

Letter from...

Jennifer Frum, University of Georgia Vice President for Public Service and Outreach

In his 1996 editorial for the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Public Service and Outreach* (now the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*), Eugene Younts, then University of Georgia vice president for public service, addressed why launching a scholarly journal of outreach was timely and important. First, he noted that at the time, no journal or publication systematically covered the “diverse, interdisciplinary field of public service.” The new journal was to create a forum for distinguished scholars and practitioners of outreach to openly exchange ideas and build a collaborative network that supported the integration of service with the teaching and research missions of the university. Younts also underscored perhaps the most compelling rationale for the new journal: *to share how higher education uses its unparalleled expertise to directly address complex societal problems*. Younts considered the university–community connection a privilege and an obligation, reflecting the historic role land-grant institutions have played in building a modern society.

Thanks to the foresight of Eugene Younts, his predecessor J. W. Fanning, and the three vice presidents for public service and outreach who succeeded them, today the University of Georgia has one of the largest, most comprehensive, and most effective outreach programs of any university anywhere in the world. Grounded in our land-grant and sea-grant missions, UGA’s outreach programs have evolved from their original focus on building a modern agricultural and industrial economy in Georgia to today’s programming and partnerships that address complex 21st-century challenges. At the same time that UGA has risen in national rankings with status as a “public ivy” and has become more selective in its admissions process, leaders at this institution have strategically reinvested in community engagement programs, acknowledging the important role these efforts play in maintaining UGA’s historic connection to *all* the people of Georgia. Most importantly, the continued, steady investments in UGA’s outreach and engagement infrastructure indicate that these programs are the clearest way to demonstrate return on investment to citizens of Georgia and UGA stakeholders.

It is fitting that UGA is home to the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*. The scale and scope of UGA’s significant outreach and engagement programs is unparalleled. UGA’s large

and diverse land-grant priorities require a group of faculty having continuing direct contact with citizens and officials in Georgia. UGA's public service faculty track includes more than 500 faculty experts appointed across eight public service units, Cooperative Extension, and 13 colleges and schools. The development of our strong, nationally recognized public service and outreach programs has been dependent to a large degree on a well-defined, objective career ladder with advancement-associated titles and rewards that are equivalent to those in academic faculty lines, reflecting the unique but no less valuable contributions of public service faculty. These faculty work alongside external partners to implement research-based solutions, providing technical assistance, applied research, and community-based instruction and training that help the state create jobs and prosperity, develop leaders, and address the state's pressing issues. These public service faculty are often the "front door" of UGA, sharing objective, data-driven information and applied research with important external partners. The work of public service faculty, the majority of whom are not based on campus but instead are located all over Georgia, generates tremendous goodwill and support for UGA.

Although the benefits of public investments in higher education are often intangible and long-term in nature, the effects of universities' outreach and engagement efforts on people and communities are often immediate and should always be tangible. In today's external environment characterized by competition for scarce public resources and even some hostility directed toward the perceived "ivory tower" model of higher education, universities must be able to effectively communicate solid evidence of return on investment to key institutional stakeholders (donors, parents, taxpayers, granting agencies) that make funding decisions related to higher education. It is not enough for public institutions to tout their successes in terms of journal citations, the number of reciprocal partnerships, or scholarship that explores the impact of engagement efforts on the academy. Instead, our scholarship must examine how to increase the real and concrete benefits of our efforts to the society we serve.

This outward focus on how to best employ our vast resources, expertise, and applied research and techniques to simply make people's lives better has driven the success, impact, and external support that characterizes UGA's outreach programs. Our list of partners is expansive, from the 22,000 state and local government officials who participate annually in our education/training programs to local chambers of commerce, schools, hospitals, small

businesses, and nonprofits. We are constantly examining the impact of our community-based engagements, searching for best practices, cutting-edge approaches, and ways to address the next grand challenge.

We know our efforts produce tangible and meaningful results, both quantitatively and qualitatively. For instance, our applied research partnerships with Georgia's coastal communities protect and sustain marine environments and monitor flood insurance programs that help residents and communities save on their premiums. UGA's coastal outreach programs have a \$112 million economic impact on Georgia annually. Engineering and Landscape Design faculty and students participating in service-learning in partnership with communities plan and design downtown streetscapes for revitalization and pedestrian structures for sports and recreation complexes. Research conducted by UGA's Office of Service-Learning demonstrated that UGA students who took at least one service-learning class had higher starting salaries after graduation and were hired 2 months faster than students who did not take service-learning courses. These service-learning courses produce a total direct economic impact of \$19.2 million per year in Georgia. UGA's Small Business Development Center, which assists thousands of entrepreneurs, has helped small businesses create 20,000 new jobs and obtain \$800 million in new capital over the last 5 years. Through best practice management of poultry, pecans, peanuts, eggs, cotton, and other top commodities, Cooperative Extension faculty help keep agribusiness number one among Georgia industries, adding \$71 billion a year to the state's economy. And the impact goes on and on.

Recent research shows that in 2014 alone, there was a \$4.4 billion return on investment from UGA to the state of Georgia, \$580 million of which was directly linked to public service and outreach programs. These tangible and monetized outcomes have helped us tell our story of impact in quantitative terms. However, as important as these impacts are to the public, the knowledge and learning that are afforded in these scholarly pursuits must be shared outside the state with our colleagues and constituents for discussion, critique, and evaluation, in a form upon which others can build. Each and every time the university engages with the community at any level, new goals are established, discipline-related methods are employed, new discoveries are made, and knowledge is transformed and extended to a broad spectrum of academic and community partners. In fact, I am sure many readers would agree with me that the scholarship of engagement has the potential to become

one of the most comprehensive and highest forms of learning, encompassing the full spectrum of scholarship that Ernest Boyer explicated in the anchor issue of the *Journal*.

Boyer's work and the immeasurable contributions of other esteemed academic leaders are being celebrated in this anniversary issue. They, along with the many other contributors to the *Journal*, have challenged us to fulfill our role of committing our best research and instruction to the public good, and at the same time advancing scholarship on how we maximize impact. Knowledge dissemination ultimately ensures that new information is communicated to broader audiences, and updated approaches are added to fields of study and practice. The *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* has served this role for 20 years, dedicated to advancing the landscape of university–community engagement and helping to usher in national programs of support and recognition such as the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification.

What Gene Younts and his contemporaries envisioned became a reality. The *Journal* has provided that open exchange needed to share theoretical perspectives, research findings, and best practices of engaged institutions that are applying scholarship to meet the challenges of society. We owe deep gratitude to their leadership and to the devotion of our editors for keeping the *Journal* innovative and state-of-the-art. Our current editor, Lorilee Sandmann, has advanced the *Journal* in myriad ways, increasing its rigor and relevancy, and guiding it to a new level of scholarly excellence. She, associate editors, editorial board members, and editorial production staff have created this commemorative 20th anniversary edition that is both reflective and prospective. It serves to energize our collective roles as public servants and public scholars and renew our resolve to promote engaged scholarship for its vital role in improving the communities we serve.