RAISING THE BAR TOGETHER

Successful Strategies for Workforce and Economic Development Collaboration

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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Successful Strategies for Workforce and Economic Development Collaboration

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Economic Development Research Partners (EDRP)

The EDRP Program is the “think tank” component of IEDC, designed to help economic development professionals weather the challenges and grab opportunities from economic changes affecting our communities. EDRP members are leaders in the field of economic development, working through this program to improve the knowledge and practice of the profession. IEDC would like to thank the Economic Development Research Partners program for providing the impetus and resources for this project.

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Executive Summary

Economic developers more actively engage in workforce development now than they have in the past. This is partly due to the realization that a talented labor supply is critically important for economic prosperity in a community. Workforce development professionals have also begun to recognize that they need to develop and offer training programs that are more aligned with the needs of the local industries, and that economic developers can be a conduit for such valuable information. Ultimately, both parties have come to understand that a strong partnership can be mutually beneficial.

Although the process of establishing partnerships is complex and tedious, communities are designing new collaborative frameworks to bring workforce and economic development organizations (EDOs) closer. Such partnerships are predicated on goal alignment between not only workforce and economic development, but also between other stakeholders like businesses and educational institutions.

This paper aims to showcase several successful methods in which workforce development organizations and EDOs can collaborate. Sponsored by IEDC’s Economic Development Research Partners (EDRP) program, it profiles three exemplary case studies on the state, regional, and local levels. Two additional emerging programs are profiled to showcase innovative tactics in collaboration. The paper concludes with an extended discussion of common best practices distilled from the case studies.

Five examples are discussed in the paper.

- The Los Angeles Workforce Systems Collaborative (LAWSC) is a city-wide effort to coordinate the programs of the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation; the Chamber of Commerce; workforce development partners at the city, county, and state level; education providers; labor representatives; and charities. Focused on nine target industry sectors that have strong potential for expansion in the near future, LAWSC has streamlined workforce training as well as
improved communication and understanding across economic and workforce development stakeholders. This has resulted in 10,499 jobs being retained.

- The Eastern Carolina Workforce Innovation Network (WIN) is a regional collaboration between the regional economic development authority, North Carolina’s Eastern Region Commission, and three workforce development boards encompassing thirteen rural counties in eastern North Carolina. The partnership’s goal is to address the skills gaps in existing and emerging workers through occupational trainings and certifications such as WorkKeys. It also emphasizes education in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) at the K-12 level and continuing into higher education.

- The Oklahoma Governor’s Council for Workforce and Economic Development (GCWED) came about from a restructuring of the State Workforce Investment Board in order to increase efficiency and integration with economic development programs. As such, it influences regional workforce and economic development structures by example. The most important feature of this partnership is certification of a workforce system that brings together several players to jointly plan, implement, and monitor workforce and economic development activities.

- The Middle Tennessee Regional Workforce Alliance (MTRWA) resulted from state legislation passed in 2010 that tied funding for institutions of higher education to degree attainment and alignment with workforce needs. The Greater Nashville Chamber of Commerce adopted an innovative model of facilitating dialogue between business leaders and educators to improve skills training in a ten-county regional area. The efforts are focused on three target industries that are projected to have maximum job creation potential in the near future.

- The Grand Rapids Apprenticeship Program is designed on the German dual education system to provide apprenticeships and training to recent high school graduates and incumbent workers. The program brings together the economic development agency—The Right Place, Inc.—community colleges, and local businesses to design and offer training programs that meet the needs of existing manufacturing firms.
It should be noted that the last two programs are still in nascent stages of implementation and may go through significant changes to achieve their stated goals.

In each of the case studies profiled, collaboration between EDOs and WIBs led to a paradigm shift for all partners involved. Both groups had to adjust their focus from short-term gains to long-term thinking about labor supply and talent development. Central to this approach is strategically focusing long-term workforce efforts on competitive and growing industry clusters. EDOs can, at a minimum, offer unparalleled research and analysis capabilities for strategy development.

For communities that are looking to forge collaborative partnerships between workforce and economic development players, the paper offers several recommendations.

**Recommendation 1: Adopt a Shared Vision but Different Metrics**

EDOs and WIBs working in collaboration must see beyond their separate goals to create and engage in a shared vision of sustained workforce development. However, each group’s performance must be measured relative to its core competencies and associated metrics. Furthermore, organizational leaders must be engaged and willing to commit resources and time to advance the shared vision.

**Recommendation 2: Organize and Collaborate with Partners in Education and Business**

In addition to aligning WIBs and EDOs through a shared/common goal, a complete strategy includes a strong role from stakeholders in the business, labor, public sector, and educational communities. This may require bridging cultural gaps by educating partners or more deliberate measures such as professional facilitations.
Recommendation 3: Utilize Effective Partnership Frameworks

Those who convene collaborative efforts must balance competing needs of bringing together appropriate partners on the one hand and non-aligned service areas on the other. It is essential to work with the partners who have the focus and capacity to engage in true collaboration. Working regionally helps resolve some issues. Partnerships must also take into consideration funding streams and their impact on leadership structures. Ultimately, partnerships must present a unified brand and message to all partners.