



Expanding Economic and Educational Opportunity in Distressed Rural Areas

A Conceptual Framework for the Rural Community College Initiative



A national demonstration
of the Ford Foundation

MDC, Inc.
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The Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) was created by the Ford Foundation as a partnership among 24 participating colleges, MDC, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), and the Foundation. The Initiative is managed by MDC. Documentation and assessment is provided by AACC. The Ford Foundation also supports a sister project at the University of Namibia's Northern Campus for which MDC provides technical assistance. Video Dialog Inc. provides video documentation and related media services for both RCCI and the Namibia project.

MDC's mission is to foster economic, workforce, and community development that works for all people. The organization accomplishes its mission by analyzing economic, workforce, and demographic trends to identify challenges that impede progress. It addresses those challenges from multiple angles, including: developing responsive public policies; demonstrating effective programs; building institutional and community capacity for change; and informing the public dialog. MDC emphasizes approaches that benefit poor people and poor places. A private nonprofit, the organization is supported with grants and contracts from foundations; federal, state, and local governments; and the private sector.

MDC has produced numerous resources for RCCI which are available to the public.

For more information about RCCI, this publication, and related video and print resources, please contact MDC or visit the RCCI website at www.mdcinc.org/rcci.html.

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Preface

The Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) began in 1994 as a national demonstration designed to help community colleges in distressed regions move their people and communities toward prosperity. It challenged community colleges to become catalysts for economic development and supported aggressive efforts to increase access to education in rural communities.

Over the past seven years, RCCI has nurtured a peer learning network among member colleges, providing a forum to discuss common challenges and share promising strategies. It has provided expert technical assistance to improve educational access, stimulate community and economic development, and strengthen colleges' institutional capacity. It has generated new ideas to energize colleges and stimulate innovation. And it has demonstrated a workable process for college/community collaboration. The RCCI also has spawned an independent membership organization, the Rural Community College Alliance, that plans to sustain the RCCI learning network, share RCCI practices with more colleges, and become a national voice for rural community colleges.

The RCCI has been a dynamic initiative. Its core principles have remained constant, but new concepts have been added over the years based on innovations at the sites, insights from RCCI partners, and research on rural development. The first edition of the *Conceptual Framework* was written in 1994 to provide a common philosophy for the demonstration and guide activities at RCCI sites. MDC revised the paper in 1996 and 1998 to incorporate new ideas that had become part of RCCI. This final edition of the *Conceptual Framework*, written in 2001, reflects seven years of experimentation and learning.

The RCCI is a proven model that can inform and inspire community colleges seeking to partner with their communities to expand opportunity for rural people. Readers who want to explore RCCI process and practices further should refer to the collection of videos, guidebooks, and resource materials titled *Strategies for Rural Development and Increased Access to Education: A Toolkit for Rural Community Colleges*, available from MDC. (See inside front cover for contact information.)

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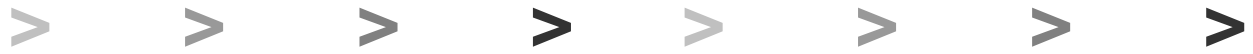


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Introduction

The Rural Challenge

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.

In recent decades, global economic forces and technological change have caused many rural communities to lose their historic job base of mining, farming, timber, or low-wage manufacturing. Many Indian nations have never been able to develop viable economies on reservations. Other rural communities face a different challenge: rapid growth threatens to overwhelm traditional culture, while the benefits of an expanding economy fail to reach low-income residents.

Distressed rural regions are diverse racially, ethnically, and culturally as well as economically. Their populations include Appalachians, African Americans and whites in the Deep South, many Indian nations, Mexican-Americans and other Hispanics in the Southwest. Despite their differences, these communities share rich cultural traditions and strong values of family and community. They also share common economic and social challenges.

In all these regions, education levels are low. Many young people drop out of school; others leave home after high school or college for lack of job opportunities. Community development efforts struggle to combat the sense of powerlessness that comes from absentee ownership of land and resources, a one-industry economy, or high dependence on government programs and transfer payments. And many communities are divided by conflicts between racial or ethnic groups, between rich and poor, or between natives and newcomers.

Rural people deserve opportunities to participate in America's prosperity. And rural communities have few institutions other than community colleges that can simultaneously work to build a viable economy and educate people for a better life.

The Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) offers a model to help community colleges in distressed areas move their people and communities toward prosperity. The RCCI challenges colleges to think broadly about their potential as catalysts for regional development. It does not impose a particular set of programs or strategies to solve regional problems; rather, it fosters a climate of innovation that will spark local solutions. The RCCI approach helps colleges, in partnership with their communities, develop effective strategies for economic development and educational access—a process that can put their regions and their people on the road toward economic renewal.



RCCI Principles

The RCCI is grounded in five principles:

1. ***Rural America matters.*** Rural communities are the source of our natural resources as well as many of our values. The heart of America must remain healthy if the body is to survive.
2. ***Healthy communities focus on their assets.*** Rural America is home to rich cultural traditions and diverse natural environments. Successful communities nurture and build on their natural and human assets to promote prosperity. The RCCI encourages development that is compatible with the valued heritage of rural communities.
3. ***Change begins with self-assessment.*** A willingness to address community problems and work for institutional change is central to RCCI. The change process begins with an honest, data-driven analysis of community strengths and challenges. This analysis helps the community reach agreement on priorities for action and set attainable goals that reflect its vision for the future.
4. ***Effective change requires collaboration and inclusiveness.*** The divides of geography, race, wealth, and culture are particular threats to fragile rural communities. Across the country, communities that value diversity and practice collaborative, inclusive decision-making are more successful than those with narrowly held political power or deep race and class divisions. Successful communities pay attention to building institutional collaboration, eschewing internal competition, broadening leadership, and promoting shared decision-making. To this end, RCCI strengthens partnerships between the college and the community and brings new voices to the table.
5. ***Equity and high expectations should undergird education and economic development goals.*** The most successful communities are committed to guaranteeing all people—rural and urban, rich and poor—access to high-quality education, with support to help them succeed in school and in the economy.

Strategic Directions: Economic Development and Access to Education

The RCCI stresses economic development and access to education as concurrent goals because both are needed to revitalize distressed rural areas.

- ***Economic development*** can create jobs, income, and wealth. But economic development often fails to benefit poor people. Even in a growing economy, people with weak education and skills cannot get good jobs. And even in a



thriving region, lack of access to capital and business know-how prevents many potential entrepreneurs from starting successful businesses.

