2021 LARRY ABERNATHY AWARD
OUR TOWN & GOWN STORY
April 9, 2021

Dear Judges:

Greetings from Grand Forks, North Dakota! It’s with great pleasure the City of Grand Forks and the University of North Dakota submit our nomination — “Our Town & Gown Story: Two Communities. One Vision. Endless Opportunity.” — for your consideration for the International Town & Gown Association's 2021 Larry Abernathy Award.

In the same spirit our founders and early townspeople crossed the treeless prairie to celebrate our University’s groundbreaking in 1883, we regularly strive to find new and innovative ways to make our shared community a better place to live, learn, work and play.

Now home to 60,000 people, Grand Forks has experienced a relatively stable population with one key exception — its recent 48 percent boom in the number of young residents ages 25 to 39. Though this growth is unexpected for a modest-sized Midwest city in a rural state, one regional economic leader has an explanation for such unprecedented growth in this vital demographic: It’s linked directly to the University’s increasingly collegial relationship with the City.

We agree. And we hope this application clearly demonstrates how the University and Grand Forks are working and strategizing to make a difference for all. Together, and in a short time period, we have shifted our community culture to one of ongoing collaboration rather than simple and occasional cooperation. Students and longtime residents alike are creating new opportunities for designated leaders and everyday people to shape a community they’re proud to call home.

This application is broken into three main parts:

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**Our Town & Gown Story: Two Communities. One Vision. Endless Opportunity.** How we turned University Avenue’s aggravating potholes into a powerful new path to progress.

**Strategies in a nutshell:** We take a sneak peek at all the partnerships, workforce development, research and other shared initiatives the City and University have in the works.

**Building a bridge:** From the classroom to the real world, we show how our robust internship programs are transforming students into leaders in action and building a steady, ready workforce.

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A lot has changed since the City and University first came together more than a century ago to build an institution that eventually would count astronauts, brain surgeons, Pulitzer Prize winners and best-selling authors among its 163,000+ alumni. Great things have happened, and we know many more great things are to come. Today’s enriched town/gown relations represent a brand-new beginning, and we’re extremely excited to see where we’ll go next.

Sincerely,

City of Grand Forks
University of North Dakota

Note: Most photos included in this proposal were taken pre-pandemic.
TWO COMMUNITIES. ONE VISION.
ENDLESS OPPORTUNITY.

But for a single curve over the railroad tracks and a bumpy wayside bend by the city’s iconic, late-night taco joint, University Avenue is almost a straight shot of two-lane road connecting the heart of downtown Grand Forks to the University of North Dakota.

In a city of 60,000 people — and where the state’s flagship university of 14,000 students is six years older than the state itself — it seems the road and perennial parade route has always been there.

Hugging a meandering river that marks the edge of Minnesota, the avenue runs east to west. Past City Hall, churches and community centers. Past old and new businesses. Past friendly neighborhoods and a sprawling park before finally reaching the ivy-draped halls of campus.

In all, the distance stretches roughly 3 miles, but it just as well could be hundreds. This is the story of how one city, one campus and one well-worn, pockmarked path came together to close the gap.

So, this is how our story begins …

Grand Forks Public Affairs Manager Greta Silewski said it was in part a conversation about University Avenue’s aggravating potholes that sparked a colossal culture shift in the way the two communities communicate.

The historic UND Homecoming Parade was one of the few times each year you could count on the whole town coming together. Other than that and spectator sports, Silewski said, the coexisting communities more often marched to the beat of a different drummer.

The greater Grand Forks community did its own thing, and the smaller campus community generally followed suit, each attending to its own business without getting in the other’s way.

It would be the City’s job to plan the roads and pour the curb and gutter. The University would plant the flowers and seed and trim the grass along the boulevards and berm. All was well, and this worked fine until a handful of leaders began to brainstorm how this cooperative relationship might be made better.

“What’s great for UND is great for the community. What’s great for the community is great for UND. That is why it is so imperative we work together for the prosperity of everyone.”
— City of Grand Forks Mayor Brandon Bochenski
“Some sort of relationship always exists between a host community and its university,” Silewski said. “It can be a good relationship or a great one. Sometimes, it can be bad. But the best relationship, the highest level you can go, is when you can move from friendly cooperation to collaboration. That’s where we’re at now.”

Grand Forks and UND leaders had always talked, Silewski said. There were always those parade logistics and plenty of other occasions when one needed to ask the other for cooperation — maybe a little more leniency on the citywide noise ordinance, or a call for student volunteers to help fill sandbags during flood season.

