



Charlotte Business Journal Op Ed FINAL

University partnerships with business more timely than ever

By Philip L. Dubois, Chancellor
UNC Charlotte

Economic, cultural and social issues of the greater Charlotte region directly drive UNC Charlotte’s approach to program development, faculty recruitment and funding. In 2007, the North Carolina Commission on Workforce Development predicted a significant “talent gap” during the upcoming decade due to projected state population growth and the eventual creation of 700,000 new jobs requiring skills acquired only through post-secondary education. Despite the dampening effects of the Great Recession, those projections are still relevant; the need for an educated, competitive workforce may never be more acute. To address evolving employer needs and keep North Carolina attractive to businesses, the commission said, North Carolina’s universities would need to produce an additional 15,000 more degree-holders annually.

In its role as North Carolina’s urban research university, UNC Charlotte’s mission compels us to help solve issues confronting the business community and to deliver a workforce that can understand and solve tomorrow’s needs. The talent we develop at UNC Charlotte will become the region’s next generation of innovators, entrepreneurs, teachers, finance and health professionals, and engineers. Their educational experience is enhanced through industry partnerships.

Indeed, interaction with industry is a part of our fabric — we’ve dedicated the facilities, funding and faculty resources to make these collaborations successful. Two manifestations of our commitment are the Charlotte Research Institute and the Ben Craig Center. CRI is a dedicated

public/private research institute on campus to complement and stimulate economic growth in the region. CRI is *the* portal for business-university technology partnerships at UNC Charlotte and has served to elevate our status in applied research. In its first 25 years, the Ben Craig Center – the original Charlotte business incubator – has nurtured more than 115 businesses in getting off their feet and into the marketplace.

UNC Charlotte’s soon-to-open Energy Production and Infrastructure Center (EPIC) is a prime example of how the corporate community partners with an urban research university to help drive the future of a mainstay industry. EPIC was tailored to develop and train the next generation of energy industry leadership. It was conceived with involvement from energy industry leaders and with the help of generous financial support from the state.

The College of Computing and Informatics is another intellectual resource directly engaged in helping to solve cyber crime and other contemporary business problems in an environment of constant change and innovation. CCI is the largest and fastest growing college of its kind in the state. It offers a rich set of education and research programs, from computer science – to information technology – to bioinformatics, and is a major convener of related technology conferences.

Consider CCI’s role in “Envision: Charlotte.” This public-private collaboration is working toward sustained reduction in electric energy use by 20 percent in some 70 buildings in the Charlotte central business district by 2016, the first time anywhere in the country an urban area with large buildings will be connected to a “Smart Grid.” The Smart Grid will provide detailed information about energy demands, and University researchers will analyze that data with an aim to creating building systems that use energy more efficiently and energy delivery systems that allocate electrical power in the most effective way possible.

For over 40 years the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute has partnered with Charlotte’s leadership to find solutions to the social, economic and environmental challenges facing our communities. One Institute initiative of note, BusinessFirst Charlotte, is a partnership between the city and the Charlotte Chamber that focuses on helping businesses solve problems. Staff and volunteers visit business owners to hear first-hand about their everyday problems and help identify solutions.

The idea of the urban research university isn’t new. When the modern research university and the academic disciplines emerged in America in the late 19th century, they developed mostly

in major cities, and their leaders insisted that their urban location was crucial to their success. Nicholas Murray Butler, who transformed Columbia from a traditional college into a modern university, wrote that “there is no doubt whatsoever as to the superiority of the city’s opportunities and environment as a place of graduate, professional and technical study.”

I agree, but must add that it takes collaboration to strengthen and diversify a region’s economic, cultural and social offerings. As the region’s only public research university and by far its largest and most comprehensive, we are in the right place to work with business and industry for the benefit of the community, and the time to share resources and build new partnerships is now.

###