© Journal of Public Service & Outreach, Volume 2, Number 3, pp. 71-78 (1997)



The Potential of the Public-Private Partnership in Outreach

Cynthia Needles Fletcher, Ph.D.
Professor and Extension Specialist
Department of Human Development and Family Studies
Iowa State University

Jeanne M. Hogarth, Ph.D.
Senior Analyst
Consumer and Community Affairs
Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System[1]

Jane Schuchardt, Ph.D.
National Program Leader - Family Economics
Cooperative State Research, Education,
and Extension Service
United States Department of Agriculture

In the inaugural issue of this journal, the late Ernest Boyer wrote eloquently about the responsibility of higher education to become more vigorously engaged in the issues of the day, connecting the rich resources of the university to pressing social problems. He spoke of a scholarship of engagement that creates a special climate in which academic and civic cultures communicate creatively with each other, enriching the quality of life for all. Boyer was convinced of the value of scholars and practitioners speaking and listening carefully to each other (1996).

In the same volume, James Votruba echoed this sentiment and proposed strategies to realign universities in order to strengthen the impact of their outreach initiatives (1996). Among those strategies was a call to better prepare faculty to enter into partnerships with publics outside the university. "Indeed, true partnerships between faculty members and external clients exist when they view themselves and their partners as both teachers and learners, where

both have something to contribute and gain from the partnership" (Votruba 1996). Votruba also called for better assessments of the quality and impact of outreach programs and services. He proposed two foci for impact assessment:

First, to what extent does a particular outreach program or service have a demonstrable impact on the intended audience? What difference did it make? Second, to what extent did the outreach program or service enhance the research and teaching missions of the university? If the outreach program is to be a fully integrated element in the overall academic mission, then the university should put the highest priority on outreach programs that accomplish both objectives (Votruba 1996).

. . . a second common theme in higher education is a call for greater integration of outreach within the overall academic mission . . . [P]erhaps one of the most important strategies is to design, conduct, and evaluate outreach programs that . . . enhance the teaching and research missions of the university.

The charge to public service and outreach in higher education is twofold. On one hand, the message is clear that "creating 'universities that matter' will require collaboration among public universities, government, industry and the nation's private foundations" (Schutjer 1993). That is, universities must look outward and engage or connect with society in true partnerships. Yet, a second common theme in higher education is a call for greater integration of outreach within the overall academic mission. While there are numerous ways to accomplish such integration, perhaps one of the most important strategies is to design, conduct, and evaluate outreach programs that, as Votruba states, not only make a difference in the lives of the intended audience, but also enhance the teaching and research missions of the university.

These writers set high standards for truly effective outreach in higher education. The purpose of this article is to describe a public-private partnership which was formed to carry out a specific outreach program and to report findings from a two-stage impact assessment of the program. Using a shared leadership model, faculty from seven land-grant universities, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Extension program leader, and a corporate partner accomplished far more than any one institution could on its own and, in the process, learned much from each other. We believe the process itself as well as the findings from our evaluation provide insights that can be integrated into the academic mission.

"Putting Consumers in Charge: Credit Education Strategies" illustrates many characteristics of a model outreach program. The

project aimed to: enable communities to build coalitions and collaborative teams at the local level to conduct credit education; help participants to define their roles in credit education and recruit people to follow up as necessary; have participants commit to making an initial use of resources and strategies with a targeted segment of their audience; and provide participants with a variety of strategies and suggested opportunities for reaching audiences with credit education.

In the next section, this paper describes the partnership and the project. This is followed by a discussion of the findings from an evaluation of the program's impact immediately after completion and one year later. The final section of the article describes the implications of the findings for future Extension/outreach, teaching, and research agendas.[2]

Forming a Public-Private Partnership for Outreach

Throughout the early 1990s, community educators and industry representatives became increasingly aware of a need to improve the ability of families to manage consumer credit (Schuchardt et al, 1996). A history of cooperation characterized by the exchange of educational materials and expertise between Extension and the Consumer Affairs Office (formerly the Office of Public Responsibility) of the American Express Company was the foundation for the "Putting Consumers in Charge: Credit Education Strategies" project.[2] Combining the human and financial resources of both organizations increased their capacity to respond jointly to credit education issues and to extend knowledge, both of substance and process, to community educators.

Given the complexity of credit issues, the planning team (seven university faculty, one USDA representative, and two American Express consumer-affairs professionals) launched two efforts to assess needs to focus on concerns of highest priority. The first was to hold a roundtable conference with more than thirty national-level agencies and organizations to discuss gaps in credit understanding and to share resources. Following the roundtable, community-level Extension educators completed a written survey to help to refine the issues identified in the roundtable. These educators work with consumers daily through personal finance workshops, home-study courses, and other means, and are well aware of the real problems of people.

