

Impact 2100: The University and Its Effect on Business and Economic Development

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Ladrica Menson-Furr, PhD

The University of Memphis

The University of Memphis is a large, urban institution situated in the midst of a tri-state area—Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee. This institution has awarded thousands of degrees during its 100 plus years in existence, and it continues to produce thousands of alumni or bodies of “human capital” into the city’s, states, region’s, nation’s and world’s logs of University trained workforce. The University employs a workforce of approximately 2,500, including 930 full-time faculty members, and boasts a local economic impact of \$1.43 billion dollars (“Quick facts” www.memphis.edu). However, beyond human capital, what other economic effects do institutions of higher education offer? Numerous answers to this question have been provided by history and job and economic development studies and analyses, but colleges and universities have the best opportunity to assess and document this impact themselves.

The Challenge: Economic Impact Assessment

The University of Memphis was encouraged to engage in this type of inquiry when, in January 2013, it was invited by the Association of Public Land-grant Universities to participate in a pilot assessment study along with 22 other APLU member institutions (such as The Ohio State University, University of Georgia, University of Michigan, Washington State University, and the University of Missouri) to assess and demonstrate its economic impact on its region. Specifically, the invitation challenged the University of Memphis to participate in a pilot project that, if successful, may result in earning the newly created “*Innovation and Economic Prosperity Award*, to be presented by the Association’s Commission on Innovation, Competitiveness, and Economic Prosperity (CICEP). [This award] will honor an APLU member institution for achievements in contributing to the economic development of the region, state, and nation” (APLU “Letter of Invitation”). The letter of invitation further explained:

The Innovation and Economic Prosperity Award represents a novel approach to institutional recognition. CICEP has worked over the last number of years to develop tools and resources to help University leaders make the case with state and regional stakeholders that we are significant contributors to the economic wealth, and to better define and describe these contributions. As the attached process/timeline illustrates, universities competing for this award are being asked not only to highlight their achievements, but also to demonstrate a process of

assessing contributions to the economy, and planning for improvement, and they will make use of CICEP's toolkit to do this.

We write to ask you to consider competing in the pilot year of this new award. We are inviting a limited number of presidents and chancellors to the competition during this first year, allowing us to conduct a small pilot test of the award application process. Full recognition as the first-ever recipient of this award will go to the winning institution. More importantly, participation in the award application process promises to bring new opportunities for your institution to communicate economic contributions to state and regional stakeholders, and to gain recognition from peers for the work you have done. You will also have the opportunity to learn from other institutional leaders about what works in economic engagement efforts. You and University of Memphis have been selected as a potential competitor because of the interest shown by leaders at the institution in CICEP's assessment tools and metrics initiatives. (APLU "Letter of Invitation")

Dr. David Cox, Executive Assistant to the President for Partnerships and Administration and the University's representative to the APLU and CICEP Assessment Committee, assembled a team of University executive administrators, deans, faculty researchers, and members of the City of Memphis' business community to prepare the response to the APLU's invitation, as suggested within the letter of invitation, to enable the University to "better communicate its economic contributions" and "learn from other institutional leaders about what works in economic engagement efforts" (APLU "Letter of Invitation").

As the University of Memphis' 2013 Maxine Smith Fellow, I was fortunate to participate as a member of this team, specifically during the second-component of the assessment process, and gain first-hand knowledge of best practices in University-wide assessment practices. I assisted Dr. Cox and Ms. Jean Rakow, Coordinator of Reporting and Special Projects, in contacting the University's deans and faculty researchers to participate in small focus groups, and compiling notes/data from these focus groups. I compared my data interpretations with those compiled by Dr. Cox and Ms. Rakow as means to make certain that we were able to accurately record the numerous comments and suggestions offered by faculty researchers, college deans, and members of the city's business and industry sector and used this data to conceive of other means of University assessment, specifically within the humanities. Thus, this project afforded me the opportunity to not only actively engage in an important University assessment practice, but also use data to make informed recommendations, a skill which can be applied to programs and courses. Moreover, this project demonstrates the goal of the Maxine Smith Fellows program to expose and "allow Fellows to observe and participate in decision-making situations and provide Fellows the opportunity to experience how policy is made at the institution, senior administrative and governing board levels"

[www.tbr.edu/http://www.tbr.edu/offices/accessanddiversity.aspx?id=3064&terms=maxine%20smith%20fellows](http://www.tbr.edu/offices/accessanddiversity.aspx?id=3064&terms=maxine%20smith%20fellows)).

