Coleen Burrus, director, corporate engagement and foundation relations at Princeton University.

Promoting Princeton

University making concerted push to engage businesses in effort to spur more partnerships and collaboration

Janice Hahn

Coleen Burrus added one word to her title shortly after being hired by Princeton University in spring 2015.

Director of corporate and foundation relations quickly became director of corporate engagement and foundation relations.

The simple move was meant to convey a specific shift at the university, no question, said Burrus.

“Supporting fellowships is absolutely vitally important,” Burrus said. “I talk to their vice president for research, Christopher Molloy, frequently. Their corporate relations people know very well. So, obviously, we’re looking at companies overall, but right here in your backyard is really very important.”

“Having those students keep coming back here is extremely important. So, for us to have a relationship with local industry is extremely important.”

As are the relationships with other New Jersey colleges.

“Our connection to Rutgers is vitally important,” Burrus said. “I talk to their president, the provost, the dean for research.”

But, Burrus noted, there are other ways companies can become involved with the culture at Princeton. That can help with the discovery of very specialized talent.

“Supporting fellowships is really important, especially at the Ph.D. level,” she said. “The companies, like pharma, that are looking for that specialized talent, if they’re sponsoring fellowships, they’re knowing what’s going on in the labs.

“So, that’s also very good for local companies to do. We want that engagement.”

Burrus cited Bristol-Myers Squibb, which sponsors research at several of Princeton’s departments as well as an endowed fellowship to support molecular biology graduate students, as an example of this type of engagement.

Another example, she said, is Siemens.

“They’re hiring interns, hiring full-time and funding research,” she said. “They’re extremely involved.”

Burrus also said visiting campus and speaking directly with students can help foster a relationship between the school’s students and local industry.

“The head of Merck gave a talk last year to our molecular biology folks,” she said. “Having those people on campus, that’s really exciting for them to hear what we’re doing and for us to hear what they’re doing.

“A CEO from traveling from California out here, that’s a lot more challenging. So, for us to have a relationship with local industry is extremely important.”

For all of Princeton’s global presence and its regional economic impact, the actual size of the school seems counternaturally small: Its total enrollment for 2016 was 8,013 students.

Rutgers, by comparison, enrolled 66,013 students the same year.

Burrus said that, because of the school’s size, Princeton isn’t much of an employment pipeline compared to other schools.

“We’re not a big university,” she said. “Let’s face it. No company is going to hire 20 people a year from here. They just can’t. We don’t have that many people.”

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“There’s a reason why, in Silicon Valley, there are so many companies. They work together because of proximity, so it’s extremely important to have that proximity to the companies.”

Coleen Burrus, director, corporate engagement and foundation relations at Princeton University.
By the numbers

$601.9M
Payroll

$453.6M
Purchase of goods/services, total

$35M
Goods/services purchased within Princeton-area ZIP codes

$16.5M
Goods/services purchased in the rest of Mercer County

$137.3M
Goods/services purchased in New Jersey

$318.1M
Construction/maintenance
(43 percent of which went to New Jersey contractors and vendors)

$59.7M
Student spending: off campus
(directly and indirectly accounted for)

$49.7M
Visitor spending: off campus
(directly and indirectly accounted for)

$20.2M
Financial aid to New Jersey students
(estimated)

Of Princeton’s workforce, 35 percent reside in the Princeton area, 23 percent reside elsewhere in Mercer County; 23 percent reside elsewhere in New Jersey and 19 percent reside outside the state.

Robert Durkee, the university’s vice president and secretary, said the college felt it important that this information be collected and made public, so the state can see the return on its investments.

“The state, in particular, provides benefits to a university like ours, I think, for good public purposes,” he said. “There’s a long-standing belief that education is a good thing and a public good.

“Individuals benefit from the education they receive, but so does the state, society and the economy.”

Burrus said each institution has a specific role based on their own specialties.

“Why do we need to compare? We’re not competing. We do different things; we have different expertise, so complement each other,” she said. “I don’t know why we wouldn’t be sharing information and getting together.”

It’s a symbiotic relationship, Burrus said. The type of heavy research that occurs within Princeton won’t produce its fruits until it’s continued outside the school. It’s a process she said can sometimes take decades.

So, while companies and other institutions rely on this research as a bedrock for innovation, Burrus said Princeton relies on those collaborators to take Princeton’s hard research and capitalize. And she thinks that is one possibility for the college to continue expanding its relationship with industry and innovation.

“A lot of companies’ R&D, they’re not putting as much money into it as they once did,” she said. “Funding research here is also one way to get that, so they can also build on that internally, where they can do the ‘D’ and we can do more of the ‘R’. So, again, that’s helping the pipeline for industry as well.”

As the founder, CEO and president of BioNJ, Debbie Hart has helped life science and biotech companies collaborate with Princeton for more than two decades.

Hart said the school as always been a “pleasure” to work with throughout her 24-year career. She also said the university has been more proactive in the last two years.

“This new level of commitment to the New Jersey ecosystem will build on many years of partnership, but will escalate it and accelerate it to a whole new level,” she said.

Hart said this commitment includes a new focus on entrepreneurship.

“From where I come, it’s all about entrepreneurship and building companies in the bio-tech and biomedical life sciences space,” she said. “That’s really where I’m seeing an amazing new way of thinking and commitment to investing in the community in which they live.”

Michele Brown sees it, too.
As CEO and president of Choose New Jersey, the privately funded 501(c)3 organization founded in 2010 with the mission of encouraging and nurturing economic growth in the state, Brown was thrilled when the university joined the organization’s board of directors as an education advocate in 2016.

Brown knows how important the Princeton brand can be.

