



ROANE STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

Building Partnerships to Advance Economic Opportunity in Morgan County

Roane State Community College (RSCC) carefully reviewed Community Vibrancy modules from Achieving the Dream (ATD) and became most engaged with the curriculum when leaders scrutinized regional employment data. College leaders saw that rural communities in their service area, which are home to beautiful state parks and natural amenities, offered residents little opportunity for upward mobility. The major employers in some counties are local government, the school system, Walmart, and, in some cases, the large state prison complex, says Karen Brunner, RSCC's vice president for institutional effectiveness, planning, and student success programs.



Roane State Community

College (RSCC) serves nearly 5,000 students at nine locations serving ten counties (Roane, Anderson, Loudon, Campbell, Scott, Cumberland, Morgan, Fentress, Knox, and Blount counties) in eastern Tennessee. RSCC has been an ATD Network college since 2015 and a Leader College of Distinction since 2021.

Reviewing the community vibrancy data, college officials began to wonder, “How can we bring either new business to these counties or connect workers to remote jobs in the digital space?” Vice President Brunner says. “We asked ourselves, ‘Is there something that we can do as a college to work with these counties to bring in jobs?’”

Following the Community Vibrancy Framework’s approach to expand the institution’s impact on its most underserved communities, RSCC decided to focus its community vibrancy work on Morgan County, which has the highest poverty rates and the highest percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are neither in school nor working — also known as “opportunity youth” — in its ten-county service area.

“We wanted to work with Morgan County as part of our commitment to lifting up high-poverty communities and because it has [a] population that we felt we could wrap our arms around,” Vice President Brunner says.

“This is the work of a community college,” says Chris Whaley, president of RSCC. “This is the community part of our name.”

President Whaley notes that the community vibrancy work is the next phase of the student success movement, answering the question, success to do what? “We want to help students get a job, have a family-sustaining career, and be a more well-rounded citizen. Ultimately, what we want is for enough of those folks in a community to have economic and social mobility so that we’re not just lifting up one or two individuals, but, hopefully, with the work that we do in partnership with the local community, we are lifting up the entire community. We can’t do that on our own, but we certainly have an important role and responsibility in that work.”

While more than half of Morgan County’s population does not earn enough to afford basic household necessities and it is home to only two major corporations, the community has some strong assets that could lead to a brighter future for its residents. Morgan County boasts a growing tourist industry and four state parks, two national parks, and two wildlife management areas. Not least, RSCC has a permanent campus with a site director who has deep connections to the community, as it does in all ten counties it serves.

Raising Key Questions

RSCC invited Morgan County leaders, including mayors of townships, school district superintendents, corporate HR representatives, and leaders of community-serving agencies and philanthropic organizations, to a meeting focused on the needs of the county. At the meeting, which was attended by more than 35 county leaders, college officials underscored that they were simply a partner

and convener — they were not there to save them. They came with data and some questions sparked by the Community Vibrancy model’s focus on bolstering social and economic mobility and community well-being. Among the questions were:

- How can key players in the county work together to bring new business to the county, encourage more remote, digital jobs, and advance development of emerging industry?
- What can be done to reconnect youth to learning?
- How can the region tap into new opportunities through its leadership networks, regional economic development district, and untapped land, educational, and service assets?



Carefully discussing the data with local leaders and partner groups, RSCC learned that available data isn’t always accurate and could conceal underlying realities. For example, a seemingly high homeownership rate (81.5%) masked the fact that the housing stock was old and not in livable shape because elderly residents, who make up 20% of the population, could no longer afford the upkeep. Similarly, while the data showed that more than a third of 16- to 24-year-olds are not in school and not working, the county has a near universal high school graduation rate of 99.1%. The hidden problem is not 16- to 18-year-olds who are not in school but what happens to graduates who don’t go on to postsecondary education. The county has a college degree attainment rate (19% of adults with an associate degree or higher) that is less than half of the state average (39%).

LESSONS LEARNED

Key lessons RSCC leaders identified include:

- **Determine a strategic place to start.** For RSCC, which does not have the resources to take on 10 counties at once, it made sense to apply a place-based approach to initiate the work in a rural county. The changes there are focused on more than just bringing in a company or two — they require connecting to the new digital economy, encouraging entrepreneurship, and, especially, understanding the culture. It might take time to get these elements in place and be worth starting small before expanding across other rural counties.

- **Build the work around local people who have already established strong relationships built on trust.** RSCC’s site director and President Whaley are well-known natives to the county and trusted in the community.
- **Find the right fit.** RSCC has much to offer, including certificate programs and upskilling opportunities, experience with design thinking and incubating new businesses, and a business and digital learning curriculum that could support economic development. But it views these assets as tools that can be offered if and when it is appropriate; it is not the purpose of the partnership.
- **Leadership must communicate urgency to the rest of the college.** Every time community colleges recalibrate what’s important — from focusing on enrollment in the last century to student success over the past 20 years, and then to completion and today’s wraparound services and community success — institutions need to reset priorities and communicate urgency and the benefit to the institution over the long haul.

“Community vibrancy work involves some imagination,” notes Vice President Brunner. “The dance has to be really delicate, because at some point these communities have to envision what the workforce of the future really looks like. It’s not necessarily that we want to bring in a big manufacturing company. We want to help them understand what this new digital economy is like and how we can spread small business ownership. That kind of reimagining of the future is a little scary for everybody, but that’s partly where this is leading in some of these rural counties.”

“This is not an add-on to the mission,” President Whaley reasserts. “This is the mission.”

He notes that the work addresses the institution’s long-term sustainability and builds crucial relationships with school districts, businesses, and public agencies. Not least, he says, “Community leaders appreciate that the college is willing to roll up its sleeves and strategize with them to uplift the community.”

ATD’s Community Vibrancy Framework brings ATD’s strategic vision to life by supporting colleges in moving their student success work beyond completion and connecting their institutional transformation efforts with community impact. The framework helps colleges expand access to previously underserved communities, strengthen early momentum and completion of degrees and credentials, establish greater economic and social mobility for their students, and connect these gains with stronger and more vibrant communities. It also encourages colleges to become boundary-spanning institutions and is the backbone of ATD’s approach to innovation, coaching, and service delivery. To test the framework and associated curriculum, ATD engaged 15 ATD Network colleges to be part of its first Community Vibrancy Cohort. This profile is one in a series that explores how colleges are using the framework and lessons learned to date.



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