

College: State University of New York at Potsdam
Location: Potsdam, New York
Practice: Merwin Rural Services Institute
 Supporting a multi-faceted approach to rural development
 in a sparsely populated region

<i>Year Started</i>	1990
<i>Budget</i>	\$500,000
<i>Program Participants</i>	10,000+
<i>College FTE</i>	4,000
<i>Target Sector</i>	Government, health care, economic development organizations, and social services
<i>Staff Size</i>	6 FT; various PT employees
<i>Structure</i>	MRSI is a subsidiary institution at SUNY Potsdam
<i>Key Outcomes</i>	Local government needs have been met, including efficiency and education Improvements in health care, social work, and economic development processes

Introduction

Since it was founded in the early 19th century, the State University of New York at Potsdam has been a key force in the evolution of the state’s widespread and sparsely populated northern-most region. Indeed, the small university (4,200 students) regards community service as an essential part of its educational mission. With no community colleges serving this region, the university assumes a dual responsibility, providing associate degrees, continuing education, and customized training typically delivered in other places by community colleges and more advanced degrees and research capacity. In 1990, wishing to bring together its community efforts under one organizational umbrella and further concentrate on how it could enhance the region’s quality of life, the

university created the Merwin Rural Services Institute. The result was a multi-faceted approach to rural development ranging from local government assistance to economic development statistical analysis.

Community Background

The six counties of New York’s North Country—St. Lawrence, Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Jefferson, and Lewis—contain 2.4 percent of the state’s population, but more than 21 percent of its land area. Consequently, its 423,000 people and 9,700 square miles translate into a scant 43 residents per square mile—well below the state average of 384. The region is also home to Adirondack Park, roughly the size of Vermont.

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic condition	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
Community hub	No	Stable	20	3.1	40	Existing workforce

<i>Service Area</i>	<i>St. Lawrence, Jefferson, Lewis, Essex, Clinton, and Franklin Counties</i>
<i>Total Population</i>	423,000
<i>Median Household Income</i>	\$29,000
<i>% Below Poverty Level</i>	16.0
<i>% Unemployment Rate</i>	8.0
<i>% Minority Population</i>	9.5
<i>% Rural Population</i>	65.0
<i>% High School Graduates</i>	74.0
<i>% College Graduates</i>	14.0

The region's employment is concentrated in agriculture, mining, forestry and the factories that process those resources. Other industries represented include higher education, correctional facilities, retail, and government. Household income is well below the state average, and poverty rates are among the highest in the state. Population and job loss have been severe over the past decade.

Program Description

The Merwin Rural Services Institute (MRSI) consolidates the university's community activities and seeks to increase their effectiveness at enhancing local development capacity. MRSI uses the following guidelines to direct its efforts:

- Provide services only when need is evident.
- Bring together relevant stakeholders and create advisory groups of community members to help steer projects.
- Complement and facilitate other organizations, rather than compete with them or duplicate their services.
- Conduct regular reviews of activities to determine if they are still relevant and effective.

A separate entity that reports directly to the university president, MRSI has an annual budget of approximately \$500,000. Approximately 20-25 percent of the budget comes from college funds. The balance comes from outside grants, contracts, private contributions, and the state's social services and labor departments. College funds pay for the

director's salary and that of faculty working on MRSI projects. Outside funds go to other staff salaries and project costs. The institute has six full-time staff—two professionals and four support/technical staff.

Following are synopses of some of the institute's programs.

North Country Economic Development Publications

MRSI publishes three documents that collect, analyze, and disseminate statistical information critical to the North Country: Socio-Economic Profile of the North Country, Rural New York Profile, and North Country Economic Development Newsletter. These publications address what public officials and economic developers regarded as a lack of accurate and objective data for the region that hindered planning efforts. According to officials, the publications have become indispensable resources for government officials, business leaders, and economic development practitioners throughout the North Country. The Economic Development Newsletter, published four times a year and containing economic development articles, data analysis, organizational news and events, and commentaries, is of particular note because it aids public policy development and supports economic development professionals in the region.

The combined cost of producing MRSI's publications is about \$10,000 to \$12,000 a year. Funding comes from private and public entities including banks; the New York Rural Development Council; the Council for International Trade, Technology, Education, and Communication; and the North Country Alliance (a regional economic development organization).

