



Understanding Community Engagement from Educators' Perspectives

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Abstract: This paper explores the perspectives of educators on community engagement in higher educational institutions (HEIs). Community engagement involves collaboration between HEIs and local communities to address shared challenges and promote mutual growth. This study focuses on various dimensions such as curriculum integration, student involvement, faculty participation, collaboration with community organizations, resource management, and the overall impact on the community. Through interviews and surveys with educators, the research uncovers their views on the benefits and challenges of implementing community engagement programs. The findings reveal the perspective of faculty members towards community engagement practices from various dimensions. Additionally, effective resource management and partnerships with community organizations are crucial for the success of these initiatives. The study concludes that a strategic approach to community engagement can lead to significant benefits for both HEIs and the communities they serve.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Higher Educational Institutions, Educators' Perspectives, Curriculum Integration, Student Involvement, Faculty Participation, Community Collaboration, Resource Management, Impact on Community

Introduction

Community engagement in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) is increasingly recognized as a vital component in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030. According to the United Nations, SDG 4 emphasizes quality education and lifelong learning opportunities, while SDG 11 promotes sustainable cities and communities (United Nations, 2015). Engaging communities through HEIs fosters knowledge sharing, practical skill development, and mutual growth, which are essential for sustainable development. As UNICEF (2021) reports, community engagement ensures that educational initiatives are inclusive and equitable, reaching the most marginalized populations. This approach not only enhances educational outcomes but also strengthens social cohesion and resilience within communities.

Further, the World Economic Forum (WEF) highlights the importance of community engagement in building partnerships that drive innovation and address local challenges (WEF, 2020). HEIs play a crucial role in this process by leveraging their resources and expertise to support community-led initiatives. The World Health Organization (WHO) also underscores the significance of community engagement in promoting public health and well-being (WHO, 2021). Effective collaboration between HEIs and community organizations can lead to improved health outcomes, reduced inequalities, and sustainable community development. By integrating community engagement practices into their core missions, HEIs can contribute significantly to the achievement of the SDGs and the overall betterment of society.

Environmental threats such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, pose significant challenges to sustainable development. Community engagement is crucial in addressing these threats as it fosters environmental awareness and encourages sustainable practices. HEIs, through their research and educational programs, can lead the way in promoting environmental stewardship and resilience. By involving students, faculty, and community members in sustainability initiatives, HEIs can drive collective action towards a healthier planet. Reports from UNICEF and WHO emphasize the need for community participation in environmental conservation to achieve long-term sustainability goals (UNICEF, 2021; WHO, 2021).

In India, HEIs have a unique role to play in community engagement due to their vast reach and influence. India has a huge educational system with 14.89 lakh schools. Out of these, there are 1.5 lakh secondary schools and 1.42 lakh senior secondary schools. In higher education, there are 1113 universities, 43,796 colleges, and 11,296 standalone institutions, including 3,781 polytechnics. India has a large number of teachers too, with 95 lakh teachers in school education and 15.51 lakh teachers in higher education (AISHE, 2021). With this large number of universities and colleges, India's educational institutions can act as catalysts for social and environmental change. Faculty members, as key stakeholders, have the responsibility to integrate community engagement into their teaching, research, and social extension activities. Their perspectives and efforts are crucial in shaping the next generation of socially responsible and environmentally conscious citizens. By fostering a culture of engagement and collaboration, faculty can help bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world applications, thus contributing to sustainable development at both local and national levels.

Review of related literature

Bandy (2018) investigated the concept of service learning and community engagement within higher education. The study's major objective was to explore how community engagement can enhance educational experiences for students. This qualitative study involved a comprehensive review of community engagement practices in various institutions. The findings suggested that community engagement significantly enhances students' practical knowledge and social responsibility, leading to a more holistic educational experience.

