



# Keeping Opportunities in Place

The Influence of the  
Rural Community College  
Initiative



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**A National Demonstration Funded by the Ford Foundation**



by Vasti Torres and Arthur Viterito

with assistance from Aimee Heeter, Lilia Santiago,  
Susan Johnson, and Lynn Barnett



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# Executive Summary

A request from the Ford Foundation prompted a fourth and final assessment of the demonstration phase of the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI), established by the Ford Foundation. Between 1994 to 2002, 24 community colleges answered the foundation's charge to improve access to higher education and to expand the economic development of their regions. Each college was located in an economically distressed part

**Mountain culture influences course offerings in rural communities (stock photo).**



of the United States—Appalachia, the Delta/South region, the Southwest, and tribal reservations of the Northern Plains. Involvement in RCCI brought to each college modest grants, hands-on coaching, targeted technical assistance, and membership in a unique learning community that included regular meetings and innovative networking opportunities. RCCI asked the colleges to ground their work by focusing on their assets, using self-assessment to begin change, strengthening partnerships and collaborations, and focusing all work on equity and high expectations. The Ford Foundation invited colleges to join the initiative in two cohorts: the “pilot” colleges in 1994 and the “expansion” colleges in 1997. MDC, Inc., of Chapel Hill, North

Carolina, served as the RCCI managing partner. MDC made available coaches and other experts to the colleges, guided them through a strategic planning process called Vision to Action, and convened all the RCCI colleges periodically for professional development meetings hosted by one of the colleges. The foundation provided a research grant to the American Council on Education in 1994 to document the RCCI work and, beginning in 1997, granted funds to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) to assess progress in reaching the initiative’s twin goals of access and economic development. The fourth and final assessment is the focus of this report.

Each college was located in an economically distressed part of the United States.

**Colleges serving sparsely populated regions face transportation and other challenges (stock photo).**



Questions of interest in the Phase IV assessment, the final stage of RCCI research, focused on the effect and benefit sustained by the colleges as a result of their participation. Using a mixed method approach, the research team conducted case studies with eight colleges and used federal data sets to consider how these colleges progressed on economic and access indicators in comparison to like institutions. Colleges participating in the case studies were Mountain Empire Community College and Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College in the Appalachia

region, Southeastern Community College and Coahoma Community College in the Delta/Southern region, Southwest Texas Junior College and Laredo Community College in the Southwest region, and Sitting Bull College and Fort Peck Community College representing the tribal colleges and universities of the Northern Plains.

The assessment findings show that RCCI values were sustained through four major pathways: the colleges embraced the role of change agent, adopted a mission focus on planning, found ways to enhance student

success, and developed creative efforts to sustain change. This report expands on each of these four themes. Overall, the colleges tended to do as well as, and in some cases, better than their comparison colleges on indicators of enrollment and economic factors.

Three findings may be of particular interest to funding agencies. The first finding indicates that encouragement of local buy-in for change initiatives appears to result in the loss of identity for the funding agencies. As the colleges successfully integrated the changes within their own institutional

**Students concentrate in a Southwest Texas Junior College class.**



structure over time, it became difficult to draw causal relationships between the sustained change and the funding identity—RCCI. The second finding was that sustained change allowed the institutions to grow as organizations, prompting them to identify new needs that required additional resources. This recognition of the need for “more” should be interpreted not as dependency on the external funder, but as a sign of sustained growth. The final finding was that the greatest influence this initiative had on the

colleges was to build the capacity of these colleges to try new things and to succeed.

In conclusion, RCCI appears to have stimulated, supported, and sustained impressive improvements in access and economic development in distressed rural communities, but over time these improvements were perhaps at the cost of branding. Whether that represents a problem or is evidence of success is a question for the funder.



# Introduction

**T**he Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) began in 1994 as a national demonstration, funded by the Ford Foundation, to assist community colleges in distressed rural regions of the United States in moving toward improved economic development and access. The original objective of RCCI was established to “energize distressed rural communities and the local colleges that serve them” (Eller et al., 2003, p. vii). The demonstration began with 9 pilot colleges and later added 15 expansion colleges (Appendix A). The initiative used a structured process of interventions at 24 colleges and their communities to change how the colleges and the communities saw themselves. The focal point of the interventions was to implement collaborative projects that would stimulate opportunities for economic development and increase access to education.

The demonstration began with 9 pilot colleges and later added 15 expansion colleges.

External researchers studied the initiative throughout the demonstration between 1994 and 2002. The last assessment concluded that the greatest change was seen in the colleges’ internal capacity; that is, changes in the way institutions defined their culture, leveraged resources, and developed leadership. In 2002, the Ford Foundation moved RCCI beyond the demonstration into a new implementation phase led by two Regional Rural Development Centers, one at Iowa State University and the other at Mississippi State University. At the same time, the foundation authorized a new national assessment, the RCCI Phase

IV assessment led by a new research team at the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), to consider the long-term effect of participation in the RCCI initiative. This assessment phase focused on the experiences of selected colleges from the original pilot and expansion college demonstration cohorts. This report examines both the effect on and the benefit to the colleges as a result of their involvement in RCCI between 1994 and 2002.

The Phase IV assessment of RCCI focused on 24 community and tribal colleges in four persistently poor rural regions of the country: the South, Appalachia, the Southwest,

and tribal colleges in the Northern Plains. The study integrated data from case studies conducted at selected colleges as well as data from the U.S. Census, U.S. Department of Labor, and U.S. Department of Education. The data collection and analysis for this phase of the assessment occurred between fall 2004 and fall 2006. This report provides evidence of how these change processes compare with the existing literature within higher education and offers new understandings relative to funding agencies. The final section of the report provides detailed information about the methodology used to conduct this assessment.

**A rainbow arches over Mountain Empire Community College, Big Stone Gap, Virginia.**





# Findings

**T**he analysis of the case studies and governmental databases revealed four themes consistent among all the colleges. These themes illustrate the sustained learning and influence of RCCI on the eight institutions represented in the Phase IV Assessment. The four themes, explained in detail in the following sections, are—

- **embracing the role of change agent**
- **adopting a mission focus on planning**
- **enhancing student success**
- **developing creative efforts to sustain change**

## **Embracing the Role of Change Agent**

RCCI's most notable influence on the colleges in the study was the way it instilled the belief that the community college could have a new role as a change agent within its community or service region. The colleges transformed themselves by serving as a catalyst for change, changing the mindsets toward the local economy, empowering others to take on stronger leadership roles, and building capacity within their own employees.



**Tribal buffalo herds graze on Standing Rock Reservation, North Dakota.**

### **Serving as a Catalyst for Change**

In different ways, each of the institutions served as a change agent. Sitting Bull College and Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College embraced this role by becoming a vehicle for start-up businesses. Sitting Bull College has sustained the Tribal Business Information Center (TBIC) that was established during the RCCI demonstration to offer entrepreneur training and assistance with business plans and financing. After identifying the lack of local funding for start-up business as a major barrier for economic development, TBIC initiated the Tribal Business Equity

Loan Fund. This new entity provided funding for people who completed the entrepreneur training; the college's Trickle-Up Program also provided small loans to low-income participants. Participation in RCCI created a cultural shift at Sitting Bull that prompted the college to incorporate economic development into the college mission.

In Kentucky, Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College (then known as Southeast Community College) partnered with area banks to develop the Pine Mountain Community Development Corporation to provide access to capital for

those who would not normally qualify for traditional bank loans. The program began during the RCCI period and continues today. The college started this corporation with a community agency as a for-profit venture; now it is reconsidering this status and looking at the possibility that the service area might gain more from opportunities offered for nonprofit status programs.

Although Laredo Community College was unable to continue the Familias Pueden program begun during the RCCI demonstration phase, the community benefited from its residual effect. As a result of the college's involvement in RCCI in the late 1990s, Laredo Community College expanded its adult basic education and continuing education programs. This effort was made possible by the completion of a new campus outside the city limits that serves a larger number of residents living in the county's low-income areas (Colonias). In this region, it is difficult to separate economic development from access because of the large proportion of low-income and unemployed people who have educational challenges, limited English proficiency or insufficient literacy skills.

Mountain Empire Community College sustained three economic development projects in Appalachia that began during the RCCI demonstration phase. These include the Coal Field Water Development

Fund, Business Incubator, and the Regional Community Development Foundation. Each of these projects illustrates a solution to community need sustained through partnerships between the college and the community.

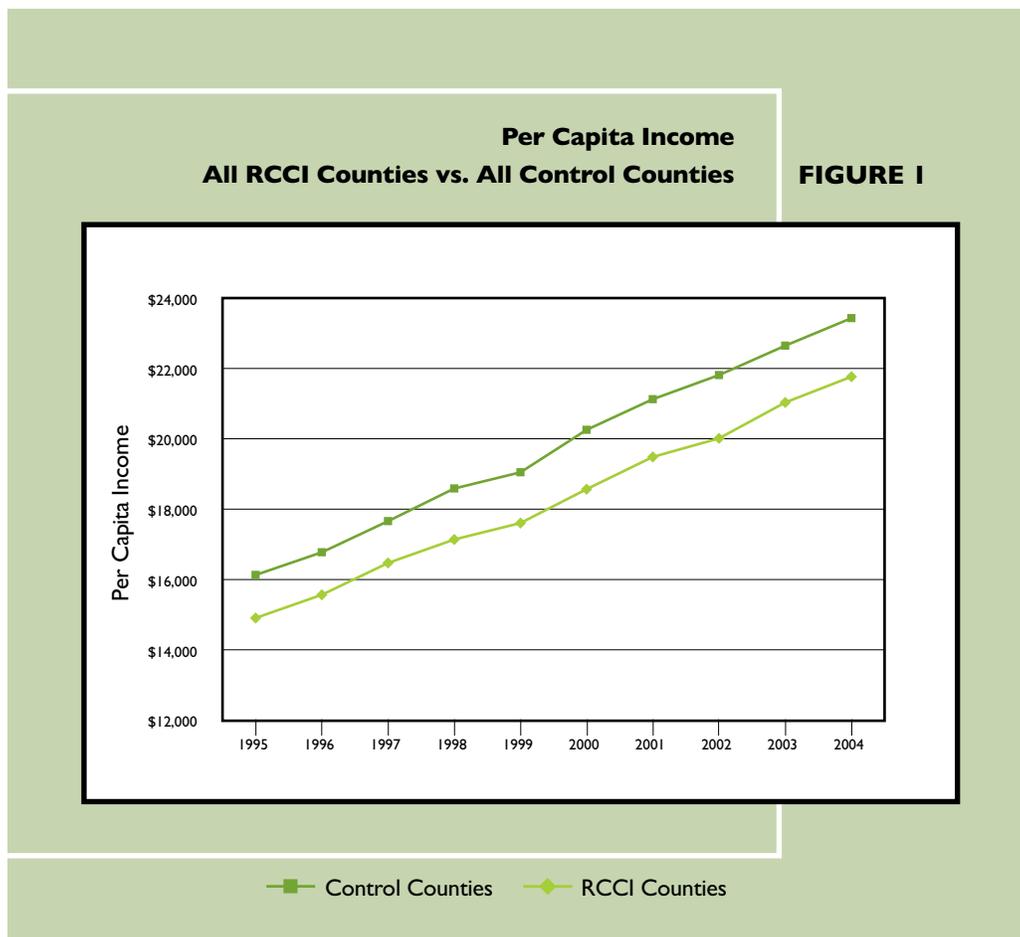
The case studies provided evidence of the sustained role of change agent at each college. To validate that finding, researchers identified a set of colleges that

**Female students outnumber males in community colleges across the country (stock photo).**



did not participate in RCCI to provide a comparison sample. Although each of these areas was economically distressed, all of the RCCI counties were able to keep pace with their comparison counties in per capita income. Using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Bureau of Economic Analysis, researchers found that the per capita income for RCCI colleges rose at the same trajectory as their control counties (Figure 1).

In all of the service areas, the control counties began with a higher per capita income level and maintained the trend throughout the study period. The comparison gap (difference between control counties and RCCI counties) in per capita income was smaller in the Delta-Southern and Southwest regions. The largest gap between RCCI and control counties in per capita income appeared in the Northern Plains region, followed by the Appalachian region.



An examination of these two regions with the largest gap, the Northern Plains and Appalachia, revealed several economic factors (e.g., limited resources, isolation, and, in some cases, the closing of large industries) that continue to influence the gap in per capita income. These two areas also experience the drains associated with natural energy sources (coal for Appalachia and oil reserves for some Northern Plains colleges). Although energy resources may provide some prosperous times, once depleted, they create tremendous economic voids in the regions. Yet the RCCI colleges' service regions were able to keep up with their comparison groups. Some of the colleges offered compelling examples of how to manage these historical and economic factors.

One of the Northern Plains colleges, Sitting Bull College, has shown a capacity to do more with fewer resources than other institutions in its region. Given the unique needs of the Standing Rock Reservation, Sitting Bull is perhaps the most creative of all the colleges included in this assessment. Before RCCI, many of the graduates of the college's building trades program had to leave the reservation to find construction jobs, an exodus caused by the absence of construction companies operating within the reservation. Seeing the need to reverse

... these colleges shifted the way they viewed the economy and their role in the local community

the trend, the college created the Sitting Bull Construction Company to provide jobs for its own building program graduates. The college also launched a technology company to service computer hardware.

Both of these companies provide employment opportunities that were not previously available on the reservation.

In Appalachia, Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College faced losing opportunities when state grants were not available for several area businesses. In response, the college helped sustain the businesses through the Southeast Education Fund (SEEF). These ventures included the historic Benham Schoolhouse Inn, Kentucky Coal Museum, Sleepy Hollow Golf Course, and Mine Portal 31, a new animatronics exhibit that tells the story of mining in the Appalachian region. In 2006, all of the businesses shifted ownership to the Kentucky Department of Parks, but the college continued to participate in running the enterprises.

