

College: West Virginia University at Parkersburg

Location: Parkersburg, West Virginia

Practice: Polymer Alliance Zone (PAZ)

Developing a favorable environment for the polymers industry through partnership of education, business, and government

<i>Year Started</i>	1996
<i>Budget</i>	\$150,000
<i>Program Participants</i>	72 in cluster-specific training programs
<i>College FTE</i>	2,000
<i>Target Sector</i>	Plastics industry
<i>Staff Size</i>	3 FT
<i>Structure</i>	Partnership between WVU-Parkersburg, government, and the plastics industry
<i>Key Outcomes</i>	Expanded the state's industrial base Created and retained local jobs

Introduction

In March of 1996, West Virginia Governor Gaston Caperton signed an executive order creating the Polymer Alliance Zone (PAZ). A public/private partnership of the plastics industry, education, and government, the PAZ has a two-fold mission: to create a premium climate for the plastics industry in a three-county region in northwestern West Virginia and to build a state-of-the-art workforce development program.

Today, the PAZ contains one of the world's largest concentrations of facilities producing high tech specialty plastics and is home to some of the nation's most prominent polymer manufacturers, including DuPont, General Electric Plastics, Shell Chemical, and SDR Plastics. While much of this

development predates the creation of the PAZ, the alliance nonetheless provides support and synergy to the cluster.

Community Background

The PAZ is located on the banks of the Ohio River in scenic northwest West Virginia. Its three host counties (Jackson, Mason, and Wood) have ample access to highway, rail, and river transportation—an environment that has attracted a good deal of industrial activity to the region related to the chemical industry. Currently, more than a dozen nationally known companies operate chemical plants in the region.

While the region's manufacturing base remains stable and the service industry is expanding, the

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic condition	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
Business services and training	Yes	Stable	21	0.4	34	Dislocated workers, economically disadvantaged, youth/students

<i>Service Area</i>	<i>Jackson, Mason, and Wood Counties</i>
<i>Total Population</i>	141,000
<i>Median Household Income</i>	\$27,000
<i>% Below Poverty Level</i>	20
<i>% Unemployment Rate</i>	8.3
<i>% Minority Population</i>	1.5
<i>% Rural Population</i>	49.6
<i>% High School Graduates</i>	66.5
<i>% College Graduates</i>	9.7

community still faces several problems. Unemployment in the three counties is considerably higher than the national average, population is declining, poverty is high in certain pockets, and advanced educational opportunities are lacking.

Program Description

WVU-Parkersburg was founded in 1961 as a regional branch of West Virginia University at Morgantown. It became a self-sufficient, comprehensive community college in 1971. Today, the college draws students from a seven-county area and enrolls over 3,500 students each semester. It offers one-, two-, and four-year programs in a variety of fields.

As a partner in the PAZ, WVU-Parkersburg's primary role lies in workforce development—providing training and education that meets the needs of its industry partners. Specifically, the college has helped create a seamless technology curriculum from high school through graduate levels. Students are introduced to the program at an early age and may choose to continue all the way through an associate's, baccalaureate, and master's degree.

In response to the growing chemical processing cluster, the college has developed associate degree programs geared specifically to the chemical and plastics sectors. These include degrees in manufacturing with specialties as a chemical process operator, a plastics technician, and an environmental technician. Using state-of-the-art training facilities, work-based training, and distance learning, the PAZ program has created an environment where

students are encouraged to become highly skilled, highly valued employees in this cluster.

Other partners provide critical ingredients as well. The private sector has donated resources; WVU-P and local high schools have donated time and instructors and set up specific programs to create a globally competitive workforce for the plastics industry. State government provides support and partial funding for the program.

Outcomes

PAZ has brought about a series of positive impacts on the northwestern West Virginia region. They include:

- Increased industrial investment in the region
- Improved workforce skills and abilities
- Awareness of local employers looking for highly skilled workers within the area
- Improved regional infrastructure
- Enhanced image of the region and the state

To date, DuPont has invested \$400 million in its Wood County plant. Additionally, two new companies have opened facilities within the zone. PAZ recently forged partnerships with the West Virginia Manufacturing Association's Chemical Industry Committee, the Society of Plastics Industries, Industries for the Future, and the U.S. Department of Energy, who has presented the program with a \$1.5 million research contract for recycling obsolete government electronic equipment.

The program also obtained a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), and the ARC is considering ways to replicate the program in other areas with other clusters. The federal agency requested that the PAZ be presented at an economic development seminar as part of the 2000 American Planning Association conference in New York City.

Strengths, Challenges, and Replicability

The strength of this effort is the continued cooperation and collaboration between multiple partners and participants. Together they create a synergy that supports the cluster through myriad activities. The challenge, not surprisingly, is funding. Though the program is still struggling with improving

resource capabilities and identifying other sources of funding, public and private assistance keeps this program running.

The initiative could be replicated in communities with a sizeable industrial concentration, no matter what the industry.

For more information, contact:

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