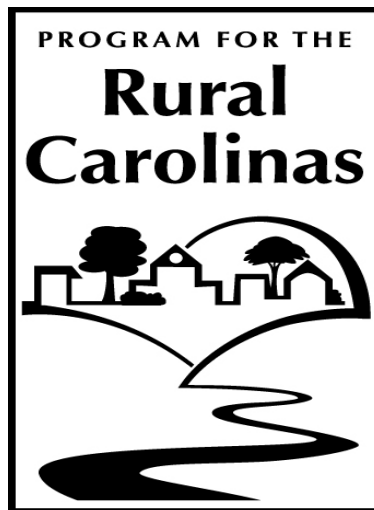




Discover Columbus

A Report on the Achievements and Lessons Learned by
the Columbus County Program for the Rural Carolinas



**A Rural Economic Development Project
of
The Duke Endowment**

Acknowledgement

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MDC, Inc.

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BACKGROUND

In a time of rapid change, rural leaders and institutions are struggling to maintain viability and ensure a future for themselves and their children. Some of the multiple disadvantages rural communities face are:

- A high dependence on traditional manufacturing, which is shedding jobs or leaving altogether for low-wage workers offshore;
- Low education levels when economic development depends more than ever on a highly skilled workforce;
- Aging populations as younger people seek opportunities in urban and suburban areas;
- Limited access to information technology and a lack of digital preparedness; and
- Thinning of the leadership ranks.

Columbus County, North Carolina, continues to experience the aforementioned problems. Columbus County, like many other rural communities, can no longer rely on conventional wisdom and single-shot solutions such as branch plant recruitment to fix the problem of rural decline. Massive infrastructure investments and broad job training strategies needed to attract high-tech industry are rarely available to economically declining rural communities. They face an uphill battle in the current knowledge-based global economy. At the same time, a generation of work in community economic development has demonstrated that successful community renewal can spring "from within" when the people who care about a community join together in determination to revive their civic and economic fortunes, whatever the obstacles. This was the opportunity the PRC offered Columbus County.

This paper summarizes the design, implementation, obstacles, accomplishments, sustainability, and replicability of Discover Columbus, the Columbus County Program for the Rural Carolinas (PRC) initiative.

THE PROGRAM FOR THE RURAL CAROLINAS

The Duke Endowment's PRC was a five-year effort to help rural communities in North Carolina and South Carolina that were facing multiple challenges: flat or declining population growth, job losses, growing numbers of dislocated workers, declining infrastructure, and increasing poverty. The PRC program was designed to:

- Bring together in each community people and organizations representing all population segments to consider local economic conditions and new and innovative approaches to bring about local equitable economic renewal;
- Challenge those community "teams" to develop a shared vision for economic and community improvement;
- Lead them in developing a concrete action plan to achieve their vision; and

- Support community teams as they implement the plan.

The PRC established two broad goals to guide the work of participating communities:

1. To increase employment, income, and wealth for people left behind by a changing economy; and
2. To build the leadership, assets, and structures needed to support the long-term economic renewal of the community.

The PRC was funded by The Duke Endowment, designed by MDC Inc., and co-managed by both organizations. Community efforts were funded through local institutions that are eligible to receive grants from The Duke Endowment. For the PRC, these were not-for-profit rural hospitals, rural United Methodist churches, and children's homes. The program had two distinct components, Option 1 and Option 2. In Option 1, seven communities pursued large-scale collaborative efforts to energize community development and strengthen economic vitality. In Option 2, another 15 communities developed innovative, smaller-scale projects with the potential for economic and community impact. The first year of the five-year program concentrated on selecting PRC communities, forming community teams, and planning local initiatives. Years two through four focused on conducting local economic development programs and building team capacity for longer-term efforts. The fifth year, which was originally unplanned, was added to enable 15 of the 22 communities to take final steps necessary to sustain their efforts.

The Duke Endowment

The Duke Endowment, the largest foundation in the South, was established in 1924 by industrialist and philanthropist James B. Duke. The mission of the foundation is to serve the people of North Carolina and South Carolina by supporting selected programs of higher education, health care, children's welfare, and spiritual life. Established as a perpetual trust, the Indenture is a remarkable document, not only did it set forth the causes and institutions that were to receive funds but also named specifically the institutions that Mr. Duke wanted the Endowment to support. However, remaining mindful that times and situations change, Mr. Duke used the Indenture to give Endowment trustees broad discretion to make grants for similar charitable purposes in accordance with his original wishes. This foresight made support for the Program for the Rural Carolinas possible.