### Changing the Mindset Toward the Economy

In addition to embracing the role of change agent, these colleges shifted the way they viewed the economy and their role in the local community. Although some of

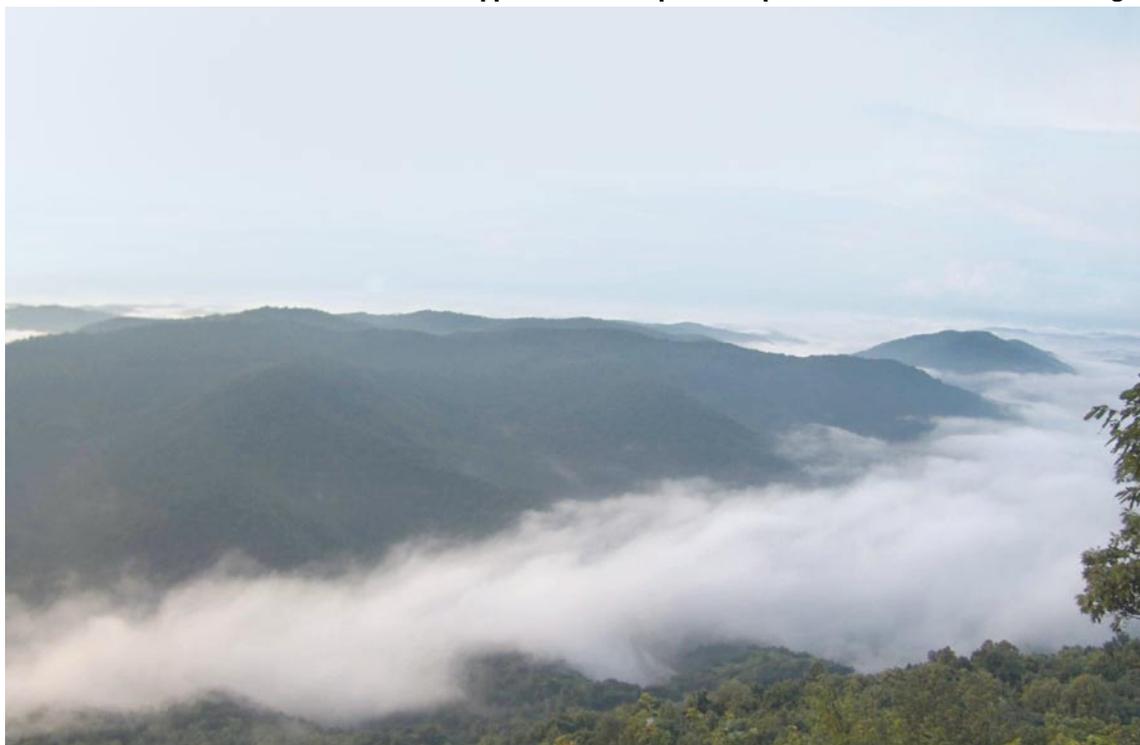
the institutions had already begun this transformation before participating in RCCI, others made dramatic changes in their mission. As noted previously, Sitting Bull illustrated a change in mindset by adding economic development as part of the college mission, a move approved by the college board of trustees.

As found in a previous assessment of RCCI, these colleges were seen as neutral places for local stakeholders to come together and collaborate. The fact that the college was perceived to serve the entire region or area created an impression of the college's neutrality—a characterization that would set the stage for collaboration. The

overlapping nature of rural agencies often makes it difficult for governmental agencies to play this role. When community colleges become the convener, the atmosphere is less judgmental or threatening, making the community college the natural center for collaboration. This role allowed community groups or regions to work together to change attitudes toward a college's role in economic development.

Using the counties of the comparison colleges, it was found that the service counties served by RCCI colleges decreased unemployment at a greater pace than the control counties. In 1995, the average unemployment rate for all the RCCI counties

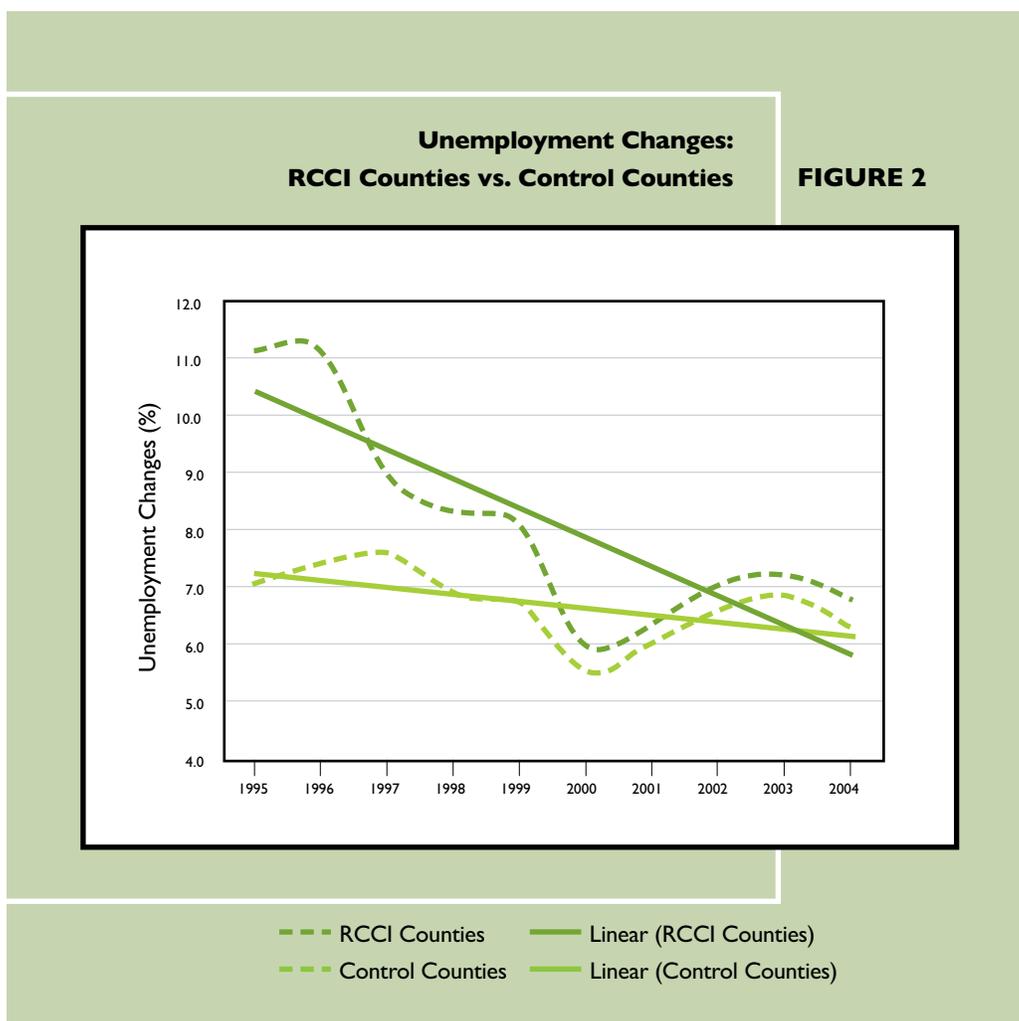
**Opportunities in “place” inspire rural communities and colleges.**



was 11.1%; by 2004, this rate had dropped to 6.8% (Figure 2).

Although there was a decrease in unemployment rates in the counties for both pilot colleges that began RCCI work in 1994 and expansion colleges that began in 1997, the decrease was attributed more to the pilot colleges than to the expansion colleges. The counties of expansion colleges also had a decrease in unemployment rates

that was greater than the control counties, but the steepness of the decrease was not as significant as those counties with the pilot colleges. As a group, the counties with pilot colleges dropped unemployment from 11.1% in 1994 to 6.8% in 2004, whereas the expansion colleges went from 8.1% unemployment in 1997 to 6.8% in 2004. From a regional perspective, the Northern Plains colleges and the Southwest colleges



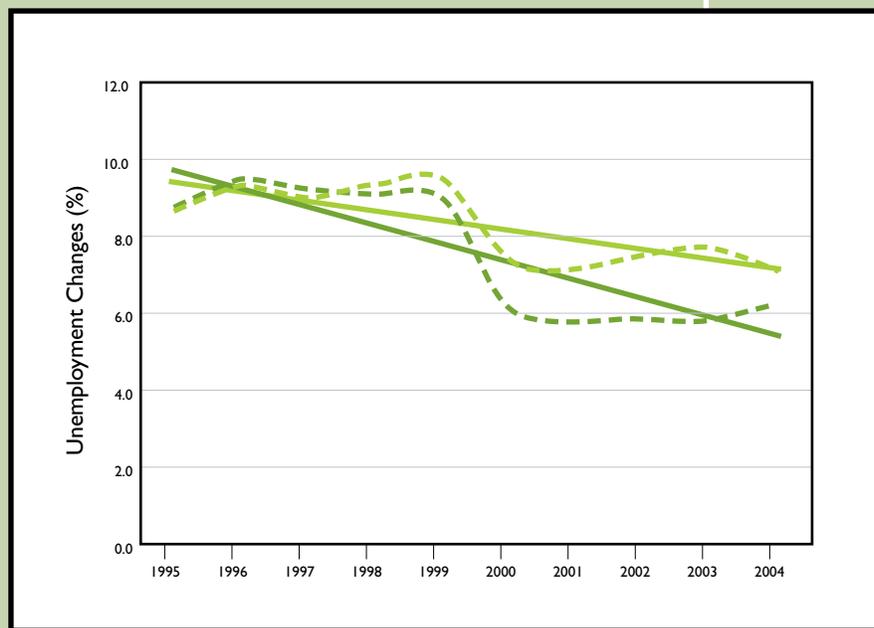
saw the most dramatic decreases. In both of these regions, the unemployment rate for RCCI counties was higher than the control counties. In both regions, the RCCI counties were able to lower the employment to less than that of the comparison control counties (Figures 3 and 4).

During a focus group in 2007, researchers queried college representatives

about why this trend was more evident in the tribal colleges and in the Southwest. Responses confirmed the impact of local economic trends, including increased expenditures in the energy industry in the Southwest and tribal areas. Industries in other regions were closing, and lost jobs were not being replaced. The case studies revealed that the pilot colleges had more time to

**Unemployment Changes:  
Northern Plains/Tribal Counties vs.  
Northern Plains/Tribal Control Counties**

**FIGURE 3**



- Northern Plains RCCI Counties
- Northern Plains Control Counties
- Linear (Northern Plains RCCI Counties)
- Linear (Northern Plains Control Counties)

fine tune the techniques learned during the RCCI initiative and were perhaps more apt to create mechanisms to respond to the economic changes.

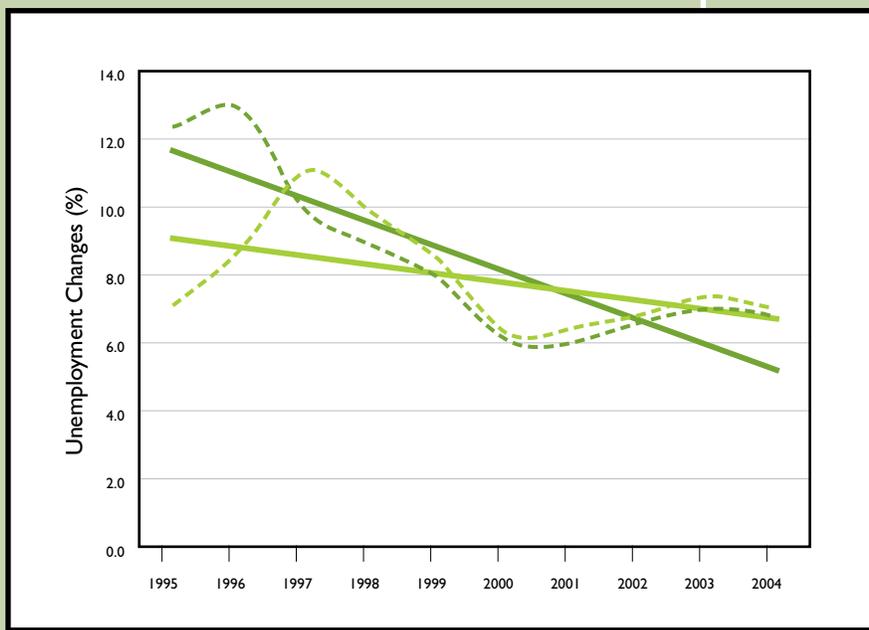
Other examples of changing mindsets toward the economy appeared at Mountain Empire and Southeast Community Colleges as they moved away from the idea of bringing

large businesses into the community. Instead, they focused on local entrepreneurship and small business development to mediate the loss of large industries.

Laredo Community College attributed participation in RCCI to changing its longstanding view of the relevance of region's outlying rural areas. Lessons from

**Unemployment Changes:  
Southwest RCCI Counties vs.  
Southwest Control Counties**

**FIGURE 4**



- Southwest RCCI Counties
- Southwest Control Counties
- Linear (Southwest RCCI Counties)
- Linear (Southwest Control Counties)

the RCCI-funded Familias Pueden, which addressed the importance of reaching out to underserved community members, prompted the college to view the outlying areas as part of its service area. Laredo launched a campaign in 2000 called “LCC Si” to build a new campus in an isolated southern part of the county. To build the facilities, the college had to convince voters to authorize a \$50 million bond. The campaign successfully educated voters about the need for this new campus, and the bond passed with an 82% approval rate.

In North Carolina, Southeastern Community College had traditional views and involvement in economic development. Participation in RCCI prompted the college to actively engage—in fact, to lead—the county in its planning process. By 2006, the college had fostered a culture of partnerships and economic development initiatives. This cultural shift within the college resulted in numerous economic development programs that have been sustained, expanded, or enhanced, including small business centers, a job link center, “mom and pop” grants, and individual development accounts.

... buy-in at multiple levels is necessary for an institution to be a catalyst for change.

A significant lesson acknowledged by the colleges was that buy-in at multiple levels is necessary for an institution to become a catalyst for change. At

Southwest Texas Junior College, buy-in was evident in the senior administrators’ ability to articulate how the mission affects the daily work of the college. The college requires all new faculty applicants to submit a statement describing their philosophy of education to determine whether the views of new hires are congruent with the college mission. Southeastern Community College senior administrators are expected to support and sustain the college’s efforts to serve as a catalyst for change. The college’s new president summed it up this way, “if they [senior administrators] don’t carry the message [to those in their division] the message breaks down.” In spite of leadership turnover at Southeastern and Mountain Empire, both colleges were able to continue their RCCI efforts after the grants and demonstration phase ended. Holding onto RCCI core values such as self-assessment, collaboration, and equity, the colleges continue to act on their roles as change agents in their communities.

### Empowering Others to Take on Leadership Roles

Although all of the colleges studied were able to maintain buy-in among key stakeholders, the need to empower others to assume leadership roles is critical. A few RCCI colleges expanded leadership development through specific programs. Southeast’s

Leadership Harlan County United, which the college continues to help manage, selects community members for activism-based leadership development. Some of the outcomes have been personal growth as well: One former participant was inspired to get her college degree and to run for election as a city official. After its RCCI involvement, Mountain Empire acquired grant support to establish a student leadership development program. A college student services staff member guided students to complete service-learning projects in community agencies while they were enrolled in a leadership development course. The goal is

to instill leadership skills in the students so they will be a force for positive change in the community. As one staff member observed, “we use the community as a classroom and the classroom as a community.”

