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Can Regional Colleges Make a Difference in Rural America?

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In college and university towns across America a mutual dependence exists between the school and the community. Traditionally, these schools have acted as employer and customer for local goods and services. They have also contributed to the local amenities through their libraries, theaters, art galleries and even outdoors clubs. In recent years, colleges have begun to take on larger roles in the economic development of their regions. While all educational institutions seek to better the world by educating their students, some regional colleges are now taking more proactive roles in developing their communities and regions.

Most of these institutions are two-year degree granting community colleges, but they also include some four-year degree granting colleges that offer applied occupational programs, or even branches of state universities. Their mission



extends beyond education — they seek to create better jobs and spur economic opportunity in their regions. But in doing so, these regional colleges face challenges that go beyond those faced by traditional colleges and universities.

Goals for development

Colleges that have taken an interest in developing their community and region have a variety of goals. Some goals, such as employing local people, purchasing local services, and providing local amenities, are a natural outcome of ongoing college programs. Other goals, such as helping businesses to grow and reach their full potential, require focused strategies and innovative programs.

Regional Technology Strategies, Inc., has identified a number of programs at two-year community and technical colleges that help rural businesses and labor forces adapt to the challenges of rural economies. In a project funded by the USDA's Fund for Rural America, RTS reported on a selection of programs with defined goals and a proven track record for successfully implementing strategies to reach those goals.

In all, RTS identified 43 regional colleges with benchmark practices and well-defined programs to meet their economic development goals, both in the United States and abroad. Five goals stood out among the various regional colleges:

- Produce skilled and professional workers
- Act as the source of innovation and technology diffusion
- Act as a broker of services
- Act as a repository of information
- Act as a wellspring for new businesses.

To make a significant impact on regional development, many colleges are focusing on producing skilled and professional workers *for their region*. Universities often import students for their time of study, then return those students to their hometowns to work and live. Many

liberal arts colleges produce students whose skills are not directed toward the needs of the *regional* economy. In contrast, institutions interested in regional development focus on giving students the skills needed by local employers.

Some regional colleges interested in economic development strive to be a source of innovation and technology diffusion. These schools often seek to strengthen ties to industry through “advanced technology centers.” These centers facilitate interfirm cooperation, perform technology and skill needs assessment, and provide technical information — and in so doing become sources of innovation and technology diffusion.

Other regional colleges interested in development seek to act as brokers of services — that is, to help put companies and services in touch with one another and encourage technology transfer and information exchange. Faculty who are well-connected to industry become purveyors of the “untraded transactions” that represent technology and knowledge transfer and diffusion.

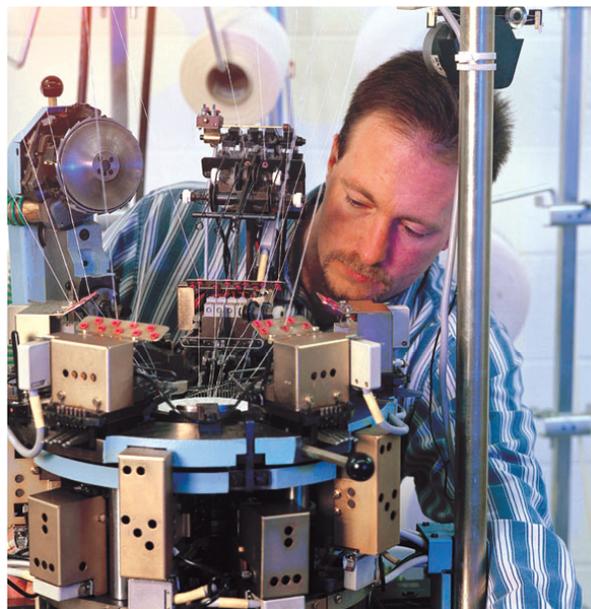
Still other colleges interested in regional development want to be seen as a “repository of information.” These institutions want to be the leading source of technological expertise and know-how as well as the core of the region's knowledge infrastructure. Community colleges seek to capitalize on the fact that they are better positioned than large universities, consultants, and service agencies to reach the small firms. The technical colleges are better positioned because they are less intimidating to the small firm owner and because many of the other groups prefer not to bother with “know-how” needs that may not be technologically challenging or

of a scale that can be sufficiently profitable.

Finally, the major goal for many regional colleges interested in economic development is to act as a wellspring for new businesses — to support entrepreneurship through their business education programs, adult education, new business incubators, and access to technical assistance centers.

