Resilience Report

Campus, Community, and Continuity in Action

CENTER FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
Illinois State University

Ipsos

COUNTRY FINANCIAL

01 INTRODUCTION

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Communities thrive when they are strong, connected, and ready to face whatever challenges come their way. Understanding the key factors that contribute to community strength is essential for fostering an environment where individuals and their institutions can flourish. This research summary combines findings from two comprehensive studies:

1. COUNTRY Financial's Community Resilience Index created in partnership with Ipsos.

2. Optimal College Town Assessment (OCTA) adapted by Illinois State University's Center for Civic Engagement.

Both sets of research aim to understand how communities recover from difficulties, build trust, and create meaningful connections. Together, these studies offer a deeper understanding of what makes a community work. The COUNTRY Financial Community Resilience Index offers defining characteristics of resilient communities and actionable recommendations for enhancing community preparedness. The OCTA reveals the complexities of university and community interactions and offers ways to foster better collaboration. In bringing these two studies together, we aim to provide insights that can help local residents, leaders, businesses, and organizations strengthen the place we call home. Whether it's through better disaster preparedness, stronger trust between neighbors, or closer collaboration between institutions and the people they serve, these insights help pave the way for a more resilient and engaged community.

02 FINDINGS

Community Resilience Index
a report by **COUNTRY Financial**

COUNTRY Financial pursued research in response to growing concerns about how communities recover from disasters, such as the immediate and long-term impacts of severe weather events. Ipsos surveyed 1,039 people across the U.S. from Illinois, Georgia, Missouri, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, Nevada, Alabama, Colorado, Idaho, and Oregon. They looked at these communities' ability to handle challenges, such as during a severe weather events and disasters. From there, the research team developed a national resilience score, offering a roadmap for how communities can better prepare for the future and support one another in times of need. With extreme weather becoming more frequent, the need for stronger, more resilient communities has never been more urgent. Recognizing that impact that disasters are having on their policy holders, COUNTRY Financial created the Community Resilience Index to help communities understand and measure their ability to withstand and recover from these challenges. This research takes a deeper look into what makes some communities more resilient than others and highlights areas where improvements can be made to help promote resiliency. The goal of this Index is to provide actionable insights that can help residents, local leaders, and businesses come together to strengthen their communities.

3 out of 4
said their community has faced a severe weather event.

HALF
Said their community is slow to recover after severe weather.

Said their community is unprepared for future emergencies.

Power of Resilience

Communities with an above average resiliency score reported feeling:

65%
more prepared
for catastrophic events.

55%
more likely to trust that their local government understands their needs.

50%
more likely to trust local leaders during emergencies.

What Makes Communities Resilient?

The Community Resilience Index identifies four key factors that contribute to a resilient community: respect, engagement, collaboration, and trust. These factors influence how individuals interact, how businesses support local initiatives, and how communities can strategically plan for a more stable future. The research provides a national resilience score, offering a roadmap for how communities can better prepare for the future and support one another in times of need. Communities that reported these four values were ranked as having above average resiliency. These highly resilient communities were also more likely to foster stronger relationships among residents and care for one another in times of need. Of the communities surveyed across the United States, 37% were classified as having average resilience, with 31% scoring above average and 32% scoring below average on the Resilience Index.

Businesses play a critical role in fostering community resilience. Companies can demonstrate respect by treating residents fairly through business practices, engagement through sponsoring and/or participating in local events, collaboration through investing in disaster preparedness, and trust through listening to residents about community needs. COUNTRY Financial is empowering their representatives to lead discussions on resiliency and provide resources to help their communities. The company also supports communities financially through initiatives such as their Community Resilience Grant, which aims to fund projects that focus on strengthening local resilience. As COUNTRY Financial celebrates 100 years of serving communities, it remains committed to helping them not just survive but thrive.

Optimal College Town

Assessment (OCTA)

a report by

ISU's Center for Civic Engagement

The Optimal College Town Assessment (OCTA) is a survey developed by Stephen M. Gavazzi, Ph.D at the Ohio State University that looks at perceptions of collaboration, social cohesion, and the role of students, faculty, and local residents in shaping a unified community. Rachel Waring-Sparks, Ph.D, Assistant Director of Assessment at ISU's Center for Civic Engagement, adapted the OCTA with permission to evaluate the relationship specifically between Illinois State University and the Bloomington-Normal community. The survey was conducted in 2023 and gathered responses from 612 ISU affiliates and 206 community members. The survey highlights both strengths and opportunities for deeper collaboration through looking at concerns such as accessibility to campus events, the visibility of campus representatives in local involvement, and the broader economic impact of university and community interactions.

