

Accomplishing Outreach Through Centers and Institutes

At Michigan State University, the number of centers and institutes equals the number of academic units, and they have great potential for impact both within the university and through outreach. These nondepartmental organizations have unique structures and face unique issues and challenges. What are these tensions and what strategies do centers and institutes use as major players in outreach? The three panelists represent three distinct types of organizations from social science, science, and business. Presentations addressed the range of problems faced, lessons learned, policy tensions, rewards and barriers, senior-level commitment, and potentials and problems of partnerships.

Institute for Children, Youth, and Families

The mission of the Institute for Children, Youth, and Families (ICYF) at Michigan State is the integration of research and outreach to enhance understanding of and service to diverse children, youth, and family agencies, local, national, and worldwide. According to Richard Lerner, outreach should address community concerns as defined by the community, by generating, transmitting, applying, and preserving knowledge. Outreach in the ICYF must cut across such issues as economic development, environmental quality, health, and so on — all of which now affect children, youth and families at historically unprecedented levels. New solutions must involve all the institutions of society and combine their powers, because separate solutions have failed. Universities must be part of that collaboration in a co-learning framework.

This collaboration has many dimensions: coalition formation with stakeholders, including youth; building a collective vision of a positive future; asset mapping across institutions; collaborative program planning, delivery, and evaluation; and policy engagement. Two cultures merge in the process — campus and community — resulting in development of a “best practice” for the community, the integration of research and outreach for faculty, and capacity building for graduate students. Such collaboration combines discipline-based research with Applied Developmental Science (ADS) through a community/university interface, and is extended through cooperative extension services and community agencies.

The role of ADS is to look at people in their ecological settings rather than through manipulation of lab experiments and, as a result, to advocate policy and program change. A National Task Force on ADS has been established, which has catalyzed a growing number of colleagues to this approach. To build this model will take a stakeholder-valued substantive focus, upfront and broad administrative buy-in, a strategic plan for the involvement of a critical mass of high quality faculty, a system of evaluation and accountability, collaboration with other comparable centers and institutes, and maintenance of state and national colleague and community stakeholder investments.

Contact:

Martha Hesse
Senior Presidential
Advisor/Assistant
Provost
Michigan State
University
450 Administration
Building
East Lansing, MI 48824
Phone: 517/432-0005
Fax: 517/353-3768
E-mail:
21334mlh@msu.edu

Presenters:

Michigan State
University
Tamer Cavusgil,
Executive Director,
International Business
Center; Professor,
Marketing and
International Business
Richard Lerner, Director,
Institute for Children,
Youth, and Families;
Professor, Family and
Child Ecology;
Psychology; Pediatrics
and Human
Development;
Counseling Educational
Psychology and Special
Education
James Tiedje, Director,
Center for Microbial
Ecology; Professor, Crop
and Soil Sciences

Center for Microbial Ecology

The Center for Microbial Ecology, a National Science Foundation (NSF) Science and Technology Center, is involved in basic research, industrial outreach, and educational outreach on the complex issue of management of microbes. James Tiedje describes it as a basic research center that takes a multidisciplinary approach to complex problems. Its advantages are that it deals with areas of critical importance to the country and the world, and it serves as a central facility and point of contact for identifying expertise. Two major collaborators are Japan and Russia.

As an industrial outreach center, it has a user community for its particular knowledge. For example, the center has a major grant from four major U.S. companies who have contacts with Japan. The key elements of its industrial outreach are:

- **Faculty:** The center can attract a research-oriented faculty because of the funding sources (NSF, NIH, EPA) and because of the prestige associated with NSF.
- **Key philosophy:** Collaboration doesn't mean the mixing of the missions of the university and industry. The university stays focused on knowledge generation through research.
- **Approach:** Hire front-line professionals with knowledge both of management and of the discipline, evaluate potential synergies with user community sectors (i.e., industry and government), and develop an industrial advisory panel of companies and government agencies.

In educational outreach, the center brings science excitement to K-12 students through programs like "The Unseen World" delivered in Detroit and to rural communities, and the "Microbial Zoo" on World Wide Web and CD-ROM.