The following is a summary of the work that I composed as part of the APLU project team and the initial data interpretations and data-driven recommendations that I gleaned from the data gathered for this competition. My findings did not completely correlate with those compiled as part of the final “entry” or report submitted in August 2013; however, they demonstrate my exposure to and training in University administrative assessment practices.

Methodology: The Assessment Process—Part One

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities provided the University of Memphis and each participating institution with a survey generated and distributed through the Survey Monkey assessment tool. In January and February 2013, Dr. David Cox invited members of the Greater Memphis business, industry, and technology communities to complete the APLU composed survey instrument that would assess the University’s impact and role in local and regional economic development. This survey was distributed by the University using the Survey Monkey tool and its findings were reported directly to the institution. The survey’s main questions and responses are summarized below along with my interpretation of the findings:

Initial Survey Assessment and Gap Analysis Observations—External Respondents (17)

Q5: What is the University’s role in regional innovation and economic growth initiatives?

The majority of the respondents concur that the University’s role in regional innovation and economic growth initiatives are very important activities/actions, and indicated that the University performs “good to excellent” (appx. 88%) in each area, especially its efforts to work alongside business/community leaders to identify actionable economic growth priorities.

Q6: How well does the University create and encourage opportunities for innovation and partnerships among import regional economic actors?

Respondents indicated that there is a perceived need to improve the process of securing research contracts, licenses, and other agreements with the industry.

A specific area of need identified by respondents was identifying ways the University can support consulting/exchange programs for faculty.

Q7: How could the University be a better partner with your organization or economic development issues?

Respondents indicated that the University needs to improve in this area. Specifically, they offered the following suggestions:

“The University has the ability to be a major “convener” of higher education, workforce, technology and other development-related sectors. Convening major organizations in key

development-related sectors with public sector leaders would help us better understand needs and opportunities and move quickly to capitalize on opportunities.”

“While the University does a good job of this for selected clients that we know of, all too often the University is difficult to deal with, slow, unresponsive to contract deadlines and deliverables, expensive and occasionally opinionated.”

Q8: How could your organization be a better partner with the University on economic development issues?

The respondents suggested that the organization could use employees to serve as liaisons between the organization and the University and ensure that more local stakeholders and University faculty and administrators work collaboratively to improve in this area.

Q9: How well does the University link its resources and expertise to public needs?

The respondents indicated that the University needs to improve its performance in this area. While the majority indicated that the University performs “fairly” in this area or that there is no basis for judgment, there is a need for improvement.

Again, this area is important/extremely important to the respondents, particularly in their desire for the University to provide infrastructure for entrepreneurship and creation of start-ups/spin-off businesses.

Q10: How well does the University create educational and professional development opportunities that are relevant to regional economic growth and innovation?

The respondents indicated that the University should improve in creating and fostering a culture of entrepreneurship (similar to the responses to Q9) and improvements need to be made in developing structured experiential learning opportunities for students through internships co-op experiences across a wide range of academic programs. Moreover, the respondents noted that University’s curriculum does a “fair” job of aligning its curricula to match current industry-specific needs.

Overall, this practice/area is very important to the majority of the respondents with the majority indicating that the creation of a culture of entrepreneurship across the institution, including training and mentoring opportunities for students and faculty.

Q11: How well does the University contribute to the development of the region?

The respondents suggested that this is an area in which the University needs to improve in its contribution to an infrastructure that supports early-stage innovation, developing partnerships with government at federal, state, and local levels to create and attract new business clusters and connecting economic actors across organizational boundaries for collaborations.

Q12: How does the University contribute to areas relevant to the region’s economic growth (if at all)?

