

A Special Edition of the Editorial Column

CROSSROADS REFLECTIONS



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The UAEDI Obituary (2002-2009) RIP – And Thanks for the Memories -

This is a special edition of my column in the Crossroads Connection Newsletter. It is intended for a special audience comprised of all those who have played a role in creating the great innovative grassroots partnership between UAEDI and the people in rural communities throughout Arkansas. While this obituary is personally painful to write, it must be done and it is only right that you as UAEDI's family be among the first to know and I be the one to tell you. To begin, every obituary should contain a date of birth and the time of death.

The death announcement came suddenly without warning or official review on March 19, 2009 when David Gearhart, the new chancellor at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville (UAF) informed me that he was closing UAEDI effective July 1, 2009. This action terminates UAEDI's on-going strong partnership with the 10-county Crossroads Coalition, its lesser partnership with the 6-county Cornerstone Coalition, and its new initiative with the 8-county West-Central Arkansas Regional Development Partnership. UAEDI's support of regional webpage information and the Crossroads Connection newsletter will end.

Similarly, its SEED (Students Engaged in Economic Development) program will cease along with its Student Community Summit partnership comprised of rural communities, others in higher education and EAST.

The birth announcement about the creation of UAEDI on July 1, 2002 was made in a press release by then UA Chancellor John White who said: *"As we continue to improve academic quality across the board at the University of Arkansas-particularly in view of the recent \$300 million gift from the Walton Family Charitable Support Foundation-we want to extend that quality across the state in novel ways that spur economic development and enhance the quality of life for all Arkansans. The creation of the new institute and Otto Loewer's appointment as director will be a major step in making that happen."*

I've presented the facts about the demise of UAEDI, the abbreviated obituary if you will. But what about the rest of the story? Specifically, why did UAEDI die so young after such great accomplishments, recognition and potential?

It is the answer to these questions that is of considerable importance to the people of Arkansas, especially those living in rural communities. Thus, the rest of this editorial is my perspective about a life well-lived, an expanded UAEDI obituary if you will. It is also likely that this is my last Crossroads Reflections column, a final time "at bat" if you will. I'm going to use the "three-strikes" I have remaining for a single purpose. I want to publically promote the crucial role and responsibility of higher education for directly helping generate broad-based development (economic, community, education and leadership) throughout Arkansas and especially its rural communities.

Now, let's look at UAEDI's Obituary in a little more detail.

At some level, most of you who are reading this column have been UAEDI partners over the years. Thus, you know that I've pushed hard to promote the SEED-Summit idea as a low-cost way for Arkansas students to become vested in the future of their state and local communities. Accordingly, early in February I presented Chancellor Gearhart (who I reported to directly) with a no-cost proposal asking him to endorse this concept on the UAF campus. My hope was that with his strong support and encouragement to the UAF faculty, SEED could be expanded to perhaps 75-100 projects per year. My goal was to eventually have at least one SEED project per country on average and involve other institutions in higher education as well in the SEED initiative. On March 18, 2009, I was summoned to Chancellor Gearhart's office for a March 19 meeting, I presumed to discuss this proposal. There I was told that UAEDI was being eliminated and that I was being returned to a faculty position in the department in which I hold tenure. (This is an example of why tenure is important in a university).

Because there was no type of official review of UAEDI, I never saw this action coming nor do I fully understand the reasoning. I do know that when things like

this occur with such suddenness, people quickly begin to speculate about the reasons. Therefore, I feel compelled to “clear the record” on three fronts:

- First, and most importantly to me personally, there is no accusation by anyone of any personal, professional or business-related misconduct on my part.
- Second, while budgets are always tight, to my knowledge UAF did not experience a decrease in state funding this year. Furthermore, the entire operating budget (not counting my salary) is \$80,000, which is about what 12 full-time students pay each year in tuition and fees. Thus, budget in itself seems an unlikely reason given that UAF’s 2009-10 budget is \$380,000,000.
- Third, UAEDI’s record for working with communities across Arkansas, and especially with the Crossroads Coalition, is simply outstanding so this surely can’t be the reason. Let me note some UAEDI highlights to support this claim:
 - UAEDI has played a major role in helping create the Crossroads Coalition, a partner role in assisting the Cornerstone Coalition, and a major role beginning in February 2009 in helping create the West-Central Arkansas Regional Development Partnership. Together, these groups represent 24 of the 75 counties in Arkansas and represent over 450,000 people, some 16 percent of Arkansas’ population.
 - UAEDI helped create the Technology Center for the Delta, a symbol of hope for what people in the Delta can accomplish when working together towards a shared goal.
 - UAEDI introduced the initiative that eventually led to the creation of the award-winning ADTEC (Arkansas Delta Training and Education Consortium). ADTEC is comprised of the five community colleges in the Crossroads and has generated over \$32 million in external funding in the last 3-4 years, mostly for workforce development throughout the Arkansas Delta. ADTEC is also creating a viable University Center to increase educational opportunities for the Crossroads Coalition in that there is no 4-year university located in this 10-county region.
 - National awards and recognition from many sources have been received by UAEDI and its closely affiliated partners such as ADTEC.
 - \$576,000 in grants/contracts went mostly to UAF as a direct result of UAEDI.
 - UAEDI has created an exceptional website that has about 9000 visits per month from approximately 1000 unique visitors (<http://uaedi.cast.uark.edu>). It features each of its partnership regions in 24 counties and also includes an innovative way for

presenting information about rural regions called CARL (Crossroads Assets and Resources Library).

- UAEDI created the SEED (Students Engaged in Economic Development) program that led to the Community Development Summit initiative (with EAST as the primary partner). These have proven highly successful in getting students from middle school through graduate school vested in their communities and state through low-cost student projects.
- UAEDI was more than an organization. It also created a philosophy as reflected by its “*Ten Commitments*” (see the web page). These were generated in dialog with its Delta partners in the Crossroads and shaped the way they saw themselves, each other and the University of Arkansas. Effectively, these ten declarations of belief gave a voice to the voiceless. It created an environment of openness and unity where everyone was welcomed to participate, where everyone was allowed to champion a cause consistent with the Crossroads mission, and where the cost of possible failure was accepted as part of the price for bold innovative ideas.
- And perhaps most importantly, UAEDI as UAF’s representative offered a special type of hope for rural communities who are often in difficult economic and social circumstances. This type of hope comes in three forms: hope for a better tomorrow through a viable partnership, hope that the prestige of the state’s flagship university brings by its very presence, and hope for an enduring, deepening and mutually rewarding relationship.

So, given the above, what possible reason would there be for a decision by leader of the state’s flagship and primary land-grant university to eliminate UAEDI? After all, most rural communities in Arkansas have been in economic decline since the 1950’s and are especially impacted by today’s recession.

I offer that this decision by Chancellor Gearhart is significantly based on his vision about the role in higher education that UAF seeks to play in the future.

Let me be clear. My personal and professional ox is being gored with this decision so anything that I might say should rightly be viewed accordingly. My opinion is also slanted because I’m a native son of the Delta. Those that know me know that I’m from Arkansas and not just from Fayetteville because I happen to presently live there.

Please understand, I truly believe that Chancellor Gearhart has every right and responsibility to lead UAF forward in the manner that he believes best within the guidelines defined by the state. I respect his leadership position and would not be so presumptuous as to claim to be able to read his mind about his intentions for UAF. Fortunately for all, I don’t have to. Chancellor Gearhart has

documented with great detail his vision for how UAF will seek to operate in the future under his leadership.