- ***Education and training*** are essential to help individuals gain access to good jobs, wherever they choose to live. But without a strong economy, many rural people have to leave their communities to find work.
- ***The link between economic development and access to education*** is especially important in poor rural regions. In these places, low levels of educational attainment and high poverty are barriers to development that must be addressed directly if the economy is to thrive.

Why Community Colleges?

Rural community colleges and tribal colleges are uniquely positioned to be catalysts for increasing economic and educational opportunity in their communities. They are “common ground” institutions, respected by the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Compared to most institutions, they are trusted by people across social classes. They can convene diverse groups of people to work on community problems; they can help create a collaborative civic culture, part of the foundation for community prosperity. They have the stature, the stability, and the flexibility to provide leadership for regional development.

Community colleges are active on both the supply and demand side of the labor market, working to create jobs while preparing people to fill those jobs. Indeed, they are the only institutions with the capacity for both *place-based* economic development and *people-based* education and training strategies.

As flexible institutions with a broad mission, community colleges have the potential to build bridges within their communities and regions. For young people, they can bridge the gap between high school and postsecondary education or work. For adults, they can provide links to basic education, occupational training, a baccalaureate degree, and good jobs. Community colleges can connect employers with qualified workers, cutting-edge technology, and improved forms of workplace organization. And they can link potential entrepreneurs with resources for successful business operation.

A Collaborative Process

Despite their strengths, community colleges cannot achieve RCCI goals on their own. There are many forces—both internal and external to the community—that bear on community vitality and prosperity. In seeking to expand educational and economic opportunity, the college operates in a complex environment that includes the economic system (with many levels, from local to international), the educational system, and multiple tiers of government. The environment also



encompasses social values and norms that shape the behavior of individuals, families, civic organizations, businesses, and government. And it includes other institutions that influence community affairs, such as local newspapers and grassroots organizations.

On its own, the college has direct influence in just one of these spheres—education. But even in that sphere, many factors affect the college’s ability to expand educational access—the nature of local K-12 schools, public investment in higher education, local job opportunities, cultural values about education, to name just a few. In the realm of economic development, the college occupies an even less central position.

The RCCI experience has shown there is much that colleges can do as catalysts for improved education and economic opportunity, but they cannot do it alone. The multifaceted environment in which the college operates, coupled with the ambitious goals of economic development and educational access, calls for deep college/community collaboration. Besides providing an effective way to address community problems, such collaboration can also strengthen the college as an institution.

To encourage effective collaboration between college and community, the RCCI process begins with a leadership team representing both the college and the community. The team analyzes economic opportunities and educational needs in the region and develops a strategic plan. It draws in key partners from the college and the community to help make the resulting vision a reality.

This team-led collaborative process is important for three reasons. It produces a plan that addresses issues of serious concern to the community. It generates the energy needed to implement the plan. And finally, it models the kind of broad-based, inclusive leadership that characterizes successful communities. That process can set an example for other community initiatives in the future.



Economic Development

In RCCI, “economic development” means creating jobs, raising incomes, generating wealth, and reinvesting that wealth in the region’s businesses, institutions, and people. It means increasing the overall level of economic activity in the region—creating opportunities for people to start and operate profitable businesses, do productive work, and raise their standard of living. And it means targeting economic opportunity to people who have been left out.

Each community or region needs to define the kind of development it seeks based on the values of its people, its assets—including natural and human resources, cultural resources, and existing economic strengths—and its constraints or weaknesses. It is not always easy for a community to agree on a vision for developing its economy. Many communities debate the trade-offs between growth and environmental or cultural preservation. In some rural communities, including Indian reservations, there is deep-rooted ambivalence toward a capitalistic, money-centered economy. Before signing on to an economic development agenda, people want to know how it will lead to a better life.

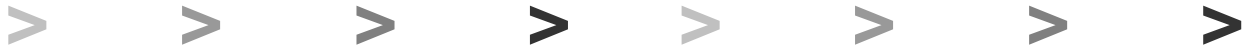
The RCCI encourages each community to define economic development in harmony with local values and set appropriate goals that will lead toward prosperity.

The Foundation for Development

Economic development efforts often focus on job creation by encouraging new business start-ups, helping existing businesses expand, and recruiting businesses to the region. But in many rural communities, the foundation for business development must first be put in place. That foundation includes technology and capital; a well-prepared workforce; a culture of entrepreneurship; sound physical infrastructure; and strong civic and social infrastructure, including broad-based leadership, good schools, competent local government, health care, child care, and strong community organizations.

In the past, much rural economic development relied on exploitation of natural resources or recruitment of industry, often marketing cheap land and labor as community “assets.” In an era of global competition, those old approaches will not yield positive, sustainable results. Today, a community’s economic prospects depend on a flexible, well-trained workforce, good public schools, access to technology and capital, cultural and natural amenities, and a strong civic infrastructure.

Today’s successful communities are those that help their existing businesses become more productive and competitive, as well as assisting new business start-



ups. They take a regional approach, working across town and county lines to build on common strengths. And they work to strengthen their foundation for development, especially their civic infrastructure.

Building Civic Capacity

Increasingly, the notions of “civic capacity” and “social capital” are helping people understand what makes for healthy communities and strong local economies. Civic capacity refers to factors such as the vitality of local leadership and local government, citizen involvement in civic affairs, and the breadth and capabilities of community organizations. The related notion of social capital encompasses relationships, networks, and bonds of trust among people that facilitate problem-solving and collective action within a community.

Based on the experience of MDC and other researchers and practitioners, communities that make the surest progress toward improving quality of life for all citizens are those with a culture of inclusion, engagement, and democracy. These are places where voices from all sectors of the community are heard in solving community problems—including newcomers, women, lower-income people, members of racial and ethnic minority groups, and people with unconventional views. To bring new voices to the table, communities must have the “will” to become more just, fair, and democratic, and they must be open to new ideas. Successful communities practice open, inclusive decision-making. They work to strengthen leadership and group process skills so more people can participate effectively in broad-based decision-making.

Equally important are interpersonal relationships. Successful communities benefit from a critical mass of trusting relationships that cut across lines of race, class, religion, and neighborhood. These relationships enable leaders of diverse constituencies to work together on common problems.

Another characteristic of successful communities is a sense of shared responsibility and consensus around a common vision for the future. When leaders from business, government, education, and community organizations—along with diverse, ordinary citizens—recognize their common interests and reach “alignment,” working together toward common goals, the community is more likely to move ahead.

Finally, a healthy local economy depends not only on private entrepreneurs but also “civic entrepreneurship.” People scout out promising models for community revitalization, develop innovative responses to local problems, and volunteer their time for community development efforts. Capable organizations initiate projects and services that are not provided by government or business.