Strategies to achieve development

Once a college determines a set of goals for community and regional development, it then identifies strategies to reach its goals. The RTS study showed a number of effective strategies. All of these strategies support at least one of the college's goals. Like the goals, some of these strategies require little special



The Hosiery Technology Center at Catawba Valley Community College in North Carolina gives local firms technical training and access to state-of-the-art equipment to help them realize their vision for the future.

action, while others require a change in traditional thinking.

Design programs and services that are relevant and respond to changing labor market conditions. Colleges that are interested in economic development work to align their programs with the needs of industries in their regions. Specific curricula, programs, and services are all ways colleges work to meet the needs of indus-

try. With advice and partnership from industry leaders and innovators, colleges are able to keep their programs relevant and produce workers with the skills industries need.

Identify and invest in niches. The easiest way for a regional college to achieve world-class status is to find a niche opportunity for the local economy and build a high level of capacity and exploit that niche. Typically, colleges establish centers that focus on a technology or an industry cluster. These centers may challenge certain traditions within the organizational and decision-making structures of the institutions, requiring that some structures be modified to ensure the center's success.

Maintain an entrepreneurial environment. Colleges that most effectively support regional economies must themselves have an entrepreneurial spirit. In particular, they are flexible in adapting to changing conditions, pursuing new opportunities, and thinking innovatively. This flexibility often requires that faculty be given the opportunity and authority to experiment with new approaches and to look for external sources of funding that are not dependent on student enrollments. Sometimes programs that support emerging regional opportunities need to be funded even if they have only a few students. Such programs can gain self-sufficiency in the following years as enrollment increases.

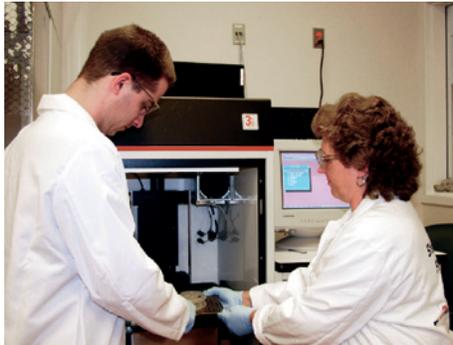
Connect work-based to theoretical competencies. The regional college uses its connections to the area industry base to embed theory in real experiences and to use real situations in the cluster to better teach theory. In other words, the college connects "book learning" with hands-on, practical experience. The connections are used to create a context for learning that pervades all college programs.

Hire faculty with expertise and experience in industry. In colleges that effectively support regional economies, at least some of the management and staff members have recent industry experience and con-

nections. Remaining active in industry and professional associations helps build productive linkages to the college.

Think and act collaboratively.

Successful colleges support collaborations and create structures that lead to partnerships and alliances among firms in the region. They promote and facilitate, for example, regional skill alliances, supplier



The Computer Assisted Technology Transfer Program at Oklahoma State University—Okmulgee helps firms gain the capacity and certification needed for defense contracts.

associations, business networks, and continuous user improvement groups.

Offer flexible scheduling to accommodate lifelong learning. Colleges have to be prepared to offer their programs at times and in places that are accessible to adults — people already in the work force who want to add to their stock of knowledge and credentials. Courses in evenings, on weekends, at plant sites, and courses offered in accelerated modes are all forms of flexible scheduling.

Build global connections. Colleges are often part of national and international networks and associations that help them stay abreast of new innovations and best practices, give access to new materials and curricula, and help the college gain an international reputation. Networking with institutions from other regions is perhaps the best way to spur innovation, as schools continually monitor each other to find ways to improve their own programs.

Recognize that skill needs are related to other business changes. Colleges interested in supporting small and medium enterprises in their area offer more than simply

workforce training. Many regional colleges act as "one stop shops" where enterprises can find answers for a variety of their needs, from education and training, to expertise for improving their competitiveness. Colleges that follow this strategy act as a convenience store for local businesses.

Address needs of under-represented populations. Colleges interested in regional development reach out to populations that have not historically held skilled positions in industry, like women or specific minority groups.

Examples of programs working for regional economic development

The goals and the strategies of many regional colleges are beginning to yield positive economic results — higher paying jobs and improved standards of living in their regions. The following are brief descriptions of five programs in the United States that appear to be particularly successful.

