A Perspective on the Future of Branch Campuses

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Abstract

Branch campuses can thrive in the extremely competitive environment of higher education, because of their commitment to access and their relatively low cost of operation. Success, however, depends on understanding the preferences of adult learners and other place bound students. With targeted programs, focused services, careful financial management, and a solid-marketing plan, branches can be an integral part of enrollment management, as well as an important contributor to the institutional bottom line.

One of the greatest challenges in writing about branch campuses is that there is so much variation in their history, missions, and connections back to their main campuses. Even without the clarity we might like to have, however, it seems apparent that the number of branches across the country has been increasing for years, especially if we are flexible about the definition of a branch, and that enrollment is strong at many campuses. Nevertheless, the world of higher education is changing quickly, with new competitors and the widespread use of technology to enhance and change delivery, so it may be valuable to speculate on just how the future could affect branch campuses.

In many cases, branch campuses, whether part of community colleges or of public or private universities, are well positioned to thrive. However, demographic change, the cost of attending residential campuses, and the flexibility created by online and hybrid courses will require some adjustment in the way institutions think about their branches. With so many options for attendance, all campuses will find that having the right program, at the right price, with outstanding support services is critical for success in attracting students.

In this article, I will expand on these themes, beginning with a description of the history of branch campuses at Ohio University, to illustrate how main campus priorities and commitments have influenced the development of our campuses, as well as how we've taken advantage of the technology available to us to support an access mission. Then, I will discuss some of the trends that may impact the future of our campuses, or that of other branch campuses, and how institutions might respond effectively to encourage enrollment growth and financial success. Inevitably, this article will draw primarily on my own experience, discussion with colleagues, and thoughts derived from many years of observing both campus politics and general trends in higher education. In short, it is more of a thought piece than a research study.

A Brief History

I had a wonderful opportunity to research and write a history of regional higher education at Ohio University, as part of a book, celebrating our bicentennial (Bird 2003, 150–152). Writing the history had a major impact on how I think about the mission and institutional interests that drive the creation and development of branch campuses.

Briefly, the Ohio story began in 1909, with the creation of an extension division, which offered courses at various locations around southeastern Ohio. The purpose seems to have been a sincere effort by an institution located in a rural, undereducated area to help interested individuals gain access to college-level work. Supporting teachers across the region was a particular concern, in an era when many teachers did not have a completed baccalaureate degree.

Taking courses to the people took an interesting turn, in 1914, when the university hired three faculty members, who spent their week, from Monday morning through Saturday afternoon, riding trains and streetcars to deliver courses in various locations. I mention this aspect specifically to point out that the university was using the technology of the day to provide access to higher education. Education required the presence of an instructor, in a room where students could gather, but with the use of trains and street cars, it was reasonable for the room (and the instructor) to be at locations other than the main campus.

Access expanded further in 1924 when we began offering correspondence courses. Students could earn about a year's worth of credits, through these paper-based courses that used the United States mail to send materials and lessons back and forth. Ohio University was given a state monopoly on correspondence courses, and over the years it has been a valuable tool to help students fill in missing requirements, deal with job or military requirements for travel, and so on. After 1924, then, place bound students had access to courses, through face-to-face classes taught at schools, libraries, and churches near their homes, and through nonterm-based correspondence courses. Degrees could not be completed, but significant progress could be made.

In 1939, Ohio University decided to take a more systematic approach to course offerings by opening evening divisions in two communities. These divisions were closed, soon after, under pressure from other universities in Ohio, but in 1946, we officially opened what were called branch campuses in three communities. The stated purpose was to accommodate returning GIs, because of capacity issues at the main campus, in Athens. In fact, the president assured the governor that these branches would be closed, once the enrollment pressure had passed. The branches offered evening programs, delivering mostly general education courses, through high schools. In most cases, instruction was provided by commuting Athens faculty members, but some adjuncts were hired, as well.

Popularity of the branch campuses, as well as the revenue they generated, prompted the university to ask permission to continue operations. Enrollment grew, as did

demand for still more coursework, including daytime courses. In 1966, we opened our own buildings, for the first time, ultimately providing a total of five branch campuses, the last of which opened its own building in 1985. Other universities in Ohio also opened branch campuses, during this same time period, and there are twenty-three such campuses, today.

Also in 1985, we began delivering courses to the campuses through fully interactive television. We helped fund a system of microwave towers across the Appalachian Ohio region, and although the technology is different, today we continue to use interactive television as an important mode of delivery. Today, the branches each have their own resident faculty, provide a relatively full range of services, employ the interactive video system, and make courses available online or (still) through paper-based correspondence.

Once again, I am struck by how the university expanded its commitment to access and to using new technology as it became available. Although our branches, like others in Ohio, were founded as two-year feeders to the main campus, degree programs became available at the branches, including a range from associate to baccalaureate to master degrees. Enrollment has grown to about 9000 students, and there are over 200 full-time faculty members serving on the campuses.

A Twist

My own career with branch campuses began in 1976, at a campus of Ohio State, but until I wrote the history of the Ohio University effort, it never struck me that my career included nearly 80 percent of the entire history of branch campuses in Ohio, at least in terms of campuses with their own dedicated facilities. Clearly, creating campuses was a necessary and practical requirement to provide access for students who were place bound or otherwise could not afford to relocate to a residential campus. For years, I touted the campuses as offering small classes, with dedicated full-time faculty, outstanding services, and excellent facilities all at an attractive price. I have been known to say that we only differ from our main campus in ways that are to students' advantage.

However, there is a catch. If the development of branch campuses was a strong approach that derived from the best available options for access, what happens now, when online providers are proliferating, private nonprofits are reaching out more aggressively, and for-profits have become important providers in the same market served by our branches? In a sense, one could ask whether these relatively full-service branches are still necessary, given emerging technology.

Many people will scoff at that sort of question. They will argue that face-to-face instruction is superior to the best online courses; that students prefer coming to campus, meeting with professors and having the live interaction with other students. During the careers of current faculty and staff members, the campuses have always existed, so it is natural for them to assume that the campuses should continue. But, how do we make the case? What will successful branch campuses look like in the future?

My concern begins with the observation that branches were nearly always created in response to some main campus need. Initially, ours were a simple response to so many World War II veterans coming to college that the main campus (and the town in which it is located) couldn't handle the numbers. We needed a way to create a holding pattern.

More generally, branches seem to have been created to serve audiences that are distinct from typical main campus students. Thus, branch students are more commonly part time, attending at night, older, or unable to meet admissions standards for the main campus. In many cases, branches were intended to generate new revenue for the institution by attracting new enrollment and by operating at relatively low cost. Sometimes, at least according to anecdotes I've heard around the country, branches were created as a defensive maneuver, to block expansion of some competitor, or to lay claim to a geographic area, before someone else did.