The majority of the respondents agreed that the University provides an educated workforce to fill business/industry positions, provides employment opportunities, purchases local goods and services, use its resources to improve the community, and is a benefit in that it a four year-degree institution in the community.

Q13: How open, accessible, and responsive is the University to the community’s needs?

The majority of the respondents (appx. 54%) reported that the University facilitates a respectful civic discourse and contributes to community understanding of complex issues. However, the respondents indicate that the University needs to improve in developing structures and networks to facilitate interactions among key University personnel and the region’s economic actors.

Q14: How (and how well) does the University communicate contributions, successes, and achievements that benefit the region?

Approximately 52% of the respondents agreed that the University works with well with regional leaders to capitalize on its cultural and athletic activities to cultivate a dynamic local environment to attract a highly-educated workforce. Fewer respondents think the University performs well in its reporting of its impact contributions to regional innovation and economic growth to local/regional stakeholders and in its dissemination of information about University/community collaborations.

Q15: How might the University perform better as a collaborator in regional economic growth?

Several of the respondents’ written responses expand their responses to Q14 (Communication of successes), and the University’s performance/connection to business/industry:

- Do a better job of communicating success. Memphis needs to know that really “smart” things—sometimes world class—happen at the University.
- Do a better job of publicizing its academic and research successes.
- More interaction and collaboration with other development-related entities in Shelby County
- Focus on one or two specific development related activities, commit the resources, and look to achieve significant results.
- Revisit the mission of the FIT—The FIT was at one time supposed to be the “front door” for external economic development access.
- Recognize that it has to deliver more like a business consulting firm and less like an academic institution when working with business/industry schedules and deadlines.

Q16: General Feedback

One respondent provided the following comments:

- The FedEx Institutes current practices and initially stated mission appear to be misaligned, particularly when one “click[s] the ‘Business & Industry’ link on the UM website.
- The Transportation Institute plays a very important role and the University’s support of Operation Safe Community/The Crime Commission has been instrumental, but the University is largely silent on other development -related issues.

Summary of Findings: Institutional Assessment/ Internal Respondents (47)

Q3: Engage and Assert Institutional Leadership

How do you assess the University's current performance?

The respondents indicated that University is performing well in this area, but improvement is needed in the University's ability to identify key research strengths and align them with government expectations and leaders and actively engaged senior campus leaders in regional economic development dialogue and initiatives. Overall, the internal respondents that each of these areas is of importance to the University's role in regional economic development.

Q4: Create a Supportive Culture

The respondents indicated that this activity is very important to University's role in regional development. However, this is the one of the areas in which the respondents concur that the University needs to improve its performance. Respondents identified the following areas for improvement:

- Develop faculty institutional reward systems that recognize faculty involvement in technology development and entrepreneurship and community partnerships as another form of disseminating scholarship.
- Recognize and promulgate policies and processes that facilitate effective University-community interactions, and support and strengthen University-community partnerships, including those involving applied research and use of academic facilities by industry
- Promote an understanding of the interdisciplinary and inter-institutional actions and practices needed to address community needs.
- Support alignment of curriculum to meet industry's continuing education requirements.
- Encourage the development of more efficient contracting procedures for business to access University research and institutional resources.

Q5: Ensure that University Activities Benefit the Public

The respondents reported that the University's performance is lacking in this area, indicating that improvements are needed the following:

- Leverage University investments in facilities and outreach to support regional economic activity such as attracting and retaining companies and building industry clusters.
- Link the University to the regional technology base.
- This area is very important to the majority of the respondents.

Q6: Develop an Innovation Economy

The respondents' evaluation of the University's performance in this area was overwhelmingly low. They found the University's ability to identify, track, and inform colleagues and partners of established statutes, mandates, and governmental policies related to economic development and analyze local and regional targeted industry studies to assist in creating new industry and training and students (clients) as two areas in need of improvement.

Q7: Provide Relevant Educational Opportunities and Programs

The respondents noted the University's strong performance in its ability to deliver flexible curricula, class times, and locations that enable students and community workforce to pursue highly demanded career paths and opportunities for talent development through internships and co-op experiences across a wide range of academic programs.