### Building Capacity Within Their Own Institutions

Two phrases popped up repeatedly during case study visits to describe what occurred at these RCCI demonstration phase colleges. The first was a “cultural shift” and the second was a “residual effect.” To understand how the colleges interpreted the terms, researchers convened a focus group with representatives

**Janette Carter performs at Mountain Empire Community College’s annual Home Craft Days concert.**





**Campus leaders look for ways to help the next generation of students to be “college ready” (stock photo).**

from eight RCCI colleges that had taken part in the case studies. The college representatives responded to questions about which of the two phrases best described what occurred on their campuses. They used the term “cultural shift” to describe the capacity building that occurred among college staff, which spurred new ways to think about the future of their colleges. The few colleges that seemed to have experienced a “residual effect” had focused more on programs that were sustained or created by their RCCI work rather than on the development of individual capacity.

Examples of cultural shift include college changes in employment practices. Southwest Texas Junior College adapted faculty hiring

practices to fit new situations. By 2006, the college had designated several faculty positions as “traveling” faculty. Although based at the main campus in Uvalde, the faculty members travel to other towns to conduct their courses. The expectation to provide this kind of extended service was made clear during the hiring process. This is a new twist on the traditional community college commitment to access; that is, taking the college to a new region rather than expecting students in the region to come to the college. At Sitting Bull College, another kind of shift took place. Each academic program added an advisory committee consisting of both community and college

members to help keep academic programs community based.

These examples, along with U.S. Census data about per capita income and employment rates, illustrate that the colleges continue to embrace the role of change agent and to sustain the RCCI values of collaboration to enhance economic development and access. The next theme is an example of how sustaining these efforts have infiltrated the fabric of the institutions.

### Adopting a Mission Focus on Planning

Changing or enhancing a college's institutional culture is challenging, if not sometimes impossible. The RCCI colleges

appeared to have embraced the idea of change over stagnation. They made planning for the future a central tenet of the college mission. Within this theme of mission focus, four strategies emerged: increasing the culture of community involvement, sustaining a culture of planning, establishing a culture for data-driven decisions, and expanding the college to other areas.

### Increasing the Culture of Community Involvement

Community involvement was part of the tradition of several colleges before their participation in RCCI. Southeastern and Mountain Empire had previously collaborated with the local community through economic development projects for their service regions. Sitting Bull's

**Clouds float over Kingdom Come State Park in Cumberland, Kentucky.**





**Auto tech students prepare at Southwest Texas Junior College.**

culture of community involvement was tied closely to the tribal college mission to serve Native American people and maintain Native American culture. Nevertheless, even these colleges were able to create new partnerships and strengthen existing affiliations within their communities. Others, such as Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College in Appalachia and Laredo Community College and Southwest Texas Junior College in the Southwest, made community involvement more central to their missions, and they attribute this change to their RCCI participation. For Southeast Kentucky, the RCCI work made the community more a part of the college's

planning by bringing new stakeholders to the table. Southwest Texas had been described as being in “castle mode” before RCCI. Today, Southwest Texas’ mission has broadened to include a proactive regional attitude and service to a broader community through new programs in a variety of service centers. Its expansion in workforce development increased at such a high rate that the programs became self-supporting years before economic sustainability was expected. At Laredo, community partnerships made it possible to bring long-neglected services to the rural county and eventually to build a new campus.

### **Sustaining a Culture of Planning**

Perhaps the most impressive change brought on by the capacity building of the college employees was the ability to create and sustain a culture of planning. One notable change in capacity building is evident at Coahoma Community College in the Mississippi Delta. In 2003, just as their RCCI participation was ending, Coahoma administrators held a weekend retreat to create a strategic plan for the institution. The choice to use an outside facilitator was prompted by exposure to and confidence in MDC, Inc., and a coach from the RCCI demonstration days. Since the 2003 retreat, Coahoma has infused the strategic plan throughout the college,

and all administrators interviewed during the case study could describe clearly what they needed to do to carry out the strategic plan. Two events that occurred at the right time led to this transformation of employee capacity. The first was the strategic planning retreat, which came at a critical point for the college; the second was a turnover in second-level administrative staff. Although these new officers had been at Coahoma before taking on the second-tier leadership positions, their new energy and ideas allowed the strategic plan to flourish and to influence the way Coahoma served its students and community. Coahoma credits the RCCI-driven capacity-building changes with increased enrollment, a higher retention rate, and increases in the percentage of employees who see the institution as engaging in ongoing planning and evaluation.

All of the community colleges continue to sustain a culture of planning. The planning includes analysis of reasons for changes in enrollment, as well as solid buy-in at multiple personnel levels. At North Carolina's Southeastern Community College, senior administrators' commitment was critical to maintaining, sustaining, and enhancing the efforts of the college. This point is reflected in case study reports from Southwest Texas and Mountain Empire as well. Southeast Kentucky attributed its

sustained planning culture to a dedicated president and a committed RCCI team. The retention of committed people from earlier RCCI phases allowed the institutions to increase and sustain their culture of planning. As a result of the college's leadership during the RCCI demonstration, a new association, the Rural Community College Alliance (RCCA), was established to serve the needs of rural community colleges. RCCA has been led by several presidents from the original RCCI colleges. From the original group of 24 RCCI colleges, 79% (19) continue to participate in RCCA. RCCA became an affiliate council of AACC in 2007.

### Establishing a Culture for Data-Driven Decisions

Several of the community colleges that participated in the RCCI Phase IV assessment described a new institutional culture that depends on data-driven analysis and decision making. In 2004, Mountain Empire Community College and Southwest Texas Junior College became part of the national Achieving the Dream Initiative sponsored by Lumina Foundation for Education. This initiative focuses on creating a culture of evidence to make more informed institutional decisions for student

Several ...  
described a new  
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making.

success. The approach requires colleges to take more seriously than before the collection and interpretation of data and to make changes consistent with the evidence found. In small, rural colleges strapped by fewer resources and staff, it can be a challenge to attract and retain institutional research staff who are trained not only to collect data but also to analyze it critically and to discuss the implications for internal policies and practices.

Coahoma Community College administrators realized that having a new strategic plan in place was not enough to drive effective change. They used an internal survey to tell them whether the college community as a whole had bought into the strategic planning process. According to the college's 2007 Campus Climate Employee Survey Report, 96% of employees agreed or strongly agreed that the mission statement was "clear, appropriate, and available." In addition, nearly 89% of employees agreed or strongly agreed that the "institution engages in ongoing research-based planning and evaluation in order to improve programs and services." This agreement on the visibility of mission and planning illustrate the capacity building that Coahoma has attained in the years since the demonstration phase of RCCI. Although these changes occurred

... having a new strategic plan in place was not enough to drive effective change.

after RCCI, it appears clear that RCCI planted the seed.

### Expanding the College to Other Areas

Some RCCI colleges expanded their course delivery; two of the largest expansions took place in the Rio Grande Valley area of Texas. Laredo Community College opened its South Campus in 2004, with an enrollment of 1,300 students; by spring 2005, it had reached 1,900. Several key administrators attribute the college's changed view of the rural county area to the RCCI intervention. Similarly, Southwest Texas Junior College converted its outreach centers in Eagle Pass and Del Rio into full-fledged campuses. The redefinition of these outreach centers was partially responsible for the college's 49% increase in enrollment since its RCCI beginnings in 1994. These two colleges have kept up with the increase in the general population in the growing Rio Grande Valley and continue to serve the area with creative academic and workforce training opportunities.

Some colleges expanded their physical facilities. A new building at Fort Peck Community College and additional campuses at Coahoma enabled the colleges to serve their communities more effectively. Other colleges worked toward building or

expanding residence halls. Although residence halls are not the norm at community colleges, approximately 25% of all community colleges have them. The distances some students need to travel to be part of the college community makes residence halls in these rural community colleges a necessity.

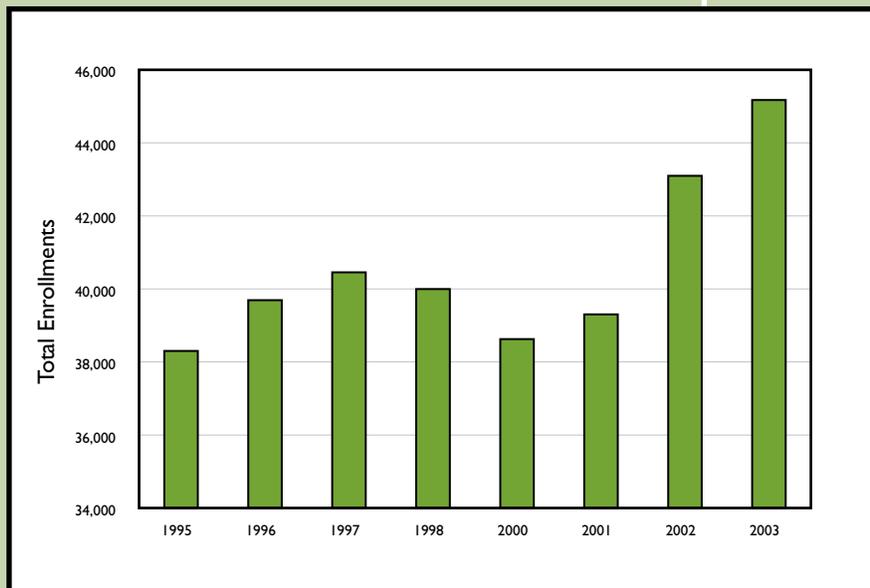
### Enhancing Access and Student Success

Improving access to education was one of the main goals of the RCCI initiative, and many

of the RCCI colleges sustained their efforts in this area. U.S. Department of Education data show that enrollment increased at RCCI colleges between 1995 and 2003 (Figure 5). The data shown here consider only those colleges that were able to report consistently viable information about their enrollments. Coahoma Community College showed the most change, matching dramatic increases in enrollment with increased retention rates for first-year students. Coahoma's enrollment doubled from 1994 to 2006, from a 934 headcount to a 1,866 headcount. Along

**Total Enrollments:  
All Selected Colleges**

**FIGURE 5**



with this increase in numbers, the college's retention rate for first-year students rose from 22% in 1999 to 53% in 2004.

The RCCI colleges also continued to increase their participation rate or percentage of the area residents who enroll at the community colleges. This growth in participation rate suggests continued community confidence in these the colleges (Figure 6).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The participation rate for some colleges is difficult to discern during this time because of restructuring of some statewide systems or the addition of campuses or entire colleges that were not part of the participating college before RCCI. For the colleges that experienced system changes, an estimate was calculated to represent the most realistic data. These challenges also limit the amount of disaggregating that can be done with the data.

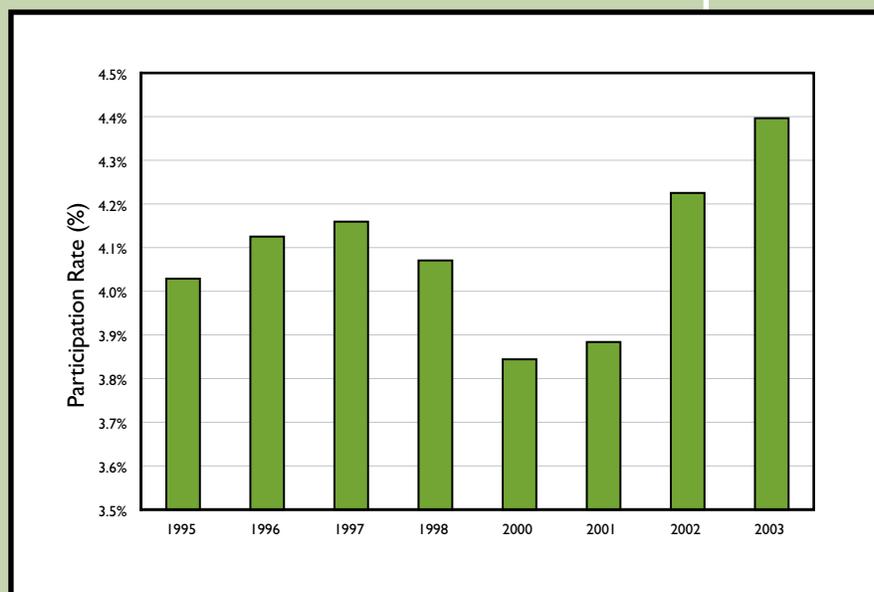
Within the context of enhancing student success, two strategies illustrate how colleges are maintaining a commitment to access—improving students' skills and creating infrastructures to support student services.

### Improving Students' Skills

Nationally, more than half of students entering community colleges need developmental or remedial education to be ready for college courses. Southwest Texas Junior College was no exception. To address this challenge, the college created academic

**Total Participation Rate  
(Enrollment as a Percentage of Total Populations)**

**FIGURE 6**



centers for excellence on each campus to provide tutoring services for most courses, including developmental education courses. Southeastern Community College enhanced its basic skills program to increase the number of graduate equivalency diploma (GED) participants the college serves. This action required personnel changes for the program and resulted in an enhanced focus on the student. In both cases, the colleges made tough decisions about how best to use existing resources to improve support for student access and success in a climate of level funding.

Colleges enhanced student success by disaggregating and analyzing their student data to understand specific needs and then provide skill-building support. For example, Southeastern Community College created the Minority Mentor Program, which matched African American male students with community mentors. The idea was to create a support system for minority males who often felt left out or outnumbered. After an initial cohort of 17 students, the program doubled in its second year to serve 34 students. In spite of fears of expected funding decreases, a new president ensured that the program would be sustained. By 2007, 45% of participants had completed college transfer or certificate programs, and the mentoring program was still in place, although staffing, transportation, and student financial aid challenges remained.

Some of the other colleges gained a better understanding of the specific needs of their students by offering outreach activities to K–12 youth. Laredo continues to offer its Kids College, which provides children an opportunity to visit the campus for daily activities. Mountain Empire has participated in Virginia’s statewide GEAR UP program, which offers summer activities that include a college residential experience. Southeast Kentucky offers the Southeast Scholars

**Mentoring programs support African American and other first-generation students (stock photo).**



Program to provide selected mentoring, tutoring, and cultural activities to selected students in grades 6 through 12.