Community colleges can make important contributions to building all these underpinnings for economic development—inclusive decision-making, broad



civic engagement, stronger bonds of trust across the community, alignment around a common vision for the future, and a spirit of civic entrepreneurship and innovation.

Nation-Building in Indian Country

Economic development in Indian Country presents special challenges akin to those in developing countries. Indian nations are isolated from mainstream America, with poor infrastructure, weak governments, and little access to capital. Poverty is endemic. As with other developing countries, the native nations of America must reassume control over their tribal assets, tribal institutions, and tribal governments before they can build a new economy. This transformation is slowly taking shape in Indian Country under the rubric of “nation-building.”

For many decades, life in Indian Country was dominated by centrally controlled federal government programs. Today, American Indian leaders are on a steep learning curve when it comes to managing tribal assets and accessing and managing capital from nongovernment sources. They must also contend with the volatility of political strife in Indian communities. Nevertheless, they know that education and strong governance are keys to long-term development.

The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development maintains that economic development on reservations is first and foremost a political challenge. To build their economy, Indian nations must first develop: (1) stable institutions and policies; (2) fair and effective dispute resolution; (3) separation of politics from business management; (4) a competent bureaucracy; and (5) a form of government that is compatible with tribal culture.

Thinking Strategically

The goal of most local economic development programs is simply “job creation.” The RCCI urges rural communities to delve deeper in setting their goals by asking, “What outcomes do we seek?” Objectives might include diversification of the economy, greater local ownership of businesses, higher-skill/higher-wage jobs, drawing new income to the region, or targeting development efforts to benefit the poorest citizens. Different objectives point to different strategic approaches.

If job creation is the central objective, it is important to recognize that not all jobs are created equal. This is true not just in terms of job quality (for instance, wages, benefits, job security, occupational safety) but also in terms of impact on the regional economy. The most important distinction is between “economic base” businesses that bring new income into the region and service/retail businesses that recirculate consumer dollars within the region.



Retail and service businesses typically serve local customers. These firms are important for rural communities—they offer convenience (for instance, a grocery store close to home) and they prevent consumer dollars from leaking out of the region. But a regional economy cannot be built on service businesses alone. Regional economies thrive based on their ability to export products (for instance, through manufacturing) and import dollars (for instance, through tourism). Regions that find ways to build their economic base will have a stronger economy in the long run.

How does a region go about building its economic base? Successful economic development efforts identify and build on the region's competitive advantages. These can include strengths such as existing industry clusters, workforce capabilities, natural and cultural resources. Successful communities also recognize that today's competitive advantage may not be tomorrow's. They improve their long-term prospects by looking entrepreneurially for new opportunities, rather than just protecting their current economic niche.



Economic Development Approaches for the Future

New economic realities in rural America demand new approaches to economic development. Rural development experts looking toward the next century urge communities to develop their human resources and a sound civic infrastructure, to assist new and existing businesses, and above all to take a collaborative, regional approach to development.

Typical Past and Current Approaches	Approaches for the Future
Heavy dependence on natural resource base—agriculture, extraction, and timber.	Importance of intellectual, cultural, and civic resources for economic development.
Recruitment of industry, marketing cheap land, labor, and taxes.	Enhancing productivity and competitiveness of existing business and workers; help for new business start-ups. Strengthening the foundation for development, especially civic infrastructure.
Competition among adjacent towns and counties.	Regional approach that involves business and civic leaders across town and county lines.
Economic development priorities often set by one or two agencies, in a process dominated by established interests.	Priorities emerge from collaborative process involving multiple agencies and organizations, with broad-based community participation and support.
Focus on increasing the number of jobs.	Focus on raising the overall economic tide while also benefiting lower-income, lower-wealth residents.

Economic Development: Roles for Community Colleges

Across the country, workforce education is community colleges’ most widely recognized contribution to economic development. Colleges prepare workers for technical occupations, upgrade the literacy skills of adults in the workplace, and in many states, provide customized training for employers.

In addition to workforce preparation, there are several other ways in which community colleges can provide support and leadership for economic development. These are especially important in rural areas, where there are often few institutions other than the community college that can perform these functions.



Rural community and tribal colleges have acted as catalysts for economic development in the following ways:¹

1. ***Strengthening the foundation for economic development through civic capacity-building.*** Community colleges can help build civic capacity by convening stakeholders to develop a unified vision for the community and by nurturing a broad-based cadre of community leaders. They can also help strengthen a web of innovative organizations prepared to respond to community challenges.
 - *Act as conveners to build a unified vision for the community’s future.* A widely held, shared vision for the future can help a community move toward prosperity and equity. A community college can build this alignment by convening leaders from business, government, education, agriculture, and community-based organizations, helping them develop a positive vision for the community and supporting them in working toward common goals. Strategies tested by RCCI colleges include: organizing “economic summits” and other events that introduce community leaders to new ideas and successful models for community development; initiating regional planning efforts; and mobilizing large numbers of people to get involved in civic affairs.
 - *Broaden the civic leadership base.* Rural community change often is impeded by the small size and homogeneous make-up of local leadership. Expanding the leadership base can bring the community new energy, new ideas, and new directions, especially in communities with high poverty, deep race or class divisions, and narrowly held political and economic power. Strategies initiated by RCCI colleges include: designing and operating community leadership programs that draw more people—especially minorities, youth, and lower-income citizens—into civic life, and working with tribal government to strengthen economic development leadership.
 - *Create new organizations to lead community development work.* In most rural communities, the nonprofit sector is small and fragile. Funding for nonprofits is limited and tenuous, and most organizations focus on a narrow area of activity. Yet nonprofits increasingly are recognized as important players in facilitating community change and providing services not offered by the public or private sectors. In RCCI, college/community teams have provided leadership to create or strengthen organizations such as community development corporations, community foundations, Indian chambers of commerce, and a special fund to provide water-and-sewer services for low-income rural homes.

¹Many examples of economic development strategies can be found in the *RCCI Toolkit*. See especially the videos and case stories on regional economic development, small business development, workforce development, telecommunications/distance learning, and harnessing the power of culture.