The respondents noted that these two areas need improvement:

- The University's need/ability to create a culture of entrepreneurship
- Create an administrative infrastructure with policies and procedures to ensure quality interactions with regional business/industry partners, other institutions, and business and industry experiential learning centers, community colleges, etc.

Q8: Promote Openness, Accessibility and Responsiveness

The majority of the respondents indicated that the University needs to improve its performance in the following areas:

- Developing user-friendly systems that will allow faculty and staff to access advanced research and development facilities and information and technology infrastructure
- Developing structures and networks to facilitate meetings between key University faculty, staff, and administrators and the region's business and government leaders

Q9: Communication: Communicate Contributions, successes,

The majority of the respondents indicated a need for improvement in the area of faculty education regarding opportunities for and benefits of their participation in regional and economic development activities.

Q10: Questionnaire Improvement Feedback

- Too much emphasis on technology and business. . .
- The University needs to understand fast pace of industry.

Methodology: The Assessment Process—Part Two

Focus Group Assessment: Summary of Findings

After analyzing the survey generated data, the APLU team conducted a follow-up focus group to better gauge the external and internal respondents' perceptions of the University's economic impact and obtain feedback on ways the University can better connect to industry, improve its economic and business development foot print, and market its research faculty, students, and research contributions.

The external focus groups (3), held in June and July 2013, were comprised of business, industry, and technology leaders and representatives from various companies and organizations throughout the Memphis, Shelby County, and West Tennessee communities. The participants were presented with a PowerPoint presentation that highlighted the University's economic impact, enrollment, and number of employees, and numerous economic and business incubator-type centers, as a means to demonstrate the University's contributions to economic development. This presentation also included three media examples or "case studies" of faculty researchers' and students' projects that exemplified the various ways that the University contributes to business and economic development. After viewing the presentation, the participants were invited to answer the following question: *What can we do better?*

Consistently the first response to this question was, *"Why didn't I know that all of this great work was taking place at the University?"* Each external focus group appreciated learning about the ways that the University helps to develop and utilize technological to impact medical science, the environment and the community, but agreed that the institution could do better in communicating this this impact to the external community

These groups also discussed the role that the FedEx Institute plays in business development and suggested ways to inform the business community about programs, workshops, courses, etc. that can help develop employees, projects, and logistics. In essence, this group asked that businesses be invited to the University to hear about its business and economic development activities and offerings, and, in turn better relationships between the business sector and faculty researchers can develop.

During one focus group, one participant specifically discussed the beneficial relationship that he and his company have with a faculty researcher and his graduate students. He detailed the cost effectiveness of utilizing the University's research faculty, students and facilities as benefit to his company and noted that the University's work is competitive with research and product development that is often outsourced internationally. This strong review is another testament to the University's direct impact on local economic development and may serve as an additional case study.

At the conclusion of each focus group, the participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to assist the University in furthering its presence in local and regional economic development.

Internal Focus Groups

The Internal focus groups (3) were comprised of faculty administrators and researchers who were invited to complete the survey. After presenting each group with a summary of the APLU's competition letter and allowing them the opportunity to review summarized survey gap analysis data, participants were asked their opinions of the University's role in business and regional economic development. From these groups, the following themes emerged:

- If the University is committed to encouraging more faculty participation and activity in research development, then current annual review and tenure and promotion models may need to be revised.
- Faculty incentives must be put in place to encourage faculty researchers to develop courses and research projects that demonstrate an awareness of and commitment to economic development.
- Departments must be more collaborative when applying for grants, research funds, etc. so that more faculty and students can work toward the development of viable economic development projects.
- Faculty members need to be invited to participate in workshops that will encourage them to think in a business and industry development role.

The most interesting response from these groups was their appreciation to be involved in a discussion about how their departments have and can connecting to business and industry.

Comparative Assessment: Findings

The external and internal assessment data—surveys and focus groups—addressed different areas, but the shared goal of each tool was to ask the following questions: How does the University impact economic and business development? How can it continue to do so into the 21st century? The consensus between both internal and external stakeholders is that the University and industry need to forge stronger and more demonstrative research and business development collaborations. Also, the two groups appear to agree that the University should do more to support and encourage faculty research and collaboration.