Bhatnagar, Agarwal, Sharma, and Singh (2020) conducted a study with a focus on students' perceptions of community engagement in higher educational institutions in India. The study aims to understand the benefits and challenges from the students' perspective. Using surveys and interviews, this mixed-method study revealed that community engagement activities improve students' practical skills and foster a sense of social responsibility. However, challenges such as lack of resources and institutional support are highlighted.

Bray (2020) provided a theoretical framework for understanding community engagement by defining key concepts and exploring various models. The objective of the study was to clarify the meaning of community engagement and its relevance to sustainable development. This theoretical study reviewed existing literature and presented models of engagement. Findings indicated that community engagement is essential for sustainable development, fostering collaboration, and community well-being.

Gruber (2017) examined online resources available for community engagement in higher education. The study's objective was to identify useful tools and information sources for implementing community engagement practices. This qualitative review of online resources found that digital platforms can significantly support community engagement efforts by providing access to a wide range of information and collaboration tools.

Jadhav and Shukla (2016) explored community engagement practices in Indian Universities through fieldwork experiences. The study aimed to identify effective strategies and outcomes of community engagement. The empirical study involved case studies and field observations. The findings highlighted successful strategies such as partnerships with local organizations and community-based projects, which lead to mutual benefits for both students and communities.

Ogunsanya and Govender (2020) discuss the current state of university-community engagement in Africa, focusing on tensions and future trends. The objective was to understand the dynamics of community engagement in African higher education. This qualitative study used interviews and document analysis. Major findings included the identification of key tensions such as resource constraints and differing priorities between universities and communities, but also the potential for impactful collaboration.

Tinkler, Hannah, Tinkler, and Miller (2018) explored the use of service-learning to teach social entrepreneurship at the University of Minnesota. The study's objective was to assess the impact of service learning on students' entrepreneurial skills. This case study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. Findings suggested that service-learning enhances students' entrepreneurial skills and fosters a deeper understanding of community needs.

UNICEF (2021) highlights the role of community engagement in promoting inclusive and equitable education. The report's objective was to emphasize the importance of reaching marginalized populations through community engagement. This descriptive study reviewed various community engagement initiatives supported by UNICEF. Findings underscore the critical role of community engagement in improving educational outcomes and fostering social cohesion.

United Nations (2015) outlines the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing the role of community engagement in achieving these goals. The objective was to provide a framework for sustainable development. This policy document reviews global efforts and strategies for community engagement. Findings highlighted that community engagement is crucial for achieving SDGs, particularly in areas of education and community development.

World Health Organization (2021) provided a framework for community engagement in health promotion. The study's objective was to guide the implementation of community engagement practices in health initiatives. This qualitative study reviewed case studies and best practices. Major findings indicate that community engagement leads to improved health outcomes and stronger community resilience.

Research Gap

Despite the extensive research on community engagement, there is a perceived significant gap in understanding the specific mechanisms through which higher educational institutions in India can effectively integrate community engagement into their curriculum and institutional practices. Most studies focus on general benefits and challenges, but detailed strategies for implementation and long-term impact assessment are lacking. Furthermore, there is limited research on the role of faculty in facilitating community engagement and how their perspectives can shape successful initiatives. Addressing these gaps requires more empirical studies and case analyses that explore these dynamics in the Indian context.

Objectives

Objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To find out the significant differences in teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions based on their gender
2. To find out the significant differences in teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions based on their locale
3. To find out the significant differences in teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions based on the duration of teaching experience

Method

The present study is descriptive in nature and aims to investigate differences, if any, in teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions, based on select demographic factors. A quantitative research approach was employed for collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data. A 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 t-test and One Way ANOVA. The results were interpreted to accomplish the objectives of the study.

Sampling

In the present study, the target population consists of faculty 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 5 Government Degree Colleges of Hyderabad District (erstwhile) and 27 teachers from 5 Government Degree

Colleges of Adilabad district (erstwhile) 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	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
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	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
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 aimed to assess the level of teachers' perception and consisted 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.

