

Economic Development as a Higher Education Imperative

By Ron Cole | December 9, 2024



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The US Economic Development Administration defines *economic development* as the process of creating conditions that improve quality of life and economic growth. Academic leaders in higher education are in a unique position to take action to [contribute to economic development in their region](#) while also enhancing student outcomes and employee quality of life. This makes good business sense.

Why is economic development of our town an imperative for me and my institution? Because as goes our town, so goes our college. Beyond caring about where we live and work, we know that the vibrancy and economic health of our town matter for the recruitment and retention of students, faculty, and staff. This is especially relevant as the US faces a [decline](#) in the number of traditional-age college-bound students and a [shrinking workforce](#).

To be successful, a commitment to economic development must be shared by campus stakeholders including the governing board, senior administration, faculty, staff, and students, as well as community stakeholders including local government, businesses, and nonprofit and service organizations. At my institution, after seeking input from each of these stakeholders, we codified our commitment to community and economic development *explicitly* as one of five goals in our [Strategic Pathway](#). As a liberal arts college, we bring to the table research capacity, expertise in a wide range of disciplines, and resources to pursue grants and other funding opportunities. We know that it's important to avoid a mindset of "swooping in" to "save" our town. Instead, we are *part* of our town and need to work alongside community partners to build capacity.

I'd like to share four initiatives Allegheny College has launched to serve the greater Meadville region to achieve our goal of community and economic development. These strategies expand workforce and economic development and strengthen partnerships that support both our students and surrounding communities. While these specific actions may not be right for every college or university, we trust you'll find an integrated approach or concept that is worth developing for your own institution.

One of the significant contributions we made toward our economic development goal is the establishment of a [community revitalization corporation](#), launched with financial support from the Richard King Mellon Foundation. Importantly, the revitalization corporation is an independent nonprofit organization with a steering committee and board including representatives from local government, the chamber of commerce, independent businesses, the economic progress alliance, nonprofit groups, banks, the regional medical center, and my institution. Focus areas include renovating and developing residential and commercial real estate, improving public spaces, and promotional branding and marketing to attract talent, visitors, and students to the region.

Another major initiative involves the launch of the [Community Impact Hub](#). The hub is a collaborative network of community partners, faculty, staff, and students organized into five impact teams that use a collective impact model to determine shared goals and outcomes. The impact teams are organized around community and economic development, health and well-being, arts and culture, education and social development, and environment and sustainability—key ingredients for a thriving community. Faculty and students actively engage with nonprofit partners in initiatives to support the region's capacity-building and community improvement efforts. The college integrates community projects into its curriculum and engagement activities, giving students practical experience as they explore career paths and cultivate a deeper commitment to engaged citizenship.

A third initiative we launched, the [Allegheny Lab for Innovation and Creativity](#), integrates liberal arts learning, emerging technologies, and the manufacturing industry to meet growing needs in workforce development in our region with micro-credential, co-op, and internship opportunities for traditional and nontraditional students. The curriculum is based on needs assessment of local industry with collaboration from our county economic progress alliance. Among the needs are skills we value in the liberal arts: research, innovation, critical thinking, leadership, and communication, along with more technical skills. We are not expert in all the technical skills needed, but we do specialize in designing and delivering education that is at the root of workforce development. By hiring professionals with technical expertise as instructors, developing their pedagogy, and integrating skills from a liberal arts education, we are contributing to our regional economy with workforce development.

Lastly, with seed funding from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, faculty and staff established a cross-disciplinary, multifaceted research, education, and community outreach [watershed center](#) that promotes ecosystem protection and sustainable rural economic development. More than 155 students have engaged in watershed projects, and in the first two years we have established 16 successful collaborations with agencies, nonprofit organizations, other universities, and research centers as well as public landowners.

In each of these examples, students gain [high-impact practices](#) through collaborative and capstone projects, research, community-based learning, internships, and co-op classes, with mentoring by faculty, staff, and community partners. These types of experiences have been entry points for graduates into our local economy—alumni are employed in leadership roles with local manufacturing, healthcare, finance, and law firms; are downtown entrepreneurs and business owners; serve in elected office; and are educators in our school districts. Considering that colleges and universities annually bring a new population of young adults into our towns, imagine the capacity building—particularly in areas of declining population—that can occur if even a few percent of graduates each year choose to stay in the region as employees, homeowners, consumers, investors, and engaged citizens.

Relationships are key for success in this work. Getting to know community partners and industry leaders can build trust and help to identify needs. This takes time but can yield an important shift in mindset to consider the local community as a place to be part of capacity building rather than a laboratory for student projects. As such, these are not passive relationships but an active part of economic development. This type of economic impact goes beyond service hours and students, families, and employees shopping locally. Capacity building results in new businesses and stronger nonprofits, adding to the workforce and leveraging the assets of our regional institutions. Such outcomes enhance quality of life and vibrancy, making the region a magnet to prospective students, faculty, and staff.

Another benefit is a positive town-gown relationship. Our institution happens to be on a hill above the central downtown area; our aim is to metaphorically flatten that hill. Demonstrating that higher ed is part of economic development can foster a paradigm shift in how a college or university is perceived, dismantling ivory tower stereotypes.

Leveraging strengths in academic programs and institutional mission along with community assets can be a foundation to build partnerships that enhance the workforce, attract businesses, and build capacity in nonprofit and government agencies. There are mutual benefits to our college and the town, such as helping to attract new students and employees with a vibrant community while providing high-impact practices and career readiness for students. Not only is this good business sense, but it shines a light on colleges and universities as integral parts of economic development in their communities.

Ron Cole is the 23rd president of Allegheny College. Under his leadership, the college is achieving record-breaking fundraising and alumni engagement to ensure the place of Allegheny College as a leader in interdisciplinary 21st-century education, where students and faculty pursue innovative solutions to real-world problems.

Tags: [community engagement](#), [town-gown relationships](#)