But it wasn’t until the potholes, paired with the One UND Strategic Plan, that a very different philosophy began to take shape.

Cooperation vs. collaboration

Of course, it was nature and its freeze/thaw cycles that made University Avenue’s potholes a perpetual headache. Year after year, drivers grumbled and complained of the patchwork repairs as they perfected their weave-and-dodge techniques. They had all but given up, one leader said, “thinking the road was probably as good as it was going to get.”

But 2016 would prove to be different. That spring, an especially moonscaped University Avenue prompted leaders to take a closer look. University Avenue — part City road, part University road, part community road — was everyone’s problem, they realized. And it was everyone’s opportunity.

“Everyone was brought into the conversation to reimagine how we could make this road better for everybody,” Silewski said. “All of a sudden, we were able to leverage our resources, hear different perspectives and gain new expertise to move toward a better, more collaborative outcome.”

Ideas flowed freely as more and more people joined the conversation. First, the potholes would be fixed by a combination of brand-new street and mill-and-overlay. Then came the adjacent streetscape, the new light poles and banners. The wayfinding, the traffic lights and the student-friendly crosswalks. Next, a citywide bike-share program. A merged public transit system. And plans for skywalks and mixed-use development, encouraged by Grand Forks tax incentives.

“There’s an opportunity for UND to become the economic engine for the city and the region. We can parlay all the great research happening on campus into something really meaningful.”

— UND President Andrew Armacost
That was just the beginning

Suddenly, it seemed, the wheels were turning all over town. Civic, business, economic and educational leaders stepped more and more outside their silos to shape a shared vision for a better community.

Students and longtime residents alike spoke up and found a seat at the table. Individuals and organizations were eager to take action. Good things snowballed. And soon, the synergy couldn’t be stopped.

Former five-term Mayor Michael R. Brown called the City’s “town and gown relationship better than it’s ever been,” while UND President Andrew Armacost recently praised his vice president, faculty, staff and students for their efforts to create closer connections with partners outside the University.

“We know the more students we attract, the better it is for the Grand Forks economy,” Armacost said. “And when we create those opportunities for students to connect to our community, additional magic happens. Now, you’re placing these great graduates into key positions here in Grand Forks.”

Demographics for population by age in Grand Forks (MSA) show a 9%, 22% and 17% increase in the respective age groups of 25-29, 30-34 and 35-39 over a seven-year span. Experts credit the strong growth in this key economic driver to retention efforts made by both UND and the community.
Growing our own workforce

Already, new and robust internship programs — one in which the University shares costs 50/50 with the City, and a second administered by the Grand Forks Region Economic Development Corp., with costs shared equally by UND and participating businesses — are growing a talented workforce that’s proving vital to the city.

EDC President Keith Lund credits the internship programs and the strong town/gown connections for a 48 percent increase in the number of young people choosing to live and work in the region after graduating from UND.

“We’re doing a much better job in retaining top talent, and that’s just one byproduct of that stronger relationship between the University, the community and the students,” Lund said. “UND leadership’s decision to be very intentional in investing in the community was a pivotal moment. It’s our responsibility now to maintain that momentum.”

And that movement doesn’t look like it’ll be slowing down anytime soon. A number of other internship initiatives, research projects, workforce development and other innovative partnerships are underway.

Even more important, leaders say they’re confident they’ve built a solid collaborative infrastructure to ensure continuity as people move in and out of key positions.

Solidarity critical during a crisis

That strong web of ready relationships withstood the ultimate test and proved especially critical in the community’s COVID fight this past year.

Though Grand Forks Mayor Brandon Bochenski and UND President Armacost both were brand-new to their posts, they made partnering in the face of a pandemic seem like old hat.

A united front, they strategized together to align safety standards for the whole community. The University was able to shift quickly to a remote and then to a hybrid instruction model, and both Grand Forks and its lifeblood students didn’t miss a beat.

“It’s now part of our culture,” Grand Forks City Administrator Todd Feland said. “Today’s world is so much bigger and so much more collaborative. We know if we’re going to stay innovative and leading-edge, the University and community really have to work together.

“It’s in our DNA now. It’s what we do. Our No. 1 goal is to strategize together. We can’t afford to be exclusive and distinct from one another. We need each other to create a greater community.”

Grand Forks Mayor Brandon Bochenski (on field, left) and UND President Andrew Armacost (right) stand united at a campus COVID-19 testing event.
STRATEGIES IN A NUTSHELL

So, what makes Grand Forks and UND so different?

Beyond the greater pothole solution, which came to be called the “Coulee to Columbia and Beyond Development and Infrastructure Partnership,” what else makes our town and gown relationship so unique?