Objective 1: *To find out the significant differences in teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions based on their gender*

H₀: There is no significant difference in teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions based on their gender

To test the difference in teachers' perception of community engagement, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The results of t-test are presented in Table 3:

Table 3

Results of t-test for the difference in Teachers' Perception of Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions based on their Gender

Variables	Gender	N	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Curriculum	Male	28	11.43	2.73	1.191	.238
	Female	45	10.69	2.48		
Students' Involvement	Male	28	17.54	3.19	2.423	.019*
	Female	45	15.58	3.45		

Faculty Involvement	Male	28	14.46	2.52	1.934	.057
	Female	45	13.13	3.05		
Collaboration with Community Organizations	Male	28	14.57	2.79	2.843	.006*
	Female	45	12.56	3.03		
Resource Management & Services	Male	28	14.25	2.93	1.855	.068
	Female	45	12.76	3.58		
Impact on Community	Male	28	15.14	3.03	2.289	.025*
	Female	45	13.42	3.18		
Overall Community Engagement	Male	28	87.39	15.65	2.284	.025*
	Female	45	78.13	17.52		

* $p < 0.05$ level: Significant at 0.05

As illustrated in Table 3, results revealed that with respect to the perception of community engagement in higher education institutions, the mean score for male teachers ($M = 87.39$, $SD = 15.65$) is significantly higher as compared to that of female teachers ($M = 78.13$, $SD = 17.52$) ($t(71) = 2.284$, $p = .025$). As the p value was found to be less than .05, the null hypothesis was rejected. It indicates that male teachers have a higher score with respect to the perception of community engagement in their institutions compared to their female counterparts.

As far as the dimensions of community engagement are concerned, results of the study revealed that significant differences were found in the dimensions of *students' involvement collaboration with community organizations* and *impact on community* as male teachers were found to have significantly higher scores compared to female teachers. However, no significant differences were found in the dimensions of *curriculum*, *faculty involvement* and *resource management & services* as both the male and female teachers perceived similar levels of community engagement in these dimensions. From these findings, we can conclude that gender differences play a role in how teachers perceive various aspects of community engagement in higher education institutions.

Objective 2: To find out the significant differences in teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions based on their locale

H_0 : There is no significant difference in teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions based on their gender

To test the difference in teachers' perception of community engagement, with the help of statistical software SPSS, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The results of t-test are presented in Table 4:

Table 4

Results of t-test for the difference in Teachers' Perception of Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions based on their Locale

Variables	Gender	N	M	SD	t	p
Curriculum	Urban	46	10.22	2.65	3.500	.001*
	Rural	27	12.26	1.91		
Students' Involvement	Urban	46	15.22	3.39	3.913	.000*
	Rural	27	18.22	2.75		
Faculty Involvement	Urban	46	12.70	2.91	3.989	.000*
	Rural	27	15.26	2.12		
Collaboration with Community Organizations	Urban	46	12.28	2.89	4.192	.000*
	Rural	27	15.11	2.59		

Resource Management & Services	Urban	46	12.22	3.19	4.003	.000*
	Rural	27	15.22	2.93		
Impact on Community	Urban	46	12.96	3.20	4.370	.000*
	Rural	27	16.00	2.20		
Overall Community Engagement	Urban	46	75.59	16.50	4.396	.000*
	Rural	27	92.07	13.50		

* $p < 0.05$ level: Significant at 0.05

As illustrated in Table 4, results revealed that in the perception of community engagement in higher education institutions, the mean score for rural teachers ($M = 92.07$, $SD = 13.50$) is significantly higher as compared to that of urban teachers ($M = 75.59$, $SD = 16.50$) ($t(71) = 4.396$, $p = .000$). As the p value was found to be less than .05, the null hypothesis was rejected. It was concluded that rural teachers reported to have a higher score with respect to the perception of community engagement in their institutions as compared to urban teachers.

