

The Evolving Role of State and Community Colleges in Economic Development

Community and State colleges have a long history of direct involvement in the economic development of their surrounding communities and regions. Our institutions understand well the growing challenges of the American workforce, and that the success of the communities we serve depends more than ever on the quality and depth of our engagement. Educational institutions have historically served in responsive fashion to meet the needs and demands of the workforce. Across our nation community and state colleges are now taking on an expanded role in determining the very direction of that workforce. We don't have to look far to see that there will be "winners" and "losers" in this increasingly competitive economic climate. Texas recently passed New York as the second largest economy among US states, and may one day surpass California (USA Today, 2011). Dramatic realignments pushed North Carolina, Virginia, and Georgia above the industrial might of Michigan. The international landscape is no different in regard to change. China is projected to overtake the US in GDP by 2040 (Murphy, 2011). India is predicted to supplant Japan as the third largest GDP, with Mexico, Russia, and Brazil passing Germany, Britain, and France.

John Murphy of Ernst & Young's Global Managing Partners (2011) tells us that organizations that monitor broad trends, embrace technology, and look for talent within traditionally neglected segments of the workforce may well be among the winners. He goes on to contend to state that, "As businesses and governments look to the future, they would do well to remember that executing on their current strategy may no longer be good enough. Instead, they will have to think more deeply about the opportunities and risks presented by evolving global trends. With a different mindset, they can reimagine what is possible, discovering what they can do that is new and how best to do it. Those that succeed may find themselves not just navigating tomorrow's global trends, but actually shaping them."

As we look at each of our traditional service areas in community and state colleges our perceptions of those boundaries change. Yet, our commitments and relationships are often defined by proximity, and the regions we serve, however connected, persist in our relationships. How do we, as educational institutions, respond to these changing boundaries and still embrace and serve our regions (however broad) in their quest to remain economically competitive? As Mr. Murphy reminds us, we must look to new models of economic development, be willing to "think more deeply" about opportunities and risks, and look to untapped populations for tomorrow's workforce. We must take an active role not only in serving these needs, but shaping them.

At Gulf Coast State College this commitment has taken the shape of an Advanced Technology Center. The GCSC Advanced Technology Center is a \$35 million, 80,000 square foot facility dedicated to driving and accelerating regional economic growth by fostering partnerships across business, industry, government and education. As one of over 150 such facilities across the US, many within community colleges, it serves within the National Coalition of Advanced Technology Centers. The methods and approaches used in planning this facility and the economic development formula upon which its philosophy rests will indeed set it apart. Core to this philosophy is the proactive role of this center and its involvement of staff, redefining the role of faculty, and fostering a region-wide approach to economic development on multiple fronts may well serve as a national model. The intent has been from its

inception not only to serve the needs of workforce, but to provide the resources and venues which will drive the nature of that workforce and to ensure that credit programs and continuing education serve the region under that role.

The GCSC ATC will offer engaging and adapting academic programs across the fields of Sustainable Technology, Alternative Energy, Information Technology, Robotics & Automated Manufacturing, Engineering & Electronics, Architecture & Design, Culinary Programs, and Entrepreneurship. The GCSC ATC plays an active role in the exploration of sustainable technologies and alternative energy applications to secure a cleaner environment for the present and next generation, modeling this commitment as a Gold LEED certified facility. The GCSC ATC works closely with area K-12 systems to create seamless pathways leading to industry-recognized certificates and programs. Through “dual enrollment” offerings at K-12 sites and a projected integrated “Middle College” program within the facility (High Technology High School), the ATC will offer 9th-12th graders the opportunity to follow career and technical education pathways from certificates, to Associates of Science, to Bachelors of Applied Science.

The Rise of Clusters and Entrepreneurs

The GCSC ATC is a transformative facility embracing a philosophy grounded in innovative partnerships across the key sectors of business, industry, government and education within a “future-forward” framework. This premier facility will be the tipping point of the region, harnessing the intellectual capital of the brightest minds in business and academia to create a truly synergistic system grounded in innovation and the formation of knowledge and technology clusters.

