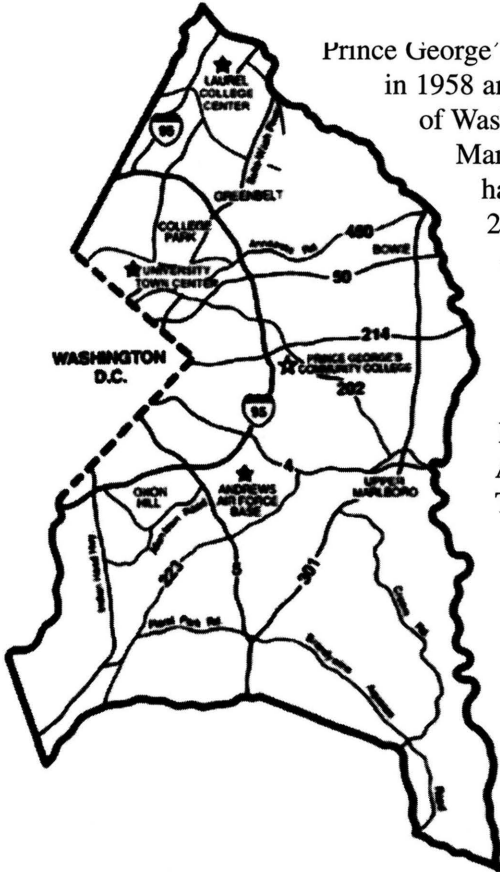


# A Tale of Three Centers

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## Abstract

*Prince George's Community College has developed three distinct models for off-campus centers. Examination of each model reveals the impact of variables such as location, ownership, design, target audience for a particular site (student demographics, community needs, and access issues), the role of partnerships with other institutions, and management and staffing decisions, particularly as they relate to the delivery of student services.*



Prince George's Community College (PGCC) was founded in 1958 and is located in Largo, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, DC. The fourth largest of Maryland's sixteen community colleges, PGCC had a credit headcount of 13,619 in the spring 2010 semester. In addition to the main campus, the college has three off-campus centers, which, collectively, enrolled nearly one in five (18.8 percent) of the college's spring 2010 credit students. The first extension center opened at Andrews Air Force Base (AFB) (now Joint Base Andrews) in 1972. The second, University Town Center, opened in Hyattsville, Maryland, in 2000, and the third, Laurel College Center, opened in 2001 in Laurel, Maryland.

## Andrews Air Force Base/ Joint Base Andrews/NAF Washington Center

## History and Facilities

Prince George's Community College opened an extension center at Andrews Air Force Base (officially known as Prince George's Community College at Andrews AFB or often referred to as Andrews) in 1972, the same year the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) was established. CCAF had evolved in the early 1970s as a means of gaining accreditation and recognition for Air Force training. Seven major Air Force training schools provided the technical portion of CCAF's credential. The technical education offered by Air Force schools was combined with a core of general education from

regionally accredited civilian institutions of higher education, and management education from Air Force or civilian sources. Since Andrews Air Force Base is located in the heart of Prince George's county, the college and the Air Force forged a natural partnership.

Throughout the years, PGCC and Andrews AFB have had a series of five-year agreements. The memorandum of understanding (MOU) is reviewed and renewed regularly by both PGCC and the Andrews education and training office. The MOU describes and outlines the business processes, academics, facilities, student services, and staffing responsibilities of both institutions. PGCC directly supports the Andrews education and training office that encourages all enlisted personnel to get a CCAF degree. The college, as one of five higher education institutions with staff and offices on the base, pays no rent or utilities, and the base provides classrooms, furniture, and technology. In return, military units use the college's on-base computer classroom, outfitted with the college's personal computers, for their own training needs, thus creating a mutually beneficial partnership. While such an arrangement has obvious advantages, it should be noted that military needs supersede civilian needs, which can occasionally lead to scheduling difficulties. Additionally, classrooms are neither as numerous nor as large as would be ideal. One biology lab and four classrooms are in one building and four classrooms in another, with the largest classroom holding only twenty students. More classrooms are available and negotiable, but all are shared by four other on-base institutions: University of Maryland University College, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Central Michigan University, and Webster University. Out of the five institutions, PGCC has the largest on-base enrollment. The availability of Andrews PGCC classes, about ten-miles south of the main campus, is generally attractive to residents from the southern end of the county, although civilian students come primarily from locales directly surrounding the base.