- 2. *Initiating and strengthening entrepreneurship and small business development programs.*** In distressed rural areas with few large employers, growing healthy small businesses is a particularly important economic development strategy. Many rural colleges operate small business centers that offer counseling, technical assistance, and skills workshops; and RCCI urges them to set high-quality standards for their services. Additional college strategies in support of small business include: developing and managing business incubators (including specialized incubators for e-commerce, food products, or other types of businesses); working with banks and other institutions to create new loan funds or other strategies to make more capital available to rural businesses; providing specialized support to self-employed artisans; offering entrepreneurship courses to help more people start and operate successful businesses; and seeking out or developing entrepreneurship curricula that are in harmony with local culture and values.
- 3. *Promoting a regional approach to economic development.*** Whenever possible, RCCI encourages communities to work regionally to develop their economy. For too long, rural towns and counties have approached economic development as a competition against their neighbors. In today's highly competitive global economy, small communities achieve more when they pool resources, identify common assets, and work together to develop the regional economy. Community colleges are natural leaders in this arena because most serve multicounty areas. Strategies tested by RCCI colleges include: leading regional or reservation-wide tourism initiatives; initiating regional planning efforts; and uniting regional leaders to design regional economic development initiatives.
- 4. *Coordinating a regional workforce development system attuned to employers' changing needs.*** Community colleges enhance their regions' competitiveness when they work closely with employers to design and deliver high-quality education and training at a variety of levels. These include: basic and advanced skills training for existing workers; customized training for expanding firms; workshops to help managers implement quality standards for the high-performance workplace; training in teamwork and related skills to help workers adjust to new workplace demands.
- 5. *Promoting technology transfer and competitiveness.*** Just as the Extension Service has helped spread new agricultural technology among farmers during the 20th century, 21st century rural America needs an institution to help small and mid-sized businesses adopt new technologies. Community colleges can play important roles by organizing manufacturing networks, serving as brokers between firms and sources of specialized technical assistance, and developing programs tailored to key sectors in the regional economy. These services, along with high-quality workforce training, can have significant impact on the stability and expansion of local businesses.



- 6. *Developing programs that target poor people while creating jobs.*** Too often, the fruits of the best-intended economic development efforts fail to reach the people who most need jobs and income. Some economic development strategies address this challenge head-on. These include: school-based enterprises (which teach entrepreneurship and business management skills while creating actual businesses based at a high school or community college); microenterprise programs for welfare recipients and other low-income people; youth community service programs (which provide education, job skills, and heightened self-esteem for participants while supporting community development efforts); and targeted job training for new and expanding industries (which gives poor people direct access to new jobs created as a result of successful economic development initiatives).
- 7. *Encouraging a strong education ethic.*** Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, most jobs in rural America required little formal education. The rural economy failed to provide an incentive for completing high school, let alone college. Today, the playing field has shifted—education is a prerequisite for both individual and community prosperity—but many people have not heard the message. Community colleges can be a powerful force for economic development by encouraging a strong education ethic in their regions.



Access to Educational Opportunity

Providing broad access to education is central to the community college movement, and community colleges pride themselves on extending an “open door” to all in their service area. Indeed, rural community colleges (as well as their urban sisters) serve a broad socioeconomic cross section of the population, and RCCI colleges serve large numbers of the rural poor.

There are particular populations, however, that face special barriers to education and employment: they are the people for whom “college” is often an alien idea and a forbidding institution. If they are to enroll and succeed in college programs and secure good jobs, the college needs to provide not just passive accessibility through open admissions and low tuition but active, aggressive outreach, counseling, support, and job placement.

For RCCI, the term “access” encompasses both access to the college and access through the college to expanded opportunities—including further education and productive, rewarding work. It calls for active attention to several populations:

- Middle school and high school students—especially those at risk of dropping out of high school and those enrolled in academically weak programs that prepare them neither for college nor for work.
- Community college students (including first-generation college-goers) whose weak academic skills or need for support services threatens their success.
- Adults and out-of-school youth (including high school dropouts and welfare recipients) who are unemployed, marginally employed, or have given up looking for work.
- Adults in the workforce who need new skills, including recently dislocated workers and those in danger of losing their jobs due to changes in technology or workplace reorganization.
- People living in remote areas who seek education but cannot travel the long distance to the college campus.



Access to Education: Approaches for the Future

New economic realities in rural America demand an expanded definition of access.

Typical Past and Current Approaches	Approaches for the Future
“Open door” admissions.	Aggressive outreach to groups that need education and workforce preparation, including young high school dropouts, working and unemployed adults.
Enrollment as primary goal.	Multiple institutional goals that emphasize positive outcomes for students, including retention, graduation, and placement in further education and jobs. College helps each student achieve his or her individual goals.
Emphasis on credentials—awarding of degrees and certificates.	Emphasis on competencies—learning what one needs now, while keeping the door open for future learning—as well as graduation and certification.
Emphasis on teaching.	Emphasis on learning—student-centered, individualized approach.
Initial college relationship with students at age 18.	College relationship with middle and high schools to prepare more students for postsecondary education and raise the college-going rate in the region.
Enrollment of those who can travel to campus.	Extension of classes to people in remote areas and at worksites.
College isolated from other educational institutions.	Strong links with secondary schools and four-year colleges/universities.

Access: Roles for Community Colleges

The RCCI encourages colleges to be aggressive about increasing access to education, training, and productive and rewarding work. This means reaching out to disadvantaged populations and offering appropriate programs that take people



from “where they are to where they want to be.” RCCI colleges have increased access to education in the following ways:²

1. ***Building partnerships with secondary schools.*** Community colleges can play a powerful role in raising academic standards and achievement levels in middle schools and high schools. They can encourage more young people to prepare for and enroll in college, and they can help students make a successful transition to college and career. Proven strategies include: coordinating a high-quality regional Tech Prep program; developing “bridge” programs that offer career education, academic enrichment, mentoring, and dropout prevention for middle and high school students; joint faculty development and curriculum development for the college and secondary schools; dual enrollment courses which enable high school students to earn college credit; and organizing citizens and educators to improve education at all levels from preschool through adult.

2. ***Helping all students achieve success.*** Economically and educationally disadvantaged students face particular barriers to academic success. To serve these students effectively, the college first needs to create a welcoming environment for those who may feel intimidated by the very concept of college. To help students complete programs and advance to further education and jobs, the college needs to provide strong support services such as counseling, tutoring, mentoring, financial aid, child care, and transportation. And it needs to help faculty and staff adopt techniques for working effectively with disadvantaged students. RCCI colleges have demonstrated several ways to reach disadvantaged populations and increase student success:
 - ***Reach out aggressively to disadvantaged and minority students.*** Rural community colleges in high-poverty regions typically enroll many low-income students. Even so, RCCI challenges colleges to assess whether any disadvantaged populations may be underserved. Sometimes such scrutiny shows relatively low enrollment for minorities or people from certain geographic districts. Strategies include hiring minority recruiters to work in minority high schools and neighborhoods, and establishing outreach centers in underserved communities.

