

College: Southeastern Community College
Location: Whiteville, North Carolina
Practice: Continuing Education Division
 Providing leadership in economic development, industry recruiting, and strategic planning for Columbus County

<i>Year Started</i>	1988
<i>Budget</i>	\$1,300,000
<i>Program Participants</i>	N/A
<i>College FTE</i>	1,979
<i>Target Sector</i>	Manufacturing
<i>Staff Size</i>	N/A
<i>Structure</i>	A division of the college that houses a variety of programs and maintains a range of public and private sector partnerships
<i>Key Outcomes</i>	Establishment of industrial parks and incubators Brought four international firms with 180 jobs to Columbus County One-stop workforce center has won national awards

Introduction

Tucked in North Carolina’s southeastern pocket against the South Carolina border, Columbus County describes itself as a “tightly knit community... quietly progressive in both industry and farming.” Rich in natural beauty and close to the Atlantic coast, Columbus is beginning to develop its advantages as a tourist and retirement destination. It is among the most rural of North Carolina’s counties, with more than 90% of its 52,000 residents living in a rural setting. It thus faces challenges similar to those facing much of North Carolina’s rural population: limited job opportunities, low job skills, and lack of access to services and programs that assist in overcoming these difficulties.

Southeastern Community College has emerged as one of the strongest forces in Columbus County’s efforts to overcome these challenges.

Founded in 1964 and serving more than 7,000 students each year, Southeastern has adopted an assertive approach to fostering growth in Columbus County. Its contributions have taken a variety of forms, ranging from continuing education programs to small business development to welfare-to-work strategies. All of these efforts have been marked by a degree of initiative, creativity and leadership that Southeastern’s partners say is the most innovative aspect of its work in Columbus County.

Southeastern’s contribution starts with its commitment to adult continuing education. Like many community colleges, Southeastern has a

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic condition	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
Business services	No	Distressed	40	4.0	21	Dislocated workers, economically disadvantaged, entrepreneurial candidates, minorities

<i>Service Area</i>	<i>Columbus County</i>
<i>Total Population</i>	51,000
<i>Median Household Income</i>	\$20,498
<i>% Below Poverty Level</i>	23.7
<i>% Unemployment Rate</i>	7.6
<i>% Minority Population</i>	39.9
<i>% Rural Population</i>	89.8
<i>% High School Graduates</i>	59.4
<i>% College Graduates</i>	9.1

Continuing Education Division (CED) with a wide range of educational and vocational programs to help adults prepare for and advance in the workplace. Like other North Carolina community colleges, Southeastern's CED goes beyond individual services, offering customized training and education programs for new and expanding industry in the service area. Rather than providing these services on an as-needed or by-request basis, however, Southeastern takes the initiative in researching the needs of firms that are considering relocating to the area and initiates recruitment efforts. Southeastern has made its Continuing Education Division into one of Columbus County's most important tools of industry recruitment and expansion.

Southeastern's role in the community goes beyond its training programs, however; it has also taken a strong leadership position in county-wide economic development planning. For example, it marshaled county leaders and resources to develop a comprehensive welfare-to-work plan, and it initiated and led a two-year process of developing a strategic economic development plan for Columbus County. During this process, Southeastern was able to highlight its concerns about the status of minorities in Columbus County. Because of Southeastern's "proactive rather than reactive position," one partner says, "economic development planning efforts are more inclusive and have resulted in greater attention being given to all population segments of the county."

Community Background

Columbus County is struggling with high levels of poverty and unemployment. Twenty-four percent of the county's residents live under the poverty line,

and the unemployment rate has recently jumped to nearly 10 percent due to the closing of three textile plants. Textiles and agriculture have long been the basis of Columbus County's economy; now, textile jobs are declining due to automation advances and to NAFTA-related plant closings. Tobacco, which had been the county's largest cash crop, is in decline due to quota cuts following the national tobacco settlement. The service sector and some other industries, however, are showing signs of slow growth.

Two other concerns have been at the forefront of Columbus County development efforts: educational attainment and the status of minorities. Columbus County is behind the state and national curves in high school graduation and college attendance; county leaders have pointed to insufficient local spending on education as a possible contributor. Community leaders are also concerned that minorities in Columbus County have significantly lower per capita income and are much likelier to live under the poverty line than the general county population. The county's economic development plan includes strategies for minority economic development, largely due to Southeastern's leadership.

Program Background

Southeastern Community College was founded in 1964 with the purpose of "providing an open door to opportunity for individuals seeking to improve their lives and well-being." Its mission statement calls for "education, training and retraining for the work force...support for economic development through services to business and industry...services to the community and individuals that improve the quality of life." SCC offers more than 30 occupational and liberal arts curriculum programs, and serves more than 7,000 students each year (1,979 FTEs).

In 1988, Southeastern Community College significantly changed the way it participated in county economic development. Before then, it had, as an administrator says, "assumed a passive posture in terms of economic development and training for business and industry." With the 1988 arrival of a new president, the college adopted a more proactive role, beginning to establish itself as a leader in community development efforts.

