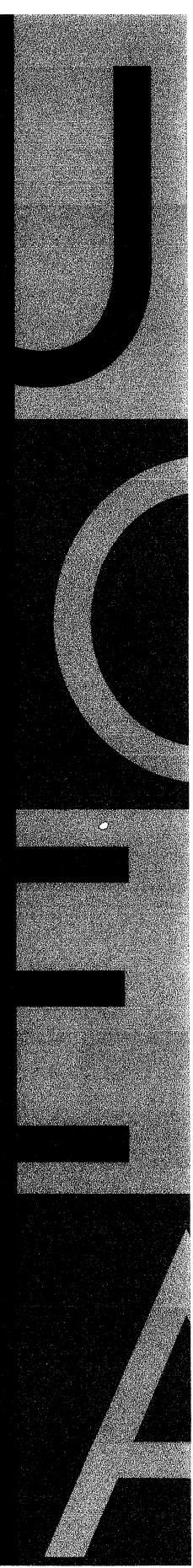


# CONTINUING HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW



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# *Outreach in the Twenty-First Century: Survival Strategies for a Unique Environment*

*Anne C. Kaplan*

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

## INTRODUCTION

**S**PEAKERS AT THE 2004 UCEA ANNUAL Conference, “The New Majority,” made it repeatedly clear that the number of non traditional students in higher education has surpassed the number of 18-22 year olds. The population that was continuing education’s primary constituency is now the constituency of higher education in general. The margin has become the center, presenting educators – particularly those in continuing education – with numerous opportunities and challenges. “As nontraditional students become an increasingly significant population in most colleges and universities,” conference planners asked, “how is this affecting continuing education organizational structures?”

Judging from at least some of the presentations and much of the conversation in San Antonio, centralized continuing education organizations are responding to this new focus on “their” constituency by contemplating decentralization, and decentralized units are coming back together. The trend toward centralization seems to be based on the premise that continuing educators have been dealing with these nontraditional populations for years; they know these groups, and can get the rest of the university up to speed faster if they are in charge. Decentralization, on the other hand,

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appears to be designed to get experienced professional continuing educators into other campus units where their wisdom and practical knowledge will rub off on staff whose work has been limited to the 18–22 year-old cohort.

*... Continuing education units ... are perfectly positioned to help make the case for the role that universities play in economic and workforce development, education reform, social welfare, municipal planning, and the myriad policy issues with which local governments and state legislators struggle every day.*

Neither of these approaches is new, and neither seems to address the much larger issues that confront higher education institutions. First, higher education is under attack from politicians and the press. Costs are said to be too high, accountability too low. Second, state and federal support for higher education is being reduced at the very time when the need for an educated workforce and the demand for educational services are at an all time high. The shift in higher education demographics is related insofar as institutional apathy toward addressing the needs of the “new majority” often exacerbates the attacks, and new student populations contribute to the demand for new services. Nevertheless, the influx of formerly nontraditional students is not the greatest challenge facing American higher education, and it should not be the primary challenge facing continuing education units, either.

This is a moment in the history of higher education when continuing education units—particularly those that go beyond the delivery of instruction to incorporate outreach, engagement, and public service—are perfectly positioned to help make the case for the role that universities play in economic development, workforce development, education reform, social welfare, municipal planning, and the myriad policy issues with which local governments and state legislators struggle every day. As public officials at all levels retreat from supporting public funding for higher education, it is crucial that universities find new and more effective ways to assert their public value. Continuing educators have much to contribute to that discussion, especially when they assume a

more comprehensive role in the life of the institution and are not marginalized organizationally or occupied solely with instruction.

Continuing education in the traditional sense has meant offering credit and noncredit programs to busy adults who cannot come to campus to study. In addition to the delivery of instructional programs, however, units responsible for continuing education, especially at institutions like Northern Illinois University (NIU) that have off-campus facilities, can also offer more visible ways of extending the university's reach beyond the main campus. NIU's continuing education unit, like some others across the country in recent years, refashioned itself as "university outreach" in 2001 and embraced engagement, not only with students but also with associations, businesses, service agencies, and communities across its region. University outreach staff see "outreach," tailored to the needs and aspirations of NIU's unique region, as a key component in the university's claim to be a major regional—and therefore state and national—resource. The loss of continuing education's demographic "turf" (those "nontraditional" students who are becoming more standard all the time) to the university as a whole makes embracing this broader mission ever more important.