Fostering a Strong Campus-Community Relationship

The study revealed that majority of community respondents (84.95%) believe that ISU students, faculty, staff, and administrators actively contribute to the well-being of the Bloomington-Normal area. These findings showed that ISU is perceived as a vital part of the area's community and helps to foster the community economically and socially. In addition to ISU's contributions, a large portion of respondents reported a positive relationship between the campus and the surrounding community. Over 83% of community members stated that they have a positive relationship with ISU students, faculty, staff, and/or administrators, while 74% of ISU respondents reported positive interactions with Bloomington-Normal residents. These findings reflect a strong and cooperative town-gown relationship that supports mutual engagement and collaboration. The study also found a significant alignment in priorities between the University and the community. This shared vision is important because it creates opportunities for deeper partnerships in addressing the community needs and enhances ISU's role and responsibility for shared community development.

Bridging the Gap

Ideal Campus/Community Alignment in terms of Shared Goals and Concerns:

How Business Owners and Residents viewed the Current Relationship:

*Left circle represents ISU and the right circle represents the Bloomington-Normal community. Overlap is the alignment of Campus and community goals.

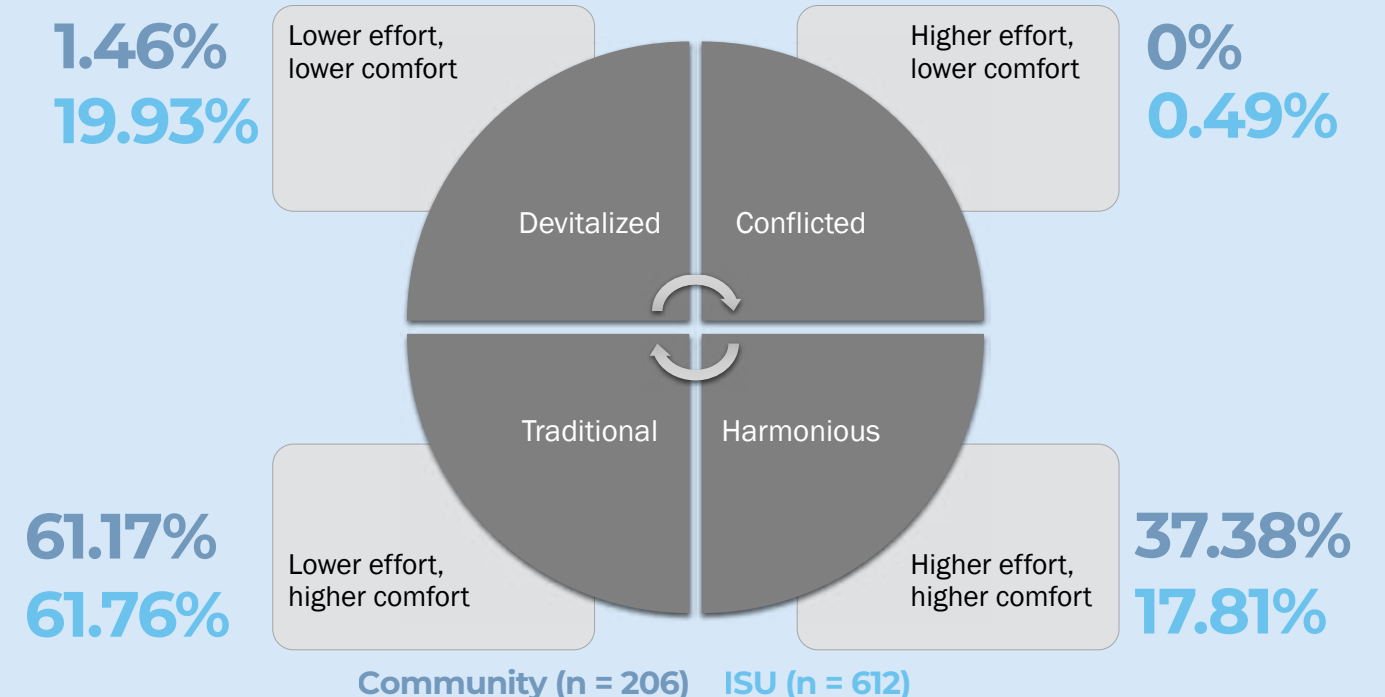## *Addressing Tensions and Equity in Campus-Community Dynamics*

