

Chapter 15

Education, Industry Partnership, and the Creation of Innovative Workforce Training Spaces

Tom McDonnell

Metropolitan Community College, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the planning process undertaken by Metropolitan Community College (MCC) in Omaha, Nebraska to program and design three new academic buildings to meet demand for middle skill workforce training in the Omaha area. Context on the economic climate in the Omaha area is provided to establish the need for more extensive job training programs at MCC. This chapter also describes the engagement of a master planning consultant, as well as internal and external stakeholders to develop a comprehensive facilities master plan. Finally, a description of each of the new buildings is provided.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning, community colleges have long been regarded as the just-in-time workforce training and education provider driving the economic engine of the American middle class. With an emphasis on affordable education, and degree offerings in the skilled trades, enrollment in community colleges has doubled over the past 50 years (Felix & Pope, 2010). Metropolitan Community College (MCC) in Omaha, Nebraska is no different in this regard. As MCC began experiencing record enrollment in the 2009-10 and 2010-11 academic years, College leaders felt the timing was right to study the future of MCC and determine how the College could best meet the needs of the local workforce.

This chapter will provide an overview of the MCC master planning process, the economic climate that led to the master plan, and how MCC used data, industry advisor input, and input from internal stakeholders to design and program three new buildings on its historic Fort Omaha campus. MCC is a multi-campus urban community college in the center of the United States. There are three main campuses: The Fort Omaha campus is in the Northeastern part of the city of Omaha, the South Campus is in the Southeastern section of the city and the Elkhorn Valley campus is in the westernmost part of the

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Omaha city limits. The Fort Omaha expansion project is one of the most ambitious capital projects ever undertaken at a community college. The three buildings that resulted from the master planning process make up more than 250-thousand assigned square feet and cost approximately 90-million dollars to build. More than half of the construction cost was funded by private donations.

Each of the three new buildings: The Career and Academic Skills Center (CASC), the Construction Education Center (CEC), and the Center for Advanced and Emerging Technology (CAET) contribute to the end goal of providing a ready-trained workforce to address the deficiency in middle skill (or skilled labor) jobs in the greater Omaha Metropolitan area. The Fort Omaha expansion project also represents an important commitment to what has historically been an economically disadvantaged segment of the Omaha population. MCC's Fort Omaha campus is made up of more than 45 percent minority student enrollment, compared to the College-wide minority student population of approximately 30 percent. Northeastern Omaha has the highest unemployment rate in the state of Nebraska. Additionally, African-American Students graduate high school at a lower percentage than other ethnic groups in the state of Nebraska. It was with these issues in mind, that the Fort Omaha Campus expansion project was undertaken.

THE ECONOMICS

Nationally, the “skills gap”, as it is known, is widening at an alarming rate. The Manufacturing Institute in Washington, DC (www.themanufacturinginstitute.org) first published a study on the widening skills gap back in 2003. There have been updates to the report since that time, the most recent being in 2015. Authored in conjunction with Deloitte Development LLC, the 2015 report notes there will be more than 3.5 million job openings in the manufacturing sector in the next decade for skilled, aka middle skilled, laborers, and more than 2 million of those jobs will go unfilled (Giffi et al., 2015). With such a widening skills gap, companies employing skilled labor are less likely to take on expansion opportunities and build capacity to increase production, because the reality is they simply cannot.

The greater Omaha Metropolitan area is in need of middle skill level employees. Omaha mirrors the rest of the nation, where there is growing concern over the shortage of middle skill workers. The concern is over the graying of the workforce in the middle skill sector, with insufficient numbers of younger workers ready to replace the retired or soon-to-be retired incumbent workforce (Modestino, 2016). To be considered “middle skill” or skilled labor, a job requires some college-level work by way of either an Associate of Applied Science degree, an industry certification, or some just in time workforce training program (Modestino, 2016). At MCC, students can earn degrees in middle skill professions such as welding, precision machining, carpentry, electrical technician, and plumbing.

Thompson (2014) identified middle skills jobs in information technology, construction and manufacturing as high demand jobs for the Omaha area. Additionally, more than 40 percent of Omaha area employers indicated they were less likely to undertake a major expansion because of a lack of skilled workers to fill needed positions (Thompson, 2014). In several middle skill occupations such as manufacturing, transportation, installation, maintenance and repair, construction, information technology, and architecture, job openings exceed the number of trained workers by roughly a two to one margin (Thompson, 2014).

While the Omaha area, and Nebraska as a whole enjoys a lower than the national average unemployment rate, Northeastern Omaha has a much higher unemployment rate than the rest of the state. Additionally, according to the state department of labor, Omaha specifically, and Nebraska more generally has

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