### Creating Infrastructure to Support Student Services

Internet connectivity helped some colleges overcome the twin challenges of geographic isolation and limited transportation to enhance student opportunities. Improved technological infrastructure at Southwest Texas and Southeast Kentucky supported additional course offerings for students at remote sites. With electronic connectivity to all its area high schools, Southwest Texas can now extend the reach of its distance

education courses. These connections continue to provide more remote rural residents with access to college courses. Because of this initial venture, the college increased the number of its distance learning classrooms by almost 40%.

With the assistance of a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, Southeast Kentucky was able to wire all of its campuses with Interactive TV (I-TV). This system allows the college to offer courses that do not have sufficiently large student enrollment on a single campus but that garner a critical mass of students when the course is offered on multiple campuses through I-TV.

**Respiratory therapy students demonstrate their award-winning hand-made ventilator to Coahoma Community College President Vivian Presley.**



To sustain a culture that promotes student retention, Coahoma instituted a new policy in 2006 called the Satisfactory Academic Policy, which tracks student progress. The policy has three components that represent hands-on strategies: (1) a letter is sent to all students explaining their academic progress each semester, as well as the consequences of not continuing to make adequate progress (e.g., loss of financial aid); (2) an intrusive advising system assigns an academic advisor in the student's major to every student and creates a profile sheet for each student; and (3) instructors receive profiles showing each students' academic background and contact information. Faculty members inform the college when a student has been repeatedly absent from classes, prompting a letter to be sent to the student explaining that absences can result in failing the class or withdrawal. These new policies were instituted because students were taking classes but not necessarily making academic progress.

Fort Peck's student services staff added a "search and rescue" function in 2000 by creating a Students with Academic Attendance Trouble (SWAAT) team. Faculty members give the names of students not attending classes to the student services office, and the SWAAT team seeks to find out what is happening to cause students to

miss classes. The process has helped some students return to their classes and assisted others with withdrawal in a manner that does not affect the student's academic standing. SWAAT team members believe this is the best way to help students succeed and are willing to put in the necessary extra effort.

Another nontraditional approach to student services is Fort Peck's gas voucher program, which addresses one of the pressing financial needs on the reservation—transportation. Begun in 2002 with external funding, this program provides a \$5.00 gas voucher for needy students. The students must use the voucher to get to class, cannot show up on the "search and rescue" list, and must attend a workshop on skill building and encouragement.

... student services staff added a 'search and rescue' function ... [that] has helped some students return to their classes ...

## Developing Creative Efforts to Sustain Change

The final theme that emerged in the Phase IV assessment was how the colleges have done more with less. Because of decreased state and federal funding, each institution found creative ways to sustain change within its region. The approaches fell into

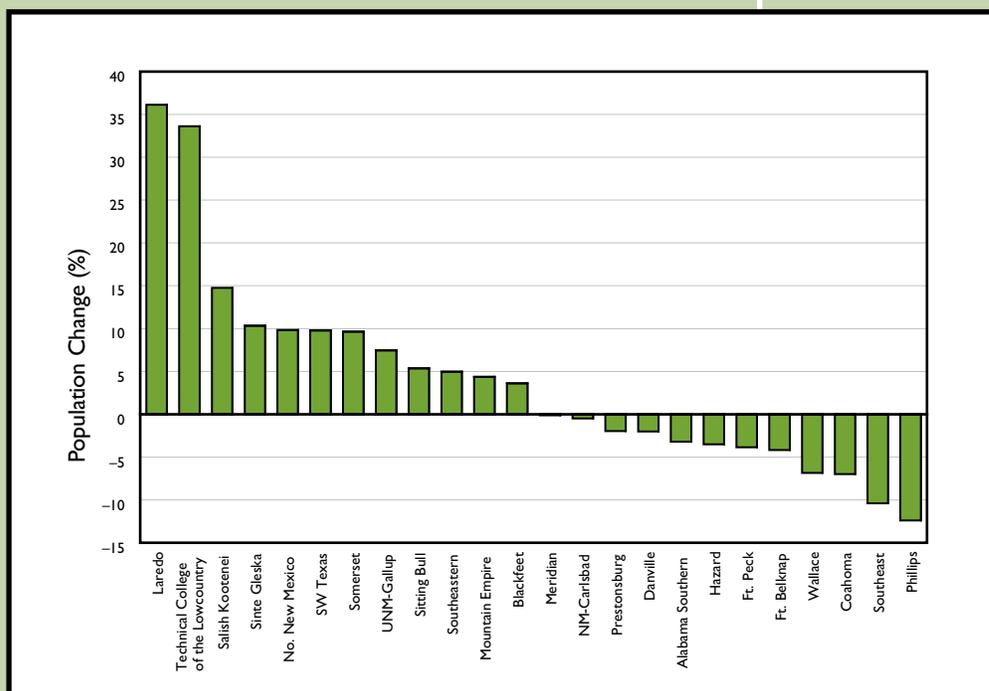
four categories: using resources creatively, managing limited funding, leveraging capital through grant writing, and changing economic vision.

As shown in Figure 7, half of the service areas served by RCCI colleges continue to experience population increases; the other half has remained the same or lost population in their service areas. This population loss is more evident among the

pilot colleges than the expansion colleges (Figure 8).

The loss of population influences enrollment numbers, funding formulas, and student services. Interestingly, although 67% of the pilot service areas lost residents, the colleges' participation rates remained consistent with the comparison control colleges (Figure 9). The significance of this finding is that it illustrates that although

**Population Change:  
Base Counties All RCCI Colleges (1995–2005)** **FIGURE 7**



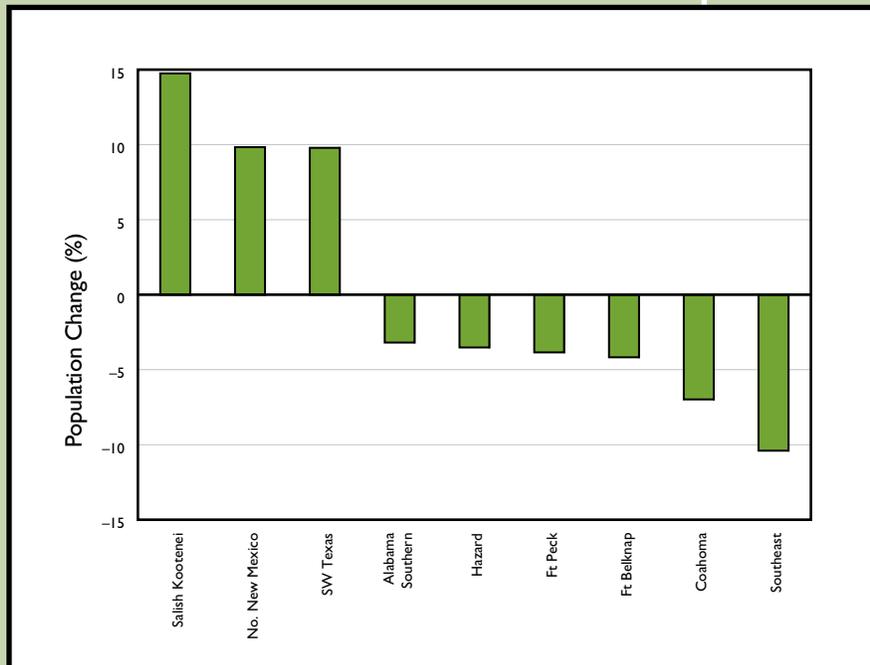
population bases weakened, the colleges continued to attract the same percentage of the areas' population as students.

The participation rate trend for expansion colleges is not as clear. Although the majority (73% or 11 out of 15) of the service areas for the expansion colleges saw increases or stability in their populations, the participation percentage increased only slightly (Figures 10 and 11).

This inconclusive result could be related to unstable data reported by the colleges. Although the case studies did identify some issues, there was no clear explanation for the slight increase in college participation rates. For example, Mountain Empire Community College instituted a new student information system—part of a new statewide system—that presented several problems for students who tried to register for college courses. The staff

**Population Change:  
Base Counties RCCI Pilot Colleges (1995–2005)**

**FIGURE 8**



at the college believed that the difficulties the students experienced contributed to a decrease in enrollment.

### Using Resources Creatively

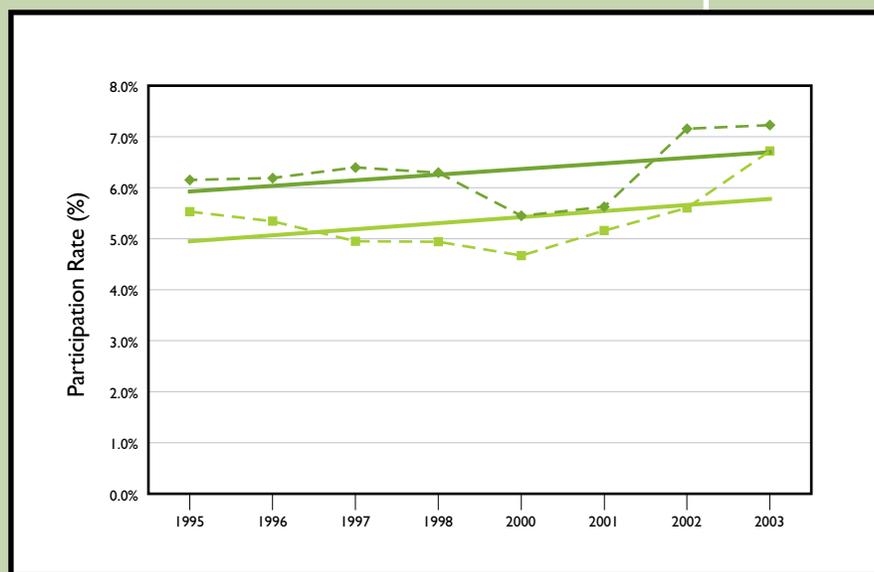
Sitting Bull College lost funding for its federal TRIO Student Support Services program. Rather than close the program, the college assumed its cost within the institutional budget and worked toward securing new grants. According to the college's director of student support

services, approximately 90% of Sitting Bull's incoming students could be eligible for TRIO services as defined by program regulations. The college knew that student success would be compromised without this support program. Although the college hopes to regain TRIO funding in the future, the critical decision was made by college leaders, including the president, to meet students' current needs by realigning institutional funds.

Fort Peck established its Department of Community Services, a new division

Pilot vs. Control Participation Rates

FIGURE 9



-◆- RCCI Pilots                      -■- RCCI Pilot Controls  
 — Linear (RCCI Pilots)              — Linear (RCCI Pilot Controls)

supported through funding from external sources. The department averages approximately \$2 million a year in funding but has reached as much as \$3 million. The department consists of four areas: social and economic development, agriculture, wellness, and outreach to K-12 youth. Department services are based on a family education model that focuses on the importance of culture and family. Because the reservation faces many social and health

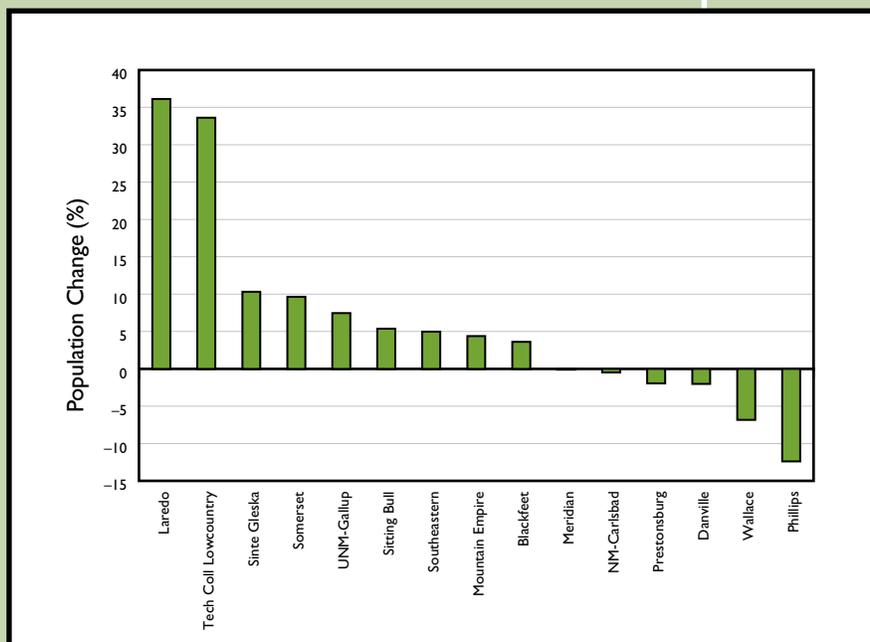
needs, the college has emerged as a central place to find solutions.

### Managing Limited Funding

Sustaining student support services at Sitting Bull is one example of shifting priorities in light of budget restraints, but there are many more. State and federal declines in funding for community colleges have necessitated some difficult choices for college leaders

**Population Change:  
Base Counties RCCI Expansion Colleges (1995–2005)**

**FIGURE 10**

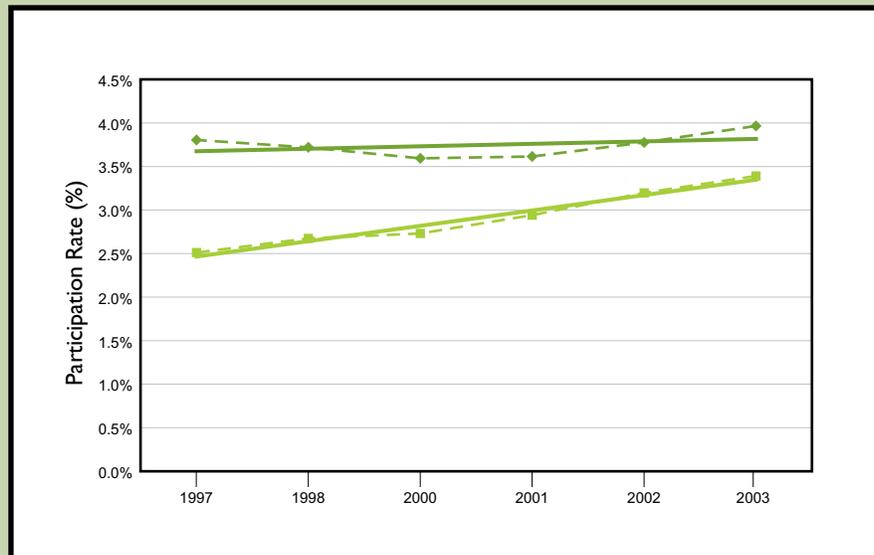


but also some new approaches to revenue generation. Faced with an enrollment plateau, Sitting Bull College decided to be more intentional about seeking students with GEDs by letting them know how the college can help them advance their education. The college's student support services director, who oversees the adult education program, identified GED graduates as an untapped source for new enrollment. The college also increased its efforts to develop residential

units on campus to attract students. The desire for first-time students to move away from home, combined with the lack of housing on the reservation, makes residence halls a necessity for this community.

