

Gordon H. Mueller

The University of New Orleans (UNO) Business/Higher Education Council is made up of leaders from business and other parts of the community and of all top management personnel of the university. Created through the initiative of UNO's Metropolitan College, the university's principal continuing education and outreach unit, the council is dedicated to fostering economic development through education and work force training. It stands as an excellent example of the brokering, linking, boundary-spanning role that continuing education can play in metropolitan universities.

The University of New Orleans Business/Higher Education Council

Building Community Boards from the Inside Out

New Orleans is one of America's most cosmopolitan cities. It was founded in 1718 by French explorers and later ceded to Spain. Eventually, the flags of five different nations flew over the city, and even today it retains a vibrant international flavor. Its historic Vieux Carre is an architectural showcase for the city's famous restaurants, museums, art galleries, and antique shops. Symphony, opera, ballet, and theatre enrich the cultural life of the city.

The area's economy is largely based on its geography, its people, and its natural resources. New Orleans is the largest port in the United States and among the top five in the world. Vast onshore and offshore oil and natural gas reserves have provided tens of thousands of jobs in the area. New Orleans is a national leader in tourism, attracting eleven million visitors each year through conventions and individual family vacations.

The University of New Orleans (UNO) is a relatively new metropolitan university, founded only thirty-four years ago. A part of the Louisiana State University System, UNO is now the second largest university in the state and is located in the largest

urban center of Louisiana. It recognizes its mission to lead in research and public higher education, primarily serving metropolitan New Orleans as an urban land-grant university. Outreach and public service have become measurably more important to UNO in the last fifteen years. More than sixteen thousand students are currently enrolled at UNO. Its seven colleges and schools provide excellent undergraduate programs as well as master's degrees in sixty fields and twelve doctoral degrees, and its graduates form a continuing pool of trained employees for the region.

In 1980, UNO created Metropolitan College to consolidate all of the outreach and extension activities of the university: continuing education, off-campus credit programs, conferences, international study programs, and credit as well as noncredit professional training seminars. Starting with about four thousand enrollments and a budget of \$750,000, Metropolitan College grew to serve over twenty thousand students a year with a budget in excess of \$7 million by 1990.

Within a few months of its opening, Metropolitan College began to explore the possibilities of forming a blue-ribbon advisory board of business and government leaders drawn from prominent citizens and leaders in the region. This initiative came solely from within the institution and reflected its desire to forge a business / higher education alliance. The initiative's goal was to provide strong community input to the university concerning the problems that faced the city, especially in the areas of worker education and training. Metropolitan College had the central responsibility for extending the instructional resources of the entire university into the community. The college was also expected to identify problems in the city that could best be addressed by the educational programs of the university. It needed the advice of an external board to help identify these needs on an ongoing basis.

At the time, there was no external pull from the business community to do this. The city was in the midst of an oil boom and ten years of uninterrupted growth and prosperity. As the price of oil climbed from ten dollars a barrel in the 1970s to thirty-five dollars a barrel at the peak in 1983, many in the university and the community expressed the view that the region was "recession-proof." Education was thought to be important but not essential to sustain future economic growth. The three principal pillars of the New Orleans economy at the time were (1) oil and gas, (2) the port with its trade and shipbuilding, and (3) tourism. Except at the upper levels of management and engineering, none of these industries depended heavily on a highly skilled and well-educated labor force. High school graduates, even the high school dropouts which constituted 40 percent of their age cohort, could earn a fortune working in the oil patch. Many could earn respectable wages as stevedores at the port or as waiters and other front-line service workers in the growing hospitality industry.

The mood of the city was definitely upbeat and the community was riding high. UNO was twenty-three years old and coming into its own as a major institution in the city, recognized as a tough university with an open-door admission policy that weeded out students through the maintenance of very high academic standards. The attrition rate in the early years of the school was nearly 50 percent, and the university earned a reputation for academic excellence in its graduates. The faculty was, on

the whole, youthful and academically solid. Some departments, such as chemistry, had world-class reputations with strong Ph.D. programs. The master's-level programs were also of high quality and provided important degrees for the many UNO graduates moving into white-collar professional and middle management positions.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, more than 90 percent of UNO's graduates remained and worked in the metropolitan New Orleans area. In 1980, 25 percent of the student body was over the age of twenty-four, working full time, and attending UNO part time. These students attended class in the evening or on the weekend, both on campus or at one of the off-campus centers. The institution was just beginning to feel the impact of the changing student demographics, but until the formation of the Metropolitan College in 1980, the university had not made a substantial commitment to meet the needs of these new students. For the most part, the faculty thought of the institution as a traditional university, dominated by the arts and sciences and serving traditional-age students in daytime classes.

