

Educating Tomorrow's Work Force Today



Area Development Site and Facility Planning

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Businesses and schools are working together to prepare students for twenty-first century jobs.

A community's educational resources are not just vitally important to pupils; increasingly those resources have emerged as a dominant factor in corporate site selection. Traditional university and college systems have long played a role in attracting new development. Now, however, community colleges as well as private and public schools are an even greater part of the effort to re-energize America's educational system. The challenge for members of corporate America? How to find the "right" fit for their own unique needs.

The Progressive Training Role of Community Colleges

Studies show that higher productivity and lower turnover are the rewards for many executives relying on community colleges to recruit and train both entry-level and skilled workers. That's why the potential invaluable partnerships available in a community should be scrutinized closely by a site selection team.

Related to this, in January's State of the Union speech, President George W. Bush announced the "Jobs for the Twenty-First Century" program. The plan aims to better prepare workers for future jobs by strengthening postsecondary education and job training, as well as improving high school education. It includes \$250 million to fund partnerships between community colleges and employers in high-demand job sectors, and \$33 million for expanded Pell Grants for low-income students who complete rigorous coursework in high school.

Specifically, the proposed \$250 million will finance community-based job training at community and technical colleges. In a 2004 speech on the topic, President Bush claimed that this new partnership is expected to help train 100,000 more people annually. "You can't change as a society if you don't have a work force that is

capable of working in the new jobs of the twenty-first century," he said. "...And the community college system provides the capacity for us to have the skill sets necessary in our workers."

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), there are 1,175 community colleges nationwide, of which 997 are public institutions. Their combined enrollment is 10.3 million students. "Virtually all" of them are engaged in some sort of business/industry partnership, asserts Norma Kent, AACC's vice president of communications.

Where should a company begin research on community colleges? "Most have pretty extensive websites, so I'd start there," she advises. "Then I'd contact the office, mostly likely found on the continuing education side, that deals with customized training and/or industry partnerships. They function to serve the community. And that most definitely includes finding ways to serve the changing technology and work force needs of businesses in a flexible, cost-effective manner."

In Los Angeles, the Ford Foundation Corporate Involvement Initiative operates a spin-off called Win-Win Partners (www.winwinpartner.com). Its website features stories of companies and organizations achieving competitive advantage through community investment, some of which involves partnerships with community colleges.

One such story concerns Excel Coip. About 65 percent of 2,000-plus workers at its Fort Morgan, CoIo., plant are immigrants. While many possess the technical skills to process over 4,000 head of cattle daily, they lack skills needed to communicate effectively and be promoted. To stem high employee turnover, Excel created an English as a second Language (ESL) program in cooperation with Morgan Community College. The results? Turnover declined 23 percent. And success is evident in improved communication, safety practices, quality, and productivity. The ESL "helped turn our work place into a community," said one manager.

Another example is Pennzoil 10 Minute oil Change, which provides drive-in automotive services in the San Francisco Bay area. The company recently found recruitment of entry-level workers troublesome, even though those industry jobs paid above minimum wage and offered career growth. The City College of San Francisco played a part in the solution, helping to develop an automotive training program giving low-income people targeted industry training. Pennzoil gained well-trained employees, and also benefited from not paying referral or advertising fees.

Then there's U.S. Borax, which mines minerals with a wide variety of uses. For a

decade its Boron, Calif., operation engaged in a re-vegetation project with limited success. More recently, the company entered a three-year partnership with nearby Victor Valley College, a community college, committing \$10,000 annually to a student internship program addressing sustainable development challenges. Thanks to this relationship, vegetative mortality rates are dropping, while the transplant rate is expected to rise this year from 100 plants to 500 annually. These accomplishments persuaded two nearby mining firms to form similar partnerships with the college.

Researching a Public School System

While the United States education system is not broken, it could certainly stand to improve its rankings on the global stage regarding core subjects. In 1999, for instance, U.S. eighth-graders exceeded the international average of 38 countries in mathematics and science, but performed lower than their peers in 14 countries. In 2001, U.S. fourth-graders performed above the international average of 35 countries in reading literacy, but lagged behind England, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

Moreover, ample anecdotal evidence abounds from both the corporate and college communities about the poor writing/communication skills exhibited by a sizeable number of today's high school graduates - skills below par of graduates from just a generation ago.