COLUMBUS COUNTY ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS

Columbus County is the only county in the United States named in honor of Christopher Columbus, discoverer of the New World. Columbus is the third largest county in land area in North Carolina and has 10 incorporated municipalities. The information listed below is an overview of Columbus County, as it existed in 2001:

- The total 2000 population was 54,749 — a 10.4 percent increase since 1999;
- 63.4 percent of population is White;
- 30.9 percent of population is African-American;

- 3.1 percent of population is Native-American; and
- 2.3 percent of population is Hispanic (an increase from .5 percent in 1990).

The economy in Columbus County has changed over the years. Agriculture, while still important in county earnings and income, employs only 2 percent of the workforce. More than 400,000 acres of county land are forested, so the timber industry is a large part of Columbus' economy. Consequently, wood product manufacturing has been part of the economy for nearly 100 years, turning out lumber, plywood, furniture, pulp, paperboard, tools, cabinets, and pallets. This industry sector, however, is under heavy global competition. International Paper Company remains the county's largest industry, employer, and taxpayer. The textile and apparel industries began relocating or closing in the 1990s due to global competition. This sector has been the hardest hit area of the county economy. Since 1995, Columbus County has lost over 2,500 apparel/textile jobs.

Columbus County employment is largely based on natural resources and declining low-wage manufacturing. The three largest industrial employers — International Paper, Georgia Pacific, and National Spinning — do business in a highly competitive environment. The percentage of the workforce in manufacturing has dropped from 27 percent in 1990 to 20.4 percent in 2007. New companies have moved to the county over this period of decline, but new job growth has not kept up with job losses. Nevertheless, manufacturing still provides the highest average wages of any industry sector in the county.

The NC Department of Commerce classified Columbus County as a Tier 1 county, designating it as one of the state's most economically distressed counties. The tier is determined by the county's standing in unemployment, per capita income, and population growth.

Banking and health care are bright spots in county employment. At its regional headquarters in Whiteville, Branch Banking & Trust (BB&T) Company maintains one of the county's larger "white collar" workforces of approximately 500 workers. United Carolina Bank, BB & T's predecessor, originated in Columbus County and spurred the county's growth over the last several decades. Health care is a growing sector. Columbus Regional Healthcare System was expanded in 1998 and another expansion is planned to accommodate increased demand for health care services.

**The Columbus Economy
at a Glance**

- Columbus County's per capita income of \$19,815 ranks it 73rd of 100 counties
- The county's 20.5 percent poverty rate nearly doubles the state rate of 12.6 percent
- Low-wage employment is the base of Columbus' economy. Low-wage service jobs employ 25 percent of the workforce and the average weekly wage in all business sectors is \$476. Government provides 19 percent of the workforce

Columbus County is close to two large retirement areas, the North Carolina coast, and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. A trickle of retirees has moved into the county, but not in large numbers. Tourism revenue has increased over the last few years as the county has begun marketing Lake Waccamaw, Lake Waccamaw State Park, several museums, the North Carolina Museum of Forestry, rivers, and other attractions.

Columbus County has two public school systems — Columbus County Schools and Whiteville City Schools. Southeastern Community College provides an array of educational, workforce development, and training services to the county. The college also provides services through its industry skills training center and international development program to industries, services that few other community colleges provide.

Columbus Education Levels

- Percentage of adults with high school education is 59.4 percent compared to the state average of 70 percent.
- Percentage of adults with college education is 9 percent compared to the state average of 17.4 percent.
- Average county SAT score in 2001 was 897 compared to the state average of 992.

The county has high unemployment and a low-skilled workforce. There are two major reasons for this. First, most of its base manufacturing industries, textiles and apparel, left the county for lower wages offshore. Second, the county has depended for decades on agriculture and low-wage/low-skill industry and there has been little incentive for workers who planned to remain in the county to advance their work skills. Compounding the problem, the county has a high illiteracy rate.

