



## Fostering Strategic Partnerships Surviving and thriving in challenging times.

By Dr. Scott D. Miller and Dr. Marylouise Fennell - College Planning & Management, April, 2011

In difficult economic times, most procedures and ways of doing business are subject to review. Sustainable growth requires not just strategic, long-term planning, but also strategic partnership. To paraphrase Charles Dickens, periods of sustained recession can evoke either the worst of times for our institutions, or alternatively, today's challenges can lay the foundation for the best of times if territoriality gives way to innovation, entrepreneurship, and synergistic partnerships.

Contrary to some thinking, scarce resources actually create opportunities for partnerships that can reduce costs, enhance quality, raise needed revenue, and build win-win relationships with new external audiences.

External partnerships are a vital component of any effective strategic plan, notes our colleague Dr. Wendy B. Libby, president of Stephens College in Missouri. Coming to the presidency at a crossroads in the institution's history, Dr. Libby quickly seized on engagement with the larger Columbia community, fostering and enhancing relationships with businesses and individuals, and leading a renaissance in Stephens' enrollment and visibility. Writing in our book *Presidential Perspectives* (Aramark publications), she cites two opportunities for campuses to create a more student-centered culture, recognize employees as valued members of the community, and enhance a respected brand identity among key audiences:

### **First, convert underutilized facilities into revenue-producing resources.**

Often vacant spaces such as auditoriums, residence and recital halls, and other spaces can be made productive when aggressively marketed as event venues. On-campus conference centers can not only produce needed revenue, but also they can help to reconnect alumni with their

alma mater while attracting community residents and businesses to campus. Campuses cannot afford to let playing courts and fields, student residences, and other non-performing assets lie fallow when students and faculty are not on campus; leasing them for summer conferences and camps attracts revenue and students when programmatic objectives are synergistic with the institution's mission and values.

### **Second, new external partnerships with local vendors can enhance the student experience while boosting institutional brand.**

A balanced and robust partnership with an external dining services provider at Stephens, where a large percentage of students place a high priority on body image and fitness, served as the cornerstone for an entire student-centered dining experience under the umbrella of a strategic plan. A new emphasis on options, sensitivity to cultural differences and dietary preferences and flexibility in food choice as well as meal plans as part of a "customer-conscious" awareness comprised a critical strategic component of enrollment and retention goals, helping Stephens to be perceived as more competitive and student friendly.

Although Stephens College opted to outsource dining services, other campuses may consider other candidates, including facilities maintenance. As Dr. Martin Nadelman, president of Alamance Community Colleges notes, each college has a different set of actors to weigh when considering outsourcing. It is prudent, he points out, to review items for change that are too costly, demand more of our time than we would like, or may be better handled by others outside our campus.

### **Other Factors to Consider**

Here are other cost-related factors to consider when seeking to build public-private partnerships involving outsourcing of functions currently performed in-house: Consider average increases in expenditures in the outsources area over the past three to four years and compare them with the escalator factor used by the vendor.

Factor in "hidden" costs such as cleaning supplies, which are often included in outside vendors' fees.

Calculate significant institutional expenses without an actual cost factor, including personnel expenses such as sick days, advertising, interview costs, sick and annual leave, and unemployment compensation.

Analyses should carry costs over a five-year period. Many vendor contracts include a multiplier linked to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) to facilitate budgeting.

Historians are fond of noting that civilizations seldom recognize a "golden age" as occurring in the present. With a student-centered focus, laser-like strategic planning consistent with our mission and values and a with imagination a vision, we can create a "golden age" on our own campuses today.

*Dr. Scott D. Miller is President of the College and M.M. Cochran Professor of Leadership Studies at Bethany College in West Virginia. Now in his third college presidency, he has served as a CEO for 20 years.*

*Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, a former President of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, PA, is Senior Counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and a Partner in Hyatt Fennell.*