

Collaborative & Strategic Partnerships | An Engine for Workforce Development

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The International Economic Development Council defines economic development as “a program, group of policies, or activity that seeks to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for a community by creating and/or retaining jobs that facilitate growth and provide a stable tax base.” Some practitioners may define economic development and community development as two separate pursuits, but I have found them to be inextricably linked by a shared mission and toolset. I stand firm in considering them synonymous. In my opinion, community economic development supports sustainable businesses and communities in order to create jobs and wealth, enhance education and training, and increase the community’s overall quality of life. A community will not thrive without a stable and strong business counterpart, and businesses will not flourish without the continued support of the community members and consumers. As communities become more interconnected and residents move about more freely, economic developers must champion initiatives to educate and train the existing workforce while creating an education and employment pipeline for new and incoming workers.

Today, the economic development discussion considers not only how well a community performs compared to other communities within its nation or state, but how well the community positions itself and performs on the international stage. The International Economic Development Council defines globalization as, “the process by which regional and national economies are integrated into a larger, more diverse and more competitive global economy.” In addition to the increasing inclusivity of the worldwide business climate, globalization refers to the social interconnectedness of the world and to companies’ abilities to share knowledge, resources, and operations around the world. An organization succeeds as a knowledge hub only by identifying the educational, research, and technology entities in its region and then connecting

those resources to create a network or cluster for knowledge sharing. Investing in amenities creates a desirable environment for living and working, so the region can offer its best self while anticipating and preparing for the needs of its desired target market. Building capacity for economic development can take many different forms, but it generally manifests in preparing the region through sound financial planning, developing infrastructure to meet the needs of a developing economy, and educating and training the local workforce.

St. Tammany Parish boasts an educated workforce, with the majority of its residents in the prime ages for accepting employment opportunities. According to the 2010 Census, the population of St. Tammany Parish was 233,740, which was a 22.2% increase from the 2000 Census. The Louisiana Workforce Commission reports that there were 111,699 people in the civilian labor force in December 2015. Workforce development is an integral part of the large economic development picture. IEDC states, “A well-trained workforce, combined with effective infrastructure for providing training programs, can give a community a distinct competitive advantage which, unlike incentive payments and tax abatements, cannot easily, quickly, or inexpensively be duplicated by competing communities. This can also augment the business attraction and marketing efforts of the community.” Local businesses and industry associations, EDOs, community colleges and universities, training centers, and community-based organizations are all key players in workforce development, and often the combination of these entities and their resources allows for the most effective and valuable training opportunities. This cluster-based approach to workforce development engages businesses in workforce training and promotes the sharing of resources among many of key players, who otherwise may not have interacted in terms of workforce development. As practitioners often state in the industry of

economic development, this is a field of playing matchmaker—connecting businesses and individuals with resources, opportunities, and the community at-large—to build relationships and strengthen the communal economy as it grows.

According to the International Economic Development Council, new growth theory “posits that the production of knowledge is the driving force behind long-term economic development. [...] New growth theory, therefore, is the theoretical force behind current trends to increase research and development, build up the research capacities of universities, support entrepreneurship, increase access to venture and seed capital, and increase the number of educated and professional workers in a region.” Opportunities for higher education surround St. Tammany Parish. There are currently multiple satellite campuses located within the parish, and eleven other universities, colleges, and community colleges are located within a 75-mile radius of the parish. More specialized schools of continued higher education for fields including agriculture, medicine, law, and pharmacy all operate within commuting distance of St. Tammany Parish. These institutions of higher learning are developing the future workforce of St. Tammany Parish and providing them with the tools they need to succeed in quality jobs after college.

Mary Lindenstien Walshok expresses her position on the role of universities in economic development, stating, “Universities can appropriately contribute to economic development by developing knowledge-linking activities that enhance technology commercialization, support organizational and community change, and enhance the competencies of workers and professionals.” St. Tammany is poised for further higher education development with the January 2017 opening of the Northshore Technical Community College campus on Highway 434

in Lacombe. As Northshore Technical Community College's new flagship campus, this facility will serve as the administrative hub for the institution and will feature a STEM facility and Advanced Technology center in the first phase of its development. This will be the first physical college campus located in St. Tammany Parish, and it will be an invaluable asset for economic development.