WORKING TOGETHER: TEAM ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP

Columbus Regional Healthcare System and its community-based partnership, Healthy Carolinians, was the natural choice to provide leadership for the PRC project, primarily because Healthy Carolinians has strong

community ties and brings together community members, leaders, organizations, hospitals, the health department, schools, political leaders, faith communities, and businesses and civic organizations to organize and mobilize resources around a shared vision.

Recruiting, Building, and Sustaining Team Involvement

In 2001-2002, one of the first tasks was to develop a PRC planning team that took the name "Discover Columbus." In developing the team, the organizing group viewed inclusiveness and community involvement as keys to the team's eventual success. As a result, the organizers reached out to identify and recruit additional members for the Discover Columbus planning and oversight team and for working groups that would carry out its program activities. To ensure that the team represented all geographic, ethnic, and economic segments of the population, the organizers conducted focus groups that involved dislocated workers, did live radio programs, spoke to local civic groups, and invited high school students to participate. A theme of "success through

unity" was used to encourage organizations to avoid duplicating their efforts by sharing resources and responsibilities.

Discover Columbus established an open door membership policy that enabled anyone interested in the project and willing to make a time commitment to participate. Flexible participation was also used to sustain involvement. Some individuals were unable to make the time commitment, but were interested and agreed to serve as "resource persons." They were available to disseminate information and contribute their expertise when needed or to assist with a specific project. When a team member was unable to attend, she/he would send a representative. At times, these non-member representatives continued to participate along with the regular member in Discover Columbus activities.

Because of those efforts, the Discover Columbus team grew to include the following members.

- Healthy Carolinians
- Southeastern Community College
- Economic Development Commission
- Area chambers of commerce
- Business and civic organizations,
- City and county schools
- Boys and Girls Home of North Carolina,
- Political leaders
- Youth and senior centers
- JOBLINK Career Center
- Community development corporations
- Agricultural growers (small and large)
- Health department
- Columbus Regional Healthcare
- The DREAM Center, Inc., an alcohol and drug abuse prevention.
- Family CHAMPIONS, family support programs and services
- Representatives of the working poor, dislocated workers, and others left behind by the changing economy.

MDC, Inc

MDC is a private, nonprofit organization with the mission to advance the South through strategies that expand opportunity, reduce poverty, and build inclusive communities. Established in 1967, over the past 40 years MDC broadened its geographic scope and conducted demonstrations, published research, and developed policies and programs to strengthen the South's workforce and economy and remove barriers between people and jobs. MDC now works to facilitate the South's transition to a high-performing, multiracial society where the economy works for all people.

Organizing the Team

Deborah Albritton, an MPA with more than 15 years experience in community mobilization who directed Columbus County Healthy Carolinians, provided management and oversight for the Discover Columbus PRC team. The PRC team was the main planning body. Columbus Regional Healthcare System served as fiscal agent for the project. To carry out program activities, the PRC team divided into three working groups: agri-business, leadership development, and eco-tourism. Each CORE working group includes the following:

Champion and/or co-champions — Duties included communicating regularly with the Discover Columbus facilitator, planning and facilitating subcommittee meetings, and helping implement subcommittee goals and objectives. The champion or co-champions reported at each PRC team meeting.

Recorder — Duties included documenting subcommittee meetings and activities and ensuring the Discover Columbus facilitator received the information in a timely manner.

Team Members — Duties included participating in subcommittee meetings and actively supporting the champion in implementing subcommittee goals and objectives.

Program Planning

From the beginning of the PRC project, the Columbus team sought to “discover” the potential of the community in three focus areas: agri-business, leadership development, and eco-tourism. The team's vision for the future of Columbus County was to:

- Enable those left behind to become more productive citizens;
- Provide better access to training and technology;
- Develop agri-business opportunities;
- Promote the county’s natural assets; and
- Develop a diverse group of grassroots leaders committed to service.

The Initial Planning Period

To realize this vision, the team used collaborative planning to promote better communication and coordination among participating organizations. The team met approximately five times and conducted numerous electronic meetings during the visioning process. PRC team meetings had an average attendance of 15. The team discussed the county’s needs, its strengths, and weaknesses in terms of improving conditions of those left behind by the economy. This process uncovered resources and gaps and the team added new partners to address them. Examples of the team's findings follow.

