

Collaborating for Quality Growth: Applying Higher Education Resources to Community Needs

Report on Conference Focus Group Discussions

Introduction



On April 9, 2003, more than 120 college/university faculty and staff, government officials, community planners, and business/civic leaders met at the conference “Collaborating for Quality Growth.” The goals of the event were to 1) identify higher education expertise on issues relating to quality growth and 2) foster new collaborations between Atlanta-area institutions and community stakeholders.

Co-hosting the conference were the Atlanta Regional Consortium for Higher Education (ARCHE), Atlanta Regional Commission, Association County Commissioners of Georgia, Urban Land Institute-Atlanta District Council, Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and Georgia Department of Community Affairs.

A key portion of the conference centered on eight focus group

sessions in which participants from all sectors discussed various community growth-related issues, pertinent college and university resources, and how best to apply these resources to community needs through collaboration.

A summary of the insights and recommendations offered by focus group participants is provided in this report. As a summary, the following is intended only to capture the major ideas expressed during the focus groups.

The views and opinions in this report are those of conference participants, and are not necessarily the positions or policies of ARCHE or any conference co-host or sponsor.

“Collaborating for Quality Growth” Conference Co-hosts:



ULI Atlanta



ATLANTA REGIONAL CONSORTIUM *for* HIGHER EDUCATION

Defining the Current Situation

COMMUNITIES

Communities of all sizes currently face challenges in dealing with growth in ways that ensure a high quality of life for their citizens.

- Funding constraints and limitations on personnel resources often make it very difficult for city and county officials to address long-range planning issues. These communities need assistance defining the amount of growth they want and identifying the resources available to support that growth.
- Even though many resources are available to communities from agencies, higher education, and other providers, local officials can find it

confusing to sort out who does what and – most importantly – who does what *well*.

- Educating the public and various stakeholder groups in a jurisdiction about complex planning issues and the policy decisions required to implement long-term change adds significantly to the difficulty of creating a long-term vision for a community’s growth.
- Officials have a particular challenge in motivating citizens to attend meetings, learn about issues, and communicate *before* a problem becomes a crisis.
- Communication problems on issues of growth are exacerbated by different understandings people have of the same words, based on their different value judgments: what one

“We need real facts to make good informed decisions and to educate the public... The facts we need relate to how use of land can affect transportation, air quality, health, and the quality of life issues that are so important.”

– Helen Davis Hatch, Principal, Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback & Associates, Inc., and Chair, Urban Land Institute-Atlanta District Council

person believes is “quality growth” may be “over-regulation” in the opinion of another.

- Educating elected officials about growth-related issues is challenging when there is high turnover among officials, and when particular interest groups are first in line to influence officials during election campaigns.
- Often, zoning and other growth issues generate public outcry that discourages public officials from



making tough decisions. Trying to make the right decision for a community doesn't matter much if it simply gets one thrown out of office.

- Not surprisingly, given the problems of dealing with growth at the local level, it becomes almost impossible for officials and the public to think about how their jurisdiction fits into and affects the larger Atlanta region.

“Colleges and universities are interested in becoming more integrated with the communities in which they are located and are reaching out to new communities. They also have expertise in building and operating mixed-use, self-sufficient communities because they often are such.”

– Michael M. Sizemore, Principal, Sizemore Group, and Member, Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce Land Use Committee

HIGHER EDUCATION

Colleges and universities have many resources that could help communities deal with a broad range of issues related to growth, but organizing, publicizing, and delivering these resources in collaborative ways present challenges to both higher education and communities.

- The most valuable resources colleges and universities can offer communities are the knowledge and expertise of their faculty, the research that is done on growth-related issues, and the service learning of student interns.
- While not a focus of this particular conference, what institutions do in their own campus development – the quality of the growth that they undertake on their campuses – directly affects the communities in which they are located.
- While colleges and universities have valuable resources to offer communities, the institutions do not have unlimited resources themselves, and so must be careful not to try to be all things to all people. Therefore, it is important that college and university outreach efforts fit within their missions as educational institutions.





- Even though institutions may have been interested in increasing their outreach efforts, funding

“Another model of how universities can promote quality growth is through their community outreach programs. Communities can be laboratories that universities can tap into to try out quality growth ideas.”

– Laura J. Meadows,
Commissioner, Georgia
Department of Community Affairs

mechanisms often are not available to support those efforts.

- Institutions must be careful in providing outreach services if such services compete with those offered by the private sector.
- Other than the ARCHE directory (released at the conference), there are few coordinated efforts to inform communities of the growth-related resources available from higher education. Colleges and universities need to be more entrepreneurial in educating people about the resources they offer and how they can be accessed.
- Faculty research is, for the most part, designed and reported for use by other academics, and is not presented in ways that are useful

to community decision-makers. Research on growth-related topics needs to be “packaged” and made available in ways that allow officials to apply the knowledge in their own situations.

- Tenure decisions on campuses, for the most part, do not recognize or reward faculty outreach efforts to work with communities. In addition, faculty at many institutions are expected to generate grant funding, and often must take research projects that result in grant support over projects that do not.
- While the Atlanta region offers great opportunities as a “living laboratory” for research, faculty must be careful to treat communities as full collaborative partners in the research, lest the community be made to feel like “test subjects.”
- There is a perception among some planning professionals that students are graduating without enough hands-on experiences and are not as engaged in professional organizations and events as they once were.
- While colleges and universities are eager to provide students with internships that allow them to apply academic concepts and gain hands-on

“We need the collective wisdom of all the people of the metro Atlanta area. Corporations, individuals, businesses, universities all need to be a part of quality growth. The issues we are facing do not have easy solutions. And if we’re going to have the will to implement solutions, we need to have created those solutions together.”

