Quantifying Social Return on Investment for University-Community Partnerships

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Abstract

This article examines methodologies and applications for quantifying social return on investment (SROI) in university-community partnerships. While traditional return on investment metrics focus on financial outcomes, SROI provides a framework for valuing the broader social, environmental, and economic benefits created through collaborative initiatives. Drawing on evidence from established frameworks and case studies, this paper presents a comprehensive approach to SROI measurement in the higher education context. The analysis explores definitional boundaries, measurement challenges, and implementation strategies across different partnership models. The findings demonstrate that quantified SROI metrics can strengthen institutional commitment, enhance partnership sustainability, inform resource allocation, and increase stakeholder engagement. Evidence-based approaches for building organizational capacity to measure and communicate social impact are presented, offering practical guidance for university administrators, community relations officers, and nonprofit partners seeking to demonstrate and enhance the value of their collaborative work.

Keywords: Social Return on Investment (SROI), university-community partnerships, impact measurement, social value quantification, community engagement assessment, monetization of social outcomes, stakeholder-inclusive measurement, higher education civic engagement

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Universities have historically claimed broad social benefits stemming from their teaching, research, and service missions. However, higher education institutions increasingly face pressure to demonstrate their contributions to society beyond conventional metrics of student outcomes and research outputs. This pressure comes from multiple sources: government agencies demanding accountability for public funding, philanthropic organizations seeking evidence of impact, community stakeholders questioning the value of institutional presence, and students themselves seeking meaningful engagement with real-world challenges.

University-community partnerships represent a significant mechanism through which institutions create social value. These partnerships span diverse activities: service-learning programs, collaborative research addressing community challenges, technical assistance to local organizations, facility sharing, economic development initiatives, and cultural programming. Yet the full value of these partnerships often remains invisible or undervalued when conventional financial metrics dominate evaluation frameworks.

Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodologies offer a promising approach for capturing and communicating the multifaceted value created through university-community partnerships. By quantifying social, environmental, and economic outcomes in monetary terms, SROI provides a common language for discussing impact across diverse stakeholder groups. As Emerson et al. (2000) noted early in the development of social impact measurement, "not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts"—yet the discipline of measurement remains essential for organizational learning, strategic decision-making, and accountability.

This article presents evidence-based approaches to SROI implementation in university-community partnerships, analyzing both technical methodologies and organizational strategies for embedding impact measurement in institutional practice.

The SROI Measurement Landscape

Defining SROI in the University-Community Context

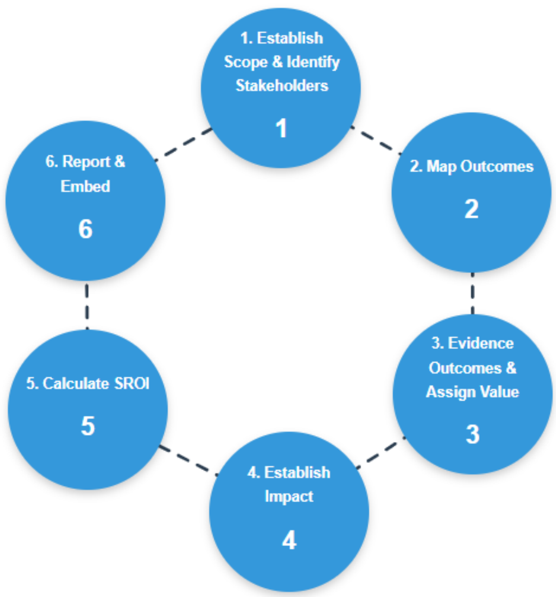
Social Return on Investment represents a principles-based approach to measuring and accounting for value beyond purely financial returns. Developed initially in the late 1990s and refined by organizations like Social Value International (formerly the SROI Network), the methodology provides a framework for identifying, measuring, and monetizing outcomes across social, environmental, and economic dimensions (Nicholls et al., 2012).

In the university-community partnership context, SROI specifically refers to the ratio between the monetized value of social benefits created through partnership activities and the investments required to generate those outcomes. A simplified formula expresses this as:

SROI = (Present Value of Outcomes) ÷ (Value of Inputs)

For example, a university-community health initiative might calculate that for every $1 invested in the program, $4.30 of social value is created through improved health outcomes, reduced healthcare costs, enhanced productivity, and strengthened community capacity.

