University outreach programs: service to the surrounding communities while developing faculty

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ABSTRACT

University Outreach programs have evolved from their agricultural roots to virtually all areas of higher education. Outreach programs are a key element in endearing institutions of higher education to their surrounding communities and constituents. This paper discusses the evolution of university outreach. Benefits of outreach for the institution, faculty, and community are discussed. An outreach program is reviewed. Recommendations for fostering future outreach programs are presented.

Keywords: university, outreach, faculty, development, communities

INTRODUCTION

University Outreach programs involve instructional and professional activities by faculty and staff with individuals and organizations who are not enrolled in the institution. University involvement in economic and community development can be traced back to the Morrill Act (1862), the Agricultural College Act (1890), and the Smith–Lever Act (1914). From this government supported financial base, colleges and universities have evolved their supporting role in technical training and economic growth.

Activity outside the Ivory Towers or off campus is often viewed as "unscholarly" in certain academic circles. In comparison, the perception by the business community of the typical faculty member is a wizened and stooped professor, cloaked in a black robe. This fountain of intellectual purity lives on the school grounds, eats at the school cafeteria, and rarely leaves campus. Informational intake is limited to scholarly works and refereed journals. Current events are generally viewed as passing fads or annoying distractions. Basically, the academic purist is personified by J. K. Rowling's Cuthbert Binns at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Professor Binns teaches History of Magic and has the distinction of being the only teacher at Hogwarts who is a ghost. Professor Binns died while napping in the teacher's lounge. However, he didn't notice his own death. He left his body behind and returned to his classroom to continue teaching. Supposedly, his students could detect only a minimal alteration in his classroom demeanor (Rowling, J. K., 1999). To continue the analogy, the outreach initiates would be represented by Rowling's Gilderoy Lockhart. Professor Lockhart's primary pursuit would seem to be public accolades and newspaper headlines. He knows nothing of the body of knowledge in his field, makes outrageous claims on a regular basis, and pursues the limelight as an end in and of itself. Hopefully, faculty can evolve beyond either of these archetypes. Outreach programs may be able to help faculty development, university missions, and community development.

University outreach activities should be based in a healthy two way communication between practitioners and professors. The practitioners could provide feedback to the professors concerning "best practices and success stories". This material could then be incorporated into classroom lectures. In return, the professors could advise practitioners in job related problems, new concepts, and changing technologies as discovered through academic research activities.

Textbooks regularly incorporate mini-testimonials from business leaders to assist in the connection between theory and practice. Faculty outreach activities can accomplish a far more advantageous and identifiable result through local interactions.

EVOLUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION OUTREACH

review of research literature finds an expanding trend of higher education's roll in economic outreach activities. For example, Anders (1992) found growing evidence of universities integrating their traditional classroom subjects with the needs of outside organizations. This shift to a more interactive approach contrasts with the historic and albeit isolationist world of academic purity. Traditionally, academic institutions followed the European approach where faculty were devoted to teaching, research, and service (Luria and Luria, 1970: 76). Service, in this sense, largely means the involvement of faculty in university governance, their individual disciplines and professional associations, and to a lesser extent the outside community.

The Smith-Lever Act in 1914, which established agricultural extension programs in the

U.S., formalized an off-campus service orientation and encouraged faculty to engage in translating scientific research into actual practice. The NASA space program expanded government funding for research and development through specialized research centers at universities. The resulting technologies helped create new industries in computer hardware, software, biotechnology, and robotics (Anders, 1992). Gibson (1988) identifies several factors which account for changes in university orientations toward a new emphasis on cash flow and constituency building. Two of the key elements include competition for fund raising and a growing recognition of the importance of university-industry linkages.

