

Engaging Locally: Promoting UCI's Connection to the Surrounding Communities

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Background

UCI now consistently ranks among the top 10 public universities in the U.S., soaring to the top 5 of universities nationwide in terms of undergraduate applications over the past 3 years. Despite UCI's tremendous success, Orange County (OC) residents seem largely unaware of UCI's prominence. In 2022, 53% of a representative sample of Irvine residents and 63% of OC residents stated that they had not recently seen, heard, or read anything about UCI. Moreover, 32% of Irvine residents did not think UCI has any impact on them or their family. This is particularly noteworthy given that UCI is the second largest employer in Orange County, and 75-80% of UCI alumni stay within the region.

This group's objective was to address the following question: *What can we do to improve UCI's visibility and reputation in Southern California?* To address this issue, our group engaged in a discovery process, which included interviews with local community members and a meeting with Sherry Main, UCI's Vice Chancellor for Strategic Communications and Public Affairs.

We identified three main concerns:

1. Lack of visibility in the community
2. Lack of connections to the community
3. Incorrect or outdated views of UCI among members of the community

Enhancing UCI's local reputation is important. First, we want UCI to be the first place that Orange County residents seek out for scientific expertise and potential partnerships. Second, UCI is surrounded by communities that we aim to serve and engage with as a Hispanic-serving institution, an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution, and a First-Gen Forward University. Having support and recognition from the surrounding communities is essential to continue UCI's upward trajectory.

Proposed solutions:

A successful community engagement strategy for UCI should consider three key elements: 1) Enhance our visibility; 2) Build community relationships; and 3) Create meaningful connections.

1) Enhance alumni relations: Engage with our alumni so they become our ambassadors.

- Short-term solutions:
 - Send alumni visible "swag" to promote UCI (license plate holders, car stickers).
 - Make sure departments include alumni in their events mailing lists.
 - Give alumni a permanent UCI email.
- Longer-term solutions:
 - Boost UCI alumni network and seek their help to mentor students.
 - Create opportunities / events to bring alumni to campus (e.g., raffle free tickets for alums).

- Add to school websites an alumni network tab. Include professional info for all alumni (e.g., LinkedIn) and placement info for PhD graduates (e.g., links to their faculty webpages).

2) Improve media communication: Show that UCI researchers solve problems that matter and can be agents of change.

○ Short-term solutions:

- *Local/regional media:* Publish UCI events (e.g., OC Register, Irvine Standard, OC Voice).
- *Social media:* Leverage UCI's social media platforms to engage local communities. Follow important local organizations; tag UCI alumni, faculty, students, staff, and affiliated organizations in posts; and create content relevant to local communities.
- *e-Newsletters:* Encourage departments to publish and broadly disseminate newsletters that report on faculty and student activities, including community presentations and initiatives.

○ Long-term solutions:

- *Websites:* It is critical for us to improve UCI's campus websites.
 - (1) Create a "one stop shop" featured on the main page of the UCI website where people can search by keyword for UCI experts on a given topic/for a given project. The current search function is problematic, not merely ineffective.
 - (2) Create an events page that lists all UCI public talks, conferences, art, and sports events.
 - (3) Create a page that highlights UCI community engagement activities.
- *Podcasts:* Support UCI faculty in creating podcasts and highlight topics likely to be of interest to the local community. Podcasts should be multilingual based on target audiences.

3) Facilitate community connections through faculty and students

○ Short-term solutions:

- Help faculty and student organizations build attractive web pages.
- Identify faculty and students to invite to UCI sponsored events. We understand that many outside stakeholders want to speak directly with faculty and students.

○ Long-term solutions:

- Reward faculty who spend substantial time on community engagement via the Merit and Promotions process.
- Foster a culture of engagement for faculty and students.

4) Bring people from the community to UCI

○ Long-term solutions:

- *Events:* Make UCI a destination for OC residents of all generations by creating more frequent events on campus involving the community. Offering affordable/free parking is crucial.
- *Support:* Create physical space for community members seeking support or services (e.g., tutoring, translation services, legal aid). Consider incorporating these spaces into existing UCI satellites (e.g., UCI Health Family Center in Santa Ana).

Implementation Strategy:

- A. Define metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of proposed solutions.
- B. Survey local communities annually to understand how UCI's image evolves.
- C. Create a small task force (Strategic Communications staff, faculty, students, and community members) to analyze data and advise on engagement efforts.