

COME TO THE TABLE: COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIPS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research is unique because it offered insight into economic development partnerships formed specifically in rural communities in the Southeast and, as a grant requirement, involved the local community college or university. The purpose of the effort was to identify requisite factors that support the development of effective community partnerships to maximize resources, minimize service duplications, and create opportunities to benefit rural communities. Emergent findings revealed how community colleges significantly influenced these collaborations. The role of higher education institutions in engaging and resolving local social needs is essential to economic development because they have the capability to link global perspectives to local frameworks. Partnerships enable different people and organizations within a community to leverage and utilize their varying strengths and capabilities.

PARTNERSHIP RESULTS

Findings uncovered a significant amount of information emerged regarding the impact community colleges wield on partnership development and sustainability in rural communities:

- Neutrality
- Institutional Capacity
- Access to Education
- Economic Development

NEUTRALITY

Neutrality plays a critical in building trust to aid partnership development. The need for neutrality in partnerships is important and often unspoken, especially in rural southern communities. Community colleges and the university were viewed by several of the interviewees as “neutral.” This supports findings from the Rural Community College Initiative (2003) project which found that colleges were considered “neutral places for building community confidence, trust, and cooperation...”

INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Institutional capacity refers to a college’s ability to devote attention to non-academic issues and concerns. It requires colleges to seek partnerships with other organizations and encourages innovation and risk-taking. In this study, the interviewees described services the colleges provided that are not related to academic or training efforts, yet beneficial

to the partnership. Interviewees identified the support of the institution’s president, the role of non-credit activities, the number of college employee’s dedicated to the partnership, community involvement, and “neutrality” as contributions of the participating college.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Rural community colleges provide a variety of academic and economic services to their communities (Miller & Tuttle, 2007). Access to education included programs in middle and high schools, distance learning, online learning, credit, and non-credit programs. Participating colleges provided classes depending their partnership’s initiatives. They offered classes in the following areas: GED, Adult Education, workforce development, financial planning, computer literacy, aquaculture, alternative crops, and entrepreneurship. Access to education also meant reaching out to all residents through creative measures to deliver training and programs.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

New approaches to economic development include creative solutions focusing on the natural, cultural, and intellectual resources of a region, leadership development, assisting existing businesses to grow, and promoting entrepreneurship, as they tend to be locals or

citizens with little intention of leaving the community. All of the community college or university representatives interviewed discussed the importance of economic development to their institution and their role in supporting that mission. Economic development activities included grant writing, providing linkages and contacts to different entities, participation on local economic development boards, serving as the economic development liaison for the college, and promotion of entrepreneurship.

CONCLUSIONS

The colleges that participated in this initiative had a lasting impact to the teams they served. The colleges benefited from participation by obtaining additional grant funding for the college and partnership, expanding the college’s perception of their role from workforce development to economic development activities, demonstrating the importance of outreach and inclusiveness by bringing non-traditional students to the college. This study provides probing insight in how community colleges can and do impact the actual functioning of the partnerships for the purpose of creating economic development opportunities for rural communities.



menu

COME TO THE TABLE:

COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIPS

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"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

-- Margaret Mead

What images does the phrase “come to the table” or “at the table” evoke? A happy family gathering during the holidays or a business dinner with dissatisfied clients? The title of this study of six rural partnerships originated from the phrases “come to the table” and “at the table” used over 225 times by twenty-six people to include: hospital administrators, community college administrators and staff, agency heads, ministers, and concerned citizens to describe the partnerships they created, maintained, and in some cases, sustained to create economic development opportunities. All were engaged in building the economic development of their rural communities, with assistance of local community college, as a result of a grant program called Program for the Rural Carolinas (PRC) funded through The Duke Endowment and managed by Manpower Development Corporation, (MDC), Inc., a consulting group that works with rural partnerships primarily in the South, from 2002-2006.

This effort was unique because it offered insight into economic development partnerships formed specifically in rural communities in the Southeast and, as a grant requirement, involved the local community college or university. The purpose of the effort was to identify requisite factors that support the development of effective community partnerships to maximize resources, minimize service duplications, and create opportunities to benefit rural communities. Emergent findings revealed how community colleges significantly influenced these collaborations.

Background

Economic development is the process of creating wealth for people, organizations, and communities (Swager, 2000) and is largely dependent on functional partnerships (Porter, 2005; Swager, 2000; The Palmetto Institute, 2006). Rural communities are at greater risk for decreased development during economic downturns than their metropolitan neighbors because of a lack of financial, infrastructure, and human resources (MDC, Inc., 2007). However, community partnerships are now recognized by a growing body of literature and practice as a strategy to improve rural economic development outcomes and maximize resources (Austin 2007, Barnett, Hall, Berg, & Camarena, 1999; Johns, Kilpatrick, & Whelan, 2007; MDC, Inc., 2007; Porter, 2005; Weinberg, 2000).