First, it’s the widespread engagement and whole-hearted, spirited buy-in from individuals, businesses and other organizations in our dual Grand Forks communities — plus that of our sister city across the river and our military base neighbors just 18 miles to the west. Second, it’s a whole lot more.

“It’s not a transactional engagement but a true desire to work together for the betterment of our community,” said Meloney Linder, vice president of UND’s Marketing & Communications.

Many leaders throughout the community frequently work across the aisles, she said. For instance, she is an active board member of The Chamber of Grand Forks/East Grand Forks and the Grand Forks Region Economic Development Corp.

“A lot of communities say they have a strong town/gown relationship, but here in Grand Forks, it’s really true,” she said. “That is validated when you look at the sheer number of projects we are working on.”

In a nutshell, you could say a lot of people have been busy. Here’s a rundown of just some of those partnerships and programs in the works:

Keeping connections top of mind

Last spring, the Community/Campus Enrichment Committee was established as an official and ongoing body to work together toward fostering community relationships that enhance both the student and Grand Forks citizen experience. Specifically, focal areas include communication and educational, professional, social and volunteer opportunities.

- A designated student from UND Student Government chairs the committee in collaboration with the Grand Forks Mayor’s Office, with a representative from the City and UND administration.
- Subcommittees work to ensure students are made aware of professional development opportunities such as internships, co-ops, research and jobs. Plus, members look for ways to support businesses and other organizations in providing those opportunities.
- They also work with nonprofit organizations to make sure volunteer and service opportunities are available and successfully marketed to students.
• A fourth goal establishes **awareness of social offerings** such as specific social/cultural events as well as recreational activities and other networking opportunities.

• One key project establishes an annual "**rhythm of events**" to keep students and other community members connected year-round. E.g., Greenway Takeover and Downtown Street Fair in the fall, as well as Winter Warm Up events and the Spring Fever concert.

**User agreement partnerships**

Integration of public transportation for the City and the University. The public bus systems for Grand Forks and the University merged last fall to improve service and efficiency. Not only do both organizations save money but so do students, faculty and staff. They ride for free and have access to expanded routes.

Alerus Center agreement. Early last year, the University signed a 10-year usage renewal agreement with the City-owned convention center. We established UND Football Game Day, and our team had brand-new permanent turf for the inaugural 2020-21 Missouri Valley Football Conference season.

**Coulee to Columbia/infrastructure**

City and University partnership. Major renovation and development of University Avenue, the main thoroughfare through both the heart of campus and the city. The plan went beyond the potholes to include streets, sidewalks, streetscapes, bike lanes, safer pedestrian crossings, traffic signals, wayfinding, light poles and banners as well as other beautification projects.

Public/private mixed-use campus development. The City and University worked together to plan new development along both University Avenue and Columbia Road. City Planning & Zoning collaborated, and new tax incentives were created to develop a brand-new district that will enhance the student and communitywide experience.

Come on down: Several events are an open invite to University and Grand Forks residents alike.
Internships, research, innovation

Undergraduate and graduate-level internships. City and University partners are celebrating the seventh anniversary of an internship program that has resulted in 10 full-time hires. The annual cost of hiring 15 to 20 interns is shared 50/50. Interns are paired with a designated mentor in at least 16 different departments — ranging from community relations, information systems and mental health to civil engineering, police investigations, budget analysis and wildlife biology.

Intrapreneurial (plus, entrepreneurial) and hard-to-place internships. The University also partners with the Grand Forks Region Economic Development Corp. to place students in internships at early stage companies and traditionally hard-to-place positions such as financial consulting. The cost is shared 50/50 by the University and participating businesses and organizations.

Doctoral-level traineeships. The City and University also are coordinating with internal and external partners to provide traineeships to doctoral students each year. Initial traineeships are exploring the implementation of UAS technology and data analytics for the City’s essential services.

Applied research. Students and faculty in the UND School of Engineering & Mines are partnering on four projects with experts in the field at Grand Forks’ Public Works Department and Water Treatment and Wastewater Treatment plants to study the effects of brine on various pavement surfaces, to mitigate biosolid odors and the formation of disinfection byproducts, as well as to reduce scaling and plug potential. The City and University are harnessing their shared expertise and innovation to solve real problems. Added bonus: The City saves money by using its resident experts rather than contracting out.

A City/University liaison makes it stick. A brand-new position has been created to help ensure the City and University stay connected and on task. The initial position is an internship, but leaders hope it will evolve into a full-time job. The liaison’s role is to collaborate with City staff, UND student leadership and UND administrators to research and develop strategies to enhance the student experience through deeper community integration via social, professional, educational and volunteer efforts. They also will aggregate data on community initiatives and work with others to lessen barriers that restrict engagement. Another key focus will be to explore best practices used by similar liaisons in other communities.