North Country Coalition of Social Services Commissioners

The coalition formed in 1991 to improve the skills of New York Department of Social Services (DSS) regional staff. It meets twice a year, bringing together DSS staff, county staff development directors, social services directors from the six-county MRSI service area, and representatives of the Akwasasne Tribe in Hogansburg. In addition to addressing DSS staff development and training issues, the coalition is putting together a cost-effective, customized training program for the six-county staff.

Since its inception in 1991, over 8,000 social services staff members have been trained in

approximately 75 different topics. The topics include productivity enhancement, interviewing skills, and dealing with difficult clients. This locally provided training addresses specific agency-related needs and increases employee skills while maximizing training dollars.

Funded through the various participating county departments of social services and the Office of Human Resources Development (OHRD), the budget for this program was more than \$110,000 in 1998. The coalition has been instrumental in carrying out training programs related to Welfare Reform.

MRSI Health Care Providers Advisory Group

Rural upstate New York has long been targeted by state agencies as a medically under-served area. Consequently, MRSI began its Health Care Providers Advisory Group in 1993 to assess the shortages of health care professionals in St. Lawrence and Franklin counties and determine how area colleges and universities can help alleviate them. The group's research led to the creation of a coordinated degree program in nursing between SUNY-Potsdam and SUNY-Plattsburgh that uses distance learning technologies. The program allows registered nursing staff in the Potsdam area to complete their BSN without travelling to Plattsburgh. Local hospitals provide the required clinical training. Other programs created by the advisory group include a Med-Tech program that allows lab technicians with an Associate's Degree to obtain their Bachelor's from SUNY-Potsdam within two years, and Physician's Forum, a periodic series of seminars in which local hospital representatives discuss concerns facing doctors in the managed health care system.

Participants and board members donate their time to the advisory group, and local hospitals sponsor the group's seminars.

The A. C. Walker Foundation North Country Research Fellowships

This program gives financial incentives in the form of fellowships to faculty from the region's colleges and universities to research critical economic, social, and environmental problems confronting the North Country. Chosen faculty members are then paired with local co-investigators to ensure that the research is relevant and necessary to the area. These fellowships are open to community college faculty, and about half of those awarded have been to community college faculty in the region.

The A. C. Walker Foundation provides funding for this program. Fellowships go up to \$2000. Since 1993, 39 awards have been provided through these two research programs, on topics ranging from the lasting impact of the Ice Storm of 1998 to studies on community groundwater contamination and other regional environmental impacts.

Other Activities

Other MRSI activities that affect the community include grant-writing workshops for local community groups, the annual Local Government Issues Conference, a leadership institute, and a job search center. The institute is also helping a town develop its strategic plan, working with regional leaders on a tourism plan, and providing technical assistance to a training program for local entrepreneurs.

Outcomes

The Merwin Rural Services Institute is a catalyst for regional change and an important link between resources of the college and the neighboring communities. Among its outcomes are scores of registered nurses who have obtained bachelor's degrees while working at local hospitals; widespread dissemination of useful information; research projects funded; and workshops, teleconferences and leadership training programs.

Through its cooperation with regional government, local businesses, and institutions of higher education, MRSI has provided what one partner calls, "a welcome ray of light in a very rural area." A former economic developer in the region said,

I have worked in a number of rural communities across the country and have never seen anything even close to [MRSI].... It is innovative specifically in its outreach to communities in the region, and in the pragmatic means it accomplishes its goals.

Strengths, Challenges, and Replicability

The strengths of MRSI lie in its comprehensive engagement in the region and its effectiveness in building partnerships. As one partner noted, staff "really get out in the trenches...and consistently deliver." Being a separate entity within the college

has meant increased credibility and stability. Strong support from the college's president has also helped. The ability to raise outside funds sustains MRSI since college funds are limited.

Challenges to the program include breaking barriers to cooperation among community organizations, developing region-wide approaches to accomplish goals, developing a greater understanding and appreciation among community groups as to what colleges and universities can do for them, and generating interest among faculty and others to work on community projects.

MRSI is a potential model for community colleges interested in creating a multi-purpose community-oriented hub for information and services that impact the local region.

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