

Out on a Limb: The Precarious and Not So Precarious Existence of Branch Campuses

John E. Krueger, Phyllis Bebko, and Charles Bird

Hidden amongst the more popular higher education issues regarding educational reform, the cost of attending institutions of higher learning and the financial issues of societies in general, are the overlooked accomplishments of those dedicated individuals who facilitate continuous learning on the branch campuses and extension centers of our nation's colleges and universities.

Students, faculty, and support personnel are busy successfully attaining their branch campus goals regardless of their proximity to the mother ship or their designation as a state public education system or private university system.

The obscurity surrounding life on branch campuses is well understood by those who work for and/or attend classes on branch campuses. However, many administrators, students, and faculty members place bound on the main campus pay little or no regard to what Schindler in 1952 has described as the stepchild of the college campus. The literature points out that regardless of the branches' lack of prestige, students are happier, faculty are more engaged, and school personnel are more motivated than their main campus counterparts. Foregoing prestige is a small price to pay for the large rewards afforded by attending or working on a branch campus.

For most branch campuses, the target audience is adult students. Once called nontraditional, the adult student is one that does not fit the historically typical model. In 2006, Stokes confirms a remarkable evolution, stating that only 16 percent of those attending college fit the traditional undergraduate student model of eighteen to twenty-two year old, attending full time, and living on campus. The majority of higher education students are adults with other full-time responsibilities. Whether an institution seeks to increase adult access to high demand degrees, to broaden its brand recognition through showcase programs, or to provide coverage to an assigned service area, it will consider branch locations.

There is great need. The Lumina Foundation (2009) has set the goal to "to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025." The percentage in the United States has remained stable at thirty nine for some time while other countries have moved to higher levels. Reaching this goal requires a greater commitment to serving the adult or nontraditional student.

Consulting with its clients in higher education regarding their marketing and program planning efforts, Stamats, Inc. conducts phone surveys of thousands of potential adult

students. From these Adults TALK interviews, Dr. Brenda Harms (2009) has learned that adults seeking degrees consider among their top five criteria:

- Flexibility of class scheduling
- Cost to attend
- Location convenient to home or work (53 percent of undergraduate and 44 percent of graduate were much more interested if colleges offered extension sites close to their home)

Believing branch campuses to be full of opportunity and well suited to maximize adult access during times of limited resources, the authors of the articles in this issue are practitioners and leaders. As administrators of branches, most in urban areas, they understand the challenges of increased demand and fewer discretionary dollars. These are also members of the National Association of Branch Campus Administrators (NABCA).

It is notoriously difficult to pull together reliable information on branch campuses. Indeed, even the term branch campus lacks an agreed upon definition, so that one cannot assume that one institution's branch campuses have the same characteristics as another's. On the other hand, those of us who have worked with and thought about branch campuses probably can agree that serving as a faculty member or administrator on a branch campus is different than serving on the main/home/mother campus to which the branch is attached.

Relatively few individuals ever set out on their career paths with the idea of spending decades at a branch campus. As a result, to the extent that life on a branch campus is different than at a more traditional campus, newly appointed faculty members and administrators often feel as if they somehow woke up in a strange land, where decision-making processes seem counterintuitive, lines of communication confusing, and budgets are a mystery. Indeed, the simplest of curriculum, scheduling, and staffing decisions can create enormous frustration and disappointment.

For all that, the mission and contribution of branch campuses is critical to expanding access to higher education and providing economic development support for communities. Observation suggests that the number and type of branches has been expanding for many years, and there is no end to that expansion in sight. Hundreds of talented individuals have discovered that serving on a branch campus brings unexpected rewards and satisfaction, and it is in that spirit that we offer this special issue of the *Metropolitan Universities* (MUJ).

To bring support to branch campus administrators, some states have created formal or informal branch organizations, but the primary effort to provide support on a national basis comes from the National Association of Branch Campus Administrators (NABCA). NABCA was created about fifteen years ago as the Western Association of Branch Campus Administrators, to serve states in the western United States.

From the beginning, NABCA has had ambitions to grow into a solid professional organization, although financial considerations have forced its development to proceed at a modest rate. It is a relatively loosely structured organization, led by an elected executive committee, and recently it began to maintain a formal membership roster. NABCA also maintains a website at www.nabca.net. As described on that site, “NABCA is committed to creating a forum for professional development, information sharing and dissemination, and the study of the management, teaching, and learning conditions on all higher education branch or regional campuses.”

NABCA also maintains affiliations with some state-level organizations, and it is affiliated with the only other national conference that is dedicated to branch campus issues, the Regional and Branch Campus Administrators Conference (RBCA). RBCA has no formal governance structure and the conference is very much focused on the specific concerns of branch campus chief administrators.

Over the years, NABCA’s leadership has sought to create a highly inclusive organization. Although few full-time faculty members participate in the conference, programs have been multitrack, with an effort to appeal both to academic and student support staff, as well as to campus executives. Programs include sessions on a wide range of topics, with an emphasis on those presentations that report on specific research that may help provide participants with a larger context for thinking about challenges and opportunities.

