

The Engaged University

Northern Kentucky University is building closer links to its community

By Jon Marcus

HIGHLAND HEIGHTS, KENTUCKY

THE INTRODUCTIONS have been made, the speeches finished, the endless litany of benefactors thanked when the blast of an unseen and unmuffled engine suddenly revs to life, shaking the arena and the polite crowd gathered in it with an ear-blasting, methanol-fueled roar.

James Votruba smiles. “It’s the faculty senate,” he jokes.

Nothing could ruin this day. Wielding a giant pair of scissors, Votruba is about to cut the ceremonial ribbon on the new \$69 million, 10,000-seat Bank of Kentucky Center at Northern Kentucky University, where he is the president. In addition to the university’s NCAA Division II men’s and women’s basketball teams, the arena is designed to host events including Cirque du Soleil, performers such as Carrie Underwood, and the Monster Truck Tour (which accounts for the interruption from the monster truck concealed from the audience behind a curtain).

The week before, Votruba had presided at the opening of a sleek new \$37 million student union with a Starbucks, a sushi bar and plasma-screen TVs. They showed, in continuous loops, the progress of the nearly \$300 million worth of building projects on his campus, which, just 40 years before that, was a farm where cows grazed on 400 acres of empty, rolling fields seven miles southeast of Cincinnati.

The youngest of Kentucky’s eight state universities, NKU began as a community college that didn’t formally become a university until 1976, but has since seen growth that seems methanol fueled itself, racing to an enrollment of 15,000—up 50 percent in just the last ten years. And it plans to add about as many undergraduates in the next 12 years as it did in its first 25, toward a goal of 26,000 by 2020.

What has put this once-provincial campus on the higher education map is its seemingly single-minded push to improve the lot of its surrounding region. It’s not some vague pledge. (Nor is it purely altruistic; if the public university helps the community, this perfectly reasonable strategy goes, the community will stand behind it.) A lynchpin of a regional development plan Votruba and others at the school coauthored, NKU has promised to help create some 50,000 new, high-paying jobs by 2015 and also help to double the number of Kentuckians with bachelor’s degrees to 800,000, as a means of supplanting the state’s traditional economic mainstays of coal-mining, horse-breeding, bourbon and tobacco, with advanced manufacturing, finance, healthcare, business services, and technology. That’s the reason for the push to boost enrollment—and the attraction, it seems, for rising numbers of arriving students.

To make the area more economically competitive, the university has taken on uncommon and audacious roles, beginning not with entering freshmen, but with elementary-

school children; training local teachers in such areas as math and science; recruiting high-performing high school graduates to attend the university; nudging its own students toward programs that meet the needs of local business—information, finance, science and technology, healthcare and social services; and working to attract bachelor’s degree holders from other states by beefing up its graduate-level offerings and enrollment, in a “brain-gain” strategy meant to reverse Kentucky’s brain drain by attracting some 8,600 college graduates from outside the region by 2020.

Lots of taxpayer-supported universities mumble about contributing to economic development but don’t follow through—a survey of American Association of State Colleges and Universities presidents and chancellors found that fewer than half believe their schools are closely linked to their communities. But NKU is making a name for itself by adding programs in such eminently practical disciplines as entrepreneurship and information technology management, opening a Center for Civic Engagement, even making faculty hiring, tenure and promotion contingent on community service along with teaching and research.

“Regions that make talent a central priority are anchored by high-performing universities that not only nurture talent in their classrooms and laboratories but also apply their knowledge to advance regional economic and social progress,” asserts the school’s strategic plan, which was the subject of a case study at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “They are stewards of their regions.”

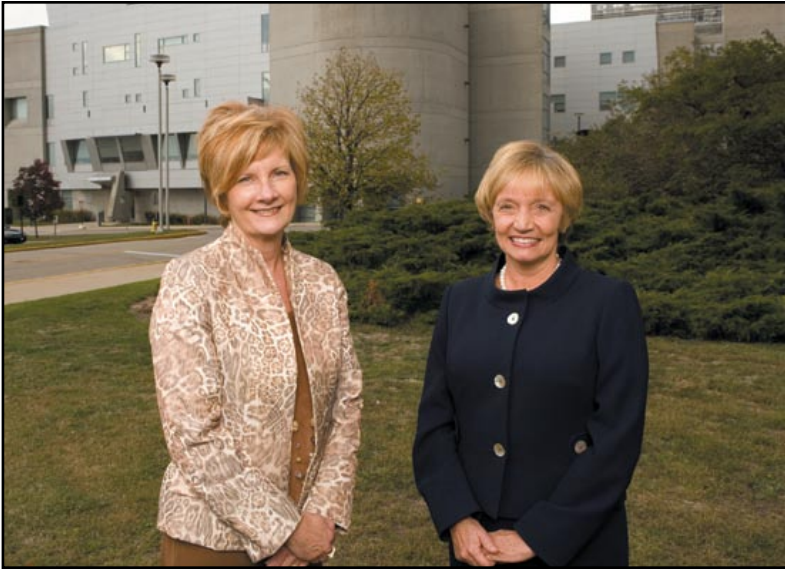
NKU was singled out by George W. Bush as an example of how public universities can be partners in economic competitiveness with businesses and civic institutions. It was one of 13 universities that helped the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to devise a voluntary higher education classification of “community engaged,” and was one



Robin Nelson, Black Star, for CrossTalk

President James Votruba of Northern Kentucky University has vigorously promoted ties between the university and the surrounding region.

