

Expanding College and Job-Skills Opportunities in Western Maine

The Rural Family Economic Success (RuFES) framework has three broad outcomes—Earn it, Keep it, Grow it—designed to help families increase their income, stabilize their finances, and build assets and wealth.

This story addresses “Earn It” strategies to help workers to find, keep and advance in good jobs. Many entry-level jobs in rural areas pay low wages and offer few benefits. To increase their income and better support their families, working parents need access to education and training so they’re qualified for higher-paying careers.

To help revitalize Franklin County, Maine, a broad consortium of local leaders has brought community college courses and other job-skills training to the area—connecting people seeking new skills and industries seeking higher-skilled workers.

Located in western Maine, about 90 miles north of Portland and stretching up to the Canadian border, Franklin County is a world apart from the state’s bigger cities and fabled coast.

A vast, sparsely populated region graced with lakes, rivers, forests, mountains, and small towns that have more moose than traffic lights, this is “the other Maine”—rich in natural beauty and resources but without the population or economic opportunities found in the state’s more populated, prosperous south.

Hard hit by a downturn in longtime industries that employed generations in the production of shoes, paper, lumber, toothpicks, croquet sets, and other wood products, Franklin County has one of Maine’s highest unemployment rates and lowest median household income levels. Two ski resorts do lure tourists and expensive vacation homes. But off the main roads, especially in the county’s isolated northern reaches, there are telltale signs of poverty—worn mobile homes, boarded up factories, struggling shops.

Yet there is new optimism among the 29,467 residents here, thanks to a community-wide effort that has brought community college courses to the county—a vital resource for people seeking new skills to get higher-paying jobs and for industries seeking higher-skilled workers.

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FRANKLIN COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE NETWORK: REINVENTING THE REGION BY RETRAINING THE WORKFORCE

“We’re trying to reinvent this area,” says Gary Perlson, a community education director in northern Franklin County. “We have one card to play—to retrain our existing workforce and train our emerging workforce to be the high-skills workforce of the 21st century. We’re creating opportunity—for businesses to get skilled employees, for people to get an education.”

This used to be a particular challenge because Franklin County does not have its own community college. But in fall 2005, the Franklin County Community College Network—a community college without walls created by a broad consortium of local leaders—began offering college courses at three Franklin County sites operating as off-campus locations for Central Maine Community College (CMCC), in neighboring Androscoggin County. By spring 2008, the network expanded to offering 11 courses at five off-campus locations—two high schools, a hospital, an adult learning center, and a vocational center.

The network also has developed training courses to meet the needs of industries seeking workers. For example, when the Cianbro Corporation, a Maine company, needed trained welders to build boats, a 160-hour welding course was created that will lead to full-time jobs at Cianbro for successful graduates. The company is paying residents to take the course.

“We said ‘We have people who are unemployed. We’ll work with you to help train them,’” recalls Ray Therrien, an adult education director in southern Franklin County.

This was good news for Cianbro, which has struggled to find qualified workers. “Any time that you can get training where these folks are learning skills, that’s exciting,” says Todd Gilley, Cianbro’s human resources recruiter. “It’s going to be better for them—and us.”

The network’s accomplishments are also a major selling point when Alison Hagerstrom, executive director of the Greater Franklin Development Corporation, approaches prospective employers. “That’s helping us,” she says. “Business owners are beginning to understand that this is a real key thing for them should they come here.”

EASY ACCESS TO COLLEGE CLASSES FOR BOTH FULL-TIME STUDENTS AND WORKING PARENTS

To date, about 320 students have attended the college classes now offered in Franklin County. About one third of the students currently enrolled are taking their first college course. About half are fully registered college students seeking a certificate or degree, including Caleb Simpson, of Kingfield, population 1,097.

Approaching age 30, starting a family, and eager to increase his ability to get a higher-paying job than the “dead-end” one he had at a lumber yard, Simpson took advantage of the network’s easy access to start college, ten years after high school. “I was nervous because it had been awhile,” says Simpson, whose wife is expecting their first child. “But I felt comfortable pretty quick after the first semester when I did very well.”

Simpson is pursuing an associate degree in electromechanical engineering that he hopes will enable his family to remain in Franklin County and do well. “Most of my high school friends left for more opportunity down in southern Maine or Massachusetts. There wasn’t much keeping them here. I left for a little while but I wanted to come home,” he says. “Getting an education will open doors.”

Before the network, college wasn’t an option for Autumn Therrien, Ray Therrien’s niece, given her long work hours and responsibilities as a single parent. Now, instead of a two-hour round trip commute to CMCC, she can take classes ten minutes from her home in Farmington, population 7,410, the county’s largest town.

“I’ve been waitressing for four years. You never feel like you’ve accomplished anything,” says Therrien, 29, who hopes higher education will lead to a better-paying job that better supports her family. “My biggest dream is to give my seven-year-old some security.”

For Karen Henderson, 35, who lives in Phillips, population 990, with her husband and school-age son, taking classes at three network sites (including the high school she graduated from in 1990) saved time and money. “It’s so much more feasible and geared toward people who work. That’s what makes it do-able,” says Henderson, who, like many students, has a scholarship.

A former shoe-factory worker now employed at a lumber yard, Henderson plans to pursue a four-year community health degree. With community college courses under her belt, she says, “I feel more confident that I can face whatever challenges come my way.”

“We need 40,000 more people in Maine with college degrees—businesses have told us that,” says Gary Perlson. “But Maine is dead last of all New England states in the percentage of people with college degrees. We’re 50th in the nation in the percentage of our population enrolled in community college, (at only one percent).”