That's not to say that founders lacked some more noble motives. Branch campuses absolutely expanded opportunity for thousands of individuals who otherwise would never have been able to reach their educational dreams. Communities received important support for economic development simply by having an institution of higher learning nearby. Regardless, I would suggest that every branch ever created was considered by people at the main (previously existing) campus to be an extension of their institution, created to serve a limited purpose.

From a main campus perspective, branches are similar to colonies, established away from the mother land. They are not colleges or universities in their own right, but intended to extend the brand by providing certain programs and services as deemed appropriate by the main campus faculty and administration.

Sometimes campuses grow to a size that seems to call for more independence, and there are examples of free-standing institutions that began as branches. In other cases, an institution may morph into a system, with a number of campuses pursuing independent missions, but none of them truly a branch of a single main campus. Nevertheless, as long as a campus is considered to be a branch, the main campus will exercise strong control over curriculum and governance.

Implications – What is a Branch Campus?

This is not simply a rant about how branches are unfairly limited, nor an attempt to explain to branch campus faculty and staff why they should accept their status. Rather, it is to point out a fundamental issue: What best serves the community that hosts a branch and what best serves the interests of the broader academic institution are not always—or even usually—aligned. On the other hand, if we look to the future, with an eye on how technology is affecting the way people choose to pursue a degree or select an institution to attend, with an understanding of the significance of adult learners to enrollment growth, and with a perspective on the financial challenges of higher education, then I believe branch campuses will be seen as critical to the ability of many institutions to thrive.

To gain a perspective on the future of branch campuses, it would help if we had a shared understanding of what a branch is or is not. For present purposes, I consider a branch to be a permanent facility, offering full-degree programs, but not all of the programs delivered by an institution. It offers a reasonably full range of services, but again, probably not all of the services available at the main campus. (For example, there probably is not a full-scale intercollegiate athletic program, a student health center, or residence halls.) Branches often have some resident faculty, but those faculty members generally do not have independent curriculum authority, typically requiring approval through appropriate academic units at the main campus in order to expand courses and programs.

I recognize that many people do not like the term branch, and object to referring to the founding entity as the main campus. Objectively, however, and no matter how often the president declares that we are one university, the reality is that employees, students, and alumni know the difference. In fact, if the difference isn't apparent, then you probably are looking at a system, rather than a main campus with branches. Fonseca and Bird (2007) provide a fuller description of branch campus characteristics, as well as of the diversity of types. Other discussion of branch characteristics can be found in the initial posts on a blog I maintain, at www.branchcampus.blogspot.com.

Students enrolling at university branch campuses are more likely to be part time than at a predominantly residential campus. (Urban universities that enroll more commuters than residential students may also have significant part-time enrollment.) Undergraduates, at least, are probably several years older, on average, than at the main campus, and admissions standards are probably more flexible. It is rare for branch campuses to offer large class sections, and although they may make heavy use of adjuncts, there will be few teaching assistants or primarily research-focused faculty members.

An absolutely crucial point is that branch campuses typically cost much less to operate than the main campus. Our main campus provides an enormous number of services and programs to support student life that the branches do not provide. There is a large Division I athletic program, a large student fitness center, and a beautiful, relatively new university center. Our branches, unlike many that I know of, charge only about 60 percent of the main campus tuition, but their state support comes under the same formula that applies to the main campus. There are far fewer buildings, of course, and until recently, the campuses had relatively modest maintenance expenses. Moreover, the branches pay their faculty somewhat less, whereas they teach about 50 percent more sections per year than faculty on the main campus. (Average section size, however, is smaller by a good margin than on the main campus.)

From a financial perspective, more net revenue is generated by a branch campus credit hour, on average, than by a main campus credit hour. To take the argument a bit further, students enrolled in graduate programs offered on the branches are nearly always paying full fees, whereas at the main campus, most are receiving fee waivers tied to teaching or research assignments. (Teaching by graduate students helps offset the cost of the fee waivers, but our analysis has been that main campus graduate programs are a net cost to the university.)

As it happens, demographics and student preferences align with the strengths of branch campuses. Brenda Harms (2010) provides a concise summary of enrollment trends and other factors that suggest the enrollment of adult students represent the primary opportunity for growth at most colleges and universities. Moreover, the cost of residential education may become prohibitive for many younger students, at least in terms of attending for four or more years.

Adult students place a high priority on convenience of location and flexibility in class schedules. In fact, Stamats *Adult Students TALK* studies, reported by Harms (2010), found that having the right program, flexibly offered was more important than the reputation of the institution or even the level of tuition.

Unless a university or community college happens to be located where commuting is convenient, then branches located near population centers may be increasingly valuable. However, the Stamats data, among other studies, suggests that adult students have a preference for fully online or hybrid courses, over programs that require traditional classroom attendance. (Night courses also are attractive, according to their research.) An important predictor of whether or not branches thrive may be the extent to which they embrace online or hybrid courses and programs.

To take on the role of a futurist, I believe other important trends may be emerging. For example, younger students may prefer to choose campuses closer to home, whether at a community college, university branch, or urban university, in order to reduce the cost of attendance. It is quite possible for an undergraduate student at one of Ohio University's branches to cover the cost of attendance through part-time jobs, if families continue to absorb the cost of room and board at home. Whether the students attend for four years or relocate to the main campus at some point, the diploma they receive is identical.

My own consulting experience suggests that small private institutions, lacking large endowments, may need to discount undergraduate tuition to levels where they simply cannot balance the overall budget, offer adequate salaries, and make necessary investments to remain competitive, unless they significantly expand programs for adult learners and other nontraditional students. Successful programs for adult learners offered at night, at branch campuses, and/or online may be necessary for the institution to survive.

Finally, for any reader with a background in continuing education, these developments must seem not only obvious, but equally promising for the future of their own programs. It is not unusual for branch campus operations and an institution's continuing education operations to have a close relationship. My suggestion is that planning for expansion of programs for adult learners as well as for distance learning programs should be closely linked. After all, any program offered on a branch campus is at a distance from the main campus. It makes sense to consider distance learning as including online, hybrid, televised, and face-to-face delivery.

Possibilities for the Future – New Types of Branches?

As I look at the future of branch campuses, success will depend on how well institutions understand the changes that are occurring, and then adjust their thinking with regard to enrollment management. Of course, the sector of higher education within which an institution exists will matter, as well.

I've heard many people say that parents will continue to send their children off to college, because they believe that is the right thing to do. No doubt, many young people will, indeed, continue to go off for four (or five) years of residential education. Demographics suggest, however, that institutions are competing for, at best, a relatively steady-state population of prospects. Moreover, my personal belief is that state funding will continue to be a major problem for public institutions, and that tuition levels, at both public and private institutions, already are forcing families to reconsider their options.

