CCSU’s Engagement in the Community
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Last fall, several hundred people attended the first “CCSU Night at the Museum” at the New Britain Museum of American Art (NBMAA). This remarkable event seriously challenged the image of museums as a quiet place to contemplate art. Visitors were treated to a cornucopia of electrifying artistic expressions from students—poems, dances, paintings, videos, puzzles, songs, musical performances, and dramatic readings—exhibited and performed to overflow crowds throughout the galleries, corridors, and stairways of the museum.

The event had the feel of a 1960s style “happening” when communities spontaneously formed around an explosion of creative activity, only there was nothing spontaneous about this event. It was the culmination of months of collaboration between the NBMAA, the New Britain arts community, and faculty members and students at CCSU, who had entered into this innovative partnership to provide an enhanced educational experience for students and to share that experience with the community.

This event is only one of many examples of how a university and its local community can collaborate to further the university’s academic goals and to provide enriching experiences for members of the community. Service to the community is integral to CCSU’s mission as a public university, and the university actively promotes community engagement as a benefit to both the university and the community.

Universities increasingly recognize the value of integrating community-based experiences into students’ education. Experiences outside the classroom enable students to apply what they are learning to real settings and to cultivate students’ sense of civic responsibility. Such experiences also benefit the community by enlisting the help of students and faculty to develop answers to real questions and solutions to real problems in the community. For students in most majors at CCSU, such experiences routinely include projects in community service agencies, civic organizations, and local businesses.

However, the benefits of collaboration between the university and the community can extend well beyond what a single class can accomplish. By taking a broader approach to collaboration, larger units within the university—programs, departments, schools, even the university as a whole—may engage with its local community in collaborative efforts to address major problems in the community, such as poverty, unemployment, affordable housing, education, crime, health, financial literacy, the technological divide, etc. Creative problem-solving partnerships between the university and community can make significant contributions to the public good while substantially enhancing students’ learning experiences and furthering faculty research.

CCSU has increasingly embraced community engagement as a top institutional priority. At a recent colloquium, faculty members and students described community-based projects in their courses. This spring at CCSU, representatives from local colleges and universities will showcase ongoing course-based initiatives in our communities. A new small grants fund has been established at CCSU to support the integration of community projects in courses. All of these efforts will culminate this year in a study to determine whether CCSU will apply to join a select group of institutions nationally that are specifically identified as “community engagement” universities.