

Don't overlook the little guys

Engagement with small businesses: Plenty of opportunity but limited bandwidth

It's not that industry engagement executives have anything against working with smaller companies; in fact, the idea of working with these companies, including start-ups, can be the beginning of an exciting process as both the company and the partnership grow. But corporate engagement leaders admit they sometimes simply lack the time required to pursue these companies as much as they'd like.

"The biggest problem for all of us is how to make the best use of our time," says **Nathan K. Utz**, vice president of Purdue's Office of Industry Partnerships. "One of the beautiful things that made me shift from Notre Dame to Purdue is also a problem; there's so much industry because of size and scale."

In fact, he says, "we have this conversation every day and every week," and he stresses that there is no shortage of opportunities, just a shortage of time and resources. "I absolutely think start-ups and small companies have a lot to offer universities -- and the entire ecosystem -- and we do engage at those levels -- just not at the proactive level we do with the Fortune 500 companies that are obvious targets."

"There are several layers to this landscape map," adds **Kelsey S. Evans**, executive director for corporate relations at the University of Texas-Austin. "I would say on the whole we get philanthropic gifts, research, and student [support] from nearly 400 companies a year, and of that, only about 175 are under active management from development professionals -- the Microsofts,

continued on page 34

What's inside ...

38

Ole Miss partners with HBCUs to tackle "workforce cliff" in insurance industry

Last fall, the University of Mississippi announced a program intended to address a workforce shortage and a lack of diversity in the insurance industry by partnering with agents, brokers, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

40

GSK partners with FIU students to increase diversity and reduce health disparities

Although Florida International University had never previously collaborated with GSK, one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies, their first partnership is a biggie. On January 19th StartUP FIU, the innovation hub at the university, and GSK launched the GSK Innovation Challenge, a 12-week program in which a cohort of 31 FIU undergraduate students will seek to identify barriers to timely and effective health maintenance and care within their communities.

43

U Kansas research park rebrands in bid to better target industry partners

It was created in 2009 as the Bioscience and Technology Business Center, but the research park in Lawrence, KS (adjacent to the campus of the University of Kansas) was rebranded about 18 months ago to KU Innovation Park. The non-profit economic development organization that runs the park has four equal stakeholders -- the University of Kansas, the City of Lawrence, Douglas County, and the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce. They insist that the change had less to do with the park's performance than it did with sending a clearer message to existing and prospective industry partners.

46

A year after launch, U Kentucky's Innovation Connect making solid progress

On April 11, UK Innovation Connect will host the inaugural Kentucky Innovator Challenge in Lexington, coinciding with the one-year anniversary of the industry engagement program. The University of Kentucky division is marking the anniversary by holding an event that doesn't just celebrate the milestone, but doubles as another touchpoint for corporate partners.

Small businesses continued from p. 33

the Googles, the Exxon Mobils,” she says. “That means an awful lot of companies’ interactions are probably single faculty members and a single member of the company -- or a ‘niche’ connection. That’s great; we want and need that to be happening. There are only so many ways to feed the dragon, and you need all sources in. I love that we have more companies on our tally list than we are actively managing.”

Having said that, Evans continues, “we are also in the very fortunate position of tracking companies moving here after the pandemic, and we have close to 310 that have moved [to Austin] in the last handful of years. My team, and the university as a whole, are very cognizant of [the question] how do we create pathways in for these new companies, to engage our students, faculty, and their employees? In my dreams I’d love to have an advancement professional on my team dedicated to these new companies, big or small, and the small ones in particular deserve special attention.”

Working with such companies, she explains, “is like going to Vegas. All bets do not win, but if you engage and they grow, it has enormous potential for payoff on the back side.”

Leah Aschmann, director of corporate relations in the Office of Corporate and Foundation Relations at Rice University, is on the same page. “The philosophy of how to manage these partnerships is one that should ideally be able to be applied to large companies, start-ups, whatever -- but it’s a capacity issue of what you can really handle effectively,” she says. “Philosophically, they should all be the same.”

A different approach?

When corporate engagement offices do

become involved with smaller firms, is their approach different than it is with their larger counterparts? “Inherently, yes,” says Evans. “The success I’ve seen with smaller companies is you start at the top -- find out from the top level what the most important issues are.”

People at the senior level, she explains, “have great insights about what the company needs, and what its goals are for the next 12-18 months. In larger companies we have often started with a university relations designee or an alum and tend to work from the bottom up. With small companies, [you start at the top] then make a handoff. For me and the university, that has been an effective way to navigate into some of these smaller companies -- we’re talking 500 or fewer employees.”

“Absolutely it’s a different ballgame,” adds **Zachary Holman**, associate professor and director of faculty entrepreneurship at Arizona State. “When you’re working with large companies, they have funds available, they usually need large workforces, research can be high up on their list; they care about a lot of different things from the university. They definitely spend quite a lot of time with redlines, going back and forth before everything [in an agreement] gets done. And it’s a challenge finding the right person in the company -- the decision maker -- and who in the organization needs to sing from the same song list.”

Start-ups, on the other hand, “are scrappy, understaffed, definitely underfunded and [present] very unique problems -- ‘I’m looking for a piece of equipment that can do this;’ or ‘I need one person who has these skillsets.’ If you can fill that niche, there’s the possibility to move very quickly with few redlines. The negotiations can be so wonderfully simple. You need alignment with very few people.”

continued on page 35

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Small businesses continued from p. 34

The challenge, notes Holman, is to be flexible when it comes to funding. "Maybe you have a conceptual alignment, but you apply for funding together; the office has to be flexible before the money comes in," he offers. "They may want a one-year project paid in advance. Or, \$150,000 may be a huge deal for a five-person start-up, but if the university is willing to accept quarterly payments, it may be possible to do. You have to understand the pain points and perspectives." Despite these challenges, he says, "I love working with them."

Many similarities

In terms of the approach to partnering, however, Utz sees many similarities to dealing with the big boys. "There's a lot to contemplate, but it's no different than a larger company," he asserts, and it always starts with the question, "Why would this company, no matter what the size, be interested in partnering with Purdue University?" Depending on the size and resources, that engagement differs. But small start-ups and companies small to mid-level have talent needs. Obviously, that's an easy way to engage and help them, and they can add value to Purdue by providing learning opportunities for our students," Utz points out. "That's a great way to engage -- at least as a start. They probably also have some research and technology gaps they need to fill, but with smaller companies do they have the resources to actually outsource R&D? Even in that case there are great opportunities to engage when it comes to going after certain federal funds."

