

News

Community College as Convener

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In better times, Monroe Community College knew where its bread was buttered.

Rochester, N.Y.'s three major employers -- the Eastman Kodak Company, the Xerox Corporation and Bausch & Lomb, all of which maintain major offices in the city -- filled the college's coffers, contracting it to train most of their workers.

"This 'big three' really drove workforce development and training in the region by sheer volume," writes Anne M. Kress, MCC's president, in an e-mail. "One or the other might express a specific training need for literally hundreds of employees, and MCC would develop and provide this training."

This, she explains, is one of the reasons why MCC has such strong optics and advanced manufacturing programs -- rare offerings for a community college.

But the boom times for the stalwarts of Rochester's economy did not last forever, and the three giants have all significantly trimmed their payrolls. Kress notes that Kodak, for example, now has fewer than 10,000 employees in the area, down from a peak of nearly 60,000.

Now, instead of being dominated by a few major employers, Rochester has transformed into a hub of small businesses. Kress notes that more than 90 percent of businesses in the area have fewer than 100 employees and that most of these businesses are high-tech in nature, including many with a focus in optics and advanced manufacturing, like the "big three."

As the region's economic landscape shifted, MCC adapted, both to keep a stream of corporate contract dollars coming in and to meet the job training needs of local residents.

"Now, we are situated to be the 'convener' for workforce development and training," Kress writes. "We work with and across, for example, dozens of optics firms to identify a common skill set for future technicians in this field. We are the neutral party in the center that works to find and respond to the common interests of dozens of potentially competing companies."

To gather small business at the same table to discuss their training needs, MCC hosts program advisory committees. The college also hosts the Rochester Tool and Manufacturing Association, a group with more than 250 member companies that leverages its size to accommodate training opportunities for area employers. More traditionally, the college is also active in the area chamber of commerce, the Rochester Business Alliance, an organization Kress says was "instrumental" in helping the college "bring both hospitals and insurance companies together to structure a funding stream that would support increased capacity" in its nursing program. In recognition of the "changing economic landscape," Kress notes that the college is creating a new position to coordinate all of these efforts.

MCC's transformation is indicative of the changes many community colleges -- whether located in the Rust Belt or the Sunshine Belt -- have undergone during the recession. Community colleges in and around Detroit, for instance, have had to radically [change the way they approach corporate contracts](#) with the "big three" automakers following last year's government bailout.

"More and more we're seeing employers in different labor market areas come together more to look collectively at their human capital challenges and look together to get solutions," says Maria Flynn, vice president for building economic opportunity at Jobs for the Future, a research and advocacy group. "In some cases we're seeing a change of mindset. People who once saw themselves as competitors are now coming together to work collectively."

Jobs for the Future is slated to release a paper later this month on the important role of community colleges as "workforce intermediaries." Flynn says that community colleges are more likely than ever to offer "an integrated set of services" to displaced and

entry level workers instead of individual, disconnected programs. She adds that the organization hopes its scholarship will encourage more two-year institutions to take on a “convener” role in their communities, as MCC has done in Rochester.

“We’re intrigued by how many community colleges are expanding their role, providing leadership and helping to guide the vision of work in the region,” Flynn says. “So many of the new jobs that are being created are going to require some type of training beyond high schools, and community colleges need to be the focal point of this training.”

When Chrysler closed a plant in Burlington, Wis., Gateway Technical College stepped in to gather the area’s other local businesses to retrain and get these displaced workers new jobs.

“We’re not waiting for electric and hybrid cars to become the norm here, for example,” said Bryan Albrecht, Gateway’s president. “We developed a diagnostic certification program to retrain some of these auto technicians for newer jobs in the area. Also, we took a look in our community and realized some of the same technologies that are used in the transmission of a car are used to develop wind turbines, a growing industry in our area. These cross-training initiatives keep individuals in our community.”

Now, locals who would have worked at the local Chrysler plant are finding employment at a local Snap-On Industrial plant, which manufactures tools that are used in areas like wind power. As fewer larger companies dominate the local training market, Albrecht says, colleges like his are being forced to change how they interact with smaller area businesses.

“Our college is in some ways like an industry,” Albrecht says. “The existing contract training model worked until corporate training dollars and contacts were cut. Now, we need to develop more partnerships and were forced to find a new models like cross-training.”

Community colleges that now find themselves the focal point of local industry could use some assistance, their leaders say, noting that state and federal policy could help support their “convener” role.

“As always, it comes down to money, I suppose,” Kress writes. “Developing curriculums – whether for short term training or degree programs – takes funds, so changes that help more funds come directly to community colleges to support these activities are always important. This is especially important when dealing with many small companies.”

Like many community college leaders, Kress argues that the [reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act](#), federal legislation that provides training dollars for retraining programs, is “crucial.” She adds that funds for programs like the Community Based Jobs Training grants, which are aimed at training in emerging fields, are also important. So far, she says, the attention community colleges have received in recent years has made it easier to make this case.

“In general, I will say that the [growing federal recognition](#) of the essential role that community colleges play in training the nation’s health care and technical workforce has been very important,” Kress writes. “So many of the entry level jobs in the years ahead will be ‘[middle skilled](#)’ – needing some college but not a four-year degree – and this is the métier of community colleges.”

— **David Moltz**onvener