

Higher Education Needs Assessment

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The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development

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Executive Summary

This feasibility study evaluates the post-secondary educational and economic development needs in the Union, Snyder, Northumberland, and Montour County Region. A Higher Education Community Steering committee is undertaking a process, funded by the Bloomsburg University Foundation, to ascertain thoughts about higher education availability, affordability, and program interests in the four-county region. The committee is comprised of individuals from business and industry, higher education, K-12, economic development, workforce development, and non-profit sectors. The study includes three components, including: 1) foundation data - provides an analysis of the region's population, including racial, gender, age, educational achievement, and economic status distributions, and an analysis of the region's population data and trends over the preceding five years and projections for the ensuing 10 years; 2) survey analysis - surveys were deployed and analyzed from six target groups: ninth through twelfth grade students from the region's public and private high schools, their parents, recent high school graduates, business and industry, the community at-large, and nontraditional students and displaced workers; and 3) analysis of post secondary education institutions, economic development programs, locations, and areas of study.

Foundation Data

The vast majority of residents in Montour, Northumberland, Snyder, and Union Counties are Caucasian, and the counties have an increasing but generally low number of minorities. Most of the surveyed counties have relatively stable education distributions, with most residents having attained a high school diploma. The percentage of residents with some amount of a college education is consistently increasing, but remains fairly low. Migration for all areas included in the proposed region remains relatively low, as its populations have remained fairly consistent and stable. The four counties included in the survey are often some of the most popular destinations for the other three counties' out-migrants. Over the years, the counties have managed to maintain a fairly even trade

of residents.

Each of the county's income distributions has become less left-skewed than in 1990, thus leading to the conclusion that the area's residents have a more normally-shaped income distribution. While some counties' distributions remain more severe than others, this signifies that they are probably experiencing fewer poverty problems than they experienced in the 1990's, and that their economic climates are continuously improving.

Many of the region's past economic problems continue to plague the counties today; such problems are largely attributable to a widespread lack of educational attainment by the majority of residents. The area's low number of high-paying jobs/opportunities may also help account for some of its problems, as many residents are employed in industrial or trade occupations.

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Historically, all counties surveyed experienced a slight decrease in unemployment, typically between 2004 and 2007, followed by a recent sharp increase in unemployment – a result of the 2008 economic recession. Usually, the unemployment rates range from 4.00% to 6.00%, however, recently, rates have reached 10.30%. It should be noted, however, that some counties experienced much less volatility than others. Currently, Montour, Northumberland, Snyder, and Union Counties differ greatly from statewide and national socioeconomic standards. Each of the counties surveyed has a lower income distribution than state and national averages, although some differ more than others. In terms of educational attainment distributions, the counties are home to more residents with educational attainment levels of high school diploma or lower, as compared with state and national statistics.

By 2013, each county's educational attainment and income distributions are expected to improve and better-reflect the national and statewide statistics. Income distributions are expected to adjust to indicate a slightly more normal statistical distribution curve. The

percentage of residents with higher education experience is expected to increase.

Likewise, the number of residents with educational attainment levels of a high school diploma or lower is expected to decrease.

Within the surveyed counties, construction remains the largest employer of residents by far. Specialty trade contractors and food manufacturing also employ a significant percentage of area residents, with 2,180 and 1,790 employees, respectively.

Along with utilities and electric power, these fields continue to be the area's most prosperous industrial fields.

By 2012, some business clusters are projected to experience significant changes.

Natural gas distribution is expected to exhibit a five-year annual growth rate of 4.86%,

which is consistently seen as the field with the most projected growth potential in all four

counties. Water, sewage, and other systems are also expected to see a significant

annual growth of 2.12% throughout the four-county region. Most industries, however,

are expected to experience negative annual growth rates through 2012. The industry

category of other heavy and civil engineering construction is projected to exhibit an

exceptionally large decrease in its five-year annual growth rate of -4.30%. While construction is projected to be the most popular industry for area residents, it also is

expected to have a negative annual growth rate of nearly -0.36%.