 - ***Address family and community barriers to education.*** Many potential students never enroll in college programs—or enroll and drop out—because of family or community barriers. For instance, women may experience family resistance to their educational or career aspirations; students with family responsibilities may drop out when problems at home eclipse their studies. Some community colleges are beginning to view students holistically, in the context of family and community. Strategies for support include: on-campus child care centers; wellness centers; family

²See the *RCCI Toolkit* videos and case stories on educational access, telecommunications/distance learning, workforce development, and harnessing the power of culture.



literacy programs; and on-campus “one-stop centers” where students can get referrals to counseling and other human services. As important as specific strategies are faculty and staff who understand and support their students.

An emerging concern at rural community colleges is the declining enrollment of male students. In some economies, men stay away from college because they can find work despite their low education levels. But increasingly in many rural areas, men languish unemployed and unemployable while women prepare themselves for an economic future. Some colleges are experimenting with ways to draw in more male students, from marketing targeted to men to providing mentoring and support services for male students.

- *Help students move beyond developmental courses into college-level programs.* Many students who enter college with low academic skills never advance beyond developmental studies. This can change if the college integrates developmental studies with college-level courses and provides appropriate support for at-risk students. Strategies include: assigning outstanding teachers to developmental courses and encouraging communication between developmental teachers and other faculty; after careful testing, integrating marginal students into regular classes augmented by tutoring and learning labs; and teaching faculty how to use learner-centered methods that tap into students’ differing learning styles.
- *Use culturally based curriculum.* All students learn better when they feel valued, and for students from racial and ethnic minorities, this includes affirming their cultural heritage. Historically, Native Americans, Appalachians, Latinos, and other rural minority groups have seen their cultures belittled by educational institutions and disrupted by outsiders and newcomers to their regions. Tribal colleges in particular (as well as other rural community colleges) have shown how to integrate traditional culture into the curriculum in a way that makes education more meaningful and builds students’ pride in themselves and their community. This in turn helps students succeed academically.
- *Ensure that community college students can transfer successfully to four-year institutions.* In low-income rural areas, a high proportion of students who seek a baccalaureate begin their college education at the community college. To help students transfer successfully to a baccalaureate program, the college must ensure high academic standards in transfer courses, work out articulation agreements with four-year colleges and universities, and counsel students about their options.

3. ***Offering nontraditional programs to meet the needs of nontraditional students.*** With reduced federal support for job training and welfare programs, it is more important than ever for community colleges to reach out to hard-to-



serve populations including high school dropouts, welfare mothers, and older, dislocated workers. Many of these adults are not presently candidates for traditional college curricula. They need job-readiness preparation, improved literacy skills, and referral to other employment-related services. In many rural communities, the college is best positioned to coordinate these services.

- *Job readiness.* The community college, in conjunction with other community organizations, needs special staff to reach out to unemployed adults, to counsel them and refer them to programs tailored to their needs. The college may be the best place to provide the instruction they need—including literacy and occupational skills, personal motivation and self-esteem, and job-seeking skills. Once they are employed, the college can link these adults to the continued education and training they need to advance beyond an entry-level job.
 - *Adult literacy.* In many communities adult literacy programs are fragmented and unrelated to the demands of the workplace. Colleges should work with the local organizations that sponsor adult basic education to insure that programs are accessible, of high quality, and helpful in preparing adults for the workplace. Many rural community colleges offer literacy instruction in workplaces, tailored to the specific needs of workers and employers.
 - *One-stop centers.* Under the federal Workforce Investment Act, the hub of employment and training programs are one-stop centers that connect people to education, training, and employment. Community colleges are an ideal institution to house these centers since they have relationships with both job seekers and employers, and they can provide both short-term and lifelong education and training.
4. ***Offering distance learning opportunities.*** In sparsely populated rural areas, distance education is an especially useful tool for educational access. The community college can be a catalyst in forming distance education networks and helping partners obtain funding for telecommunications equipment. It can use interactive video to provide specialized college prep courses at isolated high schools and a variety of classes and videoconferences at remote community centers and satellite campuses. Through agreements with universities, rural community colleges can make baccalaureate and graduate level courses more readily available to rural residents.
 5. ***Bridging the digital divide.*** Rural people and communities face several disadvantages in the digital age. Lagging infrastructure in some rural areas makes telecommunications connections expensive and/or slow. Computer ownership and Internet access are low among low-income, low-education, minority, and rural households—the very populations that predominate in distressed rural regions. (On Indian reservations and in Appalachia, many households cannot even afford basic telephone service.) And people with the



know-how to service computers, manage networks, develop software, and design web pages are scarce in rural communities. Community colleges—along with K-12 schools and public libraries—can help expand computer and Internet access for low-income people and enhance computer skills in their communities. College-based strategies include: initiating community technology centers where adults and youth can learn to use computers; providing computers and Internet access for faculty and students; organizing low-cost Internet service for the community at large; providing Internet access to businesses through college-run small business assistance centers or business incubators; and developing new curricula to teach computer-related skills.



Essential Institutional Capacities

To be effective catalysts for regional development, community colleges need to do more than launch programs promoting economic development and access to education. They also need to look inward, honing their own ability to anticipate and respond to the needs of the people and communities they serve. They need to build partnerships with other organizations. And the college itself needs an institutional culture that supports innovation, risk-taking, and learning.

The RCCI urges rural colleges to ask themselves how they measure up against the following ideal and to work toward strengthening these essential capacities.

- 1. *A clear institutional mission that encompasses economic development and broad access to education.*** More than simply having the right words in its mission statement, the college has a deep institutional commitment to the goals of economic development and access. That commitment begins with the president, emanates throughout the administration and faculty, and is shared by the board. College policies support these dual goals, for instance, by providing incentives for faculty and staff to engage in community service projects. Service to the community is fully integrated into the mainstream of college activity and is valued as highly as more traditional academic functions.
- 2. *Strong partnerships with the community.*** The college works collaboratively with elementary and secondary schools, economic development organizations, employers, local governments, and community organizations. Community members advise the college on its programs and vice versa; there are many collaborative initiatives involving the college and other institutions. In the words of one RCCI'er, "The college is the community, and the community is the college."
- 3. *Capable faculty and staff.*** College staff have strong knowledge and skills in their fields, and they have the ability to provide leadership for change. Faculty are excellent teachers and use a learner-centered approach in the classroom. Vocational/technical faculty have experience working in their fields and credibility with industry. Appropriate staff are knowledgeable about the regional economy and have frequent interaction with employers. Staff development provides ample opportunity for continued learning, and there is frequent interaction and collaboration among college departments.
- 4. *High-quality programs.*** College programs are highly regarded by students, employers, and the community at large. Students master what they need to know to be successful in the workplace and in four-year college or university. The college monitors and evaluates its programs and strives for continuous improvement.



