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In 1987, a new Baltimore County (MD) administration undertook a set of explorations to guide the government into the 1990s. It immediately became apparent that higher education interacts with many elements of county and regional life. A key initiative became "a joining of hands and cooperation for the common good." This article describes significant steps taken by the county to establish formal and sustained cooperation among government, higher education, and business, steps aimed at creating a climate that would sustain a quality of life that would entice new business.

A Joining of Hands

Cooperation for the Common Good

Early in 1987, a new Baltimore County administration began a process of setting priorities that would guide the government into the 1990s. An initial review of the usual categories of governmental concern, such as aging, primary and secondary education, recreation, economic development, and public safety, quickly indicated the pervasive role of higher education in county and regional life. There had been previous interaction of government and the private sector with colleges and universities in the county, but at no time had a formal, broad-based relationship between these constituencies been clearly defined. Yet the collective role of academic institutions emerged as being of increasing importance in the task of generating a milieu and serving as a catalyst for successful economic development.

Baltimore County and region are experiencing major shifts in the needs of their communities. The county is now part of a *global village*, an unknown concept a decade ago. The county government, business, and higher education institutions are also partners in new developing *metro-cities*—the *urban villages* of the latter part of the twentieth and the early part of the twenty-first centuries. In the age of new technologies, higher education institutions must play an important role in the shift from a smoke-stack/heavy manufacturing economy to a service-based economy. The region must be poised to take advantage of its vast higher education resources and maximize their great potential.

Higher education institutions have a strong presence in Baltimore County and in the neighboring city of Baltimore. Within the county's boundaries are two state universities and five colleges. In the city of Baltimore, totally surrounded by the county

and within minutes of the heavily populated urban and suburban areas of the county, there are seven additional universities and colleges. This great resource was at the fingertips of the government, but it remained underutilized. There were, and are, many single-purpose and unilateral interactions between institutions and various parts of the government, but coordinated, continuing broad-based interchanges did not exist.

A key four-year initiative of the Baltimore County government became "a joining of hands and cooperation for the common good." Formal and sustained cooperation among government, higher education, and business was not only appropriate but necessary if the county hoped to fashion a climate that would sustain a quality of life that enticed new business. To this end, the county administration created an Executive Focus Group on Higher Education. The group's mission was to develop innovative ways in which the area's colleges and universities could help government, as well as private industry, to improve service delivery to county residents, and to enhance mutually productive relationships between the academic community, the business community, and local government. The focus group was charged:

- to examine relationships among the area's higher education institutions, as well as between higher education and business in the region, and to explore how these interactions could improve the quality of life in the county;
- to identify ways in which institutions could interact directly with the government in sharing resources and in exchanging information and expertise; and
- to examine how government could influence programs and curricula at academic institutions so as to develop private sector managers and leaders more sensitive to the needs and problems of government, and to develop more contemporary and adaptable public administrators.

The county administration considered two important factors prior to defining the structure of the focus group. First, it recognized that each of the higher education institutions had its own identity, and that, in some cases, institutions were in competition with each other. Any successful effort of coordination and cooperation would require that the individuality of each institution be respected. Further, since a major thrust of the coordination effort was to aid business and enhance economic development, caution was needed to ensure that business interests were not lost in an academic exercise or in a bureaucratic maze. The scope of the charge required that the focus group be representative and include members of each of the sectors, yet also be small enough to permit effective interchange. To achieve this goal, the county created a two-tiered structure consisting of a twelve-member core group and a twenty-seven-member advisors support group.

The group set out to establish its initial vision and direction before beginning work. The broad tasks it faced included providing a focus for the effort, conducting necessary studies, cataloguing relationships, monitoring progress and, of great importance, establishing a base for continuing effort. Discussions had to consider immediate and long-range government needs and to identify new concepts, trends, and

techniques that could move on a regular basis from higher education to business and government. The group agreed to disregard the county boundaries and to take a regional perspective on higher education. This perspective would encourage extensive cooperation and collaboration among the academic institutions, while recognizing and nurturing their diversity and maintaining an emphasis on flexibility and creativity. This decision would later result in important participation and input from institutions outside the county.

The Goals of the Focus Group

The group looked at problems that others have studied, or possibly should have studied, but showed little interest in trying to solve every related problem that might be identified. It viewed as its primary goal the design of a desired future for business, government, and higher education interaction, an interaction based on a continued sharing of knowledge and cooperation beyond levels previously achieved. Meeting the charge of the county administration required a comprehensive approach. But within such an inclusive framework, the goals must be specific and realistic, with explicit timetables, recommendations for needed resources and their means of attainment, and a plan for continuity of activities, communication, and cooperation. The focus group established six thematic areas of emphasis:

- improving the quality of life;
- enhancing economic development;
- enhancing education at the K–12 level;
- broadening multinational efforts;
- improving the operation of county government; and
- improving the sharing of information, resources, and skills.

Recommendations

In 1990, the Executive Focus Group recommended the establishment of two new entities as mechanisms for an ongoing dialogue focused on the higher education resources of the region: an Executive Advisory Board on Higher Education with membership from higher education, business, and government, and a Higher Education Forum with membership at the presidential level for all higher education institutions in the region who wished to participate. These two ongoing groups, which have been established by the county, will serve the region by providing mechanisms:

- to continue to address specific charges and respond to change;
- to maintain dialogue and exchange of knowledge and skills between the Baltimore County government and the higher education community;
- to set an ongoing collaborative and timely agenda to continue to address

the needs of the region through periods of rapid change, now and in the future.

