

Since 1991 the Executive Advisory Board on Higher Education of Baltimore County has brought together leaders in local government, business executives, and higher education administrators to address issues of mutual concern. This article describes their annual conferences and the Higher Education Helpscreen information clearinghouse project and suggests various benefits of and hindrances to regional cooperation in higher education.

The EAB: *An Experiment in Regional Cooperation*

The Executive Advisory Board on Higher Education of Baltimore County — the EAB — had its origin in 1987, when a new County administration began a major evaluation of priorities to help steer policy into the 1990s and beyond. As part of this initiative, an Executive Focus Group was set up charged with designing a plan for business, government, and higher education interaction. This group, known as the Task Force, reviewed a number of major studies of the Baltimore region, surveyed constituencies, and submitted a list of 24 priorities. At the top of the list was the recommendation that an Advisory Board on Higher Education be set up to continue the work started by the Task Force and implement its most important recommendations. Among these were continuing education programs for County employees, a clearinghouse for higher education information, and an annual conference on business/government/education issues.

Like many best-laid plans, the Task Force recommendations "gang agley" when a new County executive was elected with a more conservative agenda, whose first priority was to re-evaluate the priorities of the past and see which should be continued. However, in 1991 the new administration agreed that government/business/higher education cooperation deserved its support, and a modest budget was established and a director hired to manage the program. The background up to this point is well-covered in a previous article in *Metropolitan Universities*, "A Joining of Hands: Cooperation for the Common Good," by Robert L. Caret and Ted Zaleski, Jr. (Winter, 1991).

Baltimore County is a once-rural area immediately north of Baltimore City. Its inner suburbs were initially an extension of Baltimore, but after the construction of the Baltimore Beltway in mid-century, the County spawned a necklace of "edge cities" which are independent economic centers. Today, although numbers of County dwellers still commute into Baltimore City, just as many work locally or commute around the Beltway to other County jobs. Some of the County's working-class suburbs were created adja-

cent to major industries such as Bethlehem Steel, the Martin airplane factory, and the Port of Baltimore. These have suffered with the general decline of blue-collar industry. Others are middle-class dormitory subdivisions, blending out into the magnificent horse country of Hunt Valley, now largely populated by Baltimore's old money and new business elite. The County also now has the largest population of seniors outside Dade County, Florida.

Although a creation of Baltimore County, the EAB has never limited its interest exclusively to County issues and institutions. All the sixteen colleges and universities in the greater Baltimore area are represented, and these include private and public institutions, two-year community colleges, comprehensive universities, and research universities. Some are located in the city, others in the county. Board members include senior representatives of the County government, business leaders, the county schools, and higher education. Board meetings are well-attended and lively, and much of the value of the institution consists in just this informal interaction. That college administrators can engage in first-name discussions with business and government leaders and with each other is itself salutary, though as a "program" this interaction is almost impossible to evaluate. The Board meets bi-monthly, with Steering Committee meetings in between, to maintain continuity.

Most institutions start small and grow. They pick up grants and programs and hire staff, and soon accumulate a bureaucracy which feeds on itself. The EAB is not an organization of this kind. Its mission is to serve as an "environmental scanner," to spot what needs attention, and to be a forum for discussion and a catalyst for action. When an issue is identified as needing attention, it is referred to those agencies most likely to be able to deal with it. An early example of this low-profile intervention occurred when the need was recognized for a Baltimore County Technology Council. The EAB, which inherited the idea from the Task Force, assigned a board member to approach the Baltimore County Chamber of Commerce, which welcomed the suggestion and adopted it. Today the Technology Council is thriving as a Chamber function – but no one seems to remember the EAB's role in helping create it. Such is the lot of matchmakers: invisibility is their most important asset!

The EAB Conferences

"BC 2001"

One role in which the EAB has enjoyed a higher profile is as a convener of conferences, and these have had a modest success, although with a minimum of media fanfare. Once again, perhaps their major achievement is putting people in touch with people and assisting in the networking that is so important in getting things done.

The EAB's first conference had the ambitious title "BC 2001: Meeting the Training Needs of Business and Industry." "BC" stood for Baltimore County and City and suggested looking to the past and to the twenty-first century. The topic was chosen as one most likely to stimulate the involvement of business and government, and a number of interested organizations were invited to serve as co-sponsors: the Economic Development Commission, the Chamber of Commerce, the Regional Council of Governments, and the ASTD, the American Society for Training and Development. Continuing education departments were also invited to play a major role and display their wares in an exhibit area.

