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Access: The Journal of the National Association of Branch Campus Administrators

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Must be in English and follow the style guidelines set forth in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA), Sixth Edition (2009). Should be a maximum of 7,500 words, not including abstract and references (if applicable); double-spaced (including quotations and references); and references must be complete and placed at the end. If a submission substantially cites the work of another author, a signed agreement giving permission to reprint the material from that work's copyright holder must be included.

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Who Counts as a Branch Campus Student? A Three-Dimensional Framework from the Stockton Campus of California State University, Stanislaus

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Abstract

A fundamental but underexplored question in higher education administration is, Who counts as a branch campus student? Using the Stockton Campus of California State University, Stanislaus as a case study, the authors argue that traditional enrollment-based definitions fail to capture the full scope of student presence in decentralized campus environments. Drawing on institutional enrollment data, GIS-based spatial analysis, and student engagement metrics, the study advances a three-dimensional framework for defining branch campus students through instructional presence (course enrollment), spatial belonging (geographic proximity), and behavioral engagement (campus service utilization). Findings demonstrate that each dimension identifies different but overlapping student populations and reveals forms of branch campus participation that remain invisible within conventional reporting systems. Geographic analysis shows a growing population of students living closer to the Stockton Campus, while engagement data highlight substantial use of campus resources by students not formally counted as Stockton enrollees. The study argues that reliance on singular enrollment metrics can systematically undercount branch campuses and contribute to inequities in resource allocation, staffing, and program development. The proposed framework offers administrators a more comprehensive approach to measuring student presence, planning services, and aligning institutional policy with student realities in underserved regions.

Introduction

Branch campuses play a critical role in expanding access to higher education, particularly in regions underserved by four-year institutions. Yet a fundamental question remains underexamined: *Who counts as a branch campus student?* This question is not merely definitional. How institutions count students directly shapes resource allocation, faculty workload, program development, and the distribution of student services (Kuh et al., 2005; Middaugh, 2010; Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Massy, 2016).

At branch campuses—where students routinely move across locations, modalities, and institutional categories—these counts are often incomplete. Students may live near one campus, take courses at another, and access services at a third. As a result, institutional definitions based solely on enrollment can fail to capture the full scope of student presence. In this context, branch campuses risk being systematically undercounted and, consequently, under-resourced.

This article examines this problem through a case study of the Stockton Campus of California State University, Stanislaus (Stan State). Drawing on enrollment data, geographic analysis, and student engagement metrics, the study demonstrates that no single definition adequately captures the student population served by a branch campus. Instead, it advances a three-dimensional framework that

conceptualizes branch campus students through overlapping forms of affiliation: *instructional* (course enrollment), *spatial* (geographic proximity), and *behavioral* (campus engagement).

The framework advanced here conceptualizes branch campus students as occupying overlapping but distinct domains of affiliation. Instructional presence captures students through course enrollment and reflects the formal academic structure of the institution. Spatial belonging situates students geographically, identifying those for whom the branch campus represents the most proximate point of access. Behavioral engagement reflects patterns of participation in campus services and activities, indicating where students rely on institutional resources. While each dimension produces a different count, it is their intersection that most closely approximates the full scope of student presence at a branch campus. Students may exist within any single dimension or across multiple dimensions, and it is precisely this variability that challenges singular enrollment-based definitions.

By integrating these dimensions, the study offers a more comprehensive approach to understanding student presence in decentralized campus environments. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing conversations about access, measurement, and resource allocation in higher education, while providing a practical framework for branch campus administrators seeking to align institutional metrics with student realities.

Institutional and Regional Contexts

For the 1.5 million people who live in a six-county region making up California's San Joaquin Valley, Stanislaus State University is a critical educational and community resource. Stan State is a member of the 22-campus California State University (CSU) system, which was established to provide access to a high-quality, affordable education. Stan State is a four-year comprehensive institution located in California's Northern San Joaquin Valley, with the main campus located in Stanislaus County, in the city of Turlock, and a branch campus in the city of Stockton in San Joaquin County. San Joaquin County is one of the fastest-growing counties in California (Fitzgerald, 2022), but its bachelor's degree completion rate of 18% remains well below the California and national averages of 36% and 38% respectively (US Census, 2022). Stockton is one of the most diverse communities in United States (US News & World Report, 2020) and one of the fastest-growing urban centers in California.

The Stockton Campus serves place-bound students in San Joaquin County and adjacent counties who transfer from community college, largely from San Joaquin Delta College. Most transfer to the branch campus to complete a bachelor's degree in one of five majors: business administration, criminal justice, liberal studies, psychology, and social sciences. Other options include a second bachelor's in nursing, single and multiple subject teaching credentials, and a master's in social work.

The Stockton Campus has a new state-of-the-art regional health and human services training center opening in Spring 2026 (CSU Stanislaus, 2026), which is poised to allow for expansion of health and human services training capacity and for growth in current programming. This builds on Stockton Campus growth as a regional anchor institution that focuses on community capacity for wealth building and serving to meet local workforce gaps in health and human services and in preparing K-12 educators (Sweitzer et al., 2026).

The Problem of Defining a Branch Campus Student

Defining a branch campus student presents a conceptual and operational challenge. Traditional enrollment management systems in higher education are designed around relatively stable, campus-based populations (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). These systems typically categorize students based on course enrollment, program affiliation, or admission status. While effective for centralized campuses, such frameworks are less well suited to branch campus environments, where student affiliation is more fluid and multi-sited.

At branch campuses, students frequently move across institutional boundaries, taking courses at multiple locations; enrolling in hybrid or online formats; and accessing services at sites different from where their courses are coded (Jacoby, 2015; Allen & Seaman, 2017; Thomas, 2020). This produces a mismatch between how institutions count students and how students actually experience the university. As Kuh et al. (2005) note, student success is closely tied to patterns of engagement, yet engagement is often not captured in traditional enrollment metrics. Similarly, geographic proximity has been shown to influence enrollment decisions and degree attainment, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds (Jacoby, 2015; Kobus et al., 2015; Thomas, 2020; Taylor & Mitra, 2021; Brownie et al., 2023; Acton et al., 2025).

For branch campuses, this raises a central problem: no single metric adequately captures student presence, affiliation, or need. Enrollment-based definitions reflect instructional activity but not geographic access or campus engagement. Geographic definitions capture access but not participation. Engagement metrics reveal usage but not formal enrollment. This study addresses this challenge by advancing a three-dimensional framework that integrates these perspectives.

Methods and Data

This study draws on three complementary data sources to examine patterns in student enrollment, geographic access, and campus engagement at the Stockton Campus of Stan State.

First, institutional enrollment data were obtained from the Stan State institutional data dashboard (accessible at https://www.csustan.edu/iea/institutional-data/enrollment-trends). These data provide official census-based measures of student headcount, enrollment intensity, and program affiliation. The analysis focuses on Fall 2023 and Fall 2024 census snapshots, allowing for both a current baseline and year-over-year comparison. Descriptive and comparative analyses were used to identify changes in enrollment patterns across time and student subpopulations.

Second, GIS-enabled spatial analysis was conducted using student-level residence data obtained from the Stan State Data Warehouse (Home > Student > Records > Current Enrolled by Plan). Two datasets were used: (A) all undergraduates enrolled in state-supported majors/programs at the Fall 2024 census, and (B) the corresponding population from Fall 2023. The Fall 2024 dataset served as the primary analytic baseline, while the Fall 2023 dataset allowed for comparison of geographic trends over time. Student records were georeferenced using primary residence addresses and aggregated for spatial analysis. Geographic proximity to campus locations was assessed using distance and travel-time measures, with particular attention to students residing within a one-hour drive of either the Stockton or Turlock campuses. Spatial distribution and clustering techniques were used to identify regional enrollment patterns and shifts between the two academic years.

Third, student engagement was examined through a key correlate of campus-based participation: usage of the Stockton Campus food pantry. This measure was selected as an indicator of basic needs utilization. Participation data were provided by the Division of Student Affairs and analyzed across the same time period as the enrollment and geographic datasets.

Taken together, these three data sources—enrollment, geographic, and engagement—provide a multidimensional view of student presence at the branch campus. By integrating institutional records with spatial and behavioral indicators, the study captures not only where students are formally enrolled, but also where they are located and how they interact with campus resources. While these data provide a robust view of student presence, the analysis is limited to available administrative records and does not capture informal or unrecorded forms of student interaction with the campus.

Defining the Stockton Student: A Three-Dimensional Framework

1. Instructional Presence: Enrollment-Based Definition

The most common institutional definition identifies Stockton students as those who have taken at least one course coded to the Stockton Campus. This definition is embedded in institutional dashboards and provides a consistent, longitudinal measure of campus activity.

A five-year analysis of Stockton Campus enrollment reveals a U-shaped trend, with declines during the COVID-19 pandemic (2021–2023) followed by strong growth in Fall 2024 (Table 1). These trends parallel enrollment patterns at San Joaquin Delta College, the campus's primary feeder institution, highlighting the interdependence of transfer pipelines and branch campus enrollment.

Table 1. Stockton Campus state-funded enrollment numbers from the Institutional Assessment data dashboard.

Year	Enrollment	Mean Unit Load	FTES
2020	1,068	13.49	978
2021	997	13.31	897
2022	951	12.41	798
2023	738	12.54	629
2024	1,315	12.82	1,141

As shown in Figure 1, Stockton enrollment has also increased as a proportion of total university enrollment, highlighting the campus's growing role within the institution. By Fall 2024, Stockton Campus enrollment accounted for approximately 14% of total university enrollment and 15% of FTES. However, discrepancies in FTES calculations reveal a critical limitation. Stockton FTES are calculated based only on face-to-face course completions, excluding online courses. In contrast, FTES calculations for the main campus include online enrollments. This distinction is increasingly problematic in a post-pandemic environment, where Stockton-based programs require a mix of in-person and online coursework, much of which is administratively coded to Turlock. As a result, the enrollment-based definition systematically undercounts Stockton student activity and underrepresents the campus's instructional contribution.

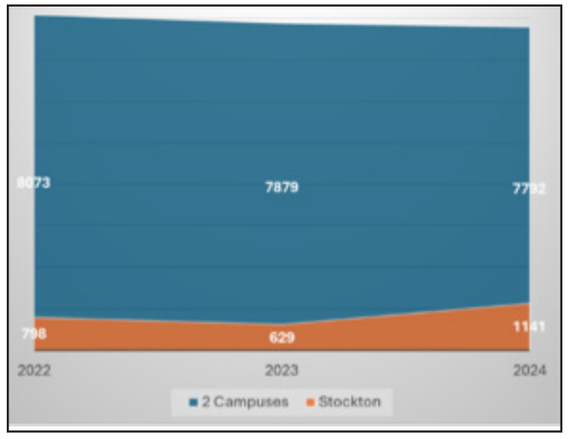


Figure 1. *Stan State total enrollment numbers across two campuses with Stockton enrollment shown in orange as a percentage of total enrollment.*

2. Spatial Belonging: Geographic Definition

A second approach defines Stockton students based on geographic proximity. Using GIS-enabled spatial analysis, this approach maps student residences and identifies which campus—Stockton or Turlock—is closer to each student's primary address. This approach shifts the question from where students are enrolled to where students are located, aligning more directly with the access mission of the branch campus.

Analysis of Fall 2024 data (n = 8,194 state-supported undergraduates university-wide) shows that 22% of students (1,787) reside closer to the Stockton Campus, while 78% (6,221) are closer to the Turlock Campus (Figures 2-5). Importantly, 88% of students in the Stockton catchment area live within a one-hour drive (Figure 6, Table 2), a threshold associated with persistence and student success in the literature (Jacoby, 2015; Thomas, 2020). The spatial distribution reveals clear clustering in Stockton and surrounding San Joaquin County communities, with additional concentrations extending into Lodi, Manteca, and parts of Sacramento.

Year-over-year comparisons further clarify the significance of this geographic dimension. Between Fall 2023 and Fall 2024, the number of students residing within one hour of the Turlock Campus declined (from 6,019 to 5,925), while the number within one hour of the Stockton Campus increased (from 1,551 to 1,579). While modest in absolute terms, this divergence is notable: even as overall university enrollment experienced slight contraction in the Turlock catchment area, the Stockton catchment showed continued growth. This pattern suggests that the branch campus is capturing an expanding share of the university's geographically proximate student population, reinforcing its role as a point of access for the northern portion of the service region.

The geographic analysis also reveals important insights into program alignment. Among students residing within one hour of the Stockton Campus, the top ten majors include both established Stockton degree completion programs—such as Business Administration, Psychology, Liberal Studies, and Criminal Justice—and majors not currently offered at the branch campus, including Computer Science, Biological Sciences, Child Development, and Exercise Science (Table 3). The presence of these non-Stockton majors within the local catchment area highlights a gap between where students are located and where programs are delivered.

This misalignment has direct implications for curricular planning. If branch campuses are intended to serve place-bound students, then geographic data can be used to identify unmet demand and guide program expansion. In this case, the concentration of students in non-Stockton majors suggests opportunities to extend additional degree pathways to the Stockton Campus, particularly in fields already attracting significant numbers of nearby students. More broadly, the geographic approach provides a planning tool that complements enrollment data by identifying not only who is currently served by the branch campus, but who could be served under different program configurations.

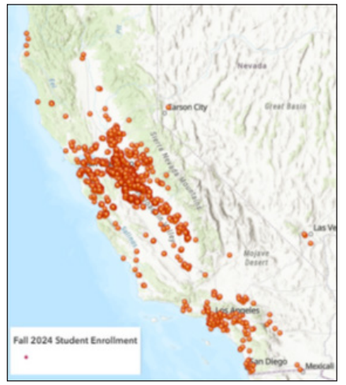


Figure 2. *Location (primary address) of all undergrads.*

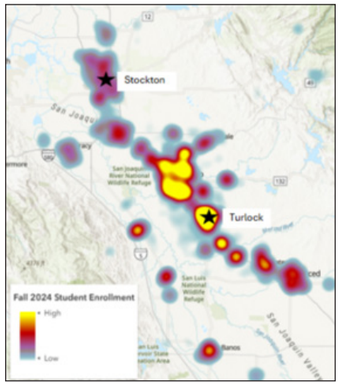


Figure 3. *Heat map, undergrad clusters around each campus.*

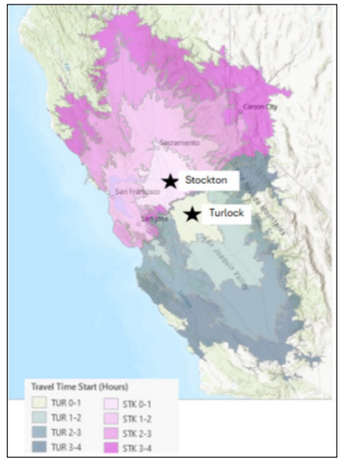


Figure 4. *Drive-time catchment areas for each campus.*

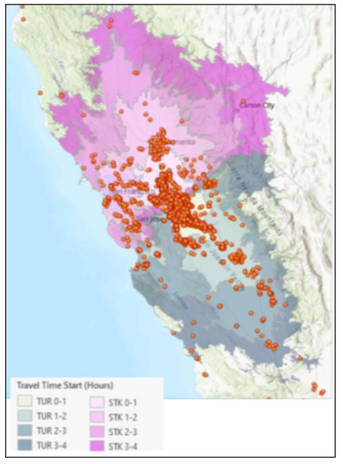


Figure 5. *Distribution of undergrads within catchments.*

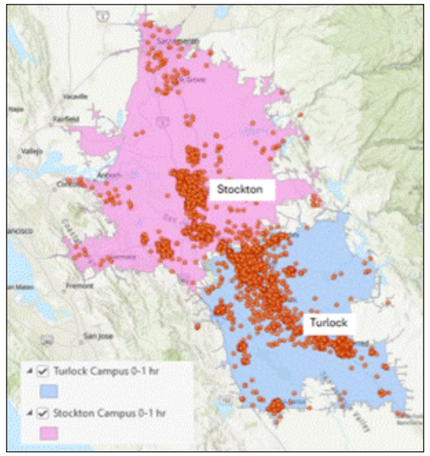


Figure 6. *Distribution of undergrads within 1-hour drive time of each campus.*

Table 2. Distribution of undergrads according to drive-time catchments.

Catchment Area	Count
Stockton 0-1 hr.	1,579
Stockton 1-2 hrs.	188
Stockton 2-3 hrs.	10
Stockton 3-4 hrs.	10
STOCKTON 0-4 hrs.	*1,787*
Turlock 0-1 hr.	5,925
Turlock 1-2 hrs.	187
Turlock 2-3 hrs.	93
Turlock 3-4 hrs.	16
TURLOCK 0-4 hrs	*6,221*

Table 3. Top 10 majors of state-supported undergraduates living within one hour of the Stockton Campus with comparison to Turlock Campus.

Top 10 majors 0-1 hr. of Stockton Campus	Count	Count Turlock 0-1 hr.	Percentage Stockton
Business Administration*	365	1,081	25%
Psychology*	316	850	27%
Liberal Studies*	132	550	21%
Criminal Justice*	109	387	22%
Computer Science	70	319	18%
Biological Sciences	55	292	16%
Public Health Promotion	54	259	17%
Child Development	51	208	20%
Exercise Science	43	164	26%
Nursing	36	96	27%
Social Sciences**	36	49	42%

**Program established in Stockton prior to summer 2018.*
***Program established in Stockton spring 2023.*

In this sense, geographic proximity functions as both a measure of access and an indicator of potential growth. It captures a population that is only partially visible through enrollment metrics alone and underscores the importance of aligning branch campus offerings with the spatial distribution of students.

3. Campus Engagement: Behavioral Definition

A third approach defines Stockton students based on engagement with campus services. This study examines food pantry usage. Food pantry usage increased in both unique users and total visits (Figure 7), with highest usage among majors supported at the Stockton Campus, including Business, Psychology, Nursing, Liberal Studies, and Social Sciences (Figure 8).

Notably, engagement data reveal participation beyond formally defined Stockton students. Students in programs not housed at the Stockton Campus (e.g., Communication Studies, Child Development) also regularly utilize campus services. Geographic analysis

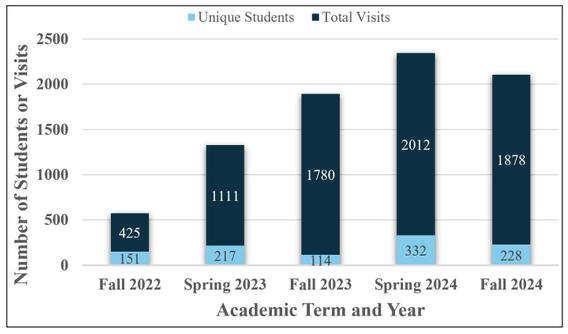


Figure 7. *Stockton Campus food pantry usage increases across terms both in the number of unique students using the pantry (light blue) and overall pantry visits (dark blue).*

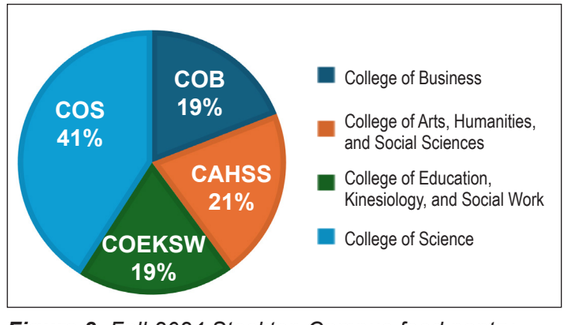


Figure 8. *Fall 2024 Stockton Campus food pantry visits based on the users' college of major enrollment.*

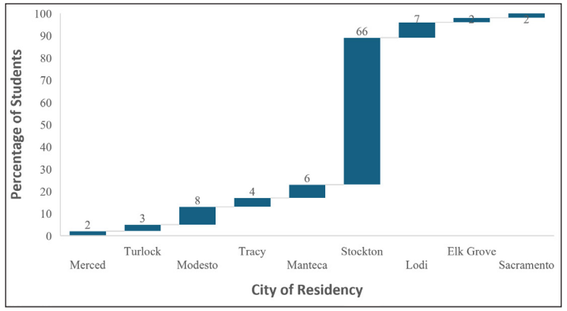


Figure 9. *Fall 2024 Stockton Campus food pantry visits based on the users' city of primary residence.*

of food pantry usage further shows participation from students across San Joaquin County, Modesto, and parts of Sacramento (Figure 9).