“Our Through continued collaboration and communication, time and time again, our student body, University leadership and our greater community have come together to develop programs and initiatives to better the day-to-day life of those here in Grand Forks.”
— UND Student Body President Matthew Ternus
Collaborative and integrated space. In early 2019, the City purchased the downtown Grand Forks Herald newspaper building with plans to renovate the large facility into a **shared community innovation space**, coupled with offices and multiple collaborative spaces. UND and other government agencies, businesses and civic groups already are showing strong commitment. **Planned programming** includes a UND Student Hub, Grand Forks/UND value-added research, electronic library resources, grant writing collaboration, graduate/professional/undergraduate classes and certificate programs, as well as Grand Forks Public Schools/UND Counseling collaborations.

**UND Nistler College of Business & Public Administration.** In an effort to reach its goal of increasing enrollment from 2,000 to 2,800 students, the college is working on plans to establish a **Community Workforce Development Center** for recruitment and retention. Other key players are the City and Altru Health System, the town’s primary health care provider. Both this branded center and downtown Herald hub would provide students with resources and study space.

**The Gershman Graduate Center.** Thanks to a generous gift to the University, the remodeled home of UND’s first president will host professional development training for graduate students who want to polish their skills in effective writing, communication, business ethics and leadership.

**Workforce Development Initiative.** This program works to align classroom coursework, curricula and labs to meet the needs of both undergraduate/graduate students and potential employers. A recent survey of Grand Forks employers determined a demand for increased “professional skills” such as communication, conflict resolution and team building.

**UND Innovation Studio.** Students will learn how to use design thinking — the human-centered, creative problem-solving model — to simplify complex challenges. In **Design Thinking for Students**, participants learn foundational knowledge and skill-building in seven- or 14-week sessions. **Design Thinking for Business** offers one- and two-day design sprints as well as semester-long internships.
The Career Academy. This startup is being discussed as another potential workforce initiative that could be housed in the Herald building. Its goal would be to offer occupational classes for high school students who might not otherwise choose to attend college immediately after graduation. Here, they will build knowledge and skills to help land jobs in “hard to place” positions within organizations such as the City and Altru Health System.

Digital videos for public service announcements. A UND digital video instructor and students are partnering with the City to create six videos for community education. Video topics include: How to pay utility bills online, teaching children how to make a 911 call, understanding the City’s recycling program. Plus, the rules of winter road/snow removal, Police Department community outreach and an overview of available internship programs.

“We’re part of their play, and they’re part of our play. It’s almost like an extension of staff. The important part of creating a collaborative culture is you develop informal ways of making things happen. You don’t have to have all sorts of special meetings. It’s just like working with a fellow colleague within your own organization. We’ve created that bond now. We’re more one than separate.”

— Grand Forks City Administrator Todd Feland
BUILDING A BRIDGE

From the classroom to the real world, hands-on internships transform students into leaders in action.

You can hear it in her voice and in the way she rattles off one positive change after another. Gracie Lian is excited. She sees big things for her future, her community and the University of North Dakota.

As a lifelong Grand Forks resident, the 21-year-old senior and former UND Student Body president has a unique perspective on the current state of the “town and gown” relationship: It’s on a roll.

“I think it’s the best it’s ever been,” Lian said. “And I think you’ll hear the same from everyone else … the campus is more involved with the community than it’s ever been.

“We’ve seen so much success in just the beginning stages of these programs, and we’re setting the groundwork now for even more. In the coming years, so much more is going to happen that will really, really benefit the students.”

Lian already has experienced some of those benefits firsthand. While a sophomore working toward her double-major in English and political science, she was selected for a summer internship with Grand Forks County.

The post was one of more than a dozen in the annual InternGF program administered by the Grand Forks Region Economic Development Corp. The University shares the cost of the internships 50/50 with the participating businesses and organizations.

A triple win

EDC President Keith Lund described the program that focuses both on intrapreneurships at early stage companies and traditionally “hard to place” internships such as financial consulting as a triple win.

“The University meets its commitment to experiential learning. The business benefits because they get value with a high-quality intern. And the student gets an opportunity to really try out and work for an exciting company in the region,” Lund said.

Former UND Provost Tom DiLorenzo, a catalyst in getting the program started along with a similar program within city government, said it’s tough to put a value on that kind of high-level, hands-on learning.

