Chapter 15

Bringing Eleven Universities to Town!

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Background

The Northwestern Region of Michigan is well known for sparkling lakes, wonderful scenery and resourceful communities built around agriculture, light manufacturing, and tourism. Since the 1970's the region has experienced population growth at a far higher rate than the rest of the state, including some counties that have led the state in population gains since 1990. Interestingly, with over 100,000 residents in the region, no locally chartered four-year higher education institution has been established to serve them.

How could such a situation exist? The answer - by design! Northwestern Michigan College (NMC), a comprehensive community college founded in 1951, avoided the urge to reinvent itself as a four-year college and instead went about luring universities from across the state of Michigan to offer their programs to the people of the Northwestern Region. And, thanks to distance education, it's working. There are currently 11 participating four-year universities offering 58 programs leading to Certificates, Bachelor degrees, Master's degrees and beyond.

How It All Started

In 1988, an economic development study conducted for the Grand Traverse Area Chamber of Commerce by the Battelle Institute in Grand Rapids noted the lack of baccalaureate and advanced degree opportunities in the five counties of the Northern Region and identified this as one of the significant problems in attracting prospective business and industry (Battelle Institute, 1988). The report struck a sensitive chord within the community and at Northwestern Michigan College. Degree opportunities beyond the first two years were only available through limited off-campus programming (such as a bachelor's degree completion program in nursing offered on the community college campus), or by commuting directly to a main campus. For most employed adults, the time required to even travel to a campus close to Traverse City seemed to be an almost insurmountable hurdle, and they were applying pressure on Northwestern Michigan College to begin the process of converting from a 2-year open-access college to a 4-year regional university.

A study conducted by the State of Michigan Board of Education in 1991 entitled "Project Outreach" determined that 81 percent of surveyed citizens in the College's service area felt that the College needed to "either become a university or expand baccalaureate and advanced degree offerings" (Michigan Board of Education, 1991). Furthermore, the strategic planning process developed by the Grand Traverse 20/20 Steering Committee for the Citizens of Grand Traverse County in 1991, referred to as Grand Traverse 20/20, determined that within the area of education, the highest regional priority was for NMC to meet this educational challenge (Smith, 1991).

The community identified advanced educational opportunities as a key factor in the region's
capacity to encourage economic development. Concerns over relative geographic isolation, gaps in rural infrastructure, particularly as this would apply to communication systems and access to technology, as well as a sense that the area was paying a disproportionately high percentage of state taxes without the benefit of closer access to a public university all contributed to a grassroots effort to work with the College to create alternatives. This group of civic leaders and interested citizens called themselves the "Founders 21."

In 1993, *Founders 21* presented a set of recommendations to the Board of Trustees of Northwestern Michigan College (Founders 21, 1993). The vision behind the *Founders 21* report was best articulated by Les Biederman, the primary driving force behind the creation of the College in 1951, who had anticipated that NMC could become:

"...an association of colleges, a university of satellite institutions of learning. In Traverse City, grouped around the central campus...it seems, of course, overwhelming to think about starting other four-year colleges, but if NMC's resources, already available and functioning, were to be utilized, would-be schools could be helped on their way to opening" (Biederman, 1982, p.148)

So with the idea of helping already available and functioning colleges and universities "on their way to opening" in Northwestern Michigan, NMC began the process of creating mechanisms to make it happen. The Board of Trustees, upon the recommendation of the founders group, took action and identified the fall of 1995 as the date when this new enterprise would begin. The initiative would be formally known as the "Northwestern Michigan College University Center" (UC).

**The First Steps**

With an eye toward this prize, the College partnered with the regional intermediate school districts to develop "Project Interconnect." With a major grant from the Kellogg Foundation and in collaboration with area cable companies, "Project Interconnect" was designed to provide two-way interactive television capabilities to the 15 high schools in the College’s service area, and to build the base of interactive classrooms that would become the backbone for delivery of university classes to the region.

In 1993, the distance education movement in the state was beginning to invest heavily in these facilities as a primary strategy for delivery of courses and degree programs at a distance. Northwestern Michigan College was planning to become a state-of-the-art regional facility as part of its strategy to encourage the participation of universities. At the time, the cost of developing one classroom exceeded $80,000. NMC managed to develop seven such rooms within two years.

A significant portion of the Kellogg Foundation grant was dedicated to the training of faculty who would be teaching in this new venue, and NMC became a central training facility for faculty from around the Midwest interested in the potential of the technology.

**Developing the University Center Concept**

The movement toward higher education partnerships in which one institution becomes the host through which other universities deliver programs is certainly not new to Traverse City. In the
early 1990's, Mott Community College (Midland, Michigan) and Macomb Community College (Macomb County, Michigan) were both developing relationships with 4-year partners to facilitate bringing bachelor degree completion programs to their communities. Northwestern Michigan College's approach was to facilitate the development of a dedicated campus in which multiple universities would co-locate and share resources that would reduce the overall cost of bringing programs to the area.

From the academic side, NMC worked closely with its faculty and with the faculty of prospective university partners to improve communication between schools and to assure support for the students who would be learning in a very different and somewhat experimental environment. Multiple agreements were developed to make administrative partnerships work smoothly as well; everything from how students would apply for admission and financial aid, register, purchase books and supplies - even sweatshirts - was considered before the project was announced to the public.

To support this significant enterprise, the College developed a $5 million dollar community capital campaign to fund the development of a new campus, purchase needed technology, develop an electronic library for students, and to establish an operating endowment. A measure of the community support for this project was the remarkable success of the campaign that raised over $8 million dollars in support.

