

**College:** Hocking College  
**Location:** Nelsonville, Ohio  
**Practice:** Natural Resources and Tourism Development  
 Supporting economic development through cluster development and college-owned businesses

*Year Started* 1996

*Budget* Over \$1 million

*Program Participants* 6,000

*College FTE* 4,700

*Target Sector* Local business and industry

*Staff Size* N/A

*Structure* Partnership between the community college and the surrounding business community

*Key Outcomes* Creation of new local businesses  
 Increased number of jobs in community

## Introduction

Nestled in the Appalachian foothills of southern Ohio, downtown Nelsonville has changed little in appearance since its founding. Rich in history and natural beauty, however, this small, rural community is developing a tourism economy that is due in large part to the active participation and leadership of Hocking College, the town's two-year public college.

Started in the 1960s and currently enrolling some 5,000 students, Hocking College promotes innovation in several realms. First, through its president's leadership, the college exhibits keen insight in developing new programs before most of its competitors, both in the state and across the country. As a result, Hocking has a much broader reach than most community colleges. It has attracted students from 26 states and 51 countries

over the years. Second, Hocking has led efforts to draw businesses and tourists to the region, strengthening its economy. The third innovative aspect of the college's reach into its community is its emphasis on hands-on training, often through student-run businesses.

## Community Background

Nelsonville is a community of just over 4,500 residents identified by the Appalachian Regional Commission as a "severely depressed" area with high poverty rates. The surrounding region (Athens and Hocking Counties) is faring better statistically, but the poverty level is still nearly 20 percent and unemployment remains at 6.4 percent, a figure above the national average.

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic condition	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
Community hub	No	Distressed	13	1.7	33	Youth/students

<i>Service Area</i>	<i>Athens and Hocking Counties</i>
<i>Total Population</i>	90,000
<i>Median Household Income</i>	\$25,000
<i>% Below Poverty Level</i>	20
<i>% Unemployment Rate</i>	6.4
<i>% Minority Population</i>	5.4
<i>% Rural Population</i>	59
<i>% High School Graduates</i>	71
<i>% College Graduates</i>	16

Much of the land in the college's service area is forested and publicly owned, limiting the taxable base for the region. Many residents drive 60-70 miles to work in the greater Columbus area. In addition to Hocking College, primary employers in the area include the local hospital, an outdoor boot and shoe manufacturer, and Ohio University in nearby Athens.

## **Program Description**

The force behind Hocking College's economic development efforts is its current and only president. When the institution opened in 1968, he took the job on the condition that he have full control over starting and ending programs, obtaining equipment, and plotting the college's course.

With programs in business, technology, health, natural resources, and hospitality, Hocking is a comprehensive college. Its service area includes some 100,000 residents; however, it draws many of its students from other Ohio counties and states.

The initiatives described below illustrate the college's efforts to help the region become a tourism destination of choice and equip its students with practical, cutting-edge educational experiences.

### ***Downtown Revitalization***

In 1990, the college and business leaders formed Towne Centre, Inc., a non-profit group to preserve buildings in the downtown business district and to be a catalyst for economic development. As a result, the Nelsonville public square was recently added to the National Register of Historic Places and six new businesses have located there in the past four years.

Funding for this program is provided through the Hocking College operating budget, private donations, and a \$5,000 grant from the Ohio Arts Council.

### ***Innovative Curricula***

Faculty and staff at Hocking College believe that a unique curriculum is one of the best tools to attract, retain, and prepare students. The college has been a leader in identifying career directions and establishing programs that are at the vanguard. "From the very beginning I've watched trends," said Hocking's president, a member of the World Future Society. "Not necessarily scientifically, but...with the idea that when you see a trend you try to get in on the beginning, not the end."

Recently initiated programs include eco-tourism, aquaculture/fish hatchery management, archeology, global positioning systems, and geographic information systems. The eco-tourism program centers on attracting tourist revenue through the promotion of the area's natural, historical, cultural, and environmental assets. The college's aquaculture program is the only two-year program of its kind in the state, and one of only three nationwide. Its goal is to replace rapidly diminishing fish supplies from both ocean and freshwater sources by farming the fish for food or sport. With a training facility located at a nearby lake, all students enrolled in the college's Department of Recreation and Wildlife Management receive hands-on experiences as well as classroom teaching in general studies and humanities courses. The programs are funded through the revenue provided by full-time equivalent programs at Hocking College.

