

**Economic Development:
What Is the Community College's Responsibility?
"The Role of Contract and Continuing Education"**

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Over the past several years, discussion of community college involvement in economic development activity has become quite prevalent. Few experts would argue the premise that a key factor associated with economic development is a well-trained, well-educated work force. A good argument can in fact be made that the essence of economic development is education (including job training and retraining), which prepares people to effectively perform on the job. Such an environment assists American business and industry in being competitive in a world economy. Operating under this premise, all institutions of higher learning are involved in economic development efforts to some degree. How extensively a community college pursues its economic development responsibilities will vary around the country. However, all of those who educate and prepare people for employment opportunities are involved in economic development. Community colleges are uniquely positioned by virtue of their local base and their very charters to assist their communities in terms of growth, prosperity, and quality of life. A well-educated and trained work force can assist a community in its ability to attract new business investment and, more important, can assist in the retention and expansion of existing business and industry.

Rapid technological advances and world competition will require communities to show that they have the kind of educational infrastructure necessary to effectively compete for the jobs of tomorrow while retraining the jobs of today. It will be necessary for communities to show that a labor pool with the ability to be trained and retrained exists for job creation and expansion to take place. This educational infrastructure is where the community college can provide the edge for a community or region in the area of economic development.

Through its contract and continuing education arm in particular, the community college can provide the necessary

avenue for local business and industry to train and update their work force, (via short and customized courses) thus providing a competitive advantage and hedge against employee job skill obsolescence. These "nontraditional" areas of higher education lend themselves readily to fulfill the short skills-oriented training needs that have resulted from rapid technological advances. As technology continues to advance at astronomical rates, training and retraining have exploded into a multibillion dollar growth industry that is not only necessary to keep local communities economically viable but, additionally, can be a valuable source of college headcount, credit hour, and revenue generation.

In *Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century*, a 1988 report of the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, the authors outline several recommendations that relate to the future of community colleges. Among those recommendations is this:

Decision makers across the country should fully use the resources of community, technical, and junior colleges to promote economic development efforts within their state or region. We recommend that regional clearing houses be established to keep track of emerging work force needs in areas served by the community college. Such centers should take inventory to determine future work place patterns and describe the educational resources available at surrounding educational institutions. (p. 39.)

The reasoning for such a recommendation is founded in the premise that for communities to be competitive in a world economy they must have a highly literate, well-trained work force from which to draw employees. No educational entity is better positioned than America's community, junior, and technical colleges to help their communities and local regions be successful in their endeavors to attract and retain businesses and to create an environment for entrepreneurial success.

While some community colleges have a more limited view of their job training responsibilities (some merely see themselves as little more than the first two years of a four-year degree), this limited vision is tantamount to pulling the "community" out of the community college and clearly places such communities at a competitive disadvantage in a world economy where business and industry

success are contingent on the preparedness of the local work force. This is not to say that there isn't great value in the role community colleges play through their various degree-credit courses and programs. On the contrary, this area has always been, and will continue to be, a long-term key to the economic viability of a community. However, America's community, junior, and technical colleges must provide more than associate degrees and certificates if their communities are to compete and survive.

In their article, "Trends and Forces Motivating Community College Involvement in Nontraditional Economic Development," Katsinas and Lacey (1990) describe some of the ways community colleges are, or can be, involved in local economic development. Such activities as small business assistance and planning, research, and information centers, in addition to customized contract and continuing education programs, can and do play a significant role in supporting local economic and community development efforts.

In conclusion, it is incumbent upon the local community college to incorporate this "economic development" responsibility into its institutional goals and objectives and to devise a means of outcome measurement for such activity in the college's day-to-day operations. In so doing, American business and industry will clearly benefit in terms of their international competitiveness and community colleges will benefit by virtue of a strong, viable tax base. The communities that we serve rely on our knowledge and judgment in this area and deserve such a commitment.

References

- Commission on the Future of Community Colleges. (1988). *Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community and Junior Colleges.
- Katsinas, S., & Lacey, V. (1990). Trends and Forces Motivating Community College Involvement in Nontraditional Economic Development. *Community Services Catalyst*, 20(2), 8-16.