Unlike the traditional university where classical education and basic research are the principal forms of academic endeavor, the modern university trains specialists, encourages applied research, and is involved in the development of new technologies and theoretical analysis for commercial application. This technical orientation necessitates improved lines of communication between academia and practitioners in both business and political circles. A major result of this involvement is the growing integration of proven business techniques with theoretical approaches. Kuhlman (1986: 18) sees these charges as engendering substantial tensions between those faculties in the "quality-oriented" classical disciplines, and those in the "utility-oriented" fields of science, engineering, and business. Larson (1989) points out that the degree of difference between these two is a function of the university's interactions with the marketplace. "Economically, is the university 'market' or 'product' oriented? A 'market' orientation implies tailoring products to 'sell' in the competitive marketplace. 'Product' focus, on the other hand, entails offering products on a take-it or-leave-it basis." (Larson, 1989: 63)

Within the university community, progressive administrators encourage professors to operate outside the institution through membership in business organizations, and as consultants. The effect of this new type of relationship is to reduce the lag between the development of new technologies and their commercial applications. On the negative side, faculty research may become dependent upon the availability of outside funding. This implies a loss of academic freedom by scholars, and autonomy by academic departments. Despite a growing interdependence, there are substantial differences between the nature of academic and business needs.

In predicting future growth, Thompson (2000) concluded that the twenty-first century would see an expansion of university off-campus activities aimed at serving the needs of economic outreach. More recent research reported that effective university-community partnerships were associated with increased emphasis on community issues (McNall et al., 2009).

OUTREACH THROUGH CENTER FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Outreach programs come in all shapes and sizes. Some involve students assisting local organizations. Others incorporate faculty and staff programs targeting community development. A search of the web sites of the AACSB institutions in the same state as the authors by the term “outreach” found numerous links for all the AACSB institutions. Activities varied from individual student programs and internships to dedicated outreach departments with dozens of programs.

The outreach activity emphasized in this paper, are supported by Jacksonville State University (JSU), through the College of Commerce and Business Administration (CCBA) and the Center for Economic Development and Business Research (CED). Through CCBA efforts, JSU has played an expanding role in economic development and economic education for over 30 years. The CCBA mission statement today includes a commitment to the support of economic education and development in Alabama, with most of the work concentrated in northeast Alabama.

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) most recent maintenance of accreditation letter commended the Center for Economic Development and Business Research (CED), the Small Business Development Center (SBDC), and the Jacksonville State University Center for Business and Free Enterprise Education and Entrepreneurship (JSU Center) for its significant community outreach and economic development activities. Recognition of outreach activities as supportive of the institution's mission by accreditation programs certainly lends credibility to such activities.

Center for Economic Development

The CED provides services and assistance to local, regional and state organizations. These services are designed to meet the unique needs of each client. In many of these cases, JSU faculty and staff use their knowledge and skills to facilitate a successful outcome. The CED also publishes a bi-monthly economic update that provides economic data and includes a featured economic article and promotion of CED programs. CED programs include: government services, business services, small business development, and government procurement services for small business.

In addition, the CED organizes three regional forums in the area of Alabama in which the school is located. They include the Cheaha Economic Activity Zone Forum (CEAZ), the Northeast Economic Activity Zone Forum (NEAZ), and the Calhoun County Chamber of Commerce Forum (CCCC)

Workforce Development and Supervisor Training

The CED has played a key role in providing logistical support for a leadership and management training program designed for the largest employer in the region, a U.S. Army maintenance and repair facility. The program provides participants with an overview of the strategic, analytical, functional, and managerial elements needed to be a more effective leader. Over five years, this program has trained over 100 mid-level depot employees.

Local Chamber of Commerce Economic Outlook Project

By far the longest running continuous outreach program involves the CED's relationship with the local chamber of commerce. The CED conducts an annual online survey of business executives on behalf of the chamber of commerce. The purpose of the survey is to assess business leaders' views and perceptions regarding the present and future strength of the local economy. Results of the study are presented each year at the Chamber's Economic Forum in conjunction with the organization's annual meeting.

The survey is an electronic instrument hosted on the Department's web server. Once the instrument has been created and tested, an email is composed that is to be distributed to all Chamber members that have provided an email address. The email explains the purpose of the study, as well as including hyperlinks to the survey instrument and the College's Privacy Policy.

