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The Archway Partnership: A Higher Education Outreach Platform for Community Engagement

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This article provides an overview of the Archway Partnership, an outreach platform for community engagement at the University of Georgia. The project was recognized with the 2009 Outreach Scholarship W. K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Award for the Southern Region.

Background: The Role of Partnerships within Outreach

Charting a trend among land-grant universities losing touch with their outreach goals, the Kellogg Commission *(1999)* noticed a growing gulf between universities and their communities, observing that, "To the non-academic, the university is a near-inscrutable entity governed by its own mysterious sense of itself . . . we are so inflexibly driven by disciplinary needs and concepts of excellence grounded in peer-reviews, that we have lost sight of our institutional mission to address the contemporary multidisciplinary problems of the real world" *(p. 20)*. To engage the community more effectively, the Kellogg Commission proposed a different paradigm, one that intentionally engages the community in the outreach process. By making the community a partner in the outreach process, the institution makes its resources more accessible to the community, and reaffirms the university's value to the state through a process that is sustainable and ensures the long-term success of both the community and the institution. As the Kellogg Commission states, "Embedded in the engagement ideal is a commitment to sharing and reciprocation" *(p. 9)*. For the Kellogg Commission, this process should filter through the institution, changing the way that outreach is conducted and further enhancing the relationship between the university and its partners.

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Outreach Partnership Center Program looked at how universities partnered with communities, tracing best practices and noting the need for changing the "top-down" paradigm that had dominated much of university outreach for the last several decades. Partnerships between universities and

their communities provide the best model for outreach, with communities and the university committing their own resources and talent to the task of solving issues in the community.

Partnerships, however, provide their own challenges. The report notes that "successful partnerships have to serve the interests of all parties, and herein lies a central program challenge. Effective university-community partnerships cannot be forged easily; they require mobilization of resources from diverse parties with overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, interests" *(Vidal, Nye, Walker, Manjarrez, & Romanik, 2002, p. 1-4)*. Successfully navigating these relationships can be an arduous task, with each party having to confront and challenge existing notions about their partners. Faculty and staff members can no longer consider the community to be just a site for data collection, and leaders in the community should be encouraged to welcome the advice of the university, to see it as a resource that can positively affect economic and community development. Partners must "strike a balance between their respective interests, needs, and strengths, [so that] joint efforts to change communities for the better [can be] sustained" *(Vidal et al., 2002, p. 1-4)*. Wilson *(2004)* observes the problem of engagement from the community perspective, noting that "Residents of communities are no longer receptive to academicians as lone rangers who come into communities and prescribe solutions to social, economic and educational needs and conditions without involving the communities in the solutions" *(p. 22)*. To ease the reticence of community members and encourage success, he suggests that "Institutions of higher education wishing to engage in meaningful, significant, and relevant community outreach have no choice but to form strategic alliances and partnerships," because, in acting as a partner and convener of community interests, university faculty can use their expertise to stimulate productive discussion and action in communities *(p. 23)*.

"[E]ffective partnerships between universities and communities break down social and cultural barriers, identify factors that motivate engagement, and ultimately build the organizational capacity for the university and the community partner."

Weerts *(2005)* observes that effective partnerships between universities and communities break down social and cultural barriers, identify factors that motivate engagement, and ultimately build the organizational capacity for the university and the community partner. The impacts of these relationships are often hard to quantify. It is generally felt, however, that they promote success as (a) communities become aware of what universities have to offer and become more adept at navigating confusing academic bureaucracies; and (b) universities become aware of what can be learned from the communities with which they partner. A mutual understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses is necessary because success also depends "on the organizational capacity of the partners, i.e., their ability actually to deliver capably on the commitments they make to one another" *(Vidal et al., 2002, p. v)*.

Still, there are few guideposts structuring the ideal community-university partnership. As Franklin *(2008)* points out:

> Oftentimes, needy communities approach universities for help, but fail to look for or find university needs that they can meet through a partnering arrangement. Universities may partner halfheartedly out of a sense of obligation, and fail to identify ways in which the partnership can meet their own needs. Such imbalance flies in the face of literature about the basis of sound partnerships, which indicates that each party expects to contribute as well as benefit from the relationship *(Vidal et al., 2002)*. If universities are going to be involved externally with communities, through research, public service, and student service-learning, there is an opportunity to align the goals of the university faculty and staff capable of delivering these programs and services with the needs of a region rather than just pursuing a scattershot approach. *(p. 271)*