It became clear that access to materials on credit education was not an issue; the issue was how to effectively use these educational resources with consumers to improve their credit management. The planning team identified a satellite video conference as the mechanism for brokering or exchanging knowledge between the university and local communities, and fostering creativity and change within local coalitions of credit educators. The planning team envisioned the creation of a pyramid of partnerships, starting with an Extension-American Express Company planning team as a model, and extending to communities nationwide.[3] Each partnership would build

on the strengths of the individuals and groups at each level and be empowered to use this network of resources to improve credit literacy. Of critical importance in building this pyramid was identifying individuals or groups who had access to satellite downlink facilities and were willing to facilitate a local conference.

Intensive marketing activities resulted in 729 persons from fifty states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, and several international sites registering as downlink conference-site coordinators. Other educators taped the broadcast or ordered the video tape for future viewing. All site coordinators received substantial support materials (a handbook on running a video conference, participant handouts) and satellite training to review responsibilities and answer technical and substantive questions. Funding for the project was provided by the American Express Company with significant in-kind support from Extension. Some sites charged registration fees to defray participant costs.

The two-hour conference aired December 7, 1994. Hosts facilitated lively discussions with credit experts on the topics of credit choices, credit costs, and how to control the use of credit. Interspersed were pre-taped segments about successful programs that could be adapted by the community educators. The live broadcast ended with a presentation designed to motivate participants to actively pursue credit education in their communities. During the broadcast, participants called in questions, many of which were handled on air. Staff coordinators at local sites were encouraged to engage participants — before and after the broadcast — in planning exercises to determine credit-education needs in the local community and discussions on how to address those needs.

Immediately following the satellite broadcast, participants and site coordinators were asked to evaluate the conference. Evaluations were received from 147 of the site coordinators and 1,274 of the participants. Because it is not known how many of the 729 sites involved a participant audience, no response rate has been calculated for this evaluation. The 147 reporting sites had an average of ten community educators attending.

In fall 1995, a follow-up telephone survey of site coordinators and conference participants was conducted to assess the long-term impact of the video conference on credit education efforts. All site coordinators who returned evaluations of the video conference, and for whom researchers had addresses and phone numbers, were included in the survey (n=133). Of the remaining site coordinators, a random sample of 100 names was drawn resulting in a site-coordinator sample of 233. The conference-participant sample was drawn by taking 20 percent of those who returned evaluations and who provided contact information, resulting in a participant sample list of 178 names.

Of the sample, 166 site coordinators and 116 conference participants completed interviews, yielding a total of 282 respondents and a 68.6 percent response rate. In the following

discussion, evaluation refers to the post-conference evaluation in December 1994; survey refers to the follow-up survey conducted in fall 1995.

Did We Make a Difference?

Both evaluation and survey data show that the conference contributed to building a strong pyramid base for community partnerships as evidenced by the broad array of participant groups representing government, non-profit, and private sectors. Most sites included such groups as Extension, staff from financial institutions, Consumer Credit Counseling Service (CCCS), high school teachers, community college staff, military personnel, women's organizations, senior citizens/AARP chapters, state and local government agencies, credit bureaus, Y(MCA/WCA) Associations, employee-assistance programs, and labor unions. Clearly, this conference achieved its goal of assembling the diverse groups within communities that have a common interest in credit education.

Both evaluation and survey data show that the conference contributed to building a strong pyramid base for community partnerships as evidenced by the broad array of participant groups representing government, non-profit, and private sectors.

One-third (34 percent) of the site coordinators reported on post-conference evaluations that a task force was formed to address credit education issues in their communities. In the follow-up survey, nearly one-third (31 percent) of respondents reported working with a task force to address credit education needs in their communities. Reporting on the evaluations was robust. The tools, techniques, and motivators that were the cornerstones of the conference carried over into the longer-term work of the participants.

Prior to the conference, only half of the participants had conducted credit-education programs; by the end of the conference, four-fifths said they planned to conduct or assist with credit-education programs (e.g., workshops, exhibits at malls, home-study courses, media) in the future, with an estimated outreach to about 450 people. In the follow-up survey, nine out of ten said they did conduct credit-education programs, reaching, on average, about 400 people, via direct, face-to-face techniques, and 49,000 via indirect methods such as mass media or displays.

One of the conference goals was to foster greater cooperation among community educators. In the post-conference evaluation, 40 percent of the participants reported planning to work with at least one other organization. Financial institutions were the most

frequently cited partner, with 10 percent reporting work with this type of community organization, followed by Consumer Credit Counseling Services, Extension, the military, housing authorities, teachers, and employee-assistance programs. In the follow-up survey, 75 percent of respondents reported working with at least one of these groups. The higher number of partnerships that were actually formed, as compared to those planned, during the year following the conference attests to the positive impact of this project.

In the post-conference evaluation, site coordinators were asked to identify what their group would do in credit education as a result of this video conference. Many indicated they would deliver a program; others said they would implement an event, plan programs through task forces and local coalitions, adopt or adapt resources for use in programs, train others, and/or continue with their current credit education work. In the follow-up survey, the same credit-education activities doubled as compared to those reported in the evaluation. Again, the increase in the number of programs actually conducted compared to those planned is a measure of success.

