An Evaluation of the
Southern Rural Community College Initiative
(2002-2007)
Executive Summary

The idea for the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) was first conceived by the Ford Foundation in the early 1990's and implemented in 1994 with MDC, Inc. as the managing partner. With the beginning of the initiative's second phase in 2002, Ford passed the RCCI from MDC to the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) at Mississippi State University and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (NCRCRD) at Iowa State University.

This report presents findings from an evaluation of the Southern Rural Development Center’s RCCI program. The overarching question addressed is whether the Ford Foundation succeeded in scaling up the initiative by moving it from MDC to the regional centers and encouraging the land-grant system to institutionalize RCCI goals.

Evaluation findings include the following:

- Coaching is a valuable role for Extension educators and specialists under some circumstances but was not the critical factor in whether colleges and universities achieved the core RCCI goals. A more important question was whether the institutional relationships could be sustained.

- Support from college and university administrators in the form of leadership and resources, as well as a strong community development program in the land-grant university, helped create relationships that were likely to be sustained over time.

- Committed and well-funded local partners, a political culture that supports change, and a focus on economic development and educational access were among the factors that helped colleges broaden their core role to include community outreach.

- Positive community impacts were most likely to occur where new institutional relationships were created in the colleges’ service areas.

Expectations for the RCCI’s Phase 2 were extraordinarily high. The Ford Foundation was very ambitious in expecting to scale up the initiative by institutionalizing it within the land-grant system, while investing a relatively small amount of money in a transition process that was expected to take a short four years. The initiative should have been viewed as a pilot project for achieving real systemic change.

To institutionalize the progress and achievements made during Phase 2, three things should happen. First, the land-grants should build from the existing community development conceptual framework, network and institutional infrastructure. Second, within each state, colleges and the land-grant should look for efficiencies in relationship building. Finally, land-grants and community colleges must commit to real partnerships in the form of joint appointments and/or co-location of Extension faculty on the college campuses.

The Southern Rural Community College Initiative was an inspiring multi-year commitment on the part of colleges, universities and the Southern Rural Development Center, and there is evidence that it can be successful over a longer term with adequate funding, patience and leadership.
Introduction

Background

The idea for the Rural Community College Initiative was first conceived at the Ford Foundation in the early 1990's and implemented in 1994. During this first phase, the RCCI was managed by MDC, a nonprofit development organization in North Carolina. The RCCI had two goals, as explained in the 1998 MDC report, “Expanding Economic and Educational Opportunity in Distressed Rural Areas: A Conceptual Framework for the Rural Community College Initiative.” The first was to promote economic development, in the sense of “creating jobs, raising incomes, generating wealth and reinvesting that wealth in the region's businesses, institutions and people... targeting economic opportunity to people who have been left out.” Its second goal was to provide greater access to education, including “both access to the college and access through the college to expanded opportunities – including further education and productive, rewarding work.” As Ford and MDC learned during the initiative’s early years, colleges must be strong institutions with stable funding and leadership in order to achieve economic development and improved access. Hence, MDC and Ford often referred to building institutional capacity as a third goal of the initiative.

By 1997, the RCCI involved 24 rural community colleges. They included nine pilot colleges that first received support in 1994, and 15 expansion colleges that received funding starting in 1997. The 24 schools were located in Appalachia, the Lower Mississippi Valley, the Southwest and in tribal lands of Montana, South Dakota and North Dakota. By the end of 2001, Ford had granted roughly $17.2 million to the 24 colleges and to MDC to manage the initiative.

With the beginning of the initiative’s second phase in 2002, Ford passed the RCCI from MDC to the SRDC and NCRCRD. The Foundation intended to institutionalize the initiative within the land-grant university system by providing the two centers with bridge grants totaling $800,000 over the next four years. These grants terminated in 2007 and no additional financial support from Ford is expected.