Specifically, the internal survey data and focus groups results demonstrated a desire for the University to continue to consult deans and faculty researchers as it pursues economic development opportunities and evaluations. Moreover, this group suggested that the University

incentivize departments and faculty to integrate business and economic development factors into the University's curricula, interdisciplinary research projects, and faculty recruitment.

Recommendations, Changes, and Future Assessment Opportunities

The final APLU report was submitted in August 2013. This report included the University's assessment of its business and economic impact and listed several areas in which the University plans to increase this impact. As stated in the final report, the University will implement several changes to encourage economic development including:

- Starting AY 2013-14, Academic Affairs is adopting a [Responsibility Management Center \(RMC\) model](#) where each unit will receive all of its revenues and income and be responsible for its own expenses. The incentive for economic development is that economic development partnerships serve a unit by providing a source for revenue and a means for recruiting and retaining students.
- [Workforce Development](#): The UofM's Interim President and Provost plus relevant Deans and Center Directors are scheduled to personally meet with the CEO's of the 25-30 largest employers in the region by the end of December, 2013. The goal is to determine the human resources and economic development needs for the next 10 years and what the UofM can do to meet those needs? The meetings will inform business leaders of the resources the UofM offers to assist their development, and they will provide a forum for setting up access points to the UofM for those businesses and access points for the UofM to those businesses and agencies.
- [Tenure and promotion process](#)-- Each college will develop and begin implementation of a faculty workload policy in AY 2013-14. Engagement in economic development activities will be included in a college's or unit's workload as appropriate to that discipline. The workload policy will provide additional support by defining different faculty responsibilities applicable to tenure and promotion such as teaching or engaging in economic development activities.
- [Curriculum](#)--The external assessment made very clear the desire by external stakeholders for the UofM to link its curriculum more closely to the knowledge and skills needed by regional industries and businesses. Likewise, internal participants in the assessment expressed their interest in improving those connections. (APLU Submission Report, August 2013)

As a result of my experience with this process, I identified three areas of improvement which were consistent with the APLU report's recommendations—marketing, faculty development, and greater inclusion of “soft skills” in discussions and assessments of its role in economic development. The APLU team's identification of the University's “workforce development” initiative (bullet two) is an example of the type of marketing and collaboration activities that the University should and will do in order to inform local businesses and industries that the University is here to serve their needs.

The University's commitment to faculty development and support of business and industry economic development presents itself in its revisiting of its colleges' tenure and promotion processes and curriculum development. These are areas where faculty will learn more about the importance of business and economic development while, simultaneously, designing courses that will expose and encourage students to the possibilities of business and economic development.

The last suggestion that I identified, "greater inclusion of soft skills," is one that was often omitted from the internal and external respondents' suggestions, comments, or questions. Soft skills may be defined as those critical thinking, strong communication, and humanistic skills that help to shape, define, and sustain a stronger workforce. These are skills that business, industry, and economic development assessments must acknowledge alongside those skills considered to be more "marketable." This omission provides ample opportunities for University colleges and departments that specialize in these imperative skills—Communications, Literature, Political Science, History, Sociology, etc.—to consider ways to assess, highlight, and "market" these skills as significant contributors to and influences upon the region's business and economic activity. I will utilize the assessment skills garnered from this experience to begin to consider and design assessment activities for my two home departments (Dept. of English and the African and African American Studies Program), and, if successful, other departments within the University to assist the administration, my colleagues, and our students in understanding that a college and/or University degree and a highly trained workforce are two of the greatest influences on continued business and economic development.

Conclusion and Update

This project began with the Association for Public and Land-grant Universities' invitation to participate in a "contest" to gauge our University's business and economic impact. The University of Memphis was not only a member of the "inaugural class of designated APLU Innovation and Economic Prosperity Universities," but also placed as a finalist for the inaugural APLU Innovation and Economic Prosperity Award. Securing a finalist position is an excellent illustration of the University's commitment to identifying and continuing its role as a significant space for business and economic development in the region, state, and nation.

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