After all the hyperlinks have been verified, the email is sent to the Chamber for distribution.

The invitation-to-participate email is distributed to all Chamber members using the Chamber's email account. Originally, the study administrators used a University email account for distribution purposes. However, many Chamber members either failed to recognize the account name, or their spam filters would not allow the email. Thus, initial response rates were very low, in the 1 to 3 percentile range. Having the invitation distributed by the Chamber allowed members to recognize the email address and most had already reset their spam filters to accept Chamber emails. Once the change in distribution strategy was implemented, response rates have averaged roughly 11 to 12 percent.

Another issue arose, albeit briefly, after 3 years of conducting the study. The Chamber changed its policy regarding distribution and preferred that a link to the study be loaded on the Chamber's website, rather than using email distribution. Obviously, the study administrators had no control over this decision. The result was that the time for the data collection effort was significantly extended and the quantity of data was drastically reduced. Thankfully, the Chamber re-evaluated and returned to email distribution for all studies since then.

In regard to the time for data collection, once the study has been launched, the usual pattern has been that roughly 50 percent of all responses are received within the first 24 hours. The remainder is normally received within 2 weeks. One week after the initial email blast, a reminder email is distributed that typically results in an increase in response rates of 2 to 3 percentage points. The time involved from questionnaire development until the data has been collected and analyzed normally is 3 weeks.

The questionnaire assesses various items. This includes the respondents' general economic outlook perceptions, whether they expect to expand their workforces, keep the same or cut them back, as well as whether they expect an increase in their customers' demand. Additional questions measure product mix changes, distribution and promotion changes, employee compensation adjustments, and how supportive of business the Chamber members view their local government. Basic demographics are also collected and an assessment is made of whether the Chamber members are purchasing their products locally, as well as the geographic location of their primary target markets. Since the survey has been conducted annually since 2003, comparisons to previous years are possible, see Figure 1 (Appendix).

Presentation to Chamber Membership

Information is compiled from the membership survey in combination with customized secondary information on the county, region, state and nation. Elements of the resulting report include demographic profiles, governmental developments, company updates and economic statistics (labor force related information, housing activity, unemployment claims, and tax revenues). County level information is compared to both historical information and state information. State information is compared to both historical information and national information. In addition to the local business leader confidence survey, results from other regional, state and national surveys are included.

The final compilation of information is professionally packaged and presented to the Chamber of Commerce Membership in conjunction with its annual meeting. The meeting typically takes place in either late January or early February. Holding the meeting early in the year enables a calendar year timeline for the information. The presentation session is divided into several elements. The economic forum generally starts the session. The economic forum is often followed by updates from economic developers in the region. The final segment culminates with a keynote speaker. The 2011 keynote speaker was Dennis P. Lockhart. Mr. Lockhart is the 14th president and chief executive officer of the Sixth District Federal Reserve Bank in Atlanta, GA.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REACHING OUT TO PRACTITIONERS

Presenting to practitioners can be dynamically different from what might be described as marginally vested undergraduates. An engaged, often hostile, and certainly skeptical businessperson is a fundamentally different audience profile from a passive and accepting undergraduate student. Some professors are not accustomed to being challenged on the validity of their sources, methodology, or even control of their presentations. Such an environment while interesting may feel more like a dissertation defense than a typical lecture. With that in mind, presenters need to be prepared to produce detailed copies of source material and methodology, and be willing to interact-with versus lecture-to the audience.

CED outreach presentations normally include both secondary and primary information. Post event feedback is regularly collected. Based upon this information, certain following recommendations are offered.

Primary Information

Post event feedback from CED and chamber of commerce events reports favorably on the primary information elements of the presentations. Primary information can offer numerous challenges including substantial time and costs. However, the audience seems to appreciate information that has been collected for their local organizational needs. The accuracy of the predictions is reviewed annually. The predictions have consistently tracked with local market performance.