In order to make the partnership work, the university should be aware of the benefits that intentional community engagement offers, such as improving the university's stature among legislators; improving the university's profile in areas of the state with traditionally lower admissions rates to the institution; and increasing the school's research capacity *(Franklin, 2008)*. To further ensure that engagement at the university level remains intentional, the university must dedicate the financial and human resources necessary to

direct and nurture the partnership. As the Kellogg Commission *(1999)* states,

> Making engagement real on our campuses will require broad strategies to identify community needs, catalogue community resources, highlight academic strengths and capacities, and coordinate the work of many individuals and groups, frequently over long periods of time. There are no quick fixes or painless solutions for many of the challenges our states and communities face. *(p. 39)*

The University of Georgia's Archway Partnership Is Formed

Seeking to make the university's engagement more intentional, the Archway Partnership was created to meet the changing and emerging needs of Georgia. In 2005, administrators recognized that a rapidly changing 21st-century Georgia needed a contemporary higher education outreach platform. The two largest University of Georgia (UGA) outreach units (Public Service and Outreach and Cooperative Extension) recognized the need for a new model but also the need to maintain their historic missions. These two university units partnered to provide continuing support for a new entity, the Archway Partnership. The new structure allows maximum flexibility to innovate and shape the developing model. The University of Georgia Archway Partnership was initiated as a pilot to provide the Moultrie/Colquitt County community with greater and easier access to higher education resources, and to make it easier for faculty members and students to become involved in high-priority community needs. Since 2007, the Archway Partnership has expanded beyond the pilot community to seven more counties across Georgia, representing a variety of geographic areas, including urban, rural, coastal, and college towns. The Archway Partnership model of engagement ensures that the institution's capacity is utilized by the communities. It allows the university to remain a public good, by directing policy and financial mechanisms toward economically distressed parts of the state *(Franklin, 2008)*.

How the Archway Partnership Works

The Archway Partnership is a process, not a project, with community members integrated from the beginning through meetings with University of Georgia outreach faculty members as well as

through a community-wide listening session that involves citizens from nearly every aspect of the community. In this capacity, the University provides a neutral third-party platform uniquely positioned to facilitate community discussions around difficult issues. As a platform and a process not based on specific disciplines, projects, or institutions within the University System of Georgia, it can be easily replicated (it has grown from one community to eight communities over the course of two-and-a-half years). This cross-institutional access allows the Archway Partnership to deal with a variety of issues, including health care, education, economic development, leadership development, access to services, housing, environmental design, marketing, and land-use planning. An article published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* noted,

> At a time when land-grant and research institutions across the country are seeking deeper engagement with their states and regions, the University of Georgia has repurposed the traditional agricultural-extension model for community and economic outreach. Its Archway Partnership takes the university into the community, where full-time staff members stationed in each participating county work with civic leaders to identify local needs and connect towns with expertise across the university and the state-university system. *(Fischer, 2009, p. A14)*

Steps in the Archway Partnership Process

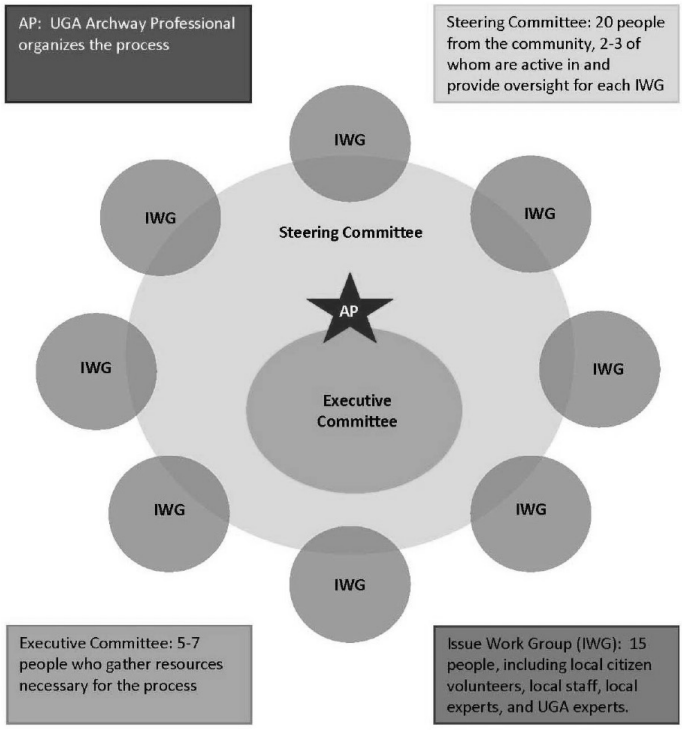
The process begins with a community-wide listening session, where UGA faculty members facilitate small-group discussions with community members. They ask questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the community as well as gather feedback about what the community members determine to be the most pressing issues in their community. They also identify the community's assets that can be applied to these issues. The Archway Partnership team members collect and synthesize the information gathered in these small-group discussions. The results are summarized in a report, which provides the foundation for the engagement between the community and the university.

