

Entrepreneurial Institution of the Month

Dickinson State University

Dr. Lee Vickers, President

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Entrepreneurship in Higher Education

Dr. Lee Vickers, President of Dickinson State University, had an epiphany about education while talking to his granddaughter.

After asking her about her day in school, his grandchild replied, “Papa, I didn’t do well today. I colored outside of the lines, and you’re not supposed to do that.”

Vickers said this comment illustrates that school systems can discourage creativity.

“We don’t always encourage innovation and going outside of the box (in education),” Vickers said. “But we’re trying to change that on our campus.”

With the abundance of entrepreneurial activity going on at Dickinson State, and in the entire state of North Dakota, Vickers’ statement rings true. Coloring outside the lines may not be popular at his granddaughter’s grade school, but it’s encouraged at DSU.

“Institutions must be entrepreneurial in the way they conduct their business,” Vickers said.

Statewide Mandate Promotes Entrepreneurship

Three years ago, educators, business leaders, and lawmakers got together at a legislative roundtable to carve out a long-range plan for education in North Dakota. The result promises a university system that encourages entrepreneurship.

“We held the roundtable because we knew that higher education needed to be the key to North Dakota’s future,” Vickers said. “If the economy in North Dakota was going to grow, higher education had to lead the way. Also, as the economy grows, the budget for education will grow, too.”

Cornerstones of the roundtable’s plan include economic development, educational excellence, a flexible and responsive system that works with other agencies and institutions, educational accessibility for all North Dakota residents, and sustaining the entrepreneurial vision.

“I can’t think of any other state focusing on this approach,” Vickers said. “This is a major change for institutions.”

When boundaries at DSU were erased, and departments and programs allowed to set their own course, the university became more creative and responsive to students’ and citizens’ needs.

“There have been a lot of positive changes, but challenges, too,” Vickers added. “When you have 11 institutions across the state trying to implement this plan, it’s great to go forth and be entrepreneurial, but if you’re the chancellor, it can be difficult to create a unified system.”

National legislators have also joined the push to promote entrepreneurship in the state.

U.S. Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.), along with U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), sponsored a bill to reverse the chronic problem of out-migration from rural areas.

The New Homestead Economic Opportunity Act proposes federal tax and other financial incentives for a new generation of modern homesteaders.

“People who come to live and work in rural areas for five years would be offered help to buy a home, pay for college, build a nest egg or start a business,” Dorgan said in a DSU newsletter. “We believe these incentives can help attract a new generation of home-steaders and entrepreneurs.”

According to Vickers, Dorgan has also helped sponsor two national conferences on population issues, a key element to revitalizing rural economies.

DSU has taken a leadership role in organizing the conference, titled the Great Plains Population Symposia Project. Collaborators in this project – including researchers at DSU, North Dakota State University, Iowa State University, the University of Montana and Colorado State University – analyze population trends, new technologies, communities and workings of a new economy in the Great Plains.

Globalization and high tech industries that promote a “knowledge economy” are key ingredients in this new era. As out-migration bleeds the state of its young people, North Dakota leaders attempt to resuscitate their economy and provide more economic opportunities for youths.

Among the findings of the latest symposium: “Universities are a primary resource in the knowledge economy. They have been characterized as the ‘factories of a knowledge community.’”

If this is the case, Vickers and his team at DSU have built a successful factory producing opportunities for students and state residents alike.

Conferences Boost Business Knowledge

“Higher education needs to demonstrate entrepreneurship, but also provide training for entrepreneurs,” Vickers said.

DSU offers a myriad of learning opportunities through workshops and meetings.

One high profile meeting is Entrepreneurship in North Dakota, held for three consecutive years at the DSU campus. At this gathering for students and citizens, a variety of speakers, academics and successful entrepreneurs share their stories and advice.

Titled “Growth through Entrepreneurship,” this year’s seminar focused on the positive force entrepreneurship can be for local and regional economies.

Don Macke, co-director of the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, spoke at the conference about the key role that small business leaders can play in boosting rural areas.

