

# Love, marriage and town-gown relationships

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A new study assesses a town-gown relationship as if it were a marriage: asking community members just how much comfort they felt with people from the campus community and how much effort they put into getting along.

"A town-gown relationship is a lot like an arranged marriage that neither partner can end," said Stephen Gavazzi, co-author of the study and dean of The Ohio State University's Mansfield [campus](#).

"You have to make the marriage work regardless of how you feel about your partner. We found this marriage metaphor works very well in assessing how a [college campus](#) interacts with its surrounding community."

Town-gown refers to the intersection of a college campus and the surrounding non-academic community.

Gavazzi and a colleague used a marriage model first developed in 1965 to design a survey measuring the status of town-gown relationships.

This marriage model, developed by John F. Cuber and Peggy B. Harroff, hypothesized that the success of marriages was largely determined by two factors: how much effort the couple put into their marriage, and how comfortable each partner felt with each other.

"I realized that this kind of typology captures very well the relationship between a campus and its surrounding community," Gavazzi said.

Finding this connection was no accident: Along with being the senior administrator of a regional campus in a small metropolitan area of 50,000 residents, Gavazzi is a professor of human sciences at Ohio State and has long studied marriage and family relationships.

"I think the marital model is something everyone relates to," Gavazzi said. In fact, he said college faculty and administrators often approach him after he talks about this research and tell him about their own marriages and how it translates into the town-gown relationships at their institutions.

With this marriage model in mind, Gavazzi and his co-author, Michael Fox, professor of geography and environment at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, Canada, developed the Optimal College Town Assessment. This 16-question survey asks a variety of questions about how people see the levels of effort and comfort in a town-gown relationship.

For example, the survey asks participants to rate how active they believe different campus groups are in contributing to the well-being of the community as a whole. (Rated on a five-point scale from "not active" to "very active.")

Another question asks participants to rate their own personal relationships with different campus representatives, on a five-point scale from "very negative" to "very positive."

The researchers tested the new survey with people from Mansfield, Ohio, which is the location of Gavazzi's Ohio State regional campus, and in the nearby towns of Shelby and Ontario.

They interviewed, via a web survey, 602 community members, including teachers and school administrators, leaders of non-profits, business

owners and others. They asked about their relationship with Ohio State's students, faculty, leaders/administrative staff and board of trustee members.

Survey results, recently published in the journal *Innovative Higher Education*, put relationships into four categories, depending on the amount of effort and comfort shown. The best category is harmonious, with is characterized by high effort and high comfort. The least favorable relationship is called devitalized (low effort and low comfort). Traditional relationships have low effort and high comfort, while conflicted relationships have high effort but low comfort.

Results showed that Mansfield and the Ohio State campus have a mostly traditional relationship. But the important insights come from digging deeper into the results, Gavazzi said.

One of the key findings was that community members felt they had the most contact with students compared to other campus representatives.

"It was very clear that when people thought about how the campus was engaged with the community, it really had to do with the students," Gavazzi said.

"Of course, we all knew students were important, but we didn't realize just how important. For faculty and administrators, the message is that if you want to have an impact with the community, you really should do it through the students."

Another key finding was the impact that distance had on the town-gown relationship.

"Shelby is only six miles away from our campus, but it might have been 100 miles away from the way they perceived us. We found that for Ohio

State to connect to people who live just six miles away, we have to make a special effort to reach them," he said.

The researchers have made the assessment freely available and Gavazzi said he hopes other campuses will use it to get a more exact picture of their relationships with their surrounding communities.

Too often, he said, college administrators rely on gut feelings and anecdotes to gauge how things are going between their institutions and local [community members](#), rather than being data-driven.

"Now there is a way to quantify just how healthy that relationship is," Gavazzi said. "You can use the assessment to benchmark the status of a relationship and then follow-up regularly to see how new initiatives help or hurt. You don't have to guess anymore."

**More information:** *Innovative Higher Education*, [link.springer.com/journal/10755](https://link.springer.com/journal/10755)

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