If the number (without worrying too much here about how we define number) of potential residential first-year students holds steady or declines, and nearly all institutions are trying to address financial problems by increasing enrollment, we are likely to have winners and losers. My prediction is that flagship institutions and elite privates will be fine; that community college and online enrollments will continue to grow, as a proportion of total enrollment; that well-managed urban institutions will hold their own, if they make adjustments similar to what I am suggesting for branch campuses; and that small private institutions and public institutions in rural areas or with modest national reputations will struggle. I place university branch campuses, even if they are associated with flagship or elite universities, in the category that will struggle, unless they make meaningful changes to their approach to attracting enrollment. The competitors of branch campuses are not necessarily the same as the competitors of their main campuses.

(I note here that nearly every public institutional leader with whom I've spoken over the past few years has expressed a goal to attract more out-of-state students and more international students. All speak of increasing the proportion of transfer students. Some speak of increasing enrollment at their branch campuses, but none have described anything beyond expanded programs and increased marketing as their strategy. There is great opportunity in this environment for leaders with vision and courage.)

I believe that demographics, technology, and the preferences of adult learners have combined to create a disruptive environment in higher education. I am borrowing the notion of disruption from the work of Clayton Christensen. Christensen distinguishes between sustaining and disruptive innovations within an industry. (Christensen 1997; Christensen, Horn, and Johnson 2008)

A critical point is that ... "customers' needs in a given market application tend to be relatively stable over time. But companies typically improve their products at a much faster pace than customers need so that products, which at one point were not good enough, ultimately pack in more features and functions than customers can use" (Christensen et al. 2008, 45). In this context, I take customers to be students, especially place-bound adults or others who are not current consumers. Product improvement reflects not only various efforts to employ technology and branch campuses (as well as centers and sites) as a way to reach out to prospective students, but also expanding majors, services, and facilities, in an effort to attract students. In my opinion, it also includes engaging in a variety of practices that are intended to enhance an institution's reputation, with heavily subsidized athletic programs being an example that has received considerable attention.

With regard to branch campuses, all those steps we took at Ohio University over the years, to expand access and opportunity worked well. However, as we also expanded our facilities, added faculty, introduced new support services and technology, we may have done the higher education equivalent of over-engineering our product. The reality is that a professor in front of his or her class on a branch campus is more like than unlike a professor teaching on the main campus. A class delivered through video technology expands access, but the experience is more like having the instructor in the classroom than it is different. These may be branch campus strengths in working with the type of students we currently attract, but it may also be problematic when a disruptive innovation occurs.

The problem for branches may be that their overengineered product leaves an opportunity for some new model to emerge. This model may be less good than the existing model, but more attractive to people who are current nonconsumers—exactly the audience we need to attract to colleges and universities, if we are going to grow. I want to emphasize here that by less good, I do not mean courses of poor academic quality, but having fewer of the services, less breadth of curriculum, and so on that a main campus or even many branches provide and need to fund.

My friends in small business often talk about having to cover their nut. By that, they mean that a certain level of income is required, just to cover facility costs, back-office costs, and employee salaries and benefits. The nut for a residential campus may be huge, before anyone ever goes to class. The nut for a branch campus is probably much smaller, but in many cases it is large enough that it leaves open the opportunity for a competitor that delivers more focused programs and services, or employs technology in ways that significantly reduce cost to the institution. This, in my opinion, is a principal reason that for-profit providers are doing so well, not to mention community colleges, which tend to have a much more focused view of their mission than many universities.

Although many traditional-thinking faculty members continue to take shots at the quality of online education, the fact is that the quality has become very good, at least at some institutions. This isn't the place for an extended argument on quality, however.

My point is that adult learners and other students who look like adult learners are choosing online education. Online programs meet their need for flexibility and convenience. Providers typically do not offer programs of interest to small numbers of students, but instead focus on the three most popular areas for adults: business, education, and health care. Providers do not offer many options to students, either, allowing for a very tight set of courses, and there will only be one version of each course, regardless of the number of different faculty members teaching (or facilitating) various sections.

Debating the desirability of these disruptive options is akin to fiddling while Rome burns. It is happening, and it is changing higher education, especially in terms of attracting those current nonconsumers, in ways that are likely to be permanent. Nevertheless, I do believe that branch campuses can continue to be a critical asset to their institutions. In recommendations, below, I will offer some suggestions that can take advantage of existing branches, and perhaps justify creation of still more, if they are approached with an understanding of the changing environment.

Recommendations

As with other sectors of higher education, I anticipate that some branch campuses will thrive and others will struggle or even disappear. The determinant will be how well campuses adjust to the changing landscape. Some of that adjustment will require leadership from administration and faculty to bring a stronger student focus to the programs and services offered, to manage budgets in line with that focus, and to engage in partnerships that help attract students who otherwise would not have come to the campus.

In addition, I believe we already can see signs that leaders of many smaller institutions, public or private, are realizing the potential value of branch campuses, as a critical element in a comprehensive enrollment or financial plan, especially to the degree that they focus on adult learners or other audiences that would not ordinarily attend the main campus. The relatively low cost of operation and the significant number of potential students make this a highly attractive direction to emphasize. What is far less clear, at least to me, is that most institutional leaders understand the extent to which serving this audience is different than serving their traditional population.

Accordingly, I offer recommendations that are divided into two categories: those that focus on more efficiently or effectively pursuing the traditional mission and audience, and those that are intended to compete directly with emerging approaches and thereby attract nonconsumers, or at least audiences that are new to the campus. My own experience is mostly with university branch campuses, and although I believe that many of the recommendations could apply or be adapted by community college branches, my sense is that community colleges already do a better job, in relation to adult learners and others for whom residential education is unattractive, than do universities.

It makes sense for branches to continue their commitment to their traditional mission, in terms of providing face-to-face instruction and providing support services that have a demonstrable impact. In these financially challenging times, institutions need their traditional programs to yield enough net revenue to fund innovative programs, so those current faculty and staff members who are most comfortable working in traditional programs should be able to stay occupied However, success in this area, following Christensen, will be driven by incremental improvements to the product. Those improvements generally should reduce cost per credit hour, while also demonstrably enhancing recruitment and retention.

Consider, once again, the priorities of adult learners and other similarly situated students. (For simplicity's sake, I will continue referring to adult learners, but intend the term to include any student who is place bound or otherwise unable to attend a residential campus.) They value the program they want, delivered conveniently and with flexibility, more than price and brand. Branches were created to be convenient for students, but online or hybrid delivery increasingly impact students' perception of flexibility (Harms 2001; see the Stamats research).

My conclusion is that branch campuses need to be very focused in the programs they offer, the support services they provide, and their approach to making sure that prospective students are aware of the opportunities. In addition, thoughtful pricing (tuition charged) can combine with a strong reputation to create a competitive advantage. Brand, or reputation, in this context may be influenced as much or more by local word of mouth, as by the national standing of the main campus.

To unpack all this, it is important to understand that the interest of the institutional leadership probably includes seeing their branches generate increased net revenue that can help support the entire institution, fund investment in the development of innovative programs, and offset some of the difficulty in balancing the budget at the (expensive) residential campus. This may seem unfair to people dedicated to the branch mission, but it is a political reality, and it is highly unlikely that the branch campus will exist at all unless the main campus remains a viable entity.

