Reimagining the 21st-Century Land-Grant University

By Karin Fischer

Sandersville, Ga.

For many people at the University of Georgia, this bucolic town in the center of the state is, at most, a way station en route to the annual football showdown with the University of Florida, where the Dairy Lane's peach shakes tempt carloads of Bulldog faithful to slow down and stretch their legs.

But a more robust relationship between the state's flagship research university and the town of 6,200 has begun to flourish. Over the last two years, University of Georgia students and faculty members have worked with community leaders in Sandersville and surrounding Washington County to tackle some of the area's most pressing problems, among them, reversing a doctor shortage and improving air quality to meet federal standards.

Their work is part of an effort, now in seven Georgia counties and soon to expand to an eighth, to link local communities with the university's vast resources. At a time when land-grant and research institutions across the country are seeking deeper engagement with their states and regions, the University of Georgia has repurposed the traditional agricultural-extension model for community and economic outreach. Its Archway Partnership takes the university into the community, where full-time staff members stationed in each participating county work with civic leaders to identify local needs and connect towns with expertise across the university and the state-university system.

Before Archway, "the university was seen as an entity on high you couldn't get to," says Theo McDonald, president of the Washington County Chamber of Commerce and a member of the partnership's executive committee. "Goodness gracious, this opens up everything at the university."

University officials say that Archway, which recently won a regional outreach award from the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and now is up for a national prize, has significant benefits for faculty members and students as well, providing them with opportunities for research and hands-on experience through internships and service-learning projects.

"Land-grant institutions were founded on the notion that scholarship could matter in daily life," says Arthur N. Dunning, the university's vice president for public service and outreach. "We're building on that heritage."

Georgia is not alone in rethinking what it means to be a 21st-century land-grant university. The push to reinvigorate the mission of these institutions, founded to provide practical training in fields like agriculture and engineering to students of all economic classes, dates back nearly a decade to the release of a report by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities. It called for a new "covenant" between public research universities and their surrounding communities and for making engagement central to the whole institution, not just a handful of departments or colleges.

This work is not entirely altruistic, of course. Community-based programs can help state institutions
demonstrate their public value to taxpayers. This year, despite biting budget cuts in Georgia, state support for
the Archway Partnership increased, to $1.25-million. Community partners cover about a quarter of the overall
costs.

Such efforts have only intensified recently, as colleges nationwide have been asked to help revive flagging state
and regional economies and retrain dislocated workers. Even institutions like the University of Michigan at Ann
Arbor, which is not a land grant and previously "thought of itself as quite insular," says Mary Sue Coleman, its
president, find themselves responding to local needs. "We can't think like we did any longer."

Part of Michigan's response has been to create a business-engagement center that connects homegrown
companies to faculty experts, university-generated technology, and continuing-education programs. At the
University of Wisconsin, minisummits bring together campus specialists and community and business leaders
around hot topics, like bioenergy. The connections made can lead to interdisciplinary collaborations on specific
projects, says Greg Wise, director of the university's Center for Community and Economic Development.

Land-grant institutions have always run many outreach programs, of course, but they have often been
uncoordinated efforts by individual faculty members. What makes these recent projects distinct is their
coordinated approach, which helps make the university much more visible in the community.

Another difference is that the new projects are deliberate responses to local needs. Research universities once
jump-started regional economies largely through happenstance—think Stanford University and the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology and their many spin-off companies, says Jack M. Wilson, president of the
University of Massachusetts system. But communities now are turning to universities to help them find
solutions to a more complex set of problems.

"Serendipity only works so well," says Mr. Wilson, who is incoming chairman of an Association of Public and
Land-Grant Universities commission on economic development. "We have to learn to be intentional."

Georgia's Archway Partnership is modeled after an earlier project at North Carolina State University, which
focused on a dozen economically distressed counties statewide for concentrated outreach activities. Rather than
make the existing cooperative-extension agent the point person for the expanded effort, as in North Carolina,
Georgia officials decided to create a new position, the Archway professional, who would also work full time in
the community.

"We didn't want to add to the extension agent's job but to take the best of that model," Mr. Dunning, the
Georgia vice president, says.

For its 2005 pilot, the university went to Colquitt County, in south Georgia, far from its Athens campus, says
Mel Garber, director of the Archway Partnership. With the announcement that a massive new
chicken-processing plant would be built there, the rural county was facing multiple challenges, including limited
wastewater-treatment capacity, few child-care options, and no countywide zoning.