The success of the partnership centers on the creation of a local executive committee, made up of leaders from a variety of community sectors, including school boards, chambers of commerce, development authorities, hospitals, boards of health, city and county governments, and business leaders. The executive

committee meets on a monthly basis to prioritize already identified needs and to discuss emerging needs. These meetings also provide a networking opportunity to ensure smooth interactions between the university and the community. The executive committee is the grassroots mechanism of the partnership, with members of various community sectors sitting around the same table, in many cases for the first time, to collectively determine how to best address the needs of the community. Generally, each institution represented on the executive committee has made a financial commitment to support the Archway Partnership.

In most cases, the executive committee seeks community-wide input through a larger steering committee. The steering committee increases the partnership's presence across various interests in the community, and encourages feedback and engagement from more groups. The steering committee helps select specific projects to tackle. It facilitates formation of issue work groups, smaller committees made up of leaders and interested citizens whose work focuses primarily on a single community issue (e.g., tourism, leadership, or technological development). Figure 1 illustrates the relationships supported by the Archway Partnership.

Figure 1: Archway Partnership model



An Archway professional, a full-time UGA faculty member, lives in the community to facilitate local discussions, and provides the crucial connection between the community and the university. This faculty member brings the issue areas and action plans back to the university, and identifies faculty members and students who have a research or educational interest that can benefit the issue areas. The Archway professional's success depends upon her or his ability to build relationships in the community, to connect disparate and various groups in the community, and to remain academically neutral.

"By fostering relationships in the community and navigating resources within the university, the Archway Partnership efficiently matches faculty members and student research interests with the community's identified issues and needs."

By fostering relationships in the community and navigating resources within the university, the Archway Partnership efficiently matches faculty members and student research interests with the community's identified issues and needs. It also brings new, real-world educational opportunities to students in the form of service-learning, community service, and research projects.

Archway Partnership Outcomes

The idea underlying the partnership model dictates that both the community and the university derive tangible benefits from working together. By actively facilitating the process, the Archway Partnership helps ensure that projects meet the goals of community partners while also contributing to the research, teaching, and outreach imperatives of the university.

Community Benefits

Community leaders laud the opportunity to be equal partners in the outreach process, and assert that their equal footing encourages the spread of trust between the community and the university. This sense of trust engenders empowerment within the community, giving groups and leaders the space and resources to develop and implement their own solutions. The Archway Partnership model

is flexible enough to address nearly any issue a community may encounter, as in the following examples.

Improving an existing wastewater treatment facility.

When the City of Moultrie learned that it needed to develop a new and expensive wastewater treatment facility, Archway Partnership staff members worked with city officials and provided them data collected and analyzed by UGA Engineering Outreach Services and the Carl Vinson Institute of Government faculty members. By including the new data, the City of Moultrie was able to compile an alternate plan that was approved by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division. It is estimated that up to $25 million could be saved by solving this important issue in a timely manner.

Creating a community plan.

Anticipating a 49% increase in population over the next two decades, Glynn County must proactively address the impacts that growth will have on infrastructure, housing, and community facilities and institutions. Recognizing that this anticipated population growth should be addressed proactively, Glynn County Archway Partnership participants have made "Planning for Quality Growth" a top priority. A Glynn County Growth Task Force (GTF) was created to work on the community's growth and development. Prior to the creation of GTF, there was no comprehensive planning entity that brought the community's multiple planning agencies together around one table to discuss future growth of the community. Glynn County Archway's GTF is represented by 14 local planning agencies, including the Brunswick–Glynn County Development Authority, Brunswick–Glynn County Joint Water and Sewer Commission, City of Brunswick, College of Coastal Georgia, Coastal Regional Commission (CRC), Georgia Ports Authority, Georgia Power, Glynn County Board of Commissioners, Glynn County Board of Education, Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT), Jekyll Island Authority, Southeast Georgia Health System, and Saint Simons Land Trust. Since its inception, GTF has met regularly to deliberate future growth issues. Corridor and entryway improvements, streetscape and landscape design, and redevelopment/revitalization opportunities are among the topics that have been discussed by GTF.

Finding accurate demographic data to help with growth.

To plan for growth and attract new businesses, Clayton County needed accurate demographic information. An Archway Partnership public administration intern worked closely with the economic development office to gather this information, making it easier for local leaders to share information with interested businesses and to make decisions directly affecting expected growth.

Creating a new design for an industrial park.

The Hart County Industrial Building Authority (IBA), seeking to diversify its local economic base, is developing an industrial park that can serve a variety of high-tech and competitive businesses. To make the park more appealing, the IBA turned to the Archway Partnership, which connected it with students from UGA's College of Environment and Design. These students looked to other areas and to current design trends for progressive ideas on how to design an industrial park that appeals to the higher-end and high-skills businesses that the IBA seeks to bring to Hart County. The design has an environmental focus, reflecting the community's push for environmentally conscious development.