Net revenue can be thought of as the difference between what is earned or received per credit hour and the cost to produce that credit hour. Thus, when I talk about covering the nut, it means generating sufficient income to take care of all costs. If anything remains, that's the profit. Profit, in turn, can be increased by increasing income or by reducing cost. In a competitive market, there is pressure to hold down tuition, even though state support or investment income may be sliding. For these reasons, it is important to be very careful about spending.

Branch campuses have a number of options for reducing cost per credit hour. An unpopular choice with faculty members is to increase average section size or teaching loads, so that each faculty member teaches more credit hours, and fewer sections are offered for a given level of campus enrollment. Campuses can, and should, take care on the development of facilities, not only because they are expensive to operate and

maintain, but because the trend toward online and hybrid enrollment implies that fewer classrooms will be needed in the future, since many classes will not be meeting face-to-face for nearly as many hours.

With regard to programs and services, campuses should be attentive to demand and effectiveness. Recently, I had an opportunity to visit a small private institution, at which the leadership took some pride in making all majors at the institution available to students enrolled in the program for adult learners, both on their main campus and at their branches. However, an inspection of their enrollment data revealed that students overwhelmingly were enrolled in just six majors, all of which related to the big three of business, education, and health care. Focusing attention on those programs—or others that might be developed to attract students with related interests—could significantly reduce instructional and support costs, as well as allow for much more effective marketing.

One of the keys to the business model of for-profit institutions is that they only provide the courses and services that are valued by their students. If campuses build highly efficient class schedules, focus services on those that have demonstrated impact on enrollment and retention, and (most likely) invest more in market research and marketing, they can compete effectively with other institutions for those audiences they have traditionally served. In a sense, I am calling for branch campuses to embrace their mission and not try to emulate too much of the residential campus model.

From my point of view, however, these steps fall within Christensen's sustaining improvements. They will be helpful in the short- to medium-term, and success will contribute to a strong bottom line. On the other hand, they will not hold off the impact of a disruptive competitor. My prediction is that new business models will emerge over the next few years that will drive down the tuition charged for programs targeted at adult learners.

At present, most institutions charge the same or more tuition for programs that are entirely or primarily online. For-profit competitors also charge relatively high tuition. Some institutions, however, are developing very successful programs, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, that rely on scaling enrollment. A high-quality, scalable program invests in developing very strong content, with faculty members supported by design professionals to create courses. When a course is delivered, there is a supervising faculty member, who works with a team of facilitators who, in turn, bring a high-touch approach to working with students. For example, there might be a facilitator for every twenty-five students, and a faculty member might supervise six or eight facilitators. (Most facilitators may work with two sections, per term.) Whereas many institutions limit enrollment in online courses to twenty or twenty-five students, a scalable course might enroll 200–300 students, or more. A program that scales to large numbers can amortize course development costs over many enrollments, gain cost efficiencies in support services, and reduce tuition to levels that overwhelm the competition, allowing for market domination and significant net revenue because of the high volume of students.

I know there will be skeptics about this approach, and this is not the place to make the argument that such courses and programs can be successful, both in terms of learning outcomes and student satisfaction/retention, but we have had such experience with an RN to BSN online program at Ohio University. It is in this area that I believe collaboration between branch campuses and continuing education programs can be most productive. The same program that continuing education may market to a large region or across the country can be shaped by a branch campus to provide a strong blend of online learning with conveniently available support services, and the campus may even add limited face-to-face meetings to help provide support and structure for students. Of course, students who are inclined to do so may also create their own combination of online and face-to-face courses.

This is the essence of the disruption I see on the horizon. If and when institutions provide the programs sought by adult learners at a sharply reduced price, compared to competitors, combined with a strong marketing campaign, they will open doors for nonconsumers. We've had that experience with our online RN to BSN program. In less than a year, enrollment grew to more than 1500 students per term. Tuition was about half of our normal tuition, and we employed a very low-cost marketing approach that was based on recruiting employers, as partners, rather than recruiting individual students. Enrollment built far too quickly for other institutions to respond, in kind, and I can report that retention and student satisfaction have been strong. This particular program was supported through our continuing education arm, but much of the course development and supervision of facilitators came from branch campus faculty members. It was not an easy or comfortable experience for many of our staff members, to be sure, and there still are challenges being worked through, but as a proof of concept, the experience was valuable.

Branch campuses have an excellent opportunity in this environment. Their costs already are well below the main campus, in most cases, and the use of online, or even hybrid programs, can effectively expand their geographic reach from a typical thirty miles to fifty or even hundred miles. If campuses develop niche programs that meet a regional need, and emphasize flexible delivery and appropriate services, they may open up student markets that have been outside their reach. This is the type of situation that begins to draw current nonconsumers, and if those students have a good experience, then word of mouth, including students sharing information on social networks, will provide a long-term advantage. Again, keep in mind that adult learners value program, services, and flexibility over brand. If a campus gets pricing right, it will be very difficult for a competitor to be successful, even if that competitor has a bigger name.

An additional opportunity for branch campuses that is enhanced by the use of flexible delivery methods is to develop deeper partnerships—what I call engaged partnerships, with other institutions. In particular, there are excellent opportunities for university branches to partner with community colleges in ways that go much deeper than articulation agreements or arranging for the university to offer courses on the

community college campus. We have explored such partnerships that have involved joint marketing, but also could lead to joint admissions and advising, as well as collaboration on program development. I have argued that the goal for the university should be to become a preferred partner of the community college, so that the university has a leg up on competitors. This type of work will come much more naturally to branch campuses and to continuing education units than it will to most main campuses.

I believe that many institutional leaders have begun to recognize that growth of programs for adult learners, including at branch campuses, but also including online or hybrid programs, are crucial for financial health. As a result, they not only are taking more interest in these types of programs, but they also are more interested in their financial performance. They want to see the programs grow, but they also want those programs to funnel more revenue into institutional coffers. There is limited institutional value in increasing enrollment, if it doesn't help solve the budget problems leaders face.

Conclusion

Branch campuses are likely to play an even more critical role in the future, especially at institutions, public or private, that need increased enrollment from adult learners in order to address financial challenges. Attracting adult learners requires convenient, flexible scheduling and delivery of courses, leading to certificates or degrees that are of perceived value to students who are primarily oriented toward career advancement.

It will be helpful if main-campus and branch-campus leaders have a shared understanding of the purpose of the branch campuses. Growth of branch campus enrollment is a matter of expanding access to current nonconsumers—those adult learners and other students who are not now enrolled and are unlikely to enroll at the main campus. If main-campus faculty and staff insist on viewing branches as extensions of themselves, they will almost certainly fail to be competitive with other institutions that do understand these student populations.