This approach captures a behavioral dimension of student identity—where students show up and rely on campus resources—providing insight into student need and institutional reach that is not visible in enrollment data alone (Kuh et al., 2005).

Implications for Branch Campus Administration

Taken together, the three approaches advanced in this study suggest that "Stockton student" is not a singular category but a composite of three overlapping dimensions: *instructional* (course enrollment), *spatial* (geographic proximity), and *behavioral* (campus engagement). Each captures a distinct relationship between students and the branch campus. And while each approach produces different counts, they all point in the same direction toward growth.

This multi-dimensionality reflects a broader challenge in branch campus environments. Traditional enrollment management systems are built around relatively fixed, campus-based populations and rely heavily on course enrollment as the primary unit of analysis (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). In branch campus contexts, however, student affiliation is more fluid. Students may live in one place, take courses in another, and engage with services in a third. As a result, any single definition—particularly one based solely on instructional activity—inevitably provides a partial and potentially misleading picture.

The Stockton case demonstrates that reliance on enrollment-based definitions alone can obscure both the geographic reach and the functional role of a branch campus. For example, FTES calculations tied only to face-to-face instruction fail to capture hybrid and online course participation, leading to systematic underrepresentation of branch campus activity. At the same time, geographic analysis reveals a substantial population of students for whom Stockton is the closest and most accessible campus, even when those students are not formally counted as Stockton enrollees. Engagement data further complicate the picture, showing that students who utilize campus services extend beyond those captured by either enrollment or proximity measures.

For branch campus administrators, these findings have direct implications for resource allocation, planning, and institutional positioning. First, definitions of student populations shape how resources are distributed. If branch campus students are undercounted in enrollment metrics, they are likely to be under-resourced in faculty lines, student services, and infrastructure. Aligning FTES calculations and other metrics with the realities of hybrid instruction is therefore not simply a technical issue, but a matter of institutional equity.

Second, this study suggests the need for integrated data approaches. Incorporating geographic and engagement data alongside traditional enrollment metrics can provide a more complete understanding of student presence and need. Geographic proximity, in particular, has been shown to influence enrollment decisions and persistence, especially for students from underrepresented and place-bound populations (Acton et al., 2025; Jacoby, 2015). Similarly, patterns of engagement—such as participation in orientation or use of student services—are closely linked to student success outcomes (Kuh et al., 2005). For branch campuses, these dimensions are not peripheral but central to understanding how students interact with the institution.

Third, the findings reinforce the importance of place-based planning. The geographic distribution of students within one-hour catchment areas suggests clear opportunities for targeted program development, outreach, and partnership building. In the Stockton case, the alignment between local student populations and certain majors supports the expansion of degree programs tied to regional workforce needs. At the same time, the presence of students in programs not currently offered at the branch campus points to potential areas for growth.

An important limitation of this framework is that it emerges from a branch campus context in which the Stockton and Turlock campuses remain geographically proximal and reasonably accessible to one another. Many students move between campuses, enroll in courses across locations, and utilize services at sites other than where they are formally enrolled. In branch campus systems where campuses are separated by much greater distances—or where routine travel between locations is impractical—the overlap among instructional, spatial, and behavioral dimensions may be less pronounced. In such contexts, students may exhibit stronger campus-specific identities and patterns of engagement, potentially reducing the complexity of affiliation observed in this study. While the three-dimensional framework remains conceptually useful, the relative importance of each dimension may vary across institutional and geographic contexts. Future research should examine the applicability of this framework in branch campus systems characterized by greater geographic separation, independent service infrastructures, or limited cross-campus mobility.

Finally, this case highlights the need to move from ad hoc measurement toward systematic recognition of branch campus populations. The three-dimensional framework advanced here is not intended to replace existing metrics, but to supplement them. For administrators, the challenge is to institutionalize such approaches—embedding them in dashboards, planning processes, and decision-making structures—so that branch campuses are evaluated in ways that reflect their actual role within the university.

In sum, defining a branch campus student requires moving beyond singular metrics toward a more integrated understanding of how students enroll, where they live, and how they engage. For institutions seeking to expand access and improve student success, particularly in underserved regions, such an approach is not optional but necessary.

Conclusion

Branch campuses are not simply extensions of main campuses; they are distinct educational spaces with complex, multi-dimensional student populations. The three-dimensional framework presented here demonstrates that defining branch campus students requires moving beyond single enrollment metrics. By integrating instructional, geographic, and behavioral measures, institutions can develop a more accurate and actionable understanding of student presence and need. For branch campus administrators, the challenge is not only to adopt such frameworks but to embed them within institutional systems, including data dashboards, planning processes, and resource allocation models. Without such shifts, branch campuses risk remaining

structurally undercounted within systems designed for centralized institutions—despite playing an increasingly central role in expanding access to higher education.

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Case Study

Engineering Belonging: Becoming a Community Partner Through Curriculum, Commitment, and Reciprocity

Nancy L. Lollar

Abstract

This case study examines how Purdue Polytechnic Institute Columbus's reinvention of their institutional role as a branch campus occurred through the integration of community partnership into the prescribed curriculum. By looking beyond the episodic engagement and extracurricular approaches to community partnership, the campus created a model in which they wove together student learning objectives, stakeholder collaboration, and workforce development within a predetermined academic model. This was done by focusing on a first-year gateway course in which leadership was distributed across the campus in terms of faculty, students, industry partners, clinicians, and family. This was done in such a way that encouraged equitable participation. By engaging in the GoBabyGo initiative, students become involved in actual engineering design experiences in which responsibility, empathy, and professional identity development become the primary focus. The implications show how the curriculum structure can become the foundational anchor in terms of belonging, legitimacy, and community. This case also shows how a branch campus can reinvent their institutional role by creating a system in which learning objectives, partnership, and accountability become integrated.

Case Study Introduction

The purpose of a branch campus is not established through its affiliation, facilities, or program offerings. It is established through the relationships it maintains and the responsibilities it accepts within the community it serves.

Purdue Polytechnic Institute Columbus exists within Purdue University's statewide system to expand access to applied engineering and technology education. Located in a manufacturing-intensive region and embedded within the Advanced Manufacturing Center of Excellence, the campus operates in close proximity to major manufacturing employers, regional workforce demand, and community partners with defined expectations for workforce-ready graduates. Yet proximity alone does not create meaningful partnership, and institutional presence alone does not ensure that students experience a sense of belonging. Yet proximity alone does not create partnership, and presence alone does not produce belonging.

Over time, we recognized that episodic engagement and project-based outreach—while well intentioned—did not build the continuity required for trust. Community relationships followed academic calendars. Partnerships reflected individual champions more than institutional commitment. Students experienced engineering as preparation for future employment rather than responsibility within present community contexts.

These conditions prompted a deeper institutional reflection: not how the campus should grow, but how it should exist.

The guiding question became: *What does it mean for Purdue Polytechnic Columbus to function not simply as a provider of courses, but as a reliable community partner through curriculum, commitment, and reciprocity?*

This case study emerges from that reflection. It examines how institutional purpose is clarified not through statements, but through practice—through where engagement is embedded, how partnerships are sustained, and how students encounter engineering as both technical preparation and civic responsibility.

Purpose, in this context, is not defined once. It is enacted repeatedly through the choices an institution makes about learning, partnership, and accountability.

Meet the Players

In this case, leadership is defined as the intentional design of institutional structures that align curriculum, partnership, and student identity development toward shared community outcomes.

- Campus Director, Dr. Nancy Lollar, EdD: Provides strategic integration, ensures alignment with institutional mission, safeguards sustainability, and structures partnership accountability across academic and community boundaries.
- Faculty Leads, Dr. Ruiji Sun, PhD, Dr. Poonam Jayal, PhD: Operationalize the model within curriculum, embed technical rigor, assess outcomes, and translate community need into structured engineering learning.
- Students: Serve as accountable design practitioners, responsible for ethical decision-making, iteration, documentation, and delivery within real-world constraints.
- Industry Partners, Cummins, KPIT, Qualtronics, Honda engineers: Act as co-educators and professional validators, reinforcing industry standards, safety expectations, and workforce alignment.
- Clinical Partners, Rebecca Scholl, Physical Therapist and Denisa Nelson, Occupational Therapist: Provide developmental expertise and safety oversight, ensuring dignity, appropriateness, and risk mitigation.
- Families: Function as co-design authorities, contributing lived expertise and shared decision-making authority.
- Community Organizations, Arc of Bartholomew County and Assisted Independence: Anchor continuity, trust-building, and community integration.
- Facilities and Infrastructure: Advanced Manufacturing Center of Excellence (AMCE)- Provide the physical ecosystem necessary to support sustained applied engineering integration.
- Alumni and Volunteers: Extend institutional memory and mentorship continuity beyond semester timelines.

Shared Leadership Ecosystem

However, the success of GoBabyGo is neither due to one leader nor by a mere accidental emergence of leaders. Rather, it is due to an orchestrated leadership ecosystem, wherein a leadership ecosystem refers to an organized network of stakeholders who are collectively responsible for decision-making, execution, and results, each with their own unique expertise and influence in an organized system (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Bolden, 2011). In case of a branch campus where roles and responsibilities are divided, there should be shared leadership that is clearly defined and reciprocal in nature.

In such an ecosystem, neither do faculty members, students, industry participants, healthcare providers, parents, and community groups act independently, but rather as co-leaders with roles purposely assigned towards ensuring curriculum, partnership, and student success. The following stakeholders illustrate the phenomenon of distributed leadership.

Institutional Context

Purdue Polytechnic Institute Columbus is part of a statewide delivery model designed to expand access to higher education while responding to regional workforce needs. Within this context, branch campuses function not only as instructional sites, but as institutions embedded within local communities, where their effectiveness is shaped by the quality and continuity of external relationships (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

In this environment, engagement cannot be episodic or transactional. Research on community engagement in higher education emphasizes that trust and credibility are developed through sustained, reciprocal partnerships characterized by shared accountability and long-term commitment ((Weerts & Sandmann, 2008; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). For Purdue Polytechnic Columbus, this requires moving beyond short-term or project-based interactions toward partnership models that extend across academic cycles and institutional roles.

Purdue Polytechnic Institute Columbus is a statewide location of Purdue University, serving both regional workforce needs and the broader mission of the institution. Its distinction lies in its dual responsibility to support statewide access while remaining responsive to local industry and community demands. The campus offers undergraduate degrees in Mechanical Engineering Technology, Electrical Engineering Technology, Computer Engineering Technology, and Advanced Manufacturing.

The campus operates within the Advanced Manufacturing Center of Excellence, a shared environment intentionally designed to reflect the identity of the manufacturing economy in South Central Indiana. This alignment supports the integration of applied engineering education with industry-relevant practice and workforce development (Foor et al., 2007).

Despite the opportunities afforded by proximity to industry, research suggests that physical co-location alone does not ensure student belonging or meaningful partnership development (Johnson, 2013; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Campus leadership and faculty identified that the mere coexistence of industry does not automatically create a sense of belonging among students, nor does it inherently foster trust with industry partners.

Columbus, Indiana, is widely recognized as a major manufacturing hub and is home to the global headquarters of Cummins Inc., one of the largest manufacturers in the world (Wilcox et al., 2022; Porter, 1998). This equates to a tremendous opportunity to connect with partners and mentors, as well as access to challenging engineering problems applicable to industry. As with many Purdue Polytechnic branch campuses, one of the most significant barriers to overcome was legitimacy—not only in terms of our standing as an institution of higher learning, but also as a community partner (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). The campus director and faculty recognized that legitimacy was not inherent, but rather a value that had to be intentionally cultivated as part of the institution's overarching mission.

General Situation

The campus came to understand that these challenges represent real institutional risks and that the more episodic the community partnership, the more trust is eroded, and the more partner fatigue is experienced. For a branch campus, establishing and maintaining the campus's legitimacy is critical to the perception of the broader community, families, and employers who expect consistency and accountability from the Purdue presence in the state.

As of 2022, two pertinent facts are relevant to the description of the Purdue Polytechnic Institute Columbus. Firstly, the educators involved realized that the students in the first semester of the engineering technology program were having difficulty understanding the relevance of engineering beyond future job opportunities. The concepts learned in the field of engineering were abstract and related to future events, with the application and results to be experienced at a later date, rather than having a present, tangible outcome.

Secondly, there has been a tendency in engagement efforts on this campus to be episodic and more personality-driven than process-driven. As a result, the relationships between families, clinicians, and nonprofit organizations have been more in sync with academic than community-related timelines. Community partners have been generally positive and willing to partner, though somewhat tentative due to the lack of continuity and the student-related projects that have been less tied to a sense of community need and more to the interest of a faculty champion in each project.

The campus came to understand that these challenges are not the fault of individuals but are, instead, a symptom of a broader lack of a shared, sustained sense of purpose that unifies curriculum, student learning, and community partnerships into an institutional identity.

The Problem

The campus also identified several non-negotiables, which influenced the problem and limited the possible solutions:

- Engagement had to be equitable and embedded, not optional.
- Community partners had to feel a sense of consistency, safety, and respect.
- Student learning outcomes had to continue to be rigorous and assessable.
- Industry engagement had to be meaningful, not symbolic.
- The model had to be sustainable, not dependent on individual champions.

The problem facing Purdue Polytechnic Institute Columbus was not a lack of opportunities, resources, and good intentions. Instead, it was a problem inherent in its structure.

The leadership at this campus was confronted with a fundamental question: *What are some ways a branch campus could encourage early, equitable, and engaged student learning and development as a reliable and reciprocal community partner without increasing student curriculum loads or relying on precarious extracurricular models?*

This questioning led the leadership to consider the design of institutions rather than just individual programs and projects. This question led them to question their prevailing beliefs about the place of community engagement, the audience for engagement, and the balance between academic integrity and civic responsibility without a zero-sum approach to curricular space.

Leadership Recognition: From Project to Partnership

We clarified what GoBabyGo was not to be. It was not to be a one-time "feel-good" project driven by enthusiasm, lacking structure. It was not to be dependent on informal agreements or unclear expectations on the part of the families and clinicians involved. Furthermore, it was certainly not to be defined by institutional convenience at the expense of community dignity. These thoughts and reflections were the impetus for the decision to view GoBabyGo not as a project to run, but as a partnership to build.

When the initiative, an adaptive mobility intervention that modifies ride-on toy cars for children with disabilities, was proposed to the campus director at Purdue Polytechnic Institute Columbus, the risks and opportunities involved were immediately apparent.

"GoBabyGo" can easily become a volunteer opportunity, an altruistic "feel good" service project, or an ad hoc partnership, depending on the level of enthusiasm generated. This is the same set of issues the university attempted to resolve in the first place.

At the same time, it is recognized that GoBabyGo represents a unique intersection of engineering education, industry, and the families and clinicians who are affected by the university and its students' work. It is a unique opportunity to improve engagement and community simultaneously, but it is also important to do so thoughtfully.

Instead of thinking about the initiative in terms of which course or faculty person it might be assigned to, the leadership defined the challenge as: *If GoBabyGo is going to be an effective influencer on behalf of students and the wider community, where does it need to be located in order to be credible, equitable, and sustainable?*

The Community-Embedded Engineering Leadership Model

From this work, a leadership model emerged centered on embedding community partnership into required curriculum, distributing ownership across stakeholders, and designing for sustainability beyond individual champions. Rather than treating engagement as an extracurricular or episodic activity, this model positions partnership as a structural component of academic delivery.

At Purdue Polytechnic Columbus, the gateway course became the organizing anchor through which relationships, accountability, and identity formation were intentionally aligned. Leadership, in this context, was exercised not through isolated initiative but through institutional design—ensuring that engagement was equitable, predictable, and sustained across academic cycles.

This model provides a new definition for what a branch campus can do, beyond mere program delivery, and views the organization as being a relationship organization in nature. Here, the focus is not on program delivery, but rather on how the organization develops its identity and efficacy by engaging with its community partners effectively, continuously, and reciprocally (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). In this context, the curriculum, community partner, and student development emerge as intertwined aspects rather than independent processes operating in parallel.

Figure 1 presents the structure of this model of leadership, with curriculum at the center serving as the vehicle for aligning distributed leadership and community partnerships. Engagement is not a separate process, but rather one that is embedded in the curriculum itself.

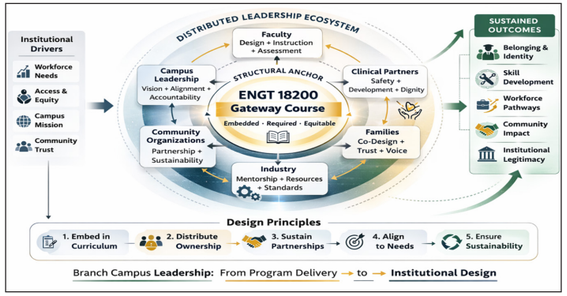


***Figure 1**. Community-embedded engineering leadership model.*

The Decision to Embed, Not Add

As illustrated in Figure 1, the gateway course serves as the structural anchor through which partnership, accountability, and identity formation converge. ENGT 18200, Gateway to Engineering, was chosen for its interdisciplinary nature and timing. By incorporating GoBabyGo into the gateway course, the project ensured accessibility for all, a consistent yearly cycle that families and partners could rely on, and institutional 'ownership' that was not based on extracurricular activity or personal preference.

The faculty deliberation indicated that a more traditional approach was likely to fail. An extracurricular approach would not provide equal access to the project but would instead privilege those already active participants. An upper-level capstone course would delay the project's potential impact beyond the time when students' identities are most vulnerable. A one-time attempt at an outreach strategy would replicate the transactional relationship that the university had been working to get away from.

By making a deliberate and impactful decision, the leadership chose to integrate "GoBabyGo" into the ENGT 18200 – Gateway to Engineering Technology course, a necessity for students in their first semester of an engineering technology degree program.

However, such a decision also means that risks must be considered. Creating a community-facing project that was associated with a gateway course meant that there were more coordination issues to contend with, more ethical issues to balance, and more 'public eye' issues to navigate.

Solution: Designing for Reciprocity Through Curriculum

This model also helped in clarifying the role of partners and eliminating ambiguity for all the stakeholders:

- Families contributed lived experiences, priorities, and design constraints.
- The physical and occupational therapist ensured the design was developmentally appropriate and safe.
- The industry partners helped in mentoring, materials, and engineering review.
- The faculty ensured assessment, sequencing, and reflection.
- The students owned the design and the outcome in the context of the constraints.

