

Agricultural Outlook Forum

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GROWING A RURAL ECONOMY WITH AN ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE

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# GROWING A RURAL ECONOMY WITH AN ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

*Rural America is a study in contrasts. While some regions and communities are thriving, others are struggling to survive. During the widespread prosperity of the 1990s, many rural areas continued to suffer persistent poverty.<sup>1</sup>*

Danville Community College (DCC), located in south central Virginia, often described as southside, has been a major partner in a concerted effort to diversify and transform the economy of the region. The primary strength of the region's economy for the past half century has rested on wood products, tobacco and textiles.

Danville Community College's service region consists of two rural counties: Halifax (population: 36,362) and Pittsylvania (population: 61,752) and the City of Danville (population: 46,371) for a combined population of 144,485.<sup>2</sup> In 1992, more than 40 percent of all the jobs in the region were in manufacturing. With the dramatic decline of manufacturing jobs in textiles, tobacco, and to a lesser degree, wood products, approximately 25 percent of the jobs are currently tied to manufacturing, which is still higher than the national and state levels. Danville Community College, a member of the 23-college Virginia Community College System (VCCS), has a rich tradition in working with business and industry, a record that extends to the inception of its predecessor institution, Danville Technical Institute, established in 1935. For example, a number of Danville Community College's programs are more than 60 years old such as heating and air conditioning, welding, electronics, machining, and a number of others. Another predecessor institution was the Danville Branch of Virginia Tech which was established after World War II as a two-year extension center to prepare engineers, business and liberal arts students for transfer to Virginia Tech.

An article which appeared in a recent League for Innovation publication, the title of which is "Workforce, Economic, and Community Development: The Changing Landscape of the Entrepreneurial Community College," advances the proposition that not all community colleges have an entrepreneurial focus. In addition to the traditional access goal, the article's authors argued that entrepreneurial community colleges

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<sup>1</sup> *Expanding Economic and Educational Opportunity in Distressed Rural Areas: A Conceptual Framework for the Rural Community College Initiative.* MDC Inc. (Chapel Hill, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2005 Population Estimates.

concentrate on the following broad goals: (1) strengthening the workforce; (2) assisting with economic development; and, (3) assisting with community development. Moreover, the entrepreneurial community college is designed “to capture its entrepreneurial spirit, market-oriented drive, and responsiveness to external organizations.”<sup>3</sup> Danville Community College is committed to all of the aforementioned goals as a part of a larger strategy to assist with the economic revitalization of the region’s economy.

With regard to **access**, Danville Community College has launched a number of strategies to ensure that the College is delivering its programs, people, and message to the citizens who may have trouble commuting to the 76-acre campus located in the City of Danville. The College has established three neighborhood educational opportunity centers (NEOC’s) in Danville and several rural centers in the heavily rural counties of Halifax and Pittsylvania. The neighborhood centers serve as a vitally important outreach initiative for the College.

The outreach centers were initially funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation when DCC was selected in 1997 to participate in a national demonstration project, the title of which was the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI). RCCI helped community colleges sharpen their focus on addressing two overarching goals: expanding access and assisting with economic development.<sup>4</sup> DCC’s experience with Ford was invaluable in enabling the College to transform its internal culture among faculty, staff, and students, as well as its external constituencies. Since RCCI was launched in 1997, the College has experienced steady enrollment growth--notwithstanding the fact that the region’s population growth is flat and the demographics indicate strongly that the population’s workforce is becoming increasingly older.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, there has been an inexorable and disquieting out-migration of many of the region’s most talented youth. Unless major and aggressive strategies are taken, these results are ominous for the future workforce.

A second leg on which an entrepreneurial community college stands is in strengthening the workforce. Indeed the community college’s success, mission, and *raison d’etre* have traditionally been inextricably tied to expanding access and strengthening the workforce. However, an entrepreneurial community college views workforce preparation in a much broader perspective by incorporating degrees, certificates and diplomas as a part of the workforce process. Moreover, while customized training is also central to this process, so is career planning and placement. The latter has often been overlooked by many community colleges because this segment of the college’s function is either underfunded or not funded at all.

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<sup>3</sup> Grubb, W. Norton, Norena Badway, *et. al.*, “Workforce, Economic, and Community Development: The Changing Landscape of the Entrepreneurial Community College,” p. 1.  
<<http://ncrve.berkeley.edu/Summaries/1094sum.html>.

<sup>4</sup> *A Conceptual Framework*, pp. 1-3.

<sup>5</sup> *Regional Strategic Plan*—West Piedmont Alliance Planning District, 2003, pp. 2-3, 2-5.

If a community college does not have exemplary workforce programs, it will not likely be taken seriously by the economic professionals in a community. In other words, if the access and workforce issues are not outstanding and exemplary, the local community college will not likely be invited to the table as a true economic development partner. It requires the community college administrative leaders and faculty not only to recognize this imperative, but also to work on improving the college's position every day, *vis-a-vis* economic development. DCC provides data and technical services to economic development entities, and workforce professionals meet with prospects early during a search process. The senior administrative/workforce team often serves on economic development and chamber boards. Finally, the College is a major partner in the job creation and retention business. Danville Community College has established labs with advanced state-of-the-art technology and equipment in such areas as polymers which have had a direct impact on productivity among the area's employers. The College also provides technical services in a number of other areas. In addition, DCC has partnered with Virginia Tech in establishing a polymer/plastics institute. Virginia Tech and DCC are exploring a similar arrangement with nanotechnology. As a result, DCC has formed an exciting partnership with Virginia Tech, Averett University, a local liberal arts university, the Institute of Advanced Learning and Research, and local industry and political leaders to facilitate a bold economic development initiative.<sup>6</sup>

When the community college is clicking on all of the above goals (*i.e.*, access, workforce, economic development, and community development ), it is affecting community building and economic transformation, thus contributing immeasurably to quality of life issues. Rural communities must have an aggressive, proactive plan for economic competitiveness. An entrepreneurial community college is one of the key partners in the game plan.

(I plan to show a seven-minute video on our Advanced Digital Manufacturing Center.)

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<sup>6</sup> “*Learning. Working. Winning. Bringing the New Economy to the Dan River Region.*” A Report of the Future of the Piedmont Foundation, prepared by MDC Inc., Chapel Hill, 2000.