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## Teachers' perception of community engagement in higher educational institutions: Barriers and best practices

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### Abstract

Community engagement is recognized as a vital aspect of education, which incorporates real-life experiences into learning and address community needs. The goals of community engagement in HEI are to improve quality of teaching and learning, creating better relationships between HEIs and community; to identify the problems and reach the solution faced by community members for common benefit. Teachers' role is very important in shaping students' behaviour and connecting educational institutions with the community. In higher educational institutions (HEIs), teachers' involvement in community engagement can significantly enhance the quality of education and foster better relationships between HEIs and the communities. The objective of this study is to explore teachers' perceptions of community engagement in HEIs, focusing on identifying barriers and best practices. Employing descriptive survey method, data was collected from 73 teachers from government degree colleges of Telangana State. Results revealed moderate levels of perceived community engagement among teachers and highlighted barriers such as limited community involvement and lack of funding.

**Keywords:** Teachers, higher educational institutions, community engagement

### Introduction

“A good teacher is a harbinger of positive energy”

- G. Balasubramanian, Former Director, CBSE.

Teachers are the architects of the nation. The role of a teacher at every stage of education remains dominant. Teachers' job encompasses a wider sphere than just dissemination of knowledge and students draw inspiration from their teachers. Teachers at higher educational institutions are facilitators who guide their students, groom them, and equip them to take up their careers. Higher Educational Institutions are supposed to serve as centres for nourishing understanding and sharing theoretical concepts and, hence this notion at times seems to be conservative, with knowledge being restricted to academic structure (Das & Bisht). Das & Bisht looks at community engagement as a two-way process, where the theoretical knowledge can go beyond the institution's boundaries, bridging the gaps with the closely attached communities often looked at as unapproachable agencies. It must be noted that, community engagement stands as one of the core objectives of any higher educational institution. The role of a teacher for successful inclusion and implication of community engagement as a part of curriculum transaction stands equally important.

Bender (2008) framed a comprehensive definition for community engagement as, “initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to its community. Community Engagement typically finds expression in a variety of forms, ranging from informal and relatively unstructured activities to formal and structured academic programmes addressed at particular community needs (service-learning programmes)” (p.87). He also mentioned that, “Scholarly publications, research reports, media coverage and public forums are also modes of engaging with communities, which could be seen as a natural extension of the core work of universities in teaching and research.” (p.88).

India has committed towards achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In order to meet the 17 SDGs, one must have a defined set of solutions addressing the local challenges of society. In this context, HEIs can contribute profoundly by educating the local community about SDGs and carrying out research tailored to meet the needs of the communities. Research and knowledge sharing about SDGs requires roles in multidisciplinary departments as each of the SDGs can be connected with various departments of higher education institutions. Not only to address this global challenge but also to meet the goals of socio-economic development of dream India, HEIs can make a major contribution through dynamic community engagement. This practice will benefit the HEIs in India as well, by improving the quality of research and teaching and broadening the frame of practical exposure for both students and teachers (Guidelines, 2022).

Bhatnagar (2020) <sup>[3]</sup> views community engagement as a critical game changer among one of the roles of HEIs in the community towards sustainable development. Gruber (2017) <sup>[7]</sup> mentioned that despite various challenges the compass of practical knowledge which students of higher educational body avails with its community connection establishment is gaining impetus. Though amalgamating community participation as a part of institutional plans will remain crucial, but planning and timely assessment can prove to be productive (Wendling, 2023) <sup>[13]</sup>. Community engagement must also develop within the students the values for service towards society and that of responsible citizenship Collaco (2017) <sup>[5]</sup> mentioned that the significance of teaching faculty in higher educational institutions is often undermined in affirming student participation and encouraging their participation in community engagement. The teachers are required to incorporate effective teaching methods to motivate students for community engagement. Bhatnagar *et al* (2020) <sup>[3]</sup> suggested participatory approach, enriching curriculum and providing institutional support can foster active community participation among students. Butcher (2003) <sup>[4]</sup> asserted that service learning will strengthen students through effective community engagement. Teachers owning community engagement as a core responsibility to be addressed and to gain students attention towards this area may foster social responsibility among students and encourage the spirit of community engagement (Khalid, 2013) <sup>[10]</sup>. O'Meara (2011) <sup>[12]</sup> mentions of community engagement of teachers in HEIs significant where their active involvement plays a dominant role towards innovation.

As the role of teachers in community engagement is significant. This advocates the need to gain their inputs regarding community engagement and understand their ideas of best practices in this process. And on the way to improve community engagement practices, there arises a need to gain insights about the barriers or the challenges in its execution.

## Objectives

### Objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To study the level of teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions
2. To identify the barriers and challenges faced in implementing community engagement activities in higher education institutions from teachers' perspectives

3. To identify the best practices for successful community engagement in higher education institutions as perceived by teachers

## Methods

The present study is descriptive study and aims to explore teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions, identify perceived barriers and challenges, and highlight best practices. A quantitative research approach was employed for collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data and survey method was used to collect data. The survey was carried out on a selected sample of the target population. The obtained data was then subjected to statistical analysis such as mean, standard deviation and percentage. The results were interpreted to accomplish the objectives of the study.