The role of higher education institutions in engaging and resolving local social needs, such as the need for economic development, became the focus of research in the late 1980s and 1990s (American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), 2003). Thanki (1999) states that higher education institutions are essential to economic development because, as producers of knowledge, they have the capability to link global perspectives to local frameworks. Partnerships enable different people and organizations within a community to leverage and utilize their varying strengths and capabilities. They are, however, difficult to implement and sustain because they require relationships and structures that may not be typical for the team members (AACC, 2003; Lasker, et al, 2001).

Research on rural community partnerships with involvement from a local community college or four-year institution is not prevalent. The American Council on Education (ACE) and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) urge member colleges to work within their communities to promote partnerships between themselves and various stakeholders (AACC, 2003); however, little information is available to indicate higher education institutions have taken such actions in their daily operations, with two exceptions. The Beacon College Project was initiated to create a community through collaboration, shared vision, and meaningful activities using selected colleges; however, a limitation of that project was the lack of participating colleges from economically distressed communities (AACC, 2003, Barnett, 1995).

The Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) was designed to help community colleges in distressed rural areas through goals associated with economic development and access to education (MDC, Inc., 2002). Findings from the RCCI Project were consolidated and generalized to reflect the overall knowledge gained, but no specific information on how the community college influenced the partnerships was gathered (MDC, Inc., 2001).

Over the course of a four-year period from 2002 to 2006, leaders from government agencies, churches, hospitals, chambers of commerce, community colleges, and the community, worked together as a partnership to create economic development opportunities that were unique for their community. Six different PRC rural economic development partnerships agreed to speak candidly about what it takes to make or break that partnership. In addition, these stakeholders provided an unusual degree of access to team documents that revealed behind-the-scenes insights. A review of relevant websites and related literature rounded out the data collection process; together, these sources, when compared and combined, created a rich portrait of the life –and death – of rural economic partnerships. (Brown, Cotton, & O'Hara, 2006; Spradley, 1979).

Partnership Results

Findings uncovered patterns of common factors that must be considered before attempting to partner. Additionally, a significant amount of information emerged regarding the impact community colleges wield on partnership development and sustainability in rural communities.

First and foremost, the community colleges and local university that participated in the PRC Initiative were almost uniformly viewed as essential to the effectiveness of their respective partnerships. This is perhaps not that surprising; as rural community colleges often mirror the communities they serve by working in the community to understand social and economic issues and adjusting curriculums to meet those needs (Miller & Tuttle, 2007; Vaughn, 1991).

However, the college's contribution also spread far beyond providing training and education programs. The people interviewed repeatedly noted three key community college-related influences: institutional capacity, unique access to education, and economic development. Additionally and surprisingly the concept of "neutrality" emerged as a significant touchstone of the study and was uniquely associated with benefits related to community college participation.

Neutrality

"First...I don't live in any of these counties...second... the community college is a non-partisan agency...no favorite county amongst all three." – community college dean

Neutrality plays a critical in building trust to aid partnership development. The need for neutrality in partnerships is important and often unspoken, especially in rural southern communities to "facilitate mutual cooperation between the races" (Sutherland et al, 1998, p.65). Community colleges and the university were viewed by several of the interviewees as "neutral." This supports findings from the RCCI (2003) project which found that colleges were considered "neutral places for building community confidence, trust, and cooperation..." (RCCI, 2003, p.72).

Interviewees from one partnership said neutrality was critical to their team because of the history of deep-seated competitiveness and mistrust. Community college representatives from other partnerships discussed inter-county and community rivalries and how the college or university, with its access throughout the county, was viewed as "non-threatening" or "neutral." Other strategies employed by partnership members to maintain neutrality were to meet in a different county each month, not name people in formal roles on the team, and to give everyone at the table plenty of time to discuss their issues and concerns.

Institutional Capacity.

"With the exception of the Cluster, everything we did was in-kind." - community college dean

Institutional capacity refers to a college's ability to devote attention to non-academic issues and concerns. It requires colleges to seek partnerships with other organizations and encourages innovation and risk-taking (RCCI, 2001). In this study, the interviewees described services the colleges provided that are not related to academic or training efforts, yet beneficial to the partnership. Interviewees identified the support of the institution's president, the role of non-credit activities, the number of college employee's dedicated to the partnership, community involvement, and "neutrality" as contributions of the participating college.

College Leadership

Of the six partnerships, four had community college presidents or campus deans of the local university who were aware of and supportive of their associates' involvement with the PRC Initiative. College presidents/university deans were described as supportive of employees' time and activities, not expecting immediate financial gains from involvement, active participant on the partnership, creative, and open to ideas.

Non-Credit Contributions

All colleges and university partner members were from the non-credit areas of their institutions. This supports findings from a business/industry and community college study, which stated, "A common thread in community college partnerships with business and industry was that the workforce division, which created business process improvement solutions, existed on the non-credit side of the institution" (Lavendar, 2007, p.120). Non-credit departments in this study included continuing education, small business center, JobLinks, HRD, and a leadership institute.