The most obvious motivation for economic development entities to build relationships with higher education lies in recruiting these recent college graduates to work in local companies and industries, anticipating and answering the needs of expanding business. These students have just learned the latest theories and concepts. They are looking for experience, and they have the energy, spirit, and intelligence to contribute to a company as it grows. As discussed by Scott Shane, "brain drain" is a current trend in the U.S. and around the world that occurs when students are educated in an area but relocate from that area in pursuit of more attractive professional or educational opportunities. In the Scott Shane text, Eric Bettinger and Erin Riley describe it as "the loss of skilled human capital," and also indicate that it represents "the loss of return on investment." Especially in the case of public institutions, states invest a large amount of money into the education of these students in the hope that new graduates will seek employment within the state, ideally retaining that education, skillset, and hopefully salary to be shared and spent within the state. To prevent brain drain and to retain the students who enroll in these universities and colleges from outside of the state, it is imperative that economic development practitioners build networks among the university, business, and social communities. Area students must be engaged by local mentors and exposed to locally-available opportunities early in their college careers. Economic developers can drive such efforts.

I have been connected to Northshore Technical Community College since the summer of 2013, when I began working at the St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation. I met Northshore Technical Community College Chancellor Dr. William Wainwright by happenstance at a water management and preservation community event. We struck up a conversation about my past work in higher education, and he shared an update on his role and current projects at Northshore Technical Community College. David Lloyd, a Northshore Technical Community College team member leading their workforce development department, quickly became a contact through business and industry outreach. However, it was not until early 2014 that my relationship with Northshore Technical Community College solidified—when we began to view each other as mutual stakeholders in the realm of workforce development initiatives. A local business drew us together, rallying our entities to explore opportunities for training their existing employees while still recruiting new employees with advanced skillsets and experience in their fields.

Our meeting with this company inspired us all to examine the potential for a lasting partnership. The Northshore Technical Community College team began examining data to identify the untapped education and training needs in their five-parish service area. At the St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation, I compiled a programming plan to gather business and industry representatives, community leaders, education partners, and economic development professionals to discuss pertinent workforce development challenges and opportunities facing our community. The result was a free, five-part Workforce Development Series launched in June 2014, led by regional and statewide thought leaders in workforce development:

- Jana Sikdar, Director of Workforce and Retention, Greater New Orleans, Inc.
- Allison Plyer, Executive Director, The Data Center
- Jennifer Barnett, Workforce Investment Board, Region One
- Susie Schowen, LED Fast Start, Louisiana Economic Development
- Dr. William Wainwright, Chancellor, Northshore Technical Community College

The dynamic dialogues, budding collaborations, thought-provoking conversations, and barrier-breaking interactions far exceeded my initial expectations for simply gathering people around a table. We knew we could not waste this fresh opportunity to innovate, and the timing suited everyone.

In September of 2014, I attended my first official Maritime Advisory Board Meeting. Dr. Tina Tinney, who at that time served as the Dean of Academics and STEM Programs at Northshore Technical Community College, led the effort. Her research into the needs of the regional community found that the maritime industry's strong presence in the area demanded advanced training programs, as their projected workforce needs for the next decade and beyond far exceeded the current available workforce. Meeting attendants included representatives from Southeastern Louisiana University, Northshore Technical Community College, the St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation, and seven maritime companies from across the area. Meetings rarely encourage all participants to engage vocally and candidly, but this meeting accomplished more transparent and enthusiastic communication than any previous gathering. Since many of these companies had established strong legacies in the region and were long-time competitors, the partnership proved particularly exciting. The group quickly formed committees to focus on curriculum development, incumbent worker training, and outreach opportunities. At the conclusion of 2014, two truths became abundantly clear: the St. Tammany Economic

Development Foundation Workforce Development Series must continue, and the development of a two-year Associates degree in maritime must be pursued.

In early 2015, our momentum held strong. Although we still faced many unknowns, Dr. Wainwright, Dr. Tinney, and I were unified in our passion for pursuing unique workforce development outreach, training, and education. That year, the Workforce Development Series focused on sector-specific topics in an effort to strategically engage our business community.

The series topics included:

- Healthcare and Biosciences
- Manufacturing
- Construction and Coastal Restoration
- Energy, Oil, and Gas
- Digital Media
- Education and Training | K-12, 2-year and 4-year College

The Series concluded with a regional workforce overview from the Louisiana Workforce Commission. Northshore Technical Community College participated in every Workforce Development Series event, proving to the business and industry partners that our two organizations share the same vision and actively work together to create positive opportunities for workforce development in our community.