Getting back to the theme of similarity, Utz points out that just about all technology spaces -- take hypersonics or microelectronics, for example -- are not the exclusive domain of large companies. "If you think about those ecosystems and industry sectors, they all comprise companies big and small," he notes. "In order to get from the beginning to the end result in the supply chain, it takes companies of all sizes."

He notes there's also little difference in how the university decides whether to partner with a given company. "I don't think it's any different; we have a corporate engagement process we go through with any and all companies we have a conversation with," he says. "We have a specific list of 10-15 questions; through those you start to see answers. They may say they have no R&D

budget, or they're not hiring students, so you start to discern from the conversation what the opportunities are."

For example, when it comes to talent, says Utz, they address whether the company is interested in hiring Purdue students, and if so, what they're looking for -- bachelors, Masters, PhD? A similar inquiry takes place around research needs, whether the company is large or small, he adds. "Do you have technology gaps you need help with? Products or technology to improve? Do you outsource R&D? What does your budget look like?" he shares. "Then, [the same process] for professional development and upskilling -- 'Is your workforce up to date? Are there gaps where Purdue can be a partner?'"

Most common collaborations

What types of engagement are typical with these smaller companies? "If it's a company that's new to Houston, they want to get their logo out there, to get their name in front of the students," says Aschmann. "They want to sponsor events. Sometimes there's student recruitment, and then it's easy to connect them to the center for career development. Some of them give data problems to students, and if they work for them there's a good mentorship interaction opportunity."

"People; talent is huge," says Evans. "Sometimes they need a little more hand holding. We never suggest they drop into the career center [during Career Days] at the basketball arena with 300 other companies and get swallowed up and lost. The Texas Career Engagement Center (TCE) does a beautiful job helping them understand what skills they're looking for and they host virtual or mini sessions just for that company. We're very grateful to have them; they're great partners helping us find great engagement moments."

Specific opportunities often present themselves in areas like biotech and life sciences, she adds. "It's still a pretty small sector from workforce data, so we set up a dedicated life science fair -- engineering, biology, molecular biosciences, pharmacy, and data science -- so we can have a cross-college mini career fair in that specific field," Evans reports.

"For sustainable small businesses there are things like the need for a capability -- product development, or research -- where they do not normally have the capital demanded to install

continued on page 36

Small businesses continued from p. 35

those capabilities themselves,” notes Holman. “So, they hunt around universities; they usually start at a local university, or an alma mater, trying to find out if that capability exists, and if so, how to access it. At many universities [specific experts] are squirreled away in faculty labs, with no charging mechanism without sponsored research. If you need a PhD student for one year, great. But if you have one sample, or need a unique technique, that’s problematic,” he observes. “That’s the lone reason that ASU over the last seven years has really consolidated in these core facilities, available to everyone on a fee-for-service basis,” he shares.

Another area of engagement ripe for small companies, he continues, involves internships and hiring. “In the last couple of months, we’ve had past students reach out to us on internships,” Holman says. “So many of those connections and best hires are not made at career fairs but through one-on-one relationships.” Holman notes that he’s shared this experience from the other side after launching his own start-up. “One company I started signed up for a career fair,” he recalls. “It turned out the career fair had a waiting list and a large charge, so we started our own career fair -- a start-up career fair -- partnering with regional and state organizations.”

Utz notes that the difference in engagement with these firms has to do with scale, not type. “It’s a smaller scale; in the talent space, they can still provide some real-world problems and experiential learning for our students. They can engage with student clubs and speak about what it’s like to be a small or medium-sized company.”

In addition, he says, “there are great opportunities to partner and go after some of the bigger companies” by adding the small company to a collaboration. The pitch might be, “Hey, between Purdue and this smaller company we can really fit in this gap problem you’re looking to solve.”

Creating avenues for engagement

Some universities have found creative ways to encourage partnerships with smaller firms. For example, at UT Austin, “we work closely with the Chamber, so we’re at least part of the dialogue as [companies] consider Austin,” says Evans. In addition, she explains, “we’ve created a ‘New to Austin’ engagement effort, curating executive lev-

els from those businesses -- big or small. We’ve started engaging them in thought leadership opportunities to meet with key leaders based on what they know about their business. We’ve had a couple of great events in the fall, and we have a spring series laid out.”

These events are all very small, she continues, and have involved leaders from the medical center, the performing arts center, and the gaming industry, and include panel discussions. “It’s really all about engaging,” says Evans. “There’s no fundraising request, but we’re creating connections so we understand how to best get them connected across campus -- whether in talent or research.” The December meeting, she reports, drew 20 new businesses. “There’s so much energy in town; they all ask for e-mails and do things together,” she notes. “We’re planting seeds, but we do not know what the trees will look like.”

“I work a lot with start-ups,” says Holman, both those coming out of the university and non-affiliated firms. “I engage with companies that have a particular problem and say, ‘Hey, someone at ASU does something [related].’ I’ll make an introduction. I’ll help review contracts. There are also opportunities for them to engage at ASU with large companies.”

These companies can also participate in the university’s “New Economy” initiative, which feature five centers focused on particular areas of innovation. “[The centers] fund research projects; there’s only co-investment from the companies, with the amount depending on the size of the company,” he explains, adding that 70% of direct costs are paid for by the program when start-ups are involved. “That solves a pain point -- access to capital,” says Holman.

A number of smaller companies he works with are being created at and emerge from the university, he continues, which presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the engagement team. “A key barrier is the disentanglement of the company from ‘Mother University,’” he states. “We have things at ASU to facilitate that process. There’s a facilities-use agreement; they can pay for a postage-size piece of real estate in the faculty lab, so the research activity is done within the university but the IP is owned by the company because they pay for what they use. Also, we have a fair amount of real estate to lease, so companies are very inclined to maintain relationships with the university.”

continued on page 37

Small businesses continued from p. 36

In addition, he shares, he applied for and won an Economic Development Administration grant, in partnership with the Arizona Commerce Authority, which enables start-ups (not necessarily associated with ASU) to access the university's core facilities at 50% off the normal fee-for-service rates. Resources available include a super-computer, electron microscopy facilities, and semiconductor fabrication lab.