Number of College Employees' Participation

Each college who participated, dedicated, on average, two employees per partnership site, at a minimum, one associate and, at a maximum, up to four associates, depending on the needs of the partnership. These figures did not include employees who taught or delivered services when partner members were on campus.

Community Involvement

Engagement in the community was a common theme to college participation and how that presence is needed in locales that often lack resources (RCCI, 2003). Community colleges can often be the "social engines that drive the community – not just economically, but in terms of interactions and community engagement." (Miller & Tuttle, 2007, p.118). Interviewees provided examples of community activities supported by the college, such as the college president attending a Martin Luther King, Jr. luncheon at an African-American church. Other college activities identified included: public speaking engagements, use of facilities for a variety of community functions and events, and in-kind contributions to grant efforts, such as the PRC and others (Miller & Tuttle, 2007; RCCI, 2003).

Access To Education.

"...because we are the hub and can, if we don't have the expertise, then we can help find the expertise." - community college satellite campus director

Rural community colleges provide a variety of academic and economic services to their communities (Miller & Tuttle, 2007). Access to education for the partnership colleges included programs in middle and high schools, distance learning, online learning, credit, and non-credit programs (RCCI, 2003). Colleges tried to tie training needs of the partnership initiatives into pre-existing programs, if possible. Participating colleges provided classes depending their partnership's initiatives. They offered classes in the following areas: GED, Adult Education, workforce development, financial planning, computer literacy, aquaculture, alternative crops, and entrepreneurship.

Access to education also meant reaching out to all residents through creative measures to deliver training and programs. Many of the interviewees noted that citizens in the county who are most in need have the most barriers to education, such as transportation and child care. One partnership worked out an arrangement with a local barber to provide classes, off campus, in a vacant room off his shop. "A lot of people are intimidated by it. Just college period. One of the things that hit me over the head was... can you imagine what the community college looks like? So what we did... the barber said, "I'll cut hair here and the community college can set up there." And that's what we did," stated a minister from the local African-American church. Another college offered GED classes at a local community center located several miles from its campus.

Economic Development.

"Our community colleges are our best allies in economic development... They are very, very important." – president of economic development corporation for a rural NC county

New approaches to economic development include creative solutions focusing on the natural, cultural, and intellectual resources of a region, leadership development, assisting existing businesses to grow, and promoting entrepreneurship, as they tend to be locals or citizens with little intention of leaving the community (RCCI, 2003; Renfro, 2005, Rubin, 2001). All of the community college or university representatives interviewed discussed the importance of economic development to their institution and their role in supporting that mission. "It (the grant) took us from a training provider for economic development to a role of actually doing something about economic development. And that's a pretty major shift," stated a community college dean.

Participating in collaborations that promote economic development was mentioned by every college representative. Economic development activities for the colleges and university have typically included workforce development training, but have been expanded to include mobilizing regional leadership and entrepreneurship/small business development (Pappas, 1997; Rubin, 2001). Economic development activities were mentioned by every college representative interviewed and included grant writing, providing linkages and contacts to different entities, participation on local economic

development boards, serving as the economic development liaison for the college, and promotion of entrepreneurship.

Conclusions

The colleges that participated in this initiative had a lasting impact to the teams they served. They brought personnel, facilities, equipment, networks, curriculum, grant writing skills, and much needed neutrality to their partnerships. Everyone interviewed felt the college or university made the partnership as successful as it was, when they fully participated. The colleges benefited from participation by obtaining additional grant funding for the college and partnership, expanding the college's perception of their role from workforce development to economic development activities, demonstrating the importance of outreach and inclusiveness by bringing non-traditional students to the college in locations that were not "on campus", outside funding opportunities, and strengthened community goodwill (RCCI, 2003; Vaughn, 1991).

This study generated findings that were unique and relevant to local governments, human service agencies, higher education institutions, business/industry, economic developers, grant funders, and concerned citizens. Untapped potential exists for higher education institutions to better understand how they can positively influence change for the citizens of the areas they serve. This research may be an area of interest to community college administrators to better understand how they can redirect resources in their communities to serve all citizens in a way that is valuable. Difficult economic times and decreasing state funding are issues that can limit a college from expanding its economic development role (RCCI, 2002). Leadership within the college can vary, but it also can provide the necessary support for their associates to actively seek opportunities to work together for economic development purposes.

This study provides probing insight in how community colleges can and do impact the actual functioning of the partnerships for the purpose of creating economic development opportunities for rural communities. Just like any culinary experience, the components – table, place settings, diners – are the same. What creates the difference between dining experiences are how those components are used. The same analogy applies to partnerships. The components are universal, but it is up to each team to determine how to use those components within the context of their community, local organizations, and the community college.

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