**Opening the Doors to the First Learners**

Through an extraordinary effort by hundreds of citizens and educators, the Northwestern Michigan College University Center officially opened its doors to eager learners in August 1995. Six hundred twenty-three students enrolled in over 25 degree program options, both undergraduate and graduate, offered by an inaugural group of 12 public and private state universities.

The typical UC student at that time was 34 years old. Sixty percent of the students were women, 70 percent worked full-time, 60 percent had families. Eighty percent said their principal reason for returning to school was career related. Forty percent were preparing for their first professional career. Sixty percent came directly from NMC (Northwestern Michigan College University Center, 1996).

**Life at the University Center**

Programs at the University Center are offered almost entirely in evening and weekend formats. In 1995, 30 percent of all courses were offered through the two-way interactive system, with Traverse City and two or three other communities linking to the university's main campus classroom. By 2002 this percentage had dropped to between 20-24 percent which reflected two trends - growth in online course options and a higher percentage of faculty choosing to commute to the Traverse City campus.

The largest degree programs are in education, followed by nursing and business. Students graduating from professional programs are finding employment in their home communities, fulfilling a portion of our mission to improve employability through education and to support the stability of communities by building learning resources that keep people in the area. Some
specialized programs, particularly in education for teachers, are offered daytime in the summer.

Although the University Center was chartered to support adult learners in the five county service area of the community college, students regularly travel from a ten county service region, some as far away as 100 miles one-way. Traverse City is still the closest hub for advanced education in the northwest region.

The Organization of the University Center

The University Center itself is organized so that Northwestern Michigan College is closely working with each partner university at two levels. As the facility owners, NMC manages the schedule production for the several hundred courses offered each year. Facility support is crucial in maintaining a comfortable environment for students and visiting faculty alike. The UC provides direct support to students through the Zonta Library, a "virtual" library environment where students can connect to the main campus libraries, or receive technical assistance from staff as they do homework and research.

At the program development level, the University Center works closely with each school in identifying new areas of interest and determining areas where programs should be phased out. Each partner school is responsible for staffing an office, a concept that has been described as a "one-stop shop" where all services for the student are available, from admissions and advising through graduation.

An interesting outcome of this approach is that a prospective student can easily make comparisons between programs and schools - just by walking down the hall. Customer service is the beneficiary of this competitive force, and happily, improved collaboration between schools in order to assist in student needs is also evident.

Distance Education and the University Center

In 2003, approximately 1200 students were enrolled in programs through the University Center. Teacher education programs were the most popular and this trend is expected to continue for the next decade. Over the seven years of operation, two universities have phased themselves out, and two additional universities have joined the partnership.

Several degree programs have online offerings, but this delivery mode is not expected to grow to more than 10 percent of all course offerings. Students appear to enroll in online courses when this reduces the time needed to complete their degree. With University Center students averaging 8 credit hours per semester, an online course becomes the more feasible approach for those who want to add a class. However, through the annual Student Interest Survey, students indicate that online is not their preferred learning mode, although access to the Internet has become widespread. In 1995, for example, approximately 85 percent of students reported they did not have computers or ready access to the Internet. Interestingly, by 2003, student responses indicate that this percentage has changed drastically with 83 percent of students now reporting computer ownership and Internet access, but not necessarily reflecting a preference for online learning (Northwestern Michigan College University Center, 2003).
Two-way interactive television, which was considered the "leading edge" for the distance-based delivery of educational programs in 1995, is finding new life serving as the "linking" technology for teacher professional development activities between the schools of the original Project Interconnect. The University Center will push two-way interactive applications to a new horizon with its demonstration laboratory, a science lab facility designed to connect to other labs via web-based video streaming at Northwestern Michigan College’s Great Lakes Campus, however, it is unlikely that additional interactive television classrooms will be added to the network.

**Being a Voice for Learners at a Distance**

The University Center is a learning enterprise built to the needs and expectations of the citizens of the Greater Grand Traverse Region. In ways we could not have imagined in the dreamscape of 1993, the University Center has become the **communiversity** of its vision statement, a learning environment in which distance has been transformed from barrier to opportunity. As such, the College holds dear its role as an advocate of adult learners. From the very beginning, NMC has worked to give voice to the lifelong learning interests of the community it serves. In the University Center story, technology has been a resource for the facilitation of learning. Learner commitment, however, has been the true heart of its success.

As the University Center looks toward its 10th anniversary, few remember the skepticism over interactive technology (it will be too distracting for teachers and students), or over the comparability between learning experiences on a main campus and off campus (teachers seem to believe that what adults bring to the classroom in their off-campus setting creates a rich and unique learning environment), or whether universities would even remain in the partnership for more than a few years.

The questions for the future will be of a different nature than those that led to its development. The University Center will have to understand and anticipate the changing economic landscape and its relationship to the employability of our graduates. And, it will have to develop creative options that encourage universities to deliver new programs in even more flexible configurations. The role of being a host to universities will expand to include a more systematic and comprehensive approach to market assessment, as well a more visible role working with increasingly diverse learners who now expect to be able to continue their learning without leaving home.

Our learners have taught us incredible lessons in tenacity and persistence. The University Center is undertaking a comprehensive study of the impact of the UC project on the lives of graduates since 1997, the first UC graduating class, hoping to learn more about the economic impact of degree completion as well as to capture their ideas about our next steps. The doors continue to open at the UC!

**References**