The initiative’s goals changed somewhat when it moved from MDC to the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs) in Phase 2. While the economic development and educational access goals remained similar, the third goal changed from building the colleges’ institutional capacity to increasing civic engagement in the community. As became apparent during our evaluation, this change had important implications for how the initiative unfolded after 2002.

Transferring RCCI from MDC to the land-grant university system was Ford’s strategy to scale up the initiative while spending significantly less money. The intent was that the two regional centers would seed and nurture new and sustainable relationships between land-grants and community colleges. It was a logical, if risky, strategy to move forward from the earlier, more expensive model – logical because it offered an opportunity to institutionalize the initiative within existing and capable organizations, risky because the organizations had not typically partnered well in the past.

Evaluation Questions and Organization of the report

This report presents findings from an evaluation of the Southern Rural Development Center’s RCCI program, which began in 2002 and is now officially over. The overarching question addressed in this report is whether the Ford Foundation succeeded in scaling up the initiative by moving the RCCI from MDC to the regional centers, thus encouraging the land-grant system to institutionalize the initiative. Four specific research questions guided the evaluation:

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1 The RRDCs referred to these as the initiative's three “foundations,” and referred to what might be called its four objectives (e.g. expanding the network of rural community colleges engaged in RCCI) as “goals.” To simplify the discussion here, we refer to economic development, educational access and civic engagement as Phase 2 “goals.”
• **Educators as coaches**: The coaching role was integral in the RCCI’s Phase 1, when the initiative was managed by MDC. The NCRCRD and SRDC retained this emphasis on coaching, under the assumption that with proper training, Extension educators – more specifically county faculty – could serve as coaches. The coach’s role was to be a mentor or guide who could bridge the land-grant university, college and community. Hence the first evaluation question was whether this strategy succeeded and, if so, whether the coaching role is likely to “stick” within Extension so that county or state faculty members continue functioning as coaches when appropriate.

• **Land-grant university (LGU)/college partnerships**: The Ford Foundation’s explicit strategy in the RCCI’s Phase 2 was to help the two regional centers seed and nurture new and sustainable relationships between land-grant universities and community colleges. This strategy offered an opportunity to institutionalize the initiative within existing and capable organizations. The second evaluation question was whether the RCCI created new relationships between the universities and colleges and if so, whether they are likely to endure over time.

• **Colleges reaching out to communities**: In both Phase 1 and 2, the RCCI has been about colleges taking on an outreach mission, as if they were in some sense local (rather than state) land-grants. The so-called “Parkersburg study,” which launched the RCCI in the early 1990s, described community colleges as being well positioned to help poor rural communities achieve economic development goals.\(^2\) It also concluded that the colleges were challenged by their small size, isolation and overwhelming community needs. The RCCI was intended to bring them the resources and relationships to overcome these problems. Fifteen years and many partnerships later, we must ask whether the strategy has succeeded. Hence, the third evaluation question is whether the southern RCCI colleges broadened their role beyond education to include community outreach.

• **Community impact**: When all is said and done, the bottom line of this inquiry is whether the RCCI has positively impacted communities in the southern colleges’ service areas. Have they begun to address the long-term needs of people and places in rural America, especially those related to civic engagement, educational access and equitable economic development? If they have, and it is due to new engaged partnerships with land-grant universities, the answer is important for all who have been involved in this phase of the initiative.

After briefly discussing the methodology, we present findings by each of the four evaluation questions. We conclude with implications of the research.

**Method of Evaluation**

The evaluation work plan included five main components:

• Review of background documents, including the following: documents from RCCI Phase 1; SRDC grant proposals and subsequent reports to the Ford Foundation; and memos to Ford Foundation staff by this report’s lead author, Priscilla Salant, on the subject of RCCI Phase 1 and the handover to the RRDCs.

• Meeting with the SRDC staff to finalize research questions, protocols and contacts for each state.

• Site visits to each southern state that participated in the RCCI Phase 2 (with the exception of Louisiana, Appendix A), involving personal interviews with community college administrators and faculty members, a limited number of community representatives and other partners, and land-grant administrators and faculty members.