County Strengths and Resources	County Weaknesses and Service Gaps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large available workforce • Involved, inventive community college • Regional industry park with infrastructure and ready access to feeder highways, skill training • Can-do population with commitment to improve economy • Proximity to coastal growth areas, seaports, tourist destinations, Research Triangle Park • Interstate 74 designated to pass through county. • Large variety of natural resources – 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A largely undereducated, low-skilled workforce; high illiteracy rate • Perception of low-performing public secondary schools • Loss of 2,500 traditional agriculture and manufacturing jobs in 6 years • Existing industry jobs under economic stress • Lack of countywide sewer system • No county-based land use planning • No Countywide economic development vision • Delays in establishing Interstate

lakes, rivers, forests, small town atmosphere <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong and expanding hospital and healthcare facilities 	highway system in county <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited amenities needed to attract industry • Limited tax based for development
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Replicable Models and Strategies

The PRC did not prescribe a standard set of strategies to achieve the program’s goals. Rather, it challenged the PRC community teams to think and act differently as they worked to turn locally developed visions and plans into reality.

The PRC team first identified obstacles facing the region’s people, economy, and support systems. Program components of the Discover Columbus project were chosen to address specific needs of Columbus County. The particular combination of programs may or may not be applicable to another community. However, any or all of these programs should be highly replicable in other similar locations. The programs included:

Wealth Building

The purposes of this initiative was to assist low-income and dislocated workers build and preserve assets to cushion them from the impact of lost revenue and/or unanticipated expenses (threatened mortgages, illness or injury, etc.) and build resources needed for education, home ownership, or business development.

The wealth building initiative was planned and carried out in collaboration with four institutional members of the Discover Columbus team: The DREAM Center, Family Champions, Columbus County Department of Social Services, and Southeastern Community College. Discover Columbus and its four partners saw the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) as a viable means for helping low-income and dislocated workers obtain due assets to begin or add to savings accounts. The program model was straight-forward: The participating organizations worked together to alert potential EITC applicants about the availability of the tax credit and assist them in filing tax returns for it. In addition, taxpayers taking advantage of the EITC service were given financial literacy training aimed at helping them make the best use of their tax refunds and manage their overall finances to get the best bang for their bucks.

Since its start, the program has helped residents secure over \$1,000,000 in overall tax refunds and over \$500,000 in EITC funds.

Agribusiness Development

Columbus County is predominately rural. Its strong agriculture and farming heritage made agriculture and agribusiness development key areas to focus on to increase economic growth. The agribusiness group focused on supporting the farm economy and providing opportunities for advancement. To do so, it focused on three strategies:

(1) development of a growers' marketing cooperative; (2) risk management and entrepreneurship training; and (3) specialty crop opportunities.

Developing a Growers Marketing Cooperative

The Lumber River Regional Growers Association (LRRGA), a North Carolina corporation with 13 active members, was the outcome of Discover Columbus' effort to establish a growers marketing cooperative. The regional cooperative, which includes agricultural producers in Columbus, Bladen, Brunswick, and Robeson counties in southeastern North Carolina, focuses on the collective marketing of fresh fruits and vegetables. Although the cooperative is still in its infancy, there is much potential for the growers to collectively market their farm products to public institutions such as school systems, prisons, and jails, as well as high-end restaurants in Wilmington, North Carolina.

In 2007, LRRGA formed a collaborative partnership with the Columbus County Community Farmers Market, Inc. and the Columbus County Beekeepers Association to purchase a shared-use, commercial honey extractor. Members of each of the three partnering organizations will use the equipment, capable of decapping, extracting, filtering, and bottling honey, to enhance the sale of value-added honey.

Other significant accomplishments of the Lumber River Regional Growers Association include:

- Recruited 13 producers in a three county region to pay membership dues of \$500 each;
- Filed Articles of Incorporation for the organization with the North Carolina Secretary of State;
- Developed and adopted bylaws and elected officers;
- Launched a Web site – www.lrrga.com;
- Hold regular monthly meetings of the board of directors;
- Contracted for and received, through technical assistance funds, a comprehensive business and marketing plan;
- Held two informational meetings to recruit new members;
- Assisted in the promotion of the Columbus County Community Farmers Market through promotional brochures and materials; and
- Utilized high school agriculture students/FFA members to research the availability of greenhouses in Columbus County for possible off-season production.