After an introductory address by a bank executive – who pleasantly surprised

the author by speaking powerfully in favor of a broad-based liberal arts curriculum, rather than yielding to pressure for more quickie professional training in college – participants heard a half-dozen business executives ventilate “employers’ peeves, gaps, lacks, and gripes.” Their charge was to tell it like it is, warts and all, and lay on the line their dissatisfactions with college graduates as employees. They spoke of poor communications skills, dismal knowledge of current events, unsteady grasp of scientific concepts, and an inability to work independently on creative projects or as members of a team. They faulted faculty as out of touch with the “real world” and concerned more with depth than with breadth, with their narrow specialties rather than with broad interdisciplinary studies. Students in the audience later expressed shock that their future employers should seem so negative, but these criticisms were well noted by others present.

The next session was more upbeat. Representatives from business and higher education made pair presentations of “what works,” programs and projects designed by continuing education departments in conjunction with industrial training program directors. Programs ranged from basic literacy training to executive seminars, from major industries to small business development. The community colleges shone in this area.

After the County Executive spoke at lunch, breakout groups focused on workforce issues, global competition, science education, literacy programs, business-government cooperation, and other topics.

Participants spoke well of the discussions and a Report and Executive Summary were issued, but whether there was any practical outcome to the meeting is uncertain. It would have helped had the media taken an interest in the proceedings, but they did not, and in fact were quick to point out that their lack of interest in academic discussions was long-standing. Academic discussions, they said, are truly “academic,” that is long-winded, boring, and irrelevant. Turning media attitudes around will take more than an occasional zippy conference.

“The Workplace of the Future: Is Higher Education Ready?”

Building on the success of the 1991 conference, the 1992 event focused on workplace issues, and especially the impact of the increasing proportion of women, minorities, and immigrants – the so-called “diversity issues.” A special effort was made to recruit women and minority executives as speakers, and we were fortunate to obtain as keynote speaker Arnold Packer, co-author of “Work Force 2,000,” then a fellow at the Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies. Some of the issues discussed ranged from “Is there a feminine management style?” to the challenges faced by a recently-appointed woman college president and the advantages of a culturally diverse workforce in the new global marketplace.

The next panel turned to the changing work ethic – in response to the battering given institutional loyalty by layoffs and downsizing in a period of recession. Participants were urged to rethink their ideas of work and its values, and to outgrow the self-image that relies exclusively on one’s work as defining oneself. Today the workaholic executive is no longer a hero, but one who short-changes his family. The employee of the future will probably go through many jobs and several careers – and be the better for it.

The impact of technology on the workplace was then considered: multi-media interactive education, electronic communication, and the move to the “electronic cottage” mode of employment. The trend to ever-more powerful personal

computers with user-friendly programs was noted, along with the chaotic democracy of the Internet – but also the division of society into the information-literate and the information illiterate, the new “dumpenproletariat.”

The conference ended with a colloquium to consider how higher education should respond to workplace changes. Discussion focused on the relation between academic “book learning” and the people-skills and teamwork so important to success in the workplace. Why do so many indifferent students end up running huge corporations, and so many brilliant minds serve as their drudges? Academics seemed to agree that higher education was getting a lot of things right in traditional ways, and that a balance should always be maintained between the active and the contemplative life in the Renaissance tradition.

“Colleges and Universities as Community Problem-Solvers”

The 1993 EAB Conference moved away from employment issues to consider the new role of colleges and universities as community problem-solvers. That same year Maryland colleges and universities came together to discuss faculty roles and rewards, and to attempt a redefinition of their research, teaching, and service responsibilities. This local component of the national R&R debate established that, whereas research remains dominant in determining academic merit and the value of teaching is increasing, service is dimly perceived and rarely considered in promotion and tenure decisions. In consequence, while the academic community is moving toward a re-evaluation of public service, the community (government, business, nonprofit organizations) is looking to higher education to play a more active role in community affairs.

Referring to colleges and universities as “community problem-solvers” was intended to be deliberately provocative, since it was realized that no one group of institutions can claim to solve the complex problems facing communities today. But the trend of this conference was away from education and training as primary institutional goals, and toward the community outreach and public service programs which are usually regarded as secondary, though important.

Higher education’s services to the community were grouped under three headings: Research Centers, Business/Government/Higher Education Partnerships, and People-to-People Programs (such as those for interns and volunteers). A final panel aimed to bring these elements together and discuss their needs, their resources, and especially their funding.

Speakers from four area university research centers described their programs and projects, many of national or statewide scope. What was very evident to this participant was that all these research centers were expected to compete for grant funding, and although they spoke hopefully of working more closely together in future, in fact were made by circumstance far more competitive than they were cooperative. Small local projects had little chance of getting their attention, because they came with no funding attached.