## **Partnerships**

Maintaining a strong partnership between college staff and the base education and training office staff is critically important. The Andrews education and training office staff understands that to maintain instructional integrity and to keep the maximum number of course offerings available to troops, the college must enroll both civilians and military, even in times of heightened security. Similarly, the PGCC staff understands the importance of complying with military policies and procedures. The college's program director and staff work closely with the base education staff to insure proper procedures are followed regarding program administration, military tuition assistance, specific course offerings, transfer of credit, promotion of college programs on the base, and academic advising. All procedures and requirements are outlined extensively in the MOU, but it is the above and beyond the call of duty things that make the partnership work. For example, the college staff attends many on-base functions, including Airman Leadership School graduations, which occur seven to eight times a year. Airman Leadership School trains first line supervisors for the USAF, and the college sponsors a \$1,000 scholarship to the highest achieving student in the school. Airman Leadership School encourages newly minted supervisors to earn their CCAF degree, maintaining the link between the college and the Air Force. Similarly, at a time

of decreased revenue for the college, the USAF completely funded a new, desperately needed, general biology laboratory on base used exclusively by the college.

Partnerships with other on-base colleges are also essential. PGCC's closest liaison is with the University of Maryland University College (UMUC). The college's Alliance Agreement with UMUC provides a curriculum plan for students to earn associate degrees and UMUC bachelor's degrees seamlessly. Many students take classes simultaneously at UMUC and Prince George's Community College on base. Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, Webster University, and Central Michigan University offer bachelor's and master's programs. None of the colleges compete with each other. The Base Education Partnership Advisory Committee comprising the program directors of each institution and the base education office chief reviews issues, activities, and programs benefiting active military, their families, and veterans. Committee members participate in education office activities and attend education and job fairs on Andrews and on other nearby installations such as Bolling AFB in Washington, DC, and Fort Meade in Maryland. Although these installations are not in Prince George's County, some county residents are stationed at them.

Because all civilians without military affiliation must get base access to attend class, PGCC staff on Andrews also partners closely with Security Forces Squadron (SFS). Several Andrews center staff members are cleared to give base access requests to civilians. As agents of SFS, staff members are trained in procedures and enforce base access regulations. Civilians are responsible for processing their access badges with SFS and obeying base traffic regulations and military courtesies, such as stopping at 5:00 p.m. when taps and the national anthem are played base wide.

Maintaining daily contact by email or phone with the college's main campus in Largo, which is about ten miles away, is essential. Course scheduling, business processes and student issues often require discussion and coordination with main campus staff. The college staff at Andrews stays in close touch with the main campus offices including admissions, registration, academic department chairs, academic advising, student accounts, finance (budget), and technology offices.

## **Access and Enrollment**

Until September 11, 2001, the extension center at Andrews was the largest of the college's extension centers growing to nearly 1,000 headcount. Access to the base prior to that date was open, requiring only that civilians show their driver's license upon base entry, register their cars with college staff, and get a permit to display on the dash while on base for class. Immediately after the terrorist attacks of 9-11, the Air Force barred all college classes on the base, leaving the college to scramble for alternate locations—the local high schools—for the remainder of the fall 2001 semester. Even staff members without military affiliation were not allowed on the base. In spring 2002, after revised base access processes and regulations were established, classes resumed on the base, but Andrews enrollment suffered a serious blow and will most likely never again reach its preterrorist attack level. Today, any civilian can attend

classes on Andrews provided they can pass the background check requirement and have a car. Civilians without their own transportation can use the base shuttle, but its route is limited and ends at 6:30 p.m., just as most classes are starting. That leaves walkers to hike nearly two miles to get off base or catch a ride with a compassionate classmate to the local bus stop. The security/base access issue is the major challenge for the college's Andrews center.

Currently, approximately 200–300 students, including active duty military, military spouses, federal employees and, civilians, are enrolled in evening classes on the base. Enrollment levels of active duty students declined partially due to a USAF reorganization, or force shaping initiative, several years ago, when many enlisted troops separated from active duty. Concurrently, the reorganization strengthened the college-USAF bond with directives tying military promotion to earning a CCAF degree. Active duty students attend to earn general education courses and transfer them to CCAF. Navy, Army, and Marine personnel stationed on Andrews also can take courses with the college. Military personnel and their dependents account for 50–60 percent of enrollments and county civilians and veterans comprise the balance. Curtailing base access and more stringent security procedures for civilians in addition to increasing popularity of online classes, especially for military, has contributed to the overall decline in face-to-face course enrollment.