#### NIU'S CONTEXT

##### *History*

Northern Illinois University is a large doctoral/research-extensive university. It is not a land grant institution, and it has never offered traditional extension services. As the only public university in northern Illinois outside of Chicago, however, NIU does have a regional mission to serve the area from Chicago to the Mississippi River. Most of the university's students come from this area, and many of its graduates are employed there. The university has offered credit courses at sites throughout the region for more than 60 years and is a major provider of continuing professional education for northern Illinois residents. While

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the university delivers some programming within the city of Chicago, its focus has been the expanding suburban area that makes up the so-called "collar counties," traditional manufacturing cities, and the small towns scattered across the rich farmland of north central and northwestern Illinois. NIU has a long tradition of providing community-oriented services in all of these areas through college external programming offices, individual faculty, and various centers and institutes.

Continuing education at NIU has endured waves of reform similar to those that occurred across the country. From the 1930s through the late 1960s continuing education operations were decentralized, with credit programming located in the colleges; noncredit programs, community services, and conferencing existed in separate central offices. A College of Continuing Education brought these units together under a dean in 1972, and that structure prevailed for the next 15 years. In 1987, continuing education staff were dispersed in order to create external programming offices in each of the academic colleges. Central functions such as registration and the mechanics of off-campus credit delivery remained in a central office under an executive director. Coincident with, but independent of, this movement of continuing education staff and resources, the university was increasing its economic and community development activities in the region; and, in the period between 1992 and 2001, NIU opened three regional education centers capable of housing both credit courses and noncredit conferences and workshops. By 2002, it was clear that coherence in external programming was needed to maximize the university's impact.

#### ***Restructuring for the Twenty-First Century***

To ensure that the university would be served by an aggressive, focused outreach program, NIU launched a basic strategy of "mergers and acquisitions" in 2000–2001. The President and the Provost assigned the Vice President for Administration (a position later titled Administration and University Outreach) the task of bringing together externally focused units with the intention of increasing the university's regional impact. The units

involved were the remnants of the former college of continuing education, an online learning unit, an applied research and technical assistance unit, four regional education centers, and a number of stand-alone programs that served mainly off-campus audiences. Altogether, there were 12 operations, some with a reputation for excellent performance and some that needed to be strengthened or, failing that, shut down. Some of these units were actively looking for a home; others were merely available. Regardless of their prior status, once they came together, the university could claim a division that could be charged with extending the campus to diverse and numerous forums. What the new unit could not yet claim was a coherent vision or the operational expertise to sustain that vision.

#### CONFRONTING REALITY

Determining how to define and implement a new vision was the next step. The Vice President brought together ten thinkers and leaders from across the newly assembled units to assess the division's situation. Although not available when the process began, Jim Collins' book *Good to Great* (HarperBusiness, 2001) ultimately provided a structure for this analysis and a constant prod to keep the group on track. A lot of time went into reviewing the history of the university, the development of the region around it, and the realities that both the outreach office, as a newly created unit, and the university itself faced in this particular location and at this time. As Collins would say, the group confronted the "brutal facts."

#### *A Unique Region*

To talk meaningfully about the mission of a regional university, the group first needed to achieve a common understanding of the region itself. The majority of land in NIU's huge service area is rural. Stretching from Chicago to the Mississippi River, the region includes some of the finest corn-growing soils on earth, but rich (and poor) rural areas are only a part of the picture. The region also contains aging industrial cities such as Moline, Rock Island, Rockford, Elgin, and Aurora; older suburbs needing revitalization;

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and suburban and exurban communities experiencing explosive growth. Although NIU is 65 miles from Chicago's Loop, the metropolitan area has grown rapidly to the west, bringing suburbs to within 15 minutes of the

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DeKalb campus. The combination of expanding suburbs, aging industrial towns, and rural areas makes a dynamic mix. Bob Gleeson, Director of the Center for Governmental Studies at NIU, has described Chicago's far-western suburbs as "an engine of wealth" and "one of America's great developing spaces." In such an environment, one of the things a university can do, Gleeson says, "is to bring high quality intellectual thought directly to bear on governance. Poor governance leads to things like crime, urban sprawl, exclusionary housing and a host of other problems; hopefully we can help this area avoid or curtail such problems."

#### *Politics of Accountability*

In Illinois, as across the nation, higher education is confronting increasing demands for evidence of its value, and particularly demands for justification of the kind of work it does and for its costs. While teaching is the primary role of all but a few narrowly focused research institutions, public institutions—especially public regional institutions—must take every opportunity to assert a role for higher education that goes beyond instruction. Allowing legislators and the public to dismiss, overlook, or devalue universities' other core competencies will undermine the comprehensive role these institutions have built over decades and will ultimately change the nature of instruction as well. If instruction is the only mission, then all the public needs is the cheapest and most efficient delivery of this commodity. A regional university, particularly

a university that provides instruction where it is needed and when it is needed, can make the case that instruction is the leading edge of a whole range of university services.