The reward system for promotion and tenure moved more toward research with each passing year. Teaching at all levels was thought to be excellent, but classroom performance did not weigh heavily in the reward system. Public service and extension work were considered in promotions in only the most exceptional cases.

Homer Hitt, founding chancellor of UNO who retired in 1980, had been the principal champion for the public outreach mission of the university aside from a small core of committed faculty, mostly in the School of Urban and Regional Studies and the College of Liberal Arts. In spite of a good deal of rhetoric about economic development, only very few faculty and administrators were heavily involved in the Chamber of Commerce, city government, or the local economy. During the 1980s, faculty did become increasingly interested in UNO's urban mission and in its need to become more closely involved in the social and economic life of the city. And, while the Metropolitan College became the most visible part of the university's commitment to outreach, most of the other colleges began to conduct outreach work, with varying degrees of success, so as to reorient themselves outward.

The Creation of the Council

In the fall of 1980, both the incoming chancellor, Leon Richelle, and the provost, Cooper Mackin, embraced the proposal to form a blue-ribbon advisory board for the Metropolitan College, to be called the Metropolitan Council for Continuing Higher Education. Both agreed to serve on this council. The mayor's executive assistant, the director of the Downtown Development District, and a few prominent business leaders and alumni assisted in conceptualizing the new council and its mission and in identifying a pool of prospects for the chancellor's personal invitation. From this pool of fifty individuals, thirty-five accepted the invitation to join the first Board of Directors. They were not asked for money in the early years, but were expected only to provide their advice and some of

their time to quarterly meetings. There was no real structure, there were no by-laws, and there were no financial resources provided by the institution other than the time of the dean of Metropolitan College and that of some of his staff. UNO could not spare the expense of providing direct financial support or staff to the council—a mistake that was later regretted and had to be rectified.

From the beginning, the new Metropolitan Council had an underlying goal to develop business/higher education partnerships that could help prepare New Orleans for a new economic future—a future that would depend more and more on the creation of a high-performance work force at all levels of society and of all ages. The commitment of the local business leadership to continuing education and work force development was thought to be an excellent way to acknowledge the changing economy and the changing demographics of the work force. The only problem with that assumption was the lack of understanding of business leaders about these issues. This, combined with the prosperity of the moment, made it more difficult than expected to convince the new board members of the importance and urgency of the council mission.

At the outset, the level of university commitment was also low except at the top of the institution. A few deans and several faculty were excited about the formation of the new council, and the positive response from so many of the top executives, including numerous CEOs who accepted the chancellor's invitation to serve, helped to lift the level of university commitment on the project. But despite the inclusion of the faculty chairperson of the UNO Policy Committee on the board, there was no widespread support of the new council from most of the university in the early years. Indeed, there was even a little grumbling that this new external advisory board had no business suggesting curricular changes or new programs to the university. The most conservative faculty members jealously guarded their control over all curricular matters and were suspicious of the external intrusion into "university affairs."

From 1980 to 1985, council sponsorship of several conferences brought about greater faculty involvement and captured substantial publicity in the local media. The faculty gradually began to accept the kind of opportunity for outreach that the council could foster. Two business/higher education conferences in the mid-1980s did much to capture the imagination and the attention of the faculty and the prominent business leaders of New Orleans. These conferences were designated for the senior leadership of both business and higher education, but also incorporated the top officers of most of the mainstream institutions in the city. National business leaders, futurists, top experts on incubators and research parks, university presidents, and the nation's leading economists in the area of work force education and training led the two-day symposium for 250 of New Orleans's most prominent citizens, business leaders, and policy makers. These conferences were mega events for the city, and for many they provided a new understanding of and commitment to the ways that higher education could accelerate regional economic development. They

A partnership pushed from within the university now attracted a pull from the business community.

resulted in several partnerships between education and council-affiliated businesses pursuing aggressive agendas, ranging from technology transfer to improved elementary and secondary education.