By being clearer about the role of partners, the campus eliminated the possibility of transactional engagement and maximized ownership of both student and community outcomes.

Dr. Ruiji Sun and Dr. Poonam Jayal, the faculty leaders of the course ENGT 18200 Gateway to Engineering, redesigned the course to concentrate on GoBabyGo as the primary experiential learning tool through which students learn basic engineering skills. Hypothetical laboratory activities were replaced by real-world design-build experiences that focused on need.

Students were engaged in the entire process of engineering, including working with families, interpreting the needs for the families in terms of engineering requirements, discussing the need with a pediatric physical therapist, designing the mechanical and electrical aspects of the solution, manufacturing the solution, testing the solution, documenting the entire process, and delivering a working solution.

Moreover, the entire instructional process and its sequencing were arranged so that students learned the techniques of analysis, the use of computer-aided design, the principles of electrical engineering, manufacturing techniques, and project management at the point of need. The community partners were not treated as clients; they were treated as co-educators.

Child Impact: When Engineering Becomes Real

While GoBabyGo can be seen as an adaptive mobility intervention, its deeper value lies in its attention to each child's specific needs. The program does not produce "cars." Instead, it creates individualized engineering solutions based upon assessment, co-design, and responsibility. Each child presents a different physical profile, sensory needs, and safety requirements. For the students, this means that engineering goes from a controlled academic environment to one in which design has real-life implications and consequences. One of the most widely shared "stories of impact" from this program is Brynn's story. Brynn's visual and mobility impairments required the design team to consider both safety and simplicity in the engineering solution. The build of Brynn's car also represents one of the least discussed engineering requirements: dignity. The addition of sounds, lights, and personality was not a secondary consideration. They were essential to making the car "fun." When Brynn's mother shared that the car had changed how she interacted with her older brother, moving from parallel play to interactive

play, the students saw how engineering could create not only mobility but also connection.

Other builds expanded the students' understanding of inclusive design, for example. For Evan, the modifications required consideration of trunk support needs, delayed response time, and seizure risk. The team of students designed a high-back custom car seat, a five-point harness, a removable pommel, and collision-avoidance systems. The design required mechanical stability and systems thinking.

Carlee's car required the design team to prioritize safety, including the g-tube cradle, door lock inserts, pedal block, and infrared sensors that automatically stop the car. The design required not only structural considerations but also electronic ones. Griffen's car required consideration of sensory adaptation, reducing fears of loud noises and flashing lights, creating custom hip and side supports and padding, and lowering the drive button for confidence and usability.

Throughout each of these experiences, students learned a fundamental lesson about community-embedded engineering: there is rarely a single "right" solution. GoBabyGo always has ill-defined problems, incomplete constraints, and high stakes. The result is not only a more mobile child but also engineers capable of humility, listening, iteration, and ethical responsibility.

This was a turning point for the students as a group. They were no longer learning about engineering through assignments or textbooks. They were learning engineering as a responsibility to create for real people in real contexts, with dignity, safety, and joy as part of the problem statement.

One example of how GoBabyGo has impacted the community at large is the story of Brynn, which has been disseminated through local media outlets and organizations that support children with disabilities.

Brynn is a bright, joyful, visually impaired, and mobility-limited young girl who has been living with many obstacles in her way as she tries to navigate a world that is not always designed for her. In September 2024, a physical therapist who works with GoBabyGo visited Brynn and her family, and a complete assessment was conducted, providing insight into her physical capabilities, desires, and personality.

Over the ensuing months, the students at Purdue Polytechnic Columbus worked with medical professionals to design a battery-powered ride-on toy that met Brynn's requirements. Because of Brynn's increasing ability to turn toys on by pressing a button, a large "UP" button was incorporated into the toy's design to help the child use the toy to their advantage, as well as an optional joystick so the toy could change as she grows. Other capabilities were also incorporated into the toy, such as flashing lights, music, and a revving engine sound.

In December 2023, Brynn's car was unveiled at a public build event in Columbus, sparking interest among families in industry and members of the public who witnessed the delivery process. Not only did Brynn's first test drive demonstrate her capabilities, but it was also a moment of laughter, independence, and socialization as she interacted with her siblings and explored areas of her environment, which she had never been able to reach before.

The media attention that Brynn's event received, as depicted in The Republic, focused on the significance of such an event within the community, emphasizing the different ways in which these engineering students have utilized their problem-solving capabilities, as well as their capacity to show empathy, to ensure that children such as Brynn can move about in their environment.

For Brynn's mother, such a device means so much more than just mobility. This mother explained, "It changed the way Brynn interacts with her older brother. Now they play instead of him doing his own thing."

Student Perspective: Learning with Stakes

Students frequently described their experience in GoBabyGo as "the first time they experienced engineering as real" (Student reflection, ENGT 18200, Fall 2024). One student noted that "engineering is not just solving problems—it is being accountable for what happens when someone uses your solution." Students also reflected on the importance of communication, explaining that they learned "how to communicate decisions clearly to families and partners who are not engineers, because the project is not ours alone" (Student reflections, ENGT 18200, Fall 2024).

Students described the experience with GoBabyGo as "where engineering became concrete and tangible." Calculations, circuitry, and safety factors were recognized as critical because an individual's well-being depended on them. Several students reported that this experience altered their understanding of engineering as a field that meets human needs.

For some students, however, the experience in GoBabyGo represented an event that justified and validated their decision to pursue an engineering technology degree.

Industry Perspective: Why Partners Stay

The impact of GoBabyGo at Purdue Polytechnic Columbus is quantified by program milestones that indicate steady growth in the number of adaptive vehicles deployed, students involved, industry partner investment, and volunteer hours contributed. The impact is also reflected in the community's continued view of the partnership structure as reliable and steady. From the perspective of student development theories, GoBabyGo provides students with an expedited professional identity model. The students involved do not simply apply engineering theories; they engage in engineering practice as a responsibility. The students' work is more than designing and building adaptive vehicles. It is about making design trade-offs, safety considerations, testing constraints, fabrication limitations, documentation requirements, and stakeholder engagement. The students' work is no longer about "doing their assignments"; it is about delivering outcomes of safety, function, independence, confidence, and dignity.

The industry partner feedback on the GoBabyGo program at Purdue Polytechnic Columbus indicates that it is more than a charitable effort; it is workforce development with values. Industry partners at Cummins characterized the program as an initiative that applies technical skill to improve the quality of life. The industry partners' leadership further characterized the program as an initiative that challenges students with problems whose solutions cannot be known in advance. The students must invent, test, fail, and iterate to solve the problems. The industry partners' mentors characterized the students' growth in the program as including professionalism, teamwork, innovation, and readiness—attributes that are hard to teach.

To the community, the return on investment is clear. The delivery events are a public display of academic work that becomes a community partnership, where families see the campus deliver on its commitments, and the campus demonstrates that it is not just a short-term, superficial partnership.

For industry mentors, it became clear that the project process forced students to navigate ambiguity, revise designs based on stakeholder input, and balance competing factors under time pressure. Unlike other academic work, the GoBabyGo process allowed the industry mentor to observe how students respond to problems, communicate across disciplines, and be accountable for outcomes under conditions like those in industry.

To the industry, GoBabyGo is a litmus test of student readiness. The students demonstrated their ability to navigate ambiguity, work effectively in interdisciplinary teams, communicate across disciplines, and be accountable for outcomes within the industry partnership.

As far as the industry is concerned, the concept of GoBabyGo has evolved from community involvement to a workforce aligned with the value statements of safe, inclusive, and socially responsible engineering.

Becoming a Community Partner

Leadership learned that being a community partner is not just a sporadic activity, but rather a consistent set of practices. The campus worked to build trust by being present, clear from the start, and respectful of the community's timeline. Collaboration with clinicians and families, and accountability were visible through delivery events and outcomes. Reflection became a formal practice, rather than something that happened incidentally, which helped the partnership improve over time. The community was not just a "setting" for learning; it was a partner in educating future engineers.

Purdue Polytechnic Institute Columbus learned that being a community partner is not just about having good intentions and benevolent purposes; it is also about having observable, consistent practices, such as having a timeline to meet community needs, having shared power with clinicians and families, and having accountability visible through delivery events, decision-making, and reflection.

Trust is not established by the campus that makes cars, but rather by the development of capacity, predictability, and respect.

Benefits

Beyond individual results, institutional legitimacy was enhanced. The family came to trust the campus as a reliable entity. The industry saw a direct return on its workforce development. The community organization saw Purdue Polytechnic Columbus as a consistent player rather than a one-time partner. This helped solidify their role as a statewide campus capable of advancing both talent development and community capacity.

A beginning of professional self-identification and self-confidence was created in the students. The family returned and referred to others. The industry came back year after year. The campus gained visibility as a legitimate player in the community. The

success of this model did not end there; it extended to areas related to the individual.

Current Situation

The next leadership decision is no longer about whether GoBabyGo will continue, but about how it will be scaled up responsibly. It is about deciding whether to prioritize more cars, more courses, more industry, or a separate summer model, in a way that maintains a mutually beneficial partnership and is not burdensome to families, clinicians, or faculty.

New challenges have emerged as GoBabyGo has become a respected partnership. There are more demands than capacity to meet them. There is a need to balance the faculty workload with the program's growth. There is a need to assess the capacity to meet the demands.

As the leadership explained, the process of becoming community partners is ongoing.

Leadership Implications for Branch Campuses

This case suggests that leadership in branch campus environments must move beyond program development toward institutional design. Belonging, legitimacy, and partnership are not produced by proximity or intention alone; they must be embedded into curriculum, structured through predictable partnership roles, and sustained through shared accountability.

For branch campuses operating within statewide systems, the challenge is not a lack of engagement opportunities but the absence of structures that align learning, identity formation, and community partnership. Early curricular integration, distributed leadership roles, and sustained partnership cycles allow engagement to function as an institutional practice rather than an optional initiative.

The implication is not that institutions should replicate a specific program, but that they should design systems capable of sustaining reciprocal relationships, professional identity development, and workforce alignment over time.

Why This Matters Now

Community partnership is not a 'nice to have' for branch campuses, but a key driver for legitimacy, trust, and sustainability. Purdue Polytechnic Institute Columbus is a statewide location of Purdue University serving both regional workforce needs and the broader mission of the institution. This means that belonging is not an automatic outcome of living in a residence, having a sense of campus culture, etc. Rather, it must be deliberately created through experiences that allow the student to see themselves as engineers and to see the campus as part of something bigger than the classroom.

This is an imperative right now for two reasons. First, the world does not just need graduates with technical competence; it needs graduates who can work in teams, communicate with diverse audiences, function in ambiguity, and design for people in an ethical way. If we wait to provide that kind of application in upper-level classes, we risk losing the student before they ever see the relevance of what they are doing.

The second is that the world of community partnerships has become increasingly discerning. They cannot afford to partner episodically, where projects start and stop with the semester, or with the enthusiasm of a single champion. They need a consistent, reciprocal partnership grounded in safety, dignity, and shared responsibility. GoBabyGo is imperative right now because it represents a key opportunity to create a model where the student sees the relevance of what they are doing, and the campus sees the relevance of the partnership. The imperative is not to get more work done in the community, but to create structures that sustain partnerships, scale in an ethical way, and benefit workforce development and the community.

Ultimately, this case demonstrates that leadership in a branch campus context is exercised through institutional design rather than individual initiative. Belonging, legitimacy, and partnership do not emerge organically; they are constructed through the alignment of curriculum, relationships, and shared responsibility. The work of leadership, therefore, is not simply to launch programs, but to build structures capable of sustaining purpose, trust, and community impact over time.

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Case Study

Benchmarking Community–University Partnerships at a Branch Campus: Implications for Anchor Mission and Community Engagement

Sarah M. Sweitzer

Abstract

Community–university partnerships are central to the public mission of higher education, particularly for institutions serving regional and historically underserved communities. This study examines the quality and characteristics of partnerships between community-based organizations and the Stockton Campus of Stanislaus State, a regional branch campus, using a mixed-methods descriptive survey grounded in Carnegie Community Engagement principles. Survey data were collected from community partners (n = 17; 30% response rate) to benchmark partnership effectiveness across domains including reciprocity, communication, impact, and sustainability. Findings indicate positive perceptions of partnership purpose and community impact, with variation in perceptions of shared decision-making, communication structures, and institutional support. Results align with prior research demonstrating that partnerships are often driven by human capital exchange and shaped by individual relationships, while often being constrained by institutional complexity and capacity limitations. The study highlights the distinctive role of branch campuses as anchor institutions embedded in local ecosystems, emphasizing their potential to foster equitable, place-based partnerships while also navigating structural constraints. Implications are discussed for strengthening branch campus engagement infrastructure, advancing co-creation with community partners, and enhancing evaluation capacity as a pathway to deeper, more transformational partnerships.

Introduction

Community–university partnerships have become a defining feature of higher education's public purpose, reflecting a broader shift toward civic engagement, experiential learning, and place-based institutional missions (Yamamura and Koth, 2018). Community–university partnerships are becoming central to the evolution of higher education, particularly as institutions respond to increasing calls for public accountability, equity, and workforce impact (Breznitz and Feldman, 2012). Engagement is no longer peripheral to higher education's identity and function, especially at urban and regional institutions. Partnerships are critical to student learning, student workforce readiness, and community impact. These collaborations are particularly important for regional and urban institutions, where engagement with local communities is often embedded in institutional identity and mission (Fitzgerald et al, 2012).

The concept of anchor institutions underscores the role of universities as stable, place-based entities that contribute to local economic, social, and educational development. Partnerships with nonprofit and community-based organizations are a primary mechanism through which this mission is enacted. These partnerships facilitate not only student learning and civic development but also organizational capacity building, knowledge exchange, and community impact (Bringle et al, 2009; Enos and Morton, 2003).

Branch campuses represent a distinct and underexamined context within this landscape. Unlike flagship or main campuses, branch campuses are often more geographically and socially embedded in their surrounding communities, serving as critical access points for higher education and acting as localized anchor institutions. Branch campuses are often more directly responsive to local workforce and community needs and more dependent on partnership to fulfill their mission. This embeddedness positions branch campuses where engagement is not an institutional add-on but a core operational necessity (Sweitzer et al, 2026). Their proximity to community needs positions them uniquely to cultivate sustained, reciprocal partnerships; however, they may also face structural limitations related to resources, institutional visibility, and governance (Yamamura and Koth, 2018).

Partnerships are the primary mechanism through which this anchor role is enacted. In an aspirational model, partnerships enable co-production of knowledge, capacity building for community organizations, and applied learning opportunities for students. Research consistently highlights tensions between aspirational models of reciprocity and the realities of practice (Bringle et al., 2009). Studies show that partnerships often remain transactional, centered on student labor or short-term projects, rather than evolving into transformational collaborations characterized by shared decision-making and co-creation (Clayton et al., 2010). Further, partnership effectiveness is shaped by institutional infrastructure, individual relationships, and capacity constraints on both sides. As noted in prior studies, partnerships that exist between individuals, and without institutional support structures, remain vulnerable to turnover and fragmentation (Lubar and Marks, 2022). Additionally, community partners frequently encounter challenges related to institutional complexity, limited communication, and uneven distribution of benefits (Yamamura and Koth, 2018).

This study situates these dynamics within a branch campus context, examining how partnerships at the Stockton Campus of Stanislaus State function as mechanisms of engagement and expression of an anchor mission (Sweitzer et al, 2026). This study examines partnership quality from the perspective of community partners engaged with a branch campus. By benchmarking these partnerships using a Carnegie-aligned survey instrument, the study aims to (1) assess the current state of partnerships, (2) identify strengths and areas for improvement, and (3) explore the implications for branch campus anchor missions.

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a mixed-methods descriptive survey design to assess community partner perceptions of partnership quality. This study utilized a survey instrument intentionally aligned with the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification framework (Carnegie Foundation, 2020), a nationally recognized standard for assessing institutional engagement with community partners. The Carnegie framework is widely used by higher education institutions to evaluate the extent to which partnerships are reciprocal, mutually beneficial, and integrated into the core missions of teaching, research, and service. Its significance lies in shifting the focus from counting engagement activities to examining the quality, depth, and impact of those partnerships.

The Carnegie framework emphasizes several core dimensions of high-quality community engagement, including:

- Reciprocity and mutual benefit, ensuring that both institutional and community partners derive value
- Community voice and shared decision-making, recognizing community expertise and promoting equitable collaboration
- Integration with teaching, learning, and research, linking partnerships to student learning and knowledge production
- Demonstrated community impact, reflecting meaningful contributions to community-identified needs
- Assessment and continuous improvement, using data to inform practice
- Sustainability and institutional support, ensuring partnerships are maintained beyond individual relationships

The survey instrument was developed to crosswalk directly to these dimensions, with items grouped to reflect each domain. Careful attention was given to survey design to ensure accessibility and usability for a diverse group of community partners. Questions were written in plain, non-technical language, avoiding academic jargon to ensure clarity across sectors, including nonprofit, government, education, and business respondents.

To minimize respondent burden and support higher response rates, the instrument was intentionally kept concise while still capturing key constructs associated with partnership quality. This approach reflects best practices in community-engaged research, which emphasize respect for partners' time and the importance of producing data that are both meaningful and actionable.

Overall, the survey design sought to balance alignment with a nationally validated framework and practical considerations of partner engagement, enabling the collection of data that are both rigorous and relevant for institutional improvement and external reporting.

The survey included quantitative data (Likert-scale responses) and qualitative open-ended responses. This approach aligns with best practices in partnership evaluation, combining numerical trends with stakeholder voice to provide a more comprehensive understanding of partnership "health". This survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Stanislaus State.

Participants and Sampling

The survey invitation was e-mailed to 57 community partners affiliated with the Stockton Campus of Stanislaus State. A total of 17 responses were received, yielding a 30% response rate. Respondents represented a range of partner types, with the majority identifying as community-based organizations.

Instrumentation

The survey included Likert-scale items assessing partnership purpose and quality, reciprocity and shared decision-making, community-centered engagement and equity, curricular integration and scholarship, assessment and impact, and continuous improvement and sustainability (institutionalization). Open-ended questions were also included to capture qualitative feedback.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, focusing on response distributions and overall trends across key dimensions. Findings were interpreted in relation to established frameworks in the literature, including partnership development theory, community-based participatory research, and evaluation capacity building.

Results

Respondent Characteristics

Among respondents (n = 17), the majority represented community-based organizations (53%), 23% represented education (K-12, higher education, trades), 18% government (city, county, state, federal), and 6% business (Figure 1). This distribution reflects the central role of nonprofit partners in community–university engagement.

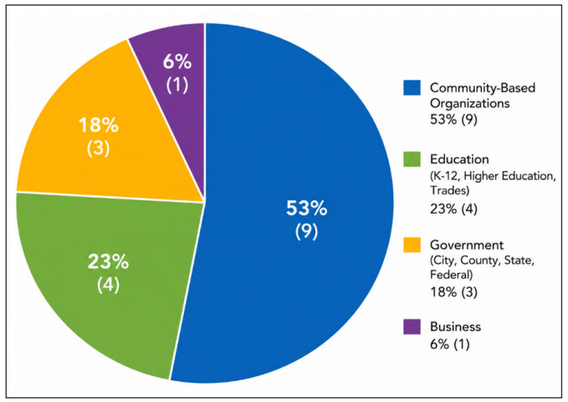


Figure 1. *Responses to the survey include a variety of organizations.*

Partnership Purpose

In 2019, only 29% of respondent organizations were activity partnered with the Stockton Campus. That grew to 76% (in 2023) and 100% (in 2026) of respondent organizations identifying as actively partnered (Figure 2).