On the other hand, there is nothing inherently wrong in the broader institution reaping financial benefits from a solid strategy of employing branch campuses and online learning to create the flexibility so important to these students. Branch campuses typically are and should be less expensive to operate, although I believe the most successful institutions will at least share the reduced cost with students, through reduced tuition, yielding higher total enrollment and maximizing net revenue.

The key, then, is a thoughtful strategy that employs focused programs and services, provides high quality online and hybrid course options, and engaged partnerships with other institutions and with employers, to create natural pathways that encourage prospective students to prefer one institution over others. With the programs and services in place, stronger marketing plans can be developed that are targeted and cost effective. The geographic reach of a branch campus can be expanded, as well. It is

about mission, understanding the audience, and keeping costs low by remaining focused on what matters to students.

I believe this is very much what one might call a first-mover situation. With the increasing impact of social media, an institution that offers an attractive program, at an attractive price will have a powerful advantage, given that this student population does not place the same premium on brand that younger, traditional students do. If services are strong, students will share stories about how well they were treated. There will be very little incentive for enrollment to shift elsewhere when other institutions try to come into the market.

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A Tale of Three Centers

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Abstract

Prince George's Community College has developed three distinct models for off-campus centers. Examination of each model reveals the impact of variables such as location, ownership, design, target audience for a particular site (student demographics, community needs, and access issues), the role of partnerships with other institutions, and management and staffing decisions, particularly as they relate to the delivery of student services.
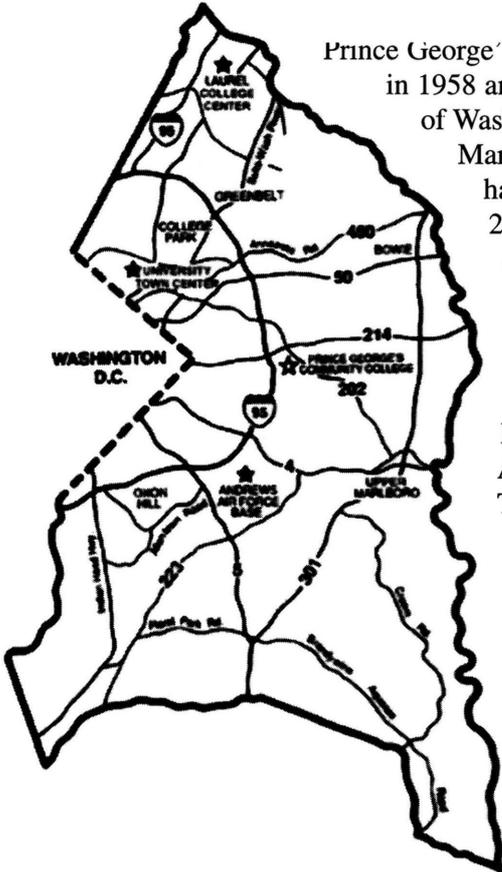
Prince George's Community College (PGCC) was founded in 1958 and is located in Largo, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, DC. The fourth largest of Maryland's sixteen community colleges, PGCC had a credit headcount of 13,619 in the spring 2010 semester. In addition to the main campus, the college has three off-campus centers, which, collectively, enrolled nearly one in five (18.8 percent) of the college's spring 2010 credit students. The first extension center opened at Andrews Air Force Base (AFB) (now Joint Base Andrews) in 1972. The second, University Town Center, opened in Hyattsville, Maryland, in 2000, and the third, Laurel College Center, opened in 2001 in Laurel, Maryland.

Andrews Air Force Base/ Joint Base Andrews/NAF Washington Center

History and Facilities

Prince George's Community College opened an extension center at Andrews Air Force Base (officially known as Prince George's Community College at Andrews AFB or often referred to as Andrews) in 1972, the same year the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) was established. CCAF had evolved in the early 1970s as a means of gaining accreditation and recognition for Air Force training. Seven major Air Force training schools provided the technical portion of CCAF's credential. The technical education offered by Air Force schools was combined with a core of general education from

regionally accredited civilian institutions of higher education, and management education from Air Force or civilian sources. Since Andrews Air Force Base is located in the heart of Prince George's county, the college and the Air Force forged a natural partnership.

Throughout the years, PGCC and Andrews AFB have had a series of five-year agreements. The memorandum of understanding (MOU) is reviewed and renewed regularly by both PGCC and the Andrews education and training office. The MOU describes and outlines the business processes, academics, facilities, student services, and staffing responsibilities of both institutions. PGCC directly supports the Andrews education and training office that encourages all enlisted personnel to get a CCAF degree. The college, as one of five higher education institutions with staff and offices on the base, pays no rent or utilities, and the base provides classrooms, furniture, and technology. In return, military units use the college's on-base computer classroom, outfitted with the college's personal computers, for their own training needs, thus creating a mutually beneficial partnership. While such an arrangement has obvious advantages, it should be noted that military needs supersede civilian needs, which can occasionally lead to scheduling difficulties. Additionally, classrooms are neither as numerous nor as large as would be ideal. One biology lab and four classrooms are in one building and four classrooms in another, with the largest classroom holding only twenty students. More classrooms are available and negotiable, but all are shared by four other on-base institutions: University of Maryland University College, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Central Michigan University, and Webster University. Out of the five institutions, PGCC has the largest on-base enrollment. The availability of Andrews PGCC classes, about ten-miles south of the main campus, is generally attractive to residents from the southern end of the county, although civilian students come primarily from locales directly surrounding the base.

Partnerships

Maintaining a strong partnership between college staff and the base education and training office staff is critically important. The Andrews education and training office staff understands that to maintain instructional integrity and to keep the maximum number of course offerings available to troops, the college must enroll both civilians and military, even in times of heightened security. Similarly, the PGCC staff understands the importance of complying with military policies and procedures. The college's program director and staff work closely with the base education staff to insure proper procedures are followed regarding program administration, military tuition assistance, specific course offerings, transfer of credit, promotion of college programs on the base, and academic advising. All procedures and requirements are outlined extensively in the MOU, but it is the above and beyond the call of duty things that make the partnership work. For example, the college staff attends many on-base functions, including Airman Leadership School graduations, which occur seven to eight times a year. Airman Leadership School trains first line supervisors for the USAF, and the college sponsors a $1,000 scholarship to the highest achieving student in the school. Airman Leadership School encourages newly minted supervisors to earn their CCAF degree, maintaining the link between the college and the Air Force. Similarly, at a time

of decreased revenue for the college, the USAF completely funded a new, desperately needed, general biology laboratory on base used exclusively by the college.

Partnerships with other on-base colleges are also essential. PGCC's closest liaison is with the University of Maryland University College (UMUC). The college's Alliance Agreement with UMUC provides a curriculum plan for students to earn associate degrees and UMUC bachelor's degrees seamlessly. Many students take classes simultaneously at UMUC and Prince George's Community College on base. Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, Webster University, and Central Michigan University offer bachelor's and master's programs. None of the colleges compete with each other. The Base Education Partnership Advisory Committee comprising the program directors of each institution and the base education office chief reviews issues, activities, and programs benefiting active military, their families, and veterans. Committee members participate in education office activities and attend education and job fairs on Andrews and on other nearby installations such as Bolling AFB in Washington, DC, and Fort Meade in Maryland. Although these installations are not in Prince George's County, some county residents are stationed at them.