Figure 1: The SROI Process for University-Community Partnerships.



This figure illustrates the six key stages of SROI analysis: (1) Establish scope and identify stakeholders, (2) Map outcomes, (3) Evidence outcomes and assign value, (4) Establish impact, (5) Calculate SROI, and (6) Report and embed.

What distinguishes SROI from traditional evaluation approaches is its commitment to five core principles:

- Stakeholder involvement in defining what value means
- Understanding what changes through the partnership
- Valuing what matters, including outcomes not traditionally monetized
- Including only material outcomes
- Transparency about methodology and assumptions

Prevalence, Drivers, and Methodological Approaches

Despite growing interest in social impact measurement, comprehensive SROI analysis remains relatively rare in higher education settings. Campus Compact's annual survey indicates that while most member institutions conduct some form of evaluation for community engagement, sophisticated impact measurement remains less common (Campus Compact, 2019). This gap stems from several factors: measurement complexity, resource constraints, methodological uncertainties, and organizational cultures that may prioritize academic rather than applied outcomes.

The landscape of SROI methodologies includes several distinct approaches:

1. *Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA)*: A traditional economic approach that seeks to quantify all costs and benefits in monetary terms, often used for large-scale initiatives with well-defined outcomes (Boardman et al., 2018).
2. *SROI Network Methodology*: A six-stage process encompassing stakeholder engagement, mapping outcomes, evidencing and valuing outcomes, establishing impact, calculating SROI, and reporting (Nicholls et al., 2012).
3. *Impact Weighted Accounts*: A framework developed at Harvard Business School that integrates social and environmental impacts into financial statements (Serafeim et al., 2020).
4. *Hybrid Approaches*: Methodologies that combine quantitative financial proxies with qualitative indicators to provide a more comprehensive view of value creation (Maier et al., 2015).

The primary drivers for SROI adoption in university-community partnerships include:

- Growing demands for accountability from funders and policymakers
- Competition for philanthropic and public resources
- Strategic alignment of partnership activities with institutional missions
- Internal advocacy for resource allocation
- Desire to improve program design and implementation
- Community demands for demonstrated value

Organizational and Individual Consequences of SROI Implementation

Organizational Performance Impacts

Institutions that systematically implement SROI analysis in university-community partnerships report several significant organizational benefits:

- *Enhanced Strategic Decision-Making:* SROI analysis provides data-informed insights for resource allocation and program development. A study of community engagement offices at urban universities documented improved strategic alignment between partnership initiatives and institutional priorities after implementing impact metrics (Dubb et al., 2013).
- *Increased Funding Success:* Organizations utilizing robust SROI frameworks demonstrate a competitive advantage in securing external funding. Foundations increasingly require evidence of social impact for their grant-making decisions, giving measurement-savvy institutions an edge in competitive funding environments (Moody, 2008).
- *Improved Program Design:* The process of identifying and measuring outcomes leads to enhanced program design. As Holland and Gelmon (2003) note in their

assessment framework, the cycle of evaluation and improvement strengthens both the partnership process and resulting community impacts.
- *Strengthened Institutional Legitimacy:* Universities demonstrating measurable community impact through SROI strengthen their societal legitimacy. In regions experiencing town-gown tensions, quantified social value creation provides evidence that counters perceptions of institutions as disconnected ivory towers (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).
- *Enhanced Partnership Sustainability:* Partnerships supported by SROI evidence demonstrate greater longevity. Lockeman and Pelco (2013) found that community engagement initiatives with robust assessment frameworks showed greater institutional resilience during periods of financial constraint.

Individual Stakeholder Impacts

The implementation of SROI measurement affects diverse stakeholders within and beyond the institution:

- *Community Partners:* Community-based organizations report increased agency and voice when participating in SROI development. Sandy and Holland (2006) found that partners involved in co-creating measurement frameworks report significantly higher satisfaction with the partnership compared to those who are merely subjects of evaluation.
- *University Faculty and Staff:* Faculty engaged in SROI-measured partnerships report enhanced ability to integrate their scholarly and service work. O'Meara (2008) found that faculty involved in partnerships with robust impact measurement were more likely to successfully include community engagement in promotion and tenure portfolios.
- *Students:* Students participating in SROI-evaluated community engagement report stronger professional skills development. Finley and McNair (2013) documented that students engaged in partnerships with clear impact frameworks reported stronger gains in critical thinking, problem-solving, and civic competencies.
- *Institutional Leadership:* University presidents and provosts with access to SROI data report greater confidence in articulating the institution's public value proposition. Leadership teams with quantified social impact metrics expressed stronger advocacy positions with boards, legislators, and donors (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