## Sampling

In the present study, the target population consists of teachers from government degree colleges of Telangana State. Disproportionate stratified random sampling was used to select the sample. One urban district, Hyderabad and one rural district, Adilabad were randomly chosen from Telangana State. 46 teachers from the district of Hyderabad and 27 teachers from Adilabad were selected. In total 73 teachers were selected as the sample. These teachers were categorized based on three demographic factors: gender (Male and Female), locale (Rural and Urban) and teaching experience (Up to 10 years, 11 to 20 years and Above 20 years). The details of the distribution of selected teachers are given in the Table 1 and Table 2.

**Table 1:** The distribution of teachers by locale and gender

Gender	Urban		Rural		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Male	13	17.81	15	20.55	28	38.36
Female	33	45.21	12	16.44	45	61.64
Total	46	63.01	27	37.99	73	100.00

**Table 2:** The distribution of teachers by locale and teaching experience

Teaching Experience	Urban		Rural		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Up to 10 years	13	17.81	9	12.33	22	30.14
11 to 20 years	17	23.29	16	21.92	33	45.21
Above 20 years	16	21.92	2	2.74	18	24.66
Total	46	63.01	27	36.99	73	100.00

## Research Tool

A tool was constructed to assess teachers' perception of community engagement. The tool consists of two parts. The first part aimed to assess the level of teachers' perception and consists a total of 36 items across six dimensions namely, curriculum, students' involvement, faculty involvement, collaboration with community organisations, resource management and services, and impact on community. The validity and reliability was ensured. The Cronbach's Alpha value was found to be .96 indicating a high reliability of the tool. The second part of the tool aimed to assess the barriers & challenges and best practices as perceived by teachers. There are 12 items in this part, 6 focusing on barriers & challenges and 6 for best practices. The items were specifically designed to capture teachers' perception of various community engagement practices.

**Results**

**Objective 1: To study the level of teachers’ perception of community engagement in higher education institutions**

The first objective of the study was to examine how the level of teachers’ perception of community engagement varies. To achieve this objective, mean and standard deviation were computed. Subsequently, for every dimension three levels, i.e., low, moderate, and high were created. Then, percentages were calculated to ascertain the distribution of respondents in each level. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Distribution of respondents according to the levels of perception of community engagement

Dimension	Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)
Curriculum	17.8	67.1	15.1
Students’ Involvement	13.7	63.0	23.3
Faculty Involvement	17.8	68.5	13.7
Collaboration with Community Organizations	16.4	64.4	19.2
Resource Management & Services	13.7	63.0	23.3
Impact on Community	11.0	72.6	16.4
Overall Community Engagement	15.1	68.5	16.4

The results in Table 3 reveal that for the dimension of *curriculum*, 67.1% of the teachers have a moderate level of community engagement in the curriculum of higher education, which suggests that there is potential for improvement in integrating community engagement activities into curriculum. A sizeable percentage (17.8%) of teachers have a low level of community engagement indicating that they believe community engagement activities are not integrated into curriculum adequately. Surprisingly, a notable portion (15.1%) have a low level of community engagement indicating that they feel community engagement activities are integrated well into curriculum.

Data regarding the dimension of *students’ involvement* showed that a majority of teachers (63.0%) perceived a moderate level of students’ involvement in community engagement activities, while 13.7% of them perceived low levels of involvement and a significant portion (23.3%) of them perceived high levels of involvement among students.

Data for the *faculty involvement* dimension revealed that a significant portion (17.8%) of the teachers perceived a low level of faculty involvement while a majority of them (68.5%) perceived a moderate level of faculty involvement in community engagement activities. However, 13.7% of the students perceived high levels of involvement.

Data for the dimension of *collaboration with community organizations*, data showed that 64.4% of teachers perceived a moderate level of collaboration, 16.4% perceived a low level and 19.2% perceived a high level of collaboration.

With respect to the dimension *resource management & services*, while 63% of the teachers perceived a moderate level of resource management & services in the context of facilitating community engagement activities, 13.7% perceived a low level and 23.3% perceived a high level of resource management and services in the context of community engagement.

In case of the dimension of *impact on community*, while the majority of teachers (72.6%) perceived a moderate impact on the community, with 11% perceiving a low level and 16.4% perceiving a high level.

Regarding the *overall community engagement*, it was found that the majority of teachers (68.5%) of students reported to perceive a moderate level of overall community engagement. 15.1% perceived a low level of community engagement, while 16.4% perceived a high level.

**Objective 2: To identify the barriers and challenges faced in implementing community engagement activities in higher education institutions from teachers’ perspectives**

The analysis revealed various barriers and challenges perceived by teachers in implementing community engagement activities, including lack of funding, limited community involvement, cultural barriers, lack of institutional support, difficulty in finding opportunities, and community awareness and interest.