Because all civilians without military affiliation must get base access to attend class, PGCC staff on Andrews also partners closely with Security Forces Squadron (SFS). Several Andrews center staff members are cleared to give base access requests to civilians. As agents of SFS, staff members are trained in procedures and enforce base access regulations. Civilians are responsible for processing their access badges with SFS and obeying base traffic regulations and military courtesies, such as stopping at 5:00 p.m. when taps and the national anthem are played base wide.

Maintaining daily contact by email or phone with the college's main campus in Largo, which is about ten miles away, is essential. Course scheduling, business processes and student issues often require discussion and coordination with main campus staff. The college staff at Andrews stays in close touch with the main campus offices including admissions, registration, academic department chairs, academic advising, student accounts, finance (budget), and technology offices.

Access and Enrollment
Until September 11, 2001, the extension center at Andrews was the largest of the college's extension centers growing to nearly 1,000 headcount. Access to the base prior to that date was open, requiring only that civilians show their driver's license upon base entry, register their cars with college staff, and get a permit to display on the dash while on base for class. Immediately after the terrorist attacks of 9-11, the Air Force barred all college classes on the base, leaving the college to scramble for alternate locations—the local high schools—for the remainder of the fall 2001 semester. Even staff members without military affiliation were not allowed on the base. In spring 2002, after revised base access processes and regulations were established, classes resumed on the base, but Andrews enrollment suffered a serious blow and will most likely never again reach its preterrorist attack level. Today, any civilian can attend

classes on Andrews provided they can pass the background check requirement and have a car. Civilians without their own transportation can use the base shuttle, but its route is limited and ends at 6:30 p.m., just as most classes are starting. That leaves walkers to hike nearly two miles to get off base or catch a ride with a compassionate classmate to the local bus stop. The security/base access issue is the major challenge for the college's Andrews center.

Currently, approximately 200–300 students, including active duty military, military spouses, federal employees and, civilians, are enrolled in evening classes on the base. Enrollment levels of active duty students declined partially due to a USAF reorganization, or force shaping initiative, several years ago, when many enlisted troops separated from active duty. Concurrently, the reorganization strengthened the college-USAF bond with directives tying military promotion to earning a CCAF degree. Active duty students attend to earn general education courses and transfer them to CCAF. Navy, Army, and Marine personnel stationed on Andrews also can take courses with the college. Military personnel and their dependents account for 50–60 percent of enrollments and county civilians and veterans comprise the balance. Curtailing base access and more stringent security procedures for civilians in addition to increasing popularity of online classes, especially for military, has contributed to the overall decline in face-to-face course enrollment.

Management Structure
With only two full-time and six part-time staff running the Andrews college office, every staff member must be reliable, punctual, and cross-trained. The program director and program coordinator are full-time positions. Two part-time coordinators, two academic advisers, and one PC lab technician work mostly evenings and Saturday morning. One administrative support person works in the morning. The program director hires, supervises, and evaluates the staff and reports to a main campus administrator (equivalent to associate vice president) in the office of academic affairs. Often the program director serves in the capacity of any one of her staff in their absence, so she must know all facets of each person's position. The range of duties includes admitting, registering, cashiering, academic advising, financial aid advising, administering placement tests, assisting students with the college's online registration system, and providing general information. The staff provides excellent service and comes close to being a one-stop shopping experience for all prospective and current students and faculty who call or stop in. Several staff members have decades of main campus experience, which is helpful, but not required.

Andrews day-to-day operations fall to the Andrews staff with very little input from the main campus. The program director provides leadership for the college's operations at Andrews, serving as a liaison with Air Force leadership, and consults with all divisions of the college to ensure delivery of services and promotion of programs. This includes decisions about course offerings (keeping in mind the focus of CCAF and the MOU) and course cancellations as well as faculty assignments in direct consultation with

academic department chairs. The program director's supervisor is kept informed via e-mail and phone and adds pertinent and timely information to assist in making decisions, especially those related to academic policy and the budget. Managing and monitoring the extension center budget and making recommendations about the budget with regard to long- and short-term goals is a team effort with the on-campus supervisor. Issues related directly to the USAF Andrews education office are deferred to the program director, who consults with her supervisor if deemed necessary. The college's three extension-center program directors meet several times a year and communicate regularly to discuss common challenges and goals.

As technology has evolved, the college website and Blackboard and the college's online platform have become increasingly important. Military action in Iraq and Afghanistan has forced many troops to enroll in online courses and improved Blackboard technology has boosted online enrollments. To make sure the Andrews center website has up-to-date information on schedules, directions, and base access for students as well as detailed information for faculty, the program director maintains constant contact with the college's web and informational technology staff to learn new protocols and procedures.

Prince George's Community College at University Town Center

History and Facilities

PGCC at University Town Center celebrated its tenth anniversary in August of 2010. In the fall of 1999, early in his first full semester as president, Dr. Ronald A. Williams met with community leaders in the western part of the county regarding issues of access to education. During these meetings, he became convinced that the college should establish a presence in the Hyattsville area.

That December, the college's office of planning and institutional research (OPIR) presented the Board of Trustees with the results of a study assessing the extent to which the college was attracting students from throughout the county. The study also provided information on ethnicity. The OPIR report, which used census data based on the county's seven planning zones, indicated that the college's draw rate for Zone Two (the area in which Hyattsville is located) ranked sixth of the county's seven regions. Additionally, the report indicated that while 11 percent of the zone's population was Hispanic, only 5 percent of the college's students from that area were Hispanic.

On June 30, 2000, the college signed a five-year lease for 14,905 rentable square feet, occupying half of the second floor of an office building located within easy walking distance of the Prince George's Plaza Metro (subway) station. The first day of classes was August 28. Although the credit headcount that fall was only 276, enrollment at the new center grew quickly. So quickly, in fact, that over the summer of 2003, the college

leased the remaining space on the second floor, essentially doubling in size. By the fall of 2004, headcount had risen above 1,200, and growth has continued steadily since then. The fall 2009 credit headcount was 1,607.

The decision to open UTC was significant because it marked the college's first venture into leased space. As noted, PGCC had been operating at Andrews Air Force Base for many years, but in that case, the military provided access to offices and classrooms at no cost to the college. Similarly, PGCC had offered evening classes in a number of county high schools, but again at no significant cost.

Signing a lease in a commercial office building represented a dramatic departure from the college's normal business model. Fortunately, the Prince George's County government was enthusiastic about the venture and provided an initial cash infusion of $500,000 to enable the college to furnish and equip the space. Additionally, the owner of the building was personally interested in bringing the community college to Hyattsville. Special concessions to the college included allowing up to forty employees at a time free access to the parking garage (no small matter in such close proximity to the Metro). The college was also granted a 50 percent rent reduction for the first year of the lease.