5. ***Ability to meet changing needs.*** Through its planning capacity, the college identifies and responds to trends in the regional and national economies. The college is able to shift its priorities and roles as regional needs change and new opportunities arise. For instance, it develops new curricula to meet the changing needs of individuals and employers.
6. ***Communication/public relations/fundraising ability.*** The college's programs and services are well known and valued throughout the region. Also, the college has the ability to raise the funds it needs from government, foundations, individuals, and corporate sources.

Institutional Culture

In addition to the above capacities, successful rural colleges have certain characteristics that can be considered part of their institutional culture. These characteristics include:

- a. ***Support for innovation and risk-taking.*** To develop and sustain the capacities described above, the college needs leadership that is open to new ideas and willing to overcome institutional inertia.
- b. ***Becoming a "learning organization."*** Successful colleges encourage faculty and staff to ask questions and to learn from each other and from the community. They are continually on the lookout for effective practices from around the country and the world that can be adapted to fit the local situation. They seek the counsel of national experts and wise community members. They set aside time for reflection and planning. They look critically at themselves and ask, "How can we improve?"
- c. ***Emphasis on equity and excellence.*** The college sets high standards and provides the support needed to help all students succeed. It has not only an "open door" but a system for bringing the disadvantaged through that door and supporting them along a path to stable careers. The college encourages other educational institutions and employers to do the same.
- d. ***Rootedness in local culture.*** Rural America is rich in cultural traditions. Preservation and celebration of traditional arts, languages, and other cultural practices are increasingly important goals guiding development efforts in many regions, and the community college is an ideal institution to lead these efforts. Integrating local culture into the curriculum also helps students succeed in college by affirming their cultural identity. A faculty and staff that reflects the racial and ethnic makeup of the local population helps make the college a welcoming, supportive place for all students.



A Note on Presidential Leadership

The president's leadership style is a major factor in setting the institutional culture of the college and in building the capacities described above. RCCI presidents have described several qualities that they believe are helpful in leading their colleges toward RCCI goals.

The president:

- Has a vision for a brighter future for the region's people and economy.
- Is committed to a process of college engagement with the community and can mobilize college faculty and staff to participate in that process. Encourages partnerships among the college, employers, economic development agencies, public schools, and others.
- Is personally involved in regional affairs, forging strong connections with other community leaders.
- Welcomes change, encourages initiative, and willingly takes risks to further the economic and educational transformation of the region.
- Models inclusive, collaborative leadership that empowers others at the college to take action. Encourages and rewards bottom-up creativity.
- Supports vigorous professional development for faculty and staff.



A Process for College/Community Collaboration

There are many examples of rural colleges—RCCI grantees and others—that perform several of the educational and economic development roles laid out in this paper. Some colleges operate one-stop employment and training centers; others offer assistance to small businesses. Some reach out aggressively to middle and high school students; others provide outstanding services to low literacy adults. Likewise, there are rural colleges that would score high on many of the institutional capacities described in this paper.

For every college, however, RCCI poses a challenging vision—that of working in partnership with other community institutions to further economic progress and expand educational access. To help achieve that vision, RCCI offers colleges a process that can strengthen collaboration with the range of institutions required to advance economic and educational opportunity. Besides benefiting the region, this collaborative process can also strengthen the college’s own institutional capacity and help expand its role in economic development and educational access.

The RCCI process is based on a model for community and institutional change that has proven effective in a variety of settings. It relies on leadership by a college/community team. It includes an intensive planning and implementation process that is grounded in the principles expressed in this conceptual framework document.³

College/Community Collaboration

By its very nature, RCCI demands collaboration. No one individual or agency can bring about the transformation of a rural economy, nor can one institution alone provide full access to education.

Regional development is best achieved through joint efforts of the public and private sectors and cooperation among neighboring towns and counties. This calls for involvement of business leaders, local government officials, public school administrators, economic developers, and other public and private sector leaders representing multiple towns and/or counties.

To ensure that economic development and access strategies are targeted effectively to poor people, another set of organizations needs to participate in RCCI planning and implementation. These include grassroots organizations, human service agencies, churches, and other community groups that represent or work closely with populations in need.

³See *Planting the Seeds of Change*, a video and accompanying guidebook that document and analyze the change process at two RCCI communities.



Why Teams?⁴

As a way of stimulating collaboration among all the above organizations and interests, the RCCI process relies on a broad-based, college/community team to lead planning and implementation efforts. Team members include the college president, administrators, and faculty, along with representatives of local business, government, public schools, and community-based organizations. It is also beneficial for the team to include students and others who use the services of the college.

The RCCI team is not a short-term task force created just to plan and spin off projects. It is a long-lived committee charged with planning initiatives, overseeing their implementation, evaluating their effectiveness, and continually scanning the horizon for new opportunities to achieve its vision. Team membership may change over time as priorities evolve, but the team remains active in providing leadership.

The RCCI process relies on a team-led approach for several reasons. First, by participating together as team members, college and community representatives open new avenues for collaboration. Second, the work of institutional and community change requires a critical mass of innovators. The team can provide a “home base” for a core group of individuals with a shared vision for their region. Team members provide support for each other, and their enthusiasm and energy spreads outward to engage others in the college and the community.

A broad-based team by its very nature gathers diverse perspectives and deploys multiple talents. It facilitates cross-disciplinary learning, which can spark creative solutions to long-standing problems. Finally, at its best, the college/community team models an important process that characterizes healthy, economically successful communities—an inclusive approach to decision-making. When seeded by RCCI, this process can spread to other community endeavors.

Private business increasingly uses interdisciplinary teams to spearhead internal change efforts. Colleges, like traditional corporations, are accustomed to a hierarchical leadership structure and often find team-led efforts challenging to institute. However, RCCI colleges that have used teams have found the payoff is high. The benefits go beyond just planning and implementation of RCCI-related activities. In a sense, the process becomes a product in its own right. Strong college/community teams have helped RCCI colleges become more responsive to community needs and strengthened the colleges’ place in the community. And by nurturing relationships among community leaders who had not worked together closely in the past, RCCI teams help build the foundation for a stronger community.

⁴See *RCCI Toolkit* videos on forming effective college/community teams.



Moving from Vision to Action⁵

The RCCI is not about replication of a predetermined set of strategies or programs. Rather, it helps create a climate of innovation where commitment to RCCI goals can be carried out in locally determined ways. Demonstration sites followed a strategic planning process that took them from “vision to action.”