No proactive targeting

For many universities, as is the case at Rice, smaller companies only enter the picture by approaching the engagement office first or having some other existing connection. "Our short answer is there is not a specific program targeting small companies," says Aschmann. "I'd say that 85%-90% of our work with companies is with 'presidential partner' companies who are truly engaged holistically and continually strengthen those partnerships."

In most cases, she continues, "the smaller companies seek out the university. Maybe it's an alumni connection; we might hear from development officers that we have an alum who started this company and would like to get more engaged. It could be through technologies being commercialized through Rice in all kinds of ways. These smaller companies and start-ups usually have a specific interest on campus, and do not have the capacity to truly engage holistically. We work with them to connect to an area that most benefits them and us, and we let that part of campus manage that relationship until their needs and wants become broader."

Purdue's approach is similar, Utz says. "The process itself is unfolding in a way that we do manage [the relationships] differently," he says. "Our folks are proactively engaged with specific portfolios in sectors. They have a list of 20-30 companies they are each tasked with engaging with. These big companies are here today -- or they should be. The smaller companies and start-ups come on our radar when they work with certain faculty who say, 'You should check them out.' We only get engaged when it comes to us; we're not out there hunting for these companies."

Optimizing bandwidth

With all the good intentions, the bandwidth challenge remains a barrier to more engagement with small businesses. How can industry engage-

ment executives manage these relationships in a way that gets them what they want without spending huge amounts of staff or money?

"There's no good, easy answer," Evans concedes. "You have to find partners on campus. As a corporate relations team [leader] I still have metrics that are very focused on top-level philanthropy, so I have to be a great front door, but I'm also cognizant of what I'm tasked with doing. We have these trusted relationships across the ecosystem; we have places to plug in so people can get e-mails to relevant programming, pathways to get them engaged without me and my team having to engage in person every time. That's really, really critical."

"With a lot of these things, [it requires] candor, communication, and being realistic with ourselves as a university as to what we offer; hopefully, [small business leaders] are realistic about what they offer as well," says Aschmann. "Usually after one or one-and-one-half hours with a company, you can put a plan in place and go from there. Identify quickly where the points of interest are and execute quickly on those."

After identifying those points, she continues, "connect them with a group on campus and encourage that group on campus to respond. Show our responsiveness and willingness to work through any questions they might have; connect them with the right faculty member."

As with many aspects of engagement, success with smaller businesses has to do with relationships -- "a friendly face, a voice, trying to make good things happen for them, the students and the university," Aschmann observes.

"It starts with understanding what their needs are and how they differ from large companies, and designing programs that specifically try to target them. In many cases it may not require a lot of time once they've made a connection with the right faculty," adds Holman. "When a smaller company [partners] with one faculty, a lot of work is identifying the opportunity up front, and there's less work at corporate engagement."

Is all this extra effort worth it? "Absolutely," says Holman. "We all think at universities that it's such a win and so exciting to have a partnership with Google or Moderna -- but they were both start-up companies coming out of universities. Isn't it exciting to be part of them when they're young, and a key enabler for them to become larger?"

continued on page 38

Small businesses continued from p. 37

“Yes, it can be,” says Utz. “Again, every day I have to say, ‘am I going to go down a rabbit hole, and in six months have nothing to show my boss?’ We make educated guesses, understand what the opportunity is, and bail if need be. These are important companies; they live and die payroll to payroll. We can help them.”

“It’s a long-term play,” Aschmann adds. “It’s all about building the relationship, because you don’t know where it’s going to be. I’ve said for a long time that gifts and grants of \$5,000 are often more time-consuming than a million -- and more personal. From a giving perspective, smaller opportunities often take more work, and a new relationship takes more time. For those existing partners, even companies giving multi-millions

each year, the trust is already there. So, that’s where the work comes in.”

“Yes, it’s worth the effort if you have the vested interest of stakeholders in units and they’re willing to pick it up,” says Evans. “You have to have folks across campus also see the benefit. Obviously, along with the hand-holding you have to begin to see students respond in a positive way. If year over year you get only 50 kids to show up at a career fair, maybe it’s not worth it.

“As a university,” she concludes, “it’s on us to break down the complexities and begin to engage.”

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Ole Miss partners with HBCUs to tackle “workforce cliff” in insurance industry

Last fall, the University of Mississippi announced a program intended to address a workforce shortage and a lack of diversity in the insurance industry by partnering with agents, brokers, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

The program comes at a time when insurance companies are experiencing the kind of historic personnel shortages that result when an industry’s retirements significantly outnumber its new hires.

“In general, the industry is looking at a pretty massive workforce cliff,” says **Hughes Miller**, director of corporate giving and business engagement at Ole Miss. At the same time, he adds, “the people in the profession don’t fully reflect the communities they serve. We are trying to build a diverse pipeline.”

To do that, Ole Miss has teamed up with the Council of Insurance Agents and Brokers (CIAB) in Washington, DC, several regional powerhouse insurers, and Mississippi’s HBCUs.

“Our most recent initiative is focused on increasing diversity in the risk management and insurance space,” explains finance professor **Andre Liebenberg**, PhD, a chief proponent of the effort. “For this initiative we have engaged leading firms

and an industry organization that have funded a certificate and internship program that is focused on HBCU students. Not only will the firms provide paid internships, but they will also provide executive level mentoring.”

Threading the needle

The challenge, Miller points out, has been “how can we connect and foster diversity without detracting from the HBCUs?”

Why even try to thread that needle? “Ole Miss is a corporate citizen, so our mission is to elevate the state,” says Miller, and there’s no better way to do that than to make sure equity and diversity are woven into the fabric of industry partnerships with Mississippi’s flagship university.

The answer was a certificate program which guaranteed accessibility and affordability while ensuring that people of color could dive into the insurance job market quickly, which serves both a diversity goal and helps the insurance companies avoid that looming workforce cliff.

In the insurance and risk management industry “there are some roles in which you need a full four-year degree,” Miller explains -- the type of leadership roles that deal with more complex industrywide issues or academic matters -- but “others in which you don’t.”