Partnerships

Unlike the site at Andrews, with its strong links to the base education office and the other educational institutions on the base, and unlike Laurel College Center, which is operated jointly by two colleges, external partnerships have not played a big role in the operations at UTC. While the partnership with the building landlord is obviously important, the most significant relationships for UTC are those developed between the staff of the center and individuals on the main campus who provide advice and technical support, as well as materials and other resources. Main campus employees— the woman in the records office who can explain anomalies, fix mistakes, and override barriers in the college's registration system; the man in the financial aid office who can solve a problem and get the money flowing so that the teary-eyed off-campus student leaves with a smile on her face—are as much a part of the off-campus team as anyone.

An example of another type of partnerships with the main campus was a field trip organized by the director of advising in which his entire group came to UTC for a tour and meeting with the staff. Seeing is believing, after all. The good advice given by main campus student services staff about studying at one of the off-campus centers got even better after that visit, and the subsequent connectedness between staff at UTC and their counterparts in that office on the main campus was refreshing. This sort of exchange is important not just for the problem-solving efforts of employees but, more importantly, in the quality of advice given to students.

A memorandum of understanding was signed with the Prince George's County Memorial Library System to address the library needs of PGCC faculty and students.

A branch of the library is located within walking distance of the UTC site, and faculty members frequently avail themselves of the library's offer to provide tours and orientations to library services. It is also important to note that college librarians from the main campus also visit UTC upon request from faculty members to introduce students to the college's online databases.

Finally, UTC staff work closely with recruiters from neighboring institutions, most notably the University of Maryland University College, to facilitate the transfer of students beyond the community college. The student services coordinators also attend events, such as college fairs and financial aid evenings, at nearby high schools, especially targeting Hispanic families.

Access
Over the years, UTC has been referred to variously as an access center, an extension center, and a degree center, but regardless of the terminology, providing the community with access to educational opportunities has been at the heart of the center's existence. The location, just a five-minute walk from a Metro station, and all the bus routes that feed into it, has opened up educational possibilities for students who previously were discouraged by the lack of public transportation routes to the main campus. Moreover, the site is in the middle of the largest immigrant receiving area in the county, and reaching out to these populations has had a huge payoff. In the fall of 2009, 62.3 percent of the credit students at UTC were born outside the United States. By contrast, that figure for the college as a whole was 35 percent. Contrary to initial expectations for UTC, most of the foreign-born students are from Africa, with Nigerians and Ethiopians being the two largest groups. Still, the significance of UTC in terms of Hispanic enrollment is impressive. In the fall of 1999, the year before UTC opened, the college's Hispanic students numbered just 330, or 3 percent of credit enrollment. Ten years later, the number of Hispanic students had more than doubled to 702. At UTC, 15.3 percent of the students are Hispanic.

Currently, the biggest issue facing UTC is classroom space, as enrollment has grown beyond the capacity of the current facility. But even limited space can have certain advantages in terms of access. At UTC, students have easy access to staff, and the one-stop shop that has evolved out of necessity is, in fact, an ideal way to ensure that students succeed.

Management Structure
As is true at each of the three centers, the UTC program director reports to the office of academic affairs on the main campus. Of the twelve full-time and eight part-time individuals working at UTC, seven report to the program director. Custodial staff, technology staff, student services staff, and instructional services staff (e.g., the biology lab technician) all report to their respective functional areas on the main campus. Faculty members (more than one hundred of whom teach at UTC each semester) are hired by the academic departments. For UTC to function effectively, the

program director needs to be familiar with and engaged in the work of each of these areas. He is frequently consulted by main campus supervisors with regard to the performance of individuals assigned to UTC but not reporting directly to him.

UTC is the only one of the three off-campus centers to have full-time student services employees. Because the center was created, in part, to reach out to the local Hispanic community, a bilingual position, reporting to the director of advising, was created. The new position carried a new job title, student services coordinator, which recognized that this individual would have a broad range of functions. Evening and peak registration needs were filled by on-call academic advisers during the first several years, but as enrollment at the center grew, two additional full-time positions, reporting to the UTC student services coordinator, were added.

The range of functions performed by UTC student services personnel is remarkable. From admissions and placement testing, through orientation, advising, registration, and financial aid, they do it all. As soon as the semester starts, they shift gears to retention programming, disability support services, student activities, and transfer and career workshops. Frontline clerical support is provided by the front-desk staff of the center, and each of the individuals reporting to the director is cross-trained in some aspects of student services. Still, the value of a full-time student services presence, throughout the day and into the evening, cannot be overstated, especially given the needs of the population served at an access center such as UTC.

Laurel College Center

History and Facilities

Laurel College Center (LCC) opened its doors in fall 2001, just one year after the University Town Center. The city of Laurel lies in the northernmost area of Prince George's County, where the borders of four Maryland counties (Prince George's, Howard, Anne Arundel, and Montgomery) come together. Prior to the opening of LCC, the college had not experienced an effective presence in this area, and as was the case with the western area a year earlier, Dr. Williams wanted to establish a strong presence in the Laurel area.

An opportunity arose when the computer learning center, located in the heart of Laurel, had to close its doors. The space available was fully furnished with a floor plan of administrative offices and classrooms, ready-made for an educational institution to walk in and take possession. The City of Laurel invited PGCC to consider taking over the space. Dr. Williams appointed the College's workforce development and continuing education (WDCE) personnel to explore the possibilities of the invitation.

The opportunity to open a new site in this area required some thinking outside of the traditional box. When a five-mile radius was drawn around the proposed new site, it was found that a considerable part of the area was beyond the boundaries of Prince

George's County. As a result, WDCE suggested partnering with an institution or business in one of the bordering counties to make opening the new center a more viable and cost-effective possibility.

The president initiated a visionary plan to collaborate with Howard Community College (HCC) based in Columbia, Howard County, Maryland, eleven miles north of Laurel. HCC's then president, Dr. Mary Ellen Duncan, felt that the southern part of Howard County could be also better served with an extension center in Laurel. This partnership was HCC's first real venture into the world of extension centers.

Special legislation was created to allow both Prince George's County and Howard County residents to pay in-county rates for any class taken at the LCC. PGCC and HCC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and joined in a unique partnership to create the LCC. The institutions jointly signed a lease for the space at the end of July, 2001. In a whirlwind of activity, the center was opened in five months. The partnership was unprecedented in the state of Maryland. It is a true fifty-fifty partnership; the cost and responsibilities—regardless of enrollments from either college—is shared equally.

The initial plan was for LCC was to offer only Microsoft and CISCO certification credit courses, along with a variety of continuing education classes. This plan was short lived; however, as enrollment in Microsoft and CISCO certification programs took an abrupt decline nationwide. In the spring 2002, LCC redirected its focus toward credit classes and started offering general education courses. Among the classes LCC now offers are all the credit courses required for five associate degrees. LCC also remains a continuing education center, with over one hundred courses offered each semester in response to the professional and personal interests of the surrounding community.