Based on the percentages of teachers perceiving each barrier as a challenge, the ranking from highest to lowest is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Barriers and challenges in implementing community engagement activities as perceived by teachers

Ranking	Barriers	Percentage of Teachers
1	Limited Community Involvement	61.6%
2	Lack of Funding	52.1%
3	Cultural Barriers	42.5%
4	Lack of community awareness and interest	37%
5	Difficulty in Finding Opportunities	34.2%
6	Lack of Institutional Support	24.7%

As is shown in Table 4, *Limited Community Involvement* (61.6%) is perceived by teachers as the most significant challenge, indicating a significant barrier in engaging communities effectively. This suggests that teachers feel that there are issues in engaging the community effectively, which hinder the success of such activities.

*Lack of Funding* (52.1%) the second most significant challenge reported by teachers, suggesting that financial constraints are a major barrier in implementing community engagement activities.

*Cultural Barriers* (42.5%) are perceived as a significant challenge by a substantial portion of teachers. This indicates the importance of cultural sensitivity and understanding in community engagement efforts.

*Lack of Community Awareness and Interest* (37%) is perceived as a significant challenge by a considerable percentage of teachers, highlighting the need for better strategies to inform and motivate community members to participate in community engagement activities.

The barrier regarding the *Difficulty in Finding Opportunities* was found to be a significant challenge as 34.2% of the teachers reported this issue as a barrier in implementing community engagement activities.

The least, but still significant, percentage of teachers (24.7%) perceived *Lack of Institutional Support* as a challenge, indicating that some teachers feel there is inadequate support from their own institutions. This emphasizes that institutional support is crucial for the success of community engagement efforts.

**Objective 3: To identify the best practices for successful community engagement in higher education institutions as perceived by teachers**



The data on the best practices for community engagement was analyzed by ranking the best practices based on the percentage of teachers perceiving each practice as successful, the ranking from highest to lowest is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5:** Best practices for successful community engagement practices as perceived by teachers

Ranking	Practices	Percentage of Teachers
1	Successful student-led engagement program	72.6%
2	Successful faculty-led engagement program	71.2%
3	Model Community Engagement Activities	68.5%
4	Recognition of community engagement activities	65.8%
5	Integrated curriculum engagement program	57.5%
6	Sustained partnerships with community organizations	45.2%

As is shown in Table 5, *Successful Student-Led Engagement Program* (72.6%) was perceived as the most successful by teachers followed by *Successful Faculty-Led Engagement Program* with 71.2% of teachers perceiving such programs as successful. This highlights the importance of involvement of students and teachers in community engagement activities.

Regarding *Model Community Engagement Activities*, it was found out that 68.5% of teachers perceive that their institution's community engagement activities serve as a model for other institutions. *Recognition of Community Engagement Activities* is viewed positively by a significant majority (65.8%) of teachers.

*Integrated Curriculum Engagement Program* was perceived as a successful practice by a majority (57.5%) of teachers, though to a lesser extent compared to student and faculty-led activities. *Sustained Partnerships with Community Organizations* were perceived as least effective, as the lowest percentage (45.2%) of teachers gave positive responses, suggesting that this area may require more attention and improvement.

## Conclusion

The findings revealed that a majority of teachers perceived community engagement in higher education institutions at a moderate level across various dimensions. There is room for improvement, particularly in areas like curriculum integration and faculty involvement. Based on teachers' perception, significant barriers such as limited community involvement and lack of funding were highlighted that need to be addressed in order to enhance community engagement in higher education institutions. Overall, while teachers recognize the importance of community engagement, there is a clear indication that more efforts are needed to overcome existing barriers and enhance engagement practices.

Regarding the barriers and challenges, the data revealed that the limited community involvement was perceived as the most significant barrier, highlighting the need for strategies to enhance community participation and engagement. This was followed by a lack of funding, suggesting that financial constraints are a major barrier in implementing community engagement activities. Cultural barriers, lack of community awareness and difficulty in finding appropriate opportunities also pose significant challenges. While lack of institutional support is the least cited barrier, it remains an important area

for improvement. Addressing the identified barriers can help institutions foster stronger community ties to ensure the success of community engagement programs.

Regarding the success of best practices related to community engagement, while student-led and faculty-led engagement programs were perceived as most successful, there is room for improvement in integrating community engagement into the curriculum and establishing sustained partnerships with community organizations. Recognizing community engagement efforts and serving them as a model for other institutions are also important aspects that may contribute to the success of community engagement.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the identified barriers and enhance community engagement in higher education institutions:

1. Institutions should allocate dedicated funds for community engagement activities, as a significant portion of teachers identified lack of funding as a major barrier.
2. Institutions should develop strategic plans to actively involve community members in their initiatives, as limited community involvement was perceived by teachers as the most significant challenge.
3. To understand and overcome cultural barriers training should be provided on competency to enhance the ability of faculty and students to interact respectfully and effectively with individuals from various cultural backgrounds.
4. Outreach programs such as workshops and campaigns could be implemented to raise awareness about the benefits and opportunities of community engagement in order to encourage more participation.
5. Support from institutions should be ensured for teachers and students involved in community engagement activities through administrative support and necessary resources.
6. Successful community engagement programs should be recognized and rewarded to promote best practices.

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