Agriculture Management and Entrepreneur Training

During the course of the Discover Columbus program, nearly 100 area farmers participated in risk management and entrepreneurship training. The goal of the six-week seminars, entitled "Farming for Profits," was to help farmers become better risk managers by helping them develop sound business practices including business, financial, and marketing plans. In addition, the entrepreneurship training utilized the REAL (Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning) national curriculum to teach farmers and agribusiness leaders effective business ownership strategies. The Small

Business Center at Southeastern Community College offered continuing education credits for both training seminars. The college has continued to offer the training. Because of the long-term nature of these strategies, significant outcome and impact data was not available during the timeframe of the PRC.

Other significant accomplishments of the risk management and entrepreneurship training include:

- Cooperating with Southeastern Community College and the Columbus County Cooperative Extension Service to secure "train-the-trainer" education for three presenters of the Rural Entrepreneurship Action Learning curriculum; and
- Helping ensure the sustainability of the annual training seminar through the SCC Small Business Center.

Specialty Crops to Expand Opportunity

With the loss of the federal tobacco quota program, many farmers in Columbus County have been seeking alternative crops. The specialty crop subcommittee sought to educate and encourage farmers to develop a specialty or alternative crop operation. While the list is endless, some examples of specialty crops include mushrooms, pomegranates, figs, persimmons, heirloom vegetables, and sunflowers. The specialty crop subcommittee collaborated with the Columbus County Cooperative Extension Service and the North Carolina Border Belt Tobacco Research Station in Whiteville to offer educational tours, workshops, and demonstrations of various specialty crop opportunities. In 2006-2007, six \$500 mini-grants were offered to encourage individuals to begin a specialty crop operation.

Other significant accomplishments of the specialty crop subcommittee include:

- Hosted an annual Alternative Crops School for area farmers to learn more about specialty and alternative crops such as off-season greenhouse strawberry production, value-added pecan processing, and organic fruit and vegetable production;
- Educated farmers about grants available to produce specialty crops; and
- Helped six farmers obtain nearly \$65,000 in specialty crop start-up grants.

Eco-tourism Development

Due to its proximity to the coastal areas of NC and SC, Columbus County has a natural and cultural heritage on which to build a thriving tourism trade. The eco-tourism development group focused on the positive impact tourism can have on the local economy. An assets mapping and marketing plan project, with technical assistance from outside the county, was completed as a part of the project. From this information, the Columbus County Tourism Bureau was able to facilitate new self-guided tours, enhance the local tourism Web site, and implement targeted marketing strategies based on the research and information gathered for the plan. In 2006-2007, the focus of the project expanded to include the development of a popular Lumber River Paddle Trail along Columbus County's western border with Robeson County. Outdoor advertising and other collateral materials help to promote the natural and scenic beauty of Columbus County.

Other significant accomplishments of eco-tourism development include:

- Hosted a county-wide Tourism Summit with more than 50 attendees;
- Fostered partnerships with The Conservation Fund, North Carolina State University Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture Ag-tourism office to develop targeted marketing initiatives in agri-tourism and heritage tourism;
- Updated the Discover Columbus County Web site to reflect findings of research and targeted marketing strategies; and
- Printed and distributed a new visitor's guide.

Leadership Development

Discover Columbus emphasized that an ongoing program for leadership development in Columbus County should be implemented. Consequently, the leadership development group created a rural leadership development program. At the time, a comprehensive, countywide program did not exist. Applications were solicited for program participants in what was called The Rural Scholars Program. A review committee evaluated 20 applications and extended an opportunity to participate to a diverse group of 10 individuals. In the end, eight Rural Scholars met on a monthly basis for a year to discuss creating an ongoing leadership development program. The group looked at model leadership development programs from around North Carolina and in other states. They also reviewed the features of a previously successful program called Leadership Columbus, a program that existed in Columbus County for four years in the mid-1990s. The program, sponsored by the Greater Whiteville Chamber of Commerce, was held annually to recruit and provide specialized leadership training for up to 15 potential leaders. The Rural Scholars recommended that the Leadership Columbus model be updated and reinstated.