– Carl V. Patton, President, Georgia State University

experience, and which involve the students with the community, the host communities and agencies must be willing to give the students meaningful work that meets their learning objectives and is worthy of academic credit.

Recommendations for Next Steps

COMMUNITIES

Communities would benefit from closer working relationships with colleges and universities, and can take positive steps to establish such relationships.

- When exploring partnership opportunities with colleges and universities, communities should clearly understand and define their needs and expectations to avoid confusion over desired outcomes.
- Communities and their representative organizations should invite higher education to attend local events and statewide conferences to make presentations about resources, to establish new

relationships, and explore opportunities for collaboration. College and university faculty could be invited to offer executive summaries of their work in growth-related fields in “poster sessions” at statewide conferences.

- Communities should publicize their needs and proposed projects to colleges and universities (perhaps using the Internet), instead of waiting for institutions to approach them with services and outreach.
- Local governments should partner with each other and work with their representative organizations to develop joint research projects for higher education, and should pool funds to achieve growth initiatives.
- Communities should work with higher education and others to



inform elected state officials regarding quality growth needs, and to seek resources that would support college and university partnerships with communities.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Increasing engagement with local communities would help colleges and universities build greater awareness of resources, foster opportunities for collaboration, and enhance student learning.

- Colleges and universities should build on current efforts to inform communities of their resources and outreach. Administrators and faculty could become more engaged with communities by joining civic groups and attending local and statewide events to raise

awareness of available resources and partnership opportunities.

- ARCHE should maintain the higher education resource directory it has developed and publicize its availability to community officials and organizations across the region. ARCHE should continue working with its conference partners – ARC, ACCG, ULI-Atlanta, the Metro Atlanta Chamber, and DCA – and could serve as a “matchmaker” to help link communities and regional higher education.
- Case studies of successful college and university partnerships with communities should be developed and made available.
- Individual institutions should examine how their departments work together in providing

“Colleges and universities in the Atlanta region do have a great deal to offer both the public and private sector in the field of growth management as evidenced by the outstanding directory that ARCHE has prepared for this conference. We must maximize our sharing of these academic resources by developing and, more importantly, maintaining substantive collaborative ventures.”

– Jerry R. Griffin,
Executive Director, Association
County Commissioners of Georgia

community outreach, and consider creating a single campus contact for community leaders to simplify the process for establishing connections and collaborations.



- Colleges and universities should consider providing greater recognition and support for faculty involvement with communities. For example, community outreach could be incorporated as a consideration in tenure decisions.
- Faculty should seek new ways to summarize and present their research on growth-related issues so the information is more “user friendly” to community decision makers.
- Higher education institutions should continue to encourage the incorporation of student service learning activities into academic program curricula.
- Institutions should increase student exposure to “real world” experiences through use of practitioners as guest lecturers and adjunct faculty.



- Information on internship opportunities should be developed that describes the benefits to hosting communities and agencies, facilitates the matching of students to hosts, and provides guidelines for structuring an effective internship program.

“Higher education is important to quality growth because of the intellectual resources available and because of the physical presence of these large institutions in our communities. Local governments need to reach out to higher education for both reasons.”

– Thomas L. Weyandt, Jr.,
 Director of Comprehensive
 Planning, Atlanta Regional
 Commission



Special thanks are due those who facilitated the focus group sessions, and the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia for providing the laptops used to record participant comments.

About ARCHE

Founded in 1938, the Atlanta Regional Consortium for Higher Education (ARCHE) is a non-profit association of 20 public and private institutions of higher learning. Membership also includes corporate and non-profit Community Partners and regional Affiliated Libraries. The Consortium's mission is to advance Atlanta-area higher education through academic collaboration, community partnerships, and public awareness.

Member Institutions

Agnes Scott College, Atlanta College of Art, Brenau University, Clark Atlanta University, Clayton College & State University, Columbia Theological Seminary, Emory University, Georgia Institute of Technology, Georgia State University, Institute of Paper Science and Technology, Interdenominational Theological Center, Kennesaw State University, Mercer University (Atlanta Campus), Morehouse College, Morehouse School of Medicine, Oglethorpe University, Southern Polytechnic State University, Spelman College, State University of West Georgia, University of Georgia

Community Partners

Atlanta History Center, BellSouth, Communities in Schools, Georgia Humanities Council, Georgia-Pacific, Georgia Power, IBM, Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, SciTrek, Woodruff Arts Center, and YWCA of Greater Atlanta

Affiliated Libraries

Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System, Atlanta History Center Library/Archives, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Georgia Department of Archives and History, and Georgia Public Library Service

At the conference, ARCHE released a directory of its member college and university resources on a range of topics related to growth – from air quality to zoning. This directory of resources, along with a more complete set of notes from the focus group sessions, is available at www.atlantahighered.org.

For more information about the conference co-hosts, please visit:

Atlanta Regional Commission
www.atlantaregional.com

Association County Commissioners of Georgia
www.accg.org

Urban Land Institute-Atlanta District Council
www.atlanta.uli.org

Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce
www.metroatlantachamber.com

Georgia Department of Community Affairs
www.dca.state.ga.us