The Executive Advisory Board will undertake a systematic needs analysis of the various business and government segments of the communities. Needs in the areas of education and curriculum, training and research, and development will be assessed for the purpose of establishing regional priorities. The board will also carry out an assessment of needs for business and policy analysis, technical assistance, technology transfer, engineering, and resource sharing. The continuing education needs of the community would be among the first assessments.

All of the initiatives are to be coordinated with appropriate agencies within the region, including nongovernment activities such as business and industry councils, the Greater Baltimore Committee, the Chamber of Commerce, and other similar organizations.

While focusing on their educational mission, higher education institutions are expected to continue to expand their role as full partners in the communities they serve. The focus group firmly indicated that only through such partnerships, this "joining of hands," could the collective efforts of higher education institutions provide outcomes that successfully address the needs faced by government and business.

The focus group recommended a number of additional initiatives beyond the establishment of the Executive Advisory Board and the Higher Education Forum. Action has been taken on many of these, and there has been significant progress. A summary of the recommendations indicates the scope of the group's efforts and vision for the future:

- undertake a systematic needs analysis in the business and government sectors of those areas in which higher education can play a more active role in helping business and government address needs;
- assess the education and training needs of county employees;
- develop and maintain a directory and clearinghouse of information on higher education program offerings and curricula;
- explore financial mechanisms, including subsidized loans for county employees, to pay for higher education expenses;
- sponsor an annual conference on priorities selected by the Executive Advisory Board and Higher Education Forum. The focus will vary from year to year. The first conference, to be held in 1991, will focus on the training needs of business and industry;
- establish a Baltimore County Technology Council to promote economic growth and vitality in the region;
- develop an economic partnership between the county and the state that will ensure an adequate pool of venture capital funds aimed at creating and nurturing new business;
- promote the development of a major public research university in the Baltimore metropolitan region;
- have the county work with institutions of higher education in determining those areas in which the county can take a more active role in state legislative activities and initiatives that will directly benefit institutions in the Baltimore region;

- designate a Baltimore County internship and cooperative education coordinator;
- have the Chamber of Commerce establish the position of internship and cooperative education coordinator so as to expand placements in business;
- encourage business and government to provide adjunct faculty for collaborative offerings with higher education;
- encourage business, government, and higher education to explore the feasibility of providing personnel exchanges including sabbaticals between their sectors;
- have the county explore the feasibility of providing sabbaticals to county employees to allow personal growth and development;
- have the Chamber of Commerce evaluate coordinating business internships in government;
- urge higher education institutions to explore ways to provide expanded consulting and research activities to business and government; and
- encourage higher education to enhance the cultural and recreational resources available to the public through expanded efforts and planned program offerings and through expanded outreach to various community groups and organizations.

An additional set of recommendations addressed the need to increase collaborative efforts between institutions of higher education and the schools, because education is a continuum, and if it is to be improved in any sector, it must be improved in all of them. Schools, colleges, and universities are interdependent through many complementary relationships. With this in mind, the focus group recommended a number of initiatives:

- develop appropriate assessment vehicles so as to ensure that educational programs at all levels are achieving the goals that have been mutually set. The task should involve business and government and should focus specifically on data and other feedback that would be useful in the assessment;
- provide the region's school systems with expertise on new technologies;
- expand and enrich the county's Adopt-A-School Program, involving higher education as well as business and government; and
- foster collaboration between appropriate specialists in the schools and modern language departments on higher education campuses to improve and expand language instruction in the schools by means of support and enrichment programs. These include direct or taped satellite broadcast transmissions of foreign language, cultural, and educational programs.

Progress and the Future

There has been significant progress, and the difficult transition from a study group to an ongoing effort has been completed. The Higher Education Forum and Executive Advisory Board on Higher Education are in place. Progress has been made on a technology council, the direc-

tory of higher education offerings, and the needs assessment. The first conference, to consider the training needs of industry and business, was held in the fall of 1991.

Probably the most severe test that can be given to any study is, "do the results command funding?" The county, at the conclusion of the focus group's work, allocated funds to partially pay for an executive assistant to the advisory board. The two county universities have also contributed funds to provide for the first year of service. It is anticipated that business and other institutions will join in sharing in the costs of achieving all of the initiatives and providing continuity.

As can happen in all governments, in the fall of 1990 the Baltimore County government underwent a major transition with the election of a new executive. Additionally, five of the seven council seats were filled by newcomers. The transition of power has not dampened the progress of the advisory board. Meetings with the new county executive, a former business executive with strong education ties, have provided continued interest and support.

Progress has been made, and with a commitment from the three sectors—business, government, and higher education—progress will continue. The concern for quality of membership and the need for people who can effect change appears to have been met. The future looks bright, and there has been a successful joining of hands for the common good.

Suggested Readings

The Higher Education—Economic Development Connection: Emerging Roles for Public Colleges and Universities in a Changing Economy. Washington, DC: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1986.

Issues in Higher Education and Economic Development. Washington, DC: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1986.

Leadership for Dynamic State Economies. A Statement by the Research Committee of the Committee for Economic Development. New York: 1986.

McNett, Ian. *Demographic Imperatives: Implications for Educational Policy.* American Council of Education, 1983.