BEACON Brings Multifaceted Research and Consulting to Delmarva

By Dr. Memo Diriker, Founding Director of BEACON

Imagine you are an elected official making important budget decisions that will impact the future of all the residents in your jurisdiction. How would you gather economic trend data? If you were starting a business, how would you identify potential customers, discover where the best workers live, and locate a commercial property that fits your needs and your budget? As a developer, how would you provide your clients with information about the economic, employment and fiscal impact of the proposed project? If you were a farmer interested in growing bio-mass crops to be used in alternative energy generation, who would conduct a feasibility analysis for you? These are the issues that the Business, Economic and Community Outreach Network (BEACON), an outreach entity of SU’s Franklin P. Perdue School of Business, tackles every day.

The most visible aspect of BEACON may be the state-of-the-art office suite that occupies an entire wing of the ground floor in the new Perdue Hall, but its impact on the Eastern Shore extends far beyond SU’s ever-expanding campus!

Colleges and universities have been called upon to use their research and knowledge to help solve contemporary issues, and BEACON is a perfect example of this concept in action. Its 10-year regional economic impact has been estimated to be around $50 million, and the organization is responsible for creating or retaining over 1,000 jobs throughout the peninsula. BEACON teams participate in a wide range of grant and sponsored research projects, exploring research questions with regional economic and public policy implications. These teams use highly sophisticated research techniques, software platforms and modeling tools to examine the issues and concerns related to Delmarva. The dual mandates of community outreach and experiential education have brought Salisbury University faculty, staff and students together with the region’s business and economic development leaders on a wide variety of projects and programs designed to provide resources and support to area businesses as they attempt to leverage the changing demographics and economy of the Eastern Shore.

The Graying of Delmarva

In the United States, the elderly comprise the fastest growing segment of the population, increasing almost three times as rapidly as the rest of the general population. The Eastern Shore is aging even more rapidly, thanks to the continued out-migration of youth and in-migration of retirees attracted to the region’s climate and amenities. In Worcester County alone, an estimated one-third of the total population will be 65 and over by 2030. The magnitude and imminence of this “elderly boom” threatens the region’s ability to ensure that seniors have access to housing, health care, transportation and services that help them maintain their independence. This trend also will have huge implications for the region’s economy and labor market, as businesses adjust to the reality of aging consumers and workers. Unfortunately, neither the nation nor the region is prepared for this “graying phenomenon.” Generally speaking, resources and services for the elderly are not structured to reflect the realities of 21st century aging, such as assisted living and medical care.

Given these realities, BEACON – and its partners, MAC, Inc., the Community Foundation of the Eastern Shore and Worcester County Department of Economic Development – created an initiative to help the region stay proactive on this issue. Launched in 2004, GrayShore is a network of over 300 private, public and non-profit sector organizations that work with individuals ages 50 and over throughout the nine counties of the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Its objective is to educate regional service providers and decision makers about our aging population: both the demographic realities and the impact that these demographics will have on regional services, economy and workforce.

At a recent GrayShore event, Senator Ben Cardin praised BEACON’s efforts to focus key decision-makers attention on this important demographic change that is happening faster than anyone expected. He added: “Preparedness is our greatest tool, and BEACON’s GrayShore is giving the Eastern Shore the gift of preparedness.”

Bienvenidos a Delmarva

Migration is dramatically changing the demographics of the Delmarva Peninsula. Over the past 10 years, the region has experienced unprecedented growth. The Hispanic population, for example, has increased at astonishing rates, as high as 300 percent in parts of Lower Delaware and 200 percent in some jurisdictions on the Lower Eastern Shore of Maryland. Although many organizations in the region are reaching out to its immigrant communities, their needs often go unmet due to barriers such as language, culture and transportation.

In 2000, BEACON, with the enthusiastic
support of SU President Dr. Janet Dudley-Eshbach, addressed this deficit by establishing Bienvenidos a Delmarva (Welcome to Delmarva) to help area service providers prepare for the changing demographic on the peninsula. Bienvenidos a Delmarva brings together over 200 private, public and non-profit sector organizations that work with non-native born residents of the peninsula. The objective is to increase the capacity and the capabilities of these organizations as the numbers of new residents originally from outside the U.S. continue to grow. We are particularly proud of the way all four SU schools – and students, faculty and staff alike – have come together with the community to make Bienvenidos a Delmarva the great success it has become. Without the broad-based on- and off-campus collaborations, Bienvenidos a Delmarva would not be able to bring these important issues and the various stakeholders together. It is amazing to see prejudices and enmity slowly giving way to collaboration and cooperation each time we bring opposing sides together on a variety of hot-button issues related to these demographic shifts we are experiencing on the Delmarva Peninsula.

Staying Ahead of the Curve

Good planning requires good information. However, as a region, the Lower Eastern Shore currently has no centralized repository of information pertaining to its most urgent business, economic, workforce and community development concerns. Area businesses must rely on a service system that is continually playing “catch up” to market realities and often misses opportunities for business and economic growth. BEACON is home to several initiatives that help fill this information gap.

ShoreTrends is a quarterly economic trend forecasting effort maintained by BEACON. It gives regional business and public policy leaders a critical tool for developing the products, policies and programs needed to position the Eastern Shore of Maryland for prosperity in the 21st century. Local businesses can tap into information sources, including quantitative national, state and local data, as well as qualitative inputs from a very powerful regional online panel of opinion leaders and key informants in a way that is relevant to the economic realities of the Eastern Shore.

Michael Pennington, the executive director of the Tri-County Council of the Lower Eastern Shore of Maryland, is a satisfied user of ShoreTrends: “What we have learned from the quarterly ShoreTrends surveys over the years has been used in developing our Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) plans and our 2007 and 2012 five-year Visioning Documents.”

GeoDash brings innovative, location-based executive dashboarding to decision makers in business, economic, workforce and community development. These online, interactive dashboards provide accurate, up-to-date information for public policy, economic development, and workforce and community development. Additionally, all of the data on the dashboards will be linked to multi-layer online maps using state-of-the-art GIS technology. GNAppWorks, an offshoot of GeoDash, migrates location-based executive dashboards to mobile platforms, such as smart phones and tablets, especially for decision makers in government agencies and nonprofit organizations.

ShoreEnergy is an initiative that brings together a diverse set of stakeholders from the ever-changing energy sector on the Shore to study trends and explore innovations to better serve the needs of the residents and commercial and industrial users of energy.

On-the-Job Training

The student research assistants, known as “BEACONites,” work on faculty-mentored project teams for regional clients from the private, public and non-profit sectors. Projects include feasibility analyses, marketing plans, strategic plans, program evaluations and Web-based surveys. These students have a near-perfect record of job placement directly related to the work they do at BEACON. In fact, an estimated 90 percent of student research associates are placed upon graduation. Equally important is their one-, three- and five-year compensation levels, which are above their peers due, in large part, to the experiential learning opportunities offered through BEACON. Our greatest accomplishment is the growing success of our BEACONites in the years after their graduation. They are comfortably giving their Ivy League competitors a run for their money!