In his June 5, 2009 broadly disseminated email entitled “*Transparency and Accountability to the People of Arkansas*” he outlines his position on a number of important issues and points to a downloadable document in PDF format at: http://chancellor.uark.edu/06-04_TAP.pdf . I want to be completely fair and objective so I’ve listed the goals for UAF verbatim as the following:

- *Put students first by enhancing academic programs, creating an engaging campus life, keeping costs as low as possible and reducing obstacles to student success.*
- *Be transparent and accountable to the people of Arkansas in all decision-making.*
- *Increase overall enrollment while remaining the school of choice for the state’s most gifted students; provide a concomitant increase in faculty and staff.*
- *Enhance diversity by attracting more students, faculty and staff from underrepresented groups and by nurturing intercultural understanding inside and outside the classroom.*
- *Improve graduation rates and degree-completion times.*
- *Provide highly competitive compensation packages for the purpose of recruiting and retaining the very best faculty, staff and graduate students.*
- *Increase funding in both research awards and federal research expenditures.*
- *Marshal the university’s expertise, programs, faculty, staff and students to grow the state’s knowledge-based economy and to address major issues confronting Arkansas and the world.*
- *Provide a superior campus landscape and environment by planning for and carrying out the continuous renewal and renovation of existing facilities and the designing and building of new world-class facilities.*
- *Pursue a consistent and aggressive program for the maintenance and improvement of the institution’s libraries and technology resources.*
- *Promote environmental sustainability.*
- *Establish and market a quality brand reputation for the university statewide, nationally and internationally.*
- *Foster the arts on campus and throughout the region.*
- *Expand outreach through distance education and partnerships with other institutions.*
- *Grow public support and the endowment through enhanced relationships with constituents and sound investment strategies.*

This 53-page document is well-written with informative data. It clearly articulates Chancellor Gearhart’s belief in a “**Students First**” university and why he believes that such an approach is the correct path for UAF to follow. The above goals reflect this belief. I suggest you take a close look at this document. Especially examine how it defines the linkage between research and the

economic development of Arkansas and the role of service to rural communities. Certainly, I believe that this document accurately reflects the direction that UAF is currently headed. Likewise, at first glance UAF would appear to gain in regional and national prestige and rankings if these goals were achieved.

But where does that leave the people in the rural communities of Arkansas and at what cost?

Admittedly, I come from a different perspective. Over my 64 years, I've spent the last 46 involved in some way in higher education, from student to dean of engineering. About 20 of these 46 years have been spent at the University of Arkansas in two different stints. I've been blessed with having worked in all types of assignments while employed at six different land-grant universities during my lengthy and varied academic career. There is a common thread. Each of these universities has taken considerable pride in the proverbial "three-legged stool" mission that forms the historical philosophical base for a land-grant university – teaching, research and service - with equal priorities.

In the traditional land-grant university, students are certainly important in that they are one beneficiary of the teaching mission, whether in the on-campus for-credit environment or in off-campus non-credit public extension programs. But, they are only one part of the three reasons for the existence of a land-grant university. Why have land-grant universities not historically placed "students first"? Because if they do so, they must then relegate the other missions, such as service to rural communities, to positions of lesser importance.

Perhaps a "students first" approach is a bold and visionary path that will lead to greater things for UAF and hopefully someday for the state of Arkansas as well. Only time will tell. Certainly, this approach has worked well for larger private schools.

But, I would hope that somewhere in public higher education in Arkansas, there is some direct effort designed specifically to help address the critical issues presently facing all Arkansans in the areas of economic, community, education and leadership development. This is especially important for those who live in rural communities and who have real needs that could be addressed in part by the types of partnerships that UAEDI has successfully promoted.

Hopefully, some part of the UA System for higher education will be implementing UAEDI's mission "*to enhance the economic and social well-being and prosperity of the people of Arkansas by extending University of Arkansas programs, as appropriate, in partnerships with others having similar interests*". Fortunately for rural communities, one need look no further than the UA Clinton School or the UA Division of Agriculture to see an academic culture and mission that is closely attuned to that of UAEDI. So, probable help is available.

Let me close with a couple of memories about my upbringing in the rural farming community of Fair Oaks in Cross County that will provide you some insight into

my passion for the land-grant university's role and responsibility to Arkansans living in rural areas.