***Regional Engagement***

The intellectual capacity that produces instruction can serve many other purposes as well. Research, the most obvious of those uses, is the one most familiar to faculty. But in the current climate, many public officials view research as the province of what should be a limited number of private universities and flagship publics. To survive in the twenty-first century and to make appropriate, effective, and exciting use of the intellectual capital available on its campus, a regional university must become part of the fabric, the culture, the vitality of its service area. The public must see the university as a partner in its educational, social, cultural, political, and technological future. This does not happen solely through instruction.

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***Fragmentation***

Nor does it happen through fragmented activity—bits and pieces that never find synergies within the university or with the communities of the region. In 2002, the 12 externally focused units now collected in NIU's newly created university outreach division were not really acquainted with each other, nor were they very visible to the rest of the institution. There was no centralized planning or marketing, little in the way of internal communications, no way to curb significant duplication of effort, and not much awareness of the importance of engagement. As a result, the university was forever scrambling for information. It took weeks to collect a list of staff contacts and activities related to any particular part of the region. The university could not respond quickly to questions from legislators or the governor's office about regional or statewide impact, and opportunities to build regional loyalty to the institution were frequently missed.

**STRATEGIC PLANNING*****Now What?***

The newly created outreach division, with few of its 115 staff members understanding why or how a new organization might affect their work,

mounted a fairly conventional but effective strategic planning process intended to bring everyone to a shared focus. The eight-month process began with ten leaders who worked together for several months and then expanded to include more staff in each subsequent phase until all staff members were involved. In order to move all staff toward a shared vision, the planning process provided contextual information and ongoing discussions of the environment, operations, and goals. For university outreach as a whole and for each unit within the division, staff tried to answer similar questions:

- What is unique about our situation?
- What are the elements of our next success?
- What can we be the best at?
- How can we become more efficient?
- How do we make engagement work?
- What can we do to integrate engagement activities across the institution?

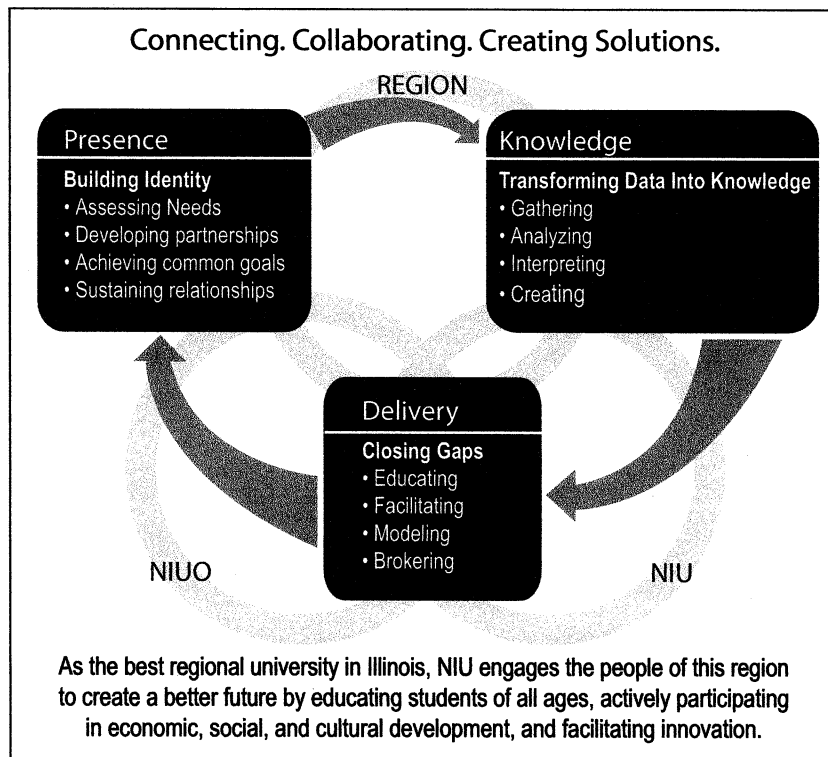
The question that was not asked was, "How can we do more with less," and the Vice President insisted from the outset that the planning process was not about budget cuts and downsizing. The economic climate in Illinois during the past three years has been no better than the climate in most other states, and NIU has had its share of budget cuts. The outreach division was not spared, but the collective thinking that got staff focused on what their units can do best, what they really care about, and what keeps their units solvent (again, thanks to Jim Collins) made managing those budget cuts much easier. Staff in NIU Outreach, more so than staff in most other parts of the university, thought about the future, and about what they were building, not about what they might lose. Predictable anxieties and skepticism notwithstanding, response to this organizational change was energetic and mostly positive. Most staff members were participating in their own career development, coming to believe that they were embedded in a function that is critical to the institution, and were gradually being convinced that their work was valued and could be defended.

