

How Outreach Helps PA Workers & Employers

For several weeks, Outreach has been involved in developing a new five-year strategic plan. One of the overarching goals defined during the planning process is focusing on communities and their needs, especially those related to health, education, energy and the environment, globalization, and economic development. Last month's issue featured an update on the new strategic theme, energy and the environment. This month's issue is an update on the economic and workforce development theme.

In Cleveland's heyday . . . proximity to water or rail mattered a lot. Today, proximity to a university campus matters a lot.

*Tim Ferguson
Forbes Magazine, 1999*

The United States' ability to remain competitive in a global economy is an issue that resonates throughout our economy. Regions and towns that have lost major employers and struggled to attract new businesses pepper news broadcasts. In Pennsylvania we've witnessed the loss of businesses and jobs through closures and cutbacks at places like Corning, Inc. in State College, Bethlehem Steel in Pittsburgh, and more recently, The Hershey Company in Harrisburg.

Like many states, Pennsylvania faces the challenge of transforming an outdated economy and workforce into a globally competitive system powered by knowledge workers. At the forefront of this transformation is higher education. With vast capabilities in applied research, innovation and entrepreneurship, technology transfer, and workforce preparation, higher education offers a holistic approach in preparing regional employers and workers for long-term economic growth.

At Penn State, there is substantial faculty expertise and interest in economic and workforce development. The University's role in economic and workforce development in Pennsylvania and beyond has been a major focus in Outreach through PennTAP (The Pennsylvania Technical Assistance Program), Cooperative Extension, and Continuing Education. In response to a national trend of increasing higher education involvement in economic and workforce development, the Outreach Office of Economic and Workforce Development was established two years ago. It is the primary vehicle through which we concentrate our work in this emerging and critical area.

The Purpose of the Outreach Economic and Workforce Strategic Theme, led by Tim Franklin, the new director for the Office of Economic and Workforce Development, is to connect faculty and the academic colleges with Outreach units to address key economic and workforce development issues and opportunities. It also serves to strengthen University-constituency relationships. "The role of universities in helping their regions become economically competitive is a key policy focus at the state and federal levels. Penn State's land-grant tradition and leadership role as an engaged university position it as a national leader in this arena," said Franklin. With his leadership, the Strategic Theme Group* has been evaluating how Outreach and the University can grow in this area.

The Vision for the Strategic Theme is to support Penn State's recognition as an international model of engagement for twenty-first century land-grant universities by serving as a catalyst for statewide economic and community vitality. The Group expects to realize this vision by facilitating multidisciplinary faculty scholarship and engagement in topics related to regional competitiveness and the ecology of the innovation economy. This includes ensuring programs and research informs cutting-edge practices.

They should be rooted in community-centered problems and inform University engagement, regional competitiveness, public policy, impact analyses, and/or needs assessments.

Five Goals for addressing economic development issues and opportunities include: 1) identifying key issues and approaches to university engagement; 2) engaging a broader array of faculty expertise to inform and lead development practices; 3) inspiring and engaging strong Penn State partnerships with community and government leaders; 4) identifying local, state, and federal resources for faculty scholarship and engagement and pair with industry sectors such as plastics and powered metals; and 5) evaluating and identifying Penn State's role and impact. One method of addressing these goals is through a speaker series the Group is currently developing. The series will generate discussions on campus and among interest groups in scholarly engagement and engaged scholarship¹, and position Penn State as a leading forum for international discussions on economic and workforce development.

The Strategic Theme's focus on facilitating multidisciplinary faculty scholarship in the areas of engagement, regional competitiveness, and the ecology of the innovation economy builds on the 44 faculty research/outreach projects to date. These projects, spanning the Penn State campuses from Hazelton, to Lehigh Valley, Abington, Harrisburg, and Berks, have successfully advanced economic and workforce initiatives, facilitated interdisciplinary work, and created new tools and services. Project results continually reflect a positive impact on key economic and workforce issues, partnerships, and opportunities.

Some Project Examples include:

- Identifying opportunities to support Pennsylvania's emerging wind industry
- Validating assessments for Pennsylvania's Critical Access Hospitals; offering assessments to Pennsylvania's rural hospitals for strategic planning
- Conducting economic impact evaluations of jobs and industries in Pennsylvania counties such as the removal of electricity rate caps for industrial, commercial, and residential customers
- Identifying best practices for new products; using regional resources; and creating a regional coalition for a new biomedical manufacturing cluster in northwest Pennsylvania
- Communicating to local businesses the effect barriers to workforce diversity have on creating a competitive workforce and economic development in Blair County
- Assessing Pennsylvania manufacturers' energy efficiency²

As our work in economic and workforce development expands, I will provide periodic updates. I look forward to sharing the work of another Strategic Theme next month.

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¹ For more information download *New Times Demand New Scholarship* report at http://www.compact.org/initiatives/research_universities/

² Economic and Workforce Development Briefs, <http://train.ed.psu.edu/brief/>