### ***Robbins Crossing***

A historical re-enactment village located on the Hocking College campus, Robbins Crossing is full of authentic and reproduction log cabins behind split rail fences and vegetable gardens. Recreating the daily lives of southeastern Ohio villagers in the 1850s, student and community volunteers demonstrate weaving, wool carding, candle making, and a host of other activities for some 30,000 visitors per year.

Due in part to their experiences at Robbins Crossing, students enrolled in Hocking College's Interpretive Services Technology Program have gone on to successful careers at various camps, zoos, and historical interpretation facilities. They are "competing with students from four-year

colleges, and really have landed some very nice jobs,” according to a college team leader.

The Robbins Crossing program is supported by the Hocking College general fund, volunteer work, business and industry contributions, and in-kind support.

### ***Student-Operated Enterprises***

The college owns and operates a full-service Ramada Inn on campus where students in both the culinary arts and hotel/restaurant management programs gain firsthand knowledge of the restaurant and hospitality industries. The college also operates Uniglobe Hocking Hills Travel Agency, a hands-on training facility for travel and tourism students and the only travel agency in the town. In addition, students in the School of Applied Business manage and operate Wildlife Products, a nature products boutique located on the Nelsonville Public Square. The college is also trying to attract other small businesses with nature or environmental themes and create an outdoor adventure cluster as part of its efforts to establish Nelsonville as a recreation and tourist destination.

These programs are funded through full-time equivalency programs at Hocking College and revenue from the small businesses themselves.

### ***Special Events and Tourism***

Hocking College co-sponsors several large events throughout the year. The largest is the Paul Bunyan Show, hosted in conjunction with the Ohio Forestry Association. It is the single largest forestry exhibition in the eastern United States and one of the largest events in southeastern Ohio. More than 65,000 persons attended last year. Roughly 1,800 students and staff from the college are involved, assisting competitors and exhibitors in a variety of ways, including concessions, first aid, and camping/traffic regulation.

In addition to the Paul Bunyan Show, the International Bow Hunter's Organization hosts the last leg of the bow hunting triple crown on college grounds. Thousands of bow hunters and their families attend this three-day event. The campus also hosts the Ohio State Smoked Meat and BBQ Festival, a cook-off held annually each October with participants coming from all over Ohio and some neighboring states. And each December, Hocking College is the primary supporter of Towne Centre Christmas, a Victorian Christmas Celebration on Public Square in Nelsonville. The program's

goal is to stimulate economic activity downtown, as well as to involve students and residents in community service.

## **Outcomes**

Hocking College is considered to be “the little college that could...it not only survived, but became a leader in technological education,” according to one community leader. Its graduates enjoy a high job-placement rate. For example, approximately 90 percent of students graduating from the horsemanship program have jobs upon graduation. Most jobs obtained by Hocking students provide a good living and ample opportunities for advancement. If the college and other community leaders' efforts to build the region's tourism cluster are successful, more students will have the opportunity to find employment in the local region. In addition to benefiting students, those efforts benefit the community by bringing tourism dollars and tax revenue and supporting local revitalization.

## **Strengths, Challenges, and Replicability**

The vision and leadership the college exhibits in its regional efforts, and the economic impact of those efforts, are the strengths of the program. That most of the efforts are in partnership with local businesses and other organizations is also a strength. The college has been willing to break the mold of what many think is the role of a community college. It has become an economic driver not just because of the impact of student and college expenditures, but through actively promoting tourism and business development. It operates entrepreneurially, investing in somewhat risky new programs and enterprises in order to create a niche market for itself and push the envelope in education and economic development. The college is also willing to discontinue programs that do not succeed. In fact, the chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents recently commended the college for the fact that it has ended 12 programs in 32 years—more than most schools.

A great deal of the college's success can be attributed to its president. When he leaves, the challenge will be to continue his philosophy under new leadership. With respect to replicability, most community colleges do not enjoy the autonomy

that Hocking does, and thus it may be more difficult for them to undertake similar efforts. Nonetheless, there are aspects of the college's economic development activities that could be replicated in part, if not in whole.

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