#### *Strategies for Success*

In order to reinforce the results of the planning process, each outreach unit

## OUTREACH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

was asked to develop a business plan aligned with the division's vision, mission, and priorities. Marketing and communications staff had the task of developing new branding and identity standards, and a division-wide performance management process was implemented that emphasized integrating engagement into departmental, unit, and individual activities. Finally, the planning group created a graphic that demonstrated both the concepts that underlay the planning process and the functions of the units within the outreach division.



The overlapping circles of the Venn diagram place NIU Outreach within NIU and NIU within northern Illinois. The boxes labeled “presence,” “knowledge,” and “delivery” represent what university outreach does. Importantly, activities can start in or be primarily focused on achieving the results in any of the boxes, but no matter where the activity or the staff member starts, it is assumed that the other two functions will be kept firmly in mind. Outreach staff members are learning to work in all three of the inter-related areas, not just the one which defines the employee's primary job.

Most universities have units that are charged with each of the functions we call knowledge, delivery, and presence. Continuing education units are generally responsible for the mechanics of delivering courses and programs

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to nontraditional students. Some continuing education units manage regional facilities or satellite campuses where this instructional delivery takes place. Many universities have applied research and economic development units, but these are rarely associated with the continuing education units or with the regional facilities and campuses—in spite of the fact that staff in these applied research units know things about the region that could and should inform the programming delivered by the continuing education unit. Moreover, staff who manage the regional facilities and the satellite campuses know things about the areas they serve. They have developed or should be expected to develop relationships with the business leaders, school and agency personnel, and government officials in the area, which could and should inform the research and economic development agenda of the applied research unit.

That these synergies do not come naturally to most institutions reflects a division of intellectual labor that creates unnatural and unproductive hierarchies both within and among universities. Reasserting a coherent and comprehensive vision of university work is a necessary part of reclaiming public support for the role of the university in society. Continuing educators cannot make the case for public support of higher education by themselves, but as the area of the university most frequently in contact with the university's many public constituencies, continuing education units can and should reflect the best the university has to offer.

#### **NEXT STEPS**

With planning completed and an 18-month experience with implementation, one might expect a degree of comfort with prospects for the future. Organizational change rarely works that way. Getting new roles straight

continues to be a work in progress at every level. Inculcating a new vision and mission into daily operations continues to challenge the division's leaders, as people tend to slide back into familiar attitudes and work patterns. Staff members continue to receive a great deal of contextual information, and that information is necessary, but not by itself sufficient. Guidance, coaching, repetition, and more repetition are all needed to keep a new organization firmly on track.

***Regional Development***

Initiatives now on the drawing board include regional approaches to economic and community development that involve multiple players at NIU as well as local community colleges, governments, and other organizations. Historically, the units in outreach have focused on completing tasks, projects, and contracts in ways that would bring in more business. The imperatives of this century require that and much more. Departing from the project or program basis, the division plans to coordinate its broad range of activities in the interests of regional development. This will mean thinking much more explicitly about engagement and sharing information and activities in new ways and with a broader range of partners.


***University-Wide Engagement***

Extending "engagement" as a basic operational commitment across the university challenges NIU Outreach in ways similar to those facing universities across the country, even the land grants. A delicate touch and a long view are essential. Most helpfully for outreach at NIU, the university president strongly and frequently advocates regional engagement. NIU Outreach's primary approach has been to focus on topics such as P-16 reform, health services, and economic development. Such interdisciplinary topics involve both deans and faculty in multiple colleges in working with outreach staff and local agencies to address needs and aspirations across the region. In addition to coordinating technical assistance and sharing the intelligence

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that staff bring back from the field, the division hopes to inspire academic offerings targeted to newly discovered (or rediscovered) regional needs. Among key survival strategies, NIU Outreach leaders place a high priority

on the integration of outreach operations and commitment to engagement into other university functions. Building these internal working relationships tends to be equally as complex as working with external communities and groups.

In this economic and political climate, both public universities in general and outreach units in particular face a future that looks less and less like the past. Institutional alacrity in responding to older students can help, of course, but it takes more than weekend courses and expedited degree programs to address the major issues of hostile political and financial environments and uncertain public confidence. The shift in demographics, with more and more adult students seeking university courses and degrees, presents an opportunity to make the case for the value of a comprehensive regional university. That value, if asserted and made visible at the local and regional level, will ultimately be understood at the national level as well. At NIU, this work is in progress. 

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*Based on a presentation at the 89th Annual UCEA Conference on April 15, 2004, San Antonio, Texas. More detailed information about the four phases of the planning process may be found at [www.outreach.niu.edu](http://www.outreach.niu.edu).*