



Community Economics

A Newsletter from the Center for Community Economic Development; Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics; Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development Programs, and University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension Service

No. 321

Community Economics Newsletter

July 2003

COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN RURAL AMERICA

by

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Community colleges are uniquely situated to help rural areas make a transition to high-wage, high-skilled jobs. They have extensive ties and linkages with local businesses and have a good understanding of their needs and problems. Community colleges also have become increasingly linked to workers through community-based organizations, unions, and temporary agencies. Many of these organizations are helping workers to overcome their barriers to obtaining training and finding work. The objective of this study was to identify the roles of community colleges in rural areas in providing job training and delivering services to regional businesses. We were especially interested in how they are balancing customized training programs versus traditional class room instruction, how and why they are involved in collaborative efforts to deliver training, and what the demand for business services is in their region. We conducted a survey of approximately 300 community colleges that are delivering program in rural America. Although these institutions use a variety of names today, we will use the term community college in this report. The sample of rural community colleges for this study was drawn from respondents in a telephone survey of rural employers. In that study we asked respondents to identify the community/technical college that provided them with any services. The overall response rate of the community college survey was 74%. The questionnaire asked several questions about academic programs, faculty and staff, training needs of the region, apprenticeship programs, courses and services, collaboration, and involvement in economic development activities in the region.

Community colleges in rural areas tend to be smaller and serve broader area than do community colleges in urban settings. We collected some basic information on the size and breadth of the programs offered in these institutions during the 2000-2001 academic year. The average community college in non-metropolitan areas has about 75 full-time faculty and 123 part-time faculty on campus. Approximately 1600 full-time and 3400 part-time students were enrolled at these institutions during this time period. The community colleges reported that about 350 students, on average, graduated during this academic year, and that 82% of the graduates in spring 2001 had job offers within six months.

Although most community colleges in rural areas continue to offer traditional classroom instruction, a growing number are offering training programs on the premises of the workplace. We found that 57% of the instruction is traditional classroom instruction, 40% is on-site (workplace), and 3% is something else. Over half (56%) of the colleges report that the mix between on-site and traditional classroom instruction has remained about the same over the last two years. One-third of the colleges, however, have increased their use of on-site instruction, while only 10% have increased their use of traditional classroom instruction.

Most rural community colleges conduct some systematic assessment of residents and businesses in their region. Fifty-seven percent of the community colleges assess the training needs of residents, but most do not do it on a regular basis. Among those institutions that systematically assess training needs of residents, 29% do it on an annual basis and 16% do it bi-annually. The rest do it periodically or on an as needed basis. How do community colleges assess the training needs of their residents? They are most likely to use surveys (85%) or focus groups (77%). A larger number of community colleges report they systematically assess the training needs of businesses in their region. Approximately 82% said they do conduct a systematic assessment of business needs in their region. One-third do these assessments on an annual basis and 14% do it on a bi-annual basis. Similarly, community colleges are likely to use surveys (84%) and focus groups (76%) when they do these assessments. Many community colleges, however, rely on advisory committees to provide input on business training needs in their region.

We asked the respondents to identify the preferred delivery format for training among the majority of employers in their area. In almost half (47%) of the cases, employers preferred on-site training by non-employees, such as the community college or private trainers. Least preferred (3%) is off-site training by the employer, such as at headquarters or a training center. About one-fourth of the respondents indicated that the preferred delivery method is on-site by the employer (on-the-job training) or off-site by non-employees, such as certification programs or at technical colleges. In this regard, the shift to on-site instruction appears to be a response to the perceived preferences of regional businesses.

Apprenticeship programs are growing in popularity. They offer hand-on experience and training, along with serving the needs of regional businesses. Promoters of apprenticeships contend that they provide a tighter linkage between training and labor market needs. A little more than one-half (54%) of the community colleges were offering apprenticeship programs during the 2000-2001 academic year. The average number students participating in the apprenticeships program is 180 students. An average of 29 businesses participated in the apprenticeship programs.

Community colleges are increasingly involved in providing services beyond traditional training programs. About one-half (51%) of the community colleges reported that their campus delivered a business service project during the 2000-2001 academic year. The community colleges provided a wide variety of services, including strategic planning, assessment of worker skills, soft-skills training, leadership training, etc. Most of these business services tend to be fairly small, in terms of cost. Although community colleges offer services to a wide variety of clients, manufacturing firms are much more likely to receive these programs. We collected some information on the customized training programs offered by community colleges. Almost all (94%) report they offered customized training programs during the 2000-2001 academic year. Most (58%) of the customized training programs are designed for entry-level positions. On average, community colleges delivered 85 customized training programs to businesses for upgrading or retaining existing workers. These programs were widely distributed, with an average of 54 different firms contracting for customized courses and accounting for more than 2000 workers (average=2233 workers). We has respondents to estimate the percentage of customized courses that the curriculum was developed solely by the campus, solely by employers, and cooperatively between employers and the campus. The curriculum for customized courses is seldom (8%) designed solely by employers. The most common situation is where the curriculum is cooperatively developed between employers and the community college (58% of the courses). About one-third of the courses, however, are designed solely by the community college.

Community colleges can play an important role in rural areas because of their linkages with a variety of other organizations and institutions. We asked respondents a series about their relationships with consortiums of employers and community-based organizations in their region. Almost 85% of the community colleges report that they have collaborated with a community-based organization in the past three years to deliver a training program. Who initiated these collaborations? Respondents were most likely to report that it was the community college that initiated the collaboration (69% of the cases), but community-based organizations were likely to initiate the relationship in more than half the cases (53%). [Note that we allowed respondents to provide more than one response here]. It appears that collaborations are much less likely to be initiated by local employers or local government (less than one-fourth of the cases, each). What do community colleges consider the chief advantages of collaboration with community-based organizations? The most frequent (more than 50%) reported advantages are the ties and connections with workers and employers in the region. A significant number (42%) of the colleges report that the chief advantage is expertise and experience gained through the relationships. About one-third report that the advantages are primarily cost or access to equipment and/or space. Thus, while collaborative efforts have a variety of advantages, they do not necessarily address the most important constraint identified by community colleges.

Community colleges have often struggled over their appropriate mission. Is it preparation for four-year colleges or is it vocational training for local businesses? These issues have become more complex in recent years, especially for community colleges in rural areas, as they have become more involved in providing businesses services and customized training for businesses. This study suggests most community colleges are balancing a broad range of activities. Not only are they involved in basic education and training, they have become critical service providers and are actively involved in the economic development activities of their region. The study also suggests that community colleges often carry out their mission through collaborative efforts with a wide variety of community-based organizations. These linkages are especially important in helping them make connections to businesses and workers.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Carl O'Connor, Cooperative Extension, University of Wisconsin-Extension.

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