“As we advocate around the world about the benefits of living and doing business in New Jersey, being able to tout Princeton University as one of the best assets New Jersey has to offer gives us great credibility in the marketplace,” she said.

“Princeton’s partnership with us at international events such as BIO International increases our visibility to the world.”

It is these connections — many of which are long held — that Princeton wants to promote.

In addition to BioNJ and Choose New Jersey, Burrus cites the New Jersey Tech Council, the Health Care Institute of N.J. and the state Department of Education.

“We’re not everywhere, but I think if you talk to Michele, Debbie, (Education Secretary) Rochelle (Hendricks), Dean Paranicais at HIIN or Jim Barrood at the Tech Council, we’re there,” she said. “We’re showing up; we’re involved; we’re saying, ‘How can we be involved in events together?”

Robert Durkee’s relationship with Princeton dates back to the 1960s.

Durkee completed his undergraduate degree, cum laude, in 1969. Then, after getting his master’s in education, he found himself back at Princeton as assis-
Economic output

For the first time in eight years, Princeton University has released a study on its economic impact on the state and local level.

Robert Durkee, the university’s vice president and secretary, said the report highlights the positive impact an institution like Princeton can have on the state.

“I think what this demonstrates very clearly is that it’s actually a very strong net-positive for the state that you have an institution like this that employs the number of people that we employ, that purchases what we purchase and does the kind of work that we do,” he said.

The analysis, completed by Appleseed Inc., estimated that the university “directly and indirectly” accounted for $1.58 billion in economic output in New Jersey, while supporting 13,450 jobs with total earnings of $970.7 million. — Andrew Sheldon

tant to the president.

Now vice president and secretary at Princeton University, he’s very familiar with the school’s deliberate approach to communicating with the community.

“We have this body here that’s existed since 1970 called the Council of the Princeton University Committee,” he said. “It meets six times a year and is chaired by the president. It’s intended to provide an opportunity for anyone who wants to bring forward a question or an issue.

“Its membership is undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff and alumni; it brings together all different elements of the university community on a regular basis, and any topic is potentially on the table.”

For Durkee, these types of deliberations illustrate how committed the school is in receiving input through collaboration.

“I think it’s a healthy way of saying we’re open to questions and challenges,” he said. “We try to do the same thing with our neighbors.”

In fact, once a year Princeton President Christopher Eisgruber meets with the town council in an open setting to answer questions and discuss what the university is planning.

“If it’s a serious, thoughtful question,” he said, “we’ll deal with it.”

Just as the administrators deal with that bit of verbiage they use that is both pithy and disarmingly self-aware, regarding the way the university is perceived throughout the state.

They’re perfectly cognizant of the fact that the community views them as “in, but not of” New Jersey.

The school’s chief financial officer, Carolyn Ainslie, is quick to say that’s not true, no matter how often it’s repeated: Not only is the school invested in the state, but it wants community input to determine the best ways to drive economic growth.

“It’s really important to our president, as part of the strategic planning process, how Princeton can create an innovation ecosystem,” she said.

Ainslie said she speaks regularly with members of chambers of commerce, local business leaders and state economic organizations. She said the reactions among those she spoke with were entrenched with the current prevailing wisdom.

“I sat down and asked people, ‘What do you know about Princeton? What do you know about our role in creating an innovation ecosystem in New Jersey?’ she said. “They were surprised that we were asking the questions and didn’t know this was of interest to us.”

But that’s just the thing, she said. Princeton does want to communicate. So, Ainslie then had her staff travel to other schools to create a white paper on how comparable innovation ecosystems were being constructed.

And that, she said, will lead to an even larger collaboration.

“Our plan is to get a larger group of people together to figure out what our investments are in this area,” she said.

Prior to her work at Princeton, Burrus was simultaneously senior director of corporate engagement for Northwestern University and the 9th Ward alderman for the city of Evanston.

It was a great gig, she said, but there was something unique about the privilege of coming to work among the culture at Princeton.

And she said she thinks, if the public and private sectors can join to harness it, that’s a force that might help drive economic development in the state.

“I think that’s a compelling argument about why we need to have not only a strong relationship with industry where they need to know what we have going on here, but that we also need to have this cultural piece that helps us,” she said.

Developing that culture is also central in keeping the quality of the college consistent as it grows by drawing the best students and faculty to the institution.

“Entrepreneurship is important for our students,” she said. “For new faculty coming in, it’s extremely important.”

Those shared values are a sign of the changing professional climate, Burrus said. In that, Princeton can’t rest on its laurels.

“You have to evolve with the times, and things are changing,” she said. “If you think about our parents, they stayed with the same company forever and that doesn’t happen anymore.

“Princeton’s constantly changing. They don’t do it on trends, but they look further down the road.”

Durkee said the commitment to entrepreneurship is there, though the school’s approach to it may resemble Princeton’s history of careful deliberation than anything else.

“We did a report a year or so ago about how we are committed to entrepreneurship, but in a Princeton way, which might be different from Silicon Valley,” he said. “I think, over time, as we pursue more initiatives in entrepreneurship, there is more engagement now with companies than there has been and there likely will be more; it may be more evident.”

And then there’s the wet lab incubator currently being spearheaded by the Princeton Entrepreneurship Council. The goal is to make it an economic driver for the whole region.

“Obviously, Princeton startups would be great, but it’s not just for Princeton startups,” Burrus said.

The key is getting the word out. Burrus had heard all the tales about Princeton’s reputation. But like any great researcher, she’s looking for evidence of it — and she hasn’t found any.

“At no point have I ever felt that someone is saying, ‘Why are you doing this with a New Jersey company or spending so much time with this?’” she said. “If anything, it’s the opposite: ‘You need to be out there. We want to build these relationships’.”

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