

College: Rural Colorado Consortium*

Location: Rural areas throughout Colorado

Practice: Rural Colorado E-Commerce Initiative

Expanding technology and education to help close the “digital divide” between rural and urban communities

Year Started 1999

Budget \$350,000

Program Participants N/A

College FTE N/A

Target Sector Small business owners

Staff Size 2 FT

Structure Consortium of six community colleges

Key Outcomes Increase in community participation and interest in “dotcom” technology
Attraction and retention of highly skilled employees
Maintenance of a quality job base in Colorado rural communities

Introduction

In today’s economy, businesses compete on brain-power, not labor; on the generation of ideas and information rather than the production of steel, glass, or textiles; on innovation instead of standardization. In such an economy, communications technology and e-commerce are absolutely critical. Indeed, the Internet—cheap, global, and fast—is becoming an indispensable business tool. Unfortunately, there remains a gap between communities that have access to and make use of current information

technologies and those that do not. Access and use vary widely along income, racial, and educational lines. Consequently, countless citizens are excluded from the benefits the new economy can generate.

The Rural Colorado E-Commerce Initiative was created to bring e-commerce and its benefits to rural areas of the state. Organized by the state community college system, a partnership of community colleges, businesses, and individuals is helping rural residents build the capacity needed to take advantage of the many possibilities the new communications technologies offer.

* The Rural Colorado Consortium consists of six community colleges: Colorado Northwestern Community College, Lamar Community College, Morgan Community College, Northeastern Junior College, Otero Junior College, and Trinidad State Junior College.

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic condition	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
Business services and training	No	Stable	12.7	2.8	36.7	Small firms

Service Area Adams, Alamosa, Arapahoe, Bent, Crowley, Kit Carson, Las Animas, Lincoln, Logan, Moffat, Morgan, Otero, Prowers, Rio Blanco, Routt, Washington, and Yuma Counties

Total Population	674,000
Median Household Income	\$29,000
% Below Poverty Level	16.3
% Unemployment Rate	4.5
% Minority Population	20.2
% Rural Population	55.1
% High School Graduates	76.4
% College Graduates	16.4

Community Background

The Rural Colorado E-Commerce Initiative (RCE-CI) covers various regions throughout the state. Consequently, the local economic conditions in the areas it serves vary. On the whole, Colorado experienced great prosperity throughout the 1990s. Among the states, it ranked first in income growth, third in population growth, and fourth in employment growth. Over the same period, Colorado also had the eighth lowest percentage of residents living in poverty.

Unfortunately, not all Colorado regions share in this prosperity. Areas in southwestern Colorado, for example, have high unemployment and poverty rates, and low median household incomes. In his 2000 State of the State address, Colorado Governor Bill Owens articulated the plight of rural areas:

[Colorado's] prosperity is primarily concentrated in our more heavily populated areas. Much of the remainder of the state continues to struggle with low incomes, little job creation, and diminished opportunities for economic prosperity.

Program Description

In 1999, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education leveraged \$1.3 million in Colorado

Technology Funds to provide a grant to the Colorado E-Commerce Initiative, of which the Rural Colorado E-Commerce Initiative is a component. The guiding philosophy of the RCE-CI is recognition that “preparedness requires both an infrastructure of technology and an infrastructure of human knowledge and readiness.”

The RCE-CI includes six community colleges that, prior to the initiative, had been working for years to improve the technological infrastructure of rural areas through programs such as Connect Colorado and the Arkansas Valley Technology Program. Under the initiative, the colleges are now working together with local businesses and individuals, encouraging them to take advantage of the possibilities presented by the Internet and e-commerce.

Collaboration is a hallmark of the initiative as colleges share resources and products with each other. While the state community college system attracted the funding, established the broad vision, and set up a structure to support joint learning among the network members, the most important element of the program, according to a system administrator, is that colleges’ responsiveness to their local needs remain paramount over state needs.

As part of the initiative, the colleges have developed several programs that include:

- Colorado Northwest Community College’s Small Business Development Center has developed programs such as “How Every Business Can Use E-Commerce” and “Business and the Internet: Research and Presence” to introduce local employers to new technology
- Northeastern Junior College, Otero Junior College, and Trinidad Junior College have all instituted a program that provides two-day training in e-business and technology for high school students to introduce them to the opportunities in technology-related careers
- All six colleges will soon be offering “Internet Masters”—a 30-hour program designed to promote the development of business networks

In all of its efforts the RCE-CI emphasizes local accountability. It does this in part by surveying local needs and developing responses to those needs. Using the results of these needs assessments, the colleges offer customized programs to meet employer needs. Indeed, the program has found real

benefit in developing new products with very specific audiences in mind. Once local programs are in place, the colleges focus on bringing them to scale by sharing programs and curricula.

Outcomes

The programs of the RCE-CI are continually increasing rural Coloradans' knowledge of options and business participation in e-commerce. Furthermore, the initiative has helped improve the technological skills of the workforce and thereby helped to maintain quality jobs in the respective communities.

Strengths, Challenges, and Replicability

Participants in the RCE-CI believe its strengths to be the shared governance structure, increased resources due to pooling, shared networks, and leadership support. Surveying and responding to local needs is also a major strength.

A lesson from this Colorado program is that collaboration among colleges increases the scale and thus impact of individual college efforts. As the adage goes, "Everybody is smarter than somebody."

With time and continued investment, the Rural Colorado E-Commerce Initiative should continue to promote participatory education in which more individuals are able to experience the challenges and opportunities of the new economy firsthand, whether urban or rural.

For more information, contact:

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