EFFORTS SPARKED BY ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION RUFES INSTITUTE

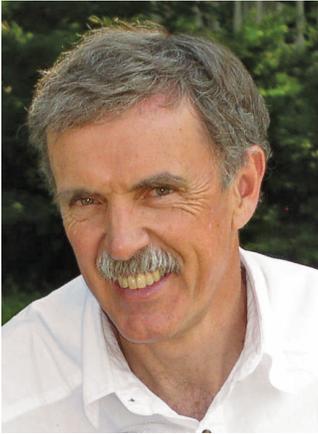
In December 2004, several Franklin County anti-poverty leaders traveled to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to attend a structured peer-learning institute focused on rural family economic success. At this working session known as a “RuFES Institute,” supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, teams from communities across the country learned about key strategies and policies, then developed action plans to take home.

“It was a very powerful experience,” says Fen Fowler, executive director of Western Maine Community Action. “Sometimes pulling people out of their own environment and having them stand back far enough...you come away with a different perspective.”

In Santa Fe, the Mainers learned how community colleges, working with businesses and social services, can boost rural economic development. “It isn’t that people had never thought of having a community college here but, conceptually, how should we do it?” says Doug Dunlap, a Franklin County minister. The team learned “this wasn’t just something for the education people to wrestle with but for the whole community to embrace.”



Autumn Therrien hopes her associate’s degree will lead to a higher-paying job that better supports her family. “My biggest dream is to give my seven-year-old some security.”



“We stepped out of the usual education and social services gatherings to welcome people from these other sectors,” says Doug Dunlap, a minister and professor who has been active in the project.

The Mainers returned to Franklin County determined to establish a community college presence. “What we learned in Santa Fe is that you need broad-based support in order to move anything in your community,” says Fowler.

For several months, Dunlap met one-to-one and in larger forums with community leaders, from school superintendents and ministers active in anti-poverty work to leaders in business and economic development.

This was done “to involve sectors of the community that we regarded as vital but are not always thought of when people are thinking about education,” says Dunlap. “We stepped out of the usual education and social services gatherings to welcome people from these other sectors.”

In June 2005, another group—including adult education leaders and CMCC’s president—also gathered to discuss offering college classes in Franklin County.

Getting wind of each other, the two groups met in July. Later on the same day, in the same place, a Maine Community Foundation advisory committee discussed helping rural Maine survive in a global economy by funding a network to build educational capacity and infrastructure.

The Foundation wound up providing a grant and technical assistance to help start what became known as the Franklin County Community College Network—which is not only a network of class locations but a social network as well. It is led by a consortium of community leaders who meet regularly to share information and resources to further expand higher education opportunities, aligning them with business needs.

CONSORTIUM DRAWS ON WIDE RANGE OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES

The consortium includes leaders in business, economic development, education, health care, career development, and social services. Even the county’s movie theater has pitched in—screening a network advertisement, free of charge. With such diverse membership, information comes in from many channels—and there are many resources with which to respond collaboratively.

To get the welding course going, for example, various consortium members pitched in, providing the instructor, equipment, training site, funding and students. “One thing happened after another to grab an opportunity,” explains Fowler. “If you have a diverse network of people, they can weave in and out to create opportunities and connections.”

From the start, three major barriers to community college access were identified: distance, cost, and culture. The multiple locations address distance. Scholarships address cost. Every adult student who needs financial help to attend an area college now receives an average of \$300 per semester. The scholarship money, which goes directly to the college, comes from sources including the local United Way and a Maine community foundation grant endowed by a local couple.

But in a rural county where an estimated 73 percent of the residents have no college degree, “culture is the barrier we have to work on the longest and hardest,” says Kirsten Brown Burbank, an assistant community education director who now teaches network courses at the high school she graduated from in 1986.

To address this, adult education in Franklin County is ramping up its efforts to reconnect the disconnected. “We’re really redefining adult education,” says Therrien. “It used to be about a GED, a high school diploma, and basic literacy skills for people. Now, it’s raising the bar, it’s creating more of a connection with our community.”

In the county, a course is now available to help residents ease into college by assessing their skills and exploring career interests. “It’s a stoic culture up here,” says Therrien. “People won’t ask for these things. They need to be approached with an opportunity in an environment they’re already sure of.”

The network’s locations also are relatively familiar and accessible, compared to online courses, a four-year college, or a distant community college. “Rural students want to be face-to-face,” says Burbank. “One reason this has been such a success (is)...they’re here with people they know.”

The network’s success also derives from the passion of its members—many of whom are natives who know what it’s like to lose a job and reinvent themselves, often by returning to school. Alison Hagerstrom, the economic development director, lost two woodturning jobs. Ray Therrien followed his father into a paper mill, with no more than a high school degree.

After serving in the military, Therrien received emotional and financial support from a veterans program to become his family’s first college graduate. “I was told in school ‘Your dad works in a mill. You’ll want to work with your hands,’” recalls Therrien.

“I was totally convinced that I didn’t have the type of brain to go through college. So I understand when people come in here twisting their dishtowel. They have the same potential as anyone else but the pathway isn’t visible. They need nurturing, understanding, and support.”

The network also is a natural outgrowth of the region’s rural character, where the challenges of living in an isolated small community, with rugged terrain, harsh weather and limited services, require residents to depend upon themselves and their neighbors. “The informal networks that take place in very rural areas are unique,” says Fowler.

Now in the fourth year of what is considered a decade-long project, the network continues to grow and evolve, seeking and responding to new opportunities, connecting businesses and employees. CMCC and the Maine Community College System recently partnered to provide \$50,000 per year to fund a new five-year position—the first CMCC admissions representative specifically for Franklin County.

“We’re not there yet, but we do have some really good things happening,” says Hagerstrom. “So it’s all the more important that this community college network be successful and do well.”



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