One of the most important steps taken by NABCA was to create a research committee. This committee has been able to bring some consistent effort to encourage research on branch campuses, and this special issue of the *MUJ* was organized through the research committee. There also is a Regional Campus Literature Bibliography accessed through the website, which is maintained by the Regional Campus Libraries Discussion Group. This bibliography can provide a starting point for considering the specific challenge of maintaining appropriate library services on branch campuses.

In those states for which we have a strong sense of how things are changing (based on our personal knowledge), branch campuses seem to be thriving. As the cost of attending residential campuses continues to increase, and more previous nonconsumers seek to obtain the advantages of an advanced education, it seems likely that branch campuses will continue to grow. Even to the extent that institutions are expanding their online offerings, many will find that having a physical location that is convenient to students will be an asset, providing important services and meeting locations that give students a sense of confidence that institutions are committed to their success.

Accordingly, gaining a deeper understanding of branch campuses—how they differ from other delivery forms of higher education, how they can expand their programs and services in cost effective ways, and how they can help achieve the goal of policy makers to expand the number of college graduates—is important.

Due to the ever-changing landscapes, which impact higher education and the limitations to expansion of the main campus, main campus administrators as well as trustees are recognizing the need for new streams of revenue to support their institution's viability. However, the lack of understanding and buy-in to the value-adding capabilities of branch campuses is constraining the innovative and forward looking determinations of branch campus teams. Through the submission of the following articles written by branch campus administrators representing various higher education institutions throughout the U.S., this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* will attempt to bring to light just how relevant branch campuses are to the future prospects of higher education.

In this edition of the journal, the authors have shared their experiences.

In Ken Shaw's case study of his branch campus of Florida State University (FSU) in Panama City, Florida, the reader will be offered a view of the numerous factors, perceived threats, and opinion shapers that influence response options for FSU Panama City administration. Shaw brings to light the day-to-day issues of managing a main campus that impact not only its branch campus but the community at large. These issues range anywhere from changes in admissions criteria to surrendering to competitive challenges. Aside from his role as campus dean, Shaw plays an active role in the economic development of the Panama City community. As he maneuvers through the political and economic environments surrounding his campus, he continually allocates his time and energy to committee work, board membership, campus management, and creating value-adding partnerships. According to Shaw, FSU Panama City with its dedicated staff persists in focusing its efforts on identifying unique program offerings and aligning them with niche markets. FSU Panama City constantly nurtures relationships, embraces the positive outcomes from awards and recognitions, and celebrates the constructive activities that bring a prideful sense of self-sufficiency to its stakeholders.

Joyce Gillie Gossom and Melanie Deckert Pelton suggest that the management of a branch campus is analogous to that of managing a three-ring circus. By no means does Gossom and Pelton expect the reader to suppose that like a three-ring circus, a branch campus is populated by freaks, clowns, or trapeze artists. However, the authors do propose that like a three-ring circus, branch campuses depend on a litany of performers to execute life-defying stunts to the thrill of students, faculty, and main campus administrators. Improvising and accomplishing traditional managerial tasks are essential skills of the branch campus director, according to Gillie Gossom. Branch campus administration requires constant scanning of not only the academic environment, but all environments that could have an impact on its performance. Branch campus managers must be able to comfortably adapt to these environments as they continue to move on with the show. In their paper, Gossom and Pelton have examined the knowledge, skills, and abilities of branch administrators. Their investigation revealed four distinct dimensions of leadership: diagnosing, implementing, visioning, and entrepreneurial. These dimensions of leadership are a

reflection of a philosophy purported by the gurus of management, namely Bennis, Drucker, and Gardner according to Gossom and Pelton.

According to Phyllis Bebko and Dennis Huffman, institutions of higher learning vary widely in the size and scope of their extension centers and branch campuses. Regardless of these factors and others, such as distance from main campus and resident to adjunct faculty ratios, Bebko and Huffman suggest that four distinct models of centers or branches may be gleaned from the data provided by their survey. Surveying participating members of the National Association of Branch Campus Administrators allowed researchers Bebko and Huffman to develop a typology of branch campuses and delineate same, and provide highlights of real-life examples.

In Charles Bird's thought piece, the reader is presented with a history of Ohio University, specifically as it pertains to the development of its branch campuses. From the creation of an extension division to twenty-three campuses, Bird discusses the technological and motivating influences behind Ohio University's systematic approach to course offerings. By taking the courses to the people, Ohio University has been able to expand educational opportunities to thousands. In addition to these noble motives, Bird clearly demonstrates that the branch campuses provide Ohio University with a competitive advantage. Not only do these branches add value by providing a financial benefit to the entire institution that plainly outweighs the cost, but they also can establish geographic dominance by setting up a rather arduous barrier to entry for the competition. Like many of the other article authors in this edition, Bird looks at the future of branch campuses from the perspective of how they respond to the disruptive environments in which they exist. According to Bird, the not-for-profit education industry can in some circumstances learn more from its for-profit counterparts than by keeping in step with and replicating the strategies of the residential campus. Focusing on programs that lack efficiency of scheduling, have minimal impact on enrollment or retention, and add little to the attractiveness of the institution is an unproductive use of resources. Bird points out that opportunity abounds for those leaders with vision and courage and especially to those who are aware of the potential for unintended consequences that arrive from the over-engineering of their products. Bird concludes that a shared understanding of the purpose of the branch campuses among the leaders of both the main and branch campuses can lead to gratifying relationships and higher enrollment and stronger revenue streams.