The panel on partnerships with business and government illustrated just a few of the dozens of valuable programs conducted jointly by colleges and universities and corporations or government agencies. In the majority, businesses provided the leadership and funding, higher education provided the academic expertise, and the beneficiaries were schools, and especially at-risk or minority youth. Teacher education was also a beneficiary. It seems a pity that corporations and funding agencies do not at present make available research funding grants to research centers the way

they do to K-12 educational programs.

The panel on volunteer programs illustrated a flowering of new projects at the federal, state, and local levels. For the most part, these are not being initiated by higher education, but rather are being created in response to government funding. Speakers spoke of the benefits to student participants as well as to those served by schools, hospitals, and other community service agencies.

The final panel on funding proved disappointing. All the major local foundations either declined to participate or sent lower echelon representatives. Presumably they feared they would have their arms twisted for funds, rather than be asked how we might approach our funding dilemmas.

One conclusion to be drawn from this conference is that higher education is not proactive in addressing its community service responsibilities. For all their lip-service to public service, institutions will be motivated only if outside funding is made available, otherwise they must divert funds from the teaching and research they consider their primary missions. Higher education is at root a fee-for-service business, and fees are received for teaching students, not for unrelated public service missions, however laudable they may be.

“The Challenge of Community Conservation: How Can Higher Education Help?”

The EAB’s first three conferences evolved out of Board discussions. In 1994 plans for a conference on K-12/Higher Education collaboration were set aside when the County Executive made known that the first priority of his administration had been established as “community conservation” – a term that has found favor recently at the expense of “community development” and “commercial revitalization.” By “community conservation” is meant what must be done to help older communities sustain their viability when faced by social and economic decline. As a concept, it attempts to extend to communities the conservation ethic previously applied to natural resources and the natural environment. Whereas “community development” suggests new growth, “community conservation” suggests preservation and restoration – but in truth the term, like most neologisms, was most likely coined to lay claim to new territory and establish the priority of its proponents.

The move to community conservation in Baltimore County also recognized that the County’s suburbs are aging, that new development has slowed, and younger people are tending to move to other suburban counties. Especially those suburbs that developed during the first half of the century to provide low-cost housing for blue collar industries have been hard hit by their decline. The young and better-educated move on and out, leaving older people in older homes, or houses increasingly owned by absentee landlords. The closer-in suburbs are thus becoming subject to the same urban blight that characterizes most inner cities – and which, ironically, earlier suburbanites moved out of Baltimore City to escape.

When establishing community conservation as a top priority for all county departments, the County Executive also looked to the EAB as a resource. Whereas earlier revitalization efforts had focused on business districts – attracting new businesses and cleaning up older shopping areas – community conservation looked behind the run-down storefronts to the economic base of entire communities, the incomes, the jobs, the education that enable residents to support their local merchants and pay their local taxes. Education was seen as the key to employment and income, and higher education was challenged to play its part in the community conservation effort.

Hence the theme of the 1994 conference became "The Challenge of Community Conservation: How Can Higher Education Help?" It followed on from the theme of the previous conference "Colleges and Universities as Community Problem-Solvers" by asking participants to focus on specific, local community problems. Rather than using the conference as a showplace for existing programs and letting the academics do most of the talking, it looked to communities to express their own needs and perceptions of what higher education might do. This consequently suggested a different style of conference, not the customary panels of experts presenting prepared addresses, but rather multiple discussion groups small enough to encourage participants to get involved and work towards their own priorities.

This format was tried out for the first time locally the previous year by the author at an academic conference hosted by Towson State University for the University of Maryland System, "Faculty Roles and Rewards: Research, Teaching, Service Redefined." At that conference, multiple discussion groups led by facilitators and annotated by recorders showed that freewheeling conversations could produce a high level of energy and involvement. It also revealed that service is by far the murkiest component of the academic tripos, but one that has great potential for faculty development. What was lacking, it seemed to participants, was the system, the organizational opportunity, to enable faculty to become involved in public service projects, such as has long existed for them to publish research and receive the recognition of their peers and the rewards of promotion and tenure. The reaching-out to community service on the part of the academic community complements the invitation of communities for higher education to become more involved in local issues, and it was this connection that the Community Conservation conference hoped to explore.

The format of the latter conference was thus to limit the formal speeches to three perspectives on community conservation representing business, government, and community, and devote the lion's share of the event to eight parallel discussion groups, with about sixteen participants in each. Facilitators were recruited from the County Chamber of Commerce, and Recorders from the academics participating. After lunch – at which the County Executive gave his perspective on government's role – facilitators presented their group's priorities and recommendations, first on the issues thought most important in conserving communities, and second on the ways in which higher education might become involved.