Customized Secondary Information

Secondary economic information is readily available and routinely reported by local media outlets. In spite of this routine exposure, feedback from forum attendees has shown appreciation for having the same material repackaged and formatted to highlight local significance. By customizing the focus on changes-over-time and adding comparison figures, the information takes on added utility. Local audiences routinely request clarification on economic numbers in ways that do not routinely come up in the classroom (i.e. Why are you using not seasonally adjusted numbers? How is unemployment measured?). See Figure 2 (Appendix).

Documentation and Hard Copy Source Material

Unlike the typical classroom environment, outreach to practitioners should not assume that even the most mundane professorial proclamation will go unchallenged (i.e. I think those unemployment numbers are wrong. I think the real unemployment is higher). Copies of all source material and methodologies should either be included in appendices or readily available for distribution. Knowing the number may prove insufficient. Understanding the process involved in its calculation may prove useful.

Limited Interpretation

While some students may be interested in your opinion, most practitioners are more interested in conclusions that you can prove and document. When presenting opinions, such speculation needs to be identified (i.e. Here are the numbers. This is how that moved last time. I predict they will move this way next time.). Personal note. Practitioners seem quite adept at note taking concerning predictions. This can be problematic if repeat performances are anticipated. They remember. They like to remind.

Forum versus Lecture

When Hermione Granger interrupts Professor Binn's lecture with a question concerning the mythical "Chamber of Secrets" (Rowling, J.K., 1999). Professor Binns is taken aback. He can't remember the last time a student interrupted his lecture. In fact, he seems startled as if noticing the students for the first time. He moves to dismiss the subject as inappropriate since it lacks verification as to its existence. However, after numerous requests, he does explain what the myth says, which is instrumental in the later discovery of the actual chamber and finally to the resolution of the primary storyline. Practitioner concerns may seem equally "off subject"; however, they could hold significant value to the questioner. Practitioners seem to have lost their tolerance for one way communication especially on subjects fundamental to their professions. Imagine discussing municipal tax revenue figures with the finance director for the city in question sitting in the front row. The comparable analogy in the academic setting might involve discussing Expectancy Theory with Ed Lawler in attendance. Academic outreach programs should include both time and mechanism for audience participation. When appropriate, presenters may find utility in yielding the podium to subject matter experts that are in attendance.

SUMMARY

Several benefits are generated by outreach activities. The most obvious is the opportunity to provide service to the local business community. The activities detailed in this paper provide information regarding the economic wellbeing of the local community. In doing so, the University and the College can foster positive relations with the community and local businesses. In the longer term, these positive perceptions can lead to increased donations to the University. Outreach activities can also encourage enrollment especially from students interested in pursuing advanced degrees or continuing their education in specialized areas. In addition to fostering economic development and enrollment, outreach programs can promote faculty development. Faculty interaction with practitioners can improve lines of communication and encourage faculty to consider the practical aspects of their profession.

