

Sanford: A prepared workforce ensures a thriving economy

Third of a series

EDITOR'S NOTE: What ensures a community thrives and succeeds? One prerequisite: an educated and prepared workforce. Lee County's K-12 public school system works in tandem with Central Carolina Community College (CCCC) to help grow and train the local workforce. In Part 3 of this series of stories produced by the Sanford Area Growth Alliance in conjunction with The Herald, the growing success of Lee County's K-12 schools, Industry Training Programs, CCCC's Innovation Center and NCWorks Certified Ready Work Communities are examined. The series continues Sundays and Wednesdays through May 14th.

SANFORD – Education, so goes the mantra, is the essence of economic development. Without a well-trained and educated workforce, a community can't thrive. And without an unwavering commitment to education, a workforce can't be sustained.

Intentional efforts, like the four Central Carolina Community College (CCCC) bonds approved by Lee County voters in November 2014, have aided in the existing success of workforce development efforts by both the Lee County K-12 school system and by CCCC. But Dr. Pamela Gibson Senegal, CCCC's vice president of economic and community development, says other "bold" moves set Lee County apart when it comes to education's contribution to economic development.

"Our region has taken bold steps to ensure that our workforce is prepared by investing in the CC Works program and by supporting bonds that enable CCCC to continue to grow and evolve," she says.

Graduating with more

Dr. Andy Bryan, superintendent of Lee County Schools, understands this as well, and he's adopted that relationship between education and economic development as part of his mission: Bryan wants to see every high school student in Lee County graduate with more than just a diploma—with that "more" being either college credits or internship experience.

Located on CCCC's campus, Lee Early College helps that happen. More than 280 students participate in the program, enabling high schoolers the opportunity to complete an Associate of Arts, Associate of Science or Applied Associate of Science degree by the time they graduate from high school.

The community college and Lee County Schools partnered to deliver this. If Dr. Bryan has his way, this program will only continue to grow and encourage more minority, first-generation and low-income students to pursue their academic dreams.

Industry Services making strides

Cathy Swindell, the director of industry services for CCCC, is also in the business of preparing people for success. While some colleges were reconsidering their vocational training programs, CCCC bolstered its efforts.

It's paid off. Many of the high-demand curriculum programs, such as Computer Integrated Machining, Industrial Systems Technology and Electronics Engineering Technology, are chock full of students. Some students even get hired before completing their degrees, Swindell says.

She and her team also meet the needs of local industries by striving to promote a business' success through low- or no-cost quality industry training.

"The goals of any project undertaken by CCCC's Industry Services Office are to foster and support job growth, technology investment, and productivity enhancement," she said.

Industry training's impact on the economy is substantial. CCCC and its students added \$229.4 million in income to the college's service area economy in fiscal year 2012 – 2013, according to a statewide economic impact study. The same study indicates \$229.4 million equals 3.4 percent of the Gross Regional Product. The total income includes the college operations impact, student spending impact and alumni impact.

Julian Philpott, chairman of the CCCC Board of Trustees, isn't surprised by those economic benefits.

"The Economic Benefit Fact Sheet on CCCC verifies that every dollar invested in CCCC provides a significant return to CCCC's students, the taxpayers in the service area, and the citizens of North Carolina," he said.

The referenced CCCC report also shows this: for every \$1 spent in education, (1) \$2.30 is gained in lifetime income for the student; (2) \$8.10 is gained in added state income and social savings for society; and (3) \$3.70 is gained in added taxes and public sector savings for taxpayers.

"From both an economic impact and an investment standpoint," Philpott said, "CCCC has clearly demonstrated that it continues to provide outstanding value to its students and the community it serves."

Innovation, the way forward

Many of CCCC's industrial training programs are offered at the Dr. Paul Howard and Dr. Barbara James Innovation Center on the Sanford campus.

At about 30,000 square feet, the Howard-James Innovation Center is central to the workforce preparedness equation. A state-of-the-art industrial training center, the center benefits companies like Caterpillar, Coty Inc., 3M, GKN, Olympic Steel and Tyson Foods with its top-notch industry training capabilities.

"We work with industry to assess needs and develop appropriate training programs," Swindell said. "From computer skills to process-related needs, we can train current or new employees to respond."

As of March, the Howard-James Innovation Center has served 34 unique organizations, instructed 3,637 trainees and provided 7,890 hours of specialized training to the central Carolina area, according to CCCC.

And this training provides a continuous pipeline of skilled workers, significantly impacting the Sanford Area's economic growth.

Making it official

Lee County, like most across the state, says it is dedicated to growing a highly-trained and educated workforce. Yet local leaders wanted to make that a tangible reality.

Through a collaboration between CCCC, Lee County Schools and the Sanford Area Growth Alliance (SAGA), Lee County earned its certification as an NCWorks Certified Work Ready Community by The North Carolina Chamber Foundation – one of just 22 North Carolina counties to do so.

Being certified demonstrates to either relocating or expanding companies that Lee County is committed to developing a skilled workforce, according to Bob Joyce, economic development executive director for SAGA. The collaborative team which worked on the certification has partnered with more than 80 businesses who now accept the certification.

Workforce development does not happen by accident, leaders say. Growing a trained workforce is due to the efforts of many on a mission—advisors like Senegal, Bryan, Swindell and Philpott—all working to improve our community’s education, training and innovation programs, positioning Lee County on the cusp of something great.