## **Management Structure**

With only two full-time and six part-time staff running the Andrews college office, every staff member must be reliable, punctual, and cross-trained. The program director and program coordinator are full-time positions. Two part-time coordinators, two academic advisers, and one PC lab technician work mostly evenings and Saturday morning. One administrative support person works in the morning. The program director hires, supervises, and evaluates the staff and reports to a main campus administrator (equivalent to associate vice president) in the office of academic affairs. Often the program director serves in the capacity of any one of her staff in their absence, so she must know all facets of each person's position. The range of duties includes admitting, registering, cashiering, academic advising, financial aid advising, administering placement tests, assisting students with the college's online registration system, and providing general information. The staff provides excellent service and comes close to being a one-stop shopping experience for all prospective and current students and faculty who call or stop in. Several staff members have decades of main campus experience, which is helpful, but not required.

Andrews day-to-day operations fall to the Andrews staff with very little input from the main campus. The program director provides leadership for the college's operations at Andrews, serving as a liaison with Air Force leadership, and consults with all divisions of the college to ensure delivery of services and promotion of programs. This includes decisions about course offerings (keeping in mind the focus of CCAF and the MOU) and course cancellations as well as faculty assignments in direct consultation with

academic department chairs. The program director's supervisor is kept informed via e-mail and phone and adds pertinent and timely information to assist in making decisions, especially those related to academic policy and the budget. Managing and monitoring the extension center budget and making recommendations about the budget with regard to long- and short-term goals is a team effort with the on-campus supervisor. Issues related directly to the USAF Andrews education office are deferred to the program director, who consults with her supervisor if deemed necessary. The college's three extension-center program directors meet several times a year and communicate regularly to discuss common challenges and goals.

As technology has evolved, the college website and Blackboard and the college's online platform have become increasingly important. Military action in Iraq and Afghanistan has forced many troops to enroll in online courses and improved Blackboard technology has boosted online enrollments. To make sure the Andrews center website has up-to-date information on schedules, directions, and base access for students as well as detailed information for faculty, the program director maintains constant contact with the college's web and informational technology staff to learn new protocols and procedures.

## **Prince George's Community College at University Town Center**

### **History and Facilities**

PGCC at University Town Center celebrated its tenth anniversary in August of 2010. In the fall of 1999, early in his first full semester as president, Dr. Ronald A. Williams met with community leaders in the western part of the county regarding issues of access to education. During these meetings, he became convinced that the college should establish a presence in the Hyattsville area.

That December, the college's office of planning and institutional research (OPIR) presented the Board of Trustees with the results of a study assessing the extent to which the college was attracting students from throughout the county. The study also provided information on ethnicity. The OPIR report, which used census data based on the county's seven planning zones, indicated that the college's draw rate for Zone Two (the area in which Hyattsville is located) ranked sixth of the county's seven regions. Additionally, the report indicated that while 11 percent of the zone's population was Hispanic, only 5 percent of the college's students from that area were Hispanic.

On June 30, 2000, the college signed a five-year lease for 14,905 rentable square feet, occupying half of the second floor of an office building located within easy walking distance of the Prince George's Plaza Metro (subway) station. The first day of classes was August 28. Although the credit headcount that fall was only 276, enrollment at the new center grew quickly. So quickly, in fact, that over the summer of 2003, the college

leased the remaining space on the second floor, essentially doubling in size. By the fall of 2004, headcount had risen above 1,200, and growth has continued steadily since then. The fall 2009 credit headcount was 1,607.

The decision to open UTC was significant because it marked the college's first venture into leased space. As noted, PGCC had been operating at Andrews Air Force Base for many years, but in that case, the military provided access to offices and classrooms at no cost to the college. Similarly, PGCC had offered evening classes in a number of county high schools, but again at no significant cost.

Signing a lease in a commercial office building represented a dramatic departure from the college's normal business model. Fortunately, the Prince George's County government was enthusiastic about the venture and provided an initial cash infusion of \$500,000 to enable the college to furnish and equip the space. Additionally, the owner of the building was personally interested in bringing the community college to Hyattsville. Special concessions to the college included allowing up to forty employees at a time free access to the parking garage (no small matter in such close proximity to the Metro). The college was also granted a 50 percent rent reduction for the first year of the lease.

