitors will have when off campus and in the community. This alone is a vital reason why both parties should work in unison to host these visitors.

### **Top Three Challenges:**

For as many reasons as there are to have a strong relationship between the DMO and University, there are just as many challenges. From the information provided by the respondents, three key challenges became apparent.

1. Finances
2. Size of the University
3. Availability of Facilities

It might be surprising to some that finances - or lack thereof - would be a challenge when working with a university. However, of the DMO executives surveyed, all twelve identified limited finances as a challenge or barrier when working or partnering with their university. Some indicated that the limited funds of the DMO prohibited them from cooperatively marketing with their university; particularly when dealing with third party marketing companies for university athletics. However, there were several DMOs that felt that the university had limited finances when asked to partner with the DMO - stating that the university funds (even marketing dollars) are often tied to special accounts and cannot be reallocated.

The size of the university was also a common challenge amongst the respondents. The average size of the universities in the destinations that were surveyed is 29,156 students with of over 7,000 faculty, staff, administrators and support staff. In universities that large, not only is there a high turnover of students, but of faculty and staff as well. This often makes it difficult to build strong relationships with the meeting planners. As Morrison (2015) has found, "It is a continual and constant re-education of the DMOs benefits and services to the consistently changing faculty."

Lastly, the DMOs surveyed have found it challenging to utilize campus facilities - whether it be athletic facilities or meeting and event facilities. Many times, the facilities on campus are booked years in advance for student or faculty events; making it difficult for the DMO to solicit large events that would utilize campus facilities, fill hotel rooms, and make an economic impact throughout the community.



## Best Practices / Key Steps:

After determining the need for, and the challenges with, partnering with the university, the next question on the survey was to help identify key steps and best practices to build the strong relationships needed for a “college town” to be successful in hosting visitors. Three key points surfaced.

1. Building Relationships
2. DMO hosted events
3. DMO Involvement and Services

The most important of these is the need of building, maintaining, and growing strong relationships. The idea of keeping strong relationships with university staff regardless of their title was universal amongst all respondents. Jones (2015) found that starting with the top was most beneficial; particularly the Director of Community Relations. Another respondent found that “getting to know the administrative assistants and treating them special helped them understand the role of the DMO when they are put in meeting planning roles,” Morrison (2015).

A second key step is for the DMO to host events tailored to the university staff and students. Phillips (2015) hosts a Planner Zone Expo on the campus of University of North Texas (UNT). This one day trade show is open to all faculty staff and students at UNT and the exhibitors are the businesses in town that cater to visitors and events (i.e. hotels, caterers, transportation companies, etc.).

Lastly, all of the DMO executives identified the need to be “at the table” whenever possible. Involvement in all university events is crucial to be seen as a true partner. “Offering assistance and DMO services for every university event, no matter

the size, helps to ensure that the university sees the value of the DMO.” (Morrison, 2015)

### **Unique Partnerships:**

All of the DMO executives involved in this survey offered some very unique, and sometimes ground-breaking, perspectives or examples of partnerships with their university. While all of them were good ideas and part of best practices when working with a university, four of them stood out as a unique example of an innovative idea that other “college town” DMOs could emulate in their own community.

The first example is from Visit South Bend / Mishawaka, home of the University of Notre Dame. The President of the DMO, Rob DeCleene (2015), understands the power of the Notre Dame image and brand. Likewise, Notre Dame understands the role of the DMO in marketing not only the community of South Bend to visitors - but also the university to potential students. Visit South Bend / Mishawaka’s brand and logo have both incorporated the Notre Dame image. By doing this, DeCleene is promoting not only the community of South Bend, but also the university as well.

Kim Phillips (2015) in Denton, TX finds that utilizing the creative minds of the students at the University of North Texas helps her save the expense of hiring a graphic designer to create her marketing campaigns and to produce her visitor publications. The Denton CVB utilizes Journalism students each year to create and produce their visitor information guide. Not only are they saving the DMO money, but the perspective that the students bring as to how to market the city Denton to visitors is invaluable.

One of the most unique town-gown partnerships that emerged during the research was in Ames, Iowa. In Ames, there is shared management of the Ames Convention and Visitors Bureau and Iowa State University (ISU) Extension and Outreach Conference Planning and Management. According to Julie Weeks (2015) both organizations are “officed together, working to bring events to Ames, hosted by ISU Departments, Colleges, and Center.” Of all of the DMOs surveyed, Ames was the only one that indicated that not only did the DMO and university “co-brand” for marketing purposes, but the DMO also received a portion of their funding from ISU.

Lastly, another unique opportunity came in Bryan-College Station when Texas A&M University was evaluating the best method by which to completely renovate their football stadium, Kyle Field. The Bryan-College Station Convention and Visitors Bureau (BCSCVB) quickly realized that should the university choose to demolish the stadium and rebuild; the community could potentially lose out on one (perhaps two seasons) of football games having a catastrophic impact on the Bryan-College Station community.