Evidence-Based Organizational Responses

Implementing Stakeholder-Inclusive SROI Frameworks

Successful SROI implementation begins with stakeholder-inclusive processes that define what outcomes matter and how they should be measured. The evidence suggests several effective approaches:

- *Co-creation workshops* that bring together university personnel, community partners, beneficiaries, and funders to map outcomes and develop indicators
- *Community advisory boards* with decision-making authority over measurement frameworks
- *Participatory data collection methods* that build community capacity while gathering impact evidence
- *Transparent reporting mechanisms* that acknowledge limitations and assumptions

In one well-documented example, Portland State University established community-based measurement teams for its neighborhood partnership initiatives. These teams—comprising faculty, students, neighborhood residents, and local business representatives—collaboratively developed impact measures reflecting community priorities rather than solely academic interests. According to Kecskes and Foster (2021), this participatory approach not only increased the validity of the measurement framework but also strengthened the partnership's governance structure and stakeholder investment.

Table 1: Common Stakeholder Groups, Outcomes, and Financial Proxies in University-Community Partnership SROI

Stakeholder Group	**Sample Outcomes**	**Financial Proxy Examples**
Community Residents	Improved health behaviors	Healthcare cost savings
	Enhanced job skills	Increased earnings
	Strengthened social connections	Reduced social service costs
Students	Career-relevant skills	Earnings premium
	Civic capacity	Volunteer service value
Community Organizations	Increased organizational capacity	Consulting service equivalent
	Program improvement	Program success metrics
University	Enhanced reputation	Increased enrollment/donations
	Faculty/staff retention	Reduced replacement costs

Developing Appropriate Financial Proxies: A Step-by-Step Approach

A central challenge in SROI analysis is monetizing outcomes that don't have obvious market values. The following process outlines how to develop robust financial proxies:

Step 1: Identify the outcome to be valued

Begin by clearly defining the outcome. For example, "Increased sense of community belonging among neighborhood residents."

Step 2: Select the appropriate valuation technique

Options include:

- Revealed preference techniques: Derive values from related market behaviors
- Stated preference methods: Use contingent valuation or discrete choice experiments
- Wellbeing valuation: Link outcomes to impacts on subjective wellbeing, then convert to monetary values
- Cost avoidance calculations: Base values on reduced public service utilization
- Benefit transfer: Adapt established valuations from similar contexts

Step 3: Gather relevant data

Collect data through surveys, interviews, administrative records, or secondary research.

Step 4: Apply the selected technique

Example calculation for "Increased sense of community belonging": Using wellbeing valuation, research by Fujiwara and Campbell (2011) established that improved sense of belonging contributes approximately $3,600 in wellbeing value per person annually. This is derived from statistical analysis of large-scale wellbeing surveys that correlate reported belonging with willingness to pay.

Step 5: Test and refine the proxy

Validate the proxy through stakeholder feedback and sensitivity analysis.

The development of financial proxies can be technically challenging, but several resources can help university-community partnerships overcome this hurdle. Social Value UK maintains a database of validated proxies that can be adapted to specific contexts. Similarly, the SROI Network's guide (Nicholls et al., 2012) provides detailed instructions for proxy development. Universities can build on these resources by creating proxy libraries specific to common community engagement outcomes, reducing the need for each partnership to develop measurements from scratch (Banke-Thomas et al., 2015).