He added: “Research shows that more students are retained. Research shows that students are more likely to get their first choice of jobs. And research shows that students with internship experience get paid better to begin their careers, as well as later in life.”
But in Lian’s case, any sort of big payday will need to wait just a bit longer. After interning nearly four months as an administrator in the public sector, she was determined to pursue her master’s degree in public administration.

“My boss actually graduated from the program,” she said. “This experience not only helped me prepare for the rest of my bachelor’s, but it also helped me solidify the knowledge that I wanted to pursue my master’s … and potentially do this work for a living.

“I now have a much deeper understanding of how many things go into running a local government and providing public services. It really helped show me how much people in government really care about the people of Grand Forks and Grand Forks County.”

Lian said the internship was personally rewarding, too, because she felt she was able to make a significant impact. Part of her job, she explained, was to interview more than 30 department chiefs to assess and prioritize the needs of the county’s diverse services to help develop a 3-, 5- and 10-year capital improvement plan.

Her research laid the groundwork for a proposed multimillion-dollar facility that eventually could house Grand Forks County’s Juvenile Detention Center, Sheriff’s Office and State’s Attorneys Office.

**Doing work that really matters**

Though no small accomplishment for a college intern, it’s the kind of success story that’s often repeated, according to Grand Forks City Administrator Todd Feland.

The City hires up to 20 students each year in its internship program. The interns are paired with a designated mentor in at least 16 different departments — ranging from community relations, information systems and mental health to civil engineering, police investigations, budget analysis and wildlife biology.

“These new partnerships have invigorated our organization with new ideas, new strategies and new people,” Feland said. “And a lot of times it was the younger people who added a lot more life into our organization. One of the really positive outcomes has been that we’ve hired several of our interns as full-time employees.”

Spencer Halvorson was one such student who turned his City internship into a full-time job. While still working toward his master’s in public administration, he spearheaded major changes to modernize the sign code for Grand Forks’ multifamily districts.

“My internship with Grand Forks Planning & Zoning wasn’t like ‘go get coffee’ or some intern story from hell,” Halvorson said. “It was real engaging work that was important. I was given an opportunity to succeed.”

“Studies have shown that the No. 1 reason a college graduate will stay in a community long-term is because of a connection with a business or first job opportunity. I can’t think of a better way to retain students after graduation than to connect them with a quality job opportunity in their field.”

— Keith Lund, president of Grand Forks Region Economic Development Corp.
Now a full-time project coordinator in the City Administrator’s Office, Halvorson works on a wide range of community initiatives and is testament to the success of the strong connections between the City and University.

“The internship program was one of the first major successes, but it kicked off a lot of other successes,” Halvorson said. “The relationship between the two major institutions in town has really accelerated toward collaboration.

“If it wasn’t for that strong relationship between the City and the University, I probably wouldn’t be working in Grand Forks right now. Nearing graduation, I probably would have done what every college kid does and applied to jobs in all sorts of different towns. I probably would have applied to jobs in Grand Forks, too, but I definitely wouldn’t have walked right into one.”

Smart and ready workforce

And that’s exactly the kind of result economic developers dream of in a community growing its UAS and technology industries, Lund said.

When the nation’s unemployment rates were hitting all-time lows before the pandemic, companies such as Northrop Grumman were getting smarter about recruiting a ready workforce.

Lund said the aerospace and defense giant has about 20 UND engineering interns working today at its nearby Grand Sky operations.

“It’s an opportunity for the student to try the company, and the company to try the student. They’ll make a number of job offers coming out of there,” he said. “Everyone is looking for top talent. You have to find effective, innovative ways to introduce yourself to that talent. And one of the best ways to do that is through a strong internship program.”

AND THIS JUST IN ...

City leaders are digging into a newly released study organized by the local Community Foundation and Knight Foundation that recommends further improvements for the rest of the University Avenue corridor.

The study was a result of a citywide online survey and multiple community engagement forums, including The Longest Table event held in the summer of 2019. Organizers set up a 1,250-foot-long table along University Avenue so the community could share a meal and a conversation.

Nearly 1,000 people — from students and parents to working professionals and retirees — got together to talk about what they’d like to see next for the area.

Top Picks? Improving safety for pedestrians and bicyclists, finding new ways to boost activity and creating a lively community identity with modified parking, neighborhood shops, flower baskets, branded banners and public art.

Organizers say it’s time now for individuals and groups to take ownership and champion some of the fresh ideas.

“Hopefully, this not only inspires this University Avenue corridor but other corridors,” City Administrator Todd Feland said. “People can say, ‘Hey, if they can do it on University, what can we do in my neighborhood.’”