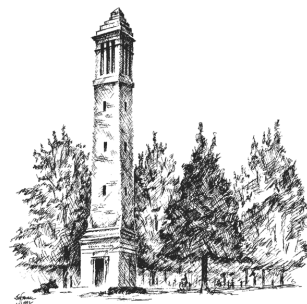




One University's Engagement History

Mary Allen Jolley

Institutional history can inform the present and point to a vision of the future. The brief history recalled in this essay emphasizes The University of Alabama's strong engagement with the state of Alabama and with local communities beginning in the early 1980s.

The recession of the 1980s left its mark on Alabama. The manufacturing sector alone lost almost 40,000 jobs. Unemployment in Tuscaloosa County, location of The University of Alabama, was the highest in the state. The university, and the state, had experienced several years of prorated budgets.

Taking note of the state's sagging economy, the newly appointed president of The University of Alabama, Dr. Joab Thomas, in 1981 made a commitment to assist in building a strong economic base in Alabama. In his initial remarks to the Board of Trustees, Thomas established three priorities to drive the university's engagement with the state: (1) The quality of all University academic programs would be enhanced. (2) The university would become a major research enterprise. (3) The research program would relate strongly to the economic development of the state.

An unusual opportunity for faculty and staff to implement Thomas's vision presented itself in 1983. A General Motors plant, Rochester Products Division in Tuscaloosa, employed 200 people in manufacturing automotive components. The plant was scheduled to close if employees could not find \$2 million in operating cost savings. In

the end, they were short \$470,000. They turned to the Tuscaloosa Industrial Board and then, in turn, to the university with an offer to sell the plant to the university as a research facility.

The discussions culminated in a three-party partnership among General Motors Corporation, the United Auto Workers, and the university. The UA Board of Trustees agreed to use the building as a research facility and to pay General Motors the \$470,000 needed to keep the plant operating; however, if faculty and staff could identify the additional savings, that amount would be reduced dollar for dollar. The UAW called an election to ratify the plan to establish a trust fund by withholding monthly contributions from their paychecks to be deposited to the fund. As savings were identified, the monthly employee contributions were reduced accordingly, and ultimately their contributions were returned in full.

A three-year time frame was agreed upon, and a management committee consisting of representatives from General Motors, UAW, and the university proceeded to implement the plan.

Within eight months the \$470,000 in annual savings had been identified. Encouraged by the success of the project, in 1984 General Motors decided to invest \$14 million to turn the assembly plant into a highly automated, vertically integrated unit to fabricate carburetors as well as assemble them.

The university received nationwide recognition for its role in the Rochester project. Articles appeared in the *New York Times*, *Harvard Busi-*

ness Review, and *Reader's Digest*. Major networks broadcast news about how a university helped save a manufacturing plant.

Here are some of the headlines of the turnaround from Alabama newspapers:

- Future Prospects Bright (editorial, *Tuscaloosa News*, January 21, 1983)
- Efforts Save Tuscaloosa Plant (Mobile *Press-Register*, January 20, 1983)
- U. of Ala. to Save Plant from Closing (Nashville *Tennessean*, January 21, 1983)
- Three-Way Plan Ensures Plant's Future (*Birmingham Post-Herald*, February 7, 1983)
- GM Factory Is New UA Classroom (*Montgomery Advertiser*, February 7, 1983)
- Labor, Brain Power Join in Bid to Save Factory (*Chicago Tribune*, March 14, 1983)

Requests for assistance from communities throughout the state began to grow, and the university responded with a strategic plan to help counties and other groups organize and plan for economic development.

The university's strategic plan included three goals: (1) Prevent job loss and attract new industry by building world-class programs in manufacturing technology that can be transported to existing and new industry. (2) Assist state and selected communities in creating effective economic development programs. (3) Help Alabama grow more of its own industry.

By 1995, the university had assisted in establishing the following economic development partnerships, each with strategic agendas in place: Tuscaloosa County Industrial Development Authority, Etowah County Development Authority (Gadsden), Selma Industrial Development Authority, Shoals Industrial Development Authority (Florence), Barbour County Industrial Development Authority (Eufaula), Phenix City 2000

Inc. (Russell County), Dothan Industrial Development Authority, Escambia County Industrial Development Authority (Brewton), Butler County Commission for Economic Development (Greenville), Covington County Economic Development Commission (Andalusia), and Talladega Industrial Development Authority.

Improving the state's economy was not the university's only engagement target. Increasing human capital was also. The Office of Economic and Community Affairs and UA's College of Human Environmental Sciences formed a partnership to strengthen families, increasing the probability that their children, especially those in communities where large numbers live in poverty, would arrive at school ready to learn. Currently there are 12 of these centers throughout the state. They constitute the Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers. Services are community based and operate from nonprofit agencies.

History is dynamic and ever changing, but these early efforts left in place university centers that remain vital to economic efforts throughout Alabama. They include the University Center for Economic Development, the Alabama Productivity Center, the Alabama International Trade Center, and the Alabama Technology Network. These achievements also left in place a broadening and deepening legacy of engagement from which all disciplines and programs at the university are benefiting today.

About the Author

Mary Allen Jolley was director of Economic and Community Affairs at The University of Alabama from 1985-94. She remains active in community service, serving on the JCES editorial board and with the Council of the Center for Community-Based Partnerships. She can be reached at majolley@bellsouth.net.