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ABSTRACT

Rural community colleges are faced with issues similar to their urban counterparts, but many challenges for rural schools are further exacerbated by limited resources, geographic isolation, and a static economy. This paper argues that the difference between success and failure can be the ability to create strong partnerships. Of the 15 colleges in the Colorado Community College System, 7 are rural, 2 are located in mountain communities, and 6 are in urban areas. Approximately three-quarters of the colleges have multiple campuses, many in rural locations. The Colorado Rural Development Council (CRDC, a part of the National Rural Development Partnership) was created in 1993 to improve school-business relationships for rural schools. A 30-member interim steering committee was created from the 300-plus people attending a statewide conference on rural development. The interim steering committee hired the Council's executive director, who was assigned the task of convening networking community meetings in order to create the CRDC board. Each CRDC has two private, two nonprofit, and two local government representatives. CRDC meetings are preceded by community forums, which provide input regarding the issues. The Council creates its Annual Plan using these common issues. The paper gives a brief history of the CRDC from its inception to the present. (Author/NB)

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PROMOTING ACADEMIC, BUSINESS, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS IN RURAL AREAS

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Rural community colleges face most of the issues of their urban counterparts, but many issues for rural schools are further exacerbated by limited resources, geographic isolation, and a static economy. The difference between success and failure can be the ability to create strong partnerships.

In 1967, the Colorado General Assembly created the Colorado Community College System. The governing board for the System is appointed by the governor, and this board (SBCCOE—State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education) is charged with establishing policy for career and technical education at the secondary and community college level for the State, as well as governing the 13 System community colleges and coordinating the two local district colleges. Each System community college has its own advisory board, and has no local taxing authority. The local district colleges each have a locally elected board of trustees, and do have local taxing authority. The Colorado Community College System (CCCS) operates under the authority of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE). CCHE coordinates all post-secondary education in the State of Colorado.

Of the 15 community colleges, seven are rural, two are located in mountain communities, and six are in urban areas. Approximately three-fourths of the colleges have multiple campuses, some many in rural locations. Given this diversity with a rural preponderance, I have chosen to utilize some of Colorado's efforts in attaining rural partnerships as a foundation for my presentation.

1993

The Colorado Rural Development Council (a part of the National Rural Development Partnership) was created in 1993. A 30 member interim steering committee was created from the 300+ in attendance at a statewide conference on rural development. This interim steering committee hired the Council's executive director. The executive director was assigned the task of convening networking community meetings in five geographic sectors in Colorado for the intent of creating the Colorado Rural Development Council (CRDC) board.

Partnerships

Each CRDC has two private, two non-profit, and two local government representatives. Denver supplied 10 federal liaisons—top-level executives at the state and regional levels from organizations such as the Small Business Administration, U.S. Forestry Service, Health and Human Services, etc. The Governor appointed 10 state partners at the cabinet level—Department of Transportation, Colorado Community College System, Department of Education, etc. Two tribal nations have board seats, and there is one general member. The level of delegated involvement is an indicator of the perceived importance of rural development.

Each CRDC Board meets in rural communities around Colorado each quarter. The Executive Committee meets eight times, also in rural communities. This allows the Committee members to share successes and challenges. Each meeting is preceded by a community forum. These forums provide input to the Council in terms of issues. The Council compiles a list of common issues of interest

throughout Colorado. The Council creates its Annual Plan utilizing these common issues as a foundation.

The CRDC provides numerous benefits to rural Colorado:

- Facilitates statewide networking and idea sharing
- Serves as rural representation to numerous organizations and initiatives to encourage accountability to grass roots
- Forum for information sharing between rural communities and governmental agencies
- Provides educational opportunities at request of rural communities
- Directly involves state and federal agencies in rural issues
- Encourages partnerships to address challenges
- Addresses rural policy issues at the federal level through involvement with the Rural Development Council and National Rural Development Partnership

1997

The CRDC compiled partnerships to sponsor and host a summit on current and future status of rural access to telecommunications and technology—the Rural Telecommunications Summit. This Summit established a resources database.

Partners

Partnerships were created among/between Qwest (US West), Arkansas Valley Authority, local community and community college personnel, Colorado Community College System computer staff, Connect Colorado, etc.

1998

In 1998, the CRDC brought *Opening Windows to Colorado*, and purchased exclusive rights for two years.

Opening Windows is a theater and human services project that addresses adolescent health and behavior issues. The play was made available, at minimum cost, to rural theater/drama groups for performance throughout Colorado.

The Opening Windows project reached about 600 people in five performances.

Partners

In addition to strong grass roots support, partnerships were forged with Columbine Health, Centura Health, and the Colorado Council on the Arts.

1999

The Colorado Commission on Higher Education leveraged 1.3 million dollars in Colorado Technology Funds to provide a grant to the Colorado E-Commerce Initiative of which the Rural Colorado E-Commerce Initiative (RCECI) is a component. The RCECI included seven community colleges that had been working long term to improve the IT infrastructure of rural areas. The resultant outcome was the T1 Internet Connection for rural sites—an opportunity to “connect with the world.”

Community colleges are now working with local businesses and individuals, encouraging them to take advantage of possibilities presented by the Internet and e-commerce. Business and industry surveys are conducted, and services provided to

meet perceived needs. These needs vary by region, with some commonalities.

Community Colleges share resources and products with each other.

Some of the strengths of the RCECI include shared governance, increased resources because of pooling, shared networking, leadership support (best utilization of available funds and resources), and responding to local needs. This is preferable to an “all programs for all sites” approach, and is based upon cited need, not presumption of need.

As a result of the RCECI, small business development center programs are available, there is an emphasis upon local need, and colleges offer customized programs to meet employer needs based upon surveyed needs, not “here’s what we think you need.” All seven community colleges offer a 30-hour program designed to promote development of business networking.