One goal of many programs is to *produce skilled and professional workers for the region.* Some of these programs target all people in their region, others target specific groups. Lakeshore Technical College in Cleveland, Wisconsin (just north of Milwaukee), targets women. In the 1990s, the Sheboygen-Manitowoc region faced the twin problems of very low unemployment and a lack of skilled workers. The Lakeshore Technical College started the Non-Traditional Occupations program in response to the demand for personnel by local employers. The program sought to increase female awareness of, and participation in, male-dominated occupations. The program allows women to explore technical careers in a more comfortable environment than traditional introductory courses that are predominantly taken by men. Workshops cover knowledge and skills used in the industries and provide hands-on training for equipment operation and manufacturing processes. Since the program started, female enrollment in nontraditional occupational programs increased 100 percent from 1996 to 1998.

During the 2000-2001 school year, 115 women were enrolled in nontraditional training programs.

Catawba Valley Community College in Hickory, North Carolina, is a prime example of a college working as *a source of innovation and technology diffusion* in its region. The Hosiery Technology Center was created by the state legislature in 1989 after the industry's regional trade



Northern New Mexico Community College in El Rito teaches a variety of traditional loom weaving skills to workers in a cottage industry that was once a vital part of northern New Mexico's economy.

association realized that their workers needed further training — training that could not be accomplished by each firm on its own. The Technology Center provides the training for workers and managers, access to the latest equipment in a neutral location where local companies can learn about equipment from different vendors, and purchase it if they wish, and a quality and standards testing laboratory. The Technology Center also provides a neutral ground for firms to gather and share information, and even to collaborate on new projects. As a result of the Technology Center, firms now invest more in training and technology, have a shared vision for the industry and the region, and better understand what they have to do to compete.

Some colleges seek to act as a *broker of services*. Oklahoma State

University—Okmulgee sought a way to help manufacturers in the northeast region of Oklahoma. The Computer Assisted Technology Transfer Program (CATT) at Oklahoma State acts as a broker of services, bringing together manufacturers and the U.S. Department of Defense. The program also acts as a technical assistance provider, helping small and medium-sized manufacturing firms gain the capacity and certification needed to contract with the Defense Department. The CATT program goes into motion when the Defense Department identifies parts it wants reengineered and reproduced. CATT then uses its database of manufacturers to identify firms that can produce the parts. The firms make a prototype and work out an agreement with the Defense Department. CATT has helped Oklahoma vendors increase their share of

manufacturing contracts with Tinker Air Force Base from 3 percent in 1995 to 20 percent today.

Northern New Mexico Community College, in El Rito, New Mexico, acts as the *repository of information* for an industry that has existed for years — loom weaving. The Fiber Arts Program at El Rito began in the early 1930s, but was suspended after WWII. In 1990 the program was restarted to ensure that the indigenous Rio Grande weaving style stays alive and that students will be able to successfully pursue a vocation in weaving. The program includes courses on loom construction, fundamentals of textile weaving, color and design, and natural dyeing. With the ability to construct their own loom, students are able to continue production in their homes. The cottage industry that was once an

integral part of Northern New Mexico's economy has been revitalized, and traditional weaving guilds have been reestablished in the community.

Some programs seek to act as a *wellspring for new businesses*. In Hazard, Kentucky, the local community college views entrepreneurship as a way to break the cycle of dependence on coal. As the coal mining industry wanes, Hazard Community College's Business and Technical Assistance Center (BITAC) seeks to provide the training and support necessary for residents interested in starting or expanding their own businesses. It also works with industry to meet its workforce needs by providing training tailored to particular sectors and individual firms. Since BITAC's inception in 1987, over 225 small businesses have opened in the region. As of 1999, 75 percent of those businesses were still operating.

Challenges

Regional colleges are redoubling their efforts to support development in their regions. But success isn't always easy. The colleges face many challenges as they expand their development programs. They must tailor their programs to a more diverse student body (in both ethnicity and age) and to changing economic conditions (which can influence funding for programs as well as students' ability to attend those programs). Colleges also face competition from other colleges for students, faculty, and funding. In addition, the local community can present funding challenges if it decides it needs a "magic bullet" immediately, rather than a long-term solution to its economic development problems. Yet these challenges can be overcome. And with defined goals and strategies, regional colleges can make a difference in rural America.

Edited by Bob Reagan

For further information, please see the article "Cultivating Successful Rural Economies: Benchmark Practices at Community and Technical Colleges" on the RTS website, www.rtsinc.org.