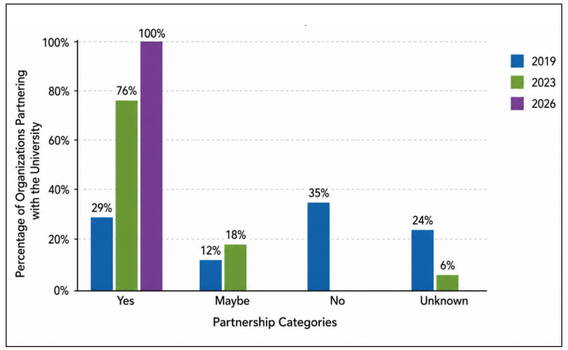


Figure 2. *The number of organizations surveyed that were actively partnered with the branch campus increased over a six-year time period.*

Organizations were most likely to partner with the branch campus (Figure 3) for student internships/ service learning (41%) and collaboration on grants (41%) followed by class presentations/career fairs/ tabling events (35%), and clinical/practicum location (24%). Partnership was less likely to include employee training (18%), employment of graduates (12%), and research/evaluation/reports (6%).

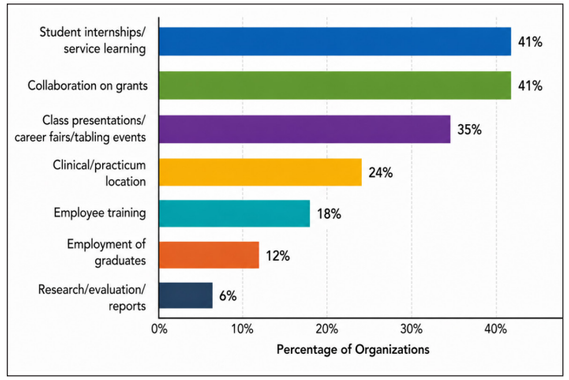


Figure 3. *There were a variety of ways in which organizations partner with the Stockton Campus.*

Overall Partnership Quality

Overall, 94% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that partnership with the Stockton Campus reflected high-quality community engagement (Figure 4).

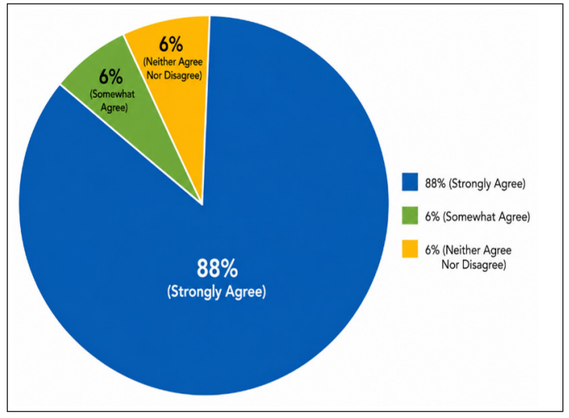


Figure 4. *Respondents agree that the partnership reflects high-quality community engagement.*

Open responses indicated that partnerships address meaningful community needs, produce positive outcomes for both community and students, and function within resource constraints. An example response encapsulates this tension:

"Keep on doing what you're doing, add more resources to the team to build even stronger support to our community to generate even more meaningful and impactful programs for the betterment of our community."

These findings align with prior research indicating that community partners value the benefits of higher education partnerships, particularly access to human capital and student engagement.

Partnership Design and Reciprocity

All (100%) respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the partnership was built on shared goals and mutual benefit (Figure 5). Nearly all respondents (94%) strongly or somewhat agreed that community and institutional partners have meaningful input in decision-making related to the partnership and that the roles and expectations in the partnership are clear and mutually agreed upon.

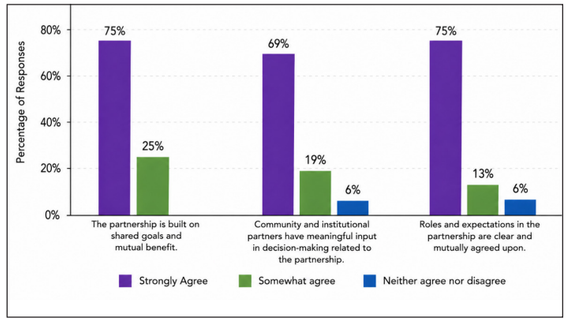


Figure 5. *Agreement that the partnerships are built on shared goals and mutual benefit, with meaningful input in decision-making, and clear roles and expectations.*

An example response illustrates the mutual benefit:

"Our partnership reflects a shared commitment to expanding access to education and workforce pathways for students and the community. Through Go San Joaquin, we collaborate to elevate and promote Stan State Stockton Campus programs and resources, increasing visibility and awareness among K-12 students, adult learners, and community members. In return, Stan State's engagement strengthens Go San Joaquin's regional network by contributing higher education perspectives, aligning pathways across systems, and supporting a more seamless transition from education to career. This mutual exchange ensure that both organizations amplify impact while advancing shared goals around equity, access, and student success."

Community Engagement and Equity

Perceptions of shared decision-making and power distribution were positive but had the highest variability of the four areas encompassed by the survey (Figure 6). All (100%) respondents agreed that the partnership advances equity and responds to community-identified needs. Nearly all respondents (94%) strongly or somewhat agree that within the partnership community knowledge and expertise are valued equally with academic expertise. In regard to decision-making and resource sharing in ways that felt fair and appropriate, 94% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed.

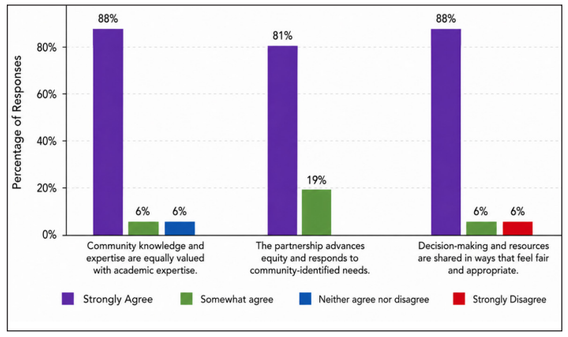


Figure 6. *Agreement that community expertise and knowledge are equally valued, responds to a community-identified need, and that decision-making and resource-sharing feel fair.*

An example response illustrates shared decision-making:

"Our relationship has opened new doors for improved relationships like the VITA program that has evolved to include other partners and grown based on Stan State's successful model and constructed on joint decision-making processes."

One respondent strongly disagreed and suggested more limited involvement in planning and decision processes. This pattern reflects broader findings in the literature that partnerships often struggle to move from reciprocity to co-creation, with power imbalances persisting in practice. Despite strong overall satisfaction, this reflects a well-documented tension that partnerships often claim reciprocity but can operate within institution-led structures. Care must be taken to ensure that partnerships do not become exploitative or transactional when power is uneven.

Integration with Teaching, Learning, and Research

Three questions were asked in relation to how partnerships are integrated into the academic mission of the branch campus (Figure 7). The questions specifically asked 1) how partnerships were intentionally connected to teaching, learning, and/or research, 2) that students, faculty, or staff were meaningfully prepared and supported for engagement with partners, and 3) that the partnership enhanced student learning and civic development. Across all three questions, 94% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed on the alignment of these three measures.

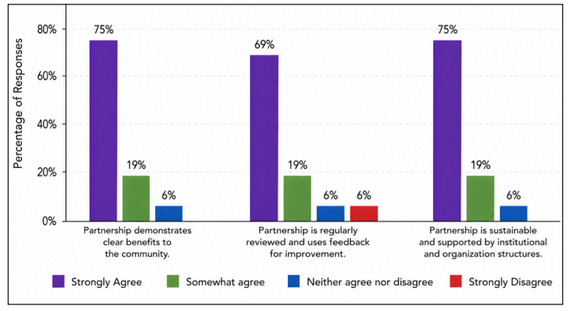


Figure 7. *Agreement that partnership is linked to teaching and learning, faculty and students are prepared for partner engagement, and that is enhances student learning.*

An example response illustrates how shared partnerships are valuable in the translation of student learning to workforce readiness:

"Our partnership supports student learning by strengthening awareness, access, and alignment across education and workforce pathways. The connection supports applied learning by reinforcing clear pathways from education to employment and ensuring students can see how academic programs translate into real-world workforce outcomes."

This aligns with national evidence showing that partnerships can expand access to human capital and improve program outcomes for community organizations with an emphasis on the human capital of student contributions to organizations and the organizational benefits to capacity and services. This confirms that student engagement remains the dominant mode of partnership.

Continuous Improvement and Sustainability

The majority (94%) of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the partnership demonstrates clear benefits for the community and is supported by institutional and organization structure (Figure 8). On the topic of regular review of the partnership and using feedback for improvement only 88% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed. This difference could suggest that systematic assessment and long-term planning are not uniformly embedded across partnerships and highlight the tension between partnerships and university resources and systems.

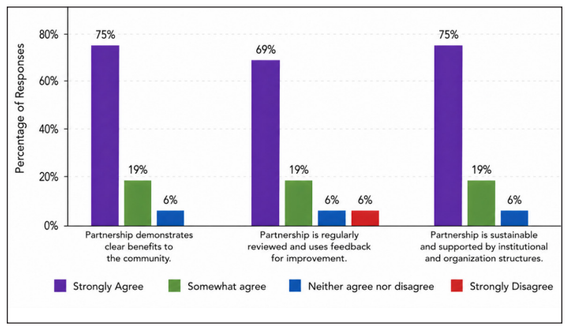


Figure 8. *Agreement that partnership demonstrates benefit to community, is regularly reviewed, and is sustainable.*

Discussion

Partnerships at a Branch Campus: Strengths and Opportunities

Findings from this study suggest that the Stockton Campus of Stanislaus State has established a strong foundation of community partnerships characterized by shared purpose and demonstrated impact. These strengths are particularly significant in the context of a branch campus, where proximity to community needs enhances the potential for meaningful engagement.

Branch campuses, by virtue of their geographic and relational embeddedness, are uniquely positioned to function as anchor institutions. Their localized focus enables them to respond directly to community-identified needs, foster long-term relationships, and contribute to regional development. This study highlights the distinctive role of branch campuses as localized anchor institutions (Sweitzer et al, 2026). These characteristics position branch campuses as high-potential, but resource-constrained anchors. As such, partnerships tend to be more relational, more place-based, and potentially more equitable. They also are more vulnerable to structural limitations.

Persistent Challenges: From Transactional to Transformational Partnerships

These findings clearly demonstrate that the growing number of partnerships are effective but can still grow to create a more sustained and transformative impact in community. Transactional partnerships are focused on the exchange of services (e.g. Student placements). In contrast, transformational partnerships are co-created, long-term, and mission-integrated (Enos and Morton, 2003; Fitzgerald et al, 2012). Most partnerships in this study are in the transactional-to-transitional range, and in their initial years of development.

Despite these strengths, the findings also highlight persistent challenges consistent with the broader literature. Partnerships risk remaining transactional, centered on student placements and short-term activities, rather than evolving into deeper, co-created collaborations without adequate campus resourcing and institutional, not just individual, relationships (Lubar and Marks, 2022). This tension reflects structural and capacity constraints on both sides. Community organizations often lack the time and resources to engage in partnership development, while institutions may lack the infrastructure to support sustained, reciprocal engagement (Trebil-Smith, 2019).

Implications for Branch Campus Anchor Missions

For branch campuses, advancing an anchor mission requires intentional investment in partnership infrastructure, co-creation practices, and evaluation and assessment systems. Partnership infrastructure includes centralized coordination leading to partnerships being maintained by the institution and not by just one individual within the institution (Bringle et al., 2009; Clayton et al., 2010). Clear communication pathways are vital to this partnership infrastructure. Co-creation practices should include shared decision-making, and community-led agenda setting (Trebil-Smith, 2019). Evaluation and assessment systems ideally include regular feedback loops, and data-informed continuous quality improvement (Lubar and Marks, 2022). By addressing these areas, branch campuses can move beyond transactional engagement toward transformational partnerships that generate mutual benefit and sustained community impact.

Infrastructure as the Missing Link

A critical insight—especially for branch campuses—is the role of infrastructure. Without institutional support, partnerships rely on individuals, sustainability is fragile, and communication can become inconsistent. As noted in prior research, effective partnerships require dedicated infrastructure and bridge-building roles (Trebil-Smith, 2019; Yamamura and Koth, 2018). For branch campuses, this is particularly important due to smaller administrative capacity and higher reliance on community relationships.

The Role of Evaluation and Capacity Building

A key implication of this study is the importance of evaluation capacity building as a key opportunity for strengthening partnerships. Research demonstrates that community–university collaborations can enhance organizations' ability to assess impact, improve programs, and communicate outcomes (Suiter et al, 2024; Taylor, 2025). Embedding evaluation practices within partnerships can support continuous improvement, enhance accountability and transparency, and strengthen the case for sustainability and funding (Trebil-Smith, 2019). Evidence shows that organizations using evaluation improve practice, communicate impact, and strengthen decision-making (Suiter et al, 2024). For branch campuses, investing in evaluation bridges engagement and institutional legitimacy, supports Carnegie classification efforts, and strengthens anchor mission outcomes.

Limitations

This study is limited by its small sample size and reliance on self-reported data. Additionally, the findings represent a single institutional context and may not be generalizable to other settings.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that branch campus partnerships are meaningful and impactful, relational and place-based, and aligned with anchor mission goals. This study provides a benchmark assessment of community–university partnerships at a branch campus, highlighting both strengths and opportunities for growth. However, advancing from effective to transformative partnerships requires deeper attention to reciprocity, infrastructure, and evaluation (Trebil-Smith, 2019; Yamamura and Koth, 2018).

As higher education institutions continue to navigate questions of relevance and public value, branch campuses may play an increasingly critical role in modeling place-based, community-centered engagement (Sweitzer et al, 2026). Strengthening these partnerships is not only an institutional priority but also a pathway to achieving broader social and educational outcomes. Branch campuses are uniquely positioned to lead this work—but only if engagement is institutionalized, reciprocal, and measured, not assumed.

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Case Study

The Great RELLIS Academic Alliance Experiment: Challenges and Successes of Establishing a New Multi-Institutional Branch Campus within the Texas A&M University-System

Shad Nelson

Abstract

Texas A&M University-Kingsville is a one of twelve member institutions in the Texas A&M University System. In 2016, a unique campus initiative was created in Bryan, Texas, located within 10 minutes driving distance from the main Texas A&M University campus in College Station, Texas. This campus located in Bryan is named the RELLIS Academic Alliance with the particular focus of serving undergraduate transfer students in the region. This campus in particular has working articulation agreements with the community college in Bryan, where students are able to take courses in their sophomore year at the RELLIS campus that will count towards a four-year baccalaureate degree. The RELLIS Alliance is unique in structure in that academic programs from each of the Texas A&M University member institutions offer degree programs at the RELLIS campus. Furthermore, the degrees issued are degrees from the member institution, so students enrolled in the specific four-year degree are students counted at the degree granting institution. In 2019, Texas A&M University-Kingsville and the Dick & Mary Lewis Kleberg College of Agriculture & Natural Resources started a Bachelor's of Science degree in Agribusiness at the RELLIS campus. This case study details the history of the RELLIS Academic Alliance, the challenges and successes of the academic programs, and the growth and expansion of the agribusiness program at the RELLIS programs. To date, the agribusiness program offered by TAMUK in Bryan, Texas has been a great success as the highest single enrolled major within the RELLIS Academic Alliance.

Historical Background

Texas A&M University main campus is located in College Station, Texas. The institution we recognize today as a land grant, R1 research intensive institution, that engages in education, research and extension outreach throughout the state did not originate with that expanded vision. The institution originated as a college as it became Texas' first public institution of higher education with the donation of 2,416 acres of land under the Morrill Act by the United States Congress in July 1862. The leading objective was to provide classical and scientific studies, including military tactics, and to teach agriculture and mechanic arts training. Thus, the Agricultural & Mechanical College of Texas was established on April 17, 1871. Instruction began in 1876 with 6 faculty educating 40 male, white only students, where the Morrill Act require military training of student participants (History-Texas A&M University. How our university began).

In 1963, the Texas Legislature change the name of the College to what we know now as Texas Agricultural and Mechanical University (Texas A&M) University. During the 1960s, several other significant changes occurred under the direction of the Presidency of General James Earl Rudder. Participation in the Corp of Cadets was no longer mandatory, but issued in as voluntary in 1965. It also permitted women and African Americans to enroll in the educational experience. The first branch campus, Texas A&M University at Galveston, was established in 1962 with a particular focus in marine-related studies in the coastal region of Texas. Thus, although historically established through the Morrill Act as a recognized 'land-grant' institution, Texas A&M University has expanded and diversified its footprint across the state such that today it is recognized as a "triple land-grant" institution, because it was designated as a 'sea-grant' institution in 1971 and "space-grant" institution in 1989 (History-Texas A&M University. How our university began).

Texas A&M University (TAMU) expanded from there into a "System" by the inclusion of various colleges, universities and higher educational institutions across the state of Texas. Some of these institutions changed their names to include the Texas A&M brand into their name, while others held on to their established and historic identity. Texas A&M University-Kingsville is one of the institutions that changed their name in 1993 a few years after it joined the Texas A&M System in 1989 (History-Texas A&M University-Kingsville). In 2025, Texas A&M University-Kingsville celebrates its 100th anniversary as a higher educational institution. It was the original institution of higher education in the southern region of the state, known as the South Texas State Teachers College in 1925, where it was chartered as the South Texas Normal School. Several other TAMU System Universities across south Texas owe their accreditation and establishment due to the help of TAMU-Kingsville, such as other system universities: Texas A&M International in Laredo, Texas A&M University in Corpus Christi, and Texas A&M University-San Antonio, and currently the Texas A&M University System has reached out to TAMU-Kingsville to help establish the newly formed Texas A&M University-Victoria campus. Today, there is a total number of 12 institutions of higher education in the TAMU System (History: Texas A&M University Diversifies).

One of the unique member institutions in the Texas A&M University System is the creation of a branch campus in Bryan, Texas that is located only 15 miles away from the main campus of Texas A&M University at College Station. This branch campus is known as the TAMU System RELLIS Campus. The location of the RELLIS campus dates back to World War II, where the site was housing barracks for over one thousand women air service pilots at the Bryan Army Air Field. After the war, it was used as a college annex and jet-pilot training facility during the Korean War. In 1962, Texas A&M initially leased the property and renamed the location as the Riverside Campus after obtaining full ownership in 1988 for the purpose of research exploration. Seeing the location's potential for enhancing educational and research opportunities for those residing in the Bryan and College Station region of Texas, TAMU System Chancellor John Sharp transformed the Riverside Campus into the RELLIS Campus in 2016. The RELLIS name stands for six core values of: Respect, Excellence, Leadership, Loyalty, Integrity, and Selfless Service (Gregg, T. RELLIS Recollections). The campus initiative has evolved into what is known as the TAMUS RELLIS Alliance, where all participating TAMUS regional (branch/member) institutions are encouraged to establish at minimum one higher educational program major at the RELLIS Bryan Texas campus.