Coahoma Community College took advantage of several federal and state mandates to create opportunities for growth and community involvement. When the federal government began requiring Head Start teachers to have an associate degree,

**Expansion vs. Control Participation Rates** **FIGURE 11**



- - - RCCI Expansions      - - - RCCI Expansion Controls  
— Linear (RCCI Expansions)      — Linear (RCCI Expansion Controls)

Coahoma put appropriate programs in place. The college also created a successful respiratory care program to serve the hospitals in the area and a culinary arts program to serve the nearby casino industry. The colleges would not have been this nimble in responding to economic and social needs without the RCCI capacity building.

### Leveraging Capital Through Grant Writing

The ability to leverage funds has become essential for all of the colleges studied. For many of the colleges, this process began during RCCI and was sustained by necessity when the colleges faced widespread state funding shortages. Fort Peck's Department of Community Services is a prime example of the strong effort to leverage external funds. Another is Southeastern Community College's funding through a new work incentive grant, channeled through the job link center, which focuses on increasing capacity to serve students and clients with disabilities. This grant provides a staff person to gather information and train others on community resources and services. The college equipped a workstation with state-of-the-art adaptive technology for Southeastern student and client use—an investment that would have been difficult without the grant.



**The Sitting Bull Monument draws tourists to the Missouri River near Sitting Bull College, North Dakota.**

Building on previous grant-writing assistance gained through RCCI, Southwest Texas Junior College has competed successfully in national programs focused on increasing student success, specifically the Engaging Latino Communities for Education program known as ENLACE, sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation, and the Achieving the Dream national initiative established by the Lumina Foundation for Education. Mountain Empire Community College, also a participating institution in Achieving the Dream, has leveraged its limited resources in

many ways. New and growing partnerships with K-12 schools are stimulating serious planning for student success in the region.

### Changing Economic Vision

Heightened attention to economic issues became a key factor in sustaining change within many of these regions. Some of the colleges helped change the area's business philosophy, which then drove other efforts. Southeast Kentucky's support of start-up businesses and management of area tourism businesses sustained those activities until the state could take a more active role. The college sees its economic development role as "managing change not chance."

This philosophy was echoed by Mountain Empire. A community member noted the region's shift away from recruitment—luring large corporations to the area—toward local entrepreneurship. For several of the RCCI colleges—notably Sitting Bull, Mountain Empire, Southeastern, and Southeast Kentucky—this change in philosophy resulted in increased participation in business incubator programs, in which the colleges offer facilities at reduced rental space to new small business ventures. Operations differ among colleges, but all incubator projects tend to offer low overhead that allows a small business to expand and provide more employment opportunities without sacrificing capital.

**Coal miner statue beacons visitors near the Benham Coal Mine museum in Harlan County, Kentucky.**





# Sustainability & Change in the RCCI Context

Changing the institutional culture of any college and sustaining that change is an arduous task. Sustaining change in small rural colleges in economically distressed areas such as those served by the RCCI demonstration colleges requires special creativity and tenacity.

Extensive research exists on organizational change and the process of change, but few studies address how change is sustained in higher education. According to most scholars, change is difficult and involves everyone in an organization (Goodman & Associates, 1982; Kezar, 2001; Levy & Merry, 1986). Kezar identified six typologies of change that are emphasized in the literature and salient to those in the field of higher education: evolutionary, teleological, life cycle, dialectical, social-cognition, and cultural (Kezar, 2001, p. 2). The evolutionary theory illustrates change as it relates to the external environment (Kezar, 2001; Morgan, 1986). The teleological theory is the idea of planned change through change agents and assumes that organizations are purposeful and adaptive. The typology of life cycle change is derived from child developmental studies and describes the maturity and decline of organizations. Dialectical typology holds that change is the result of clashing ideology and belief (Morgan, 1997). Social-cognition theory demonstrates that change is tied to learning and mental processes—the sense-making model. Finally, the cultural typology model states that change is long term and slow, and occurs naturally in response to alteration in the human environment.

Sustaining  
change in small  
rural colleges ...  
requires special  
creativity and  
tenacity.

Although the RCCI initiative could be seen as providing external pressure for change, the case studies (Appendix B) illustrate that the colleges incorporated change and have more internally (locally) defined mechanisms to illustrate their change processes. For this reason, the change that occurred among the RCCI colleges could be seen somewhere between the more deliberate teleological change and cultural change, which is long term and naturally occurring. To investigate whether RCCI colleges that were not part of this case study assessment could help explain some of the findings, researchers convened a focus group consisting of representatives from nine RCCI colleges (six were part of this assessment and three were not). During the focus group, the representatives were asked to choose from two phrases—cultural shift vs. residual effect—that described what happened at these colleges. Almost all described what happened at their colleges as a cultural shift.

Almost all described what happened at their colleges as a cultural shift.

The cultural shifts appear to have occurred because colleges understood that their local population was decreasing and the economic base was dwindling. RCCI came at a point when the colleges acknowledged that they

should do something differently, because the outlook for their communities was not positive. RCCI provided deliberate planning for change, but the focus on local solutions allowed the colleges to develop cultural changes that were more likely to be sustained. The critical piece for cultural change was the capacity building that occurred within these colleges. Limited by their isolated locations, many of these colleges had not envisioned a different future. Exposure to new ideas and techniques allowed these colleges to create a changing view of their future. For this reason, the changes were a product of both internal and external factors (Nordvall, 1982).

Residual effect was associated with program creation or maintenance. Although programs were important to RCCI success, focusing only on the program level diverts attention from the systemic change needed to influence economic development and access in general. One new program cannot change an existing culture.

Although it may be interesting to classify the type of change and situate this assessment within the literature, practitioners will be more interested in what elements actually helped institutions sustain change. The research literature identifies a number of such elements, which can serve as useful guides for creating change that can become permanent. According to Curry (1992), as



**The People's Center, owned and operated by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, offers educational and cultural programs on the Flathead Reservation near Salish Kootenai College in Montana.**

well as Barlett and Chase (2004), these characteristics include building relationships, obtaining resources, laying the groundwork (Kezar, 2001; Curry 1992; Barlett & Chase, 2004), persuading others to join the team, and ensuring effective implementation. Change presents challenges, creates disorder, and can cause discomfort. Many people see change as a social process in which key actors must negotiate with leaders to affect transformation in a system or organization (Curry, 1992).

The RCCI demonstration promoted four techniques that are consistent with the

literature on change and that assisted the colleges in sustaining change:

- **Collaboration or relationship building:** Many of the RCCI colleges focused on building collaborative relationships with community stakeholders to solve problems. This technique focuses on local solutions instead of externally imposed change. All of the colleges maintained this philosophy of collaborative relationships, and several have expanded their collaborations.

- **Leveraged connections:** The colleges continued to leverage funding to sustain their change initiatives. In some cases, they worked their connections within RCCI; in others, they identified new solutions, such as creating their own company to employ their own graduates.
- **Mission:** Colleges found ways to ensure that new members of the college community understand and support the college's mission. This was illustrated by leadership transitions in which new presidents supported existing student- and community-focused programs or created new ones.
- **Buy-in:** The technique is one often cited in the literature—buy-in at the highest level. RCCI encouraged institutions to think of multiple levels of buy-in. Sustainability was more focused within the second-tier leadership at these colleges—a point that focus group participants agreed could not have happened without buy-in at the presidential level because it caused the RCCI philosophy to permeate the structure of the college.

**Students respond to Southeastern Kentucky Community College's fall marketing campaign.**



All of these techniques helped push sustainable change at RCCI institutions. Rather than imposing a change agenda, the RCCI experience taught the colleges how to change themselves. Structured interventions allowed locally based solutions to emerge.

These structured interventions could be described as building capacity in a manner consistent with social-cognitive theory, which views the nature of people as defined by their capability to symbolize, have forethought, learn vicariously, self-regulate behavior, and self-reflect on their experiences (Bandura, 1986). The development of these capabilities can permit the people within an organization to achieve their goals. The structured intervention used during the RCCI initiative allowed isolated colleges to learn vicariously from one another while also creating the capacity to influence and have forethought about the changes needed within their community. In many ways, increasing the capacity of the colleges to influence their own

future is the most important effect any outside intervention can have on a community.

There are limitations in measuring the effect and sustainability of change at a college that was influenced by many state, national, and economic variables. Nevertheless, the data emerging from this study illustrate that change can be sustained when the proper techniques are used to increase an institution's capacity to influence its own future. The institutional change seen in these RCCI colleges is particularly noteworthy considering their geographic isolation and their limited resources. For several of these colleges, RCCI provided a completely different view of how a college could function within its service area. As a result of newfound capacities to influence change, the colleges helped improve economic development in their regions, and there is some evidence, although not conclusive, that access to higher education was expanded within these colleges.





# Implications for Funding Agencies

**T**he positive tone of this report is embedded in reality. It is difficult to say that the original funding agency truly caused these types of sustained change. The most important finding of this assessment is the sustained influence of RCCI on capacity building, which allowed the colleges to create buy-in at multiple levels of their institutions and communities. However, creating local buy-in for these changes resulted in a loss of funding identity; the new way of doing things became the college’s way, not the Ford Foundation’s way. In other words, the RCCI “brand” was lost.

The capacity growth generated by RCCI affiliation led to “newness” at multiple levels—new ways to learn, new strategies, new collaborators, and the like. RCCI prompted colleges to think differently and to own their new ideas. As a result, it is difficult to look at causal relationships. Who owned what? What was sustained as a result of RCCI? What was a residual effect of RCCI? They blend together after time. Staff changes or the passage of too much time since grant funds were expended could easily result in a loss of the funder’s brand identity. The RCCI way became the college way.

Although most funders expect some level of sustainable results and even independence for its grantees, they also understandably hope to be able to measure the impact of their philanthropy. To do this well, some kind of permanent funding identity marker is important but hard to come by. In RCCI, the colleges continued to sustain the benefits, but the acknowledgment of influence (branding) diminished with time and

The desire to expand capacity perhaps may be the best indicator of sustainability ...

distance. For a funding agency, this situation could be analogous to the parent-child roots and wings relationship. The parent or funder wants the child or grantee to succeed but to remember where they came from.

Institutional capacity building within these colleges highlighted new projects that required additional financial support, usually from external sources. This growth or extension of activities makes defining the “end” of needed funding difficult for funding agencies. With limited economic resources, these rural colleges face a situation in which

the more they know about their needs, the more they may need funding from outside agencies. This Catch-22 phenomenon is difficult to avoid and may require funding agencies to think of their funding cycles in different ways. Demonstration programs like RCCI are likely to generate additional grantee needs. Phased funding may better serve the evolving nature of community college capacity building. The desire to expand capacity perhaps may be the best indicator of sustainability—the desire to fill the gaps between mission and institutional capacity. To address these gaps, further funding is often needed.



## Conclusion

**F**or the colleges that participated in RCCI, the greatest sustained benefit was the building of institutional capacity. Increased capacity allowed the colleges to sustain the changes within the institution and to create new initiatives that continued to help increase access to higher education and improve their communities' economic development. RCCI taught the colleges how to create and sustain change appropriate for their college or service area. The RCCI approach was consistent with social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which posits that individuals or organizations must be able to create symbols that represent a different future to enact that future. Techniques like the Vision to Action strategic planning process and the periodic meetings hosted by one of the RCCI colleges enabled the colleges to learn from one another and to gain confidence to make cultural shifts that would help them envision a new future.

By building on the capacity to create change, these colleges are better equipped to sustain their role as a welcoming place for collaboration to occur within their communities. For these colleges, continual improvement is now the norm rather than a one-time intervention. Although this report illustrates the sustained efforts among the colleges, it cannot illustrate the new self-efficacy illustrated by the people who work at these colleges. Their new confidence allows them to work toward the future in a more intentional manner. Perhaps this greatest influence is the most nebulous to measure, but it is clearly the most helpful for promoting economic development and access in rural areas of the United States.





## APPENDIX A: RCCI Colleges

### Pilot Colleges

Alabama Southern Community College  
Monroeville, AL

Coahoma Community College  
Clarksdale, MS

Fort Belknap College  
Harlem, MT

Fort Peck Community College  
Poplar, MT

Hazard Community College  
Hazard, KY

Northern New Mexico Community  
College, Española, NM

Salish Kootenai College  
Pablo, MT

Southeast Community and  
Technical College<sup>1</sup>  
Cumberland, KY

Southwest Texas Junior College  
Uvalde, TX

### Expansion Colleges

Blackfeet Community College  
Browning, MT

Danville Community College  
Danville, VA

Laredo Community College  
Laredo, TX

Meridian Community College  
Meridian, MS

Mountain Empire Community College  
Big Stone Gap, VA

New Mexico State University–Carlsbad  
Carlsbad, NM

Phillips Community College  
Helena, AR

Big Sandy Community  
and Technical College<sup>2</sup>  
Prestonsburg, KY

Sinte Gleska University  
Rosebud, SD

Sitting Bull College  
Fort Yates, ND

Somerset Community College  
Somerset, KY

Southeastern Community College  
Whiteville, NC

Technical College of the Lowcountry  
Beaufort, SC

University of New Mexico–Gallup  
Gallup, NM

Wallace Community College–Selma  
Selma, AL

<sup>1</sup> formerly Southeast Community College

<sup>2</sup> formerly Prestonsburg Community College





## APPENDIX B :

# College Case Reports

RCCI Case Report

## Coahoma Community College

Clarksdale, Mississippi

### Overview

Coahoma Community College (CCC) serves five counties in the Mississippi Delta region: Bolivar, Coahoma, Quitman, Tallahatchie, and Tunica. The main campus is located in Clarksdale in Coahoma County, and there are eight additional satellite campuses, with at least one in each of the service counties. CCC was founded as a Historically Black College or University, and the college continues this tradition with a predominantly African American student enrollment.

