

College: Alexandria Technical College
Location: Alexandria, Minnesota
Practice: **Building Learning Alliances in a Full Employment Economy**
 Upgrading industry skills through customized training and lifelong learning

Year Started 1994

Budget \$1.3 million

Program Participants 1200

College FTE 2,000

Target Sector Manufacturing

Staff Size 3 FT; 20 adjunct faculty providing training

Structure The Learning Alliance is a relationship between the community college and those companies for whom they provide assistance

Key Outcomes Workforce training
 Lifelong learning
 Industry expansion

Introduction

In many parts of the country growth in the economy has led to shortages of highly skilled workers and subsequent increases in demand for training for incumbent workers. Alexandria Technical College (ATC), designated as one of the top ten vocational schools in the nation by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, is working to meet that demand. With assistance from the state of Minnesota, the Minnesota Job Skills Partnership, the West Central Minnesota Initiative, and Minnesota Technology, Inc., the college created and administers several highly regarded customized training programs to help companies in the region improve the skills and productivity of their employees.

Community Background

Alexandria is located on Interstate I-94 in rural, west central Minnesota, 130 miles northwest of Minneapolis-St. Paul and 100 miles southeast of Fargo, North Dakota. Small and medium sized manufacturers comprise the economic base of the region. Due to accessibility to larger communities, the region has also been able to attract a number of health care, manufacturing, retail, and professional services operations.

Significant job growth in the region's manufacturing and telecommunications industries has also led to population growth and economic prosperity.

Still, many incumbent workers have not shared equally in this prosperity because they do not have skills consonant with the new products and tech-

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic condition	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
Business services and training	No	Growing	20	5.5	26	Dislocated workers, economically disadvantaged, underemployed

Service Area Douglas, Grant, Pope, and Stevens Counties

<i>Total Population</i>	58,000
<i>Median Household Income</i>	\$27,000
<i>% Below Poverty Level</i>	12.4
<i>% Unemployment Rate</i>	4.7
<i>% Minority Population</i>	1.4
<i>% Rural Population</i>	75.4
<i>% High School Graduates</i>	74.3
<i>% College Graduates</i>	12.8

nology. With industrial expansion and a low unemployment rate, the region is in need of skilled labor.

Program Description

The Learning Alliance consists of five individual programs, one each with five different companies. The college and companies have been able to build close working relationships, relationships that go beyond training. College staff often participate in firms’ strategic, organization and technology planning.

Money for these programs is provided by the state of Minnesota, and is given directly to the college. ATC then sets up the training programs with each company and manages the training funds in collaboration with the industry partner. The programs in the five companies that comprise the Learning Alliance are described below.

Superior Industries, Morris, MN

Located just 45 miles west of Alexandria, Superior Industries employs 112 workers in the manufacture of aggregate processing equipment. Superior’s employees were in dire need of a skills update in order for the company to remain competitive using those employees. Without training, many employees would become obsolete and lose their jobs.

By joining the ATC Learning Alliance, Superior was awarded (and has since matched) a \$234,000 training grant from the state of Minnesota to pursue workforce training in technology transfer and state-of-the-art manufacturing, as well as employee training systems and processes. The program introduces next-generation skills and new technologies to the local manufacturing industry, and has also

identified a need for industry-wide training at entry and advanced manufacturing skill levels.

Homecrest Industries, Wadena, MN

Located 50 miles north of Alexandria, Homecrest Industries is a manufacturer of casual outdoor furniture. Homecrest employs more than 450 local residents, including more than 100 employees hired since the company joined the Learning Alliance. Like Superior, Homecrest was awarded (and has since matched) a \$125,000 grant from the state and has begun to provide training and manufacturing process refinements with the help of ATC.

Homecrest teamed with ATC to conduct a needs assessment. Based on the results of that assessment, Homecrest and ATC focused on three major areas:

- Design to manufacturing training
- Computer aided design and computer controlled equipment
- Quality systems and processing

Rural Cellular Corporation, Alexandria, MN

The Rural Cellular Corporation (RCC) was formed in 1990 when 40 local telephone companies merged their interests in the cellular and wireless communications industry. Today, RCC is the largest provider of cellular and paging services in northern Minnesota, western Wisconsin, and eastern North Dakota. RCC employs 150 sales agents and 200 other full-time workers.

As did Homecrest, RCC conducted a needs analysis with the help of ATC and discovered a need to develop and deliver next-generation technology training to the firm’s incumbent workforce. The state of Minnesota awarded a \$168,000 grant to ATC to design a training initiative for the industry. The resulting curriculum prepares employees to take advantage of new technology. The program also enables employees to improve performance and advance in the more traditional management, marketing, and sales fields.

Hoffman Aseptic Packaging, Inc. - Alexandria, MN

Hoffman Aseptic Packaging (HAPCO) is a processor and packager of high-quality sanitary products and contracts work from Kraft, Quaker Oats, and Land O’ Lakes. HAPCO employed 100 workers before it joined the Learning Alliance, but expects to double its workforce as a result of the alliance.

HAPCO was awarded a \$115,000 grant from

the state of Minnesota to create a program that will supplement its significant investment in improved technology. The program will focus on next-generation packaging, computer training, team-building, and safety processing, enabling HAPCO to remain competitive in a global marketplace.

Barrett Automatic Products - Wheaton, MN

Barrett Automatic Products (BAP) has been manufacturing screw machine components in Minnesota for 15 years. Due to its success, BAP has been able to take on a larger production schedule that could double its workforce. However, the company faces a shortage of qualified employees.

By joining forces with ATC, BAP found a nearby rural community that had lost a major employer. When relocation to this community is complete, BAP will be hiring and retraining 40 of those 55 dislocated workers, increasing human resource capital both within their company and within the region as a whole.

Outcomes

The community response to ATC's Learning Alliance has been extremely positive. Not only have jobs been retained and/or created, but also a certain level of trust has been developed between the community college, local industry, and the workforce. By focusing on job training on an individualized customer basis, ATC has helped to ensure that existing employees are ready for job promotion and new levels of management and leadership.

Strengths, Challenges, and Replicability

Customers explain that the strength of the program lies in its delivery of "customized training as it should be: provided by experts who have actually been there and done that, not just academics," and that the program uses a "common sense method, [providing] only what is needed at the time it is needed... in a cost-effective manner." By responding directly to the needs of local industry and developing unique programs for workforce training, ATC has earned the reputation of listening to the needs of each individual corporation. It is also recognized as stabilizing the local economy through diversification, training, and increased opportunity for lifelong learning.

As the connecting point and nerve center for lifelong learning in the region, the college has joined in a variety of partnerships with many different entities, including the Alexandria Area Economic Development Corporation, the West Central Initiative, and the Regional Workforce Center. Through these partnerships, the program is able to move finances and attention toward the critical nature of supporting lifelong learning within the region, thereby expanding individual productivity per worker and enticing corporate expansion within the service area.

Looking toward the future, one of the greatest challenges facing the college is to expand the reach of its services to a wider customer base. Doing so will require the college to link more closely to full-time programs of study. At the same time, training in new technology skills must be extended to populations beyond full-time students. For this, ATC must find new ways of unbundling coursework typically provided in a set curriculum, and offer that education in a more creative manner.

The high level of financial commitment from state resources to defray costs for incumbent worker training is not something to which all rural colleges have access. However, building strong relationships with firms and responding to local needs is certainly replicable.

For more information, contact:

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