Just 40 years ago, Northern Kentucky University was a farm where cows grazed on 400 acres of empty, rolling fields seven miles southeast of Cincinnati.



Sue Hodges Moore, Northern Kentucky University vice president for planning, policy and budget, and Gail W. Wells, vice president for academic affairs, say the university cannot suffer more budget cuts and still play a key role in regional economic development.

of 76 institutions ultimately granted that distinction.

Noting that its new arena “testifies to the university’s growing prominence in the economy of this region,” the *Cincinnati Enquirer* lauded NKU as a major local asset—this at a time when many other universities have yet to lower the fences that divide them from their neighborhoods. Votruba chaired an AASCU task force on public engagement (it found, among other things, that most universities were more concerned with adding programs, faculty and buildings than contributing to local social or economic well being) and delivered the annual AASCU President-to-Presidents lecture on the topic, “Leading the Engaged University.” He has been nicknamed “the mayor of Northern Kentucky” and was ranked the region’s eighth most influential person by *Cincinnati Magazine*.

Northern Kentucky seems a fertile place for such collaboration. Medium-sized metropolitan areas like greater Cincinnati are attractive to business, with low costs of living (Cincinnati’s is fully ten percent below the national average, and its housing prices 20 percent below), and with services employers need, including law firms and advertising agencies—without the unions and big-city social problems businesses don’t want. Cincinnati is already home to major companies, including Procter & Gamble, May Department Stores, and Fidelity Investments’ largest branch outside its Boston headquarters. Its new football and baseball stadiums for the Bengals and the Reds huddle up to the Ohio River, which divides Ohio from Kentucky. The area also has creditable cultural activities, and boasts a less-than-24-minute average commute, one

of the fastest in the country—an odd thing to promote, it seems, until you experience the unaccustomed bliss of coasting through a weekday rush hour without ever stepping on the brakes.

There are also significant challenges. The percentage of people with bachelor’s degrees in northern Kentucky is as low as ten percent in the western fringes of the university’s service area, far short of the national average of 27 percent. In some districts, the high school graduation rate sags below 62 percent. Per-capita income is \$28,513, putting Kentucky 43rd among the 50 states. The population is aging, as 25- to 34-year-olds move away in search of higher-paying jobs. Rural Kentucky remains largely agricultural, and what industry does exist is singularly vulnerable to larger economic shifts. Kentucky is fourth in the United States in the number of cars and trucks assembled, for example, and also makes car parts and jet engines, at a time when demand for those things is drying up.

The story of NKU is a cautionary tale in other ways, too. The university’s community-engagement crusade has stumbled against impediments both practical and cultural. For one thing, setting goals risks falling short of them when resources fail to keep pace, as they did here even before the current economic crisis. Kentucky’s higher education system got a surge of cash when it was overhauled under the groundbreaking Postsecondary Improvement Act of 1997, more commonly called House Bill 1, the goal of which was to increase enrollment and improve standards.

But budget shortfalls threaten to erode any gains. The state allocation for public universities had already been cut by \$23 million last year when it was learned it would be slashed by \$41 million more. Now state tax revenue is projected to decline by yet another \$900 million this year and next, out of a budget of \$20 billion. The governor already has proposed reducing higher-education funding by another 12 percent, putting even more of the burden on tuition, which now accounts for nearly two-thirds of NKU’s operating budget, and has been rising steeply.

Raising tuition, of course, makes it harder to increase enrollment. The regional economic plan, Vision 2015, calls for 4,005 graduates per year to be produced by NKU and other local colleges and universities. The state’s Council on Postsecondary Education has an even more ambitious target of 3,149 graduates per year by 2020 from NKU alone, which now produces 1,624. That would require an average annual enrollment growth of five percent, and an increase in the budget from the current \$186 million a year to \$571 million by 2020. It also means adding 460 tenure-track faculty and a million more square feet of space.

NKU has begun to warn that if the budget cuts continue, it will have to readjust, or at least push back, its enrollment targets. And with seven years to go, the closest answer anyone will give to the question of how many jobs have been created toward that goal of 50,000 is 2,540, an estimate made by the Northern Kentucky Tri-County Economic Development Corporation. “If we ask ourselves whether the campus is positioned to provide what both the state and the region require of us, the honest answer is no,” Votruba said last year in a somber state-of-the-university address.