Authors Lynn Lubey, Dennis Huffman, and Nancy Grinberg play tour guides and take readers on a journey through three distinct models of off-campus centers. Situated outside Washington, DC, Prince George's Community College and its off-campus centers is fostering key partnerships with businesses, communities, campus personnel, and national defense all in order to deliver educational services to the diverse population of the state of Maryland. The authors point out the uniqueness of each off-campus center as they pertain to history and facilities, partnerships, access and enrollment, and management structure. On the first step of this guided tour, readers will be reminded that regardless of the existing mutually beneficial partnerships, our first priority as citizens is to recognize our responsibility to secure the freedom that

allows these relationships to be created in the first place. The collaborative efforts between civilian institutions of higher education and our nation's defense groups can ensure cost effective ways of delivering quality educational services to military and nonmilitary personnel alike. The next stop informs the travelers that there is no free lunch. Not every off-campus center can benefit from a no cost to the college tenant/landlord relationship. However, this did not keep the college from negotiating a cost-effective lease. With courageous and visionary leadership, the college was able to secure cash infusions and special concessions from the landlord that not only benefitted the college, but its employees as well. Success breeds more success as the opening of the Laurel College Center (just one year after the opening of the University Town Center) illustrates. Lubey, Huffman, and Grinberg show how strong partnerships and creative thinking are crucial to the attainment and establishment of affordable and accessible options for those students who want to continue their education beyond the associate level. Regardless of their design structure, the off-campus centers of Prince George's Community College will each share common advantages as well as challenges according to the authors. Each off-campus center will need to adapt to inevitable changes to its landscape and modify its strategies to provide a cost-effective way to continue providing much needed educational services to its community.

Edward Hayes, Don Smith, and Glen Houston examined how collaborative efforts between four different campuses of the University of Houston System were perceived by the system's faculty, students, and administrators. Cooperative alliances within university systems attempt to improve efficiencies, raise the quality of higher education, and enhance cost savings. According to the authors, this attempt does not eliminate interinstitutional competition; rather it reinforces the system's core capabilities of serving shared markets. Although caution must be emphasized to those who pursue synergies without considering the downsides as well as the benefits of collaborative efforts. Elevated expectations and blind enthusiasms can cause more harm than good in this respect. The methodology used and data analysis of their survey instrument provide further insight into the extent of the awareness of collaborative efforts between different campuses among the faculty, students, and administrators. Interestingly enough, the study reveals how the differences in perceptions among the test subjects point to an issue of trust or the lack there of between constituent groups working for the same university system.

Build it and they will come. Plowing over a fertile cornfield to build a baseball diamond was the ultimate challenge to the conventional wisdom of most Iowans in the Field of Dreams (Robinson 1989). Transforming a university satellite campus servicing traditional students into an adult learning center would seem just as extreme by place bound main campus personnel at Wichita State University in Kansas. However, the entrepreneurial spirits that moved Susan Parkinson Norton and Keith H. Pickus to undertake such a transformation have proven that there are many valuable opportunities that do defy conventional wisdom. Through a process of strategic planning and value-adding decision making, the authors share with us this unique transformation. By addressing the harsh realities of the situation and applying

thoughtful solutions, Norton and Pickus systematically restructure the image, operation, and functionality of one of Wichita State University's satellite campuses.

To begin with, the satellite needed to refine its mission to complement that of the traditional urban-serving institution. Although the university shared a collaborative partnership with the city of Wichita, it was determined that a large portion of the population was being underserved. Norton and Pickus focused their efforts on offering opportunities to the adult learner population. Faced with the challenge of securing faculty buy-in and full central administrative support, the authors present sound arguments for support of adult learner pedagogies that would not compromise the integrity of the university's degree programs. Through niche marketing and word-of-mouth advertising, the adult learning center is getting its due recognition and indeed the adult learners are coming.

The National Association of Branch Campus Administrators and the Research Committee members are grateful to *Metropolitan Universities* journal for the opportunity to share experiences of those connected directly or indirectly with branch campuses. The authors of the articles would also like to express their gratitude for the chance to impart their research findings and acquaint the reader with branch campus distinctiveness.

For more information regarding the National Association of Branch Campus Administrators and the annual conference, please go to www.nabca.net.

Executive Editor's Note: *This issue also includes an article by David C. Perry reflecting on the "Great Cities Commitment" at University of Illinois at Chicago and its impact on mission and research culture.*

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Dr. Charles Bird has worked on and with branch campuses for thirty-five years, as a faculty member, administrator, and consultant. His commitment is to expand opportunities, especially for adult learners, whether through traditional continuing education, on branch campuses, or online and hybrid programs.

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