It is clear that CCC made remarkable progress between 1995 and 2005 in the areas of enrollment, retention, and transfer rate. The college's earlier RCCI work, which focused on internal capacity building, led to more systemic planning and the establishment of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. After a planning retreat in 2003 facilitated by MDC, Inc., the college began the process of buy-in for a strategic plan that would

guide the institution. Although the college president had served in that role since 1992, the second-tier administrators (vice presidents and directors) had turned over in recent years. The new second-tier staff, or "line staff," had been with the college but moved into these leadership positions as the strategic planning process was taking place. This change in second-tier leadership assisted with the buy-in for the mission and planning process. According to an internal campus climate employee survey report in 2007, 96% of CCC's employees agreed or strongly agreed that the mission statement is "clear, appropriate, and available." In addition, 88.6% of employees agreed or strongly agreed that the "institution engages in ongoing research-based planning and evaluation to improve programs and services." This agreement with the visibility of mission and planning suggests that the capacity building undertaken since the demonstration phase of RCCI has taken hold. It appears clear

that RCCI planted the seed and the college reaped the fruit.

During RCCI, the college began inviting community members to serve on several committees and boards. By 2007, the college employees were serving on community boards and making deeper and stronger connections. This example of continued community collaboration has served the college well as it expanded to serve its community more effectively.

The college also began identifying institutional effectiveness outcomes by program. Each member of the second-tier administration knew his or her role in making the strategic plan work. Although those familiar with RCCI believed that the Ford Foundation–sponsored initiative influenced the college by providing excellent training and exposure to different ideas, it was clear that the college employees owned the changes. They no longer referred to RCCI or Ford; instead, they acknowledged the investment of their peers in this process. For CCC, RCCI had a residual effect that in turn caused a cultural shift in how the college did its business.

### Access

Coahoma has seen a dramatic increase in enrollment from a 934 headcount in 1999 to nearly 1,900 in 2006. More importantly, increased access improved the college's student success rate: the retention rate for freshmen rose from 22% in 1999 to 53% in 2004. When asked what influenced this change, many of those working with students

believed that the president's leadership had provided the flexibility to try new things.

One new approach was stimulated by evidence that students were taking classes but not necessarily making academic progress. In fall 2006, the college began its new Satisfactory Academic Policy (SAP) by tracking student progress. Three SAP components were thought to improve student services. First, the college sent every student a letter documenting his or her academic status and explaining the consequences of not continuing to make adequate progress each semester. Not all students realized that insufficient progress could result in a loss of financial aid. Second, an intensive advising system assigned an academic advisor in the student's major field to every student. Third, the college created student profile sheets and gave them to the instructors. The profiles provide contact information for each student and include information on the student's academic background. The faculty also informed the college when a student has been repeatedly absent from classes, an action that prompts the college to send a letter to the student explaining that absences can result in failing the class or withdrawal. The most impressive aspect of the commitment to this effort is that this tracking was done manually.

CCC took advantage of federal and state mandates to create opportunities for growth and community involvement. For example, when the federal government began to require that Head Start teachers have

an associate degree, CCC was able to put programs in place to serve this population. The same process led to the creation of a successful respiratory care program to serve staffing needs of area hospitals, as well as a culinary arts program to serve the workforce needs at nearby casinos.

### **Economic Development**

According to an internal college study in 2007 of the economic impact of the career technical division and the allied health programs, the CCC community realized the importance of having educational programs that would meet the needs of the local business community and decrease unemployment or underemployment. This proactive strategic thinking was a shift from earlier years. The approach had two components, starting with an immediate response to business needs that could be met by workforce training and adult basic education programs. The second tactic, to strengthen career and technical education programs, was particularly effective. One story that stands out was the development of the college's respiratory care program, which could serve as a model for other rural communities.

In 2001, the local hospital was spending approximately \$100,000 to attract just a single respiratory care therapist to the area. In spite of the effort and extraordinary expense,

the hospital retained only approximately 40% of these therapists beyond 1 year. After a meeting of hospital and college leaders, a decision was made to establish a respiratory care program at CCC. The early result was small but remarkable. Nine students entered the program in 2002 and eight graduated; each was hired locally immediately after graduation. The hospital partner donated the funding necessary for the initial equipment to establish the program. Other hospitals, who had hired CCC graduates, began donating additional equipment to maintain the program. Of the 45 students trained in this program in the first 3 years, 41 found jobs in the field of respiratory care within the region. The college's economic impact report estimated that before the CCC program's establishment, the local hospitals spent more than \$1.2 million (including signing bonuses) recruiting respiratory therapists and sleep therapists outside of the service area during the same period. The retention rate for these recruited out-of-area employees was only 40% after one year. After the CCC program was in place, the hospitals spent only \$192,000, including signing bonuses, to recruit 48 employees and the job retention rate rose to 80% after 3 years of employment. In return, the college gained students, the graduates found good-paying jobs, and the community was well served.

## Fort Peck Community College

Poplar, Montana

### Overview

Fort Peck Community College (FPCC) serves the reservation of Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes in Montana. Approximately half of the 12,000 members of the tribes live within the reservation, which covers approximately 3,200 square miles. Less than half of the land is owned by the tribe or enrolled tribal members (Billings Area Indian Health Service, Fort Peck Service Unit, 2007). The size and rural nature of the reservation creates many transportation issues for the college.

The college has done much to reach out to its community. The Department of Community Services was established and is self-supporting through funding from external sources at the rate of approximately \$2 million annually, with 1 year reaching \$3 million. The department consists of four areas: social and economic development, agriculture, wellness, and outreach to K-12 youth. FPCC is based on the family education model, in which the student services function recognizes the importance of culture and family in educational success. Because there are so many social and health needs within the reservation, the college has emerged as a central place to find solutions. “You can do it” has become a common response to questions about things that need to be done. Under the leadership of the college president, who is committed to breaking the cycle of poverty among Native Americans, staff members are encouraged to get more education

and are assisted in the process. Many of the college staff had furthered or were presently furthering their education. In addition, the college has made an intentional effort to be involved in the local community. Several college administrators serve on community boards, and one is in her second term in the Montana State Legislature. College leaders view this kind of service as part of giving back to the community. One noticeable aspect of the college is its personal nature. Visitors to the campus noted that everyone appeared to know everyone else by name, leading to the conclusion that students and employees of the college saw the institution as a comfortable place to be.

Expansion of the college’s Wolf Point Campus provided space for more course offerings to meet student needs there. A new building for classroom use freed up space to house the Even Start program.

### Access

FPCC’s enrollment of approximately 400 students has been relatively stable. Like most community colleges, remedial education is critically needed on the Fort Peck Reservation. Lack of education serves as a barrier to success in higher education. Few of the Indian schools on the reservation meet the standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act. To help these students raise their performance, FPCC developed several programs. Each illustrates the sustainability of the RCCI goals.

The most noticeable effort is the formation of the college's "search and rescue" function within the student services area. Begun in 2000, it is implemented by the Students with Academic Attendance Trouble (SWAAT) team. Faculty provide the student services office with names of the students not attending classes, and the SWAAT team finds out the reasons for absences. The SWAAT team approach helps some students return to their courses; college helps other students withdraw in a manner that does not affect their academic standing. The people involved with this team reported that this is the best way to help students be successful, and they were willing to put in the extra effort required to make sure the students were successful.

The Even Start program, funded through a U.S. Department of Education grant, promotes literacy among all age groups on the reservation. The program director estimated that 50% of the residents within the reservation are functionally illiterate, and 40% have below a high-school literacy level. Even Start provides opportunities to increase the literacy level through adult education classes, as well as classes for children and parents. The college planned to infuse service learning into all aspects of the college beginning in 2008—a move consistent with the college's mission of service to the community.

The college addresses financial aid issues from several angles. Its philosophy of providing grants rather than loans to students, wherever possible, reflects the reservation culture, where the idea of debt is not well received. A gas voucher program was established in 2002 with external funding to provide a \$5.00 gas

voucher for needy students. Students who receive the vouchers must use the gas to get to class, cannot show up on the "search and rescue" list, and must attend a workshop on skill building and encouragement. Considering the distances involved (nearly 30 miles between Poplar and Wolf Point, the two closest towns on the reservation), the gas voucher program meets a significant need. The college works closely with the tribal executive board to ensure that other services, such as child care, are available for students.

### **Economic Development**

The college's economic development strategy mirrors the college's family education model by focusing on helping people maintain healthy lifestyles to be able to take advantage of economic opportunities. This is a persistent challenge in an environment that experiences cycles of "boom and bust" that fluctuate between seasons or economic investments in energy resources, such as oil. For this reason, it is difficult to measure or see consistent change in this area. To help people get healthy, the college maintains two wellness centers. Grant funds maintain the centers, which are the only places to "work out" on the reservation. Dependence of grant funding is problematic. The American Diabetes Association helps fund programs for diabetics on the reservation, and the elderly can use the facilities for free. Although these centers may not be a direct economic development project, they illustrate how meeting the community health needs can empower community members to feel confidence about taking advantage of economic opportunities.

## Laredo Community College

Laredo, Texas

### Overview

Laredo Community College (LCC), located on the Texas-Mexico border, is the largest land port in the United States. In fall 2004, The student body was 94.5% Hispanic, 1.7% White/non-Hispanic, and 3.3% international (primarily Mexican nationals). The college serves the counties of Webb (where LCC is located), Zapata, and Hogg, yet funding comes solely from City of Laredo taxpayers. Approximately 38% of graduating high seniors from Webb County attend LCC.

In fall 2005, the college enrollment was 9,100, marking a 9.2% boost since 2003. The increase can be attributed partially to the addition of the new Webb County south campus, near the Colonias, which opened in fall 2004 with 1,300 students in and jumped to 1,900 by Spring 2005.

“Familias Pueden” was the college’s focus during the RCCI demonstration. The program served a group of elementary age students and their families, beginning when the child was in first grade. The idea was that all members of a family, especially in communities with little or no experience with higher education, contribute to a student’s success in education. The college brought first graders, their siblings, and their parents on campus, provided community college students as friends and tutors, and generally expanded family knowledge about educational aspirations and pathways to student success. The cost of the program made it difficult for the college to

sustain Familias Pueden beyond the RCCI grant funding.

LCC tradition included an attitude about serving the region. RCCI helped stretch that commitment. Although the college did not sustain the Familias Pueden program, a number of “residual” effects appeared. One was a stronger notion of serving the entire community. Other effects were structural: changing the name of the college from Laredo Junior College to Laredo Community College, creating a grant-writing office to support the college, enhancing the development office’s capacity to increase scholarship funds, and using the RCCI Vision to Action strategic planning model as a way to move forward.

### Access

Opening of the South Campus was a momentous step. The president and other administrators attributed the changed view toward the city’s commitment to its surrounding rural communities to RCCI. Based in large part on what had been learned in the Familias Pueden program, college leaders purposely established the new campus in the southern area of Webb County. Lessons and insights from Familias Pueden as well as new data about the rural region justified locating the new campus of a city college (funded solely by the city) in a rural part of the county. Four years earlier when the process began, the location was isolated and the population clusters were the Colonias of El Cenizo and Rio Bravo.

The college's president noted that the RCCI experience helped raise awareness about the challenges of the rural county issues. The college had to win over voters to gain the \$50 million bond necessary to build the facilities. The college launched its "LCC Si" campaign in fall 2000 to educate voters about the need for this new campus in the southern region. The bond passed with an 82% approval.

The new campus includes facilities for the child development academic program, the protective services program, and the automotive and diesel repair program. New facilities allow for the further training of students in these areas. The child development center, which serves children from many low-income families, provides state-of-the-art instructional tools. The protective services programs train officers with the local police and sheriff departments. Collaboration between the college and the school board operating in the rural areas of the county could lead to dual enrollment and technical training in automotive repair, bodywork, and diesel truck mechanics.

LCC has continued its Kids College program, which provides opportunities for children to come on the campus for activities. New initiatives in Zapata County may help expand college services throughout the region. Adult basic skills and other continuing education programs are offered off site throughout the service region.

### **Economic Development**

It is difficult to separate economic development from access given the large proportion of low-income and unemployed

residents who need additional educational opportunities to participate in the workforce. English as a second language programs, graduate equivalency diplomas, and other adult basic skills programs are viewed as economic development efforts for the region. The college routinely has a waiting list of approximately 100 people seeking these programs; in past years, the list has exceeded 1,000. One of the challenges has been difficulty in acquiring funds from the county government for the participants. Limited resources and the continued demand remain challenges and stretch the college's human and fiscal resources.

The lack of transportation continues to affect this area's progress in economic development and improved access to higher education. State funding is hoped for to create a transportation system that would bring students from the surrounding rural areas to the south and main campuses of LCC. The college continues to work collaboratively with elected officials and school board officials to help rural communities in Webb, Zapata, and Hogg Counties.

As a large land port, Laredo is relatively stable economically. The college's training centers (protective services and the automotive and diesel repair programs) contribute to workforce development in the area. Adult basic education and continuing education programs are part of the key to helping the region move into a new economy.

## Mountain Empire College

Big Stone Gap, Virginia

### Overview

Mountain Empire Community College (MECC) serves four counties (Lee, Wise, Scott, part of Dickenson) and one independent city in southwest Virginia. The college had an enrollment of 1,881 in 2006–2007 and an unduplicated headcount of 4,368. Leadership of the college changed in January 2002 when the college hired a new president, but the college has retained many of the original team members who participated in RCCI.

Mountain Empire's RCCI work served as a stimulus for solving community problems. The college has always been community oriented, but RCCI provided tools and processes, such as Vision to Action, for strategic planning. The college became more actively engaged in the community and strengthened its role at the table.

It appears that much of the success of RCCI can be linked to a core group of people committed to supporting student success and changing the lives of the people in the region. A new president, who assumed his position at Mountain Empire in January 2002 after the RCCI demonstration had ended, continued and strengthened to college's mission to serve the community. In 2004, the college became a part of Achieving the Dream, the national student success initiative established by the Lumina Foundation for Education. That involvement prompted an institutionwide challenge to

build a culture of evidence and data to guide decision making. This approach was reinforced by a strong call for accountability at the state level. Some of the RCCI core team members have become members of the Achieving the Dream team. This situation reinforces some of the lessons from RCCI: that people can do things differently when supported with values they believe in and with tools and strategies that serve both college and community more effectively.

### Access

In spite of expanding several programs, MECC saw an 8% drop in enrollment between the 2002–2003 and the 2003–2004 academic years. College administrators suggested three things may have contributed to the reductions. First, tuition hikes occurred because of cuts in state funding to the college. Second, the college's new information system, PeopleSoft, posed unexpected barriers for students. Third, there was no offsetting increase in the proportion of high-school graduates (68%) who enrolled, because of the lack of growth in the region's school-age population.