Some consultants consider an area's public school rating one of the top three criteria in a site selection search. Since the United States is home to about 95,000 public elementary mid secondary schools and 17,000 school districts, the task of determining which institutions match up best with a company's interests can be daunting.

What kind of information should a company compile, at the very minimum, in attempt to find out what communities will provide adequate public school education? A good basic list will include data about SAT and ACT scores, the teacher/student ratio, dropout rates, dollars spent per student, public versus private school comparisons, number of approved school levies, and the percentages graduated from high school, college, or training schools. Care should be taken in the early research phase, however, not to overlook newer programs, schools, or classes that may be just beginning to significantly upgrade the academic excellence of a region's public educational system. Bottom line: How is a community making its graduates "work ready"?

Dr. Mary Jane Pearson, one of 10 regional representatives for the secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, says that a state's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) data

can be quite helpful in determining a school system's competence. Engaged in professional education since 1964, she works today for Region IX, headquartered in San Francisco.

"Schools are required to publish data, in language easily understood by the public, as a report card on their individual performance," explains Pearson. While a school district can report data in different ways, "It still has to be accurate. There's a lot of confusion about the [NCLB] program," she adds, noting that many people don't realize that academic goals vary from state to state. However, no matter what the differences may be, "under NCLB, by academic year 2013-2014, the federal government has mandated that all children should be doing what each state considers to be grade-level work in core subjects."

The two-year-old NCLB "Blue Ribbon Schools" program is another useful tool for site selection purposes. Both public and private schools (K to 12) can earn the distinction two ways: by having at least a 40 percent enrollment of youths from disadvantaged backgrounds and dramatically improving student performance, or by posting scores in the top 10 percent on state assessment tests. Pearson also suggests that companies do research to discover which schools a particular state recognizes and ranks as schools of "excellence" or "distinction" (terms vary).

Pearson particularly applauds the School Information Partnership's new website launched this spring (www.schoolresults.org). This nationwide initiative eventually will be able to provide more "report card" data than what's required by law about school and district performances in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. Currently funded by The Broad Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education, the public-private collaborative project employs NCLB data to help parents, companies, educators, and policymakers make informed decisions and improve school results. Specifically, the website features two exciting interactive tools: analytical software provided by the National Center for Educational Accountability, and Standard & Poor's new groundbreaking benchmarking software that identifies, state by state, underperforming and "outperforming" schools nationwide.

It's a safe bet that searching for good schools will be relatively easy in most larger cities. In Dallas, for example, "We don't have to prove our ability to provide an educated work force," notes Bill Sproull, vice president of economic development for the Greater Dallas Chamber. He points out that the region has over 60 school districts, public schools with strong accountability, over 200 private schools, and 200,000 higher-ed graduates each year, plus "community colleges with an entrepreneurial attitude."

At the very least, Sproull says, firms should determine early on (and clearly) the specific work force skill sets they need from a community, which colleges (if any) can graduate workers with those skills, and which school districts are producing the best students. "If I were looking in a third- or fourth-tier community," he adds, "I'd ask a lot more questions about the SAT and ACT scores, and what kinds of degrees are being conferred there."

In much smaller Tallahassee, Fla., initial education inquiries are typically answered in the "resources" section of www.taledc.com, reports Wayne Harris, vice president of technology and development for the local chamber and ED council. The site plays up links to institutions of higher education and the technology-transfer offices of schools. "We also point out that our institutions are open to adapting curricula to the needs of incoming businesses," he adds. To drive that point home, it's not uncommon early in the "courtship" phase for the chamber to arrange meetings between inquiring businesses and college officials regarding technology/work force needs.

When it comes to corporate site selection, a smarter, better-trained community is definitely a more attractive community for any kind of business.

[Sidebar]

Virtually all community colleges are engaged in some sort of business/industry partnership.

[Author Affiliation]

By Lisa A. Bastian, CBC

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