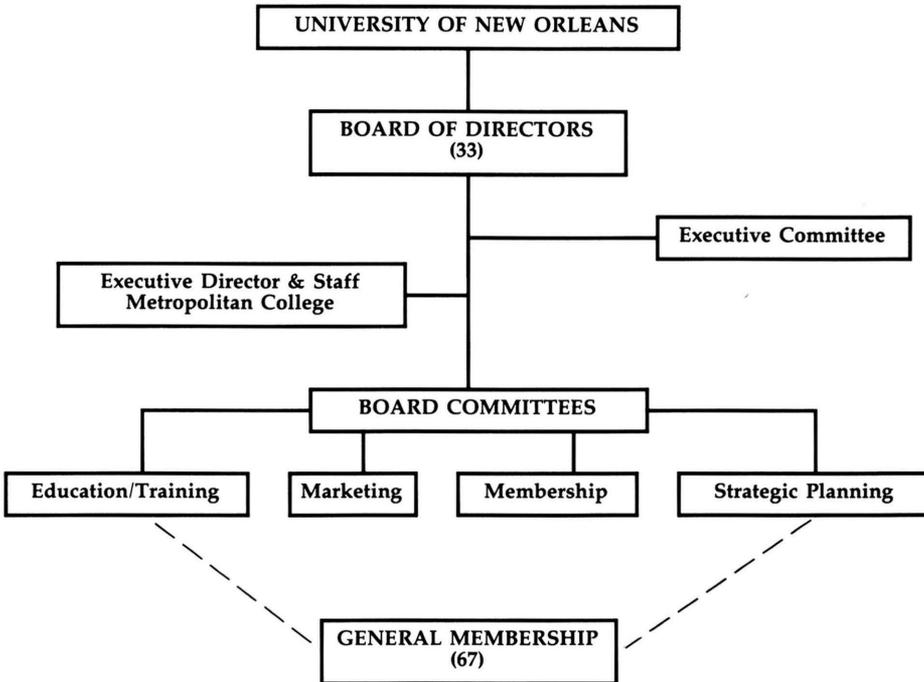
Significant organizational change in the council structure occurred in the mid-1980s, precipitated by the recession that began in 1983 with the collapse of oil prices. These events had a catalytic effect on the Board of Directors. Suddenly government and business leaders began to look for new ways to diversify a declining economy. Board members began to look more seriously at their role on the council and at its mission to achieve economic development through work force training and improvement of education at all levels. The collapse of the local economy occurred almost at the same time as the appearance of the *Nation at Risk* report in 1983. Both events combined to heighten awareness of the crucial importance of education and training to any economic recovery for New Orleans.

As a direct consequence of these events, the council undertook its first reorganization that led to by-laws, dues, permanent staff, and financial support both from business members as well as from the university. The group also took on a new name, the Metropolitan Council for Lifelong Learning. What had been a partnership *pushed* from within the university for the first five years now began to change to a *pull* from the business community. Officers of the Board of Directors concluded that the council, with its new structure and refined mission, was important to them. The president and vice president of the board visited the chancellor and argued that the university should support the council if council members were willing to give their time and money to help solve the resource and staffing problems. The chancellor agreed, and the new era of the council began with a funding pattern that has prevailed to the present day. UNO and the board members contribute about 25 percent each to the budget, with the balance coming from foundations, council events such as conferences, and miscellaneous sources. The council's 1991-92 budget is \$120,000.

The reorganized council also made an effort to broaden its membership base to involve faculty and other business men and women through participation in six program development boards. These boards, consisting of four UNO faculty members and four appointees from the business community on each committee, were to propose initiatives to the board for recommendation to the university. While this initiative sparked considerable excitement in the first year, it became quickly apparent that the structure was too cumbersome and too large to be effective. Staffing the many meetings was next to impossible. Nevertheless, the council scored impressive accomplishments during this time, such as sponsorship of personal computer learning centers, providing noncredit computer instruction at five metropolitan locations with a self-supporting budget of \$0.5 million by 1990. In addition, the council actively supported a Paralegal Institute and obtained \$400,000 in federal training grants for dislocated professional workers. It also launched a statewide publication, later to become national, called *METRO CONNECTION*—a tabloid newspaper that focused entirely on business/higher education partnerships and alliances dedicated to economic development. In addition,

the council began an annual awards event that recognized each year two individuals and one corporation that had made distinctive contributions to education, training, and economic development.