• Follow-up phone calls as needed.

• Analysis of findings and preparation of the final report.

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\(^2\) “Community Colleges that Serve Economically Distressed, Rural Communities” by Eldon Miller, President of West Virginia University at Parkersburg, commissioned by The Ford Foundation, undated but circa 1994, available from P. Salant (psalant@uidaho.edu).
Findings

Question 1:  
Was the strategy to use Extension educators as coaches successful?

More often than not, the most successful coaches were Extension state specialists rather than county educators. Their training was in a field related to community or economic development. They were good relationship builders, understood community dynamics and respected their community college colleagues. Gene Theodori from the Texas AgriLife Extension Service (formerly Texas Cooperative Extension) and Alan Barefield from the Southern Rural Development Center are excellent examples.

Most county-level Extension educators originally selected as coaches did not have community development training or formal community development appointments (there were exceptions, for example, in Louisiana and North Carolina.) Some also lacked an affinity with the coaching role and the connections needed to reach into the university for additional resources. This made it difficult for them to do the kind of process-oriented strategic planning and relationship building work that was originally envisioned in the RCCI’s Phase 2.

However, the fact that Extension educators were typically not the best choices for coaches did not doom relationships between universities and colleges. We found that neither the community coaching methodology nor the use of land-grant educators as coaches was key to embedding the RCCI in the land-grant system. Greg Clary, a state economic development specialist from the Texas AgriLife Extension Service who is working with Coastal Bend is neither a county educator nor a true coach. However, his evolving relationship with community colleges in Texas tells us the relationship may be sustained long-term. The same can be said of John O’Sullivan, a Farm Management Specialist at North Carolina A&T State University. Dr. O’Sullivan partnered closely with the Carteret team, and his knowledge of sustainable agriculture was instrumental in helping establish the community supported fisheries aspect of CarteretCatch. Dr. O’Sullivan’s greatest contribution may have been helping to connect Carteret College with the North Carolina State University Sea Grant program, a relationship which will undoubtedly continue into the future.

Coaching is a valuable role for Extension educators and specialists under some circumstances. Our RCCI interviews, coupled with our experience with the Extension-delivered Horizons program in Idaho, suggest that the most successful Extension faculty move back and forth between coaching and educating as the situation requires.

However, in the final analysis, coaching was not the critical factor in whether colleges and universities achieved the core RCCI goals. More important was whether the institutional relationships could be sustained.

Question 2
Did the RCCI create new relationships between the universities and colleges and if so, are they likely to endure over time?

Two factors helped create relationships that seem to be sustained over time:

- **Support from administrators.** University and college administrators had to be committed to overcoming “arms length” and sometimes hostile relationships of the past. We saw the best examples among leaders at community colleges. For example, 23 college presidents in Texas paid $1,000 in dues and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Consortium of Community Colleges Serving Rural Texas (formerly Texas Community College Rural Community Development Consortium). This commitment shows a willingness to put up resources and work with the Texas Agrilife Extension Service. We did not see strong evidence that land-grant administrators have made a parallel commitment. This may be because we did not interview enough of them or the right ones, and thus, it is a shortcoming of our evaluation.
• **Strong community development programs at the land-grant.** The colleges needed a community development infrastructure within the universities that allowed them to plug into an existing system. The most likely network and resources would be those housed in a strong Extension community resource development (CRD) program. Without a CRD program, there is no institutional infrastructure to partner with the colleges. Of the southern states involved in the initiative, Louisiana has the strongest CRD program (with teaching, research and Extension CRD appointments). In Texas, there is an enormous opportunity to partner since the college presidents have made a commitment to collaboration, but the Texas Agrilife Extension Service has dedicated only one faculty member to work with them. It will need much more to truly partner with the 23 colleges who have signed the Consortium of Community Colleges Serving Rural Texas’s MOU.