MECC's expanded its involvement with AmeriCorps, which provides financial support for students to attend college, enabled the college to serve additional students and community agencies. During the academic year, AmeriCorps members tutor children in 13 area schools; in the summer, they work

with the Head Start program or other day-care facilities. Although the AmeriCorps director cannot confirm a causal relationship, the children in the 13 schools who received tutoring services from AmeriCorps members improved their reading scores on standardized tests. The counties in the college's service area have begun participating in the Imagination Library program founded by the Dollywood Foundation. The program, which targets 30% of the region's children, sends a free book monthly to children from birth to age 5. MECC also participates in Virginia's statewide GEAR UP program, bringing a cohort of high-school students to the college campus once every summer for 4 years. Students in the cohort explore different themes each year. In the most recent years, the program partnered with residential colleges to offer an overnight component to the summer experience.

Two new programs have been established since the RCCI demonstration. Through a federal grant secured by MDC, Inc., from the Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, MECC had the opportunity to develop a student leadership program. MECC developed a new 1-credit-hour student leadership development course that engaged students in leading service-learning projects with several community agencies. The course helped students become forces for positive change in the community.

The college's work as part of Achieving the Dream includes a greater reliance on trend data when developing academic

programs and a community scan consisting of 209 interviews with community members about educational needs in the area. This effort can be seen as an extension of the RCCI push to involve the greater community in the college's planning processes. In an effort to understand more fully the college's impact on students, data presented at an early Achieving the Dream meeting at the college revealed challenges in tracking accurate completion rates and rates of transfer to the university. These and other questions help focus the college's focus on student success.

### **Economic Development**

MECC has sustained two economic development programs that were started or enhanced during RCCI: the Coalfield Water Development Fund and the business incubator. It also initiated discussions about the creation of a regional community foundation, but when the financial and staff resources for this project were fully assessed, it was determined that this project would not be feasible. The college is clearly seen as an important partner in the economic development of the region. The region has shifted from trying to attract large corporations to promoting a more entrepreneurial focus through the business incubator. These sustained programs illustrate how the college has maintained its active engagement in the region. The decline in state funding and the end of foundation funds have made it difficult for MECC to begin new economic development ventures while sustaining current ones. The college constantly looks for other opportunities for support.

## Sitting Bull College

Fort Yates, North Dakota

### Overview

Sitting Bull College, a tribal college on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, has a service area that includes both North Dakota and South Dakota. In recent years, the enrollment for the college reached a plateau of 350 to 380 students. The reservation's unique characteristics contribute to some of the college's challenges. The unemployment rate on the reservation is estimated to be approximately 40% in the summer when seasonal agricultural jobs are available and approximately 70% the rest of the year. The rates are likely higher if the count includes unemployed people who no longer receive unemployment benefits. The impact of the economic situation is felt by the college, which has substantial needs for infrastructure improvements. The college receives significantly less funding per student than state public colleges. These factors must be taken into account when assessing the remarkable collection of accomplishments and sustained programs at Sitting Bull College.

There appears to be clear consensus among college personnel about RCCI's profound impact on the institution. Among the several elements sustained over time was the inclusion of economic development as part of the mission of the college. Revisions in college mission statement were supported

by the college president and approved by the college's board of trustees.

Another influence of RCCI that was sustained was the focus on planning for the future. The college adopted a strategic plan that permeated all parts of the college by assigning goals to specific collegewide committees. The committees report quarterly on progress toward the goals. On the basis of the effectiveness of this approach, college leaders were so confident about the strategic planning efforts that they requested early reaccreditation. The instincts of Sitting Bull College's leaders were right: The college received accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission at the bachelor degree level for its programs in elementary education, business administration, and environmental science.

RCCI built on the tribal college's natural inclination to focus on community involvement by assisting the college in creating more partnerships and strengthening existing affiliations. At Sitting Bull College, each academic program has an advisory committee that includes both community and college members. The college remained consistent in its goal to serve the citizens of the reservation. Given the dedication of the administration and faculty, the college has shown a remarkable capacity to do a lot with few resources.

### Access

Although most of Sitting Bull's RCCI work concentrated on the severe economic needs of the reservation, two major initiatives illustrate the college's attention to access. One has to do with student support; the other has to do with facilities. After losing federal funding for its TRIO student support services program, the college could have closed the program. Instead, it assumed program costs while waiting for the next round of grant applications. This was a critical decision in that approximately 90% of incoming students could be eligible for these services.

On the facilities side, the college constructed a new campus building to house science courses and some economic development initiatives. Supported in part by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the facility will provide the college with much-needed classroom and laboratory space.

Although enrollment has been relatively level for some time, administrators see two strategies that hold promise for increasing the number of students they serve. Changes in the way the college serves GED graduates (e.g., assigning the director of student support services to oversee the GED program) are aimed at attracting more students into college-level programs. Increased attention to the planning for residence halls on campus is also expected to draw more students. The desire of first-

time freshmen to move away from home, combined with the lack of housing on the reservation, makes residence halls a necessity. Campus-based housing could alleviate the same problems faced by first-time freshmen who leave the reservation to attend a state college or university and cannot succeed in the non-American Indian culture. Such students often lose more time once they return to the reservation and find themselves needing more time to gain enough self-confidence to try education again.

### Economic Development

During the RCCI demonstration, Sitting Bull College began the Tribal Business Information Center (TBIC) with financial support from the Small Business Administration (SBA). When SBA funding ended, the college absorbed the TBIC within its operating budget. The TBIC offers entrepreneur training using the NxLevelL training program and assists participants with business plans and funding options. The absence of start-up capital is a big issue on the reservation. Only one bank, located in McLaughlin, South Dakota, serves the reservation and it is not easily accessible to most residents who live in the North Dakota part of the reservation. This situation makes it difficult, if not impossible, for a small business to establish itself. Two TBIC initiatives are addressing the problem. The Tribal Business Equity Loan Fund can help

people who have completed their business plan as well as their entrepreneur training. The director of TBIC serves on the board that reviews applications to the Tribal Loan Fund. A second program, called Trickle Up, provides small loans (approximately \$500) to low-income participants. In addition, the new college building will house a business incubator—a much-valued resource because of the lack of reservation-based business.

The unique needs of the reservation prompted Sitting Bull College to take an innovative approach to providing job opportunities for its graduates. The college's building program does well, but its graduates have had to leave the reservation to find jobs. The college created the Sitting Bull Construction Company in 1999 to

provide jobs for its graduates. In 2005, the college established a technology company to service computer hardware.

Taking advantage of interest garnered by the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial, the college sought and received approval from both North and South Dakota for the designation of the primary road going through the reservation as a Scenic By-Way. Led by a college special programs administrator, the initiative focuses on bringing more tourism to the reservation. Funding was sought from the departments of transportation in both states to provide site markers for the points of interest, tourism marketing, and production of an outdoor Native American pageant, which would provide additional job opportunities.

## Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College

### Cumberland, Kentucky

#### Overview

Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKCTC) has five campuses in Cumberland, Harlan, Pineville, Middleboro, and Whiteburg. In fall 2005, the college served 4,580 students, which represents a 5% increase since fall 2003. The majority of students come from three service area counties; Harlan is the largest, followed by Bell and Letcher. Several of the towns in the service area were founded as company towns for the coal mining industry. The ebb and flow of the coal industry greatly influences the economic outlook and demographic characteristics of this region of Kentucky.

The main influence that RCCI had on this college was to make the community more a part of the college planning. This conclusion was supported by community members, who noted that the college role should be “to work with you.” The college president thought that RCCI shocked the college back into the way it should be—more community focused. Others noted that the RCCI efforts represented the first time some stakeholders were invited to be a significant part of the conversation.

The college has sustained and in some cases expanded programs begun during RCCI. A key factor in this success was the involvement of a dedicated president and a committed RCCI team. They and college staff members assumed that the college was a catalyst for change but not the cure. This belief led to the idea that projects could be

started at the college, nurtured by the college, and then handed off to the community to sustain. Although this philosophy appeared to work on one level, the college–community boundary was not always clearly defined. College personnel, who were, in fact, community members, might continue to serve as project leaders even after the projects had been “given” to the community. That said, given its relatively independent nature, the college appears to be a natural vehicle for change and new programs. The college was seen to be more proactive about empowering people and getting the community involved in planning.

#### Access

For some of the personnel working at the college, access is pseudonymous with open enrollment. RCCI stimulated the college to establish the Southeast Scholars Program. The program asks teachers and counselors to recommend sixth-grade students to apply from each of the schools in the college’s service area. The focus is on identifying low-income, first-generation college students who have “potential” to succeed. Students are selected on the basis of a personal essay and recommendations, and they must sign a contract committing to maintain a certain attendance record, improving their grades, and participating in the activities. The students, their parents, and the college sign the contract. In return, the participants

receive tutoring, mentoring, and cultural activities that expose them to different aspects of the region. One student interviewed mentioned that before he received the mentoring, he was not considering college at all. He planned to follow in his father's footsteps in the coalmines or to become a diesel mechanic. As a Southeast Scholar, he was successful in difficult college courses and changed his career aspirations—now toward become a mining engineer. After the Southeast Scholar Program's start-up with Ford Foundation funds, alternative funds sustain it. Major funding comes from a federal grant administered by the Harlan County Community Action Agency. The coordinator of the scholars program noted that none of the students had dropped out (although some had been asked to leave for nonparticipation) and nearly all were in college. Approximately 70% of the Southeast Scholars attend SKCTC; those that do not receive assistance in securing financial aid packages.

After the RCCI demonstration grant, the college was awarded a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant to wire all of its campuses with I-TV. This system provides the “critical mass factor,” allowing the college to offer courses that did not have sufficient enrollment on a single campus but could be offered if several campuses were linked by I-TV. This strategy increased accessibility to courses overall and reduced transportation problems, which constituted one of the major barriers confronting students. The college

also recognized that it had not paid sufficient attention to developing student leadership and welcomed an opportunity to become involved in an MDC project supported by FIPSE.

Community growth and sustainability remains a concern. Although the college has a fall-to-fall student retention rate of 66%, the community faces a major concern about the loss of young talent through out-migration. The community presently does not support many high-paying jobs.

### Economic Development

The declining economic situation in this region prompted the college to increase its attention to economic development. The college was the catalyst for starting Leadership Harlan County United, a program that selects community participants and provides leadership development focused on community activism. Participants take part in a 2-day training session and then take on a variety of projects that allow them to identify community issues aligned with their own interests. One past participant reported that before her involvement with Leadership Harlan County United, she had never considered running for public office. As a result of her experience, she was thinking about become the city magistrate. The program also inspired her to return to the college to finish her associate degree and then continue her education at one of the 4-year institutions in the area. The county leadership program is spurring residents to assume more responsibility for their towns and region.

To promote economic growth, SKCTC partnered with area banks to develop the Pine Mountain Community Development Corporation. The program, which provides access to capital for those who would not normally qualify for a traditional bank loan, aims to promote new business development and expansion of existing businesses. In addition to loans, small businesses receive technological and business advice assistance from the college. Although the development corporation was developed as a for-profit organization to attract more investors, some people worry that it might be missing more opportunities open to nonprofit organizations. Although area banks provide loan assistance, the college manages the applications and technical assistance.

Through the Southeast Education Fund, the college also manages several local businesses focused on increasing tourism.

These include the Benham Schoolhouse Inn, Kentucky Coal Museum, Sleepy Hollow Golf Course, and Mine Portal 31, an animatronics exhibit that tells the story of the evolution of mining. Originally, these projects were to be financed through state grants, but political changes led the college to sustain them through the Southeast Educational Foundation, an arm of the college responsible for fundraising. By early 2006, all businesses were under the ownership of the Kentucky Department of Parks, with all sites managed and promoted as part of the Kingdomcome State Park. College administrators are optimistic that the conversion will increase tourism revenue in the area, because the state has more resources for marketing. As one college administrator summed it up, the college sees its economic development role as “managing change, not chance.”

## Southeastern Community College

Whiteville, North Carolina

### Overview

Southeastern Community College serves Columbus County, North Carolina, and has a full-time equivalent enrollment of 2,406. The demographics on Columbus County indicate that 59.4% of residents have a high-school education; 20.5% live at or below the power rate. In addition, Columbus County is in the lowest tier for poverty in North Carolina. The residents of the county are 63.4% White, 30.9% African American, 3.1% American Indian, and 2.3% Latino.

Southeastern has a tradition of collaborating with the local community and being involved in economic development for the county. Being involved in RCCI enhanced that tradition by actively engaging the county in the planning process. Because of this culture within the college, numerous economic development programs are sustained, expanded, or enhanced. Everyone the researchers spoke to viewed the college positively and believed that the community considered the college to be a safe harbor. Several participants believed the college to be a catalyst for change in the area.

One of the primary factors influencing sustainability efforts is the dedication of senior administrator(s) to assist the residents of the county. In January 2005, the college hired a new president, the first female president at the college. She made it clear that the commitment by senior administration was critical to maintaining,

sustaining, and enhancing the efforts of the college. As she noted, “if they don’t carry the message [to those in their division] the message breaks down.”

### Access

During the RCCI initiative, Southeastern focused on improving its service of African American male students. The initial effort included hiring a minority recruiter. One of the new programs created was the Minority Mentor Program. The program focused on matching African American male students with mentors in the community. In its second year, 34 students participated in this program. The program was initially funded by state, but funds ended and the college is currently considering how these efforts might be continued.

The recruitment effort to increase African American participation shifted to the Basic Skills Program. The newly added minority recruiter reaches out to the community to increase the number of GED participants by explaining the services available to improve their skills through the Basic Skills Lab. It was clear that there was a commitment on the part of the basic skills staff to improve student success. The program estimated that the majority of successful GED graduates go on to enroll as Southeastern students. There were approximately 25 to 50 students using the laboratory when researchers visited on a Tuesday morning.

A new Work Incentive Grant channeled through the job link center focuses on increasing capacity for servicing disabled students and clients. This grant funds a person to gather information and train others on resources and available services within the community. The college has also equipped a workstation with state-of-the-art adaptive technology. This investment would be difficult without the grant.

