

Rural collaboration works to build higher skill level in hopes of attracting better jobs

By

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The Golden State has lost some of its glimmer if you happen to live on the west side of California's San Joaquin Valley. Known as one of the bread baskets of the world, employment tends to be centered on agriculture production. Even in the best of times, income and education levels are low. Now ending a third year of drought, these are certainly not the best of times and some fear that the worst is yet to come. Federal water policies, environmental regulations and the national economic crisis have exacerbated the problems to a point that more than 40 percent of the residents of the two largest communities in the area, Firebaugh and Mendota, are unemployed.

There is a ray of sunshine despite the gloom. The k-12 school districts in the area and the local community college have collaborated on the Westside Institute of Technology (WIT). Pooling facilities and financial resources, WIT provides short-term job training for high-demand

careers. Most of the classes are mobile and move from community to community so the market is not over saturated and students save on transportation costs. Many of the classes are taught in English and Spanish.

A career ladder approach is used – a job, better job, a career. Skill development is the focus to allow residents to seek higher-paying jobs with more stable futures. As a highly effective strategy to engage students, academics are taught within a career context application; thus, making it more relevant and meaningful to the adult learner.

Working with local employers, the Fresno County Workforce Investment Board and Economic Development Corporation, WIT seeks to identify jobs of the future and the skills needed by those who will fill those jobs. Initial class offerings included maintenance mechanic, forklift, welding, truck driving, and security guard. In order to meet new employer demand, WIT is developing short-term training in solar and other green technologies.

Distance learning equipment is being installed in the three high schools in the partnership that will allow them to share Advanced Placement courses and offer more West Hills College classes. Middle and high school students are engaged in robotics with the help of WIT. The goal is to get more students interested in engineering, math and science.

WIT has a vision of controlling the regional economic destiny by providing exceptional career and technical education leading to career choices for highly skilled individuals. One of those individuals is Griselda Gallegos, who has lived in the small city of San Joaquin for 14 years.

Griselda, who had spent years as a farm worker, speaks of seeing a woman truck driver, “I want to do the same.”

After completing the WIT truck driving classes, she is now employed by food processor Contadina Del Monte as a truck driver. She speaks proudly of how, when her husband couldn’t work, she was able to pay for their house and take care of their three children.

“I want to better my life,” she said with conviction in her voice. “I came to school and I did it. I have my license and a job!”

Mendota resident Camilo Ramirez became a certified forklift driver for Neil Jones Foods.

“I worked a lot of time in the fields and I see a lot of people struggling right now,” he said. The instructors at WIT helped. “I took my tests and I got qualified 100 percent, thanks to the teaching they gave me.”

Camilo and his wife have four children and are content to stay and work in the Mendota area. “It’s my town. I’m glad to be right here.”

Griselda and Camilo are two of 446 people helped by WIT since it first offered training late in 2007. They participated in two of the most popular training—truck driving and fork lift. Despite 40 percent unemployment in the area served by WIT, 50 of the 76 truck driving students have found a job and 95 of the 150 fork lift students are employed.

Helping people like Griselda and Camilo is important but making sure that a skilled workforce is available to attract employers is the bottom line for WIT. Otherwise, the

communities of Mendota, Firebaugh, San Joaquin and Tranquillity may become 21st century ghost towns.

Acknowledging this fact helped bring together the college, K-12 schools, county workforce investment board and economic development corporation. In rural communities a coalition is critical to accomplishing change. Creating this coalition was no small feat. The communities involved had historically competed with each other for funding.

Recognizing that they had been individually unsuccessful in attracting a large training center to the area, they were receptive to working with the college district to begin taking small steps at providing training for area residents. Building trust was critical.

One way to build trust is to increase meaningful communication. Monthly meetings included the k-12 superintendents and a school board member, the city managers or their designee, the college district chancellor and president, the Fresno County Workforce Investment Board director and often a representative from the Economic Development Corporation. Phone calls were frequent between meetings, which rotated between communities.

WIT used a stone soup approach - each brought important ingredients to the mix. One district might have classroom space but no money. Another might have funding but no curriculum. The city had information that a major employer was coming to or leaving but had no way of addressing employer needs. Now, employers who are thinking about locating in the area are invited to WIT meetings to discuss their training needs.

Starting small projects that built trust within the communities often overcame individual personalities who had doubts. The numbers tell a story on their own. Tracking students by their home and employment zip codes provides the spice for the soup that has been created by WIT.

Since there was no major facility available, a portable classroom on the Mendota High School campus served as WIT's headquarters and the training programs were developed to be mobile so they rotate between communities.

Like any culinary treasure, a well-seasoned chef knows what ingredients are necessary to create a blend that is palatable. In the case of WIT, that chef was Fresno County Supervisor Phil Larson who shepherded the project from afar and who leaned heavily on funding agencies to make sure that the rural communities received their fair share of job-training dollars. In the past, the rural areas had often been overlooked for the larger cities.

Supervisor Larson, who had recently retired from a 30-plus year job in agriculture when he was elected, knew each community's needs. His persistence was critical to launching WIT and keeping it on track during the initial year.

Recognizing the value of a coordinated effort took leadership and collaboration. That collaboration has spilled over to other activities in the communities. A current water shortage in the region, in part created by a drought but in greater part due to regulatory, legal and legislative decisions, has threatened the very existence of the communities served by WIT.

With WIT now well established and its success documented one student at a time, the communities are better positioned to survive the drought and its economic impacts. The model of trust, cooperation, collaboration and pooled resources has worked well.