Along with the certificate courses, Ole Miss packages offerings of professional development

continued on page 39

and internships to make sure participants aren't just capable of joining the field, but are actually ushered into it. With emphasis on mentoring, certificate earners and interns will fill personnel gaps and begin seeding the industry with agents and brokers who better reflect the diversity of the industry's broad base of customers.

Industry partners provide program funding

The founding insurance industry partners in the initiative include Arthur Gallagher & Co., of Rolling Meadows, IL; Brown & Riding Insurance Services Co., of Dallas, TX; Cadence Insurance, of Tupelo, MS; McGriff Insurance Services, of Charlotte, NC; and Ross & Yerger Inc., of Jackson, MS. The program was shaped with guidance from the CIAB, which, combined with the founding partners, provided \$1 million in funding to launch the initiative.

But it isn't just about money flowing into Mississippi's educational coffers.

"The program provides substantial professional development opportunities and generally prepares students for successful internships," says Liebenberg, professor of finance who leads the university's Risk and Insurance program and holds the Robertson Insurance chair. "Once the students complete the program and internship, they should be in a strong position to compete for full-time jobs upon graduation."

Miller emphasizes that "we don't want [the industry partners] to just write a check. Part of what the foundation partners will be doing is hosting internships. Upon graduation, the CIAB will come in and make sure [the students] are connected [to industry opportunities]."

But the check is helpful, too. "The industry partners pay for the first year entirely with the \$1 million, which will fund proof of concept and help us procure permanent funding," says Miller.

Addressing a looming crisis

The Ole Miss program started in the summer of 2021, just a year after S&P Global and a cadre of other market-watchers reported a lack of diversity among America's insurance agents and brokers.

In 2019, according to an S&P white paper titled "Black representation in insurance grows slowly as industry seeks to diversify," Black or African American employees made up only 12.4%

of the insurance workforce -- which was an increase from 9% in the previous decade. Similarly, Asian Americans represented a little more than 6% of the insurance workforce, up from just over 4% in 2010, while those in the "other" category, including American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islanders represented less than 3% of insurance personnel nationally.

S&P followed in the footsteps of the 2016 Business Insurance Diversity and Inclusion Institute Leadership Conference, where CEOs committed "to driving diversity at all levels of our organizations by creating inclusive and engaging cultures that effectively serve our customers, shareholders, communities, and people. By making meaningful progress on diversity in insurance, we can win the critical war for talent, which will allow our companies and our industry to succeed.... From individual company programs to industry-wide initiatives, insurance businesses are committed to promoting and advancing diversity in their business culture -- in every sector and at all levels."

The group pledged to measure its progress annually and, in November 2022, Gavin Souter penned an editorial for the institute titled "Diversity hiring key to growing industry." In it he highlighted some steps that could make the insurance industry's jobs more attainable and successful for non-white workers.

continued on page 40

Diversity in the insurance industry

- In 2020, Allstate spent \$235 million with minority-, woman-, veteran-, LGBTQ- and disabled-owned businesses, and provides a mentoring program to help diverse business owners strengthen their companies, according to the Insurance Information Institute.
- In 2021, more than 32% of Geico's new hires were African American as compared with 22% percent of associates in 2020, the company reports.
- In 2020, Progressive "introduced an ambitious goal to double the representation of people of color in senior leadership from 10% to 20% by the end of 2025. During 2021, [Progressive] increased this senior leadership representation from 13% percent to 16%, more than halfway to [its] goal," the company's website states.

“By discarding the notion, for example, that all jobs previously set aside for college graduates really need someone who has a four-year degree, companies are able to access people that they had not previously considered,” wrote Souter. “Such apprenticeship programs need a commitment from the companies involved, because they require additional training resources, but they turn out committed and engaged employees.”

Ole Miss industry engagement leaders got the message and, to launch its effort, the school mapped out a site visit with CIAB representatives, facilitated a brainstorming session, and collaborated on what the funding strategy should be. That was all before formalizing the process in a way that would invite academic buy-in from HBCUs.

“There really wasn’t a hard part,” says Miller. “It wasn’t easy. It was a slow process. The hardest part was just bearing with the slow process -- one of those things that just go with being a university.”

Ensure top-level support

Once the partnerships were forged and the certificate, professional development, and internship programs underway, says Liebenberg, it was important to make sure that the university’s existing business school framework was supporting the diversity initiative. Its strong existing ties to industry helped on that score.

“We engage with industry in several ways,” says Liebenberg. “We have an active insurance advisory board, we host industry leaders on campus at our annual insurance symposium, we include industry experts as judges of a case competition in one of our courses, and we host over 30 companies on campus at our spring and fall career fairs.”

What can other schools learn from the Ole Miss program? The uniquely targeted strategy focused on a single industry and its urgent talent needs is undoubtedly a strategy that works.

“Most risk management and insurance programs do a good job of engaging with industry,” says Liebenberg. “What makes our program unique is that it involves a partnership between our university, the insurance industry, and HBCUs.”

Miller offers this advice to other schools that want to do something similar: “First, internally,

make sure that everyone understands the goal and is on the same page. Second, have someone in the industry who is really engaged. And having senior leadership involvement is very much a priority. It is also helpful to know how a program fits with overall university goals.”

In the University of Mississippi’s case, both the chancellor and the provost are very supportive, Miller adds.

Is it too late for new industry partners to join up? Not at all. “We hope other insurance organizations will get involved,” says Miller. ▶

GSK Innovation Challenge

GSK partners with FIU students to increase diversity and reduce health disparities

Although Florida International University had never previously collaborated with GSK, one of the world’s largest pharmaceutical companies, their first partnership is a biggie. On January 19th StartUP FIU, the innovation hub at the university, and GSK launched the GSK Innovation Challenge, a 12-week program in which a cohort of 31 FIU undergraduate students will seek to identify barriers to timely and effective health maintenance and care within their communities. FIU is one of the largest Hispanic-serving institutions in the U.S. and in fact, with about 56,000 students, one of the largest public universities in the country.