NKU has publicly forged a united front with its fellow public universities to make a case for holding firm on funding, but there is growing friction as they all vie for the same finite resources. The well-connected flagship University of Kentucky has an ambitious plan itself, to become a top-20 public research

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university by 2020, by increasing enrollment, hiring new faculty, and increasing research spending. This would require an annual budget reaching \$1 billion, \$421 million of which would be requested from the already stretched state legislature.

Meanwhile, despite the attempt of House Bill 1 to foil costly duplication by giving each state university an explicit mission (the University of Louisville's, for example, is urban research), the universities have their own ideas. The University of Louisville angered frustrated legislators by planning a research center in *rural* health, and Western Kentucky University asked for a saltwater shrimp biotechnology program, even though Kentucky State already has a freshwater shrimp production center, and Western Kentucky University is 727 miles from the nearest ocean. Meanwhile, other areas, like Austin and Charlotte, threaten to surpass Kentucky with their own ascendant university-community alliances, to the frustration of Votruba. "The risk is that we lose momentum and become like everyone else," he said, gazing at the Cincinnati skyline through the windows of his office.

And everyone else seems busy hoarding what they have. Universities often measure their success by how many programs they can add—how many buildings they can build, how much grant money they can get—all to build up their prestige, Votruba said. Yet, from their beginnings, public universities "were never meant to be ends in themselves. They were seen as vehicles to achieve a larger end, an important partner in nation-building, or, more to the point, in region-building. As any industry matures, it runs the risk of losing touch with the constituency it serves," Votruba explained, citing the American auto industry as an example. "I think that has happened with higher education."

Have faculty been universally enthusiastic about community service? "The answer to that is unequivocally no," said Dale Elifrits, a veteran professor and NKU's director of pre-engineering and outreach. Even there, he said, some faculty just won't do it—even though the university has made "public engagement" a condition of hiring, tenure and promotion. Votruba's quip about the faculty senate notwithstanding, Elifrits said, "We have our group of faculty members who we know, no matter what we call and ask for, if they have time, they'll do it. And we know who we shouldn't even bother calling. The fundamental drive by universities to require or encourage faculty to publish and get outside research money is all-consuming." As for himself, Elifrits said, "My own view of a faculty member is you have a responsibility to the public to expand the body of knowledge, which includes reaching out to your community and helping to improve their lives and their productivity." He urges his colleagues, "Please, open up your ears and your eyes to the world that's out there and how you fit into it"

While, as Votruba puts it, other universities and many faculty are doing things the way they always have, NKU has found it slightly easier to do things differently. For one thing, while research is conducted there, it is not primarily a research university like those at which Votruba spent his earlier career (Michigan State and SUNY Binghamton). And NKU is such a relatively young school that there is less deep-rooted tradition to overcome. The first group of faculty members arrived to find one building in a field of mud. They held dual jobs (the

registrar also was a chemistry professor), and even planted a community garden. "A lot of universities are trying to move to this community-engagement idea without having had a history of it," said Gail Weils, the provost. "It's in our DNA."

The university's Center for Integrative Science and Math helps to train math and science teachers. Faculty and students from the music and theater departments teach and perform in local schools. In conjunction with the University of Cincinnati, NKU counsels low-income urban high school students to consider going on to college, and gives full scholarships to any qualified graduate from schools in two border cities where about a fifth of families live below the poverty line. This year it began a Ph.D. program that focuses on educational leadership, its first doctorate outside of law.

All of these things stem directly from Vision 2015, the regional development blueprint whose steering committee Votruba co-chaired and which he calls "a textbook example of how a university can graft itself onto an economic-planning process." Vision 2015 is aimed at trying to stop young talent from leaving, by adding high-paying jobs and improving quality of life with parks and green space, better schools, walkable business districts, even free wi-fi in the airport. And, in a region that is homogeneously white and Catholic, Vision 2015 seeks to produce the kind of racial and ethnic diversity employers want. (NKU has pushed for this last goal by, among other things, granting domestic partner benefits to unmarried employees, and by sponsoring public discussions of such controversial issues as evolution in a Bible Belt state that is home to America's only "museum of creationism.")

"One barrier to progress in a community is if it's insular," said Mike Hammons, Vision 2015's president, whose office overlooks the Ohio River from the Kentucky side. "It's helpful when a university takes the lead in establishing policies that are tolerant and welcoming."

NKU has done things on its campus, too, that dovetail with the economic growth plan. In only its eighth year, the university's Fifth Third Bank Entrepreneurship Institute is ranked among the top 25 undergraduate programs for entrepreneurs by *Entrepreneur* magazine, and has been lauded by the *Princeton Review* for the applied nature of the classes. The Infrastructure Management Institute

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Amanda Neace and Keith Wilson, editors of the Northern Kentucky University student newspaper, wonder if the campus can continue its rapid growth in the face of state budget cuts.