The LCC developed into much more than a traditional higher education center in that the partners not only share space, they share carefully integrated and articulated programs. Students from the two colleges register through their home institutions, but actually take classes together at LCC. Instructors are provided by both colleges, with almost exactly half coming from each institution. Faculty have adjusted well to the realities of students from two colleges sitting in their classroom. Faculty have two class rosters, one for each college, and submit two separate final-grade submissions.

Some hurdles had to be overcome in the early years of the partnership, but both PGCC and HCC remain dedicated to facilitating the success of LCC. As a result, the center has grown significantly in its first nine years, from a little over 600 credit enrollments in fiscal year 2002 to well over 4000 credit enrollments in fiscal year 2010.

LCC occupies four floors in a ten-story professional building. The space, totaling approximately 35,000 square feet includes twenty-eight classrooms and several administrative offices. The classrooms include sixteen-standard rooms, nine instructional computer labs, one virtual library, one biology/anatomy and physiology lab, and a new

microbiology lab. An open computer lab for students, a tutoring center, a student lounge, and a multiple-faculty workroom complete the configuration of the facility.

Partnerships

Five additional partners have joined LCC: College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Towson University, Morgan State University, the University of Maryland College Park, and the University of Maryland University College. These four-year partners offer all the coursework necessary for students to earn bachelor's and master's degrees or a doctorate. With the addition of four-year college and university partners, the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) designated LCC as a Regional Higher Education Center in the summer of 2004.

Two of the bachelor degree programs offered at LCC are part of a 2+2 program. These programs provide a more affordable and accessible option for students whose educational goal is to earn a bachelor's degree. Students can earn a bachelor's degree by attending classes exclusively at the LCC by taking the first two years through the community colleges and the second two years with a four-year partner. A goal of the 2+2 program is to offer a seamless transition, from an associate degree to a bachelor's degree. One of LCC's taglines says it all: seven institutions, fourteen degrees, one location.

All of the partnerships are important, but the partnership between HCC and PGCC remains central to the success of LCC. The cost of leasing the building continues to be born exclusively by the two community colleges, although the Maryland Higher Education Commission provides some support with regard to the site's function as one of the state's eight Regional Higher Education Centers. A MHEC grant provided partial funding for the creation of a microbiology lab at the LCC.

Access

Convenience is the number one reason PGCC students give for taking classes at the LCC. PGCC's main campus is eighteen miles away, and over two hours by public transportation. Both PGCC and HCC students can meet with an adviser, submit an application, take a placement test, register, and pay their bills all at the center. Library services are accessible via the Internet in the student open computer lab, as well as in the virtual library that also houses a quiet study area. Tutoring services in biology, math, and writing skills are also offered. Although there are many services available at LCC, students must go to the main campus to get full financial aid advising.

This unique partnership between PGCC and HCC makes higher education and continuing education more accessible to the residents of Laurel and the surrounding area. The addition of four-year partners further broadened access to higher education in the Laurel area.

The LCC provides pathways for citizens with a variety of different needs—from workforce training, teacher education, allied health certification or coursework through the associate degree to bachelor degree, master degree, and potentially a doctorate.

Management Structure

Like Joint Base Andrews and University Town Center, the LCC is under the academic affairs area of PGCC. Although each of the centers is independently responsible for its daily operations, communication with main campus is critical to stay informed and connected. The extension centers would not be as effective in promoting student success without the support of the many academic, student service, finance, and technology departments on main campus.

In addition, the LCC has a Policy and Coordinating Council—made up of vice presidents and senior administrators from both PGCC and HCC. The council meets every other month to discuss LCC issues. These issues include the programs and partnerships of the center, substantial projects, for example, building a new microbiology lab this past year, and collaboration on required reports for each college's president and Board, as well as for the Maryland Higher Education Commission. The center and its students have benefited from the council's mutual cooperation and collaboration.

The center runs efficiently with a small and committed staff of three full-time and seven part-time positions that include a program director, three administrative support staff, three evening/Saturday coordinators, one systems engineer, and two computer technicians. The LCC administrative office is open and information technology support is available whenever classes are running, including days, evenings, and Saturdays. As with the other centers, to have effective coverage with a small staff, each employee must be cross-trained in many jobs. Each office staff person, including the program director, enters applications and registrations, provides general information and initial academic advising, schedules placement tests and tutoring, and takes bill payments for both community colleges. In addition to the ten individuals, who are based at LCC, the center is supported part time by advisers, test center staff, and biology lab staff who commute from the two colleges. Tutoring is provided by adjunct faculty. Needless to say, teamwork and a dedicated staff are essential.

As with all three extension centers, the program director is in charge of daily operations, including the supervision and evaluation of staff based at the center, and reports to a senior administrator in the academic affairs office. Each program director has unique additional duties, particular to their individual center. The position at LCC also acts as a liaison between its partnering institutions.

Although PGCC is officially the hiring institution for the LCC, the staff understands that they work for both institutions and represent the four-year partners. The LCC staff is extensively trained on PGCC's and HCC's policies and procedures and given access to both enrollment systems.

Conclusions

Off-campus centers, even those as different as the three described here, have a number of common advantages and potential challenges.

While none of the three sites discussed here is housed in space owned by the institution, some off-campus centers are owned by the parent college or university. Even in those cases, the most common situation would be for the center to be located in a pre-existing structure, which probably was not designed with an educational purpose in mind. The advantages to facilities built with learning as the focus (community gathering points, study space, natural lighting, high ceilings, broad hallways) are undeniable. Institutions must weigh the relative advantages of building, buying, or leasing with that in mind. Related factors to consider, especially in leased space, include parking, signage, security, and the potential for growth. This latter point may be particularly challenging when an institution is looking to expand in rented space. The temptation is to prioritize classroom space, which overtly generates revenue, over all other space needs, such as offices and lounges, the monetary value of which is harder to quantify.

The principle advantages of an off-campus center lie in the relative ease of initial start-up and the high degree of efficiency resulting from a small, cross-trained staff. Off-campus centers, whether on military bases, in partnership with other institutions, or independent, provide a cost-effective way for institutions to extend their reach to underserved constituencies. In today's challenging economic times the construction of new campuses may be nearly impossible, an off-campus center provide an effective and efficient way to make the impossible possible for many communities.

Author Information

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Dennis Huffman has been program director of Prince George's Community College at University Town Center since 2000. He received a master's degree in teaching English as a second language from the School for International Training and a doctorate in community college education from George Mason University.

Nancy Grinberg has been the program director at Laurel College Center since 2001. She worked as a student affairs adviser and program coordinator at the Joint Base Andrews Extension Center from 1987–2001. She holds a M.Ed. in instructional systems development.

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