Many of the recommendations from the Rural Scholars involved additional partners, including Columbus County Schools, Whiteville City Schools, and all area chambers of commerce (Whiteville, Tabor City, Chadbourn and Fair Bluff) in a collaborative effort to ensure the sustainability of Leadership Columbus. In 2007, 15 new leaders participated in the comprehensive, countywide leadership development program.

Other Initiatives

Columbus County Community Resource Directory came about as the Discover Columbus team researched and compiled a list of available resources. It became apparent that such a listing would be beneficial to others in the community and so the team published a comprehensive directory of available resources. The directory will be published in Spanish. Federal funds were leveraged through the Southeastern Community College JobLink Career Center to print and distribute 400 copies of the 76-page directory.

Entrepreneurial Development & Enterprise Facilitation became a key component of Discover Columbus as efforts to attract jobs from outside the county continued to fail. Discover Columbus conducted an entrepreneurship summer camp for youth to encourage high school students to think about business ownership. Various goal setting activities, business management exercises, and real-world role-play helped the youth to understand the opportunities and challenges of a small business owner.

In 2004, Discover Columbus also hosted a "Sirolli Demonstration Project" featuring Ernesto Sirolli, a nationally recognized leader in enterprise facilitation and entrepreneurial development. The Sirolli Institute teaches civic leaders to organize themselves in order to capture local intelligence and use best management practices to encourage entrepreneurship development. The outcome is local economic stimulus through the personal motivation, talent, and passion of small business owners.

Other significant accomplishments of entrepreneurial development include:

- Team members visited other Sirolli enterprise facilitation sites throughout the United States;
- Columbus County was chosen as the East Coast enterprise facilitation site by the Sirolli Institute;
- More than a dozen new entrepreneurial businesses were developed resulting in more than 20 new jobs;
- An Entrepreneur Club was started and meets monthly with an average attendance of 20; and
- The Southeastern Community College Small Business Center and JobLink Center sustain the entrepreneurial development program.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

Developing the Team

Perhaps the most significant accomplishment of Discover Columbus was the development of a team capable of pursuing several economic tracks in the short terms and long term. The Discover Columbus team is by far the most diverse team of

Keys to Team Success

- Pursue diversity and establish non-traditional partnerships;
- Seek broad representation; true grassroots involvement is essential;
- Coordinate organizations, individuals, and entities and assess their capacity for meaningful contributions;
- Recognize that everyone has something to contribute;
- Develop a level of trust where everyone can speak openly and honestly about issues.

individuals ever to come together on a single project in Columbus County.

Discover Columbus built flexibility into its plans. Specifically, the nature of the project was not determined from the top down. Everyone was invited to contribute to the direction of the project. This approach required that the mission, vision, and action plans be periodically reviewed to achieve measurable outcomes most effectively.

Improving the skills of team members is an important aspect of developing the team.

Learning clusters, hosted by MDC, Inc., shared lessons learned from other communities, offered short tutorials on rural development issues, program models and strategies, planning, financing, managing, and evaluating projects. They were simple yet effective events that helped team members improve their knowledge base and thus become leaders within the project and the community at large.

The adoption of specific action plans, timelines, and progress reports helped to hold all team members accountable for their contributions to the overall success of the project. PRC team meetings, champions, and co-champions were also required to keep an individual notebook or other documentation of their subcommittee meetings. This part of the process was crucial to communications, team building, and avoiding duplication. Regular PRC team meetings, conference calls, and electronic communications allowed us to think through strategies, clarify expectations, set priorities, spark creative ideas, and provide for continuous improvement — ultimately building strong credibility and community support.

Assessing Needs

For Discover Columbus, much of the community needs assessment already had been done by the 21st Century Economic Development Initiative, sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Commerce, which helped to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Columbus County and to identify substantial needs and areas of improvement. Members of the **Discover Columbus** PRC team and the subcommittees were able quickly to define action plans and strategies based on the previous assessment information. Team members also were asked to brainstorm strategies and ideas that would address community needs.