How did such a major commitment develop between two entities that had never previously worked together? “It came like everything comes about in Miami; there are only two degrees of separation in Miami,” says **Emily Gresham**, FIU’s assistant vice president for research, innovation and economic development and co-founder of StartUP FIU. “The GSK folks contacted one of our friends in the community that runs a social entrepreneurship incubator, [saying] that they wanted to work with a university on a challenge. They contacted us, and literally within a week we had a meeting with the (U.S.) president of GSK Pharma. I didn’t believe it when they first told me. We started talking and within about two months we pulled the whole program together.”

continued on page 41

The community partner also put FIU in contact with one of the consultants supporting GSK in its efforts to find collaborators in majority Hispanic and Black universities to help them with the challenge, adds **Gustavo Grande**, director of Venture Ready Programs at StartUP FIU and the primary mentor for the GSK Challenge. (Venture Ready is one of StartUP FIU's three divisions; it supports student entrepreneurship and education.) In early discussions with GSK, he notes, the company shared that "only 3% of their staff is Hispanic or African American. They felt they needed to have a different perspective of the community -- that through the students they'd be able to get that perspective around health equity and preventive healthcare."

"They felt they needed to work with actual minority people in order to address the health disparity issues they were interested in," adds **Robert Hacker**, director and co-founder of StartUP FIU, which works with over 40 faculty researchers in a year, as well as with minority small business owners in the community.

In terms of the university's goals for the Innovation Challenge, "I'd love to see our students spark some type of creative thinking that maybe the GSK folks do not yet have -- and that grows into something bigger for them," Gresham says, "and that students look at GSK as a viable employment opportunity and that they get jobs -- because they're good jobs. And, for faculty to begin to understand what it's like to work with industry and [become] interested in doing more of these types of collaborations."

"The first thing I'd like to see it accomplish is that this documents to corporate America -- and particularly corporate Miami -- that we at StartUP FIU can be good partners for a really challenging problem," adds Hacker. "This is a great example for students of what they call active learning, with the corporation [directly involved] in the activity. And one of GSK's goals is to identify more minority students to be hired at GSK -- they've set that goal from very first time we met them. The third objective is to do a repeat challenge with GSK and build it into an ongoing relationship. If you analyze the opportunities in the 21st century, almost everything is going to circle back to some issue related to life sciences and biology, and GSK is deep into that whole space."

The early stages

The development of the Innovation Challenge, says Hacker, "was fairly close to the same way you would do a start-up -- you start with validating the problem, and then you transition to validating a solution," he observes. Part of that transition involved GSK providing the university with a recent progress report, in which "they gave very helpful, very precise feedback on the tentative solutions, so now the students have a very clear idea" of GSK's expectation, he notes. "That kind of feedback is practically invaluable when you get it."

"Outreach was done to all of our schools; we wanted make sure there was a diversity of students not only in terms of majors, but also what year they're in and backgrounds," says Grande. The first cohort includes students from computer science, economics, and biology, among others. Students wishing to participate were asked three questions: 'Why do you care about health equity disparities?' 'What do you expect to get from this program?' and 'What strengths do you add to the group?'

"Based on those responses, the instruction team got together, reviewed more than 60 applicants and selected 31," he reports.

How does the challenge work? "We at StartUP FIU use mental models -- frameworks of methodologies that help with experiential learning, such as LEAN Startup, and Human-Centered Design," says Grande. "We divided this cohort into eight groups, who were encouraged to be of different majors so there were different perspectives on how to tackle the challenge: How might we improve vaccination rates for Shingles in Hispanic and African American communities? From that, each student needs to come up with a problem -- 'What could be the main barriers?' 'Why are rates so low?'"

Faculty mentors supervise the context of the challenges with a '360-degree' view -- what is a virus, a vaccine, what is Shingles, the difference between healthcare and public health, health equity, social determinants of health, and so forth. "Then they started applying these methodologies -- like systems thinking -- to understand how each of the elements linked together and how through that interaction we've come up with what we have today. To change the current situation, you need to change the links of that system," he explains.

continued on page 42

The students, he continues, also get involved in stakeholder analysis, from pharmacists and nurses to the role of each member of a family -- for example, the differences between an "Abuelita" and a first-generation college student. "Then there's the empathy exercise -- they were encouraged to go out and design questions for understanding how people behave," adds Grande. "Based on those interviews they could come up with insights -- patterns they discovered. They're now in the process of re-framing their initial problem statement." These exercises, he notes, "make them get comfortable with the uncomfortable; they get a lot of rejection, and understanding who the user is might change interactions of the problem statement."

The student teams' progress is reviewed through ongoing interface between GSK and FIU. "Emily Gresham, who oversees StartUP FIU, is actively involved twice a week and talks to the students. She also manages the GSK relationship while Gustavo manages the students," Hacker says.

"At the end of the challenge," says Grande, "the goal is for students to come up with a fresh, creative innovative perspective GSK had not thought about, or a different approach teams can implement [to achieve] different results. [GSK is] aware that internally they lack the perspective of understanding these communities. By having students as part of the community learn from their own community and become allies, it will help GSK decide for themselves."

Multiple benefits

The FIU leaders of the partnership see benefits for all of the participants, while noting that they have already learned valuable lessons. "For the students, it's the opportunity to work on a real live challenge with a formidable industry partner like GSK, the fourth largest pharma company in the world," says Grande. "They learn by doing what they've learned in the university, under the power of collaboration and from diverse thinking. Also, they learn skills such as communication, active listening with empathy and care, and to be more aware of how behavior plays into the decisions that people make every day. And, it adds to their curriculum as a project when they look for a job or have the desire to be an entrepreneur."

There are also very tangible benefits for students beyond their experience: they will receive corporate internship credits, as well as \$1,000 in compensation.

For the university, he continues, "we are reinforcing the role we play in the community by collaborating with an industry partner, by showing how important innovative ways of teaching are -- critical thinking, collaboration. But most important, through the students we are having an impact on the betterment of the community. It is the fact that we care; that we see them, that we want to meet them where they are, and [offer] the potential to provide a better quality of life."

Finally, he says, there are several benefits for GSK. "One, they get to get closer to the user -- the community they want to support through the students," he observes. "They get a different, fresh perspective they would potentially not get; and by having all these different perspectives they have a pool of potential [strategies] they can test. That translates to the bottom line; if they're able to test different ways to build trust or incentivize the community, that will translate into many individuals potentially getting preventive healthcare." And of course, GSK also gets a close-up view of students who may wish to join the company and bolster its own diversity numbers.