North Carolina State University (NCSU) does not have a formal community development program, but in both the western and eastern RCCI colleges, the LGU/college relationship is likely to be sustained. For example, the partnership of Carteret College with the NCSU Sea Grant is adjourning, it was logical and easily facilitated partnership. Furthermore, even though it is the hope that CarteretCatch will be housed independently of both the College and NCSU, the partnership made both parties aware of each other’s resources.

In other instances, the community colleges appeared to be expecting (wrongly) that a relationship with the land-grant would bring with it the available of financial resources. When such funding was not forthcoming, the college team became less interested in continuing a relationship with the coach/land-grant. Nearly everyone interviewed acknowledged that community colleges and land-grant universities were not natural bedfellows. Community colleges and land-grants occasionally disagree with respect to which entity should be primarily responsible for community development in rural areas.

**Question 3**

*Have the southern RCCI colleges broadened their core role to do community outreach?*

Five factors helped colleges broaden their role:

- **Strong, committed and well-funded local partners, such as tribes or state agencies.** Being strong financially was especially important for local partners. Both land-grant and College personnel consistently cited the lack of financial resources in this round of the RCCI as a limiting factor. This was not fault of the SRDC, which ran the initiative with a relatively small budget. However, it is clear that colleges with the most impressive projects were also the colleges that most successfully tapped into local resources. Both East Central Community College and the Western Carolina Partnership made good and lasting partnerships with the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, respectively. Carteret College partnered with a variety of local, state and national agencies, including but not limited to the Carteret County Chamber of Commerce, North Carolina Sea Grant, NOAA, the Carteret County Fisherman’s Association, North Carolina Cooperative Extension, and the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries.

- **A political culture that is open to change and possibly linked with a more vibrant local economy.** In areas that have recently experienced population increases related to the second home or retirement market and a move to a tourism-based economy, we saw more of an interest in bringing new voices to the table and an increased willingness to listen to partners in the community on what community development projects were needed most. This was true in both the eastern and western North Carolina sites but not in the central part of the state. There, as well as in north Florida, the “establishment” (i.e., old, prominent families, both black and white) was extremely resistant to bringing in new voices – a central component of the goal of civic engagement.

- **Colleges that reach out to a broader range of organizations and partners than they have in the past.** East Central Community College (ECCC) is a powerful example of what can be accomplished when colleges reach out to nontraditional partners. While both ECCC and the Mississippi Band of the Choctaw Indians (MBCI) have both had a long presence in their region, it was not until the RCCI that the
two became partners. In 2005, the two entities signed an MOU, in which the MBCI would lease (at no cost) a 10,000 square foot facility to house ECCC’s Integrated Technologies Training Center. The result is a training center for both tribal and non-tribal members to develop high-tech skills, with the eventual goal of working at one of the new industries that have recently moved into the area.

- **A focus on economic development and educational access, rather than “softer” community development objectives.** Because community colleges already have faculty and staff dedicated to workforce related economic development, and furthermore, because their livelihood depends in part of increasing educational access, they can maintain these kinds of outreach over the long term. It remains much harder for them to continue devoting their resources and energy to civic engagement in the form of, for example, leadership development or downtown beautification.

- **Colleges that invest resources into achieving the RCCI goals.** In Western Carolina, the printed materials and brochures for the Qualla-T Customer Service Program were printed at one of the participating colleges’ graphic design facilities. While funding for the brochures was supplied by grants from the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, it is clear that the College was willing and able to absorb the cost if funding was not forthcoming. Given the limited RCCI funding available to the colleges, this commitment made a significant difference.

**Question 4:**

*Has the RCCI positively impacted communities in the southern colleges’ service areas?*

Many of the colleges undertook projects and started programs that have either a current benefit or a potential future benefit to communities in the service area. Coastal Bend and Howard are two good examples. However, we concluded the benefits will be longer lasting where new institutional relationships were developed.