The impetus for change in the RCCI process is driven by the dissonance between the team’s values and vision for the future versus the current practices and priorities of the college and community. Teams articulate their vision for educational access and a thriving economy, and then they examine how closely the community and the college match that ideal. The gap between vision and current reality can be a powerful stimulus for change.

The journey begins with an intensive planning process in which the team uses data to analyze the “current state” at the college and in the region. It then assesses the college’s strengths and capacity to promote economic development and improved educational access. Based on its assessment of problems and opportunities, the planning team creates a vision and sets goals.

The planning team then explores strategic alternatives, which may include new initiatives of the college and joint college/community efforts. Team members seek out the best programmatic ideas from around the country and adapt them to fit local circumstances.

During implementation, the team continues meeting regularly to monitor progress. It modifies and expands its strategic plan based on its experiences. It strives to institutionalize successful efforts, weaving them into the fabric of the college and the community for long-lasting impact.

During the seven-year demonstration phase of RCCI, colleges received modest implementation grants to support initiatives in economic development, educational access, and institutional capacity-building. Typically, these grants supported staff positions, staff development, and convening of regional meetings. RCCI teams generally leveraged money from other sources for operation of new initiatives.

Besides planning and implementation grants, several other elements of the demonstration program were instrumental in supporting the work of RCCI teams. Each site had a “coach” who helped facilitate team planning, reflection, and learning activities. In addition, sites had access to national experts on educational access, rural development, and institutional capacity-building who provided consulting and staff development. MDC provided resource materials (including

⁵See *RCCI Toolkit* workbook and instructional video on MDC’s “Moving from Vision to Action” strategic planning process.



the *RCCI Toolkit* that is referenced throughout this paper) to introduce sites to new ideas. MDC organized annual institutes, leadership forums, and other learning events for RCCI teams, including topical seminars, teleconferences, and field trips to visit model programs. The peer learning network that resulted from these experiences helped inspire more activities at sites, encouraged teams to take risks, and reduced the isolation of participating colleges.

Replicating the RCCI Process

Colleges that find the RCCI model appealing should be mindful of the substantial commitment of time and energy needed to meet the ambitious goals articulated here. Based on the seven-year demonstration experience, colleges that want to adopt the RCCI model should consider the following questions:

1. Is the college leadership open to a college/community self-assessment and learning process that may challenge the status quo?
2. What process will you use to assess college and community needs and explore options for effective strategies?
 - RCCI tools are available to help guide sites through formation of a college/community team and the Moving from Vision-to-Action planning process. However, RCCI sites had the benefit of coaches who helped facilitate and guide the process. Consider whether your team will need outside help and, if so, where to get it.
 - RCCI teams met frequently during the planning phase and continued working together over a period of years to reflect on progress, discuss new challenges, and generate new projects. Are you prepared to make a substantial time commitment?
3. How will you gain exposure to concepts, strategies, models, and skills needed to pursue an RCCI agenda?
 - Again, the *RCCI Toolkit* can help. As noted, RCCI teams benefited from many learning events, field trips, and on-site technical assistance. Consider how your team will gain access to new ideas and skills.
4. To achieve results, it is essential to have some staff time at the college dedicated to the RCCI agenda. How will this be provided?
 - Can the college commit staff resources for a team leader and/or RCCI coordinator (at least a half-time slot)?
 - Is the president committed to devoting his or her own time to this effort?



Long-Term Sustainability/Measuring Success

The RCCI offers a philosophy and process to tackle long-standing, deeply entrenched community problems, which by definition cannot be solved quickly. Nor can all the challenges be tackled at once. The “RCCI swoosh” (“Moving toward long-term sustainability of RCCI efforts”) illustrates how long it can take to lay the groundwork, initiate new projects and partnerships, and institutionalize RCCI philosophy and practices for long-term impact.

During the first one to three years of the RCCI process, activities include self-assessment, planning and implementing new projects, and establishing new collaborative relationships within the college and between college and community. By the end of this first phase (“ignition”), a committed college/community team is in place, and new programs related to community/economic development and educational access have begun.

During the next two to five years (the “lift-off” phase), real change begins to occur. Programs are operating effectively and are starting to become institutionalized. Partnerships are deeper, and broad-based collaboration is starting to spread throughout the college and spill over into the community. Access and economic development strategies are starting to have visible impact on people and the community.

Based on the RCCI demonstration experience, it takes between four and eight years for RCCI efforts to achieve long-term sustainability. At that point, RCCI philosophy, process, and programs are thoroughly integrated into the life of the college and community. When the “orbit” phase is reached, the following will be evident:⁶

- 1. *RCCI philosophy is central to the college.*** The principles in the *RCCI Conceptual Framework* are an integral part of the college’s mission, vision, and/or goals. The college president, administrators, faculty, staff, and trustees understand and act on these principles. If the president and team leader were to leave, RCCI principles and activities would remain in place.
- 2. *College policies and priorities support RCCI goals.*** The college’s budget and organizational structure support continuation of RCCI initiatives. The personnel and operational policies of the college support RCCI goals.
- 3. *College has resources to support continued RCCI-related activities.*** The college has obtained funding to continue activities begun under RCCI, and it has the capacity to obtain funding for future activities for RCCI-related strategies.

⁶In collaboration with RCCI teams, MDC used these five indicators to develop a self-assessment tool for sites in 2000. Copies are available from MDC.

