

Archway Partnership connects state and campus

Caitlin Byrnes Sep 16, 2009

When Clayton County needed to revamp its image - marred by increased crime, drastic population changes and the loss of school accreditation in fall 2008 - it looked to the University for help.

The University sent MBA student Alex Morrison to the former "Gone With the Wind" town to work in the Office of Economic Development.

During the summer Morrison analyzed demographic trends to figure out how to best tackle the county's challenges.

"They didn't treat me like an intern," he said. "It gave me a low entry barrier way to get real world experience to further my education."

Morrison is just one of the many people better connected to the state through the University's newest outreach: The Archway Partnership.

The service program - piloted in 2005 before officially beginning in 2008 - is still in its infancy.

Unlike past University outreach efforts, the partnership is community-driven. Disadvantaged counties approach Archway and explain where they need help.

The University then provides an area professional who links the county with campus experts.

"The Archway Project is UGA's way to connect more of our faculty and students to citizens of Georgia, and address some issues that challenge communities," Vice President of Outreach Art Dunning said. "My desire is that the University be not only known for excellent undergraduate and graduate instruction, but also one of the best in taking our resources to the citizens."

Recently the Dalton/Whitfield County project began, making it the eighth county the partnership has reached.

"This is a new mechanism to reach out to communities with priority needs," program director Mel Garber said.

The partnership combats the state "money drain," where tax dollars go to urban areas such as Atlanta, instead of the rural areas that make up most of the state.

However, the outreach comes at a high cost in a time of budgetary shortfall. The organization's state budget - just over \$1 million - comes as the governor considers increased budget cuts.

"In most cases, our budget for the communities is basically the same," Garber said. "[It is] stagnant from year to year."

His statement contradicts an open records request showing the Archway Partnership's budget is up almost 112 percent from when it began two years ago, and 42 percent from last year. The program is also facing the six percent budget cuts, like the rest of the University, Garber said.

Washington County's Laura Bland, the only Archway professional focused solely on health care, said she thinks the partnership is a cost-effective plan for the future.

"It's important to understand that a lot of the initiatives we work on are more long-term - they are not quick fixes," Bland said. "It takes a long time to see the return in your investment."

Local contributions have also been on the rise due to strong program interest, Garber said.

Dollars from county groups now account for almost half of the partnership's total budget, up from a one-sixth contribution in 2008.

These donors - including development authorities, hospitals and city governments - sit on an advising board that determines which projects will be funded.

Jack Edmunds of the Hart County Archway executive board said he liked the University listening to the people of his county.

"Archway brought together our county and our city and our partners to sit down at the table and hear each other out," Edmunds said. "That in itself has been an excellent collateral benefit, in addition to the direct benefit of working with the University."

He works with Archway professional Ilka Decker in contacting the University for assistance in leadership, education, tourism and planning.

"The University is so big, broad and diverse that it can be hard to figure out who to go to or who to get attention from," Decker said.

Second-year communications masters student Brian Creech said the partnership is essential, based on his Archway assistantship position, where he creates flyers, press releases and communications strategy plans.

"We help places that don't have a University campus, but who can use our resources to make quality of life better," he said.

With University help, rural counties can develop and become more attractive to businesses, Creech said.

These new businesses pay state taxes that contribute to the pot of University funds, creating a multiplier effect.

Creech said he can see the program expanding to give any student hands-on experience.

That is the goal Dave Chatterjee, a management and information technology professor, had in mind when he reformatted his capstone class to include Archway. "I don't preach the traditional business gospel, which is 'make money at any cost,' so I take a non-profit stance in my lecture," Chatterjee said. "I was having a hard time getting students to listen to me."

His class, which has always worked with for-profit companies such as Zaxby's, now has three projects through Archway. He said the experience is teaching students their civic duty in a time when the country needs it most.

"They saw first-hand the inefficiencies within the health care system, the out of control costs," Chatterjee said about a hospital database remodeling project his students did last semester. "They are seeing a microcosm of a major problem being discussed nationally."

He said as far as he knows, he is the only Terry faculty member involved in the program.

Chatterjee echoed the Archway office in saying he is excited about the program's future expansion.