## **Partnerships**

Unlike the site at Andrews, with its strong links to the base education office and the other educational institutions on the base, and unlike Laurel College Center, which is operated jointly by two colleges, external partnerships have not played a big role in the operations at UTC. While the partnership with the building landlord is obviously important, the most significant relationships for UTC are those developed between the staff of the center and individuals on the main campus who provide advice and technical support, as well as materials and other resources. Main campus employees—the woman in the records office who can explain anomalies, fix mistakes, and override barriers in the college's registration system; the man in the financial aid office who can solve a problem and get the money flowing so that the teary-eyed off-campus student leaves with a smile on her face—are as much a part of the off-campus team as anyone.

An example of another type of partnerships with the main campus was a field trip organized by the director of advising in which his entire group came to UTC for a tour and meeting with the staff. Seeing is believing, after all. The good advice given by main campus student services staff about studying at one of the off-campus centers got even better after that visit, and the subsequent connectedness between staff at UTC and their counterparts in that office on the main campus was refreshing. This sort of exchange is important not just for the problem-solving efforts of employees but, more importantly, in the quality of advice given to students.

A memorandum of understanding was signed with the Prince George's County Memorial Library System to address the library needs of PGCC faculty and students.



A branch of the library is located within walking distance of the UTC site, and faculty members frequently avail themselves of the library's offer to provide tours and orientations to library services. It is also important to note that college librarians from the main campus also visit UTC upon request from faculty members to introduce students to the college's online databases.

Finally, UTC staff work closely with recruiters from neighboring institutions, most notably the University of Maryland University College, to facilitate the transfer of students beyond the community college. The student services coordinators also attend events, such as college fairs and financial aid evenings, at nearby high schools, especially targeting Hispanic families.

## **Access**

Over the years, UTC has been referred to variously as an access center, an extension center, and a degree center, but regardless of the terminology, providing the community with access to educational opportunities has been at the heart of the center's existence. The location, just a five-minute walk from a Metro station, and all the bus routes that feed into it, has opened up educational possibilities for students who previously were discouraged by the lack of public transportation routes to the main campus. Moreover, the site is in the middle of the largest immigrant receiving area in the county, and reaching out to these populations has had a huge payoff. In the fall of 2009, 62.3 percent of the credit students at UTC were born outside the United States. By contrast, that figure for the college as a whole was 35 percent. Contrary to initial expectations for UTC, most of the foreign-born students are from Africa, with Nigerians and Ethiopians being the two largest groups. Still, the significance of UTC in terms of Hispanic enrollment is impressive. In the fall of 1999, the year before UTC opened, the college's Hispanic students numbered just 330, or 3 percent of credit enrollment. Ten years later, the number of Hispanic students had more than doubled to 702. At UTC, 15.3 percent of the students are Hispanic.

Currently, the biggest issue facing UTC is classroom space, as enrollment has grown beyond the capacity of the current facility. But even limited space can have certain advantages in terms of access. At UTC, students have easy access to staff, and the one-stop shop that has evolved out of necessity is, in fact, an ideal way to ensure that students succeed.

## **Management Structure**

As is true at each of the three centers, the UTC program director reports to the office of academic affairs on the main campus. Of the twelve full-time and eight part-time individuals working at UTC, seven report to the program director. Custodial staff, technology staff, student services staff, and instructional services staff (e.g., the biology lab technician) all report to their respective functional areas on the main campus. Faculty members (more than one hundred of whom teach at UTC each semester) are hired by the academic departments. For UTC to function effectively, the

program director needs to be familiar with and engaged in the work of each of these areas. He is frequently consulted by main campus supervisors with regard to the performance of individuals assigned to UTC but not reporting directly to him.

UTC is the only one of the three off-campus centers to have full-time student services employees. Because the center was created, in part, to reach out to the local Hispanic community, a bilingual position, reporting to the director of advising, was created. The new position carried a new job title, student services coordinator, which recognized that this individual would have a broad range of functions. Evening and peak registration needs were filled by on-call academic advisers during the first several years, but as enrollment at the center grew, two additional full-time positions, reporting to the UTC student services coordinator, were added.

The range of functions performed by UTC student services personnel is remarkable. From admissions and placement testing, through orientation, advising, registration, and financial aid, they do it all. As soon as the semester starts, they shift gears to retention programming, disability support services, student activities, and transfer and career workshops. Frontline clerical support is provided by the front-desk staff of the center, and each of the individuals reporting to the director is cross-trained in some aspects of student services. Still, the value of a full-time student services presence, throughout the day and into the evening, cannot be overstated, especially given the needs of the population served at an access center such as UTC.