Simultaneously, Northshore Technical Community College took serious strides forward. Dr. Tina Tinney was promoted to Vice Chancellor of Strategic Initiatives. The college broke ground for two buildings at their brand new campus in Lacombe, launched their first giving campaign, and successfully secured an Incumbent Worker Training Program grant for one of the

parish's largest maritime companies. In the summer of 2015, the Department of Education and the Louisiana Community and Technical College System approved the industrial technology pathway for the maritime curriculum developed by the Northshore Technical Community College Maritime Consortium. Students began enrolling in the maritime pathway courses for the fall 2015 semester.

The Region One Workforce Development Board Partnership of the Louisiana Workforce Commission also introduced a new tool in 2015: Construction Connection. This tool serves as an application hub for core competencies within the construction field. For job seekers, it is a simple way to showcase all of their experience, certifications, and interests in one application rather than completing multiple applications for each specific competency, such as electrical work, pipe fitting, roofing, etc. Industry partners appreciate the ease of submitting a job order for a specific fit (i.e. pipe fitter with a TWIC card, 5 years of experience, and personal transportation) and then receiving a document listing potential candidates, all of whom meet or exceed the specific characteristics requested. The Workforce Development Board Partnership asks that employers share the names of the candidates they hire in order to track the placement of jobs through Construction Connection. This tool exemplifies how collaborative partnerships can positively benefit business and industry, as the tool increases the efficiency of job placement by matching employers' desired talents with job seekers who already possess those skill sets.

The New Orleans Regional Innovation Alliance is another collaborative partnership among higher education, industry, and economic development. The members of this Alliance include universities, community colleges, and economic development entities:

- Dillard University
- Loyola University
- Louisiana State University
- Southeastern Louisiana University
- Southern University at New Orleans
- Tulane University
- University of New Orleans
- Xavier University
- Delgado Community College
- Northshore Technical Community College
- GNO, Inc.
- Jefferson Parish Economic Development Commission (JEDCO)
- Louisiana Economic Development (LED)
- New Orleans Bio Innovation Center
- New Orleans Business Alliance
- Regional Planning Commission (RPC)
- St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation (STEDF)

Together, these partners foster a dynamic innovation ecosystem that connects intellectual assets with the talent needs of the regional economy, enhances the capacity of the region to commercialize research, and builds a regional innovation brand. The New Orleans Regional Innovation Alliance receives funding through an Economic Development Administration grant. Three priority areas have been identified: workforce and talent development, university research and commercialization, and branding. A strategic plan will be created by the Alliance to further the development of these three priorities, and recommendations of next steps will be identified and shared by November 2016.

In 2016, workforce development and higher education partnerships have taken the spotlight. Our Workforce Development Series addresses critical issues facing our community at this time, including incarceration re-entry and the growth of maritime training opportunities despite the low price of oil. A complete list of topics includes:

- Re-entry Challenges and Opportunities
- Information Technology
- STEM Education and Pathways
- Maritime
- Healthcare and Hospitals
- Regional Workforce Overview

An Information Technology Working Group formed out of the May 2016 Information Technology Workforce Development Series event. This group includes K-12 education partners, Southeastern Louisiana University, Louisiana Workforce Commission, Northshore Technical Community College, St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation, and multiple business and industry leaders from various sectors. We recognize that information technology is not an industry sector on its own, but is actually a compilation of core competencies that affects all industries. The working group desires to create an information technology version of Construction Connection, to evaluate the current education curriculum available at the high school, two-year college, and four-year college levels, and make the necessary changes to the curriculum to meet the current and future business and industry needs. In September, Northshore Technical Community College signed an engineering pathway agreement with the University of New Orleans.

New Growth Theory states that knowledge production is the key to growth. Northshore Technical Community College provides new knowledge to community members through education and training of traditional college students, non-traditional training programs, and nimble workforce development training and programs. Collaborative partnerships such as the Workforce Development Series, New Orleans Regional Innovation Alliance, Maritime Consortium, and Information Technology Working Group are incredible launch points for

changing the economic and education landscape in southern Louisiana. In order for the community to flourish, St. Tammany Parish and its regional partners must invest substantially in education, training, innovation, and collaboration. Economic, education, and community leaders must create an authentic and transparent learning community to ensure that our residents can be educated, trained, and employed to the shared satisfaction of the labor force and the business community.

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