When local programs are in place, colleges focus on bringing them to scale by sharing programs and curricula.

Partners

Partners in the RCECI program include the Office of Economic Development, CRDC, Colorado Mountain College, Colorado State University Extension, the Center for the New West, Small Business Development Centers, and the Department of Legal Affairs.

2001

The Rural Education Access Program (REAP) was instituted in 2001. REAP provides financial support to four-year colleges to deliver degree completion programs on the campuses of rural community colleges. The student earns an

associate degree and stays at the community college to earn an advanced degree. This creates a higher education level and expertise where there may be worker shortages. The program attempts to diminish the “brain drain” often experienced by smaller communities.

In FY2002, \$690,000 was dedicated to REAP. The REAP Program is part of the 03-04 Long Bill being deliberated by the Joint Budget Committee.

Partners

Current statewide partnerships exist with the four-year colleges for teacher education, business, and criminal justice.

2001

The Rural New Economy Initiative (RNEI) was implemented by the Colorado Community College System, assisted by a grant from the Colorado Commission on Higher Education.

RNEI includes 14 colleges: seven state-run rural community colleges, four four-year colleges, two local district colleges, and one area vocational center.

To date, more than 500 individuals have participated in RNEI workshops. Local needs and gaps in available programs and resources have been pinpointed to decide how to best address them.

The focus of the RNEI Project has been multiple:

- To educate elected officials**
- To fulfill the need for health care workers (this is a statewide priority)**

- **To increase offerings to small business, particularly through small business development centers**
- **To pilot a leadership development effort to address the digital age**
- **To gather local resources in a common pool (this results in decreased costs of developing new programs, while increasing the number of individuals being served)**
- **One of the four-year colleges is formatting outlines/curriculum in a database that other institutions can access**
- **RNEI will fund curriculum development for areas of interest that have not been addressed**

The RNEI Project shows again the continued overriding theme of leveraging shared resources.

Partners

The RNEI Project was a partnership effort of the Colorado Community College System, the Executive Director of the Colorado Office of International Trade, the Executive Director of the Office of Local Affairs, the Executive Director of the Governor's Commission on Science and Technology, and the Chief Information Officer from the Colorado Commission on Higher Education.

2001-Present

Academic workshops are provided throughout Colorado for teachers, on the topic of Incorporating E-Commerce Into Curriculum. Each

workshop provides four days training on an awareness of the aspects involved in E-Commerce and on how to incorporate the topic into current academic/CTE programs. Participants receive resource materials, curriculum notebooks with CDs, and 40-100 lesson plans (dependent upon number of participants) to facilitate incorporation into programs at participant's home school. The participants can receive credential renewal credit from Colorado's primary teacher training institution for their participation.

Partners

The partners in this effort included the Colorado Community College System Department of Business and Marketing Education, Colorado State University, Thomson Publishing Company instructors from the community colleges, and sites from the secondary education system.

2001-Present

Providing workers to fill the healthcare void is a statewide priority in Colorado. Toward this end, health care workforce seminars have been conducted in rural Colorado. Funding for the workshops was provided by the Colorado Community College System, through a grant from the Colorado Commission on Higher Education.

During about a year and a half, 13 seminars were held at various rural colleges throughout Colorado. A total of 446 rural health care professional and paraprofessional workers participated in the 13 seminars, which were extensively and positively evaluated by seminar participants.

Partners

The Mountain and Plains Partnership (MAPP) Office in the Colorado Area Health Education Center (AHEC) System at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center Fitzsimmons Campus partnered with the Colorado Community College System, four regional rural Area Health Education Centers (Greeley AHEC, Southeastern AHEC, San Luis Valley AHEC, and Western Colorado AHEC), and local consultants.

Challenges and Conclusions

1. Role Identification

- **Provision of business services**
 - strategic planning**
 - assessment of worker skills**
 - *soft skills training**
 - leadership training**
- **Customized training based upon specific local/regional needs**
 - on-site**
 - traditional**
 - distance**
 - on-line**
- **Industry certification programs**
 - non-vendor specific**
 - portable**
 - cross-cluster (occupationally)**

- **Skills upgrades**
 - lifelong learning
 - re-do every three years
 - based upon demands of business and industry
- **Entrepreneurial training**
 - most businesses are small businesses
- **E-business, E-commerce**
 - national and international access

***We MUST find a way to consistently and successfully include soft skills (problem solving, critical thinking, work ethics, decision-making, team work, etc.) into ALL curricula.**

2. Keys

- **CLEAR mission identification, especially as it relates to rural identity**
- **Rather than all things to all people, need to fulfill mission that will compliment and supplement own strengths**

3. Leadership

- **Is critical to identification, fulfillment of, and improvement upon roles**
- **Must be devoid of self-aggrandizement; personal agendas at all levels must be set aside**
- **Must be truly cognizant of needs and how to leverage a multiplicity of partnerships to meet those needs**

Replicating Successes

- **Community colleges are an integral part of rural economic development**
- **Leadership is critical**
- **State systems influence the nature of replication—tightly linked colleges can more quickly replicate and increase in scale, while colleges with more autonomy have more flexibility to respond to local needs and assume nontraditional roles**
- **Finding funding to replicate innovative practices can be difficult. Some funding sources might include:**
 - local business support**
 - fees for services**
 - increased funding in budgets**
 - create an “innovation” fund**
 - encourage community college networking**
 - utilize community colleges as hubs for primary workforce training, such as IT and health care workers**

ARTICLE RESOURCES

Community Colleges in Rural America: New Roles and New Challenges; Gary Paul Green, Anna Haines, Valeria Galetta; 2002

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