Lessons learned

Gresham says one of the key lessons can be seen in the short timeline required by the pharma company -- something that other universities need to get comfortable with when partnership opportunities arise. "I call it when two bureaucracies collide. Universities are notorious for having multiple departments, and big companies are as well. GSK's president gave us a two-month timeline from concept through agreement through launch. That's not for the faint of heart; we're the only partner they worked with that came through."

Achieving that speed in responding to GSK's needs, she adds, requires high-level allies on both sides of the partnership. "You need someone at a high enough level of the university and the company championing it," she says. On the GSK side, that champion was GSK U.S. President **Maya Martinez-Davis**, who told her staff and general counsel, "We have to get this done," Gresham adds. "Here, it was me talking to the attorneys and the research office. You have to have someone

continued on page 43

FIU continued from p. 42

focus on getting through all the bureaucratic checkpoints, and you need the program people thinking through how to recruit students, and how to put the project together. While they worked on that, I touched bases; it was a team effort, where we all three got together twice a week," she says. "There were dedicated professionals on both sides with high enough positions and strong enough expertise to pull it off."

One significant challenge for students, says Hacker, was that for some this was their first opportunity to interview customers and patients. "Interviewing is something that has to be learned," he asserts. "The second [challenge] is this notion of the customer value proposition; how do you tangibly create value for the customer with your solution?" To do that, he explains, students needed to learn "to be human-centric, translating the interviews into tangible benefits for the customer -- the patient."

Gresham is hopeful the challenge will lead to more collaborations with GSK. "I like to go into new relationships with the potential of building long-term, where there is give and take and it evolves as you discover new things," she comments. "We went in with a commitment to work with them on a cool project they had in mind, and I think they have the same ethos. I do believe in the future it will help us land other industry partnerships. At the end of the day, people want to see a track record. I hope it opens up floodgates for our students and faculty."

"Part my purview is thinking about elevating the translational effort here -- not just about start-ups or research commitments, but how we leverage our resources," she continues. The goals extend to ensuring "that the broader community is benefitting, whether through workforce development or R&D. I put all of that under the same umbrella, as 'translational.' From that perspective, a strategic partnership is the key to being able to do that. Working with a reputable company like GSK brings a shape to what we want to accomplish, lets people touch and feel what it really looks like to collaborate with industry. That's not only the students working on the challenge, but faculty mentors -- getting them to see how the industry approach to problems helps their mindset when it comes to research and its broader impact."

Some of those wishes may already be coming true, Grande reports. "As we were in conversation

designing the current challenge, we were already discussing how this could potentially grow to a full-year program, or a second phase where students could actually implement [their recommendations]," she says.

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KU Innovation Park offerings go far beyond workspace

U Kansas research park rebrands in bid to better target industry partners

It was created in 2009 as the Bioscience and Technology Business Center, but the research park in Lawrence, KS (adjacent to the campus of the University of Kansas), was rebranded about 18 months ago to KU Innovation Park. The non-profit economic development organization that runs the park has four equal stakeholders -- the University of Kansas, the City of Lawrence, Douglas County, and the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce. They insist that the change had less to do with the park's performance than it did with sending a clearer message to existing and prospective industry partners.

It may be a good lesson for other schools whose research parks were created before anyone ever heard the term "industry engagement" and are in need of a refresh to match the current era of corporate partnership and collaboration.

"There was a lot of confusion," says **Adam Courtney**, CFO for KU Innovation Park. "With the [original] name, people were not quite sure what we were trying to accomplish." In addition, he notes, "KU has a bigger brand," pointing to the access the park provides to university resources -- student talent, sponsored research, and core labs, for example. "Also, we're a community asset, so the more we can talk KU Innovation Park the better -- and it's easier to say than BTBC."

He underlines the fact, however, that regardless of the rebranding "we were successful in filling the space we had; the first phase filled up in 18 months. It was not lack of success

continued on page 44

or demand, just leveraging the assets of the university and that fact that people are familiar with university research parks. It's also recognition of the work we're trying to do." That work, he emphasizes, involves the park performing not as a typical incubator, but as an economic development center.

And that means corporate partnerships will be key moving forward -- a fact that the new name helped promote at the recent Association of University Research Parks (AURP) meeting just weeks ago. The rebrand "tells everyone who and where we are, and who we're partnering with on the university side," says **David Sprenger**, who was hired in January as executive vice president of business development. "We quickly get to tell the larger stakeholder story."

Unique set of stakeholders

That 'story,' he continues, is that the Innovation Park involves "a unique set of stakeholders on the public side for the benefit of commercialization and development. I'm relatively new -- in my first 60 days -- but it would not have caught my attention if was BTBC. I saw [the new] brand right away and saw the great opportunity for the intersection of university research and commercialization, community stakeholders, and economic development. This regional engine of technology and work has really raised our profile nationally as well -- it's inspiring."

"The park has found a really unique way to do things, and other parks have said this is a really good way to set up -- to have a county, a chamber, a university, and city with a common goal; that's very unusual," adds **Tricia Bergman**, KU's associate vice chancellor for economic development.

Each of the four entities has one board seat and equal voting power, "but we've never had an issue," says Courtney. "We all row in the same direction. We count on the stakeholders to fund the organization so that our businesses can provide services to the companies at no charge; otherwise, we'd just be a real estate development firm, and we wouldn't be as successful." He adds that 25% of the outside funding is public money, including state and federal grants, while 75% is private -- mostly derived from rents.

Thus far, says Courtney, marketing efforts for the rebrand "are mostly word of mouth. We have a

[budget] line to fill our marketing needs; we will hire somebody to help us with that."

Marketing (and more) for everybody

"I have a deep appreciation for marketing and strategic communications, and leading internal and external marketing -- not just for the park but for our [company] residents," says Sprenger. Market analysis services, for example, will be provided by business analysts "for everything from background to very detailed studies and work," he explains. "I want to include strategic communication and marketing for those firms to grow -- and we will provide that without charge."

The business analyst program, he continues, involves students hired from KU. "It's unlike any other experiential learning I've seen in my career," he observes. "There are all levels of conversation as relates to the park -- intimate knowledge of park operations and resident companies. We give them big tasks to take on; our 60-plus companies use that talent at the university, and it offers impactful work for those students."

