

College: Hibbing Community College
Location: Hibbing, Minnesota
Practice: Community Computer Center
 Providing both remedial and technological skills training to community members

<i>Year Started</i>	1998
<i>Budget</i>	Initial grant of \$220,000
<i>Program Participants</i>	N/A
<i>College FTE</i>	1,400
<i>Target Sector</i>	Expanding service and technology sector.
<i>Staff Size</i>	5
<i>Structure</i>	A center with flexible hours and distance learning that is open to the community at large. Partnerships with local businesses tailor training opportunities to business needs.
<i>Key Outcomes</i>	Upgrading workforce with customized training Increased ability to retain and recruit technology-based businesses IT training for low-income populations

Introduction

The leaders of Hibbing, Minnesota realized they faced a problem when a survey of local employers in the 1990s revealed that more than one-third were dissatisfied with their employees' technical skills. Hibbing Community College (HCC) responded by taking an active role to close the skills gap and thereby improve the region's ability to retain existing businesses and recruit new ones. HCC brought together a diversified group of local stakeholders to design and implement the Community Computer Center, an innovation Information Technology training center that casts a wide net in its outreach to both businesses and the community as a whole.

Community Background

Hibbing is a city of almost 18,000 residents, located 90 miles north of Duluth at the foot of the Mesabi Iron Range, which forms the heart of iron mining country in the "Arrowhead" of Northeastern Minnesota. The city is named for Frank Hibbing, a German immigrant and iron ore prospector who founded the settlement in 1893. A little over two decades later, it was discovered that the iron ore deposits actually extended underneath the city, which by that point had grown to 20,000 residents. So they simply moved the city. Over the course of the next five decades, the town's structures were moved, one by one, to a new location approximately

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic condition	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
Technology diffusion and transfer	No	Stable	8	0.3	39	Existing workforce, general

<i>Service Area</i>	<i>Itasca, Lake, Cook, Carlton, Aitkin, Koochiching and St. Louis Counties</i>
<i>Total Population</i>	119,000
<i>Median Household Income</i>	\$27,000
<i>% Below Poverty Level</i>	12.3
<i>% Unemployment Rate</i>	7.7
<i>% Minority Population</i>	0.8
<i>% Rural Population</i>	73.5
<i>% High School Graduates</i>	76.9
<i>% College Graduates</i>	12.9

two miles south of the original location.

Today Hibbing and its surrounding communities on the Iron Range are the home to nearly three-fourths of U.S. iron mining activity. What is mined is not actually natural iron ore, but rather taconite, an extremely hard rock composed of about 25 percent iron.

While the available supply of taconite is not considered a near-term problem, the mining industry has nonetheless experienced tremendous cycles of “boom and bust” in conjunction with the U.S. steel industry. Recent turbulence and adversity in the mining industry have renewed concerns about diversifying the Iron Range economy in order for its communities to survive and prosper.

In the mid 1990s Hibbing’s economic development, government, business, and education leaders sought ways to prepare their community for technology-based development and upgrade the skill levels of the workforce. The Community Computer Center is one of the results of this search

Program Description

Hibbing Community College is a comprehensive technical and community college that was originally founded in 1916, making it one of the oldest two-year colleges in Minnesota and the nation. Since then, it has gone through a number of transformations that have served to integrate its roles as both a community and a technical college. Today HCC serves approximately 3,000 students in credit courses and roughly 24,000 through its customized

training activities.

This same responsiveness to local economic conditions was the impetus behind the Community Computer Center initiative. Having received an award in 1996 from the U.S. Department of Education to upgrade its technology faculty and infrastructure, HCC decided to expand its efforts even further. It drew together a diverse coalition of community interests, representing the local business, government, education, and social service sectors to establish a new, dedicated Community Computer Center. Together they developed a program that would match Hibbing’s need for upgrading IT skills in the local workforce to available and potential resources for meeting that need. Local business partners pledged both financial and in-kind support to the project, which was initiated with the help of a \$220,000 grant from the Minnesota State College and University (MnSCU) system, with which HCC is affiliated. Approximately half of the MnSCU grant was used to purchase equipment for a 24-station computer laboratory on HCC’s South Campus, where the CCC is located. The remainder of the grant was used to hire a computer instructor and support technician. Revenues from course enrollments have allowed these staff positions to be self-sustaining since the end of the MnSCU grant in spring 2001.

The key elements of the CCC initiative include:

- Customized IT training for workers in local businesses to improve productivity and competitiveness;
- Continuing education that engages local residents from diverse backgrounds to learn about IT and computer skills;
- Reaching across the “digital divide” by partnering with a local social service provider to extend low-income and public assistance populations access to much-needed IT skills; and
- Integrating closely with the community and region’s long-term economic development strategy toward technology-based economic development.

Outcomes

By offering convenient, diverse, and low-cost opportunities for local residents and workers to upgrade their IT skills, HCC contributes directly to the productivity of existing jobs, while promoting the development of technology-oriented jobs. And HCC has thought creatively about program design, to remove barriers and improve accessibility to IT skill training among deserving populations, such as low-income and public assistance recipients, frequently overlooked by similar initiatives. Through its CCC initiative, Hibbing Community College has established itself as a community resource committed to Hibbing's economic future. The college has now "set the bar," in the words of one community member, for partnership within the community to serve the community's needs.

Strengths, Challenges and Replicability

HCC has successfully leveraged the support—financial, in-kind, and political—of a diverse set of interests in getting the Community Computer Center project from the concept stage to reality. Each of these partners holds a different stake in Hibbing's future, but have all made a credible commitment to an initiative geared to securing the community's long-term economic viability. According to the Director of Instructional Technology at HCC, the CCC initiative has led directly to an increased linkage and coordination of the college's efforts with economic development goals in Hibbing and throughout the Iron Range. As the project partners have reconvened to monitor the progress and success of the CCC, they have been able to refocus on future development challenges and opportunities facing Hibbing.

Community colleges, and educational institutions in general, are often criticized for their inability to think "outside the box" about human capital development, thinking only terms of degree programs and traditional student roles. Through its CCC, Hibbing Community College has broken through that model, reaching a wide spectrum of businesses and individuals eager to upgrade their IT skills. And through its partnership with the Family Investment Center HCC has effectively reached a low-income and public assistance population too often bypassed by such initiatives. In fact, the name of the facility was changed during the course of its

implementation, from the Community Information Technology Center to its present name, in order to make it more accessible to community residents who may be intimidated by "IT," and thus less willing to take part.

Although insecurity over the traditional economic base has been the primary impetus for efforts to promote technology, further downturns could jeopardize those efforts. Resources, particularly from local sources, could be threatened, and priorities would likely shift to more short-term adjustment needs. Particularly for low-income and public assistance populations at the margin of the labor force, such downturns could hamper efforts toward self-sufficiency.

The HCC's model for the Community Computer Center is highly replicable in other communities looking to offer its residents increased access to computers and IT skill training. The key elements of the model are a broad base of support by local stakeholders, allowing the program to leverage and integrate with existing community resources, and reflect better the needs of its customer base; also important is the leadership of a highly visible local resource like HCC, which is widely respected and willing to accept that leadership role.

Local partners in the HCC project, however, point out that one of the keys to the success of programs offered through the Community Computer Center is the quality of instructors hired through the MnSCU grant. Local factors, such as the degree and nature of community support, are highly instrumental to making initiatives like the CCC successful.

For more information, contact:

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