Challenges and issues facing the center include: 1) an overcommitted faculty; 2) the heavy time investment required to build relationships and mutual understanding with external sectors, which is why the center hired a front-line professional; 3) the appropriate distribution of resources to meet the needs of state and national constituencies that are often in competition; 4) the friction from different faculty cultures (engineering, agriculture, medical) that have different expectations for buy-out and salaries; 5) legal, political, and historical barriers, resulting in the involvement of lawyers, regulatory agencies, and consulting firms; 6) the issue of corporate welfare – MSU should not do what industry should be doing itself; 7) the issue of competition with the private sector, which is why the center focuses on new research; 8) the difficulty faculty members have in gaining peer recognition though, in the case of the center, the grants to faculty have helped overcome that issue.

Greatly increased research projects and partnerships have resulted, including field projects which are quite costly. New forefront research themes have resulted from contact with industry. There has been an increase in inventions and patents. The center has received Small Business Research Initiative funding. A new attitude has been fostered between industry and regulatory participants that seeks to solve environmental problems rather than litigating them.

The experience of the Center for Microbial Ecology suggests that centers and institutes that have good funding are excellent means to attract and involve basic science faculty in university outreach. While basic science faculty may be the university's largest unengaged outreach resource, once engaged their work benefits the national economy.

International Business Center

In 1987 the International Business Center focused primarily on establishing closer ties with the business community, creating a bridge between the business school and small and large businesses in Michigan. The center expanded its focus to include training programs and direct consulting, and became a government national business resource center (CIBER). Since then, it has added an Expert Systems Lab. In 1994, the U.S. Department of Commerce designated it as an Asian-Pacific Economic Corporation Study Center, which focuses on international business practice, with multiple constituents. Two-thirds of its funding comes from external sources. It has three audiences: academic publics, partnering with institutions and colleges; the business sector; and public policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels.

Six challenges and critical success factors face the center:

1. The need to create and maintain critical mass and a solid infrastructure. The center has a professional staff as a core for organizing activities, then must draw faculty from the university for delivery. The university must provide funding and other support. Provosts and deans need to talk positively about the center to help it be recognized as a legitimate unit in the business community. To avoid being seen as the property of the marketing department exclusively, the center needs widespread ownership and buy-in from across the campus.
2. The creation of synergies through the interaction of the research agenda with outreach. Rather than separate, independent functions, the two goals are compatible, and the rewards system needs to reflect this.
3. The necessity of staying focused on key publics, appropriate programs, and the center's core competency. Choices must be made among the many opportunities and inquiries. The center must remain flexible, since the work agenda evolves as it receives feedback from constituents.

4. The problem of making the necessary hard choices about audiences — those who cannot pay versus those who pay. Small and medium-sized business cannot usually pay, while large multinational corporations can. The business school culture is such that services are not usually given away, and nonpaying audiences may be perceived as not valuable. Balance is needed since the center must raise funds to remain in business.

5. The need to choose between two primary activities — delivering actual assistance versus designing, developing, and enhancing knowledge (dissemination versus laboratory work). Excessive delivery can jeopardize the center's role as an innovator, causing it to lag behind. The center must maintain enough direct contact with constituents so that ideas for creating new work are developed. By employing powerful distribution channels, the center can maximize its impact through such forms as computer-aided software modules, aggressive and prolific publications programs, conferences and symposia, maintaining a homepage on the World Wide Web, and the electronic dissemination of journals.

6. Finally, the need to determine the scope of the center by making hard choices between regional and national impact. Centers and institutes are near-perfect mechanisms for delivering the outreach function of universities; they broker the services and talents of faculty and students. There are many advantages. Centers can create projects around which faculty and students can rally. Centers can search for new sources of funding. They can organize and mobilize faculty around a focused agenda and around a specific project. They can cross disciplines with greater ease than individual faculty and departments to solve complex problems. For example, the center brings together foreign language and Asian studies experts with business faculty. Finally, centers and institutes can provide an outlet for self-fulfillment for faculty who enjoy this kind of work.