The BCSCVB hired Oxford Economics to determine the economic impact of Texas A&M football on the community. Armed with the information from the full report (Oxford Economics, "The Economic Impact of Texas A&M University Home Football Games", 2012), the BCSCVB approached Texas A&M with a profitable proposition for both parties. The agreement was that in exchange for a contribution of \$38 million of hotel occupancy tax (HOT) funds, Texas A&M would agree to redevelop the football stadium between seasons of play (and not move a single game of regular season play outside of the community). In addition, the university would

agree to give the BCSCVB preferred access to a variety of meeting and sports facilities on campus at the cheapest rate possible (free in many cases).

While the agreement did require state legislative action, the law was widely supported - not only by the BCSCVB and Texas A&M, but also by both the City of Bryan and City of College Station, as well as Brazos County who all had a lot to gain with this process. This has been touted by many as one of the greatest and most effective town and gown partnerships in the country. As shared by the current Chairman of the BCSCVB Board of Directors (Goodwin, "Creative Funding Partnerships", 2014) "The Preferred Facilities Access Agreement, officially documented a dynamic and one of a kind partnership between the cities of College Station and Bryan, Brazos County, the Bryan-College Station CVB and Texas A&M University. This agreement exemplifies a highly successful collaboration between several local governmental agencies, local private sector leadership, tourism partners and a world class land grant academic institution all coming together to turn an insurmountable problem, into a productive collaborative effort that will benefit all parties involved in a fair and equitable way for generations to come."

## **CONCLUSION**

The information that was collected from each of the twelve "college town" DMO executives represents their perspectives on the need for, challenges of, and best practices for building strong relationships and partnerships with the university located in their destination. As home to Texas A&M University, fourth largest university in the nation, the BCSCVB has also witnessed similar challenges when working with the

faculty, staff, administration and students. Many of the BCSCVB staff are alumni from the university, which has helped open doors for them when building relationships with administrators. However, as was found in other college town DMOs, the constant turnover of faculty, staff, and students requires a consistent education process of the DMO's services and value. Having dedicated DMO staff members responsible for this has proven to be very effective.

In Bryan-College Station, Texas A&M is the number one attraction. The meeting and sports facilities on campus are top-notch and many are state of the art and world renowned. In times of recession, the university has helped keep the Bryan-College Station community somewhat "recession proof". Hundreds of thousands of visitors flock to Texas A&M throughout the year for a variety of reasons, not the least of all, Texas Aggie football games. It is for these reasons the BCSCVB worked diligently with the hotel community and city official to create the Kyle Field funding / Preferred Access Agreement with Texas A&M.

The information shared by the twelve different colleagues from across the United States has been not only informative, but also inspirational. Working in and promoting a "college town" to potential visitors serves to be a unique experience in itself. The university is often seen as an additional stakeholder that the DMO serves. For example in the case of BCSCVB, not only do they promote and work with two separate municipalities (the city of Bryan and city of College Station); but they also promote and work with Texas A&M University. While there may seem to be many challenges when working with a university, it really is no different than working with

any other large corporation or governmental agency that are found in any one of the destinations across the country.

What did emerge from the surveys and interviews were best practices to follow when building and strengthening partnerships between the DMO and university. Focusing on relationships, from the president to the administrative assistants, hosting events such as tradeshow, and making one-on-one sales calls and visits with each of the key staff, and by being present and at the table at every opportunity, the DMO can assist in creating a method for the entire community (including the university) to be successful.

Furthermore, the unique partnerships shared by several of the colleagues serve to be examples to strive for and emulate. Connecting the image and brand of the university with the image and brand of the community, as was the case with Visit South Bend / Mishawaka and the University of Notre Dame, will help in marketing the destination for visitors as well as promoting the university to potential future students. Connecting with the students as the the City of Denton, Texas has done, and utilizing them both as creative designers for projects as well as creating a culture of the “college town” so that as the students leave the university, they serve as ambassadors for the community. And while the case of Ames, Iowa being a joint department of the Ames Convention and Visitors Bureau, as well as the ISU Extension and Outreach Conference Planning, may be considered a stretch for many of the college towns; it certainly brings to mind ways that DMOs can share some of the financial obligation of marketing the destination with the university that plays a big part. The last unique case study of Bryan-College Station and Texas A&M is already

proving to be an example for many other destinations. Several DMOs are already investigating the process, benefits and challenges of creating a similar partnerships - not only with colleges and universities, but also professional and semi-professional athletic organizations.

Destination marketing organizations should always look for ways in their own communities to build partnerships. In a college town, building a strong relationship with the university is imperative. Learning to understand each other and what each other's strengths and challenges are will aid in better partnerships on a variety of projects. If this is done consistently in earnest, everyone will benefit.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“There are multiple opportunities for communities, and the colleges and universities located within them, to jointly participate in mutually advantageous town-gown programs and projects” (“Town-Gown Relations by Roger L. Kemp - Emerging Local Government Leaders Network”, 2013). Kemp goes on to say “positive practices, which are rapidly evolving, reflect joint efforts where everyone benefits.” By keeping the lines of communication open between the DMO and the university, by realizing the impact the university has on a community, and by looking for unique ways to market jointly, everyone can win - the community by bringing more visitors to the area and the university by continued exposure to potential new students and faculty; as well as the visitors by having access to the facilities and attractions that a university offers while experiencing the “college town” culture.



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