## **Laurel College Center**

### **History and Facilities**

Laurel College Center (LCC) opened its doors in fall 2001, just one year after the University Town Center. The city of Laurel lies in the northernmost area of Prince George's County, where the borders of four Maryland counties (Prince George's, Howard, Anne Arundel, and Montgomery) come together. Prior to the opening of LCC, the college had not experienced an effective presence in this area, and as was the case with the western area a year earlier, Dr. Williams wanted to establish a strong presence in the Laurel area.

An opportunity arose when the computer learning center, located in the heart of Laurel, had to close its doors. The space available was fully furnished with a floor plan of administrative offices and classrooms, ready-made for an educational institution to walk in and take possession. The City of Laurel invited PGCC to consider taking over the space. Dr. Williams appointed the College's workforce development and continuing education (WDCE) personnel to explore the possibilities of the invitation.

The opportunity to open a new site in this area required some thinking outside of the traditional box. When a five-mile radius was drawn around the proposed new site, it was found that a considerable part of the area was beyond the boundaries of Prince



George's County. As a result, WDCE suggested partnering with an institution or business in one of the bordering counties to make opening the new center a more viable and cost-effective possibility.

The president initiated a visionary plan to collaborate with Howard Community College (HCC) based in Columbia, Howard County, Maryland, eleven miles north of Laurel. HCC's then president, Dr. Mary Ellen Duncan, felt that the southern part of Howard County could be also better served with an extension center in Laurel. This partnership was HCC's first real venture into the world of extension centers.

Special legislation was created to allow both Prince George's County and Howard County residents to pay in-county rates for any class taken at the LCC. PGCC and HCC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and joined in a unique partnership to create the LCC. The institutions jointly signed a lease for the space at the end of July, 2001. In a whirlwind of activity, the center was opened in five months. The partnership was unprecedented in the state of Maryland. It is a true fifty-fifty partnership; the cost and responsibilities—regardless of enrollments from either college—is shared equally.

The initial plan for LCC was to offer only Microsoft and CISCO certification credit courses, along with a variety of continuing education classes. This plan was short lived; however, as enrollment in Microsoft and CISCO certification programs took an abrupt decline nationwide. In the spring 2002, LCC redirected its focus toward credit classes and started offering general education courses. Among the classes LCC now offers are all the credit courses required for five associate degrees. LCC also remains a continuing education center, with over one hundred courses offered each semester in response to the professional and personal interests of the surrounding community.

The LCC developed into much more than a traditional higher education center in that the partners not only share space, they share carefully integrated and articulated programs. Students from the two colleges register through their home institutions, but actually take classes together at LCC. Instructors are provided by both colleges, with almost exactly half coming from each institution. Faculty have adjusted well to the realities of students from two colleges sitting in their classroom. Faculty have two class rosters, one for each college, and submit two separate final-grade submissions.

Some hurdles had to be overcome in the early years of the partnership, but both PGCC and HCC remain dedicated to facilitating the success of LCC. As a result, the center has grown significantly in its first nine years, from a little over 600 credit enrollments in fiscal year 2002 to well over 4000 credit enrollments in fiscal year 2010.

LCC occupies four floors in a ten-story professional building. The space, totaling approximately 35,000 square feet includes twenty-eight classrooms and several administrative offices. The classrooms include sixteen-standard rooms, nine instructional computer labs, one virtual library, one biology/anatomy and physiology lab, and a new

microbiology lab. An open computer lab for students, a tutoring center, a student lounge, and a multiple-faculty workroom complete the configuration of the facility.

## **Partnerships**

Five additional partners have joined LCC: College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Towson University, Morgan State University, the University of Maryland College Park, and the University of Maryland University College. These four-year partners offer all the coursework necessary for students to earn bachelor's and master's degrees or a doctorate. With the addition of four-year college and university partners, the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) designated LCC as a Regional Higher Education Center in the summer of 2004.

Two of the bachelor degree programs offered at LCC are part of a 2+2 program. These programs provide a more affordable and accessible option for students whose educational goal is to earn a bachelor's degree. Students can earn a bachelor's degree by attending classes exclusively at the LCC by taking the first two years through the community colleges and the second two years with a four-year partner. A goal of the 2+2 program is to offer a seamless transition, from an associate degree to a bachelor's degree. One of LCC's taglines says it all: seven institutions, fourteen degrees, one location.

