



Cultivating Successful Rural Economies

Benchmark Practices at Community and Technical Colleges

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OVERVIEW

Background

Rural America is undergoing a major structural restructuring. A half century ago rural America was mainly agricultural; today only a small fraction of its people are employed full time in farming. From mid-century through the 1980s, industrial plants flocked from cities to rural areas, recruiting people from the farms to work in the new factories; today those same plants are vacating for other countries. Expanding cities, land developers, and Interstate highways encroach on what was once remote and relatively tranquil rural communities. The excitement, job possibilities, and promise of higher salaries continue to draw young people from rural areas to large cities.

Most rural regions in the United States and other industrialized countries grapple with similar challenges created by declining employment in agriculture, decreasingly competitive industrial labor costs compared to developing countries, and infrastructure shortcomings ranging from poor public transportation to poor connections to the information highway.

The restructuring also creates opportunities for some rural areas. Increasing congestion and pollution in metropolitan areas and the natural resource amenities that rural areas can offer are enticing to some individuals and companies. A rural location is less of a drawback today than in years past for firms whose products are easily transportable (such as software or light electronics) or those that can “virtually” communicate with colleagues and customers over the Internet and telecommunications.

Despite the bright spots, most rural areas will have to continue to depend on building and sustaining the competitiveness of its homegrown industries as well as incubating new ones—all at a time when requirements for advanced technologies and skills are increasing. Economic and technological forces are shifting the factors that afford competitive advantage to higher levels of skills and technology.

In this new environment, the community or technical college has risen to the challenge of the new economy and expanded its mission to help rural businesses (especially small- and mid-sized enterprises) and labor forces adapt to changing needs. Over the past two decades community and technical colleges have accumulated a vast storehouse of experience in delivering a wide variety of education and training programs and innovative services to rural companies to help them modernize, become more competitive, and grow. Because two-year colleges are less entrenched in tradition and have stronger regional missions than universities or vocational centers, they are better able to respond quickly to market demands and changing conditions.

Rationale

Yet many administrators and faculty at community colleges and other rural economic development leaders have limited opportunities to learn about new and innovative practices. Most of their information is obtained from relatively parochial sources. Such information often lacks the depth, detail, and objectivity to support improvement and change. Furthermore, those colleges with the most to gain from the experience of others are often the most isolated from

information sources and least exposed to innovative practices—the small, underserved, and rural community colleges.

It was with the goal of identifying and sharing information about some of the most dynamic and effective programs at rural community colleges, both in the U.S. and other countries, that Regional Technology Strategies, Inc. (RTS)¹ initiated the Benchmark Practices for Local Economies project in 1998.

This effort has been conducted under the auspices of the Trans-Atlantic Technology and Training Alliance (TA3), a consortium of 28 of the leading technical colleges in the U.S. South, Europe, and South Africa that supports exchange and innovation in technical education and regional economic development through collaborative projects, conferences and research. RTS, along with CIRIUS, a Danish international education arm of the Ministry of Education, manages the alliance that was established in 1995 as an outgrowth of a U.S.-only network of community colleges called the Consortium for Manufacturing Competitiveness created by the Southern Growth Policies Board in 1988.

A guiding rationale behind the TA3 is the valuable opportunity to observe and examine practices outside U.S. borders (and particularly in other advanced industrial economies). A new perspective through a global lens gives colleges access to innovative and successful practices elsewhere that in turn can stimulate innovation at home. For the same reason, this project sought not only on successful practices in the United States, but also those undertaken in other nations by institutions most closely resembling community colleges. These include, for example, the Further Education colleges in the UK, the Institutes of Technology in Ireland, the Technical Colleges in Denmark, and the Fachhochschule in Austria. In the end, eleven of the chosen practices are from Europe and the South Pacific.

Selection Process

RTS conducted a six-month nomination process for this competition. Wide distribution of the nomination form (also available on the internet) occurred through economic development and community college conferences and meetings; announcements on numerous listserv newsletters; direct mail to heads of State community college systems; and an advertising campaign in *Community College Times*. RTS sought international nominations through contacts with foreign education ministries, the European Union, and using two European-based education and economic development consultants. Although our target was “rural areas,” we did not limit our search only to agricultural economies or open country. Our definition included industrialized and service economies ranging from small towns to mid-sized cities.

RTS received 122 nominated practices at community and technical colleges, including two dozen from colleges in countries as far flung as Iceland and New Zealand. Selection of the Benchmark Practices took place through a two-stage evaluation process. Based on preliminary information provided by the colleges, a panel of economists, community college executives, policy makers, and rural development specialists selected 62 out of the 122 nominated practices to investigate further for possible inclusion in the final compendium. Criteria were demonstrable economic impact, innovation, sustainability, scale and local support.

After the first cut, RTS conducted telephone and email interviews to validate program outcomes with three references per program, either partners, customers, or funders of the college practice. RTS also requested additional supporting documentation (e.g., program impacts, evaluations, and press coverage) from each of the colleges. The panel met again to consider these additional data and selected 43 as Benchmark Practices.

The ultimate value of this project lies in the ability of other colleges to learn from and replicate, in part if not in whole, elements of the Benchmark Practices. With this in mind, in addition to simply describing each practice and its outcomes in this compendium, we have included background information and data. By identifying the contexts and environments (economic, natural, structural, etc.) that have allowed innovation and success to take root and flourish, it is our hope that the likelihood that other colleges will be able to adopt or adapt practices to their own institutions and regions is greater.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Regional Technology Strategies gratefully acknowledges the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Fund for Rural America for its support of this project.