Developing Community Awareness, Involvement & Support

An ongoing public awareness effort helped to educate the public about the work of Discover Columbus and the PRC. As members of the community became aware of the project, their involvement and support increased. Examples of these efforts include:

- Project information shared at regular meetings of Healthy Carolinians;
- Education and outreach by PRC team members and partners;
- Team members bringing another key “boundary spanner” from their communities;
- Listening tours and focus group meetings in the community;
- Public Service Announcements on radio;
- Regular press releases to area newspapers with a total distribution of more than 15,000 households;
- Live radio program funded in-kind through Columbus Regional Healthcare System's advertising budget; and
- Community surveys and questionnaires gathered useful data and helped to increase awareness.

Measuring Results

Measuring the success of the project relied heavily on standardized reports from MDC, Inc. From the beginning of the project, the **Discover Columbus** PRC team was required to identify measurable outcomes. The components of the evaluation process included:

- Identifying desired outcomes;
- Listing key goals and action steps that would be used to achieve the desired outcomes;
- Summarizing specific, quantifiable results that were expected to be accomplished; and
- Listing the status of each expected result during each reporting period.

Sustaining the Work and Team Leadership

It made sense to the Discover Columbus team that for the changes they wanted to bring about to be effective and sustained, they would have to engage the community at several levels. With the joint efforts of local community organizations and interested partners, the team believed it could create a healthier, more economically competitive community. Indicators used to measure their success went beyond economics and included quality of life, environmental, health, and social factors. The Discover Columbus process stimulated more broad-based discussions about the community's underlying values, long-term goals, and a shared vision for the future. The team came to understand that community participation would be crucial to the process from developing the indicators of success to implementing programs and assessing outcomes. As a result, more opportunities for participation in the community's economic and cultural advancement were created and the effort grew stronger.

The accurate and effective documentation of the team's successes, challenges, and ongoing needs helped to open other doors of opportunity for sustainability. As the agencies, organizations, and individuals who collaborated on the Discover Columbus project realized the need for the programs that were created and the positive impact they could have in the community, they began to step forward with plans to ensure sustainability. In many cases, the success of the programs themselves ensured their sustainability. Nearly all of the Discover Columbus initiatives continued beyond The Duke Endowment grant period.

Recommendations

Overall, the Discover Columbus program had a positive impact in the lives of the people of Columbus County. They can do the same elsewhere. MDC and members of the Discover Columbus team stand ready to talk with any community that is interested in taking on similar work. With that thought in mind, the Columbus County team experience offers the following suggestions to communities interested in community-based development.

1. Pragmatically assess the strengths and weaknesses of their communities;

2. Organize a broadly representative team of community leaders from the middle out¹ who are interested and willing to make a time commitment;
3. Seek input and involvement from all community segments;
4. Place a high value on team member diversity;
5. Provide opportunities for team members to learn and grow;
6. Develop measurable goals, strategies to achieve those goals, and management related benchmarks to measure progress and identify areas for improvement; and
7. Don't hesitate to seek technical assistance and expertise from outside your own boundaries.

What About Your Community?

Do the economic changes Columbus County faced sound familiar? In Columbus County, local people found themselves losing their livelihoods as farming declined and manufacturing plants shut down and moved out. Yet after a group of imaginative leaders started looking at their community with new eyes, they managed to create new opportunity.

Is it possible that there are people in your community who would be interested in seeing what they, and others they know, might do to improve the situation? Names and faces come to mind? If so, there is help available.

If you are the pastor of a rural United Methodist Church in North Carolina or know one, or a rural nonprofit hospital administrator, or the director of a children's home in North Carolina or South Carolina, you have direct access through The Duke Endowment to much information on how to get started. If you are a member of a grassroots organization, a business or community improvement group, a technical or community college, a church, a community development corporation, or an individual who would like to see improvements in the local economy and in the way things are done, call MDC.

Or if you are any of the above, call the folks who faced a declining economy in Columbus County and did something about it and get their take on what might be done. All of us invite you to do so.

¹ MDC strongly encourages community-based efforts to be built from the economic middle of a community out, rather than from the economic top down or the bottom up. Experience shows the inherent difficulty in building effective community-wide collaborative efforts from either the top down or bottom up – it is too far a reach. Those in the community middle, however, have links to both a community's economic elite and its economically left behind that can be used in fostering broad-based efforts.

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