Current economic development models emphasize the importance of creating a regional identity to compete for new business & industry. But we must do more than just rely on drawing in new and big business & industry within an increasingly competitive climate. Emerging economic development models acknowledge a “creative molecular economy” and recognize the increasing role of entrepreneurs. Even “cluster” models similar to the Silicon Valley approach now embrace the development of the adaptive entrepreneurial layer. The emerging “winners” in this landscape develop their own regional culture of entrepreneurial growth in addition to competing for new business & industry. A comprehensive approach to sustained and diversified regional economic development should include:

- a. Attracting new business & industry to the region
- b. Mining existing intellectual property within the region
- c. Fostering and sustaining regional entrepreneurial growth

In order to offer the best potential, specific strategies for each of these areas should be developed. The GCSC does exactly that, cooperating with local and regional economic development entities, planning to mine existing intellectual property, and partnering with local and regional K-20 institutions to establish and celebrate innovation and “idea-to-market” initiatives.

The ATC will serve as a national model for best practices in connecting education to business and industry through flexible and accessible education programs across K-12 and articulating into postsecondary education. The GCSC ATC works closely with area K-12 systems to create seamless pathways leading to industry-recognized certificates and programs. Through “dual enrollment” offerings at K-12 sites and a projected integrated “Middle College” program within the facility (High Technology High School), the ATC will offer 9th-12th graders the opportunity to follow career and technical education pathways from certificates, to Associates of Science, to Bachelors of Applied Science. Recognizing the need to increase the number of engineers across STEM disciplines, the GCSC ATC actively partners with area universities in offering educational pathways toward Bachelor’s degrees in technical areas, as well as offering a growing selection of Bachelor of Applied Sciences.

Recapturing our Global Leadership in Innovation

The United States will need to create a total of 21 million new jobs in this decade to put unemployed Americans back to work and to employ its growing population while experiencing increasingly lengthy “jobless recoveries” from recessions in the past two decades (Manyika & Lund, 2011). The McKinsey Global Institute draws our attention in offering, “Waiting for the US job market to correct itself and depending on the solutions of the past will not hasten the return to full employment or set the stage for sustained job creation in the years to come. To create the jobs that America needs to continue growing and to remain competitive, leaders in government, business, and education will have to be creative—and willing to consider solutions they have not tried before. Workers themselves will need to acquire the right skills and to adapt to a future of lifelong learning and new ways of working.”

The GCSC ATC dissolves the barriers between regional and community assets, serving as a proactive and sustained center for unprecedented collaboration. The foundation of the ATC lies in an entrepreneurial spirit which continually adapts to the changes in the regional and global economy, enabling the formation and expansion of jobs leading to an increased quality of life throughout the area. State and community colleges can and must be driving forces in shaping economic development. They offer natural advantages as spaces of collaboration and communication across community and regional assets. They can proactively mine existing intellectual property, engage technology transfer similar in fashion to major universities, connect venture capital to entrepreneurs, and decrease the time it takes to bring an idea to market and yield new jobs. We can provide greater opportunities for high school students to excel by blurring the lines between secondary and postsecondary education connecting workforce requirements with the opportunity to earn college credit on their way toward graduation. The applied nature of our degree programs and service to existing workforce make us the most cost-effective solution to restructuring what education and holding a degree or certificate means.

But we can only do this if we foster a sustained culture of innovation. David Brin, a national best-selling author, puts it this way: “Imagine a nation that has lost its ability and desire to make things.” In his story, *Tinkerers*, he remains hopeful saying that we live in a, “world whose damage can be healed by caring skill when we fret less about blame, dogmas, or recriminations...and care more about a nerdy love of problem solving and a future of doing the next great thing.” Murphy (2011) puts it another way, “American workers will need to adapt much faster to new industries, new skill sets, and new patterns of

work than they have in the past. But the entrepreneurship, resilience, and commitment to continuous learning of American workers will play an essential role in renewing the vitality of our labor markets, too. They need better support, training, and information to adapt to the shifting economic opportunities and to remain one of the most productive labor forces in the world.”

Who better than community and state colleges to serve in that role?

As Peter Drucker warned, “The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday’s logic.”

- 1) (2011, June). Texas Wins in U.S. Economy Shift, *Bureau of Economic Analysis, USA TODAY*, accessed 7-26-2011 at http://www.usatoday.com/money/economy/2011-06-20-state-gdp-growth_n.htm
- 2) Manyika, J., & Lund, S. et.al. (2011, June). An Economy that Works: Job Creation and America’s Future, *McKinsey Global Institute*.
- 3) Murphy, J. (2011, July). Tracking Global Trends. *Leaders Magazine*, 34 (3), 73.