Chris Cone, Black Star, for CrossTalk



Douglas Perry, a cell biologist, is founding dean of the new College of Informatics at Northern Kentucky University.

researches management techniques in information technology. The university lured Douglas Perry, a cell biologist who helped create the nation's first entirely new school of informatics at Indiana University, to be founding dean of its own new College of Informatics, which encompasses information management, communication and media, computer science, information technology, and other fields important to the kinds of businesses northern Kentucky is trying to attract. All of the first 235 graduates got jobs, with average annual starting salaries above \$50,000.

Word of this is getting out. Since 2005, the number of freshman applicants has jumped 22 percent in spite of higher tuition and heightened

entrance requirements, at a school whose previous open-enrollment policy earned it the nickname "No Knowledge University," and whose most famous alumnus is actor George Clooney, who studied journalism before he dropped out. Forty percent of students are the first in their families to go to college. "We visited a lot of schools where nothing was happening," said freshman Michael Mann, who chose NKU over the University of Kentucky. "Here they're really doing things."

While more than four out of five NKU students are commuters, more, like Mann, are living in new dorms or sticking around between classes in the new student union. Students sipping Starbucks lattes browse brochures on tables set up by recruiters for FedEx and Procter & Gamble. "I see tons of people just walking around," said Keith Wilson, a

senior and opinion editor of the student newspaper, the *Northerner*. "When I first came here, people just didn't hang out." Amanda Neace, a junior and the paper's co-editor in chief, added, "People who came here like me just a few years ago wouldn't believe how much this place has changed."

Now the question is whether that momentum can continue. The university is trying to offset its continuing budget hits by finding new ways to save money—and to make it. Despite the \$3.3 million cut in its \$55 million state allocation this year, it shuffled the budget enough to pay for 61 new full-time and 116 part-time faculty. It plans to earn a profit from the Bank of Kentucky Center, and to add a

money-making \$30 million hotel, retail, restaurant and office complex at the entrance to the campus. It built the student center with the proceeds of a fee that students levied on themselves (in a poll by the *Northerner*, 83 percent said they considered it a good investment), saved \$20 million that was to have been spent on a new dorm by converting a nearby former nursing home instead, and opted to forgo moving to NCAA Division I, which would have required \$25 million in facility improvements. (Western Kentucky University had to increase student fees by \$70 a semester to pay for doubling its football budget, and spent \$49 million on its stadium when it moved from Division IAA to Division IA.)

NKU also has eliminated majors such as aviation management, and though local economic-development types are pushing for an expensive engineering major, it so far has not added one, teaming up instead to run dual engineering programs with the universities of Kentucky, Louisville and Cincinnati.

Even all of that might not be enough maintain momentum. "The reallocation was our attempt to say, 'What can we do to keep on track?'" said Sue Hodges Moore, vice president for planning, policy and budget. "But that cannot go on forever. Something's got to give."

Or, say university officials, the community will have to stand up for the university the way they say the university has stood up for the community. "It's not all about the institution. It's about what the state needs and what this region needs," Moore said. Now comes the biggest test of his community-engagement strategy, Votruba said. "The more tangible benefits they see accruing to them, their families, their communities, their lives, the more likely people should be to support us at budget time, at advocacy time," he said.

Hammons, the Visions 2015 president, is a believer. "We were the last regional university established in Kentucky, and in a sense we accepted that," he said. "Whatever we got, we felt we were lucky to get it. But about ten years ago that changed. We became a whole lot more aggressive, and we spoke as a community. And it's really important for the state to keep focused not on how we can cut the pie more, but how we can increase the pie."

Back at the ribbon-cutting for the Bank of Kentucky Center, which is connected to the rest of the campus by a pedestrian bridge, Votruba wields his giant scissors again and again with various groups of political and financial backers. "Last night, I got served a little bit too much of that poison, baby," Carrie Underwood's voice croons from the speakers. "Last night, I did things I'm not proud of/And I got a little crazy." The concessions are in full operation, and there are cheerleaders and an a cappella group to sing the national anthem. The air is thick with optimism.

"We need more Kentuckians to go to college. We need more Kentuckians to finish college if we're going to thrive as a community and as a region," Votruba says to the assembled. "Tens of thousands of visitors will come here each year. And they'll see this bridge as a bridge to their future." ♦

Jon Marcus is a writer based in Boston, who covers higher education in the U.S. for the (UK) *Times Higher Education* magazine.

Reductions in state funding for higher education are putting even more of the burden on tuition, which now accounts for nearly two-thirds of NKU's budget, and has been rising steeply.