Surprisingly, discussion did not focus on the top political issues dominating the talk show airwaves during this period immediately preceding local as well as national elections, but revealed a much deeper and more thoughtful approach to community issues:

- The problem area most often mentioned was dysfunctional families – leading to lack of values education and proper socialization of children and adults unable to function as productive citizens. Education at every level should include citizenship, home life, and child-rearing skills, as well as academic education and professional studies. How many adults have learned any parenting skills in school or college?
- Colleges should do more to enable residents of poorer neighborhoods to access higher education where transportation is a problem. Outreach to communities can be channeled through schools, libraries, and community centers. Opportunities for higher education and its benefits should be better

promoted to the disadvantaged. Articulation of courses should be improved.

- Colleges should help train community leaders and activists to take charge and provide leadership in their communities. The development of local pride and community spirit can be enhancing by local initiatives.
- College students should be encouraged to tutor less advanced students and volunteer their services in local communities as young professionals.
- Universities and colleges can play a leadership role in researching community problems and provide a neutral territory for debating community issues. Although they have their critics, most institutions are highly regarded and have more respect and credibility than either business or government that should be put to good use. They should play a more proactive leadership role.
- Universities and colleges should work more closely together in addressing community needs, rather than in isolation or competition, duplicating each other's efforts. They should do better at communicating who they are and what they do.
- Universities and colleges should be models of the good society, examples of enlightened governance and productive discourse, good employers, good servants of the community. If those who enshrine the wisdom of the past cannot be visibly superior, what value is there in learning?

Two immediate outcomes of this conference were 1. A recommendation to create a student leadership program based on and associated with the executive leadership programs currently run by local business groups and 2. Discussion group facilitators should meet once more to "prioritize the priorities" and recommend topics for an ongoing series of executive breakfasts that would focus on key social issues and bring together academic experts with local administrators and executives.

Executive leadership programs – of which there are at least eight in the State of Maryland – aim to initiate up-and-coming business executives in the principles of corporate social responsibility and the community role of business leaders. The suggestion was that students (and not only business majors) should have a similar exposure as future leaders and work with "graduates" of the executive leadership programs who would serve as speakers and mentors. As of the time of writing, business groups, student honor societies, faculty advisors, and the EAB Steering Committee have all expressed strong interest, and a program will probably be developed in conjunction with student community service offices.

The Executive Breakfast series now under way will attempt to work more intensively on community issues by bringing together government administrators, business executives, community activists, and academic specialists in related fields. The aim is to offer local program administrators the support of business and higher education, the latter providing research assistance and access to "the world of learning," education and training programs, and student internship and volunteer assistance. The first breakfast, "Focus on the Family," invited two dozen leaders in family-oriented service agencies. Discussion focused on how higher education can help correct the misconceptions of family problems as primarily related to single mothers

and welfare, and the hope is that the EAB may be able to interest a local TV channel in an in-depth series on family issues. Many institutions welcomed the involvement of student interns and volunteers and also of faculty researchers to conduct the evaluation of their programs.

These outcomes of the Community Conservation conference are likely to be of more practical use than those of previous EAB conferences, for two reasons. First, because the CC conference involved more community representatives in the discussions and was less of an “academic exercise;” and second, because provision is being made to continue the discussions and implement any good ideas that result.

Since this conference was held, another election has again replaced the incumbent county executive, but the new incumbent – the former County Council President – was an active EAB board member and is expected to continue the level of higher education involvement in County affairs.

“Higher Education Helpscreen”

One of the initial Task Force recommendations was that an information clearinghouse be set up that would make information about higher education resources accessible to business executives, government administrators, and the general public. These resources were identified as:

- Training programs, on and off campus
- Student internship and volunteer programs
- Student placement offices
- Research centers and sources of consultancy

In addition, at some time in the future it was hoped to add a comprehensive regional campus calendar to list events at area institutions, useful both to the public and to event planners.

This eminently sensible proposal has proven very difficult to implement. The first hurdle was created by the EAB’s desire to integrate Helpscreen with plans going forward to create a state-wide “database of databases” which would bring together all the proliferating information resources in government, business, and higher education. That mammoth undertaking bogged down at a time of state budget cutbacks, and for a lengthy time Helpscreen was placed on hold while the larger project’s fate was being decided.