SROI Calculation Example: Community Health Initiative

To illustrate how SROI calculation works in practice, consider this simplified example from a university-community health partnership:

Program: University-Community Diabetes Prevention Partnership

Inputs (annual):

- University faculty and staff time: $75,000
- Graduate student assistants: $25,000
- Facilities and materials: $15,000
- Community partner staff time: $40,000
- Volunteer time: 20,000

Total inputs: $175,000

Outcomes and Valuation:

1) Reduced diabetes incidence (15 cases prevented)
   a) Lifetime medical cost savings: $150,000 per case
   b) Productivity gains: $75,000 per case
   c) Total value: $3,375,000
2) Improved health behaviors (200 participants)
   a) Reduced healthcare utilization: $1,200 per person
   b) Decreased absenteeism: $800 per person
   c) Total value: $400,000
3) Enhanced community health capacity
   a) Trained community health workers (10): $45,000
   b) Sustainable programming: $35,000
   c) Total value: $80,000

Adjustments:

- Deadweight (what would have happened anyway): 20%
- Attribution (portion due to other factors): 30%
- Drop-off (decline in outcome value over time): 10% annually

SROI Calculation:

1. Total outcome value: $3,855,000
2. Apply adjustments: $3{,}855{,}000\times(1-0.2)\times(1-0.3)=3{,}855{,}000 \times (1\text{-}0.2) \times (1\text{-}0.3) = 3{,}855{,}000\times(1-0.2)\times(1-0.3)=2{,}159{,}800$
3. Calculate present value (over 5 years with 10% annual drop-off)
4. SROI Ratio = Present Value of Outcomes / Value of Inputs $= 7{,}354{,}320/7{,}354{,}320\ /\ 7{,}354{,}320/175{,}000 = 42{:}1$

This example demonstrates that for every $1 invested in the diabetes prevention partnership, $42 of social value is created over five years. Such quantification helps universities demonstrate the broader impact of their community health partnerships beyond traditional academic metrics.

Integrating SROI with Institutional Assessment Systems

To maximize utility and minimize administrative burden, leading institutions integrate SROI with existing institutional assessment systems:

- *Unified data collection instruments* that serve multiple reporting requirements
- *Integrated technology platforms* connecting partnership activities to outcomes measurement
- *Alignment with accreditation criteria* and strategic planning metrics
- *Dedicated staff positions* spanning institutional research and community engagement
- *Regular reporting cycles* synchronized with budgeting processes

Several universities have demonstrated how this integration can work in practice. For example, Virginia Commonwealth University's Office of Community Engagement created a unified data system that captures partnership activities, outputs, and outcomes within the institution's existing assessment framework (Holton et al., 2015). This approach eliminated duplicate reporting for faculty and staff while ensuring that community impact data informs institutional decision-making alongside traditional academic metrics.

Building Measurement Capacity Across the Institution

Successful institutions build broad-based capacity for impact measurement rather than centralizing expertise in a single office:

- *Train-the-trainer programs* that build evaluation skills among faculty and community partners
- *Communities of practice* for sharing measurement approaches across disciplines
- *Graduate student fellowships* focused on partnership evaluation
- *Professional development opportunities* in social impact measurement
- *Recognition systems* that reward measurement excellence

Michigan State University implemented a distributed measurement capacity model through its "Faculty Learning Community on Community Impact Assessment" (Matthews et al., 2015). Faculty and staff from diverse academic and administrative units received training in SROI methodologies, then served as measurement coaches for community-engaged initiatives across the institution. This approach helped overcome disciplinary differences in how impact is conceptualized and measured. For example, faculty from the Business College helped arts programs develop appropriate metrics and financial proxies, while Social Work faculty assisted Engineering in capturing the social dimensions of technical assistance partnerships.

Building Long-Term Impact Measurement Capacity

Embedding SROI in Institutional Strategy and Culture

Sustaining SROI measurement requires alignment with institutional identity and strategic priorities:

- *Strategic Integration:* Leading institutions explicitly incorporate community impact metrics into strategic plans and institutional performance indicators. When universities revise strategic plans, they can elevate "measurable community impact" to a core institutional priority, with specific SROI targets for university-community partnerships (Holland & Gelmon, 2003).
- *Leadership Commitment:* Presidential and provostial sponsorship proves critical for sustainable SROI implementation. At institutions where presidents include community partnership impact metrics in their regular communications with trustees and stakeholders, the importance of measurement becomes clear throughout the organization (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).
- *Resource Allocation:* Institutions demonstrating long-term commitment align budgeting processes with SROI evidence. Some universities have established innovation funds that allocate resources to partnership initiatives based on demonstrated or projected SROI, creating institutional incentives for impact measurement (Dubb et al., 2013).