### Economic Development

Southeastern has a history of economic development and community partnerships, and RCCI enhanced the efforts. Two factors help Southeastern have a tradition of community collaboration and promote the sustainability of those efforts. The first is that the college has fostered a culture of partnerships and economic development initiatives. Every person interviewed was aware of the goals of RCCI, whether they had been a part of the initiative or not. The second is the strong community college system in North Carolina. The college benefits from grants and programs that are funneled from the federal government through the system and to the community college. Examples can be found in their ongoing, as well as newly created, economic development programs:

- **Mom & Pop Grants:** Funded by the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, this program focuses on identifying and nurturing entrepreneur businesses in rural areas.

This initiative started the Rural Enterprise Through Action Learning (REAL) program, which educates potential entrepreneurs through a 39-session program. The program has remained steady with more than 20 participants.

- **Small Business Centers (incubators):**

These facilities are funded jointly by Brunswick Electric Corporation, Rural Consumer Services Corporation, and Southeastern. Small businesses can receive training and reduced rental space to begin their small business. One of the businesses was named a “New Business of the Year” by Columbus County. Some businesses have been at the centers for an extended period of time. Many would have a difficult time completely moving out of these facilities because of the low overhead costs. A business can expand and provide more employment opportunities without sacrificing capital.

- **Job link center:** This center serves both the college and the Columbus County community. The center is funded through a combination of state and institutional funds. The center provides a variety of programs to assist disadvantaged residents. The staff philosophy is that a person should be concerned only with coming to the center, and it is the obligation of the center to understand all the programs available to the potential client. Rather than promoting individual programs,

staff members are able to make referrals of eligible participants. The job link center served 2,613 people and generated a total of 9,620 client visits in 2005. The majority of their clients (approximately 80%) were African American women between the ages of 20 and 49.

- **Individual development accounts (IDA) and micro intake professional programs (MIP):** These programs are funded through the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center and serve predominantly those with low income, minorities, and women. The IDA is a matching savings account

for clients who want to save for (1) first-time home ownership, (2) education and training, or (3) new businesses. This program focuses on changing the mindset to aid people in long-range planning. The MIP program focuses on small business loans ranging from \$500 to \$25,000.

## Southwest Texas Junior College

Uvalde, Texas

### Overview

Before RCCI, Southwest Texas Junior College (SWTJC) was described as being in “castle mode” with a moat around it. This sentiment reflects the previous mission focused on transferring students to the four-year colleges in the immediate service area around Uvalde, Texas. Perhaps the major visible change for SWTJC is the broadening of its mission to include a regional attitude that incorporates a proactive rather than reactive approach to community needs. Every person interviewed understood this transformation and believed that it had become an integral aspect of the way the college conducted business. A regional attitude has nurtured a new openness to other initiatives and a greater capacity for change. There is no doubt that the regional community mission has infiltrated all aspects of SWTJC.

The college carries out this new mission by acknowledging the importance of serving the community through new programs and viewing human capital as its greatest asset. When asked about the vision of the college, several participants spoke of the importance of providing quality education to the region. This mission is sustained because of the buy-in of all of the senior administrators and their ability to articulate how the mission affects the daily processes of the college. For example, the college asks new faculty hires to submit a statement describing

their philosophy of education. This simple requirement ensures a good fit between new hires and the college’s mission.

An example of the college’s adaptability to change can be seen in its involvement in the national Achieving the Dream Initiative. This Lumina-funded grant focuses on colleges developing a culture of evidence for student success and making data-driven decisions. Almost all of the participants interviewed described the need for information and the importance of making decisions based on data, in contrast to the “gut feeling” decision-making style of the past that several participants noted.

### Access

The tremendous enrollment growth experienced by SWTJC is the most noticeable positive trend about access. In the spring of 2005, the college passed the 5,000 enrollment benchmark. This is approximately a 49% increase in enrollment since RCCI began. Although causal relationships are difficult to establish, it should be noted that the major enrollment increases are not at the Uvalde campus, but at the Eagle Pass and Del Rio campuses. These campuses were previously referred to as outreach centers, but as a result of enrollment growth and community buy-in, each of these sites became recognized as a SWTJC campus. The Eagle Pass campus has expanded by 20,000 square feet and currently has an enrollment of 1,493 students.

The Del Rio campus has two new buildings and recently purchased an additional 10 acres to accommodate the 1,172 enrolled students. Although the Uvalde campus continues to have the largest enrollment with 1,570, all of the participants acknowledge that the future growth for the college is likely to happen at the Eagle Pass and Del Rio campuses.

As a result of an RCCI project, SWTJC became electronically connected to all of the area high schools to offer distance education courses. The college increased its distance learning classrooms by almost 40%. Because of the distance and lack of transportation for many residents, this medium of instruction serves this rural community well. The college has clearly established an infrastructure that supports and enhances access through distance education and Internet connectivity. In addition to the distance education opportunities, the college has adapted faculty job descriptions to serve the region better. Currently, several faculty positions are designated as “traveling” faculty. These faculty members are based in Uvalde, but they do not teach at the main campus. Instead, they travel to various other towns to teach their courses. This is an example of taking the college to the region instead of expecting the region to come to the college.

The outreach efforts resulted in higher enrollments, but they increased the need to improve student success. SWTJC responded by creating the position of Dean of

Institutional Advancement and Technology. In addition, two new positions were created to work with this dean. One is the director of the Division of Education and Technology, which provides developmental education and online courses as needed by regional constituents. The director of the division estimates that between 60% to 70% of incoming freshmen need some developmental course work. The formal recognition of this need also prompted the college to apply for a Title V grant to create Academic Centers for Excellence (ACE) on each of the campuses. The ACEs provide tutoring service for almost any course and offer developmental courses. Students in developmental courses are required to spend one hour a week using a computer skill development program (Plato) that enhances their academic success.

As a result of the college’s desire to make more data-driven decisions, a position was created to work with institutional research data. The college created a data warehouse that identifies at-risk students and provides the necessary information to communicate with them before trouble arises. Again, this decision illustrates its proactive approach to student success.

The college is now equipped to compete and participate in national projects focused on increasing student success. SWTJC is part of the Engaging Latino Communities for Education program known as ENLACE, sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation, and

Achieving the Dream. In addition, the college participates in the national Community College Student Engagement Survey, which provides comparison data on both national and statewide institutional cohorts and allows the college to examine areas for improvement. Several senior administrators credit RCCI with giving them the exposure and skills necessary to find and apply for new funding opportunities that enhance the access to education in their region.

### **Economic Development**

During RCCI, the college began the workforce training project. The initial goal for the project was to train 500 people in 5 years. In actuality, the project trained 6,000 people in 5 years. The director of this project credits this success with the college's willingness to be responsive to the community needs. This responsiveness requires a fast turnaround on training request and continuous relationships with both the region's economic development agencies and local businesses. Pointing out that instead of saying "this is what the college provides for you," the project director asks the company what the college can provide for the businesses. An example of this responsiveness is related to the expansion of a local casino. When the casino needed workforce training for casino dealers, the director of the workforce training project contacted a community college in Las Vegas, Nevada, to partner with training needs.

The strong relationship between the Rio Grande Workforce Development Board and the college's Workforce Training Office further illustrates the sustained commitment to economic development. The executive director of the board reported that SWTJC provides 99% of the required training needs for the region. According to its executive director, the Rio Grande Workforce Development Board has the best relationship with a community college in the state. He credits this with some of the initial efforts of RCCI.

As a way to maintain connections with the region, the college president attends the Area Council of Government (ACOG) meetings. He encourages all of his administrators and faculty members to participate in regional and community agencies as a way to promote the college within the community. ACOG provides several educational programs through the college, including a summer program for college-bound high-school students. Although these community connections are difficult to maintain, they provide benefits to the college. The Del Rio campus partnered with community groups to purchase 10 acres of land for future growth. The college was able to provide a certain amount of money, and the community agreed to provide the rest. These mutually beneficial partnerships help the college provide better services to the region.

### Lessons Sustained from RCCI

The college identified several lessons on sustainability through its work with RCCI.

- Partnerships are difficult to maintain, but they work for the betterment of the community and the college.
- Communicating with partners is critical for successful community involvement.
- Understanding the connection between access and economic development leads to a more regional approach.
- Resources should be leveraged to get more grants.
- Information should be used to make decisions.
- By observing how things work, to the college community can imagine new opportunities.



## APPENDIX C: Methodology

Phase IV of the RCCI national assessment used a mixed method research design with simultaneous triangulation occurring during the assessment (Creswell, 2003). The practical nature of the assessment, along with the objective and subjective points of view that are inherent in this type of assessment, makes a pragmatic research position appropriate (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Pragmatic epistemology guided research decisions because pragmatism as a paradigm embraces the “plurality of methods and multiple method philosophies” (Maxcy, 2003, p. 52). This design requires using both qualitative and quantitative research methods simultaneously to investigate the effect of RCCI. The simultaneous and independent nature of the data gathering techniques allows for the analyses of each method to influence the other.

The methods used to collect data are independent of each other, but connected by context. The qualitative data was

collected using individual and group interviews within the framework of case study methodology (Merriam, 1998). Data analysis was conducted using open coding techniques and then axial coding to put the data back together into consistent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The quantitative data were gathered from U.S. Census, U.S. Department of Labor, and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) sources.

Trend analysis and matched-pair comparisons were used to compare the progress made in the RCCI colleges and communities with a different geographic service area that had similar characteristics but that had not been involved in RCCI. These control counties were (1) in the same state as the RCCI base counties, (2) served by a community college, and (3) had a community college with an equivalent degree of urbanization as the areas served by the RCCI comparison college.

Phase IV identified two primary questions:

1. Did participation in RCCI have a measurable effect on educational access and local economic development during the demonstration phase as Phase III assessment findings suggested?
2. Do the colleges that benefited the most from RCCI in the demonstration phase continue to benefit as the initiative moves forward?

### Sample

The set of colleges included in this assessment were selected using purposeful sampling technique (Patton, 2002). The primary researcher (Torres) contacted several people previously involved with the RCCI project. This group included members of the Phase III national assessment team, Lynn Barnett from the American Association of Community Colleges, and Cyrus Driver from the Ford Foundation. On the basis of the feedback, the following institutions were identified as potential participants in the Phase IV assessment:

- Mountain Empire Community College, Virginia, and Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College in the Appalachia region
- Southeastern Community College, North Carolina, and Coahoma Community College in Mississippi in the Southern region

- Southwest Texas Junior College and Laredo Community College, Texas, in the Southwest region
- Sitting Bull College and Fort Peck Community College representing the tribal colleges and universities of the Northern Plains

### Data Collection Procedures

The primary researcher made initial contact with the presidents of the selected institutions, asking them to designate a campus contact to work on this phase of the assessment. Potential site visit dates and individual interviews were negotiated between the campus contact and the primary researcher. Campus case study schedules varied by institution and tended to include interviews with some combination of the following leaders: the college president, economic development director, community members, institutional researchers, and other administrators. A doctoral student accompanied the primary researcher on some of the site visits to assist with taking notes, writing campus reports, and analyzing data across institutions. Eight institutions participated in the case study visits.

Before the interview, each participant received a human subject release form. After providing consent, interview sessions were tape-recorded. Each interview session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. A semistructured interview format was used

to gather some consistent information while allowing participants an opportunity to provide additional information that could assist in understanding the unique context of the institution and the influence of RCCI on the community. Researchers asked probing questions to gain a deeper perspective into the impact of RCCI and the sustainability of the initiatives. From the field notes and tape recordings, case study reports were created and checked with the institutional contact on each campus. This process of member checking adds to the credibility of the

qualitative data and allows for input from the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The validity of the findings for each case study was also enhanced by the use of a focus group from participating and nonparticipating RCCI colleges. Participants received questions prior to the focus group meeting and highlighted some of the findings that needed further clarification. This method enhanced the understanding of the outside processes and allowed the research to investigate emerging data further.





## APPENDIX D:

# RCCI Focus Group Summary

### Date

Friday, February 23, 2006

### Facilitator

Vasti Torres  
University of Indiana

### Participants by Phone

Rosemary Dill  
Coahoma Community College, MS

Ramon Dovalina  
Laredo Community College, TX

Hector Gonzales  
Southwest Texas Junior College, TX

Beverlee Nance  
Southeastern Community College, NC

Jim Shanley  
Fort Peck Community College, MT

Roy Silver  
Southeast Kentucky Community  
and Technical College, KY

Pam Ternes  
Sitting Bull College, ND

Martha Walker  
Danville Community College, VA

### Listeners of the Conversation

Jane Jensen  
University of Kentucky

Lynn Barnett  
American Association  
of Community Colleges

### Issues and Questions

1. When looking at the data, it appears that the colleges in the Southwest and the tribal colleges represent the greatest decrease in unemployment. At the onset of RCCI, the service counties for both tribal colleges and the Southwest colleges had unemployment rates higher than the control counties, and in both regions the RCCI service counties were able to lower the employment to below that of the comparison control counties. What do you think about this finding?
2. In describing the potential influence of RCCI on your college, two phrases emerged in the data. Between the phrases “residual effect” and “cultural shift,” which phrase do you think describes your college?

3. Did external forces influence your college as a result of being involved in RCCI? (Examples of this could be the exposure to resources available during RCCI or the interaction with other RCCI colleges).
4. One of the emerging findings in the case studies is that the second-tier leadership (vice presidents and directors) are assuming much of the leadership for RCCI initiated, sustained, or subsequent projects. What do you think is the impact of this finding?
5. Is there anything else that you think is interesting that we have not asked about?

### Summary of Focus Group Conversation

Each question was designed to explore a finding in the final report that could not be explained by the data that previously collected. This summary provides the highlights of the findings.

As expected in all assessments, the influence of external environmental issues or policy influences must always be considered. One of the findings from the focus group indicated that there has been renewed economic investment for energy resources in the southwest and in some tribal college service regions. This investment has improved the unemployment rates for the regions. At the same time, the other regions

have experienced closings of additional large industries thus creating higher levels of unemployment. This explanation is consistent with the findings in the final report.

Almost all the colleges chose to define what happened on their college as a cultural shift. The examples they gave as cultural shifts indicate that the capacity building accomplished by the RCCI initiative assisted colleges in making systematic and cultural changes that are sustainable. The colleges that chose residual effect tended to describe the influence of RCCI as more focused on the projects initiated rather than the system change process. It is interesting that some colleges separated their description by the goal. For example, they achieved a cultural shift in economic development, but a residual effect on access. This separation appears to be linked to the differing definitions given by the participants. The goal associated with projects was more residual and the goal associated with systemic change was associated more with cultural shift.

The final finding that emerged is that although all the colleges agreed that the second-tier leadership was instrumental, they stressed that change could not happen without presidential support. The support from the president continues to be an important factor in the success of these initiatives.



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