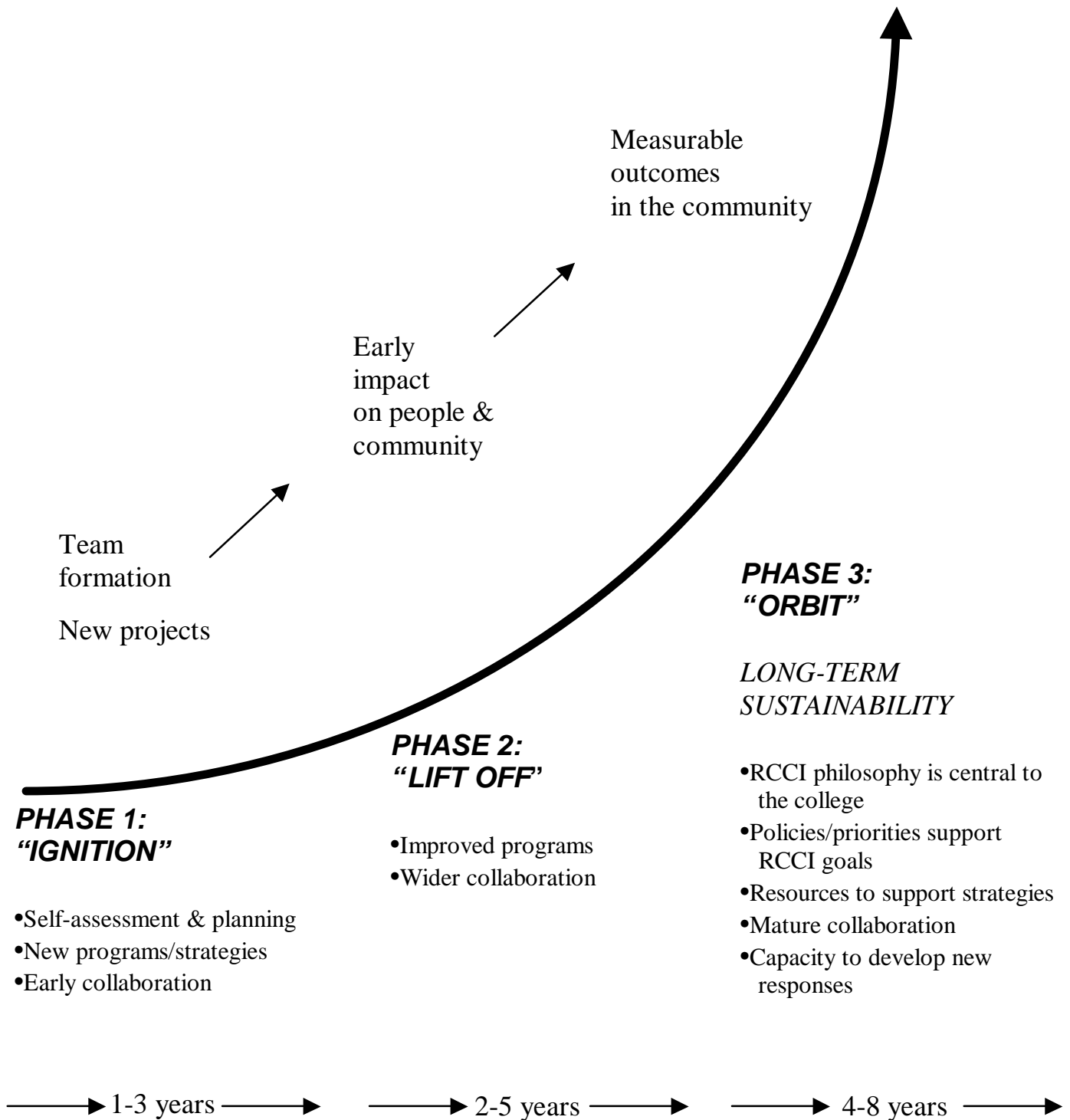


4. ***College/community collaboration is strong and “mature.”*** The college is viewed as a trusted, credible partner by other institutions. It actively collaborates with local schools, governments, employers, and community organizations to achieve mutual goals. Representatives of a broad cross section of the community participate with the college in planning and implementing economic development and educational access initiatives.

5. ***College has capacity to develop new responses to community needs.*** The college, in collaboration with the community, regularly scans the horizon for new problems that need to be addressed and new opportunities to enhance community development and improve educational access. The college culture encourages risk-taking and innovation.



Moving toward long-term sustainability of RCCI efforts





RCCI Demonstration Sites

Alabama Southern Community College
Monroeville, AL

Blackfeet Community College
Browning, MT

Coahoma Community College
Clarksdale, MS

Danville Community College
Danville, VA

Fort Belknap College
Harlem, MT

Fort Peck Community College
Poplar, MT

Hazard Community College
Hazard, KY

Laredo Community College
Laredo, TX

Meridian Community College
Meridian, MS

Mountain Empire Community College
Big Stone Gap, VA

New Mexico State University at Carlsbad
Carlsbad, NM

Northern New Mexico Community College
Española, NM

Phillips Community College
Helena, AR

Prestonsburg Community College
Prestonsburg, KY

Salish Kootenai College
Pablo, MT

Sinte Gleska University
Rosebud, SD

Sitting Bull College
Fort Yates, SD

Somerset Community College
Somerset, KY

Southeast Community College
Cumberland, KY

Southeastern Community College
Whiteville, NC

Southwest Texas Junior College
Uvalde, TX

Technical College of the Lowcountry
Beaufort, SC

University of New Mexico at Gallup
Gallup, NM

Wallace Community College Selma
Selma, AL



Selected RCCI Publications

Here are some of the print and video materials that have grown from the RCCI experience. Many are available by download from the RCCI Web site, www.mdcinc.org/rcci. Others are available by contacting MDC at (919) 968-4531 or by e-mailing Linda McKinnie at lmckinni@mdcinc.org.

Strategies for Rural Development and Increased Access to Education: A Toolkit for Rural Community Colleges. This package, which includes 10 videos, three guidebooks, and a notebook of resources, serves as a toolkit for rural communities and community colleges. Step-by-step strategic planning and team-building processes for developing the regional economy and increasing access to education are provided along with profiles of effective practices from many rural communities. A detailed description of the toolkit is available online, and a prospectus is available via mail. The toolkit introduction, which contains an in-depth description of the RCCI, the toolkit, and suggestions for use, is available online. August 1998.

RCCI: Planting the Seeds of Change. This package, including a guidebook and a documentary, describes the central principles of the RCCI and the resulting collaborative process and change efforts at Meridian Community College (MS) and Sitting Bull College (ND). Viewers watch how change happened over time in these two different RCCI communities. This documentation provides those considering a community development initiative with a better understanding of the complex nature of this work and the personal commitment necessary for those who undertake it. September 2001.

Moving Mountains Economic Summit. This teleconference on community and regional development and revitalization features case studies presented on Tupelo, Mississippi, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and Chattanooga, Tennessee. The summit was sponsored by Mountain Empire Community College, Big Stone Gap, VA, on November 19, 1999.

Stimulating Rural Economies: An Innovative Case Competition Model. This package highlights an economic development Case Competition held at Southwest Texas Junior College, Uvalde, Texas, on March 28, 1998. This was the first-ever Case Competition hosted by a community college and the first-ever on developing a regional economy. The printed material provides tips on setting up similar competitions.

American Association of Community Colleges' RCCI Publications. Throughout 2000 and 2001, an AACC team conducted site visits, gathered data, and spoke with stakeholders in order to produce a detailed assessment of the impact of the RCCI on participating colleges and communities. Earlier, in 1998 and 1999, AACC produced a series of four project briefs on the RCCI. Topics covered included the following: Rural access – removing barriers to participation; Rural economic development; Building teams for institutional and community change; and Rural development – capacity for leading institutional and community change. Each brief describes RCCI concepts and highlights best practices developed by RCCI colleges and communities. The assessment and briefs are available by contacting AACC.