A large cast of characters contributed to this effort. The expert panel that meticulously reviewed the nominated practices comprised:

Chris Beacham, *Senior Director, Research, North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center*

David Freshwater, *Professor, Agricultural Economics and Martin School of Public Administration and Public Policy, University of Kentucky*

Daryl Hobbs, *Director, University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis and Professor of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri*

Jim Jacobs, *Associate Vice President, Macomb Community College and Assistant Director, Columbia University's Center for Community College Research*

David McGranahan, *Senior Economist, Economic Research Service, USDA*

Sarah Rubin, *Senior Associate, MDC, Inc.*

Kathy Baker Smith, *Vice President for Educational Support Services, Guilford Technical Community College*

John Stewart, *Hibernia Partnership, Ireland*

Maggie Symonds, *Principal, Symonds Education and Design, Scotland*

RTS staff Sarah Butzen and Eric Foreman tirelessly conducted phone and email interviews, and researched and wrote many of the profiles for the publication. RTS intern Heather McMahon from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill also contributed through interviewing, research, and writing. In addition, she was the project's organizational denizen—her scrupulous attention to detail and good record keeping kept us all from being carried away by mountains of data.

Brent Lackey, Tom Rowley, Greg Schrock, Maggie Symonds and Patrick Tobin wrote case studies of some of the practices. Tom Rowley also edited the short profiles.

We extend a special thanks to Linda Swanson whose research and writing immensely improved the final product.

Maxine Mills created the cover design and layout. RTS staff Sue Soltis, Jonathan Morgan and Trent Williams assisted with final editing.

Finally, we acknowledge the many talented and visionary community college leaders whose innovations we seek, at least to some degree, to capture in this publication. Without their time and assistance, as well as that of their partners and clients, we would not have been able to present the information in this volume. The dedication and enthusiasm exhibited by these individuals is evident, and the regions they serve are very fortunate.

Stuart Rosenfeld and Cynthia Liston September 2001

PROFILE GUIDE AND DATA SOURCES

Classification Index

RTS classified each practice according to its location, program type, and the target population. We have also provided statistics about the economic base for each region. Determinations for these classifications were made based on information provided by community college staff and references for the programs. More precisely, the following sources were used:

<i>Region</i>	RTS generated
<i>Program Focus</i>	RTS generated
<i>Sector-specificity</i>	RTS generated
<i>Economic Condition</i>	Provided by Community College
<i>Economic Base</i>	Percentage of college service area's civilian workforce employed in Manufacturing, Agriculture and Service sectors, U.S. Census' City County Data Book - 1995
<i>Target Population(s)</i>	Provided by Community College

Sources

The profiles were written by RTS staff and consultants using information and data from numerous sources including nomination forms and supporting documents; interviews with program administrators, clients and partners; program evaluations; program brochures; web sites; and press coverage articles.

Program Table

Data in the program tables also came from the sources described above (in "Sources"). Reported budget figures are annual, and, when necessary, the numbers of program participants and college FTEs have been estimated by college and/or program staff. FT indicates full time employees; PT indicates part time employees.

Socio-Economic Data Table

In order to provide a context for each practice, each profile has a table of socio-economic indicators for the region served by the program. In addition, a community background section is included in the narrative. The data tables were compiled using United States Census figures with the exception of Service Area data which were provided by each participating institution. Collection years for the Census data are as follows:

<i>Total Population</i>	1997
<i>Median Household Income</i>	1993
<i>Poverty Rate</i>	1993
<i>Unemployment Rate</i>	1996
<i>Minority Population</i>	1996
<i>Rural Population</i>	1990
<i>High School Graduates</i>	1990
<i>College Graduates</i>	1990

Due to cultural and political differences in data collection, tables for international programs are less complete than those for practices in the U.S. Wherever possible, steps have been taken to relate comparable statistics. The Irish Central Statistics Office Statistics provided figures for practices in the Republic of Ireland. College or program staff provided all other statistics, using the most recent data available.

MAPS

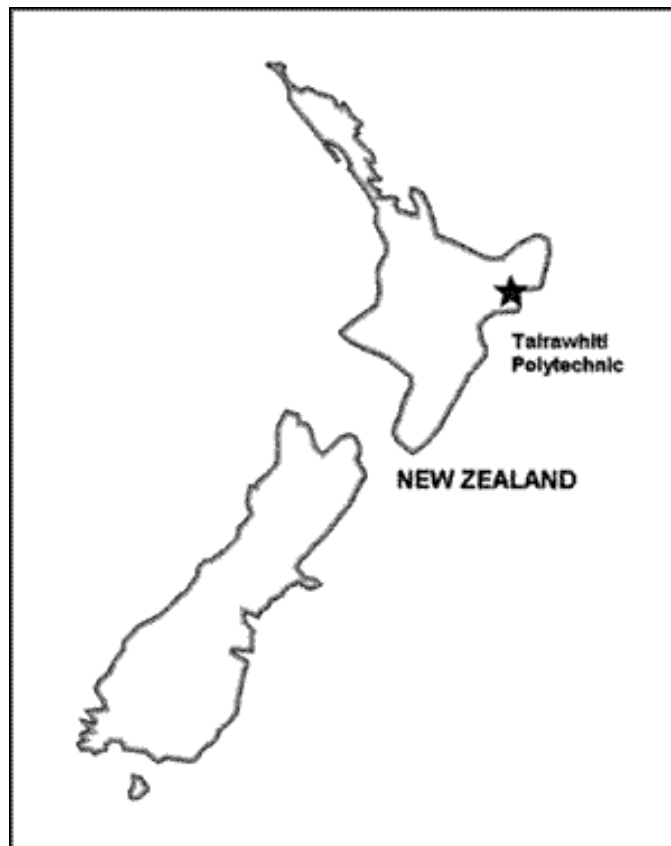
United States



Europe



New Zealand





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