RELLIS Alliance Buy-In by Regional Institutions

Participation in the RELLIS Alliance by the other 11 TAMU System (TAMUS) regional campuses, where the majority reside hundreds of miles across the state of Texas from Bryan, Texas, would not have been possible without a very influential and transformational leader at the helm of the system. The Texas A&M University System is led by a Chancellor that hires all Presidents that reside at each TAMUS regional campus. When the RELLIS Alliance initiative was created by the Chancellor all of the TAMUS regional campus, Presidents were informed that they each would have at least one academic program offered at the RELLIS campus. It was not negotiable, each regional campus would have to offer an academic program in Bryan, Texas. The regional campus Presidents were provided the freedom to select the program(s) they considered would be most valuable to offer at the RELLIS campus. Thus, this was a mandatory initiative placed upon each TAMUS member university. This may not have settled well at the onset of the RELLIS campus creation, but there needed to be separation from Texas A&M University College Station campus and collective collaboration from all other regional TAMUS universities participating in the RELLIS campus to be seen as a comprehensive and unique TAMU System Alliance educational initiative experience (History-RELLIS Academic Alliance).

The Great RELLIS Branch Campus Experiment

At the onset of the RELLIS Alliance 'Multi-Institutional' campus experiment, the main campus at College Station set aside funding for the RELLIS campus for each regional TAMUS campus to hire a faculty member to lead each newly established academic program at the RELLIS, Bryan Texas campus. The original agreement was to fund the faculty member for the first three years while the program major was being established, with a tuition cost split share agreement between RELLIS and the System University. The tuition cost share split would be based on enrollment in the program, such that as the higher the student headcount grew in the academic program classes, then the lower the financial burden on the RELLIS campus budget. The original plan was that each academic program in time would have student enrollment high enough to be self-supporting and cover the cost of the faculty member. After the initial three years, the enrollment and tuition support should be high enough and sufficient to justify each institution to cover the full cost of the faculty member housed and teaching at the RELLIS Bryan campus.

The initiation of the RELLIS campus started with several academic programs starting in 2018. However, due to the breakout of COVID in March 2020, the RELLIS campus in Bryan was closed temporarily and all programs went online. Although some programs grew slightly in headcount during this COVID time, this put added financial burden on the TAMUS regional campuses to be able to truly afford and cover the salaries of the faculty hired to teach in Bryan, Texas. So, an arrangement and agreement were made to extend the time for cost sharing with institutions and to bolster newly formed academic programs. This second round of cost sharing program was called internally as "split share 2.0" and is still ongoing at this time with several institutions as of December 2025 (Shankle 2025).

A list of academic programs that were started in 2018 and others in 2019 that are still offered at the RELLIS campus are shown in Table 1. At the onset of the RELLIS Alliance in 2018, full participation across all Texas A&M System regional campuses did not occur, as evidenced by four institutions with programs established in 2018. Texas A&M University-Kingsville initiated its first program as a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology in 2019, along with two other system member universities (Table 1). In total 12 academic degree programs continue to be serviced to undergraduate students at the RELLIS campus from seven participating A&M System branch universities.

The College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Texas A&M University-Kingsville initiated another program as a Bachelor of Science degree at the start of the Spring semester in 2020 (Table 2). Several other academic programs were created prior to and during COVID, when several started offering classes in an online/remote format in 2021 and 2022. As the campus re-opened its door for face-to-face instruction again, four new degree programs came on in 2023-2024, with Texas A&M-San Antonio joining back into the RELLIS Alliance. Over the course of four years, 15 new majors were offered by six System branch campuses at the RELLIS campus (Table 2). It is obvious from the growth of new academic programs that System campuses saw the value of investing more programs and faculty talent in the RELLIS Alliance initiative. At this time eight Texas A&M System regional/branch member universities are participating and offering degree programs at the Bryan Texas RELLIS campus.

Table 1. Texas A&M System Regional Institutions and Initial Academic Programs 2018-2019.

Initial Degrees Offered by Regional Texas A&M University System Campuses: Programs started under initial three-Year "Hold Harmless" Agreement by A&M System		
Institution	**Degree Program**	**Year Established**
Tarleton State University (Texas A&M at Stevensville)	Criminal Justice (BS)	2018
	Criminal Justice Admin (BAAS)	2018
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi	Accounting (BBA)	2018
	Finance (BBA	2018
	General Business (BBA)	2018
	Management (BBA)	2018
	Marketing (BBA)	2018
Texas A&M University-Texarkana	Biology (BS)	2018
West Texas A&M University-Canyon	Health Science (BS)	2018
Texas A&M University-Kingsville	Psychology-Health (BA)	2019
Texas A&M International-Laredo	Communication (BA)	2019
Texas A&M University-Commerce	Computer Science (BS)	2019

Table 2. Texas A&M System Regional Institutions and Additional Academic Programs 2020-2024.

Degrees Offered by Regional Texas A&M University System Campuses: Programs under the second phase "Hold Harmless 2.0" Agreement by A&M System		
Institution	**Degree Program**	**Year Established**
Tarleton State University (Texas A&M at Stevensville)	Mechanical Engineering (BS)	2020
	Mechanical Engineering Technology (BS)	2020
	Social Work (BSW)	2020
	General Studies (BS)	2021
	Civil Engineering (BS)	2022
	Social Work (BAAS)	2024
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi	Business Economics (BBA)	2024
Texas A&M University-San Antonio	Political Science (BA)	2023
Texas A&M University-Texarkana	Electrical Engineering (BS)	2020
	Supply Chain Management (BBA)	2024
Texas A&M University-Kingsville	Agribusiness (BS)	2020
Texas A&M University-Commerce	Computer Information Systems (BS)	2021
	Cybersecurity (BS)	2021

Programmatic Challenges

The onset of the RELLIS Alliance did not go without its own challenges. Several programs that were initiated early in the first years of the RELLIS campus did not continue. A list of academic programs that were started and later discontinued is shown in Table 3. Some of these programs were not successful because there wasn't sufficient understanding of the student clientele that the programs would be serving. For example, the Registered Nursing (RN) to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) was difficult to continue because the majority of student participants were working full time and in order to take courses the students would have to come to the RELLIS campus for those courses. This became too burdensome for the students to manage in their work and life schedules, so the program had to be closed. Other programs, such as the Water Resources Bachelor of Sciences program, were too "boutique" to those that it may attract into the program at the bachelor's level (Shankle, 2025). Taking a deeper look into enrollment trends at the main institutions found some of these boutique programs to have historic low enrollment at the main institutions. Other unsuccessful academic programs may have had undergraduates interested in these specific topic areas but the lead regional institutions only had successful enrollment in such niche disciplines at the graduate school level. As the RELLIS Alliance initiate was originally created to be only an undergraduate serving institution, creating or moving these boutique programs into a graduate format was not possible, and the low enrolled programs were closed. In total, seven academic programs offered by five different A&M System member universities that were initiated early on in the first years of the great RELLIS experiment have been closed (Table 3).

Table 3. Programs discontinued at the RELLIS campus.

Degrees Offered and Later Closed by Regional Texas A&M University System Campuses:	
Institution	**Degree Program**
Tarleton State University (Texas A&M at Stevensville)	Public Administration
Texas A&M University-San Antonio	Water Resources (BS)
Prairie View A&M University- (PVAMU)	RN to BSN
	Criminal Justice--Criminalistics
West Texas A&M University-Canyon	Public Safety Management (BAAS)
Texas A&M University-Central Texas	Computer Information Systems (BS)
	Business Management (BAAS)

Although the creation of the RELLIS Alliance and participation by each A&M System University was a mandate to each President to create and offer at least one academic program in Bryan, Texas, the Associate Vice Chancellor and Provost at the RELLIS campus has received permission under the new Chancellor for more flexibility to release partnering institutions that no long desire to participate in the RELLIS Academic Alliance (Shankle, 2025). For some universities, the distance from their main campus and the location of the RELLIS campus has become a real concern, as some exceed 500 miles between campuses. Some of these concerns reside not only due to distance, but serious budgetary concerns about where to put limited financial resources. Hiring a faculty member at the RELLIS campus can often lead to not having budget for a main campus faculty hire once the "no-hold harmless" agreement time has ended. This is especially problematic if enrollment increases at the main campus and slower in the RELLIS program.

Student Headcount Growth

Semester by semester enrollment has had consistently positive enrollment at the RELLIS campus since Fall 2018 through the current Fall 2025 semester. Two exceptions to this were observed in Spring 2021 where no new students were enrolled when the RELLIS campus was closed for COVID and a slight decline of 20 students in total undergraduate enrollment from Fall 2023 to Spring 2024 (Table 4). As expected, as student headcount (enrollment) increases, total semester credit hours (SCH) generally increases as long as students are enrolled in courses.

Table 4. RELLIS Alliance Undergraduate student enrollment (headcount) and semester credit hour (SCH) growth Fall to Spring 2018 to 2025.

RELLIS Enrollment & SCH				
Term	**Total Term Enrollment**	**Term Enrollment Growth**	**Total Term SCH**	**Term SCH Growth**
Fall 2018	102		906	
Spring 2019	114	12%	933	3%
Fall 2019	186	63%	1,763	89%
Spring 2020	249	34%	2,377	35%
Fall 2020	313	26%	3,078	29%
Spring 2021	313	0%	3,245	5%
Fall 2021	373	19%	3,882	20%
Spring 2022	388	4%	4,157	7%
Fall 2022	452	16%	4,551	9%
Spring 2023	481	6%	4,884	7%
Fall 2023	564	17%	5,841	20%
Spring 2024	544	-4%	5774	-1%
Fall 2024	569	5%	5,871	2%
Spring 2025	587	3%	6081	4%
Fall 2025	685	17%	7159	18%
Fall to Fall	**Growth in Enrollment**	**Change in Growth**	**SCH Change**	**SCH Growth**
2018-2025	583	571%	6253	690%

Over the past seven academic years AY19 through AY26, total student enrollment has grown over 570% (Figure 1) and total SCH growth approximately seven times higher (Figure 2) when compared to the total numbers enrolled in the first semester of Fall 2018. Texas A&M System formula funding models year to year are based off of growth in both student enrollment headcount and SCH. State budgetary evaluation for institutions generally take into consideration Fall to Fall annual enrollment for budget allocations to campuses in the A&M System. The RELLIS campus Fall to Fall enrollment increased from 102 students in Fall 2018 to 685 students in Fall 2025 (Table 5).

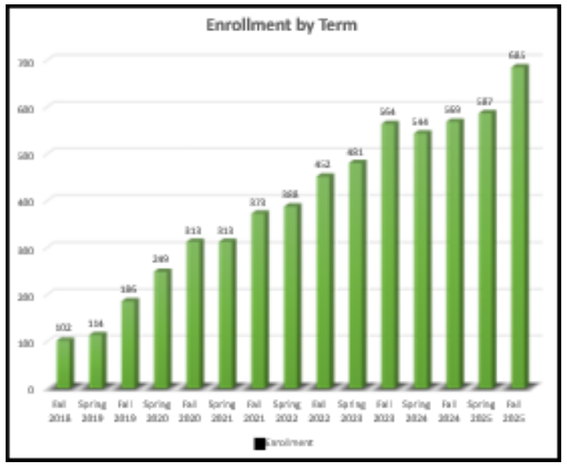


Figure 1. 2018-2025 RELLIS Student Enrollment.

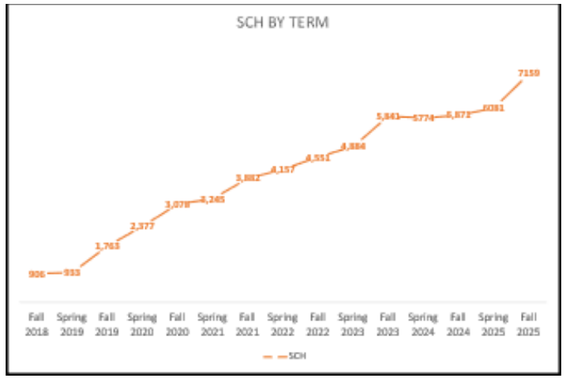


Figure 2. 2018-25 Student credit hour (SCH) per term.

Table 5. Fall to Fall semester enrollment and SCH growth by students enrolled solely at the RELLIS campus.

Term	Enrollment	Fall to Fall Enrollment Growth	SCH	Fall to Fall SCH Growth
Fall 2018	102		906	
Fall 2019	186	82%	1,763	95%
Fall 2020	313	68%	3,078	75%
Fall 2021	373	19%	3,882	26%
Fall 2022	452	21%	4,551	17%
Fall 2023	564	25%	5,841	28%
Fall 2024	569	1%	5,871	1%
Fall 2025	685	20%	7,159	22%

Collaborative Co-Enrollment with Blinn Community College

The town of Bryan, Texas is located adjacent to the city of College Station. Historically, students that have attended Blinn community college in Bryan are able to enroll for a four-year degree after completion of a two-year degree from Blinn College. Over the past decade and moving forward, the number of Blinn students transferring into Texas A&M University at College Station has been, and will progressively be, reduced, becoming harder to achieve for students desirous of transferring into TAMU College Station. The main TAMU campus just does not have the capacity to be able to take on all the transfer students from the local region.

Knowing this challenge, collaborative arrangements and MOU agreements were made so that students that are still enrolled as Blinn students and not yet completers of their Associates degrees could take upper division courses offered at the RELLIS campus. Students would simply drive between the Blinn campus and the RELLIS campus. Blinn College has one of their academic buildings located adjacent to the RELLIS campus buildings within a three-minute walking distance to further simplify the process for students to move among campuses. These working MOU agreements between Blinn College and RELLIS Academic Alliance were finalized in advance to the Fall 2021 semester, so Blinn enrolled students could start to be pre-admitted to the four-year academic programs at the RELLIS university (Table 6).

Table 6. Total undergraduate students enrolled at RELLIS University and Blinn Community College and Co-Enrolled students enrolled at both institutions.

Term	University* Enrolled	Blinn** -Enrolled (University Admitted)	Total	Co-Enrolled***	Co-Enrolled % of University Count
Fall 2018	101		101	N/A	N/A
Spr 2019	117		117	N/A	N/A
Fall 2019	188		188	N/A	N/A
Spr 2020	248		248	N/A	N/A
Fall 2020	314		314	N/A	N/A
Spr 2021	318		318	N/A	N/A
Fall 2021	376	33	409	N/A	N/A
Spr 2022	388	29	417	N/A	N/A
Fall 2022	452	77	529	N/A	N/A
Spr 2023	481	68	549	212	44.07%
Fall 2023	564	245	809	280	49.65%
Spr 2024	544	267	811	259	47.61%
Fall 2024	569	416	985	264	46.40%
Spr 2025	587	350	937	277	47.19%
Fall 2025	685	507	1192	314	45.84%

***University:** Students enrolled in upper-level courses.

****Blinn:** Students admitted to a university but enrolled at Blinn only.

*****Co-Enrolled:** Students enrolled in both upper-level and lower-level courses.

Co-enrolled student headcount was then tracked in Spring 2023 where approximate 45% of all students enrolled are co-enrolled students on the books kept by the RELLIS campus (Table 6). A good visual representation of this total headcount of sole enrollment as a student taking only junior and senior level courses as a RELLIS only student compared to those co-enrolled at both Blinn and RELLIS is shown in Figure 3. Co-enrolled students are able to take courses at both lower and upper division for credit towards their degrees, without double counting any courses. This model moves students more seamlessly on a four-year degree track as major specific courses that may be at the freshman 100 and sophomore 200 levels can be taken at the right time without having any loss in time and helps students for timely four-year graduation rates.

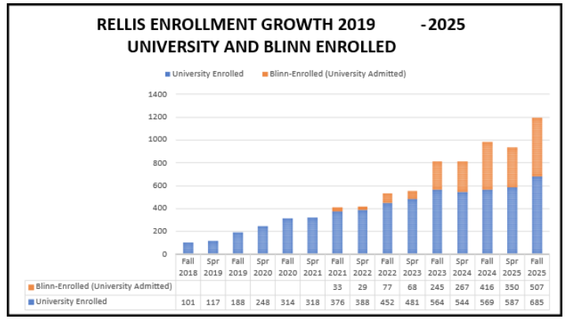


Figure 3. *Undergraduate student headcount of RELLIS University enrolled and Blinn College Enrolled (RELLIS University admitted) students from 2018 through 2025.*

Table 7 illustrates how effectively this MOU has functioned as a model for guiding students into a four-year degree track while they complete a two-year associate degree. Fall-to-Fall enrollment growth rate has consistently exceeded 20%, where combined student enrollment has moved from just over 400 students to nearly 1200 between 2021 and 2025. Impressively, the number of Blinn enrolled students that are admitted and co-enrolled in RELLIS has increased from just over 30 students to over 500 students during this time period of five years. Continuous growth in this collaborative alliance agreement helps to strengthen local efforts to better serve students in the area to obtain bachelorette degrees from an A&M university, without taking away students from the community's commitment to graduate students in the region.

Table 7. Fall to Fall RELLIS University and Blinn College Enrollment Growth Rate 2021-2025.

Term	University Enrolled	Blinn-Enrolled (University Admitted)	Total	Overall Fall-to-Fall Growth	Overall Fall-to-Fall Growth Rate
Fall 2021	376	33	409		
Fall 2022	452	77	529	120	29.34%
Fall 2023	564	245	809	280	52.93%
Fall 2024	569	416	985	176	21.76%
Fall 2025	685	507	1192	207	21.02%

Currently eight different Texas A&M System universities participate in the RELLIS Academic Alliance offering programs at the Bryan campus (Table 8). Although Texas A&M University-Kingsville (TAMUK) started its initial program a year later than several other A&M System universities, TAMUK is doing well in regards to the total number of students served at the RELLIS campus. TAMU-Kingsville has the third highest total enrollment with 159 students in Fall 2025, following Tarleton State University (TSU) and Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC) that both serve over 300 total students (Table 8). However, TAMUK only offers two academic programs at the RELLIS campus, whereas TSU offers 11 academic programs and TAMUCC offers six undergraduate majors.

Table 8. Current Student enrollment headcount in Fall 2025 at RELLIS for TAMU Systems regional universities.

RELLIS Academic Alliance Fall 2025 Data			
	Univ Enrolled	Univ Admitted-Blinn Enrolled	Total Univ & Blinn Count
Tarleton State University (TSU)	177	130	307
Texas A&M International University (TAMIU)	35	17	52
East Texas A&M University (ETAMU)	81	41	122
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC)	187	168	355
Texas A&M University-Kingsville (TAMUK)	92	67	159
Texas A&M University-San Antonio (TAMUSA)	6	2	8
Texas A&M University-Texarkana (TAMUT)	70	65	135
West Texas A&M University (WTAMU)	37	17	54
TOTAL	**685**	**507**	**1192**

Table 9. Current Student enrollment headcount in Fall 2025 separated by varying academic programs offered at RELLIS by TAMU systems universities.