Developing Transparent Impact Communication

Effective communication of SROI findings builds stakeholder trust and institutional legitimacy:

- *Accessible Reporting:* Leading institutions translate technical SROI analyses into accessible impact narratives targeting diverse audiences. Many universities produce tiered impact reports: technical appendices for accountability purposes, executive summaries for institutional leaders and funders, and community-friendly visual formats for broader audiences (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013).
- *Balanced Presentation:* Ethical communication acknowledges limitations, shares credit appropriately with community partners, and presents findings in context. Universities should explicitly identify the contributions of community partners alongside university resources,

avoiding institutional credit-claiming for collaborative achievements (Sandy & Holland, 2006).

- *Two-Way Communication:* Effective institutions use SROI findings to stimulate dialogue rather than simply broadcasting results. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro hosts annual "impact dialogue" events where SROI findings become starting points for community conversations about partnership priorities and improvement opportunities (Janke & Medlin, 2015).

Creating Learning Systems for Continuous Improvement

Sophisticated SROI implementations move beyond accountability to drive learning and improvement:

- *Developmental Evaluation:* Institutions embed SROI within developmental evaluation frameworks that emphasize learning in complex, evolving partnerships. This approach, as described by Maier et al. (2015), focuses on using impact data to adapt strategies in real-time rather than simply judging success or failure.
- *Failure Analysis:* Mature SROI systems analyze initiatives with lower-than-expected returns to extract learning. Universities can conduct "low-impact audits" that systematically examine partnerships demonstrating limited social return, using findings to improve future program design (Stoecker et al., 2010).
- *Cross-Institutional Learning Networks:* Inter-university collaborations accelerate methodological improvements and shared standards. Campus Compact and the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities have established communities of practice focused on SROI methodology for university-community partnerships, reducing duplication of methodological work (Campus Compact, 2019).

Limitations and Implementation Challenges

While SROI offers powerful tools for valuing university-community partnerships, important limitations and challenges must be acknowledged:

- *Methodological Concerns:* SROI calculations involve numerous assumptions and estimations that can affect validity. Key challenges include:
  - Determining appropriate financial proxies for intangible outcomes
  - Accounting for counterfactuals (what would have happened without the intervention)
  - Addressing attribution when multiple factors contribute to outcomes
  - Valuing long-term impacts beyond immediate measurement periods
- *Resource Requirements:* Quality SROI analysis requires significant time, expertise, and data collection resources that may be unavailable to smaller institutions or programs. Research on social impact measurement practices indicates that comprehensive SROI analysis can require substantial investments in staff time and expertise (Banke-Thomas et al., 2015).
- *Potential for Misuse:* SROI ratios can be misconstrued or manipulated to justify predetermined conclusions. Without transparency about methodology and assumptions, SROI can potentially mislead rather than inform decision-making.
- *Equity Considerations:* Standard valuation approaches may undervalue outcomes affecting marginalized communities whose economic participation is constrained by structural barriers. SROI practitioners must consciously address these equity concerns through inclusive stakeholder engagement and critical analysis of valuation methods.

- *Institutional Resistance:* Faculty and staff may resist SROI implementation due to concerns about reduction of complex social value to monetary terms, measurement burden, or potential misuse of metrics in resource allocation decisions.

Conclusion

Quantifying social return on investment for university-community partnerships represents both a technical challenge and an organizational change process. The evidence demonstrates that robust SROI measurement yields significant benefits: enhanced strategic decision-making, increased funding success, improved program design, strengthened institutional legitimacy, and more sustainable partnerships.

Successful implementation requires attention to both methodological rigor and organizational development. Stakeholder-inclusive frameworks ensure that measurement captures what matters to communities, not just institutions. Appropriate financial proxies translate diverse outcomes into a common language while respecting their qualitative dimensions. Integration with institutional systems reduces administrative burden and ensures impact data informs decision-making. Distributed measurement capacity builds institutional culture while respecting disciplinary differences.

For university leaders, the path forward is clear. First, commit publicly to measuring community impact alongside traditional academic metrics. Second, invest in the technical and human infrastructure needed for quality measurement. Third, create accountability structures that use SROI evidence in strategic and budgetary decisions. Fourth, build capacity across the institution rather than centralizing expertise. Finally, use SROI findings to tell compelling stories about institutional impact while acknowledging community contributions and opportunities for improvement.

By quantifying social return on investment, universities can demonstrate their contributions to societal wellbeing, strengthen their case for public and philanthropic support, and continuously improve how they fulfill their civic missions in partnership with the communities they serve.

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