

Public Abstract

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Title:An Organizational Analysis of the Inter-organizational Relationships Between a Public American Higher Education University and Six United States Corporate Supporters: An Instrumental, Ethnographic Case Study Using Cone's Corporate Citizenship Spectrum

ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study. This organizational analysis examined corporate citizenship through the inter-organizational relationships between a public American doctoral research university and six of its corporate partners as framed through Cone's (2010) corporate citizenship spectrum. The World Economic Forum (2002) has universally defined corporate citizenship as:

The contribution a company makes to society through its core business activities, its social investment and philanthropy programmes, and its engagement in public policy. The manner in which a company manages its economic, social and environmental relationships, as well as those with different stakeholders, in particular shareholders, employees, customers, business partners, governments and communities determines its impact. (p. 1)

The literature has shown that little research has been conducted regarding the behavior aspects of these inter-organizational relationships.

Procedures. A single embedded, instrumental, ethnographic case study viewed organizational participants from 2006 to 2010 and included a public research university, the university's foundation, and two small, two medium, and two large (i.e., Fortune 500) corporations. Research questions used to explore this relationship: (RQ1) Why does a higher education institution accept corporate citizenship engagement and financial support? (RQ2) Why do U.S. corporations engage as corporate citizens in relationships with a higher education institution as identified on Cone's corporate citizenship spectrum as philanthropy, cause-related branding, operational culture, or DNA citizenship ethos? (RQ3) What ethical concerns arise in the engaged inter-organizational relationships between corporations and a higher education institution?

Triangulation of data was provided by 36 interviews, more than 12,609 pages of documents and audio-visual materials, and a campus observation of 407 photographs.

Findings. Research questions yielded several findings that developed into themes. Three RQ1 themes included: viable resources, student enrichment, and real-world connectivity. Four RQ2 themes included: workforce development, community enrichment, brand development, and research. For RQ3, three themes emerged. First, generally no ethical dilemmas were found. Second, several general ethics discussion topics created five clusters of interest: public relations, solicitation, policies and stewardship, accountability and transparency, and leadership behavior. Third, five disparate ethical concerns were shared; none involved any of the corporate participants. Four other themes emerged relating to culture, economic challenges, alumni connectivity, and geography.

Conclusions. This dissertation contributes to the corporate citizenship literature by providing a broad, holistic framework to understand the range of motives and ROI expectations of corporate engagement in the American society as evidenced in inter-organizational relationships with higher education. The research is useful to provide both higher education practitioners and corporations with insights to better design and manage inter-organizational relationships.