Workforce Learning Summit Innovation or Best Practice

Mayland Community College

Developing the Agricultural Economy: Spurring economic and workforce development through natural resource development, creativity and entrepreneurship support

Mayland Community College has worked with multiple partners to embrace the agricultural heritage and creativity of the rural counties it serves. Through a collection of related initiatives, Mayland has implemented innovative economic development strategies to build the sustainable agriculture economy, help area residents increase income through farming and other natural resources, and prepare young people to create their own jobs.

DETAILS

Mitchell, Avery and Yancey counties have faced a number of common challenges:

- Double-digit unemployment; underemployment
- Limited industry in the area
- Poverty, low incomes
- Small family farms on the decline

However, Mayland Community College leaders and their partners have also been attuned to area strengths:

- Agriculture
- Other natural and man-made resources, e.g., energy available through landfill gas
- Strong arts culture
- Initiative and adaptability of the local population

Mayland Community College has collaborated with various local organizations, the Cooperative Extension Service, the public school system and individual investors to make use of and teach about natural resource-based workforce, entrepreneurship and economic development opportunities.

- EnergyXchange - Mayland Community College worked with community organizations to start planning for the EnergyXchange in 1996 and begin operations in 2001. Its mission is to apply the use of renewable resources and practices for educational opportunities. It supports economic opportunities in the area in a variety of ways:
  - Uses methane from the closed Yancey-Mitchell landfill to power an art studio and business incubator for pottery and glass craftwork
  - Collects seeds from native plants and propagates plants on campus to sell to local farmers as an alternative to tobacco and the recently-tepid Frasier fir market
Is co-located with the park site that will house the largest telescope in North Carolina and be the only “International Dark Sky” designated park in the southeastern United States.

- **“TRACTOR”** is a close partnership between the Cooperative Extension Service and Mayland Community College to connect small family farms with mainstream markets (e.g., Ingall’s grocery store), offer shared-use equipment and offer education and training to family farmers.

- **Community Kitchen** – After Mayland Community College’s cafeteria closed, the college turned it into a community kitchen. In addition to offering space, the college involves its Small Business Center in preparing customers of the kitchen in developing their businesses.

- **Berkshire Project** – Mayland Community College worked with the K-12 system and investors to give Berkshire pigs to high school students to raise and obtain experience in managing an agricultural business. Berkshire pigs yield particularly high quality pork, so this hands-on training provides a future income opportunity as well as promoting agriculture as a career.

- **High Country Berry and Fruit** – this program (connected with TRACTOR, the EnergyXchange and Community Kitchen) assists in the development of a more diverse agricultural market through berry and fruit processing/production.

**Partner Type(s):**
- Business/Industry (direct involvement)
- Public Schools
- Economic Development
- Other: NC Cooperative Extension (university-sponsored), chamber of commerce, community organizations, individuals

**Impact/Outcomes**

Mayland Community College has demonstrated how communities can identify and build on internal economic assets such as agriculture, other natural resources and the arts. It has helped show that “economic development” is about more than just attracting manufacturing companies.

The agricultural/natural resource initiatives have benefited various groups:

- Artisans have benefited from Energy Xchange, which was established through a partnership with community organizations and Mayland Community College and is now sponsored by Mayland Community College.
- The “Dark Sky” park designation and planned observatory co-located with EnergyXchange are likely to benefit the community and area economy.
- Farmers have been able to purchase alternative crops to grow for income through the campus initiative to propagate native plants.
- Individuals have been able to use the community kitchen for commercial/income-generating purposes.
- Six high school students so far that have learned about farming and entrepreneurship through the Berkshire Project.
**Funding Source(s)**
The initiatives were supported through various funding sources, including (for the Berkshire Project) individual investors.

**REFLECTIONS**

**Innovation or Best Practice**

- Mayland Community College’s activities make use of existing natural resource and community assets, reveal an entrepreneurial and collaborative approach to community problem-solving, and offer entrepreneurship as well as job-based income-generating opportunities.
- The initiatives show how entrepreneurship and workforce development intersect and can be promoted together.
- The agriculture-focused training demonstrates how community colleges and the Cooperative Extension Service can work together effectively.
- In its collaborative agriculture and natural resource initiatives, Mayland Community College has had a broad impact on the economy and community, and it reaches a broad segment of the population, including public school students, farmers, artisans and underemployed individuals.

**Lessons Learned**

- Community colleges can play a critical role in spurring economic opportunities.
- Perceived deficits can be turned into assets; for example:
  - Methane released from the Yancey-Mitchell County Landfill on the EnergyXChange site was used for energy for glass-blowing and pottery kilns
  - The limited development of the area kept the night sky dark enough for the area to build a globally-recognized Dark Sky park

**Scalability**

Intrinsic economic development assets vary from community to community, so it may not be realistic to expect a Star Park, landfill energy generator or arts incubator to succeed if replicated, but the general concept of building on unique community assets is applicable in any community.

The statewide “infrastructure” of the Community College System (e.g., its Small Business Center Network) and the NC Cooperative Extension Service would enable other rural communities to develop similar agricultural workforce/business development partnerships.

**RESOURCES**

**Workforce Learning Summit Presenters**
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**For Further Information**
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