The logjam was broken by new developments in the electronic information/communication field. The explosion of the Internet and the creation of a local “Gopher” system by a regional consortium of libraries and information specialists, suddenly made available a vehicle for Helpscreen that would be easy to access and inexpensive to operate. A Helpscreen Committee consisting of the EAB director, a campus library director, and a library computer information specialist was instituted and charged with moving the project ahead at full speed. To Keep it Simple, the original Helpscreen database concept was streamlined to include only primary contacts at the participating institutions – for instance, the phone numbers of offices of continuing education, internships, volunteers, placement, and the major research centers – and not detailed information about courses, faculty consultants, and so on. The sixteen universities and colleges in the region were invited to participate, and descriptions of the project were sent to their presidents along with a questionnaire enquiring about their Internet and Gopher capabilities.

The responses, mostly from academic computing heads designated as Helpscreen contacts, revealed that not all institutions had these resources. It was therefore de-

cided to ask for a minimum of basic information on discs or via Internet, and a date was established for information to be submitted. This date came and went, and follow-up enquiries failed to elicit any indication that much had been done by the supposedly participating institutions. Meanwhile, some of the more advanced institutions were having doubts about the value of duplicating information systems they were developing individually on their campuses, which were easily available to Internet users. The conclusion was inescapable that this project was not a high priority at any institution, except at the host institution (Towson State U.) where the Provost was also the EAB Chair and a committed computer information enthusiast. As of the time of writing, the Helpscreen project has just been evaluated by a panel of academic computing heads to see whether it still has life or should be abandoned. The consensus seems to be that the project is viable, but that the supposedly participating institutions need to be induced to provide the basic information requested — by assigning the task to a bright intern rather than to academic computing experts who are tied up with technical problems.

Lessons of Regional Cooperation

What lessons concerning regional cooperation in higher education can be gleaned from the EAB experience? In general, it can be concluded that the EAB conferences and the planned EAB breakfasts are or will be well supported, whereas the apparently worthwhile Higher Education Helpscreen project has languished for lack of support. But it doesn't require much effort to get academics and administrators to attend conferences, and there is a built-in incentive for them to attend so as to showcase their public-spiritedness and community projects. Programs that require active participation, including the expenditure of any time and money, are less likely to be supported, unless participants can see some clear benefit for their own institutions.

The basic relationship between institutions of higher education is one of competition, not cooperation. Competition for funding and students and gifts and corporate training programs is more fundamental than the feelgood incentives to cooperation. Individual faculty may have a fellow-feeling for other scholars in their fields and for other college teachers, but administrators are more conscious of the divisions between competing institutions. Regional initiatives such as the EAB are somewhat akin to trade associations, which function to represent the common interests of industries in regard to government and public relations, but which are usually less influential than the intense competition that exists between individual firms.

Another lesson is that regional cooperation needs to be institutionalized in the form of an organization with a paid professional staff whose only mission is to make the cooperative effort work. A committee of representatives from participating institutions will devote an hour or so every few months to discuss policy issues, but not one of them can find the time to work on cooperative projects when that takes time that could be spent on work for their individual institutions or for their own personal advancement.

However, the public (as indicated by the CC conference) is urging institutions to work more closely together in serving the public and to play a larger role in community affairs. Legislators have targeted college faculty as unproductive and sought to link government funding to simplistically-defined productivity. If institutions of higher education were to become more involved in community affairs and economic development and other public service initiatives, this would do a great deal to defuse the criticism of the academic life as detached and unconcerned with contemporary issues. As I teach my PR students, the best PR is *invisible*, in the

sense that it is seen as news, as action, rather than as "just PR" and insincere talk. Students are increasingly being urged to volunteer for good causes, to set aside their self-interest for awhile and get involved in helping their communities. But institutions too need to be urged to reflect on the role they should be playing in their communities, and this means supporting coalitions such as the EAB and cooperating to serve the public interest. That it will clearly serve their own interest to do so should also not escape them.

Suggested Reading

"BC 2001: Meeting the Training Needs of Business and Industry." EAB Conference Report, 1991.

Caret, Robert L. and Ted Zaleski, Jr. "A Joining of Hands: Cooperation for the Common Good," *Metropolitan Universities*, Vol. 2 No. 3. pp. 17-22, 1991.

"The Challenge of Community Conservation: How Can Higher Education Help?" EAB Conference Report, 1994.

"Faculty Roles & Rewards: Research, Teaching, Service Redefined." Report of the University of Maryland System faculty development conference, 1993.

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Preparing Your Own Community Plan. Baltimore County Office of Planning and Zoning, 1994.

A Resource Guide for Strengthening Communities. Baltimore County Office of Planning and Zoning, 1993.

"The Workplace of the Future. . . Is Higher Education Ready?" EAB Conference Report, 1992.