Table 1: University of New Orleans Business/Higher Education Council



Following a year-long strategic planning process in 1987, the council underwent further reorganizations, culminating in 1990 in its present format and name: the UNO Business/Higher Education Council. The diagram above shows the council's organization. The council clarified its mission statement and specified conditions for membership that included a minimum \$1,000 annual contribution for board members, later modified to a sliding scale depending on the number of employees of the business. Meetings were scheduled monthly from September to June, and the board's size reduced. The most important change was a significant expansion of university membership by the inclusion of nine UNO administrators on the Board of Directors: the deans of all UNO's colleges, the vice chancellors for research, academic affairs, and extension, and the chancellor. To complement the strong university contingent, twenty-four business leaders were selected from the metropolitan region. The vice chancellor for extension continued to serve as the executive director of the council, which was staffed by two professionals, a secretary, and a student

worker, with offices and a board room in the UNO Downtown Center. Finally, in addition to the thirty-three-member Board of Directors, another sixty-seven council members were selected from both UNO faculty and the regional business community to serve as members of the council. They were invited to serve on board committees, to attend the annual meeting, and to become involved in the numerous council activities and events.

Council Programs

Some of the programs developed by the council have already been noted. In 1988, the council conducted a training needs assessment of more than 250 businesses in the metro New Orleans region. Fifteen growth industries were targeted for the survey and a heavy emphasis was placed on small businesses and those key industries identified for growth in the 1990s. In 1991, an education and training committee of the council began to act on those findings. One concrete outcome of the survey that has already proven successful is a microcomputer training consortium that provides deeply discounted computer training to member firms whose representatives meet regularly to recommend programs that are needed by all the participating companies.

During the period from 1988 to 1991, the council moved aggressively in the policy arena to focus the attention of the business community on local abuses in the federal Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) program. As a result, the local Chamber of Commerce paid greater attention to their nominees to the local Private Industry Council (PIC) that authorized more than \$11 million of JTPA funds a year for training in Orleans Parish. Most recently, as a result of federal audits of the Orleans JTPA program and failure to meet its performance standards, New Orleans was about to lose

The most important initiative of the council in 1990 and 1991 was the creation of a Public Education Funding Task Force.

its JTPA funds. The council acted as a mediator between the governor and the mayor to solve the problem. As a result, the entire PIC was reconstituted as an independent, nonprofit corporation with an entirely new board composed of a racially diverse group of business and civic leaders known for their integrity and their appreciation for the

training needs that had to be served by the JTPA program. Most important in this process was the recognition in the business community that training is too vital to the economy to allow it to become mired in local politics.

The most important initiative of the council in 1990 and 1991 was the creation of a Public Higher Education Funding Task Force. This group launched a statewide lobbying effort that tied university-based groups of administrators, faculty and its union, alumni, and students in all nineteen state universities and colleges to a lobby of business leaders around the state. While the statewide coalition is still in formative stages, the council leadership and business support from New Orleans was strong enough to reach the task force objective in the first year. In what has been described as "the best funding year for higher education in Louisiana in thirty

years," the 1990 legislature provided \$120 million new dollars that were channeled into 12 percent faculty raises, capital outlay, library purchases, and deferred maintenance.

Also on the legislative front, the council is continuing to seek permanent state funding to establish at UNO an Institute for Continuing Education and Employment Research. The institute will collect statewide data on the demand for skilled workers, the skill levels needed for particular jobs, and the work force needs of business and industry throughout the state. In addition, the institute will provide solid information on the growing gap between the labor demand created by jobs that are coming on line and the supply of available workers with the necessary skills to meet that demand. The council succeeded in the passage of legislation to create this institute in 1984, but without any fiscal appropriation. Seed money to begin the survey work of the institute has been secured for 1991, and the council will seek legislative support for full financing in 1992–93.

To help support both of these statewide initiatives, the council is currently considering the replication of the UNO Business/Higher Education Council in other sections of the state to link the business and higher education communities together.

One of the most significant initiatives for long-term economic development in greater New Orleans has been the completion of a MetroVision strategic planning effort sponsored by the Business Council of New Orleans, the Chamber/New Orleans and the River Region, and the Economic Development Council. Spearheaded by the region's business leadership, which contributed the lion's share of funds for the million-dollar study, the MetroVision plan identified regional work force training as one of the thirteen strategic priorities that would be supported by all nine parishes in the metro area. The UNO Business/Higher Education Council has been identified as the lead group to coordinate regional efforts to accomplish this goal. The development of university science and research parks is another MetroVision goal that is actively supported by the UNO Business/Higher Education Council.