Another example is Carteret College who not only succeeded at reaching the “new voices” in the service area but also built partnerships with local businesses and organizations. A key accomplishment in the CarteretCatch program was bringing together all the partners in the local fish industry – the commercial fishermen, fish wholesalers and restaurant owners. While some suspicion and mistrust of one another may still exist among those partners, never before had all three come to the same table, and they all hold a relatively high level of optimism in the continued success of CarteretCatch.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Expectations for RCCI’s Phase 2 were extraordinarily high. The Ford Foundation was very ambitious in expecting to scale up the initiative by institutionalizing it within the land-grant system while investing a relatively small amount of money in a transition process that was expected to take a short four years. While expanding the RCCI, Ford tried to create a whole new set of institutional relationships between partners that had not worked together previously and were, in fact, often hostile to each other. Rather than an expansion, the initiative should have been viewed as another pilot project for achieving real systemic change. One can believe the land-grants should be partnering with community colleges on community development without expecting such partnerships to become sustainable over a short period of time and with a small amount of resources.

The RCCI is part of a much larger movement within higher education to link colleges to communities.3 Thinking even more broadly, it reflects an imperative to reach a much larger portion of society, as discussed by the new National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) president, Peter McPherson, at the association’s 2007 annual conference. What the Ford Foundation began in the early 1990’s has built up remarkable momentum, evidenced by the Rural Community College Alliance – a new organization created to further the goals of the RCCI. It is critical not only for the colleges but for the land-grant institutions to continue the

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momentum and truly institutionalize the partnerships. Based on our evaluation, that would require at least three things to happen.

First, the land-grant institutions should build from the existing conceptual framework (*Foundations of Practice: Cooperative Extension’s Community Development Foundation of Practice*), network (National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals) and institutional infrastructure (NASULGC and the Regional Rural Development Centers). There are professional associations, a set of institutions and a body of knowledge from which the land-grant institutions should be building capacity in the community and economic development programming area. On the college side, there is at least an institutional infrastructure, including the American Association of Community Colleges, the Rural Community College Alliance and universities with strong graduate programs in community college leadership.

Second, within each state, colleges and the land-grant institution should look for efficiencies in relationship building. Texas, with 254 counties and over 50 community colleges, made progress in this area despite what we interpreted as a lack of support from the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. The Texas Rural Community College Network could be a model for building relationships more efficiently.

Finally, land-grants and community colleges must commit to real partnerships in the form of joint appointments and co-location of Extension faculty in the colleges. There are examples of this in states outside the southern region, for example in Washington, where Extension operates “learning centers” in community colleges. These are manifestations of institutional relationships – they are not only symbolic but reflect a commitment to partner.

The Southern Rural Community College Initiative was an inspiring multi-year commitment on the part of the colleges, universities and Southern Rural Development Center. It was a bold experiment into which faculty, administrators and community members invested an enormous amount of energy. Its successes are many. There is ample evidence to indicate it can be successful over more time with adequate funding, patience and leadership.
# Appendix

## Colleges and Land-Grants Participating in the SRDC’s RCCI Phase 2 Program

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<th>State</th>
<th>Community College</th>
<th>Land-grant University</th>
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<td>Florida</td>
<td>North Florida Community College (Madison, FL)</td>
<td>University of Florida (Gainesville, FL)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Louisiana Delta Community College (Monroe, LA)</td>
<td>Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge, LA)</td>
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<td>Louisiana Community and Technical College System</td>
<td>Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge, LA)</td>
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<td>Louisiana</td>
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<td>Mississippi State University (Starkville, MS)</td>
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<td>Mississippi</td>
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<td>North Carolina A&amp;T State University (Greensboro, NC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Piedmont Community College (Roxboro and Yanceyville, NC)</td>
<td>North Carolina State University (Raleigh, NC)</td>
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<td>Haywood Community College In the Western Carolina Partnership (Clyde, NC)</td>
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<td>Southwestern Community College In the Western Carolina Partnership (Sylva, NC)</td>
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<td>Tri-County Community College In the Western Carolina Partnership (Murphy, NC)</td>
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<td>Texas</td>
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