A good deal of that work is done for university start-ups that occupy some of Innovation Park's space, alongside more established companies. The park's role in KU's start-up efforts is to help "scale [companies] and keep them in Lawrence. Providing those types of experiences creates an ecosystem that puts in a workforce, and hopefully keeps it local, building a resilient economy."

"Our start-ups are able to leverage our expertise and the business mindset the park presents, like being adjacent to companies they can learn from and strengthen as they move out of the 'four walls' of the university," adds Bergman.

"Start-ups are a primary driver of commercialization of university activity," notes Courtney, "but it needs to be done outside of university space -- and we sit on private property. That separates IP development there from development at the university."

Business support services

The Innovation Park is clearly providing much more than space to its tenants. Business services offered to these companies include market assessment, proof of concept work, financial modeling, and grant support. "There could be

continued on page 45

basic accounting and payroll services, introduction to insurance providers, legal support in the IP area, and people who may act as quasi executives in the company," he says. It even can include mentorship -- connecting the company with somebody at the university who is in the same space. "Graduates" of the park also provide mentorship to business founders.

"If you can bring people in who have done it already, it lowers barriers," Courtney says, adding that about 60% of the companies in the park are start-ups that can use such targeted help. "We sit with all the companies [to learn] what their needs are, and if we can't provide them in-house, we will do it outside -- even web design, for example. They are happy to have those resources, so they can keep their heads down in research.

"The whole suite of services, in my observation, has been very well received and helps us tell our stories to [prospects], to the larger community, and stakeholders invested in the park," he summarizes. "It's one of the reasons we see a higher rate of success in start-ups than is typical; getting free help lowers the barriers."

"It allows them to focus on doing the things they do really well. If we can provide support for things they do not understand, that's a huge value proposition," Bergman asserts. "It may even drive additional collaborations, depending on what their needs are."

There's a lot of shared space in the park, she points out, where events such as tenant happy hours are held. "We want those collaborations to happen; 'serendipitous collisions' activate the space," she says.

Major growth underway

The approach of the park's stakeholders appears to be working, as its footprint is growing . . . and growing. Phase III opened in August -- a building that provides additional office and wet lab space to allow growing companies to expand out of their current facilities. "We're almost 100% committed," says Courtney. "If [these companies] keep being successful, we need to provide more space for them -- especially as applies to valuable wet lab space; if not, we're at the risk of losing them." Courtney estimates that of the 12 companies coming into the new facility, ten "graduated" from other facilities in the system.

Phases IV and V have funding initiatives already in place. Phase IV will involve the creation of the Kansas National Security Innovation Center, for companies in cybersecurity, remote sensing, and advanced computing. The Phase V Kansas Bio-innovation and Sustainability Center will be focused on renewable energy, sustainable engineering, and ag-tech.

Both of the planned phases are aimed at research areas that match the strengths of the university, Courtney says. In fact, he adds, the park is being built in "cluster development around the strengths of KU -- bio, software development, engineering, and so forth." By 2036, KU Innovation Park is expected to include a total of 10 buildings -- each one its own phase -- comprising 800,000 square feet. Once completed, it is estimated that the Innovation Park will be directly responsible for at least 4,000 jobs.

Even 12-18 months before the rebranding, Bergman explains, "we were thinking about the research strengths, our core expertise, and where we could see from a marketing standpoint the future perspective to grow them. We came up with five, and they completely align with phases four and five. We try to keep as much continuity as possible in how we work with the park, and if the goal is leveraging university resources, you have to have alignment. This mutual benefit allows us to grow our relationships with companies in the park."

Courtney estimates that about 35% of businesses currently associated with KU Innovation Park are in life sciences and biosciences, with the remainder being tech-related, including companies focused on software development, remote sensing, cybersecurity, engineering, and telecommunications.

Another planned development, while not specifically being undertaken by the stakeholders of KU Innovation Park, will nonetheless be extremely complementary. Called The Crossing, the "live-work-play" project will include apartments, restaurants, coffee shops, walking trails, a grocery store, day care, and other amenities for individuals working at the park. The Crossing is being underwritten by KU Endowment.

"The Crossing will supply amenities that are attractive to companies that want to grow," notes Courtney. "They want day care, and places to eat. To retain start-ups you need jobs, but you also need an environment they want to live with."

continued on page 46

Still, there's a consciousness about potential competition with existing facilities in Lawrence, which is a partner in the park after all. "We're pretty sensitive to other similar amenities that might exist in Lawrence; it has a robust Massachusetts Avenue downtown, and we absolutely do not want to compete with them," says Bergman. "Our goal is to be an asset 10 minutes away from their space -- we want both areas to survive." For example, she notes, downtown does not have a little grocery store, and the restaurants will be different. "One of our goals is to diversify the economy in Douglas County," she adds.

Overcoming barriers

An undertaking this large naturally comes with challenges, but KU Innovation Park seems to be overcoming them. How did they do it? "As a non-profit, capital is always a barrier for us," says Courtney. "You have to be a creative real estate developer -- not that we're thinking of ourselves as that, but without space you can't draw start-ups and help them grow. Just be creative and understand it's a partnership.

"We get stakeholder funding, and we try to leverage that at all levels -- state and federal," he continues. "Without partnerships on the local and state level you would not be able to go get that. Trish (Bergman) is a great partner -- our window to the university -- who can effectively help us find the routes [within the university] we need to help us."

"The university is very big and complex, and finding the right door to walk through is not always the straightest," Bergman observes. "The partnership we have together can facilitate those discussions. We've also learned how to benchmark other research parks. Each one is different; they have a common approach, but we all have our own personality as relates to the university we work with. They're all set up a little differently, and you have to be flexible with how you set up."

The way KU Innovation Park has been "set up," she continues, seems to be working well in terms of generating and growing industry partnerships.

"There are companies in the park who started there and have grown from one, two, or three employees and worked within one area of the university, who [have grown and] now look at other areas of the university," she notes. "They recognized that they have a variety of interests, and the

university is available to support them, and help them grow at the same time."

She adds that the park does not necessarily house headquarters, but rather research offices, which "opens up the opportunity for us to expand back into the home office because we've developed that relationship."