While Southeastern has always offered continuing education classes, it was only after the 1988 shift in

institutional philosophy and strategy that the Continuing Education Division became an important part of Columbus County's economic development efforts. Through Continuing Education, SCC initiated partnerships with the Columbus County Economic Development Commission, the North Carolina Department of Commerce, the North Carolina Community College System, and other state and local entities with economic development goals. These partnerships have facilitated several new programs within the Continuing Education Division that illustrate Southeastern's commitment to community economic development.

Small Business Center

Founded in 1986 with funding through the North Carolina Department of Community Colleges, the Center's mission is to provide training, education, and support to the owners (or would-be owners) and employees of small businesses. The Center is home to several of Continuing Education's most successful initiatives, including the Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning program, which gives hands-on entrepreneurship training to adult students; the Microenterprise Loan Program, which provides technical training and loan for small business start-up or expansion; and the Business Development Center, a small business incubator housing several small entrepreneurial enterprises and one venture capital company. The Small Business Center also provides a resource library, information dissemination, and career counseling and referral services.

Business and Industry Skills Training Center

The Center opened in 1988 with two purposes: (1) to help existing business and industry increase productivity through continuing education and training; (2) to attract and retain new business and industry through focused training programs and other services. The Center researches the needs of relocating firms, and contacts the firm early in the decision-making process with a customized package of relocation support services that includes workforce training, assistance to the firm's relocating management staff, and technical support during construction. These services both encourage firms to choose a Columbus County location, and promote firms' success once established.

JobLink Career Center

The Center is a "one-stop" collaborative effort

among Southeastern Community College and several state and local agencies, including the NC Department of Social Services' Work First program, the Employment Security Commission, and the Jobs Training Partnership Act. The Center received a \$2.6 million grant to provide workforce training and services to welfare recipients as part of Columbus County's welfare-to-work plan. The Center also provides remedial education and workforce services to all county residents, regardless of income status. The JobLink Center received the 1997 U.S. Department of Labor Workforce Development Award for an Exemplary Program in One-Stop Career Service.

Rural Community College Initiative

Southeastern is one of 24 community colleges in the U.S. selected by the Ford Foundation to participate in the Rural Community College Initiative, a project whose goal is to strengthen community colleges' ability to contribute to their communities. SCC received three grants over five years totaling \$170,000, and used them to lead efforts to plan and begin implementing the Columbus County Strategic Plan for 1998–2007. These efforts included representatives from local industry, educational institutions, economic development entities, and several branches of local government. The Plan addresses a wide range of goals and objectives. In the area of educational quality and attainment, the Plan contains goals related to public school funding, standardized test scores, high school graduation, and higher education. In the area of economic development, the Plan's goals relate to infrastructure improvements, agricultural production, and rates of wage, poverty, and unemployment. In addition, the Plan addresses objectives relating to opportunities for minorities, parenting skills, and workforce development. An RCCI manager notes that among the colleges receiving RCCI grants, Southeastern "has been a leader in moving its various program efforts toward sustainability."

Outcomes

Southeastern's Continuing Education Division has been instrumental in recruiting four international industries to Columbus County, one in 1988 and three of them within the last four years. These companies have made a total combined investment of \$31.5 million and created 180 jobs. The Division's

programs have also assisted many sewing machine operators, who were displaced by the closing of the textile mills, by retraining them as computer technicians. In addition, Division programs help to retrain unemployed and underemployed workers, and bring displaced workers back into the labor force.

Southeastern's leadership and initiative in marshalling local, state and federal resources have been the driving force behind Columbus County's Strategic Plan 1998-2007, behind the county's welfare-to-work plan, and behind the many partnerships described above that continue to foster economic development growth and development in Columbus County.

Strengths/Challenges/Replicability Issues

Southeastern's primary strengths are its drive and leadership in the community. The college takes the initiative to identify Columbus County's most pressing needs and find creative, innovative ways to address them. At the same time, it involves many community partners, tapping the talents and resources of other county leaders; one partner notes that Southeastern has made economic development planning efforts more inclusive, ensuring that all population segments of the county receive equal attention. Its ability to develop and establish a vision for change, while still sharing responsibility and credit, make it a constructive and powerful instrument of economic growth.

This example of leadership can serve as a model for other community colleges that want to be a force for change in their communities. "Simply put," says a local economic development director, "Southeastern Community College is a vital asset to our county's economic growth, and it has demonstrated its aggressive, creative leadership by the successful results it has produced." Much, however, seems to depend on the vision and personal leadership of Southeastern's president. The challenge for Southeastern—and for colleges seeking to follow its example—will be to ensure that the college's forward-looking philosophy is shared and institutionalized throughout the college.

For more information, contact:

Harry W. Foley,
Vice President of Continuing Education,
Southeastern Community College
910-642-7141, ext. 216
hfoley@mail.southeast
www.southeastern.cc.nc.us