In terms of quality of place, the four-county region provides a wide array of recreation

activities to support a high quality of life; in addition, the region shows significant growth

potential – particularly if the right infrastructure and collaborations are developed.

Such

collaborations could allow counties to better leverage existing resources and support

expansion. The region's natural resources and historic value make it a fun and relaxing

place for visitors and local residents.

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For most counties, the major strengths lie in their availability of natural resources and

cultural offerings. Many counties capitalize on their natural, scenic beauty and close

proximity to rivers, trails and other natural resources to expand outdoor recreational opportunities. While all of the counties examined provide various forms of arts and cultural events year round, most counties could more effectively seize the region's unique cultural offerings. Weaknesses appear in the region's available dining and overnight accommodations industries. Such limited offerings make it difficult to attract needed traffic to support the food and hotel industries. Conversely, available dining options are largely suited for families of all income levels. An area's lower cost of living can certainly be a great incentive to those seeking to move from larger cities. If a high quality of life can be maintained at a lower cost, such areas will become more desirable to families as places to live and visit.

The region's opportunities lie in its potential to expand upon current arts and cultural offerings – particularly county-wide festivals. A possible threat to the region pertains to its promotion of arts and cultural opportunities; its ability to increase promotion seems stifled by its lack of large public venues to support increased traffic. The addition of more entertainment venues would greatly enhance the region's quality of life by broadening opportunities to support performing arts, attracting more affluent crowds that may support an increased number of activities, and boosting business for restaurants, hotels and bed and breakfasts that support this market. Further, the Susquehanna River and trails offer endless potential to build tourism and attract new residents.

Ongoing maintenance, improvements, and access are critical. Inclement weather presents another potential threat, as during the winter months it can be particularly harsh.

Community Analysis

The community analysis consists of surveys that target six groups: high school students in ninth through twelfth grades and their parents; high school graduates from 2007 and 2008; adults age 21 and older, both employed and unemployed; non-traditional students; business and industry; and the overall community. Each participant received a letter indicating the survey's purpose, along with instructions

and information on how the data collected will be used, a copy of the survey and a postage-paid return envelope. An online version of the survey was also made available.

The survey did not request contact or personal information.

Student surveys were distributed at schools, and parent and adult surveys were mailed.

The survey of non-traditional students was distributed through employment, workforce development and social service organizations, while the business and industry survey was circulated through business organizations and associations in the four-county area.

The survey portion of this study provided invaluable information and insight and the findings should play an important role in the steering committee's decision.

Overall, it

appears that the region has a need for additional higher education. The majority of

students surveyed are planning on attending a local four-year college after high school

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and many students would consider attending a new institution. Cost was a major factor

for students in choosing a post-secondary institution, while program of study choices

followed closely behind. Students would most like to see nursing and engineering offered at the new institution. There was also an interest in pre-professional

majors,

such as pre-med and pre-law.

The parent surveys showed a positive opinion of the effort to determine if additional post

secondary programs are needed within the four-county region. Respondents indicated

they would like a two-year community college. Because surveys were mailed directly to

parents of high school students, the Institute was able to obtain some insightful information on the plans of their children. They indicated their children would likely be

interested in attending a public four-year university. They also stated that cost was the

most important factor in choosing a higher education institution. This directly coincides

with the answers obtained from student surveys.

Recent graduate surveys consisted of respondents from three school districts.