As far as the dimensions of community engagement are concerned, results revealed that there are significant differences across all the dimensions of community engagement as rural teachers were found to have significantly higher scores compared to urban teachers in all the dimensions. From the findings it can be concluded that locale of institutions play a role in how teachers perceive various aspects of community engagement in higher education institutions.

Objective 3: To find out the significant differences in teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions based on the duration of teaching experience

H_0 : There is no significant difference in teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions based on the duration of teaching experience

A *One Way Analysis of Variance* (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the differences in teachers' perception of community engagement of higher education institutions based on their experience. Based on the duration of the teaching experience of teachers, they were distributed into three categories i.e., i) teachers having up to 10 years of experience, ii) teachers having 11 to 20 years of experience, and iii) teachers having above 20 years of experience. Post Hoc Tests using the *Least Significant Difference* (LSD) were subsequently employed to identify specific group differences. The results have been presented in Table 5 and Table 6.

Table 5

One Way ANOVA Results for Differences in the Perception of Community Engagement of Higher Education Institutions among Teachers based on their Experience

Variable		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value
Curriculum	Between Groups	40.652	2	20.326	3.224	.046*
	Within Groups	441.293	70	6.304		
Students' Involvement	Between Groups	54.640	2	27.320	2.357	.102
	Within Groups	811.470	70	11.592		
Faculty Involvement	Between Groups	31.649	2	15.824	1.913	.155
	Within Groups	579.091	70	8.273		
Collaboration with Community Organizations	Between Groups	26.756	2	13.378	1.420	.249
	Within Groups	659.354	70	9.419		
	Between Groups	95.771	2	47.886	4.540	.014*

Resource Management & Services	Within Groups	738.338	70	10.548		
Impact on Community	Between Groups	44.623	2	22.312	2.235	.115
	Within Groups	698.884	70	9.984		
Overall Community Engagement	Between Groups	1649.112	2	824.556	2.891	.062
	Within Groups	19964.641	70	285.209		

* $p < 0.05$ level: Significant at 0.05

As is evident from Table 5, in teachers' perception of overall community engagement in higher education institutions no significant difference was found based on the duration of their teaching experience ($F(2, 70) = 2.891, p = .062$). As the p value was found to be higher than .05, the null hypothesis was accepted. Hence it was concluded that there were no significant differences in teachers' perception of community engagement in higher education institutions based on the duration of their teaching experience.

As far the dimensions of community engagement, on the basis of duration of teaching experience significant differences were found in *curriculum* and *resource management & services*. However, the results revealed that there were no significant differences in teachers' perception of community engagement in the dimensions of *students' involvement, faculty involvement, collaboration with community organizations* and *impact on community*.

To evaluate the nature of the differences between the means of three groups in the dimension of *curriculum* and *resource management & services*, post hoc tests of Least Significant Difference (LSD) were conducted. The results of post hoc tests are presented in Table 6:

Table 6

Post Hoc Test Results for Teachers' Perception of Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions among Based on Their Experience

Dimensions	Pairwise Comparison	Mean Difference	Standard Error	Sig.
Curriculum	Up to 10 years of exp. vs 11 to 20 years of exp.	.500	.691	.472
	Up to 10 years of exp. vs Above 20 years of exp.	1.960	.798	.017*
	11 to 20 years of exp. vs Above 20 years of exp.	1.460	.736	.051
Resource Management & Services	Up to 10 years of exp. vs 11 to 20 years of exp.	.667	.894	.458
	Up to 10 years of exp. vs Above 20 years of exp.	2.975	1.032	.005*
	11 to 20 years of exp. vs Above 20 years of exp.	2.308	.952	.018*

Note. Pairwise mean differences are significant at * $p < .05$.

