

The Entrepreneurial University in a Technology-Based Economy

Nancy Belck

Abstract

To respond effectively to the learning and research needs of a technology-based economy, universities cannot take a "business as usual" approach. University of Nebraska at Omaha broke many academic stereotypes to become an effective leader and partner in the creation of an entrepreneurial institute that supports the changing needs of the Omaha-area economy. Different from traditional approaches to university-business partnerships, this case offers an example of a joint venture that blurs the lines between business and academe.

Increasingly, innovative universities are transitioning from university-initiated projects to synergistic partnerships among the institution and a variety of community entities. Metropolitan universities, in particular, benefit from exploring a wide range of relationships with K-12, the arts, government, public policy, business, social service, and other sectors. The benefits from these varied relationships include financial, programmatic and bricks and mortar support, internships, practica, shared executives, technology transfer, and a wide variety of other innovative partnership activities.

However, the burgeoning growth of our technology-based economy has provided higher education its most promising niche. Entrepreneurial campuses are successfully leveraging community/business interests, needs, and resources with university expertise. This, in turn, boosts academic, business, technology, and economic development to the benefit of all.

These new relationships have spawned an increasing number of university-driven technology parks—a product of university-business and community commitments. Why are these partnerships effective and desirable? They produce graduates in high-demand specializations, helping to strengthen and expand the workforce. By fostering the exchange of ideas among faculty, students, and business professionals each advances, creating a common knowledge base from which innovation can occur. And, with time, technology parks can serve as a focal point for business incubator/technology transfer initiatives.

Creating an Entrepreneurial Institution

Certainly, this has been the case in Omaha with the development of the Peter Kiewit Institute (PKI), located on University of Nebraska Omaha's (UNO's) south campus. In 1996, when PKI was conceived, more than 250,000 vacant technology jobs existed in the U.S., a figure that grows by an estimated 100,000 jobs per year. The Institute was envisioned as a venue to combine three vital entities, the UNO College of Information

Science & Technology; UNO's College of Engineering and Technology; and the business community.

PKI, which has served as a national prototype for university-business ventures, works because traditional boundaries within academe and between the university and industry are seamless. Faculty in each college work closely together so that students benefit from classes offered through each. Faculty members actually spend time in businesses learning about the high-tech problems that face industry leaders. Students are enriched by internships and summer jobs. As a result, the business community helps develop an employee pool with job-ready skills.

The creation of PKI was supported by a unique facility. The timetable for facility development was ambitious: design approval was granted in June 1996. The 192,000 square foot facility was ready for Fall 1999 classes at a cost of \$26.5 million, which was under budget and on time.

PKI also has a distinctive governance structure. PKI is governed by a Board of Policy Advisors, comprised of "hands on" business leaders and university administrators. The Board represents the interests of 35 lead donors to the project, whose financial leadership provided the impetus for PKI and sustains it today. Part of PKI's success stems from the unique combination of donors, from corporate and family foundations to business entities like Boeing, Cisco Systems, ConAgra, First Data Resources, IBM, Kiewit Foundation, Union Pacific, and many others.

A wealth of opportunities for ongoing partnerships exists, including providing equipment, student scholarships, or participating in the Expert in Residence Program. The Experts in Residence have come from Boeing, IBM, First National Bank, and most recently, Profit Systems. These loaned executives work directly with the institute and its students providing real world expertise and an insider's perspective.

Other partnership opportunities include participation in programmatic support. For example, by underwriting the Business Seminar Series, a sponsor hosts four evening seminars held throughout the school year. These seminars allow students to learn about contracts, accounting, investments, banking, communications, and other skills not presented as part of their degree offering. Another program, the Summer Academy of Excellence, encourages high school students to spend a week living on campus and learning with professors at the Institute. Students are also allowed to invite a favorite math or science teacher, thereby increasing awareness of the Institute at the K-12 level.

Through these and many additional activities, the benefits of such partnerships to business are many. Businesses keep apprised of cutting-edge technology by using faculty and students for business solutions. They gain a competitive edge through collaborations while providing rewarding job opportunities. Partnerships with PKI allow an opportunity for businesses to be involved with one of the most innovative engineering and information science institutes in the country.

In the future, continued development of south campus is crucial and will factor prominently in our strategic planning. A second round of housing, Scott Village, is already under construction and will be available next fall. This will bring the total number of beds to about 700 on the south campus; 560 exist on the north campus. Also envisioned is a new College of Business Administration facility to be programmatically integrated with the College of IST at the PKI.

Lessons Learned

Many issues must be resolved if university/business partnerships are to flourish and remain mutually beneficial. The University must adjust to the real world speed of business—which takes days, not months, to make decisions and act. In order to sustain business interest, it is paramount that the partnerships produce results and a continuing record of progress.

Universities must be able to recruit highly talented students in a very competitive market. Both sides (university and business) need to match expectations with realistic possibilities, avoiding the temptation of hype. Funding in economically-troubled times is a challenge. Part of the educational process is aiding business/community understanding of academic processes, including degree and curriculum approval, shared governance, and working with governing boards. Long-term planning should also include the identification of business community leadership and their rising stars to provide both continuity and fresh approaches.

What's needed for university/business partnerships to succeed? First, there must be top-down, bottom-up institutional support for the endeavor. The university has to commit to recruit faculty on the cutting edge of their fields. Front line personnel, i.e., those working directly with the leadership of the business partner, should be entrepreneurial individuals who understand how businesses function. Committed community support is vital.

A unified vision (university and community) of the desired outcomes should be agreed upon in the beginning. Regular communication and input among all participants is crucial. All parties should assume joint responsibility for outcomes. Sufficient funding commitments both up front and sustained must be guaranteed as much as possible. And, although sometimes highly technical in nature, results should be translated and communicated to a variety of publics.

In addition to PKI, UNO also enjoys several other entrepreneurial ventures. The Neighborhood Center of Greater Omaha and UNO/UNMC Collaborating Center for Public Health both serve as resource centers for individuals, organizations, and community groups by providing shared office space for related non-profit organizations. This allows each center to be a one-stop shop for assistance, and reduces overhead through combined office functions.

Other Centers in North and South Omaha provide a place for social work students to put classroom learning into practice. The Hope Center serves as an after-school mentoring program for minority students. College of Education students staff the Center and gain practical experience. And, the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium regularly brings together members of the College of Education and local K–12 school superintendents to discuss common issues.

Author Information

Nancy Belck is the President of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and current President of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities.

Nancy Belck
President
University of Nebraska at Omaha
6001 Dodge Street
Omaha, NE 68182
Telephone: 402-554-2312
Fax: 402-554-3555
E-mail: nbelck@mail.unomaha.edu