Over

62% of those respondents indicated that they were already attending a local four-year public university. Approximately 50% of those students said they would not consider transferring if a similar type of college campus were located in the region. Non-traditional student surveys showed a need for a community college. The majority of participants were working and attending school part-time. Although many respondents expressed that they would likely attend a four-year college if one were in the region, over one-third of respondents said they would likely attend a community college. The community survey provided valuable insight into how local residents, many without any need for a college or university, feel about the possibility of a new post-secondary institution. The majority of respondents supported efforts to determine if additional postsecondary programs are needed. Over 29% of respondents said someone in their family is going on to higher education in the next five years. More than 45% of all respondents said they would like to see a two-year community college, while 78% of respondents said they would consider or promote attending a new community college in the region if they or a member their household pursued higher education. Furthermore, more than 69% of respondents felt positively about a four-year public university,

Higher Education

Although opportunities to improve school proficiencies can be considered endless for the region, explicit and core opportunities are evident; the most relevant and paramount is the region's opportunity to balance performance levels of its eighth and eleventh graders. Although this disparity is evident statewide, research and sufficient efforts within the community could stimulate significant change. With new emphasis on secondary education and academic attainment, it is crucial to focus on high school academia and students. With the variance in performance between eighth and eleventh graders, a door opens to more opportunities in bridging the gap. This opportunity is

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significant and could be utilized for widespread benefits and to assist in surpassing state

averages.

Snyder County experienced mild improvements in terms of increasing the number of students completing higher degrees. Union County has shown substantial improvements in terms of increasing the volume of students completing higher education degrees. Northumberland County also observed substantial improvements

in educational status compared with the region and the state.

Post-secondary selections have varied for each county. All counties indicate improvements in attaining a Bachelor's degree, despite total graduate fluctuations.

Projections for 2013 indicate further improvements in Bachelor degree attainment levels.

The number of graduates attending Pennsylvania institutions of higher education and the number of those going to work have decreased since 2004, while the number of

graduates attending higher education schools outside of Pennsylvania have been increasing since 2004.

In terms of vocational education, the counties have seen decreases or no improvement

in selections during the period from 2004 to 2008. While the region's vocational programs are strong, several vocational schools are not up to par on their number of programs offered.

Further, to ensure that the gap between eighth and eleventh grade PSSA scores is

minimized, school districts must investigate techniques that maximize the potential for

K-12 students. Emphasis on improving higher education attainment and other continuing education is critical. Economic development success is dependent upon the

quality of the workforce. Quality training begins in elementary school.

Although four-year colleges and universities provide postsecondary education in the

main fields of business, health care professions, and sciences, some of these fields of

study lack diversification. Given the four-county area, there appear to be gaps and

limitations in undergraduate programming.

Overall cost increases are a significant weakness for all levels of higher education.

Pennsylvania's institutions of higher education have improved in all areas except affordability. Location is an issue for students residing in lower Northumberland County,

who may experience commutes of up to one hour for programs in Snyder County.

The region's Associate's degree programs are more limited in availability and diversification, although they adequately provide two-year postsecondary education for those wishing to enter careers in industries that are more prevalent, such as business, health care, computer science and criminal justice.

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Graduate programs are much more limited in availability and field of study diversity. For example, there is a lack of graduate degree programs in business fields. Therefore, distance poses a major obstacle for most of the region's residents who wish to pursue a business graduate degree. Another disadvantage lies in the restricted availability of graduate medical programs within the four counties.

Recommendations

Overall, there is a significant need for a new institution of higher education in the fourcounty region. Given the responses and gaps that were identified through survey analysis, there is a need for a hybrid institution – one that offers university level courses, as well as those traditionally offered at the community college level, as the region lacks certificate and continuing education courses. While it appeared that a lack of nursing programs would be an issue, Misericordia University is providing a Bachelor of Science program in nursing in Northumberland County, which works to fill that gap. As tuition costs increase and higher education becomes less affordable enrollment numbers may begin to decline, especially among lower socioeconomic classes and minority students. Cost remained the number one factor that influences a person's decision to attend a local public college/university campus in the region. Because the cost of post-secondary education is becoming increasingly unaffordable, there is a need for affordable post-secondary educational opportunities with increased financial aid. Additional recommendations include developing business partnerships to focus on

research and technology development for the proposed institution – life and physical science are appropriate sectors.

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