

Value-Added Through Regional Outreach

To what extent do off-campus university centers respond to learners' expectations for education anytime, anywhere, for anyone? What value is added through regional outreach — especially in times when technology decreases the real and perceived space between campus and local communities and constituents, and in times of limited resources? “What would an ideal, regional off-campus component look like?” asked session leader Lorilee Sandmann, director of university outreach and former director of a Michigan State University regional center. Attendees identified the following desirable attributes: easily accessible and contributes to a statewide university presence, increases local partnerships and collaborations within a geographic area, advocates for regional needs and matches community/customer needs with university resources, facilitates university offerings to meet community needs through varied delivery systems, provides for student and support services, and is appropriately staffed and adequately funded. With broad characteristics in place, representatives from the University of Virginia and Michigan State University discussed how those characteristics apply to regional outreach centers currently managed by each institution.

Models of Accessibility

Three different models were presented as ways to increase access to university resources. The “MSU Model” envisions Michigan State University as a system of regional networks. This system has the potential to be the “eyes and ears of the university” throughout the state. A part of such a network is MSU — Upper Peninsula (U.P.), one of six regional offices that coordinates the full range of MSU outreach activities. U.P. regional director Brahee said, “We think in terms of a regional outreach network that includes a regional office, but also includes the sixteen county (cooperative) extension offices and other MSU programmers and initiatives in the region.” As the East Lansing campus is the locus of the university for the whole state, each regional office is the locus for that area of the state, and each extension center is the manifestation of the university for that county.

For the past seventy-five years, the University of Virginia has spread its presence throughout the state in the form of continuing education centers engaged primarily in credit and noncredit programming. The Division of Continuing Education reaches into all units of the university and can bring resources from each to the centers. Assistant dean Timothy Scovill described the primary function of each center as representing the university's resources in the local community. Access is further increased because lower tuition and fees are charged at the local centers than at the main campus. The University of Virginia offers master's degrees in education, engineering, and urban planning. Engineering also offers a Ph.D. in addition to the master's degree, both delivered by television. The Education Department is committed to a full-degree program at the

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centers, including an intensive three-year master's program modeled on an overseas program already in place and taught through teams of faculty.

A third model to create a regional presence is a multi-university center. "The northwest part of Michigan's lower peninsula is some two and a half hour drive from any public, bachelor degree-granting institution," reported Tom Emling, associate director of MSU-North. Northwestern Michigan College (NMC), the local community college, created a university center where four-year institutions from throughout the state offer different and complementary degree programs. Two private four-year colleges and ten of the fifteen public universities, including Michigan State University, have joined in this consortium. In fact, MSU's north regional office is physically located at the NMC University Center. "There are so many benefits to this collaboration," cites Emling. "Through the NMC University Center, MSU North has access to five two-way interactive classrooms and to fifteen other interactive classrooms throughout the five-county region."

Increased Partnerships and Collaborations

Scovill reported that Virginia too has formed collaborations with community colleges and other institutions of higher education. Such cooperation, which usually begins as the "politically smart" thing to do, may become a genuine partnership. The NMC University Center and Virginia collaborations are examples of the type of partnerships that can be promoted by university personnel living in a specific area. These local placements, through the relationships they develop and nurture over time, can make the connections to key constituents necessary for new university initiatives, reduce the transaction "costs" of entry for expanded university efforts, and maintain ongoing commitments. All can benefit by these partnerships. Institutions can become less predatory, fill the gaps, and eliminate what overlaps. Sandmann points out, "An environment can be developed among institutions where we don't compete, but, rather, make more complete the educational resources in a geographic area."

Program Development

A function of all three regional outreach models is to advocate for regional needs and to match community, customer, or student needs with university resources. Center directors at the University of Virginia do "triage" on requests from the community, according to Scovill, in order to decide which requests they should respond to. This knowledge brokers' role is longstanding for off-campus personnel, but one about which there is still much to learn. It takes a particularly skillful person to create the synergy necessary to bring together campus resources and community needs for mutually beneficial outcomes. Oftentimes, there is a membrane

problem. How can regional staff effectively represent the university and how can regional staff be useful to the community/constituents on behalf of the university? Academic departments at times do not feel the regional centers are effective at marketing university resources, that is, their current “product line” in teaching and research. Conversely, regional centers often feel that the university is unresponsive to the needs identified. Frustration occurs when the knowledge linker doesn’t know how to access or find the appropriate resources, when the university has no capacity to full the needs, or when there simply is no unit nor faculty member interested or able to fill the need within the time frame of the request.

In addition to the knowledge matching role, regional centers can add “value” by conducting market or needs assessments; by serving as educational consultants to help communities or constituents frame questions, issues, or problems; by consulting with faculty to customize the curriculum and delivery to a particular locale; and by identifying possible local funding sources.

Student and Support Services

If the regional offices are to be the university in a particular setting, critical functions include providing student and faculty support services. For students such support might include academic advising; enrollment services; access to textbooks, reference or library materials; and computer connections. There is a corollary set of support services for faculty teaching in the area – such as advising space, copying, audiovisual equipment, computer access, and so on. The panelists reported a variety of ways in which these services are made available. These range from having a faculty member, advisor, or program coordinator office in the regional center, to holding regularly scheduled visitations by on-campus support units, to supplying electronic connections. For example, at MSU-UP, academic advising is provided on-site by each academic unit providing a program in the center. Students taking an off-campus course may request books and materials from the MSU campus library with a three-day turnaround on delivery to the regional center or to their place of employment.

Organizing and Staffing for Regional Outreach

University of Virginia continuing education centers are staffed with five to twenty-eight staff members, depending on local needs and the extent of program offerings. Center directors report to one of two associate academic deans who in turn report to the academic dean. Faculty from the main campus are hired to teach on an overload basis at the center, and additional faculty are hired as needed from outside the university.

MSU-Extension staff are joined by MSU University Outreach staff and faculty from academic and support units to make up the regional network. Few adjunct instructors are employed by MSU; to maintain the integrity of credit programs, full-time MSU faculty members are typically used.

Academic departments in both institutions are provided incentives to become involved in off-campus program offerings. Twenty percent of department faculty costs are picked up by the Division of Continuing Education at Virginia. MSU returns seventy-five percent of tuition revenues to the college teaching the off-campus course. Furthermore, faculty are learning through their outreach. Their experience is informing campus programs and research and teaching as well.

More important than the position or affiliation of the regional staff is their ability to manage the “two cultures” of the local community and the university. Sandmann maintained that staff at the centers need to be “bilingual,” able to speak the language of and be credible in both cultures. Sometimes a regional representative will “go native,” however. Others, on the other hand, may be too “ivory tower” to work well with the local communities.

Organizing for regional outreach is a challenge. The MSU model has been an evolving one. While there was a desire for symmetry among the regional centers, the “cookie cutter” approach of all regional centers being funded and staffed similarly proved to be faulty. Finding the most advantageous location for the regional offices has also been a struggle; five out of the six offices have relocated at least once in the last five years. One of the most promising yet undeveloped areas of the MSU regional outreach model is the integration of the regional offices with MSU-Extension. Even though the integration is conceptually appealing, operationally it is difficult. From the secretaries in the county offices, to extension field faculty, to the regional directors, ongoing commitments and organizational maintenance demands of the extension system have taken precedence over assuming less familiar, broad-based university roles.

Student recruitment, alumni relations, development, and legislative relations could also be listed as desirable functions of the regional center. “Having a broad ‘virtual’ presence is highly compelling; however, our experience has taught us the need to have more reasonable expectations about what an off-campus regional component can actually deliver to the local communities and contribute to a university’s outreach agenda,” summarized Sandmann. Nonetheless, there was general agreement that regional outreach provided real value added to the local geographic area, to specific constituents, and to the university, its faculty, and its academic units.