Presently, the UNO council is working with the blessing of MetroVision to complete an inventory of all the public and private training providers in the region to determine what is available. And a major initiative for 1991–92 will be a campaign to raise the awareness level of the regional community on the critical importance of education and training to business productivity and economic growth, and to attract new business. After ten years, the creation of a high-performance work force still remains a central goal of the council, and as it moves into the 1990s, the support of local business leadership on this issue is growing dramatically.

The Council at This Time

Metropolitan College continues to be an important beneficiary of council projects, and its first dean, Dr. Gordon H. Mueller, now UNO's vice chancellor for extension and president of the UNO Research and Technology Park, remains the key university administrator in the council's

work. He brings council programs, initiatives, and strategies directly into the Chancellor's Cabinet when issues warrant policy discussion at the highest administrative level in the university. Furthermore, since the chancellor and all the vice chancellors and deans sit on the council's Board of Directors, there is always general awareness throughout UNO of the ongoing work of the council. The council constitutes for all colleges an additional support unit outside the university that can help them advance their outreach agendas and identify new ways by which, in partnership with business, they can contribute to the region's economic development.

Financial resources are a continuing struggle. Some years the council has operated at a deficit that has carried over until a special event or foundation grant can help to balance the books. New financing arrangements are constantly studied, but present funding from council dues and the university general fund represents a little more than 50 percent of the council's \$120,000 budget. Grants, fee revenues, and fund-raising activities are expected to generate the balance.

On the whole, faculty and administrators are much more positive about the council and the university role in regional economic development than they were in the past. The successes of the council over the years, especially the positive outcome of the 1990 legislative lobbying effort on behalf of faculty salary increases, have done much to win faculty support for the council. UNO Chancellor Gregory M. St. L. O'Brien has been a highly visible champion, both on and off campus, of the campaign to integrate the university more fully into regional economic development strategies. His leadership has been crucial to the success of most of the council undertakings and to the continued commitment of business members on the Board of Directors to the work of the council. The chancellor rarely misses a board meeting and plays an active role in the execution of many council projects. He has had a major impact on the business community. In 1991, the emerging economic development strategies of the region now recognize the importance of technology transfer, research parks, incubators, and the need to attract and develop knowledge-based industries as important features of the economic and educational landscape in the 1990s and the twenty-first century. Leadership, then, is a key ingredient for the council and for the university. Without the support of every chancellor since 1980, and without the energetic and active involvement of Chancellor O'Brien since 1987, the UNO Business/Higher Education Council would not be the success that it is today.

Hindsight

What should the founders of the council have done differently? They should have been more explicit and more demanding about what was expected of board members. From the outset, they should have insisted on financial contributions from participating businesses and general fund support from the university. Effective partnerships are demanding in time and money. The projects and the undertakings are too large and too important to the university and the community to succeed without adequate staff support. The council continually had to look for ways to

involve board members and to make sure that both university and business leaders on the board felt they were making good use of their time. Involvement is the key for successful boards, and the UNO council is no exception. The secret is to identify problems and issues that are appropriate to the level of membership selected to sit on a board. Then, it is important to find the best way to utilize the talents, brainpower, and influence of board members to achieve results. Business men and women will lose interest if there is insufficient staff support or if the council mission and objectives are unclear or unfocused.

It should be remembered, however, that these business/higher education partnerships are pioneering endeavors. They are creations of the dramatic changes that are taking place in our national and world economies. There are few models to follow in constructing these partnerships. There are both opportunities and threats to the creation of partnerships that bring university and business leaders to the same table on matters linking economic development and business productivity to the strategic direction and curriculum development of the academy. The two communities have different objectives and speak different languages. But the magnitude of the problems confronting the cities, the states, and the nation are so great that all institutional resources must be leveraged to the maximum limits possible so as to find the way into the global information economy of the coming century. The UNO Business/Higher Education Council will continue to learn as much from its mistakes as from its successes, but to continue to make the effort is crucial.

Suggested Readings

- Journal of Industry and Higher Education*, London: Butterworth and Co.
- Lynton, Ernest A. *The Missing Connection Between Business and the Universities*. New York: ACE/Macmillan, 1984.
- Matthews, Jana B., and Rolf Norgaard. *Managing the Partnership Between Higher Education and Industry*. Denver: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 1984.
- Mueller, Gordon H. "Linking Continuing Education to Community and Economic Development," Robert G. Simerly, ed., *Strategic Planning and Leadership in Continuing Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.
- Powers, David R., et al. *Higher Education in Partnership with Industry*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988.