“Today, we are experiencing an explosion of innovation and entrepreneurial activities in rural America,” Macke said. “We have found that entrepreneurs create two-thirds of all new jobs; they generate two-thirds of all business growth and produce two-thirds of all innovation.”

Also in 2004, DSU hosted “Building Quality of Place: Asset-Based Development,” a workshop to explore asset-based development and community regeneration as tools in building rural communities. Attendees included economic developers, government officials and lawmakers and community leaders.

Other entrepreneurial endeavors at DSU include spin-offs from the population symposiums and the entrepreneurship conference, including an Entrepreneurship Luncheon. Here, students and

others gathered to give administrators and faculty feedback on how DSU can further implement entrepreneurial efforts at the university.

Shaping Young Entrepreneurs

Perhaps most exciting to Vickers is his university's focus on opening opportunities in business to his students and other young people.

With enthusiasm in his voice, Vickers ticks off a list of DSU initiatives for youths: "We've formed special youth community conversation groups where 10 different high schools meet on campus and talk about what they perceive as quality of place. We also partner with K-12 institutions to enhance business knowledge at a lower level. On campus, we really emphasize internships and try to connect with the business community in that area. And we emphasize diversity, as that has been a major drawing point for students."

A highlight for business students around the state is DSU's Business Challenge, an educational venture of the North Dakota business community, DSU and the Department of Public Instruction. High school students, educators and university students are teamed with successful business leaders and company advisors to learn first-hand about the business world.

During a week of concentrated study and real-life applications, students assist a business leader in running a mock company and compete with others. They also tour local industry sites.

"This program helps our young people understand what entrepreneurship is all about," Vickers said.

Since Business Challenge began in 1978, more than 7,500 students and educators have participated.

DSU doesn't stop at the high school and college level. For the younger set, they sponsor a local Marketplace for Kids.

A nonprofit organization, Marketplace for Kids offers programs and meetings that showcase ideas of North Dakota's young people. Programs target 4th through 6th graders, but they are open to all ages. During the summer, DSU has hosted Marketplace Education Days, which help foster innovative thinking and creativity.

During the a Marketplace Education Days session, Vickers came across a student participant walking down a hallway, pulling a contraption made of cardboard boxes. Proudly, the student exclaimed to Vickers, "With this invention, I guarantee kids won't fight in the back seat of cars!"

"That is the kind of creativity we are looking for," Vickers said, with a chuckle.

Across the state, 15,000 students participated in North Dakota's Marketplace for kids in 2003.

In addition to special meetings and conferences, DSU offers a variety of entrepreneurial courses. In a report from December 2003, the North Dakota University System announced that two NDUS institutions developed degree programs in entrepreneurship and 45 courses in entrepreneurship with at least once course at each campus. The report stated that 862 students enrolled in entrepreneurship courses, and six students graduated from entrepreneurship programs.

However, Vickers added, "Having entrepreneurial faculty is a real challenge because the average faculty person does not perceive themselves as being entrepreneurial."

In the future, DSU may be at the center of a national entrepreneurial movement in education. Vickers said they are trying to get federal funding to create a focused organization that can serve as an umbrella for state, and possibly national, entrepreneurial activities.

Key to entrepreneurship in higher education could be practice versus theory. While research is of utmost importance in the university setting, applying skills through entrepreneurship could actually save the state from further depopulation.

As Vickers said, at the most recent population symposium, “It’s very important to us to keep the momentum going. Let’s take what we’re learning, and put it to good use.”

Overall, Vickers is optimistic that entrepreneurial efforts at DSU and elsewhere are paying off.

He said, “Recently, it was found that North Dakota as a whole is still losing population, but the losses are much less, and some counties are growing. That indicates that things are getting better.”

-By Lisa Bauer, 0504

For more information on...

... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to www.ruraleship.org

... DSU, go to www.dsu.nodak.edu

... the Great Plains Population Symposium, go to gppop.dsu.nodak.edu

... the Entrepreneurship in ND conference, go to www.dickinsonstate.com/Entrepreneurship

... Business Challenge for youths, go to www.gobusinesschallenge.com

... Marketplace for Kids, go to www.marketplaceforkids.org