Civic leaders wanted the help but were initially skeptical about whether the far-off university could provide it,
says W. Dennis Epps, who was the first Archway professional in Colquitt County. Six months into the project, he
recalls, he was visited by one of those leaders. "I wanted to tell you I'm committed to Archway," he told a
flabbergasted Mr. Epps, who replied that he assumed so—after all, the man served on the partnership’s
executive committee.

"Oh no," the visitor told Mr. Epps, "too often those shiny-suit-and-briefcase guys come in, study us, give us a
report, and wish us well. I like the fact that you're here, you roll up your sleeves, you stay."
"Gaston," shouts a man at Roger A. Harrison from across one of Sandersville's sun-drenched streets. Mr. Harrison, Washington County's Archway professional, blushes slightly; the previous weekend he had made his debut in a community-theater production of Beauty and the Beast, playing the villainous Gaston.

"At lunch, they talked to me about Beauty and the Beast," he says of an event at which the university and its local partners officially renewed their agreement. "After the play, everyone wanted to know about the EPA grant."

The $700,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency, which the county won this month, will be used to retrofit 88 diesel-burning school buses. It is a big deal to Washington County, which prepared its application with the assistance of Georgia engineering faculty members. For years, the county has been flirting with "nonattainment" status under federal air-quality guidelines, and the designation could hamper local economic-development efforts, most notably plans to build a clean-coal plant.

For Washington County, the second Archway site, reviving the local economy is a paramount priority. Generations here depended on mining kaolin, a chalky clay used in papermaking; even the local shopping center is called Kaolin Plaza. But with the rise of cellphones and e-mail, paper production is down, and county leaders say they need to diversify.

One possibility is to attract Civil War buffs, and so a University of Georgia cartography student is spending the summer mapping historic sites across the county, which include a house where the Union general William Tecumseh Sherman paused for the night on his March to the Sea.

Improving health-care access is another goal. Laura V. Bland, the only Archway professional focused on a particular subject area, is also based in Washington County. Her long-term project is to attract young doctors to the area through scholarships, outreach to medical students from rural areas, and medical residencies and internships at the local community hospital.

"We wanted to figure out what we could really tackle," says Ms. Bland, whose salary is paid in part by the university's College of Public Health. "We don't want it to be fluff."

The partnership's priorities, as well as the approaches to solving those problems, are set by local leaders, with Archway officials helping to identify the needs and the campus resources to respond to them. "It's a bit presumptuous for us to consider that we know what's best for the community," says Mr. Garber, the Archway director.

Allan Vigil, a member of the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia and a car dealer in Clayton County, another Archway community, likes that approach. "They're not shoving things down our throats. This is our agenda."

But community-driven projects come with risks, says Nancy E. Franklin, who studied Archway and other university-outreach programs as part of her doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania.

Community leaders, she says, can be "incremental" in their thinking, preferring narrowly tailored solutions to more ambitious approaches that could, in the long run, better position their region to compete economically.

Universities, on the other hand, can bring their expertise from working across many communities, says Ms. Franklin, who is director of strategic initiatives for outreach and cooperative extension at Pennsylvania State University.
She finds much to like about Archway, since project leaders have thought broadly about ways to leverage institutional resources. That is not always the case with community-outreach programs, she says: "The university partners need to be more active in helping to set the partnering agenda."

"This isn't a particular program we're interested in selling," he says, "but a framework, a relationship with the university."

Generating good will is important for the University of Georgia, where the competition for admission has become increasingly tough, shutting out many students, particularly from rural areas. At the same time, the institution is vying for a shrinking pool of public funds.

Regents have continued to be supportive of the effort, increasing Archway's budget so it could expand this year to two additional communities. Having a dedicated revenue source could help it avoid the fate of the program it modeled itself on, at North Carolina State. That faltered, in part, because no new money was set aside to support it.

Community partners—including local governments and business groups —have also continued to pay a portion of Archway's costs. More money comes from outside grants.
Jack Edmunds, a retired banker who is chairman of the Archway executive committee in Hart County, near the South Carolina border, says the county commission there will argue over dollars and cents but recently approved renewing its share of the program funds, about $12,000, without debate.

Maybe one day, Archway, like the university's cooperative-extension offices, will be in every Georgia county, Mr. Edmunds says. "We know that at the university when Archway knocks," he says, "the door is answered."