Implications for the Outreach Mission: Universities as Catalysts for Local Change

These results indicate that a university can successfully serve as a catalyst for change within communities. The outreach path to the people doesn't necessarily have to be a direct one. The university can successfully educate "knowledge intermediaries" that multiply the learning through their established constituents.

Results of this study show that by using satellite video-conferencing technology, the authors reached into the community to increase consumers' credit knowledge and skills (the content component) and to increase community educators' responses to the credit-education needs with their clientele (the process component). Furthermore, efforts planned at the local level nearly doubled that thought possible originally. When the follow-up survey results were compared to the post-conference evaluations, respondents reported actually doing at least a third more (e.g., formed partnerships and carried out programs) than they said they would. While a variety of other stimuli might have brought about this result, the team believes the video conference was a catalyst for change. Brokering knowledge in this way also enables the university to reach diverse audiences. While Extension personnel have comprised a long-standing audience for university-based training, other agencies, organizations, and businesses clearly welcome the opportunity to participate in learning activities led by the university.

The keys to success of an outreach effort of this magnitude require reaching beyond the traditional way of going about the business of higher education. *First*, the "Putting Consumers in Charge" effort included the usual content, tools, and skills components, but also specifically addressed the problems of motivating community educators to implement consumer credit-education programs. This motivational component was new and

critical to the success of the conference. Also, significant effort went into training site coordinators to use the video conference live broadcast along with pre- and post-broadcast sessions to engage participants in a local planning process.

For too long, academe has assumed that universities could disseminate information and somehow thrust community educators into immediate action. For too long, higher education faculty have viewed themselves as the "experts" and outreach audiences as "thirsty sponges." Instead, the "Putting Consumers in Charge" outreach project exemplified Boyer's scholarship of engagement in which scholars and practitioners actually spoke and listened to each other, using and shaping new knowledge to bring about change in local communities.

Second, partnerships that were formed at each stage of the project among business, government, not-for-profit organizations, and the learners themselves — from the initial needs assessment through the evaluation phase — contributed to the success of the project. The public-private partnership was viewed as credible, resulting in products of high quality, and followed up by extensive local action and impact. Neither Extension nor American Express could have accomplished such results alone.

Implications for the Teaching and Research Missions: The Value of Partnerships

Votruba (1996) contends that truly excellent outreach efforts not only make a difference in the lives of the intended audience, but also enhance the teaching and research missions of the university. Perhaps the strongest implication from the "Putting Consumers in Charge" project was the overwhelming sense that the public-private partnership, utilizing a shared leadership model, was critical to its success. The authors believe this approach would be viewed as a radical change within the teaching and research activities of most universities. Teaching programs have welcomed corporate donations for the amenities of classroom instruction — computers, classrooms, and well-stocked laboratories. Researchers have long sought corporate sponsorship for their investigations. Yet, rarely have teaching and research programs entered into true partnerships with those outside the university to design, implement, and evaluate projects.

Universities must find ways to accomplish their mission without compromising their autonomy in the process of discovering and developing new knowledge. We believe Schujter was right. "Universities that matter" will require much greater collaboration with those outside academe in order to accomplish their outreach, teaching, and research missions. To fail to do so will result in universities that fall short of the expectations of the society in which they exist. ■

Notes

[1] This paper represents the views of the author and should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System or other members of its staff.

[2] The Cooperative Extension System is a public-funded, nonformal, educational system that links the educational and research activities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 104 land-grant universities, and 3,150 county administrative units.

[3] For example, Cooperative Extension educators assisted in curriculum development for American Express (Your Privacy) and serve as reviewers for educational resources.

[4] The authors acknowledge Dr. Carol L. Anderson, Cornell University, for her valuable insights related to this concept.

References

Boyer, E. L. 1996. The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Public Service and Outreach,* 1 (1): 11-20.

Schuchardt, J., C. N. Fletcher, and L. K. Fox. 1996. Improving consumer credit literacy — a public-private responsibility. *Credit World,* 85 (2): 21-23.

Schutjer, W. 1993. "Universities that Matter," in *Proceedings from the National President's Invitational Forum on Outreach.*, ed. Doug Bradley. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 9.

Votruba, J. C. 1996. Strengthening the university's alignment: Challenges and strategies. *Journal of Public Service and Outreach,* 1 (1): 29-36.

About the Authors

Cynthia Needles Fletcher (Ph.D., Iowa State University) is a professor and extension specialist in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Iowa State University. Dr. Fletcher teaches, conducts research, and directs outreach programs in family resource management. She served as co-director for the "Putting Consumers in Charge" project.

Jeanne M. Hogarth (Ph.D., The Ohio State University) is a senior analyst for consumer policies in the Division of Consumer and Community Affairs at the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. Prior to joining the Federal Reserve, she was an associate professor in Consumer Economics and Housing on the Cooperative Extension faculty at Cornell University, conducting family resource management programs. In that capacity, she worked with the "Putting Consumers in Charge" team.

Jane Schuchardt (Ph.D., Iowa State University) is national program leader, Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC. She works as the federal partner of the Cooperative Extension System to design, deliver, and evaluate personal and family financial education programs.