RELLIS Academic Alliance Fall 2025 Data				
Program				
TAMU System **Univ**	TAMU System **Univ**	**Univ Enrolled**	**Univ Admitted Blinn Enrolled**	**Total Univ & Blinn Count**
Civil Engineering (BS)	TSU	19	18	37
Criminal Justice (BS)		11	10	21
Criminal Justice Admin (BAAS)		1		1
Elementary Education (BS)		7	14	21
General Studies (BS)		10	9	19
Mechanical Engineering (BS)		28	30	58
Mechanical Engineering Tech (BS)		12	4	16
Kinesiology (BS)		47	24	71
Kinesiology (BAAS)		2	0	2
Social Work (BWS)		16	3	19
Sport Management (BS)		24	18	42
Communication (BA)	TAMIU	35	17	52
Computer Science (BS)	ETAMU	44	13	57
Computer Information Systems (BS)		23	6	29
Cybersecurity (BS)		14	22	36
Accounting (BBA)	TAMUCC	23	15	38
Business Economics (BBA)		1	2	3
Finance (BBA)		36	33	69
General Business (BBA)		52	57	109
Management (BBA)		37	21	58
Marketing (BBA)		38	40	78
Agribusiness (BS)	TAMUK	58	49	107
Psychology (BA)		34	18	52
Political Science (BA)	TAMUSA	6	2	8
BS Biology (BS)	TAMUT	36	36	72
Electrical Engineering (BS)		32	23	55
Supply Chain Mgmt (BBA)		2	6	8
Health Sciences (BS)	WTAMU	37	17	54
TOTAL		**685**	**507**	**1192**

The faculty and administration are excited that the Agribusiness (AGBU) program initiated by the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at TAMUK has the highest student enrollment of any major offered at the RELLIS campus (Table 9). The AGBU program has grown consistently from one student in its first term to 107 in Fall 2025 that are enrolled/co-enrolled students participating and taking AGBU classes. When the AGBU program was initiated at the RELLIS campus the University invested in the hire of one faculty member with a 100% teaching, three-year contract agreement. The faculty member was hired as a non-tenure track faculty member. However, because of the successful and rapid growth of the AGBU program between 2019 to 2022, the dean of the college advocated to move the faculty member into a tenure-track eligible contract assessing teaching and scholarly productivity over the second three-year contract with the faculty member. The continual growth of the AGBU program led the dean to request support for another new AGBU faculty line located at the RELLIS campus. This was approved and a second AGBU faculty member was hired with 75% teaching and 25% research tenure-track appointment in Fall 2024. Thus, the student headcount growth within the AGBU program led to institutional changes among the university leadership at the Kingsville campus to bolster respect and support for the RELLIS Alliance agreement and has opened up consideration for new programs and faculty lines both on campus in Kingsville and at the RELLIS campus in Bryan.

Agribusiness Program Impacts and New Program Growth

The success of the AGBU program at the RELLIS campus has spurred the college dean and department chair of the Department of Agriculture, Agribusiness and Environmental Sciences at TAMUK to enhance student opportunities after their graduation. The Department is bringing on a new Agribusiness Master of Science program with anticipated start date of Fall 2026 that can serve the two AGBU faculty working at the RELLIS campus and the other two AGBU faculty located at the main campus in Kingsville. The College dean held prior discussions with the Provost at the RELLIS campus to evaluate support of graduate courses being taught by the PhD faculty housed at the RELLIS campus. The Provost at the RELLIS campus was supportive as long it did not deter students from obtaining a four-year degree at RELLIS. The agribusiness faculty and college of agriculture leaders at TAMUK are excited that one of the first graduates from the RELLIS AGBU program is desirous to enter into the AGBU Master of Science degree under the direction of one of our AGBU faculty located in Bryan, Texas. This student will start in Spring 2026 under an existing Agriculture Science Master's program and transfer over to the AGBU M.S. program once it has fully routed with approval from the Texas A&M System regents.

Due to the growth of the AGBU program at RELLIS, the college dean started evaluating the consideration of another academic program to offer at the RELLIS campus that is not currently offered by other institutions. To ensure that we do not rush into expanding our undergraduate programmatic offerings at RELLIS and make sure that we do the groundwork sufficient for success, the dean sought for data from the Provost overseeing the RELLIS initiative. At TAMUK, the highest single enrolled major at the entire university is Animal Science, where a large number of students are Pre-Veterinary Science majors that desire to be Veterinarians. There are over 575 animal science majors within the college in Kingsville, and the numbers have grown consistently and annually for over a decade. This same trend occurs across Texas and nationally.

Agriculture Science is another undergraduate program that may be of interest and growth in the Bryan, Texas region. One aspect of the agriculture science program is the high need to fill vacant positions across the state of Texas to supply the High School Agriculture Science teachers. Ag teachers are in demand because they serve both traditional students that plan to continue into college to pursue four-year degrees after graduation, but they also provide students the essential skills training for workforce driven students that plan to enter into skills-related jobs or seek community college associate degrees. Dr. Shankle did a deeper dive into the number of students that met the qualifications to get into College Station but were not accepted and turned away in Fall 2025. She tailored her search to focus on student applicants desiring animal science and agriculture science degrees/majors. From the TAMU College Station denials list for Fall 2025 the reports demonstrated that they had denied 501 freshman applicants that qualified academically. The provost summarized from the report that there would be a demand for animal science if offered as a major. Blinn College does not offer an animal science degree, but other nearby community colleges do have animal science courses within the -year curriculum that could be preparatory course with hands-on animal husbandry training prior to upper division animal science courses. In Spring 2025, Blinn College had 482 agriculture students

and 323 agribusiness students. These number make it promising to look into the consideration of offering other agriculture-based four-year degree options at the RELLIS campus to serve these students that will not get an opportunity to enter into a bachelor's degree at College Station.

Conclusions: Case Study Summary Considerations

The RELLIS Academic Alliance created by the chancellor of the Texas A&M System is a successful example of collaboration among regional, branch universities when supported by lead main institutions and strong, bold leadership. The success of the RELLIS experiment would not be possible without the weight of a top leader ensuring full buy-in from regional campus leaders. Such leadership decisions may appear bullish at first, but over time, if the main institution is budgetarily committed to the long-term success of what is started, then the other institutions have the time and potential for growth in a space that may be far removed from their own institution. Careful thought should be put into the selection of what academic programs should be offered at a distance prior to opening that program up. Advance knowledge and understanding of the students that will reside at such a campus should be looked into, so a good market scan and job analysis is performed for potential majors. This is a long-game process, and most likely will only be financially possible to replicate if there is a large central funded effort to upfront the costs of faculty and facilities to start up such an initiative. The Texas A&M System is large enough to pull this experiment off to long-term success. Other states or systems should look into this Academic Alliance and study it well before they jump full in and start such an initiative. Furthermore, this RELLIS initiative is largely successful because of a direct tie to a local and nearby community college that attracts students to the area because of the close proximity to the Texas A&M University College Station environment. One of the challenges of the TAMU System RELLIS campus is identity separation from that of main TAMU College Station campus. The close proximity and similar Texas A&M institutional names can lead to confusion among students that enroll or consider enrolling into academic programs at the RELLIS campus. Some are surprised that they are not obtaining a degree from Texas A&M University, rather than their degrees are issued from the regional system university located in cities far removed from Bryan or College Station, like Texas A&M University in Kingsville, Texas that is located 250 miles away from the RELLIS campus.

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Case Study

Practice-Based Faculty Development at a University Branch Campus: The Stockton Survey and Stockton Talks

Matthew Derrick

Abstract

This case study examines practice-based faculty development at a university branch campus through two initiatives: the Stockton Survey and Stockton Talks at the Stockton Campus of California State University, Stanislaus. Drawing on autoethnographic methods, the study analyzes how these initiatives address structural challenges common to branch campuses, including faculty isolation, limited resources, and misalignment with main campus programming. The Stockton Survey, an interdisciplinary faculty learning community, engaged faculty in collaborative survey design, implementation, and analysis focused on the local community. Stockton Talks, a recurring speaker series, provided a platform for sharing research and fostering intellectual exchange. Together, these initiatives demonstrate how faculty development can emerge from sustained, practice-based activities embedded in everyday academic work. The findings suggest that locally grounded, collaborative, and place-oriented approaches can strengthen faculty engagement, visibility, and community, offering an alternative to centralized, programmatic models of faculty development in branch campus contexts.

Keywords: faculty development; branch campus; faculty learning communities; practice-based learning; higher education; faculty engagement

Introduction

In the spring of 2023, as a newly appointed half-time interim associate dean and half-time tenured faculty member at the Stockton Campus of California State University, Stanislaus, I assumed a lead role in developing two new research-based faculty development initiatives. The first was the Stockton Survey, the campus's first faculty learning community (FLC), designed to bring together interdisciplinary faculty to collaboratively design, implement, analyze, and publicly present a survey on multiple dimensions of life in Stockton. The second was Stockton Talks, an ongoing speaker series showcasing faculty research and creative activity on the branch campus.

This paper examines these initiatives as a case study in faculty development at a university branch campus. It argues that faculty development in such contexts is most effective not when imported from main campus models, but when embedded in practice-based structures that integrate research, collaboration, and visibility. Rather than relying on centralized programming—workshops, trainings, or formal development sequences—the Stockton Survey and Stockton Talks demonstrate how relatively modest, locally grounded initiatives can create the conditions under which faculty development occurs through shared work, repeated interaction, and engagement with place. In doing so, the case repositions the branch campus not as a site of implementation but as a source of innovation, where locally developed practices generate transferable insights. These insights have the potential to inform and reshape faculty development across the institution, effectively reversing the conventional flow of best practices and positioning the branch campus as a driver of institutional change.

The need for such an approach emerges from the distinctive challenges of branch campuses. Faculty at these sites often experience geographic and professional isolation, unequal access to resources, misalignment with main campus policies, and ambiguous or expanded professional roles. While existing scholarship documents these constraints, it offers limited guidance on how faculty development might be reconfigured to operate effectively within them. This paper addresses that gap by presenting a case in which faculty development is not treated as a discrete program, but as an outcome of structured practices that bring faculty into sustained contact with one another and with their surrounding community.

The analysis draws on my positionality as both participant and organizer—serving simultaneously as associate dean and faculty member—which gives it the character of autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). The sections that follow provide (1) a brief overview of the Stockton Campus and its regional context, (2) a discussion of relevant literature on branch campus faculty development, (3) a methodological note on positionality and approach, and (4) a detailed case study of the Stockton Survey and Stockton Talks. The paper concludes by identifying key implications for faculty development on branch campuses, arguing for a shift toward practice-based, place-oriented models that prioritize collaboration, visibility, and continuity over scale or formalization.

Literature Review

Faculty development is a central component of institutional effectiveness in higher education, supporting teaching quality, scholarly productivity, and faculty retention and promotion. While a robust body of literature examines faculty development on main or flagship campuses (see, e.g., Centra, 1978; Gaff & Simpson, 1994; Camblin & Steger, 2000; Amundsen et al., 2005; Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013; McKee & Tew, 2013; Kayyali, 2022), comparatively little scholarship addresses the distinctive conditions of university branch campuses. Branch campuses—whether regional, satellite, or international—often operate within structural, cultural, and organizational contexts that differ substantially from those of main campuses (Cavanaugh, 2007; Bebko, 2011). The existent relevant literature suggests that these differences create persistent challenges for faculty development, particularly related to isolation, resource constraints, institutional alignment, faculty roles and identity, and leadership support.

A prominent theme in the literature is the geographic and professional isolation experienced by faculty at branch campuses. Physical separation from the main campus often limits access to informal mentoring, disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration, and professional learning communities (Bland et al., 2006). This isolation can reduce faculty participation in development opportunities that are routinely available on the main campus, such as workshops, seminars, and research colloquia. Research further suggests that isolation negatively affects faculty morale, job satisfaction, and institutional commitment (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002). For faculty based at branch campuses—especially those at rural and international branch campuses—travel distance, time constraints, and cost barriers can exacerbate these challenges, making sustained engagement in professional development particularly difficult. Although distance technologies are frequently proposed as a solution, the literature indicates that virtual engagement alone may not fully compensate for the absence of in-person professional networks (Steinert et al., 2016).

Another significant hindrance to faculty development on branch campuses is unequal access to resources and infrastructure. Branch campuses often operate with smaller budgets and fewer support staff than main campuses, limiting their capacity to design and implement comprehensive faculty development programs (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). These constraints may result in fewer workshops, limited instructional design support, and reduced access to research funding or professional development grants. In addition, branch campuses frequently rely on part-time or non-tenure-track faculty, who may receive less institutional support for development activities (Gappa et al., 2007). Technological infrastructure disparities further complicate development efforts, particularly when faculty are expected to engage in online or hybrid professional learning without adequate training or technical assistance (Steinert et al., 2016).

The literature also emphasizes challenges related to institutional alignment between main and branch campuses. Faculty development initiatives are often centrally designed, reflecting the priorities, culture, and assumptions of the main campus rather than the lived realities of branch campus faculty (Rumbley & Altbach, 2016). As a result, development programs may be perceived as irrelevant, inaccessible, or misaligned with local teaching and service demands. Policy inconsistencies regarding promotion, tenure, workload, and evaluation further complicate faculty development at branch campuses. Branch campus faculty frequently carry heavier teaching and service loads, leaving limited time for research and professional growth (Kezar & Sam, 2010). When expectations for faculty development mirror those of the main campus without accounting for these differences, faculty may experience frustration and reduced engagement.

Faculty at branch campuses often occupy multifaceted and ambiguous roles, balancing teaching, advising, service, and administrative responsibilities (Hurtado et al., 2012). The literature suggests that this "generalist" role can complicate faculty development planning, as traditional development models may not adequately address the breadth of faculty responsibilities at branch campuses. Concerns about professional identity and career progression are also evident. Branch campus faculty may perceive themselves as peripheral to the institution, with fewer opportunities for leadership development, research collaboration, and recognition (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013). These perceptions can diminish motivation to engage in long-term faculty development and may contribute to higher turnover rates.

Effective faculty development is closely linked to institutional leadership and organizational culture. Studies indicate that branch campuses often lack localized leadership structures with sufficient authority, autonomy, or resources to prioritize faculty development (Gappa et al., 2007). Without sustained advocacy from campus leaders, development initiatives may be fragmented or viewed as secondary to teaching and operational demands. Conversely, the literature suggests that when branch campus leaders intentionally cultivate supportive environments—through mentoring programs, tailored development initiatives, and recognition of faculty contributions—faculty engagement and satisfaction improve (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013). However, sustaining such efforts remains challenging without consistent institutional commitment and alignment with main campus priorities.

While this body of scholarship provides a clear account of the structural challenges facing faculty at branch campuses, it offers comparatively little guidance on how faculty development might be organized in response to these conditions. Much of the literature assumes models derived from main campuses—formal programming, centralized workshops, and institutional training structures—that may not translate effectively to branch campus contexts. What remains underexplored is how faculty development might emerge from the everyday practices of faculty work itself, particularly in settings where scale, resources, and institutional alignment are limited. Equally underexamined is how successful, locally developed initiatives at branch campuses might inform faculty development practices beyond their immediate context. When such models are effective, little is known about how they are adapted, scaled, or integrated into main campus structures, or how they might reshape broader institutional approaches to faculty development. This case study addresses that gap by examining two initiatives that embed faculty development within collaborative research and shared intellectual exchange, rather than treating it as a separate or supplemental activity.

The Stockton Campus and Its Regional Context

The Stockton Campus of California State University (CSU), Stanislaus—Stanislaus State University (Stan State)—occupies a distinctive position within California's higher education landscape as both a branch campus and a critical access point for a historically underserved urban region (Sweitzer et al., 2006). Located approximately 50 miles north of the main campus in Turlock, the Stockton site functions as an extension of the university while trying to address a longstanding structural gap: Stockton is the largest city in California without its own CSU campus (Mello, 2018). With a population of roughly 330,000 and a rapidly growing and diverse community—"the most racially diverse city in America," according to US News and World Report (2020)—the absence of a comprehensive four-year public university has historically limited local access to baccalaureate and graduate education. Educational attainment in the region reflects this disparity, with only 18% of residents holding a bachelor's degree (SJDC, 2019), significantly below the state and national averages of 36% and 38% respectively (US Census, 2022). In this context, the Stockton Campus serves as a "bridge institution" (Buanes & Jentoft, 2009; Briggs et al., 2012), mitigating geographic and structural inequities in higher education access.

The growing significance of this bridging role has been recognized at the state level. Recent investments—including approximately $54 million for the construction of new instructional building and ongoing funding to support additional faculty and enrollment growth—signal a strategic commitment to expanding the campus's capacity and permanence (Qing, 2021; Workman, 2024). These developments mark a transition from the campus's earlier, more provisional status—rooted in its origins in the 1970s and its initial location in a repurposed psychiatric hospital facility (Wurz, 2007)—to a more fully institutionalized presence within the CSU system. As such, the Stockton Campus is evolving from a peripheral extension into a central node of regional higher education provision.

Academically, the campus offers a focused portfolio of programs aligned with both student demand and regional workforce needs. These include undergraduate degrees in Psychology, Business Administration, Criminal Justice, Social Sciences, and Liberal Studies, as well as limited graduate and credential programs (Stockton Campus, n.d.). Further underscoring its bridging function, the Stockton Campus primarily serves upper-division and transfer students, most importantly from Stockton's San Joaquin Delta College (CSU Stanislaus, 2018). As of fall 2024, approximately 1,300 students were taking classes at the Stockton Campus, accounting for about 15% of the university's total enrollment (Institutional Data Dashboard, n.d.).

Of particular relevance to this case study is faculty composition on the Stockton Campus. Based on the spring 2023 class schedule (Class Schedule, n.d.), the branch campus offered 53 stateside courses taught by 41 instructors—the fact that only a handful of instructors were scheduled for more than a single class on the Stockton Campus suggests a comparatively low level of commitment vis-a-vis the main campus. Indeed, a salient dynamic shaping faculty affairs at the branch campus is that only a handful of tenure-track faculty are based primarily at the Stockton Campus, their teaching load filled exclusively or mostly with classes at the branch campus; most common is the faculty member who is based primarily on the main campus driving up to teach a class in Stockton. This situation shifted slightly in fall of 2022, with the addition of four new tenure-track faculty members—including me (the author)—hired with the support of dedicated state funding to expand the degree programs on the Stockton Campus (CSU Stanislaus, 2021).

It is important to note that the Stockton Campus operates within a governance structure in which branch campus administration holds little to no formal authority over faculty or academic programming. All curricular decisions—including course offerings, degree requirements, and faculty assignments—are determined by colleges, deans, and department chairs based at the main campus in Turlock. While branch campuses across higher education systems may adopt a range of governance models, from highly centralized to more autonomous structures (Bebko, 2011; Lane & Kinser, 2013), the Stockton Campus reflects a highly centralized model in which academic control remains firmly anchored at the home campus. As a result, local administrators at Stockton function primarily in coordinating and supportive roles rather than in shaping curriculum or directing faculty work, creating both practical constraints and unique challenges for faculty development efforts at the branch site.

A Note on Methodology

This case study employs elements of autoethnography to examine faculty development at a branch campus. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that situates the researcher's personal experience within broader cultural, institutional, and social contexts, using reflexive narrative to generate analytic insight (Butz & Besio, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011; Chang, 2016). Rather than distancing the researcher from the subject of study, autoethnography foregrounds positionality, recognizing that lived experience can serve as both data and interpretive lens.

This approach is particularly appropriate for the present study given my embedded role in the development of faculty initiatives at the Stockton Campus of Stanislaus State University. The analysis draws on direct participation—as both participating faculty and lead organizing administrator—in both the Stockton Survey and Stockton Talks, as well as ongoing observations of institutional dynamics, faculty experiences, and campus development. These experiences are treated not as anecdotal but as situated knowledge, shaped by the specific conditions of a branch campus environment.