This assessment also highlights challenges between the campus and community relationship such as issues regarding student partying. It was found that student partying contributes to problems such as excessive noise, littering, vandalism, traffic accidents, and public disturbances. Responses in the survey suggest that while many residents tolerate the student partying, some believe that these behaviors put a strain on the campus-community relationship and contribute to a negative perception of ISU within the community. Additionally, there were concerns about the financial impact that student partying has on the Bloomington-Normal area such as increased costs related to law enforcement and public maintenance. Another important area of improvement found in the assessment was responses relating to discriminatory behavior. Respondents were asked to report whether they had personally witnessed or experienced discrimination based on verbal comments, written statements, or offensive visual imagery both on campus and within the Bloomington-Normal community. The findings indicated that discrimination remains a challenge within the community, the reports suggesting that both ISU and the surrounding community need to continue working towards fostering a more inclusive environment. These insights highlight the need for diversity initiatives, anti-discrimination policies, and active community engagement to ensure that all individuals feel welcomed and respected in both ISU and the greater Bloomington-Normal area.

Overall, the OCTA has allowed for a great understanding of the relationship between the ISU campus and the Bloomington-Normal community. This highlights the strong contributions of ISU to the community, such as the positive interactions between students and residents and the overall alignment of priorities between the two groups. However, areas such as student partying and instances of discrimination continue to present challenges that need to be addressed through collaboration, policy changes, and enhanced communication between the two communities. While the town-gown relationship is overall positive, there is still work to be done to continue to strengthen the inclusive and mutually beneficial partnership between the two communities.

Town-Gown Typology

The OCTA characterizes town/gown relationships into four categories based on two dimensions of effort and comfort, derived from questions about campus/community contact and relationships.

1.46%
19.93%
Lower effort, lower comfort

Higher effort, lower comfort
0%
0.49%

Devitalized   Conflicted

Traditional   Harmonious

61.17%
61.76%
Lower effort, higher comfort

Higher effort, higher comfort
37.38%
17.81%

Community (n = 206)   ISU (n = 612)

POINTS OF OVERLAP

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Both the COUNTRY Financial Community Resilience Index and the Optimal College Town Assessment (OCTA) provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to a strong and engaged community. These studies reveal several overlapping themes, particularly in the importance of community collaboration, the role of trust in fostering positive relationships, and the contributions of businesses to local engagement.

Engagement

A key finding from both studies is that businesses play a crucial role in the fostering of engagement and strengthening the overall community. The Community Resilience Index emphasizes that resilient communities are those in which businesses actively participate in local initiative, sponsor events, and invest in disaster preparedness. Similarly, the town/gown typology framework of the OCTA highlights that frequent contact and positive personal relationships between campus and community members are critical to a harmonious town/gown relationship, characterized by high comfort and perceptions of both parties putting effort into the relationship. Business owners participating in the OCTA recognized the overlap between campus and community goals and shared a desire for more collaborative events between ISU and the community. They also recognized that both parties (ISU and community organizations, including businesses) would benefit from aligning efforts and resources through increased engagement.

The OCTA data also suggests that business owners feel somewhat disconnected from ISU's engagement efforts, with lower satisfaction levels regarding the university's visibility at community events and its collaboration with local businesses. This aligns with the Community Resilience Index finding that engagement is a key factor in resilience when businesses and institutions work together, communities become stronger and more adaptable.

Collaboration

Both studies state that effective collaboration is fundamental to building a thriving community. The Community Resilience Index identifies collaboration as a key characteristic of resilient communities, emphasizing the need for businesses, institutions, and residents to work together. Similarly, the OCTA reveals that both ISU and the Bloomington-Normal communities share common priorities and generally view their relationship positively. Over 83% of community members reported positive interactions with ISU students, faculty, and staff, demonstrating a foundation for strong collaboration. Despite this, gaps remain. The OCTA notes that some business owners and nonprofit employees report dissatisfaction with their level of engagement with ISU. Strengthening these partnerships, through structured initiatives, shared projects and goals could bridge this gap and enhance collaborative efforts. Businesses that engage more actively with ISU could also benefit economically, as strong town-gown relationships contribute to a more supportive local economy.

Trust

According to the Community Resilience Index, trust in local leaders and institutions is a defining characteristic of resilient communities. Communities that rank high in trust are more likely to work together effectively and recover from challenges. Resiliency is found when locals have trust not just in their local neighbors in times of crisis but in everyday interactions. The Resilience Index emphasizes that resiliency comes from having an established trust with leaders through them understanding community needs and providing support to fit those needs. Additionally, trust comes from honoring shared beliefs and goals.

The OCTA similarly highlights trust in ISU's contributions, with many residents acknowledging the University's role in supporting the economic and social well-being of Bloomington-Normal.