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Collaborating across departments a key strategy

A year after launch, U Kentucky's Innovation Connect making solid progress

On April 11, UK Innovation Connect will host the inaugural Kentucky Innovator Challenge in Lexington, coinciding with the one-year anniversary of the industry engagement program. The University of Kentucky division is marking the anniversary by holding an event that doesn't just celebrate the milestone, but doubles as another touchpoint for corporate partners.

"We've invited executives from across the region to cast their vision for the future of their respective businesses, to showcase their challenges that are best overcome through collaborations, and to be specific about how our audience can get involved," says **Landon Borders**, executive director of UK Innovation Connect (UKIC), UK Innovate's industry partnership program.

"We've had a tremendous amount of interest from our faculty and staff here at UK, but also from our other industry partners, federal funding agencies, and policy makers. This will be a great event for Kentucky, and just one example of how we're getting creative in building partnerships," says Borders.

To date, big hitters including the Advanced Research Projects Agency's (ARPA) energy division, EchoFibre, PPL, GE Aerospace, Bullard, M2 Innovation, the National Science Foundation, Toyota, Lexmark, Gray Solutions, Houchens Industries, Logan Aluminum, Holley, and Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport, among others, have signed on as partici-

continued on page 47

U Kentucky continued from p. 46

pants under the agenda headings of manufacturing, sustainability, energy, aerospace, metals innovation, materials and logistics. The event's marquee partner is national intellectual property law firm Dinsmore.

What a difference a year makes

A year ago when the Innovation Connect program had just launched, Borders told UIEA that UKIC "was created to provide dedicated resources to support partnerships focused mainly on research and innovation and economic development for the region." It represented the university's intention to focus a dedicated team and resources on expanding corporate collaborations.

Now, he says, "one pleasant surprise in this last year has been how our office often serves as a 'connecting fabric' across campus. We find ourselves making introductions between our innovators across different departments on our own campus that have similar research thrusts."

The first several months were spent in meeting and getting to know the "ecosystem," as he puts it, of research and development throughout the University of Kentucky's region.

In line with the school's mission as a land grant institution, Borders continues to focus on UKIC's role as a service provider for Kentucky. As he told UIEA last year, "one of those services is coming up with great ideas and commercializing them. That will require a lot of collaboration and inspiration."

Armed with a background in electrical engineering and 20 years of experience in development with large commercial interests, Borders and his team envisioned a year of expansion. What they found was a constellation of talented innovators -- and a potentially discouraging fact: that Kentucky ranks in the bottom 20th percentile in most industry R&D metrics.

Yet Borders viewed that statistic in a decidedly "glass half full" way. "I see this as a great opportunity," he says. "However, to make significant advances in industry R&D in our state requires a tremendous amount of collaboration at UK and with other colleges, universities, industries, state and local governments, start-ups, nonprofits, and community partners in our region. We're willing to put in

the time and effort to make this happen because I'm especially passionate about this aspect of what we do -- so much in fact that we've prioritized [improving those rankings] as one of our top long-term goals for UK Innovation Connect."

At UKIC's inception, Borders predicted that his ability to speak the "languages" of both academia and industry would be crucial to the program's success. Has he, and the UKIC team, been able to bridge the gap between those two worlds?

Borders says the gratitude and excitement of the new industry stakeholders signing on to become UK Research partners leads him to believe they have.

"To be honest, I expected more "no thanks" or "this is not for me" while introducing ourselves and explaining our services to our faculty and partners, but that's not been the case," he says. "In most cases the help is welcomed, and in short order we find ourselves piloting a new project."

What UKIC has learned

Most of UKIC's energy since last April has been aimed at building the UKIC team to support Kentucky's most active research departments -- which means tailoring the team to meet each of the departments' unique priorities. For example, some

continued on page 48

New resource: The University-Industry Engagement Book of Best Practices

The University-Industry Engagement Book of Best Practices is an all-new 326-page resource that's chock-full of how-to strategies and case studies covering the most crucial responsibilities of corporate relations and industry engagement professionals. The rich collection of best practices offers success strategies and expert guidance straight from your industry engagement colleagues focused exclusively on building, managing, and expanding corporate partnerships for your university.

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For complete details and to view the full table of contents, go to <https://tinyurl.com/hahur6nr>.

departments need support with industry recruiting and coalition building, while others need support in creating processes to make it easier to work with the university.

“Our faculty members have tremendous responsibility and workload, so this is where we can step in and help,” says Borders.

What has the UKIC team learned in just 12 months? “We’ve learned just how important it is to work with other industry-facing units across campus to provide for a more holistic experience for our industry partners.”

Borders has been collaborating with colleagues in four areas: business engagement, philanthropy, career services, and economic development. The goal, he says, is to “provide a more holistic onboarding experience for new strategic partners to the UK ecosystem.”

As a result, UKIC has seen “more robust programmatic grant proposals; especially those that prioritize transdisciplinary collaboration and industry partnerships.”

To boost the number of grant proposals UKIC can support, the team partners with the university’s proposal development office to track all federal solicitations from NSF, NIH, ARPA-E and EDA.

“Then, we take a proactive approach by bringing them forward to our researchers and industry partners where we think there is a good fit,” says Borders. “To do that effectively, we strive to deeply understand

both our industry partners’ needs and our faculty members’ expertise, capacity and interests.”

Project-scoping templates

Like all commercialization channels, UK Innovation Connect relies on contracts. Drawing on his experience outside academia, Borders has crafted some new mechanisms to make the university-contractor relationship more hassle-free.

“For example, we’ve created project-scoping templates that aim to walk our innovators through project proposals. We are doing this in a format that looks familiar to our industry partners and puts the value proposition to both parties, front-and-center, while clarifying which problems we aim to solve.”

Additionally, the templates are put together in a way “that can be easily converted into MOUs that incorporate as much detail as possible for our contracting experts,” he says.

“We’re excited about our approach and look forward to sharing more about this once we launch our program in the coming months,” says Borders.

Contact Borders at 859-562-0189 or landon.borders@uky.edu. ▶

Coming in future issues...

Identify gaps in student talent to attract more corporate partners • Creating an "industry tiers" contracting program • U Toronto's "Blue Door" industry portal • Coverage of UIDP Nashville

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