Results of Post Hoc Tests in Table 6 revealed significant differences in teachers' perception of overall community engagement in the dimensions of *curriculum* and *resource management & services* based on the duration of their teaching experience. In *curriculum*, the pair-wise comparison revealed significant differences in the perception between teachers having up to 10 years of teaching experience and teachers having above 20 years of experience ($p = .017$). Teachers having up to 10 years of teaching experience (Mean = 11.68) perceived community engagement in curriculum significantly to be higher than teachers having above 20 years of

experience (Mean = 9.72). However, there was no significant difference in the perception between teachers having up to 10 years of teaching experience and teachers having 11 to 20 years of experience ($p = .472$) as well as between teachers having 11 to 20 years of teaching experience and teachers having above 20 years of experience ($p = .051$).

In *resource management & services*, no significant difference was found in the mean scores of resource management & services between teachers having up to 10 years of teaching experience and teachers having 11 to 20 years of experience, with a non-significant mean difference of 0.667 ($p = .458$). While teachers having up to 10 years of teaching experience perceived significantly higher level of resource management & services in the context of facilitating community engagement activities compared to teachers having 11 to 20 years of experience, with a mean difference of 2.975 ($p = .005$). Additionally, teachers having 11 to 20 years of experience also perceived significantly higher level of resource management & services in the context of facilitating community engagement activities compared to teachers having above 20 years of experience, with a mean difference of 2.308 ($p = .018$).

Conclusion

In conclusion, significant gender-based differences were found in teachers' perception of community engagement. Male teachers reported higher levels of overall community engagement and specific dimensions such as students' involvement and collaboration with community organizations and impact on community as compared to female teachers. This suggests that male teachers might have more positive perceptions or experiences regarding community engagement activities compared to female faculty.

Teachers from rural areas reported significantly higher levels of overall community engagement compared to urban teachers. Rural teachers were found to have significantly higher scores compared to urban teachers in all the dimensions. It suggests that locale of institutions play a role in how teachers perceive various aspects of community engagement in higher education institutions.

Based on their teaching experience, no significant differences were found in teachers' perceptions of community engagement except in the dimensions of curriculum and resource management & services. Teachers with less experience (up to 10 years) perceived higher levels of community engagement in curriculum and resource management & services compared to those with more experience (above 20 years). This indicates that more experienced teachers may have higher expectations regarding the community engagement efforts in their institutions. The results revealed no significant differences in other dimensions such as students' involvement, faculty involvement, collaboration with community organizations, and impact on community, suggesting that teaching experience influences teachers' perceptions in certain aspects of community engagement more than others.

Recommendations

1. **Enhance Gender-Inclusive Training Programs:** Develop and implement training programs that address gender differences in perceptions of community engagement. This can help align the understanding and importance of various aspects of community engagement across genders.
2. **Promote Student Involvement:** Given the significant difference in perceptions of student involvement, policies should encourage active participation of students in community engagement activities. Initiatives could include student-led projects, internships, and service-learning opportunities that are equally appealing and accessible to both male and female students.
3. **Strengthen Collaboration with Community Organizations:** As male teachers perceive higher collaboration with community organizations, efforts should be made to encourage female faculty to engage more with these organizations. This can be achieved through dedicated support systems, workshops, and networking opportunities.
4. **Resource Allocation and Management:** Address the nearly significant difference in perceptions of resource management by ensuring that both male and female faculty have equal access to resources and support for community engagement activities.
5. **Impact Assessment:** Regularly assess the impact of community engagement initiatives on the community. This can help identify gender-specific barriers and opportunities, ensuring that engagement activities are effectively benefiting the community and receiving equitable recognition.

6. **Institutional Support:** Provide institutional support for faculty involvement in community engagement through incentives, recognition, and opportunities for professional development. This can help in reducing the gender disparity in perceptions and involvement.
7. **Comprehensive Community Engagement Strategy:** Develop a comprehensive strategy that incorporates feedback from both male and female faculty members to ensure inclusive and effective community engagement practices. This strategy should be aligned with the goals of sustainable development and the specific needs of the local community.

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