However, concerns remain regarding transparency and accessibility. The OCTA findings indicate that some community members struggle to understand what is happening on campus or feel that ISU representatives do not readily share their expertise with the broader community. Business owners in particular expressed dissatisfaction with ISU's visibility in the community, with 73.68% stating that campus representatives are not very visible at community events. Similarly, 63% of business owners felt that ISU representatives were not well connected to local school districts. Businesses are a key stakeholder in both the economic and social life of a community. They can play an important role in bridging this gap by partnering with ISU on joint initiatives, increasing outreach efforts, and fostering more open communication.

Together, the insights from the Community Resilience Index and OCTA suggest that fostering engagement, collaboration and trust particularly through business involvement is key to strengthening community resilience. ISU already plays an essential role in the Bloomington-Normal area, but targeted efforts to enhance business engagement and transparency can further improve town-gown relations. By working together, ISU, local businesses, and community members can build a more resilient and interconnected community, better equipped to face future challenges and opportunities.

STEPS TO STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE

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Based on the findings of these two studies, there are several key recommendations that can enhance community engagement, collaboration, trust, and economic development in the Bloomington-Normal area. It is essential to strengthen the relationships between Illinois State University, local businesses such as COUNTRY Financial, and the community as a whole to meet the group goal of building a more resilient and connected place. By fostering meaningful partnerships, improving communication, and aligning efforts around shared goals, these organizations can collectively contribute to a more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable future for Bloomington-Normal.

Translating OCTA Data into Community-Driven Action

Based on the OCTA data, several recommendations can enhance campus-community relations in Bloomington-Normal. First, intentional outreach to business owners and nonprofit organizations is necessary, as these groups reported lower levels of contact, engagement, and satisfaction with ISU compared to other sectors. Strengthening these relationships through collaborative initiatives and strategic communication can address this gap. Increasing ISU's visibility at local events will also help, especially given that over 70% of business owners felt campus representatives were not present in community spaces. Improved communication strategies such as a centralized public events calendar and expanded outreach via social and local media can help community members stay informed about campus activities. Additionally, co-designed volunteer programs can foster deeper connections, especially when they align with community needs and involve students and faculty. Addressing the concerns around student partying, which both ISU and community members said was a strain on their community relationship, will require collaborative solutions involving students, landlords, and local officials.

Finally, expanding events that serve the broader Bloomington-Normal community as well as leveraging the already strong relationships with local schools and using local government as a model for wider engagement will further align ISU with the values and priorities of the community it serves. These recommendations also directly support the Illinois Innovation Networks' Bloomington-Normal Innovation Hub Strategic Plan of fostering inclusive economic development, increasing collaboration across sectors, and strengthening ISU's role as a community anchored institution that promotes social, environmental, and economic sustainability.

COUNTRY Financial's Role in Advancing Resilience

To enhance resilience across its service areas, COUNTRY Financial has chosen to take on a proactive and visible role in empowering both its agent representatives and the communities they serve. A key strategy of how they plan to put this research into action is through asking their agents "What is one great thing we could do to build community resilience?" Through holding these meaningful conversations around resiliency, they are working toward their mission of enriching the lives of the people they serve starting directly with local communities. Agents are supported through COUNTRY's co-op program where they are provided funding to do good and impactful work supporting their policyholders' communities.

At the organizational level, COUNTRY Financial strives to solidify its role as a leader in resilience by expanding its brand presence through partnerships with universities and community organizations. They are proud to be sponsoring the Resilience Grant Program which is an investment to continue expanding resiliency research into future years. These actions are rooted in findings that highlight a gap between challenges and preparedness. Also reflected in their work and what other businesses should also be doing to promote resiliency in communities is to continue to support local residents through meaningful efforts in hiring locally, paying fair wages, supporting community building initiatives, and helping prepare for disasters. Through these actions, businesses such as COUNTRY Financial are able to lead with purpose and actively contribute to building stronger and more connected communities.

CONCLUSION

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Building a resilient community does not happen overnight; it takes intentional collaboration, continuous reflection, and a shared vision for the future. The data from the Community Resilience Index and the OCTA show that Bloomington-Normal has many strengths, including strong relationships and a willingness to engage. But they also highlight areas where improvement is needed, especially in bridging gaps between institutions, businesses, and residents.

Moving forward, Illinois State University's Center for Civic Engagement and COUNTRY Financial will continue to lay the groundwork for a more connected and responsive future. Resilience will depend on how well we listen, how effectively we respond, and how deeply we invest in one another. Whether through university outreach, business partnerships, or local initiatives, every effort contributes to a stronger, more connected community. By applying what we have learned and committing to inclusive action, Bloomington-Normal can become a model for how engagement, collaboration ,and trust create lasting resilience in the place we call home.

For more information about grant opportunities for civic engagement initiatives, learn more at

https://civicengagement. illinoisstate.edu/about/grants/