The author's positionality is central to this methodology. Serving concurrently as associate dean (0.5 FTE) and director of the Social Sciences program (0.5 FTE), I occupy a hybrid role that bridges administration and faculty. This dual position complicates traditional distinctions between observer and participant; involvement in faculty development initiatives occurred simultaneously as a leader, organizer, and colleague. The boundaries between these roles are often indistinct, reflecting the fluid organizational structure typical of branch campuses (Gappa et al., 2007; Ellis et al., 2011).

Case Study: Implementing Two Research-Based Efforts in Faculty Development

Prologue

In the fall of 2022, after more than a decade as faculty at another CSU campus—a traditional residential university campus—where I was a tenured full professor and served as department chair, I accepted a faculty position as director of the Social Sciences program at Stan State. I was specifically enticed by the charge of establishing the program at the Stockton Campus. At the time, I was only vaguely familiar with even the concept of a branch campus—in hindsight, I'm confused and astounded at how little consideration I gave to how my professional life might look when conditioned by the peculiarities of a branch campus. My decision to join Stockton was driven largely by the potential I saw in the city itself. "I accepted a job at Stockton, not necessarily Stan State," as I have asserted before multiple audiences.

With Stockton lacking its own full-fledged CSU campus, I was attracted by the opportunity to build the interdisciplinary Social Sciences program, the first new stateside bachelor's program introduced to the branch facility since its elevation in status from a "center" to "campus" in 2018 (CSU Stanislaus, 2018). And I was excited to teach and advise new crops of students who, in addition to having been long neglected by regional higher education opportunities, were far more diverse—in terms of culture, socioeconomics, and life experience—than those at my previous campus.

My Stockton students proved amazing from the very start. But outside of the classroom, my experience as faculty for the first semester at the branch campus was highly disorienting. All the challenges identified in the literature review—isolation, limited resources, misaligned policies, complex faculty roles, and insufficient organizational support—were palpable. Weighing most heavily, though, was that there was very little interaction with other faculty, most of whom seemed only to parachute in to teach a class once or twice a week. By mid-semester, struggling to find connections with other faculty, though living in Stockton, I too seemed to parachute into the branch campus only to fulfill teaching duties. I began questioning my decision to leave my previous CSU campus for Stockton.

Then, late in that first semester, I was approached by my provost with the offer to serve on a half-time basis as the interim associate dean of the Stockton Campus. As a newly created position effective in the spring 2023 semester, the interim associate dean would be charged with, among a range of other administrative duties, improving what had become strained faculty affairs on the branch campus—my feelings of isolation and neglect, apparently, were shared broadly among Stockton faculty. I accepted the challenge. Amid implementing the mundane practices that previously had been absent—for example, monthly faculty meetings, regular email communication using a newly created Stockton faculty listserv, etc.—I took the lead in introducing two new research-based endeavors in faculty development: the Stockton Survey FLC and Stockton Talks.

The Stockton Survey

The Stockton Survey was organized as an interdisciplinary research seminar structured as a faculty learning community (FLC). It was modeled on the Detroit Area Study (DAS), a long-running program at the University of Michigan that paired research training with the production of systematic social data on a metropolitan region (Farley et al., 2000; DAS, 2002; Marans et al., 2023). The intent was straightforward: build a team of faculty capable of doing this kind of work and produce a first dataset about life in Stockton. Stockton itself was the object of study—the laboratory—and the survey was the instrument through which it could be known.

Faculty were recruited through an open call that prioritized curiosity and disciplinary perspective over prior experience with survey research. The resulting group of six tenure-track faculty represented all stateside undergraduate programs established on the Stockton Campus—Business Administration, Psychology (two faculty members), Criminal Justice, and Social Sciences—as well as the library. The interdisciplinarity of the team was deliberate. The survey was designed to reflect multiple ways of knowing the city. Participants brought different questions, concepts, and constructs—about health, crime, environment, education, work, and daily life—and those differences were not resolved so much as assembled into a single instrument. The FLC functioned as a research team rather than a top-down training workshop, with expertise distributed unevenly but productively, and with knowledge moving across rather than down.

The work of the FLC unfolded over three semesters, moving from design (Spring 2023) to implementation (Fall 2023), to analysis and public dissemination (Spring 2024). In Spring 2023, meeting every other week, the group began by reading about the Detroit Area Study—not as background, but as a model for what the project could be. From there, participants designed a long-form survey instrument of 70 questions organized across multiple domains, including: community connections, neighborhood conditions, environmental concerns, personal well-being, health, economic life, and transportation.

The structure of the instrument reflects this layering. Respondents were first asked to situate themselves geographically within Stockton by selecting a neighborhood from a mapped typology of the city. Subsequent sections combined standard demographic items with more interpretive measures, including Likert-scale questions such as "I feel I'm a person of worth, at least equal to others" and "I feel like I have people I can rely on in a crisis," alongside evaluations of neighborhood conditions (e.g., safety after dark, environmental quality) and issue salience (e.g., homelessness, crime, affordability). Other items tracked everyday practices—how residents access news, how often they spend time outdoors, or whether they recycle—as well as structural constraints such as access to childcare, healthcare affordability, and transportation barriers (e.g., having to leave early for work due to bus schedules).

A subset of the FLC team translated the instrument into Spanish, reinforcing the expectation that the survey should be usable in the city as it exists—about 45% of Stocktonians are Hispanic/Latino (DataUSA, n.d.)—not as an abstraction.

The survey was created and conducted using Qualtrics, and here the unevenness of faculty skill sets became visible and useful. Some participants had significant experience with survey design and the platform; others had little or none. Rather than slowing the process, this unevenness structured it. Those with technical expertise taught those without, and the act of building the instrument became a primary site of learning and skills exchange.

In Fall 2023, the group reconvened to move the survey into the field. The instrument was submitted for the university's institutional review board (IRB) approval, mini-piloted, and revised. It was then distributed electronically across Stockton platforms and left open for approximately one month, yielding approximately 120 responses. By conventional standards, this is a small sample. But that framing misses the point. The significance of the survey lies less in its scale than in its existence: It demonstrates that a branch campus with limited infrastructure can design, field, and analyze its own instrument focused on the surrounding community.

In Spring 2024, the group turned to analysis. Data were interpreted collectively, and the project culminated in a public presentation as part of the Stockton Talks speaker series, where results were shared beyond the FLC itself. This step mattered. It positioned the survey not simply as an internal exercise, but as a contribution—however modest—to public knowledge about Stockton.

As a faculty learning community, the Stockton Survey did not separate training from research. Faculty learned survey design by building a survey, learned analysis by working with their own data, and developed research agendas anchored in a shared place. In this respect, the project follows the logic of the Detroit Area Study: method, training, and knowledge production are inseparable. What distinguishes the Stockton case is not the model itself, but the context—a branch campus, limited resources, and a city that has long been studied from elsewhere rather than from within.

At the same time, the project has clear limitations. The sample size (n=120) is small and does not support broad generalization; however, the survey was conceived as a pilot, intended to establish proof of concept rather than produce definitive findings. More importantly, evaluating the project solely on the basis of the survey risks missing its primary function. As an FLC, its central outcome was not the dataset itself but the formation of a working group of faculty who, through sustained interaction, became collaborators—sharing methods, transferring skills, and building relationships across disciplines. The seminar functioned as a site of professional socialization as much as data production, and it is in this dual role that the project's longer-term significance lies.

Stockton Talks

If the Stockton Survey functioned as a structured site for building research capacity, Stockton Talks emerged as a complementary effort to make that work visible and to create a shared intellectual space on the branch campus. Whereas the survey was inward-facing—focused on building a research team and producing an instrument—Stockton Talks was outward-facing, oriented toward presentation, discussion, and connection. Both respond to the same condition: faculty working in relative isolation, with few built-in opportunities to encounter one another's work, few opportunities to get to know each other, and few opportunities to develop a shared identity grounded in the branch campus. In this sense, Stockton Talks operates as a form of faculty development not through formal training, but through structured interaction and visibility.

Stockton Talks was organized as a recurring, low-barrier forum for faculty presentations. The format has remained consistent: a one-hour session centered on a featured speaker, preceded by an informal half hour for gathering and conversation. That social half hour is not incidental. On a campus where faculty are not consistently co-located, it creates a structured opportunity for interaction that does not otherwise exist. It is in these informal exchanges—before the talk begins—that relationships are built and maintained. The talks themselves include time for open discussion, permitting faculty to engage one another's work directly. They are held both in person in the Stockton Campus's main auditorium and simultaneously over Zoom, allowing participation from the main campus and beyond and further extending the reach of Stockton-based faculty.

Since its launch in Spring 2023, Stockton Talks has been held each semester, typically featuring two to three speakers per term. The range of topics has been broad, reflecting the disciplinary diversity of faculty associated with the campus and its partners. Presentations have included work in criminal justice, anthropology, history, education, environmental studies, business, and the arts, ranging from topics such as "Henrietta Vinton Davis: The First Famous Black Actress," to "A Sense of Belonging: Black Students in Higher Education," from "Territory: Russia's Ticking Timebomb?" to "The Interplay Between Anthropomorphism and Used Products," illustrating the range of topics and approaches presented in the series (Stockton Talks, n.d.). This breadth is not incidental; it exposes faculty to work outside their own disciplines and contributes to a shared, if loosely defined, intellectual culture on the campus.

The relationship between Stockton Talks and the Stockton Survey is direct. The full survey team presented findings collectively in Spring 2024, and all but one member of the FLC has presented individual research through the series. In this sense, Stockton Talks extends the work of the FLC: projects developed collaboratively are recirculated, reframed, and made public. It also provides continuity, allowing relationships and intellectual exchange initiated in the seminar to persist beyond it.

At the same time, the scope of Stockton Talks has expanded beyond its initial focus on Stockton-based faculty. Recent semesters have included speakers from the main campus, presentations by administrators, and an invited faculty member from San Joaquin Delta College. This evolution is significant. What began as a venue for local faculty has become a point of connection across institutional boundaries. With Stockton-based faculty at its core, the series now links the branch campus to the main campus, creates space for interaction with academic leadership, and strengthens relationships with a key transfer pipeline. These connections further situate Stockton faculty not as peripheral participants, but as contributors within a broader academic network.

The series is co-hosted by the Stockton Campus and the Stanislaus State Library, an arrangement that has proven consequential. The library's involvement provides both logistical support and an institutional anchor, while also strengthening ties between faculty and library staff—an often-underdeveloped relationship at branch campuses. In this respect, Stockton Talks also expands the scope of faculty development beyond faculty alone, drawing in other campus actors who support scholarly work.

In practice, Stockton Talks does something relatively simple but not trivial: it establishes Stockton-based faculty as a visible intellectual presence within the broader university. The hybrid format draws in audiences from the main campus, and the inclusion of external and administrative speakers situates Stockton not as a peripheral site, but as a node of exchange. Over time, the series has contributed not only to the visibility of faculty work, but to the development of a shared academic culture—one built less through formal programming than through repeated interaction, presentation, and exchange.

By Way of Discussion: Six Takeaways

This case study suggests that faculty development at branch campuses is best understood not as a program to be delivered, but as a set of practices to be cultivated. The Stockton Survey and Stockton Talks, while developed independently, function together as a practice-based model of faculty development grounded in collaboration, visibility, and place. By way of discussion, I offer six takeaways from this case study.

First, the case highlights the importance of structure over scale. Both initiatives were modest in design—a semester-based faculty learning community and a recurring one-hour speaker series—yet their impact derived from regularity and continuity. In a context where faculty interaction is otherwise sporadic, these structures created predictable opportunities for collaboration and exchange.

Second, the case demonstrates how faculty development and knowledge production can be aligned. Faculty developed research capacity by conducting research and sharing it publicly. Rather than separating development from scholarly activity, the initiatives embedded development within ongoing work.

Third, the case shows how interdisciplinarity emerges as a structural feature of branch campuses. With smaller and more distributed faculty bodies, collaboration across disciplines is both necessary and productive. The Stockton Survey required integrating multiple perspectives into a shared instrument, while Stockton Talks provided a venue for those perspectives to circulate.

Fourth, both initiatives underscore the importance of place-based orientation. Stockton was not simply the setting but the organizing principle of the work. Faculty development was tied directly to engagement with the surrounding community, positioning the campus as a site of knowledge production rather than only instruction.

Fifth, the case highlights the role of hybrid administrative–faculty work. Both initiatives depended on coordination that blurred traditional boundaries between administration and faculty activity. Sustaining such efforts requires recognizing and supporting these hybrid roles, which are often essential but underacknowledged in branch campus settings.

Finally, the case suggests a reconfiguration of where innovation in faculty development originates. Rather than flowing from the main campus to the branch, effective, locally grounded initiatives can generate models that inform broader institutional practice. This raises an important question for future research

and institutional strategy: how can such initiatives be adapted, scaled, and embedded across campuses? In this sense, branch campuses are not merely sites of implementation, but potential drivers of institutional learning and change.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that faculty development at branch campuses is most effective when understood not as a program to be delivered, but rather as a set of practices to be cultivated. The case of the Stockton Campus demonstrates how relatively modest initiatives—the Stockton Survey and Stockton Talks—can create the conditions under which faculty development occurs through shared work, repeated interaction, and engagement with place.

What distinguishes this model is not its scale or formalization, but its integration into the everyday life of the campus. Faculty development emerges through doing: designing a survey, presenting research, engaging colleagues, and connecting that work to the surrounding community. In this sense, development is not separate from faculty work but embedded within it.

For branch campuses, which often operate under conditions of limited resources, geographic separation, and institutional asymmetry, this approach offers an alternative to replicating main campus models that may not translate effectively. Instead, it suggests a shift toward practice-based faculty development—one that prioritizes continuity over scale, collaboration over programming, and place-based engagement over abstraction.

More broadly, the Stockton case points to a rethinking of how branch campuses are positioned within the university. Rather than functioning as peripheral sites of instruction, they can serve as nodes of knowledge production, where faculty work originates, circulates, and connects outward. Faculty development, in this context, is not simply about supporting individual faculty, but about creating the conditions under which an intellectual community can take shape. Importantly, this case also suggests that innovation in faculty development need not flow from the main campus outward. When locally grounded initiatives prove effective, they offer models that can inform, reshape, and be integrated into broader institutional practice. Future research should examine how such practices travel across campuses—how they are adapted, scaled, and embedded—thereby repositioning branch campuses not as marginal sites of implementation, but as drivers of institutional learning and cultural change.

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2026 NABCA Conference Proceedings

BCLI Presentations

Tuesday, May 26

Responsiveness to Service Through Communication and Collaboration

Dr. Phygenia Young, Forsyth Tech Community College

Community colleges increasingly use innovative communication and service strategies to strengthen responsiveness and expand access at off-campus centers. This case study examines the revitalization of the Mazie Woodruff Center (MWC) through cross-functional collaboration, targeted marketing, and technology-enabled service delivery. Drawing on enrollment trends, service tracking, and stakeholder feedback, aligned leadership, student services, and marketing efforts to expand program offerings and launch a center-focused relaunch campaign. The initiative also implemented digital support kiosks and adopted an "Always-Assisted" service model to enhance responsiveness and access. Early indicators suggest increased enrollment, stronger internal referrals, and greater awareness of center-based programs. The findings highlight how collaborative leadership, localized outreach, and integrated service models can improve access and responsiveness in community-based settings.

Campus-Chamber Collaborative: A Short-Term Travel Study Pilot

Dr. Courtney Catledge, University of South Carolina Palmetto College

Amidst a period of enrollment volatility and fiscal constraints, small regional institutions like the University of South Carolina Lancaster (USCL) face significant challenges in fostering student belonging and professional readiness among a largely off-campus student body. To bridge this gap, this case study examines a pilot program designed to pivot from transactional to transformational community engagement through a collaborative partnership with the Lancaster County Chamber of Commerce. By aligning campus resources with local economic development via a collaborative short-term travel study experience (England, Scotland, and Wales), the initiative aims to create a symbiotic ecosystem, providing students with applied, high-impact learning while strengthening the university's role as a regional anchor.

The Great RELLIS Academic Alliance Experiment: Challenges and Successes

Dr. Shad Nelson, Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Texas A&M University-Kingsville is a one of twelve member institutions in the Texas A&M University System. In 2016, a unique campus initiative was created in Bryan, Texas, located within 10 minutes driving distance from the main Texas A&M University campus in College Station, Texas. This campus located in Bryan is named the RELLIS Academic Alliance with the particular focus of serving undergraduate transfer students in the region. This campus in particular has working articulation agreements with the community college in Bryan, where students are able to take courses in their sophomore year at the RELLIS campus that will count towards a four-year baccalaureate degree. The RELLIS Alliance is unique in structure in that academic programs from each of the Texas A&M University member institution offer degree programs at the RELLIS campus. Furthermore, the degrees issued are degrees from the member institution, so students enrolled in the specific four-year degree are students counted at the degree granting institution. In 2019, Texas A&M University-Kingsville and the Dick & Mary Lewis Kleberg College of Agriculture & Natural Resources started a Bachelor's of Science degree in Agribusiness at the RELLIS campus. This case study details the history of the RELLIS Academic Alliance, the challenges and successes of the academic programs, and the growth and expansion the agribusiness program at the RELLIS programs. To date, the agribusiness program offered by TAMUK in Bryan, Texas has been a great success as the highest single enrolled major within the RELLIS Academic Alliance.

How to Successfully Convert a Two-Year Branch Campus to a Four-Year Branch Campus

Dr. Eruore Hopkins, Northeastern State University Broken Arrow

Oklahoma's Senate Bill 701 went into effect on November 1, 2025, and opened up competition among Tulsa's higher educational landscape.

Northeastern State University's Broken Arrow campus has gone from a degree-completion campus to a four-year campus. Additionally, the campus is located in a community that is experiencing significant growth and national attention and is eager for a college of its own. The institution has a ripe opportunity to meet the specific educational needs of Broken Arrow. Northeastern State University needs a plan to not only convert its Broken Arrow campus to a four-year campus, but also to compete with the other Tulsa metropolitan higher educational institutions. Finally, Northeastern State University will need to consider its competitive options in a fiscally sound way, with the knowledge that state appropriations are not likely to increase. This study will review the actions Northeastern State University took to prepare for the transition, the results of the actions, and suggest actions for what could lead to a successful transition.

Engineering Belonging: Becoming a Community Partner Through Curriculum, Commitment, and Reciprocity

Dr. Nancy Lollar Purdue Polytechnic Institute Columbus

This case study examines how Purdue Polytechnic Institute Columbus redefined its institutional role as a branch campus by embedding community partnership into required curriculum. Rather than relying on episodic engagement or extracurricular initiatives, the campus developed a Community-Embedded Engineering Leadership Model that integrates student learning, stakeholder collaboration, and workforce alignment within a structured academic framework. Centered in a first-year gateway course, the model distributes leadership across faculty, students, industry, clinicians, and families, ensuring equitable participation and sustained partnership.

Through the implementation of the GoBabyGo initiative, students engage in real-world engineering design that emphasizes responsibility, empathy, and professional identity formation. The case demonstrates how curriculum can function as the structural anchor for belonging, legitimacy, and community trust. Implications suggest that branch campuses can strengthen their institutional identity and impact by designing systems that align learning, partnership, and accountability, rather than relying on isolated programs or individual champions.

