

# Entrepreneurial Strategies for a Metropolitan University in a Competitive Setting

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## **Abstract**

*Boise State University established a series of innovative research and development centers that linked the academic work of the institution to critical issues of the region. Because of the immediate and extensive impacts of these centers, this has been an effective strategy to enhance BSU's niche as the core higher education institution in the area.*

Over the past decade, the City of Boise and the Treasure Valley of Idaho have received considerable recognition as an area with a growing high technology economy and a home for entrepreneurial activities. This environment has influenced the development of Boise State University. It has provided the institution with wonderful opportunities, support, and encouragement, while inviting the university to adopt an institutional strategy that is highly entrepreneurial.

Boise State University is a metropolitan university with an enrollment of more than 17,700 students. The institution is comprised of a main campus in the heart of the capital city of Boise (population 193,000,) seven centers throughout the Treasure Valley (468,000), and an extensive electronic campus (Internet, television, and radio). The economic base of the valley has changed dramatically during the past decade; "knowledge workers" and a "high-tech" manufacturing environment dominate the region. Many of the larger companies have developed an aggressive international marketing focus. The valley is experiencing an average growth of 2-3 percent per year in population, and that growth is marked by an increase in cultural diversity.

At the heart of our institution's strategy is an attempt to develop a competitive advantage over other higher education institutions that are locating campuses in the Treasure Valley. Where economic success is found, competition for higher education services increases as distant campuses seek to capture a portion of the market. In this regard, the number of colleges and universities offering programs in our immediate Treasure Valley region has grown from six to more than 15 during the past decade. Our goal is to be recognized as the core higher education institution of the region, one that is fully responsive to the needs of the community and central to the life of the valley. Over the years, we have made decisions to maximize programs of instruction, research, and public service that are consistent with the needs and potentials of our location.

## **Six Strategies Guiding Development**

- 1. As an institution, we have developed instructional programs and research and development centers that have local application and national/international implications.* Our first venture was the establishment of the Raptor Research Center that is associated with our Department of Biology. With the adjacent Snake River Valley, the home of the largest nesting population of raptors, especially the peregrine falcon, then on the endangered species list, and the World Center for Birds of Prey within our valley—this research center was a natural. Over the years, its work has included such success with the peregrine falcon that it has been removed from the endangered list. The Raptor Research Center also initiated additional programs in support of these magnificent birds and to foster an understanding of the forces of ecology and industrialization. Our Center for Geophysical Investigation of the Shallow Subsurface (CGISS) studies aquifers in arid climates using the Boise Aquifer as the laboratory. Additional examples include The Idaho Microelectronics Center, the Environmental Finance Center, and the Technology Outreach Program, which provides training for teachers, places recycled computers in classrooms statewide, and enhances training in use of the Internet for schools. On our planning horizon are a new center on aspects of nanotechnology and a center with a bioengineering focus. In each case, the center starts with a local problem, but one whose solution shows promise of generating significant scientific outcomes with an impact on the research field as a whole. Thus, each center's work assists the community while generating knowledge applicable beyond the Treasure Valley.
- 2. The University seeks to build departments and units with strong core content, but with permeable boundaries.* Strong disciplinary faculties are essential to the quality of the institution and to our ability to be responsive to changing needs. However, it is necessary to develop and maintain clear and welcome mechanisms for the inclusion of community leaders in department-strategic directions and decisions. Support that encourages faculty to work collaboratively with each other and with community partners is an additional ingredient. Strong advisory committees with defined roles and responsibilities, interdisciplinary teams, and other vehicles to guide meaningful stakeholder involvement are needed at each point in the development of the organization. For example, our College of Engineering Advisory Committee periodically directs the revision of content of elective courses and also collaborates with research and development projects.
- 3. Community involvement must cut across all community issues, not just ones in which the institution has a personal stake in the outcome.* Clearly, the university has a stake in many local issues. Steps need to be taken to become involved and influence resolution of such issues to better the institution. However, effective community involvement goes beyond institutional self-interest. It involves the university and its leadership in most, if not all, of the community's issues. Sometimes institutions need not be a "player," but at the very least, can use their role as "neutral turf" to convene interested parties, promote discussion, and bring intellectual resources to a community debate. We have found it advantageous for university leadership to

spend time on various community boards and/or as contributors to community projects as a requisite to building and maintaining strong community influence and support.

- 4. Students must be involved in all university activities and linked into the community.* We encourage students to move beyond the classroom into activities such as service learning, internships, research projects with faculty, international study, or experiences in international marketing units of local corporations. These community-based strategies ensure expanded student involvement, enhanced learning, and awareness of community issues. All our research and development centers have roles for students. Future research proposals are encouraged to identify student involvement roles at the “front end.”

Institutional development involves building both “people” resources and “place” assets. Needs for changes in staff and facilities emerge continuously in response to community-identified opportunities. At Boise State University, the creation of a College of Engineering drove the need for new buildings, and this provided new opportunities for partnering and serving the region’s needs, such as the development of a clean-room laboratory for microelectronics research and development. Soon, business faculty joined engineering colleagues, leading to our construction of the TECenter, a small business incubator to support young microelectronic spin-off companies. A team consisting of business and engineering faculty created a rapid prototyping laboratory to assist local manufacturing. In the true entrepreneurial spirit, area orthopedic surgeons and other faculty worked with the laboratory applying manufacturing tools to biomechanical areas. A new technology emerged which is spawning the need for a bioengineering program.

Plans are underway to construct a Business Center adjacent to the College of Engineering. This Center will house our College of Business and Economics, business-related outreach offices in a “service mall,” and an additional on-site small business incubator. Another example of the people/place integration is our plan to co-locate the Department of Nursing and the Student Health/Wellness Center in an Hygia Hall complex. Local hospitals and others in the health care industry support this complex strategy. This new facility will both support health care needs for our students and expand training facilities for health care professionals.

- 6. No one wants to (or should) pay all the bills.* The nature of the entrepreneurial relationship is to bring several interested stakeholders together to achieve desired results. If each contributes time, influence, and resources, pride and ownership in the enterprise is assured. This strategy has of course changed our fund raising and development approach. While we look for lead gifts to support buildings and endowments, the creation of interested participants to support significant projects is the preferred strategy. Our success in building the College of Engineering, several new labs, our incubator centers, and other facilities attest to this dimension of the entrepreneurial strategy.

Like other metropolitan universities, Boise State's future directions and resources are being shaped by creative partnerships that connect academic interests and strengths with public issues and opportunities. In this way, the University and community grow together, and the University is seen as an essential and valued contributor to regional development. Metropolitan universities, by their very nature and location, can capitalize in various elements of the entrepreneurial approach to build and sustain preeminence as an institution. As local communities become more dependent upon a knowledge economy, such strategy becomes ever more important.

### **Author Information**

Charles Ruch has served as President of Boise State University for more than ten years, and recently announced his plans to retire later in 2003. Ruch led Boise State through a period of dramatic growth and expansion. He also has been an active leader in the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities and hosted the Coalition Conference in 2000.

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