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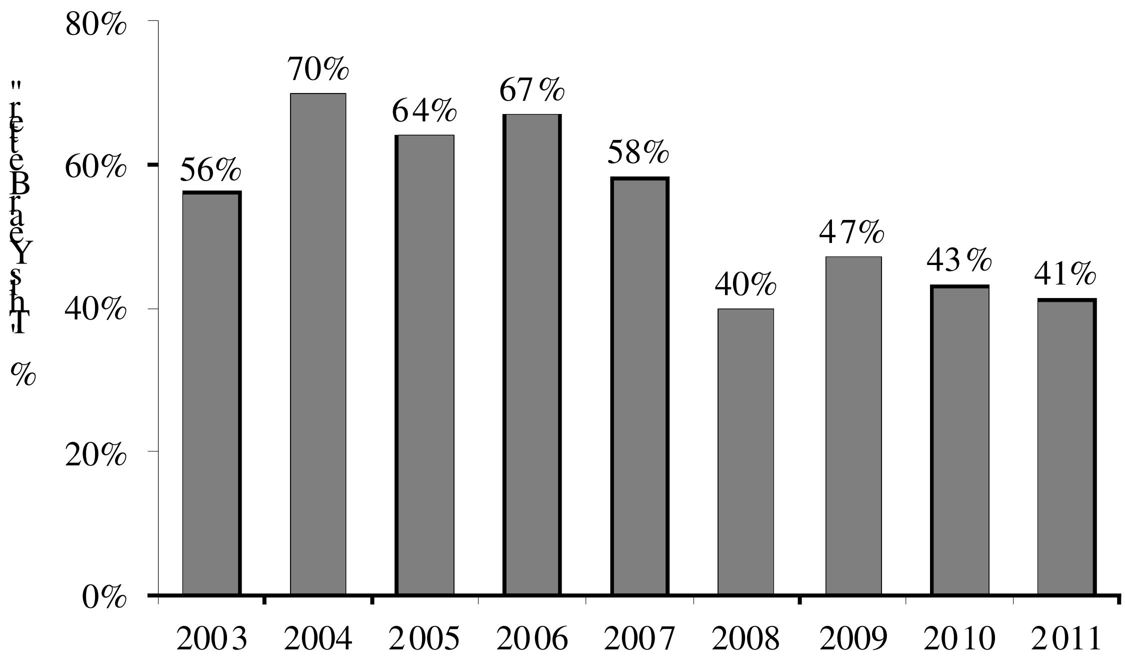
APPENDICES

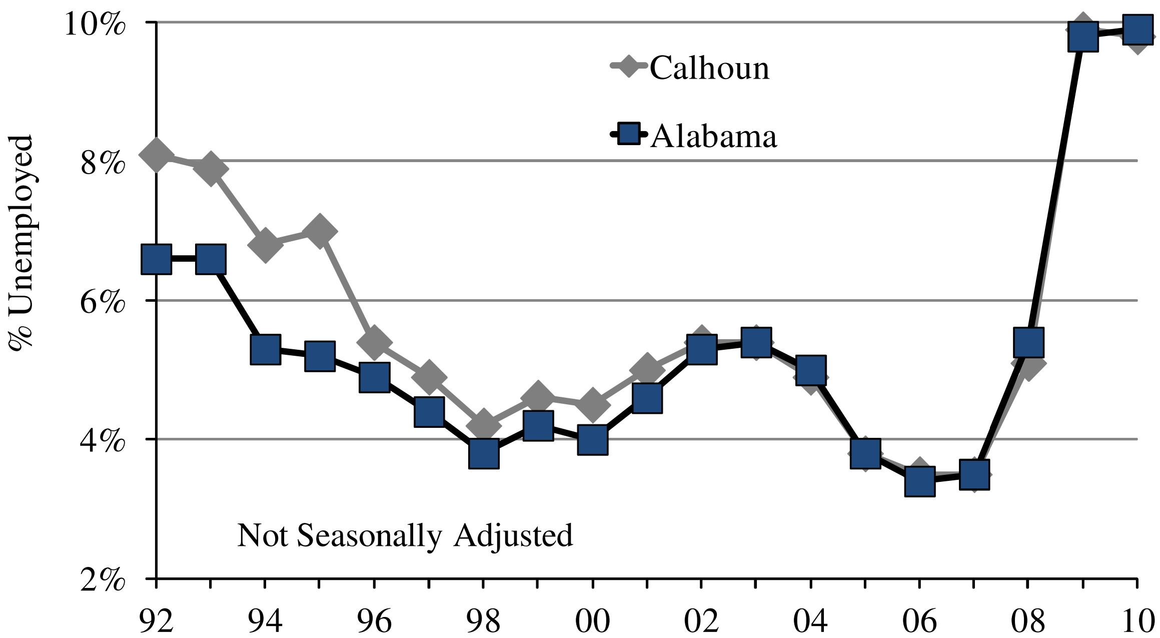
Figure 1

Your Comparison of this Years Economic Outlook to Last 2003-2011



Source: 2003-2011 Calhoun County Chamber of Commerce Membership Survey

Figure 2
Unemployment Rate for Calhoun County vs Alabama 1992-2010



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics