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Higher Education Consortium Leads to College Students Taking a Fresh Look at Continuing Challenges for their Region

Joseph Fink III

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

Institutions of higher education have long had teaching, research and service as their primary missions. Emphasis among those three areas of activity can vary substantially from one institution to another. For example, a land grant university may have a greater emphasis on service or outreach to the communities it serves than would, say, a traditional liberal arts college. Society appears to have an increased expectation that the research conducted at research universities will lead to economic development opportunities (Yusuf & Fink, 2007). Fortunately, each type of institution has much to offer society at large and the communities or regions where located.

The challenge may lie with organizing the resources across institutions to secure synergism. One such attempt, sponsored by The Center for Rural Development (The Center) is described here, along with information about a specific initiative designed to involve students from a variety of colleges and universities across a region.

The Center for Rural Development

The Center for Rural Development, located in Somerset, KY, was founded in 1996 as a non-profit organization with the primary mission of improving the quality of life for individuals in its forty-two county service region of Southern and Eastern Kentucky. It strives to achieve this by providing leadership that stimulates innovative and sustainable economic development solutions for a number of challenges that have persisted within the region for some time.

Envisioned to be a national model for technological, cultural, and economic development, The Center occupies a 100,000 square foot advanced technology building. This facility also hosts the offices of partner affiliated organizations in the areas of economic development, educational advancement, entrepreneurship, environmental issues, tourism, and a model initiative aimed at combating drug abuse in rural areas. (Table 1.)

A major focus of the programming of The Center is initiatives aimed at young people, the most valuable resource of an Appalachian region boasting great natural resources. From the very beginning, it has been The Center's goal to create opportunity for young people searching to find their niche in the Kentucky economy. Through youth programs like Rogers Scholars, a week of an intense leadership and entrepreneurial curriculum along with daily interaction with regional business professionals, The Center prepares these Kentucky high school students completing tenth grade to return home with the challenge to not only improve themselves but to make a contribution to their home communities. Launched in 1998, that program has now grown to encompass week-long offerings on three area college and university campuses. Alumni of the Rogers Scholars program are eligible to apply for scholarships from thirteen Kentucky colleges and universities reserved for those who have completed the program.

Other initiatives of The Center related to education are the Rogers Explorers and the Entrepreneurial

Leadership Institute summer programs. All target high school students. The Rogers Explorers Program is aimed at students completing the eighth grade and is designed to develop skills in leadership, technology, math, science, and community service. The Entrepreneurial Leadership Institute is for students completing eighth, ninth or tenth grade who have an interest in business and entrepreneurship.

The Higher Education Consortium

The programs just described all target high school students. It was recognized that students from the colleges and universities in the area are also a very valuable resource for creating positive change. Moreover, in many of their communities these institutions are major employers and have the potential to be agents to advance their communities and the region.

Consequently, in Spring, 2005 The Center launched the Higher Education Consortium. The purpose of this initiative is to provide opportunities for partnerships between The Center for Rural Development, its affiliates, and the colleges and universities across the region to better serve the individuals in our communities. Co-Chairs of the group have been drawn from the Executive Committee of The Center: Joseph L. Fink III from the University of Kentucky and Jo Marshall, President of Somerset Community College.

Membership in the Higher Education Consortium is open to public and private post-secondary educational institutions and organizations representing or serving them in the forty-two county service area of The Center. Institutions located in the service area or those located elsewhere but offering academic programming in the area, say at a branch campus, are welcome to participate. Those participating to date are listed in Table 2.

To date, members of the Consortium have considered these topics and issues:

- w Stimulating creation of summer internships in the region for students
- w Potential for The Center as a clearinghouse for low demand courses to coalesce a critical mass to facilitate shared offerings offered using information technology
- w Enhancing broadband access for colleges and universities through The Center
- w Stimulating student interest in science and engineering-related careers
- w Identifying and promoting potential community service projects
- w Facilitating distance learning initiatives
- w Update on the capabilities of CenterNet2, an interactive videoconferencing network
- w Courses or extra-curricular activities focusing on entrepreneurship
- w Development of a grant writing skills workshop

Possible outcomes of activities of the Higher Education College Consortium, identified at the outset of this initiative to secure support from the Executive Committee, included:

- 1] Identifying faculty to serve as community educators for programs of The Center; engage faculty to present seminars/programs to community groups
- 2] Providing summer internships for participants in institutions' student leadership programs to assist/work with the Roger Scholars program
- 3] The Center serving a clearinghouse function for various ventures such as shared instructors, technology expertise, purchasing advice and providing information about "what's next" in information technology to help keep institutions aware of new and emerging developments to prevent investments in obsolete or near-obsolete hardware or software.
- 4] Internships for social work majors with UNITE and other Center affiliates
- 5] Using CenterNET2 to take UNITE and other Center-based programs out to the colleges and universities
- 6] Using resources of The Center to facilitate internship placements at sites other than The Center throughout the region
- 7] Providing broadband access to colleges and universities via The Center
- 8] Sponsoring an annual "technology update" conference at The Center for unbiased information
- 9] Investigating possibilities with programs of the Office of University Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Representatives of the higher education institutions participating in this undertaking meet at least twice a year, alternating meeting sites between The Center in Somerset and one of the campuses of the participating institutions. In the latter situation, the hosting institution is provided time on the agenda to showcase some aspects of their institution or campus.

Project IDEAS Collegiate Summit

During 2007 the Executive Committee at The Center was presented with a one-page proposal designated "Continuing Challenges – Fresh Ideas." The document described the program, known for discussion purposes as the "Collegiate Summit", this way:

"This one day gathering of the future leaders of the region is designed to bring the thinking of young, enthusiastic, bright people to bear on issues facing the region

served by The Center for Rural Development."

An explanatory comment at the meeting amplified this by adding that members of the Executive Committee, along with many others, had spent years attempting to address and rectify continuing challenges facing the region. It was summarized this way:

"Our generation had its shot with some limited success; it's time to bring to bear some new thinking from young thinkers familiar with the region and the issues it faces."

The original proposal suggested that the convened college and university students be divided into groups to discuss these topics:

Economic development

Education

Environmental quality

Health care services

Retention of young people in the region

Stemming the scourge of drug abuse

Funding

The Executive Committee approved the proposal and identifying a source of financial resources for the undertaking was designated as a high priority. Program format and issues such as how the student participants would be identified were assigned to staff for formulation of recommendations.

The Center had secured grant funding from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) for a project designated "Developing and Implementing Community Strategies." This project was aimed at enhancing the ability of local communities in the ARC-designated "Distressed Counties" to conduct strategic planning for their areas and work on implementing those plans.

Due to a variety of reasons, some fund balances were anticipated at the conclusion of the project. The President of The Center approached ARC officials about the possibility of applying those unexpended funds to support the Collegiate Summit. Approval was secured to use \$13,200 in ARC funding with a matching amount from The Center of \$3,300 to support the Collegiate Summit.

Format

In light of the ARC support, the project changed names to "Project IDEAS" (Insight and Dialogue Engaging Appalachian Students) and the day-long session held on September 18, 2009 attracted 48 students representing 15 colleges and universities. Participants were divided into four groups of eleven each with four peer facilitators. Students were encouraged to wear their sweatshirts or jackets with school colors for photographs with Congressman Hal Rogers, who delivered the keynote address to the group. Those photographs were then distributed to the students' institutions for use in alumni or other publications.

Major presentations were limited because of their similarity to lectures the students experience each day. The emphasis of the programming was on breakout sessions led by small group facilitators who were themselves college or university students. Morning sessions focused on job creation, economic development, drug and substance abuse, educational attainment, environmental quality, health and wellness, and a miscellaneous category. Afternoon small group discussions had different assigned topics for the students to discuss:

- As a means to encourage young people to strongly consider staying in Southern and Eastern

Kentucky, what concrete steps does this group suggest implementing via -

K-12 educational institutions

Colleges and universities

Business community

Government

Non-profit organizations

Other

- Identify three steps that can be implemented during the current semester to help promote retention of youth on your college or university campus in our region
- How would this best be accomplished?
- Who would be responsible?
- How would you measure the success and impact of these efforts?
- Other discussion

Evaluation

Evaluation of the offering occurred two ways. Each student who attended completed a participant evaluation, yielding the numerical rating results compiled in Table 3. In addition, students who attended were asked to provide written comments.

Representative comments submitted by the student participants included:

- * I really liked getting my ideas out there and hearing the ideas of others.
- * Focusing on the practical aspects of community issues was great.
- * Group sizes were great, leading to very good discussion.
- * I appreciate this being set up to hear from us; we were free to express our ideas and our suggestions were taken seriously.

Suggestions for change for future offerings included identifying a way to get our ideas to community leaders, business operators and politicians.

Finally, the participants were asked what type of civic engagement they planned to participate in when returning to campus as a result of this session. Responses included:

- * Write an article for the local newspaper to talk about the good in our county
- * Suggest that our Student Government Association get more involved with the local community

* Provide a presentation on my campus about my experience here and encourage others to work for positive change

* Organize a similar summit conference on my campus and have successful people from the area come to campus to speak to the students

Additionally, each small group facilitator submitted a written summary of his or her session.

Representative comments from the group leaders included:

j The majority of the identified obstacles could be overcome or at least positively influenced by three community wide improvements. [1] Improved road conditions throughout Eastern Kentucky. [2] Increased access to cell tower/internet technology. [3] An improved image of Eastern Kentucky w/o the negative stereotypes that are currently sometimes attributed to the area.

j High schools, businesses, and the community at-large need to offer students the ability to “shadow” individuals in order to gain insight about the career they want to pursue. A problem in Eastern Kentucky is that many students are secluded from the many employment opportunities available to them and don’t know how to maximize their talents and potential. Job Shadowing offers young people the possibility of experiencing jobs and opportunities for their lives that they may not have otherwise considered for themselves.

j We are all in this together. Education affects every person and business in this area, nationally and globally. It all begins with education. If we look at tackling the issues surrounding improving education in this area we’ll see issues like job development and health/wellness in our community proportionally being resolved because when education is improved the others are similarly improved. Education leads to a good job which leads to better opportunities for families to provide for the health and wellness services necessary for them to lead a successful life in this area.

j Create programs for college students to come back to their small towns or rural communities and be mentors/role models to the K-12 population. Have college students teach summer courses that engage students to consider college or new experiences outside of the classroom. Most of all, let college students show the younger students that even someone from their small town can achieve success by going to college and then coming back to help their community.

j This inaugural College Youth Summit was a great chance to talk openly with other college students from this region about the problems we face growing up in this region and becoming advocates to make this a better home for the next generation. This was a wonderful opportunity to hear the full spectrum of experiences from other Southern and Eastern Kentucky youth, and better understand the region we live in. I expect this Summit to continue many more times to come!

j The group members collected e-mail addresses and talked about setting up a facebook group to keep in touch. They also discussed their desire for a followup summit to have a chance to look at what additional steps they could take next semester.

Discussion

The Higher Education Consortium was launched during 2005 and sponsored a number of meetings

where possible projects and collaborations were discussed. However, until the IDEAS Summit materialized there was little concrete evidence the Consortium could identify as positive outcomes. The success of the President of The Center in identifying resources that could be applied to this project was the pivotal development that led to bringing the initiative to fruition.

Giving students an opportunity to meet others from area institutions to discuss common concerns for their communities and region was viewed as a very positive experience by the participants. Hearing the views of others and having an informal opportunity to discuss possible approaches to addressing the challenges proved to be a format that facilitated free exchange and innovative thinking.

The Appalachian Regional Commission has expressed an interest in supporting a repeat offering of the Summit and taking the concept to other portions of the ARC service area. Other funding sources in the private sector may also find this to be an attractive project to support.

For the students, both being selected for this initiative and actually participating was a very positive experience. Knowing that one's ideas and opinions are heard can boost self-esteem and encourage further involvement.

Conclusions

This discussion tracks development of the Higher Education Consortium at The Center for Rural Development. Conceptualization and implementation of a summit conference for students at area colleges and universities to address continuing challenges in the area was a key initiative of the Consortium for Higher Education. "Project IDEAS" – Insight and Dialogue Engaging Appalachian Students – was conducted during Fall of 2009 and received positive evaluations from the students who participated.

Other clusters of institutions may wish to consider launching similar undertakings to capitalize on the thinking and creativity of college and university students to suggest approaches to area challenges.

References

Yusuf J-E, Fink III JL. Technology-based economic development: Connecting the research university and community leaders. *Applied Res in Econ Development*. 2007;4:95-105.

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Table 1. Affiliates based at The Center and their websites are:

FORWARD IN THE FIFTH

<http://www.fif.org>

PRIDE – Personal Responsibility in a Desirable Environment

<http://www.kypride.org>

SEKTDA – Southern & Eastern Kentucky Tourism Development Association

<http://www.tourseky.net>

SKEDC – Southeast Kentucky Economic Development Corporation

<http://www.southeastkentucky.com>

UNITE – Unlawful Narcotics – Investigation, Treatment, Education

<http://www.operationunite.org>

Table 2. Post-secondary educational institutions and organizations participating in the Higher Education Consortium to date

Appalachian College Association

Association of Independent Kentucky Colleges and Universities

Big Sandy Community & Technical College

Campbellsville University

Centre College

Georgetown College

Eastern Kentucky University

Hazard Community & Technical College

Kentucky Community & Technical College System

Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education

Lincoln Memorial University

Lindsey Wilson College

Midway College

Morehead State University

Pikeville College

Somerset Community College

Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College

Union College

University Center of the Mountains

University of Kentucky

University of the Cumberlands

Table 3. Participants' evaluation of the collegiate summit.

Element	Mean Rating*
Summit relevance to "real life" issues within the region	4.74
Generation of practical solutions to improve retention of youth	4.26
Facilitated discussion by peers	4.47
Structure of the day (plenary and breakout sessions)	4.52
Materials for participants	4.55
Keynote presenters	4.70
Length of the event	4.21
Location of the event in Somerset	4.36
Food	4.21

*Scale of 1-5 with 1 = poor and 5 = excellent

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