Improving the Student Experience/Restoring a Sense of Belonging

Dr. Martha Kline, Ohio University

This case study presents an approach to improving the student experience at Ohio University Lancaster, one of the five regional campuses of Ohio University. Established in 1956, Ohio University Lancaster is an open-admission, commuter campus located in Lancaster, Ohio, serving students in Fairfield and surrounding counties. Post-pandemic, downward shifts in enrollment and faculty presence on campus have impacted a former feeling of vibrancy. Through the redesign of an existing café area, the intention is to create a modern, welcoming space for students to gather, relax, and engage in social interaction. Key goals include restoration of vitality to the campus, increased student engagement and success, and an enhanced sense of belonging at our campus. The success of these efforts will be measured through student surveys (including self-reported usage rates and impact on the campus experience) as well as retention metrics.

The Purple and Blue Advantage: Two Access Institutions on One Campus

Miranda Gentry-Siegel, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point at Wausau

On September 10, 2025, the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point at Wausau announced a greatly expanded partnership with Northcentral Technical College (NTC). Beginning in Fall 2026, UWSP at Wausau will relocate to NTC. The partnership marks a new phase for the UWSP at Wausau campus and a tremendous opportunity for students in Central Wisconsin. This is a student-centered partnership that is carefully designed to make earning a bachelor's degree in Wausau more attainable and affordable for students who want to start and stay local. It is being co-branded as the Purple and Blue Advantage: Expanding Opportunities Across Two Colleges.

We expect phenomenal outcomes from this partnership and are excited to embark on this journey. However, there are many details, large and small, that go into moving a campus and entering a meaningful partnership. How can UWSP have a prominent presence at NTC? How can we foster a sense of belonging for our students? How can we minimize confusion for students and faculty/staff? What will cost sharing look like? How should we market the partnership in our community? We are fortunate to have nearly a full year to work through the implementation and have been answering these and many more questions. UWSP and NTC are working together to ensure that our students, staff, and community understand our partnership well.

This case study examines the genesis and implementation process for the partnership between UWSP at Wausau and NTC. Our partnership model paves a new way forward for the Universities of Wisconsin (UW) and Wisconsin Technical College System (WCTS) to work together to meet community and industry needs.

Building a Community Partner Ecosystem That Grows Nonprofit Leaders for High-Impact Higher Education Initiatives

Dr. Shanieka Frazier, Dallas College

Dallas College, one of the largest community colleges in Texas, serves more than 127,000 students annually and maintains deep partnerships with school districts, employers, and community organizations. In 2025, the institution launched the Partner Ambassador Program, an initiative designed to strengthen nonprofit capacity, elevate youth leadership, and create aligned pathways into higher education.

This case study documents how Dallas College and five nonprofit partners co designed the 2026 From Dreams to Destination: Leadership In Action Youth Summit a collaborative, youth centered event that demonstrates the power of shared leadership, strategic planning, and community based capacity building.

USC Salk D.R.I.V.E.S. – A Data-Diven Mobile STEM Initiative Transforming Rural Education in South Carolina

Dr. April Cone, University of South Carolina Palmetto College

USC (University of South Carolina) Salk D.R.I.V.E.S. (Driving Rural Innovators into Visions of Employment in STEM) is a mobile, data-driven STEM education initiative launched by USC Salkehatchie with funding support from the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). Designed to address persistent educational inequities in rural South Carolina, the initiative deploys a fully equipped mobile STEM bus to deliver rigorous, hands-on, standards-aligned STEM and clean energy learning experiences directly to students in some of the state's most underserved communities. By combining cutting-edge technology, workforce-aligned instruction, and district-level data analytics, USC Salk D.R.I.V.E.S. represents an innovative response to long-standing gaps in access, achievement, and opportunity.

A Reason to Stay: Placemaking, Student Success, and Community Engagement at George Mason University Mason Square

Melissa Thierry, George Mason University

This case study examines how one regional campus chose to address that challenge head-on, not by building new facilities or hiring a larger staff, but by rethinking what already existed. Through intentional placemaking, the strategic redesign and activation of shared physical space, campus leaders worked to transform an underused outdoor plaza into something students actually wanted to gather in. What followed offers lessons not just in facilities planning, but in how environmental design, collaborative leadership, and sustained programming can work together to shift campus culture.

Reimagining a Rural Campus: Workforce Development as a Strategy for Enrollment Recovery and Community Impact

Sarah Casscles, SUNY Morrisville

Higher education is undergoing a significant transformation, shifting from a traditional degree-centered model toward one that emphasizes workforce development, industry partnerships, and flexible, career-ready credentials. This paper examines the challenges and opportunities facing the Norwich Branch Campus of SUNY Morrisville, a small rural campus in Chenango County, New York, that has experienced a substantial decline in enrollment, from 900 students and 19 degree programs in 2019 to 200 students and four programs in 2026. Contributing factors include changing student demographics, increased preference for online learning, limited student support resources such as childcare and food access, and a misalignment between academic offerings and regional workforce needs.

Drawing on local labor market data and institutional survey findings, this study identifies a growing demand for short-term, skills-based training over traditional degree pathways. In response, the Norwich Campus has implemented a strategic shift toward workforce-focused education, including microcredentials, early college programs, and registered apprenticeships developed in partnerships with local school districts, employers, and workforce agencies. A key initiative, the Essential Workforce Skills program, demonstrates early success in

preparing high school students for employment while strengthening connections with regional industries.

The paper argues that rebuilding enrollment and community relevance requires an integrated, flexible education-to-employment pipeline that serves both youth and adult learners. By aligning programming with high-demand sectors, expanding partnerships, and leveraging grant funding for sustainable growth, the Norwich Campus illustrates a replicable model for rural higher education institutions seeking to drive economic development and improve workforce outcomes.

Practice-Based Faculty Development at a University Branch Campus

Dr. Matthew Derrick, CSU Stanislaus—Stockton

This case study examines practice-based faculty development at a university branch campus through two initiatives: the Stockton Survey and Stockton Talks at the Stockton Campus of California State University, Stanislaus. Drawing on autoethnographic methods, the study analyzes how these initiatives address structural challenges common to branch campuses, including faculty isolation, limited resources, and misalignment with main campus programming. The Stockton Survey, an interdisciplinary faculty learning community, engaged faculty in collaborative survey design, implementation, and analysis focused on the local community. Stockton Talks, a recurring speaker series, provided a platform for sharing research and fostering intellectual exchange. Together, these initiatives demonstrate how faculty development can emerge from sustained, practice-based activities embedded in everyday academic work. The findings suggest that locally grounded, collaborative, and place-oriented approaches can strengthen faculty engagement, visibility, and community, offering an alternative to centralized, programmatic models of faculty development in branch campus contexts.

Benchmarking Community–University Partnerships at a Branch Campus: Implications for Anchor Mission and Community Engagement

Dr. Sarah Sweitzer, CSU Stanislaus—Stockton

Community–university partnerships are central to the public mission of higher education, particularly for institutions serving regional and historically underserved communities. This study examines the quality and characteristics of partnerships between community-based organizations and the Stockton Campus of Stanislaus State, a regional branch campus, using a mixed-methods descriptive survey grounded in Carnegie Community Engagement principles. Survey data were collected from community partners (n = 17; 30% response rate) to benchmark partnership effectiveness across domains including reciprocity, communication, impact, and sustainability. Findings indicate positive perceptions of partnership purpose and community impact, with variation in perceptions of shared decision-making, communication structures, and institutional support. Results align with prior research demonstrating that partnerships are often driven by human capital exchange and shaped by individual relationships, while often being constrained by institutional complexity and capacity limitations. The study highlights the distinctive role of branch campuses as anchor institutions embedded in local ecosystems, emphasizing their potential to foster equitable, place-based partnerships while also navigating structural constraints. Implications are discussed for strengthening branch campus engagement infrastructure, advancing co-creation with community partners, and enhancing evaluation capacity as a pathway to deeper, more transformational partnerships.

Breakout Sessions

Wednesday, May 27

If You Build It, Will They Come?

Sara Hawes, Melissa Thierry, John Baxter, and Robert McClure, George Mason University and Stantec

As institutions look to bridge the gap between academia, industry, government and community, innovation hubs are increasingly used to attract students, faculty, and industry partners. This session explores what truly drives effective innovation ecosystems, drawing on recent examples from George Mason University?s Fuse at Mason Square, Northeastern University?s Innovation Campus at Burlington, and Seattle University?s Center for Science and Innovation. Rather than a one-size-fits-all solution, these case studies reveal a range of co-location strategies, engagement with industry partners, and institutional approaches, whether in an urban context or suburban settings. Speakers will discuss how programming, governance, space typologies and adjacencies influence the impact of co-location and cross-disciplinary activities, as well as how innovation hubs can serve as gateways to broader campus resources. Attendees will leave with practical considerations for aligning real estate investment, activation strategies, and institutional goals to create innovation hubs that are used, visible, and sustainable.

Seamless by Design: Inside a High-Impact Dual Admission Model

Emma Volks and Michelle Peters, SUNY Plattsburgh at Queensbury

Recognized by the State University of New York's Center for Professional Development as a Campus Best Practice for Student Success, this dynamic session pulls back the curtain on SUNY Plattsburgh's innovative dual-admission model. Learn how four strategic agreements guarantee seamless transfer admission for students completing their associate degrees, and how this approach strengthens recruitment, retention, and overall student success.

In this interactive session, participants will explore the full mechanics of the agreements, discover effective strategies for cross-campus collaboration and data sharing, and examine real outcomes from our partnerships with community colleges. We will share successes, lessons learned, and practical solutions that reduce barriers and create clearer, more supportive pathways for transfer students. Attendees will leave with actionable insights and replicable practices to elevate transfer pipelines at their own institutions.

Boots on the Ground: Creative Community-Based Recruitment

Melody Kees, Andy Spellman, Cheryl Tays, Susan Wiliams, and Sharon Wilson, Roane State Community College

What happens when branch campuses stop waiting for students to come to them, and instead go where their communities already are?This session highlights a "boots on the ground" recruitment approach built around creative, relationship-driven events held in local communities, on branch campuses, and across K-12 schools. By rethinking traditional recruitment and prioritizing visibility, trust, and engagement, seven of eight branch campuses experienced measurable enrollment growth. Participants will explore real-world event ideas, partnership strategies, and low-cost outreach models that can be adapted to campuses of all sizes, especially in rural and underserved areas. From pop-up community events to school-based engagement and interactive campus experiences, this session offers practical strategies that move beyond marketing and into meaningful connection.

Attendees will leave inspired and equipped with actionable ideas they can implement immediately to strengthen enrollment and community presence.

Saddle Up for Success: Building a Scalable Online Orientation

Valorie Garrett and Robyn Chivers, University of Wyoming

This session explores the development of Saddle Up Wayfinder, an online orientation built through a student-support-first lens to meet learners where they are, online. Grounded in advising and student success practice, the orientation was intentionally designed in partnership with instructional designers and supported by emerging AI tools to ensure clarity, uniformity, and accessibility. Presenters will share how cross-campus collaboration among advising, IT, academic programs, instructional design, and student services transformed orientation from a one-time checklist into an ongoing support experience. By centralizing essential information and guiding students to trusted resources, this model reduces repetitive workload for limited branch campus staff while empowering students to independently find the knowledge they need. Participants will learn how thoughtful design, strategic use of technology, and collaborative workflows can reduce information overload, improve student readiness, and foster early connection before the first day of class.

From the Margins to the Mission: Campus Belonging

Rebecca Smith, University of West Georgia

What happens when a branch campus turns freshman coursework into an intergalactic competition? At UWG Newnan, faculty designed the Mars Expo - an experiential learning event where over 120 students from six disciplines collaborated to build fictional Mars colonies, then pitched them to community leaders, local professionals, and potential employers for a chance to win $2,500 in prizes. The result? A campus buzzing with purpose, connection, and belonging.

In this session, we'll share how three faculty members secured $15,000 in grants, united dual-enrolled and traditional students around a shared challenge, and brought the community inside the branch campus in a meaningful way. Whether your campus serves 200 students or 2,000, you'll leave with a replicable model for creating high-impact, interdisciplinary events that make students feel like they truly belong, even on a branch campus.

The Atlantic City Summer Experience: Live Work Learn

Alex Marino, Stockton University

Stockton University's Summer Live Work Learn Program showcases how higher education can drive student success, institutional sustainability, and regional economic growth through intentional, place-based partnerships. The program offers students free summer housing on the iconic Atlantic City boardwalk, access to hundreds of paid, professional-level employment opportunities, and structured workforce development training that builds career-ready and transferable skills beyond the classroom.

By removing financial barriers and providing meaningful experiential learning, this initiative strengthens student retention and long-term career outcomes. At the same time, strategic partnerships with Atlantic City employers reinforce Stockton's role as an anchor institution supporting local talent pipelines, activating underutilized housing assets during the summer months, and generating hundreds of thousands of dollars in new revenue. This session highlights a scalable, replicable model that aligns institutional mission with workforce development, community investment, and measurable returns for students, employers, and the region.

Service as a Strategy

Dr. J. Gary Adcox (The Gallagher Group) and Dr. Cyndee Perdue Moore (NABCA)

Every interaction on a college campus tells a story — about who you are, what you value, and how students, families, and partners can expect to be treated. In a competitive higher education landscape, exceptional service isn't a "nice to have"; it's a strategic lever that drives enrollment, strengthens retention, and fuels powerful word of mouth referrals.

Service as a Strategy reframes customer service as an institutional advantage. This session explores what high impact service looks like in higher education, how it shapes the student experience from first inquiry to graduation, and why consistent, human centered interactions build trust and loyalty across every touchpoint.

Participants will consider their campus interactions- from admissions, advising, financial aid, student services, and campus operations - to identify where service breaks down — and where it can be transformed. You'll leave with practical tools to elevate service culture on your campus, including:

- Service behaviors that build belonging
- Strategies to reduce friction in student-facing processes
- Techniques for coaching teams toward service excellence
- Ways to turn satisfied students into enthusiastic referrers

Whether you lead a branch campus, manage a frontline team, or influence student facing operations, this session will help you design a service experience that strengthens your institution's reputation and keeps students engaged, supported, and proud to stay.

Building College Knowledge Through Student Ambassadors

Ron Blassingame, University of Cincinnati Clermont

The presenter will share how a research-backed peer-to-peer ambassador program leverages student voice to expand college access and build social capital. Designed in partnership with admissions and high schools, the program empowers students to mentor peers while navigating their own pathways. Attendees will explore how centering student leadership can transform disjointed systems, bridge the gap between K-12 and higher education, and create equity-driven models that advance both recruitment and student success.

Revitalizing 2+2 Partnerships in Rural Tennessee

Erica Bell and Anita Cannedy, University of Tennessee at Martin

Revitalizing 2+2 Partnerships: A Collaborative Approach to Student Success and Degree Completion in West Tennessee: This session highlights the strategic revitalization of a 2+2 transfer partnership between the University of Tennessee at Martin Jackson Center and Jackson State Community College. Focused on expanding access and advancing degree completion to support the West Tennessee workforce, the renewal was driven by strong leadership at system, institutional, and local levels. Attendees will explore how a new staffing model, first-year advisor engagement, a dual admission agreement, and branded pathway materials transformed the partnership from transactional to transformative. Through small-group discussions, marketing SWOT exercises, and Q&A, participants will engage in practical exploration of tools, templates, and success stories illustrating how collaborative leadership can rebuild and sustain regional transfer pathways that enhance student success, workforce readiness, and institutional growth.

From Crisis to Capacity at Branch Campuses: Empowering Human Capital

Dr. Kim Kirby, Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas

Higher education is under intense pressure from enrollment declines, staffing shortages, and fragmented cultures, especially at branch campuses who often work with fewer resources and greater isolation. This interactive session, inspired by Kevin R. McClure's "Caring University" framework, shows how to turn those realities into momentum by centering care in leadership. Learn how to build trust, foster psychological safety, and create resilient cultures that thrive during uncertainty. Packed with research-backed strategies and real-world examples, this workshop moves beyond crisis response and focuses on human potential. You will cultivate environments where people feel valued, supported, and empowered to lead boldly. Walk away with a practical roadmap to align multi-site goals, strengthen collaboration, and inspire confidence across teams. Ultimately, this session reinforces that investing in human capital is the most powerful strategy for a thriving future.

Words from Our Conference Chair

Serving as the Conference Committee Chair for this year's NABCA Conference hosted by George Mason University in Arlington, Virginia, has been a rewarding experience and a privilege. What makes NABCA special is the opportunity to connect with colleagues, learn from one another, and experience the unique culture and programs of the host institution. Like the students we serve, it is the people who make this organization so worthwhile. Highlighting NABCA's strengths this year were The Branch Campus Leadership Institute presentations, the visit to George Mason's Science and Technology Campus, and the breakout sessions which provided ideas and best practices attendees can take back to their own campuses.

A special thank you to George Mason University for hosting this year's conference and for doing an exceptional job in their hospitality, planning and willingness to share their campus.

As I conclude my term as Conference Committee Chair, I want to thank Andrew Johnson and Leigh Anne Newton for their outstanding partnership and leadership. Andrew will do an excellent job stepping into the Conference Chair role, and Leigh Anne will continue to serve the committee well as First Chair. I am also excited to welcome Jennifer Passenti as Second Chair and know the conference is in great hands moving forward.

I also want to thank Cyndee Moore for the tremendous work she does behind the scenes to support NABCA and make each conference a success.

If you have not attended a NABCA conference, I encourage you to consider joining us in the future. The relationships you build, the ideas you gain, and the opportunity to learn from colleagues across the country make the experience well worth it.

Kevin Hurst

The 2026 NABCA conference was hosted by George Mason Arlington campus, in Arlington, VA. In honor of the 250th celebration of the United States of America, the theme for the conference was "Capital Ideas: Advancing Higher Education for a Stronger Future". This theme was showcased through our BCLI presentations, breakout sessions, and tour of the brand-new George Mason University facilities. The theme also highlights the ingenuity of branch campus administrators navigating the ever-changing higher education landscape.

Touring the George Mason Arlington Campus and their new Fuse facility, and their Science and Technology Campus was a "boots on the ground" example of how branch campuses in their strongest form are connected directly in the community they support. Through providing space for local industry, capital collaboration to enhance academics, or community engagement and recreational support, branch campuses shine brightest when they become part of their regional development and growth.

The BCLI presentations covered topics from instilling the needs of the community within engineering curriculum to leveraging community partnerships to develop youth leadership. Breakout sessions highlighted new capabilities for online orientations for non-traditional commuter campuses, supporting students through summer employment, to creating an institution with the capacity of care. These are only a few of the many creative, engaging, and leadership and community focused topics covered across the three and a half days.

No NABCA conference would be complete without our Thursday night experience. This year we traveled to George Washington's Mount Vernon estate for a private tour of the home and group dinner. These types of experiences put words to action in how we choose to create a community of engaged leaders in a typically overlooked sector of higher education. We learn from each other from the presentation hall to the dinner table, to take back to our own campus to continue supporting our students and community.

Andrew Johnson

Scenes from the 2026 Conference



Cohort IIX of the Branch Campus Leadership Institute (BCLI) celebrate their graduation.





Left: *The Roane State team share their experience in creative community-based recruitment.* ***Right:*** *Socializing outdoors of GMU Mason Square.*





Left: *Melissa Thierry delivers her case study placemaking, student success, and community engagement GMU Mason Square.* ***Right:*** *Dining at Mt. Vernon after touring George Washington's estate.*



A small group of NABCA members gather for dinner out on the town in Arlington.