All of the partnerships are important, but the partnership between HCC and PGCC remains central to the success of LCC. The cost of leasing the building continues to be born exclusively by the two community colleges, although the Maryland Higher Education Commission provides some support with regard to the site's function as one of the state's eight Regional Higher Education Centers. A MHEC grant provided partial funding for the creation of a microbiology lab at the LCC.

## **Access**

Convenience is the number one reason PGCC students give for taking classes at the LCC. PGCC's main campus is eighteen miles away, and over two hours by public transportation. Both PGCC and HCC students can meet with an adviser, submit an application, take a placement test, register, and pay their bills all at the center. Library services are accessible via the Internet in the student open computer lab, as well as in the virtual library that also houses a quiet study area. Tutoring services in biology, math, and writing skills are also offered. Although there are many services available at LCC, students must go to the main campus to get full financial aid advising.

This unique partnership between PGCC and HCC makes higher education and continuing education more accessible to the residents of Laurel and the surrounding area. The addition of four-year partners further broadened access to higher education in the Laurel area.

The LCC provides pathways for citizens with a variety of different needs—from workforce training, teacher education, allied health certification or coursework through the associate degree to bachelor degree, master degree, and potentially a doctorate.

## **Management Structure**

Like Joint Base Andrews and University Town Center, the LCC is under the academic affairs area of PGCC. Although each of the centers is independently responsible for its daily operations, communication with main campus is critical to stay informed and connected. The extension centers would not be as effective in promoting student success without the support of the many academic, student service, finance, and technology departments on main campus.

In addition, the LCC has a Policy and Coordinating Council—made up of vice presidents and senior administrators from both PGCC and HCC. The council meets every other month to discuss LCC issues. These issues include the programs and partnerships of the center, substantial projects, for example, building a new microbiology lab this past year, and collaboration on required reports for each college's president and Board, as well as for the Maryland Higher Education Commission. The center and its students have benefited from the council's mutual cooperation and collaboration.

The center runs efficiently with a small and committed staff of three full-time and seven part-time positions that include a program director, three administrative support staff, three evening/Saturday coordinators, one systems engineer, and two computer technicians. The LCC administrative office is open and information technology support is available whenever classes are running, including days, evenings, and Saturdays. As with the other centers, to have effective coverage with a small staff, each employee must be cross-trained in many jobs. Each office staff person, including the program director, enters applications and registrations, provides general information and initial academic advising, schedules placement tests and tutoring, and takes bill payments for both community colleges. In addition to the ten individuals, who are based at LCC, the center is supported part time by advisers, test center staff, and biology lab staff who commute from the two colleges. Tutoring is provided by adjunct faculty. Needless to say, teamwork and a dedicated staff are essential.

As with all three extension centers, the program director is in charge of daily operations, including the supervision and evaluation of staff based at the center, and reports to a senior administrator in the academic affairs office. Each program director has unique additional duties, particular to their individual center. The position at LCC also acts as a liaison between its partnering institutions.

Although PGCC is officially the hiring institution for the LCC, the staff understands that they work for both institutions and represent the four-year partners. The LCC staff is extensively trained on PGCC's and HCC's policies and procedures and given access to both enrollment systems.

## **Conclusions**

Off-campus centers, even those as different as the three described here, have a number of common advantages and potential challenges.

While none of the three sites discussed here is housed in space owned by the institution, some off-campus centers are owned by the parent college or university. Even in those cases, the most common situation would be for the center to be located in a pre-existing structure, which probably was not designed with an educational purpose in mind. The advantages to facilities built with learning as the focus (community gathering points, study space, natural lighting, high ceilings, broad hallways) are undeniable. Institutions must weigh the relative advantages of building, buying, or leasing with that in mind. Related factors to consider, especially in leased space, include parking, signage, security, and the potential for growth. This latter point may be particularly challenging when an institution is looking to expand in rented space. The temptation is to prioritize classroom space, which overtly generates revenue, over all other space needs, such as offices and lounges, the monetary value of which is harder to quantify.

The principle advantages of an off-campus center lie in the relative ease of initial start-up and the high degree of efficiency resulting from a small, cross-trained staff. Off-campus centers, whether on military bases, in partnership with other institutions, or independent, provide a cost-effective way for institutions to extend their reach to underserved constituencies. In today's challenging economic times the construction of new campuses may be nearly impossible, an off-campus center provide an effective and efficient way to make the impossible possible for many communities.

## **Author Information**

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