I was a product of 4-H and great county extension agents who helped me mature into adulthood. Each year, the people of Cross County would gather at a banquet to honor their 4-H children by giving them silver dollars. I still have them, and they are loaded with wonderful memories that far exceed their value in silver. They remind me of a time long ago when honor and service seemed relatively more important than today's seemingly endless pursuit of money and public recognition.

I still remember the day that I discovered that our county agents were really employees of the University of Arkansas and that the materials they used were prepared by UA faculty and staff in reaching out to the people of Arkansas. I was never more impressed or proud and rightly so! It helped shape my philosophy about reaching out to "people first" to help them have a better life. Nothing is more important or more rewarding, either personally or professionally.

But there was another time that was far less joyful. My dad, a college graduate himself, was truly an equal opportunity employer. His three sons each took their place in the field at a young age along side the other employees. These farm workers were of modest means and reflected the racial and social demographics of the Delta's workforce.

In that "hands-on farm classroom" I would hear them talk of the day when they could finally get "*on Social Security*" and thus "retire" from the drudgery of farm work. I agreed with them. I wanted to be on Social Security too, and the sooner the better if hard manual labor was my only career alternative! But, it wasn't. I was blessed by being a person of "privilege" by having "chosen well" my parents and my place and time of birth. Furthermore, I was given the most precious of gifts, that of hope for a better life.

Because of the support and encouragement that I received from my family and community and state, I eventually went to college and got to live the life of a university professor. This career has provided me a level of joy and fulfillment that I never dreamed possible as a youth in the cotton and rice fields of the Arkansas Delta.

My university faculty resume is a lot thicker than most. It is filled with types of things that define a success in the academic environment. Still, I can say that no single period of my professional life has been more rewarding or important to me personally than the last seven years. Indeed I've been privileged to work with the good people in the rural communities throughout Arkansas who have come together in the shared quest for creating sustainable prosperity and wellbeing for themselves, their children and their children's children. It has been a wonderful relationship that I hate to see end.

But I must remember that this is an Obituary Column. Thus, it is only fitting and proper that it finish by me saying thanks to all those who made UAEDI possible and who are left behind. You have inspired me in so many ways, and I am eternally grateful!

- Thanks first to my coworkers at the University of Arkansas, Carolyne Garcia and Cristina Scarlat. Carolyne has created the best newsletter ever, and she has embraced the people of the Crossroads Coalition as though she was a native daughter. Cristina has skillfully developed and maintained the UAEDI website which has gained accolades everywhere, and no one has worked harder for the people of Arkansas.
- Thanks to all of you in the 24 counties that comprise the three regional development coalitions for which UAEDI has been a partner and to the people in 13 other counties where UAEDI has partnered in some capacity such as SEED. I'll always be indebted to those who participated in and led the Crossroads Coalition pillar groups and served on its Board of Directors. You should be extremely proud of yourselves!
- Thanks to the many faculty at UAF and throughout higher education in Arkansas and elsewhere who bought into and shaped the new approach offered by UAEDI via SEED and other initiatives. One of my proudest days was when UAF faculty met on the Fayetteville campus with county leaders from eastern Arkansas to help shape what became the Crossroads Coalition. Please continue to fight the good fight for the people of this state.
- Thanks to the state and federal agencies as well as so many different business and non-profit organizations that played such an important role in the success of UAEDI. You integrated your considerable skill and resources in the context of the Crossroads Coalition philosophy, and this enabled it to become a national model for broad-based development in rural communities. Hopefully, you'll continue to do so.

And lastly, I'm reminded of the scripture passage, "*Where there is no vision, the people perish*" (*Proverbs 29:18*). Accordingly, I'd like to especially thank two individuals: first, the late Bill Thomas whose extraordinary vision and leadership skill made the Crossroads Coalition possible and second, former UAF Chancellor John White whose financial investment in UAEDI made such a tremendous positive difference for the rural communities of Arkansas.

UAEDI (2002-2009) RIP. Best wishes and thanks for the memories!