

## **PASCAL Report to the North Illinois Region**

### **PURE Work 2009-2010**

#### **A. Profile and context of the region – distinctive and unique features**

Because of the close proximity to the major metropolitan area of Chicago, and the overlapping jurisdictions of many of the offices, authorities, institutions and NGOs concerned with regional planning and especially economic and labour market issues, it is difficult to exactly determine the borders of the Northern Illinois region.

Only a few of the various public authorities, NGOs, associations and institutions engage in any systematic and long term regional planning. Whilst some of these entities have a working relationship with each other, they do not share a common vision and strategy for the economic development of the Northern Illinois region as a whole, nor do they work on the basis of data that are shared with and accessible to others. That is even true for the higher education sector, the NIU and the 26 community colleges operating in Northern Illinois.

A common regional vision and clear development objectives are therefore absent, and co-operative working relationships are ambiguous, or at least not well formalized.

#### **B. Formal and informal means of engagement**

Until NIU's affiliation with PURE the higher education sector has neither significantly engaged in, nor substantially contributed to, that process.

Since then, NIU has made a major effort to bring the institutions of the HE sector together, develop a common vision, and engage in collaborative analysis and action. The effort to bring such discussions and engagement about was, and still is, not just directed at the community colleges but also to the leadership (the president and the deans) of the university, as regional engagement and cooperation was not seen by them as an essential mission of NIU. Regional outreach and engagement efforts and activities were, and still are, mainly concentrated in a few offices and programs, and while the principle of a regional mandate is not challenged by the NIU leadership, neither is it wholeheartedly embraced across all the academic units within NIU. In general, there was little contact and communication, especially between the top management of NIU and the CCs, and not a great deal of trust between them.

This has started to change. The initiative by NIU to engage in dialogue with the colleges as well as local development agencies and NGOs, supported and reinforced by the PURE process, has dispelled the prevailing distrust between the university and the colleges, and replaced it with a growing understanding and

acceptance that the region needs a common vision and cooperation more than competition and parochial perspective by individual institutions.

Formal collaboration between NIU and the community college sector is still limited to a small number of locally delivered courses and degrees at three University Outreach Centres and eight community college campuses; but there are plans and talks underway that would expand such collaborative arrangements to include other subject areas and programs.

However, there is an ongoing discussion between NIU and most of the colleges, at both presidents' and working levels, on regional workforce and economic development issues. A number of concrete targets have been identified that will be worked towards in collaboration. The challenge is to concretize and translate them into operational projects.

### **C. Benefits and prospective future gains from regional and international networking**

Benefits from this collaboration will be certain to accrue, but it is hard at this point to concretely define let alone measure them. This is so since, until now, no formal benchmarking process has been put in place. NIU has, however, engaged in a self-assessment exercise in order to be recognized by the Carnegie Foundation for its community engagement. Part of this assessment included a survey of 200 community leaders on their perception of the university's engagement. This survey, started in 2008, is designed as an annual survey so that changes in the perception can be gauged.

While the Carnegie self-assessment instrument is roughly comparable with the PURE benchmarking tool, no similar exercise has been attempted for regional authorities rating progress and gaps in reaching the main objectives of regional development. The lack of a central regional planning agency, and the overlap of jurisdictions of the many offices, authorities, institutions and NGOs that have responsibility for different sectoral policies and programs, makes such an exercise complex and difficult. That however does not mean it cannot be done, even if it not clear what role NIU or the higher education sector as a whole can play in this. Trying to bring the various players together and convince them of the benefits of such a coordinated planning exercise would be an important first step. Another would be the analysis of regional and demographic, local labour market and education data to be shared with the regional data. For the latter, NIU would probably need to create some additional unit with expertise in local and regional planning.

The RCG (NIU's Pure team) prepared excellent background materials for the CDG visits, based on a thorough analysis of the region. The University received in-depth feedback in turn from the CDG. Several members of the NIU team have also been involved as reviewers in other PURE reviews of Thames Gateway, Transdanubia, and Glasgow. This provided them with the opportunity to gain insights into the

structures, policies and problems of these other regions, and make comparisons with their own. Moreover they have been able, through these visits and through participation in PASCAL conferences, Advisory Board, Executive etc., to connect with and tap into a vast network of experts on regional development issues.

Again, as with other networks, the impact and concrete benefits of networking often cannot be specified easily, nor do they accrue immediately but over time. Yet it is clear that being a partner in an international network that is focused on universities and their regions, and which is constantly animated and provides channels for communication among the members, has great potential, and provides a great number of opportunities for exchange and action. So far, NIU has not availed itself of all of these opportunities, and is therefore not yet able to demonstrate to its partners and own leadership the practical and palpable value of its membership in the network.

#### **D. Getting more value from engagement between the region and the universities**

It is true for all PURE regions and universities that some links are easier to sustain and build on than others. In NIU's case, links between the University and the colleges of the region have been developed and actively pursued. The PURE exercise was used for this initiative, as providing legitimation and an international stamp of approval which carried weight both with the colleges and the NIU leadership.

As a necessary second step, a dialogue with cities, towns and counties as well as specialized agencies and NGOs serving the region must be initiated and, where this has been done initially (as in the case of local development agencies), maintained and followed through. Since NIU is the only institution serving the entire region this task falls naturally to NIU, even if this a tall order for a University. However, because of its standing as a research institution and its important role in training the local labour force – professionals and managers – it is uniquely positioned to take the lead role in this as well, at least initially.

#### **E. Evidence that the work of PURE will be sustained in the future**

It is tempting to think that the process of cooperating with the regional colleges that has been initiated by NIU is irreversible. It is not, and needs continued perseverance and resources to succeed. That colleges have embraced the initiative and pledged to collaborate is a good sign; that they have so far not agreed to share the costs for this exercise is disappointing. Clearly, some in-kind resources are committed, especially staff time, but to make the process sustainable it would need some more substantial buy-in on the part of the colleges.

On the other hand, since the NIU leadership has endorsed the initiative, not least by an explicit commitment by the President when meeting with his college peers, it can be assumed that NIU will continue its efforts towards bringing all the relevant regional partners to the table and work with them towards a more shared vision and collaborative development.

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### **Annex: Examples of Good Practice**

- The reorganization in 2000 of 12 offices at NIU that are serving the region into an 'Outreach Division' which reports to The PPP for administration and university outreach;
- The 2008 initiative to survey 200 community leaders annually on the engagement of NIU;
- The successful application to the Carnegie Foundation, based on an extensive self- assessment, to be recognized and classified as a university with community engagement;
- The development of ladder degree programs that recognize the previous work at community colleges;
- The collaborative effort of NIU with the (majority of) regional community colleges to set up objectives for human resources and labor force development in the region and plan joint initiatives and programs to reach these objectives;
- The attempt to reach out and collaborate with offices, institutions and NGOs working in the region.