Facilitating relationships between schools and education experts.

Through a shared memorandum of understanding (MOU), the Archway Partnership and UGA's College of Education funded an education coordinator in Hart County who specializes in connecting the College of Education to the Hart County School System. This part-time faculty member with expertise in K-12 education consults with Hart County school officials to uncover the needs determined by teachers and administrators. She then approaches the College of Education to identify faculty members and students who have the expertise and skills to help address the needs identified by the school system.

Statewide Benefits

Because of its geographically dispersed platform, the Archway Partnership is situated to deal with issues like health care and public health on a statewide basis. For example, one Archway Partnership faculty member from the UGA College of Public Health has been designated as the point person for public health resources. This faculty member has helped community

members gain technical assistance with writing grants, start public information campaigns, and plan health interventions.

University Benefits

To help ensure productive faculty engagement, the Archway Partnership tailors projects to help meet participating faculty members' teaching and research goals by encouraging service-learning opportunities. The partnership also helps to improve the university's profile in underserved and underrepresented communities and by providing research and public service grant opportunities (an avenue for the real-life application of classroom lessons).

Institutional level.

The partnership is driven by the capacity of the university's faculty members, students, and staff to deliver resources to communities. The university in turn benefits from increased visibility across the state. Working with UGA's 16 schools and colleges and many University System of Georgia institutions (there are 35 colleges and universities in the state's higher education system), the Archway Partnership is a mechanism that allows each part of the institution to extend its expertise into the "real world."

Faculty level.

For faculty members with an imperative interest in augmenting their research and teaching within a community but without the time, community engagement know-how, or connections to a community, the Archway Partnership fills the gap. Linking the right faculty member to the right community partner yields work that is optimally beneficial to both the community partner and the faculty member. The results improve life within the community while furthering the teaching and research mission of the university.

Student level.

Wilson *(2004)* notes that university-community partnerships enhance student experience by connecting theory and practice. Service-learning and other outreach activities give students firsthand opportunities to apply what they are learning in their disciplinary studies outside the academic setting, thus promoting leadership, character development, cultural and community understanding, and self-discovery.

Community partners provide both graduate and undergraduate students with service-learning projects as well as a variety of

internships in areas such as education, the arts, local government, economic development, public health, and landscape architecture. Over 200 students have engaged in community-based projects through the Archway Partnership in 2009–2010. The partnership also funds graduate assistantships, making individual departments more competitive in recruiting graduate students. Thanks to the university's close relationship with its community partners and the presence of an Archway professional facilitating the process on a daily basis, these students gain experience that is relevant to their education. They are treated as an extension of the university and as equals throughout the process. Students are motivated to engage due in part to the promise of having a tangible work product and experience to share with prospective employers.

Assessing Impact

By maintaining a close relationship with community members throughout the process, Archway professionals and administrative staff receive direct feedback from county commissioners, city managers, school superintendents, and other business and community leaders on the impact of Archway-facilitated projects. The Archway Partnership executive committee members work closely with Archway Partnership staff to define project deliverables and determine when project goals have been met. Archway staff collect tangible final products, portfolios, reports, and other project data. This information is compiled in a central database, which is used for determining common community needs, utilization of specific higher education resources, and cost savings or value.

In addition, Archway Partnership faculty members and administrators from across the state meet together quarterly to discuss the impact of community-based projects. During these meetings, they share best practices, develop relationships with faculty members from across the university system, and exchange ideas for maintaining relationships with existing community partners while developing new ones. Since partners in various communities encounter similar issues across the state, Archway Partnership faculty members use these opportunities to evaluate how well various methods and approaches have addressed a community's priorities.

Conclusion

To ensure a partnership that benefits both communities and the university, the University of Georgia Archway Partnership acts

as a linking facilitator, empowering community members to drive the process and dictate what issues and needs are to be addressed by university resources. The partnership catalyzes long-term growth in a community through continuous engagement that addresses the community's changing needs.

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The strength of the Archway Partnership does not lie in the university expertise that it brings to the communities, but in how the Archway Partnership delivers this expertise. By first establishing a strong foundation in an equal relationship between the university and an Archway community, the Archway Partnership sets the stage for a sustained, long-term engagement. The Archway Partnership acts as a neutral third party to provide a process for community dialogue to identify key issues. Faculty members and students are engaged to bring their knowledge and expertise into Archway communities to develop creative, efficient, and cutting-edge solutions to the communities' expressed priority issues. This paradigm for outreach allows university faculty members, students, and community partners to focus on what they do best. The Archway Partnership places the right tools in the right hands.

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