

# The Importance of Workforce Development for Economic Recovery & Sustainability

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**H**iring, employment and jobs are top of mind of late. Employers are hiring only as necessary, hoping to find that well-trained employee among a large stack of applicants. Each community must do whatever it can to provide local businesses with a base of trained citizens to meet their hiring needs. Without a trained workforce, existing business won't expand, new industries won't consider moving to the community and, in worst cases, businesses may close.

But, building a well-trained workforce in a community can't be done overnight. It requires a long-term strategy to support and foster training and education in a wide range of industries. Fortunately, local business, education and economic development leaders in southern Idaho have focused on workforce development since the late 1990's. The fruits of the regions decades of efforts have paid off substantially -- for businesses, workers and the community alike.

### Trained Employees Support Businesses

Well-trained employees are vital to the long-term success of any business. Large and small employers alike often see employee training as an unaffordable luxury that they just can't provide. Southern Idaho has built numerous diverse, flexible workforce development training programs that have translated into new businesses operating in the region and local businesses expanding. As a result, local unemployment numbers here are among the lowest in the state.

The foundation of southern Idaho's trained workforce is the local College of Southern Idaho (CSI). CSI has considered their commitment to the business community with economic development vision and have supported a primary role since 1965. As a result of the college's close business industry relationship that has fostered over the years, CSI has continued to develop and implement successful and highly-tailored curriculum to support southern Idaho's aggressive economic development campaign.

### Preparing For New Industry Sectors

Southern Idaho leaders recognized green energy as a growing and rapidly expanding economic sector. In fact, the region's nine-county region produces commercial-grade power in five of the five major sources of renewable energy: wind, solar, hydropower, geothermal and biomass. With trained workers needed to support local businesses operating in these sectors, CSI again stepped up and designed a comprehensive green education program to meet industry employment needs that will fall under the recently named CSI Renewable Energy Training Center.



College of Southern Idaho  
– Wind Training Apparatus

Two of the Center's programs, the Environmental Technology Program and Wind Energy Technician Program, are designed to give students a broad range of skill sets applicable to employment in any of the renewable energy areas.

"As southern Idaho has quickly secured operations in every emerging green energy market, we decided several years ago to build a comprehensive workforce training program that address all operations and maintenance aspects of the industry," said Todd Schwarz, instructional dean at CSI. "Our students get direct, occupational hands-on

training getting them ready to work in any renewable sector, anywhere. This is the only program of its kind in Idaho, so we're seeing a tremendous interest in students. And, related businesses are seeing the benefit our students will bring to their operation," he said.

### Grant Supports Region's Programs

While worker training and education was well underway in the region, southern Idaho was able to seriously ramp up their efforts over the past three years thanks to being awarded a regional workforce federal grant.

In 2007, the region's newly-formed Workforce Development Alliance -- consisting of representatives from businesses, education/training, economic development and Idaho Department of Labor -- was tasked with directing activities associated with a recently awarded \$5 million federal Workforce Innovations in Regional Economic Development (WIRED) grant.

The grant funds, which expired this June, were used as a catalyst to jump start numerous workforce development strategies that had been on the drawing board, designed to strengthen the region's availability of a skilled labor pool. The region put the funds to good use, boasting some major accomplishments:

Several training programs were established for new industries including CSI's Wind Energy Technician and Environmental Technology programs and post-secondary training certification and associate degrees in Manufacturing Technology.

Area high schools now have manufacturing training labs, dual credit opportunities in manufacturing training/technology, and professional/technical computer labs.

Three extensive career outreach programs, tools and materials were developed to market career opportunities in the region not requiring a four-year degree. The primary program named "Turning Point Careers," includes a comprehensive web site promoting these opportunities for parents, students, educators and businesses.

Several industry-led hands-on career exploration events were held during the past three years for students and adults interested in the construction/building trades and health care industries.

Even entrepreneurs weren't overlooked in the region's workforce development efforts. The first tailored web site of its kind, specifically for southern Idaho entrepreneurs was established thanks to WIRED funds. IdEAHelp.net is an on-line resource designed specifically for people with innovative business ideas. "There was never one place where entrepreneurs could go or where we could direct them that would help them through the process of turning an idea into a viable business," said Jan Rogers, executive director of Southern Idaho Economic Development. "IdEAHelp.net is the only model that finally puts all the pieces together in one place for Idaho's entrepreneurs. It provides much needed support to future business leaders in our region to create new products and services that will spur new jobs and generate a more vibrant economy," she said.

## Local Workforce Spurs Business Growth

The proof of the region's success in worker training and development is reflected in the new businesses that have moved into the area and better-than-state-average unemployment rate.

In fact, available workforce was a primary reason for Florida-based C3/ CustomerContactChannels' decision in June to bring a new contact center to southern Idaho's Twin Falls.

"The reason we came here is two-fold," said Richard Mondre, co-chief executive officer of C3. "One, the property is fabulous because it's well maintained and ready to go. Two, our systems are complex so we need a ready workforce that can be trained," he said. C3 will occupy a building that formerly housed a Dell customer call center. And many of the new workers will be former Dell employees who are trained and ready to work.

Florida-based C3/ CustomerContactChannels' has started hiring up to 1,200 positions for this facility and will begin operations this September. The Idaho Department of Labor anticipates that once C3 opens this fall, their new hires could drop the local unemployment rate in the Twin Falls micropolitan area about 2.5 percent, making this area the lowest in the state.

CSI's many tailored workforce training programs convinced several other new

companies to open operations here – Hilex Poly, Jayco, Dutchmen Manufacturing and Seastrom Manufacturing– and is credited with the expansion of many established businesses.

CSI's expertise in employee training and education isn't utilized by just the local industries here. The College continues to provide ongoing training and support for Dell's 150 employees who still live and work here. And custom training is also being done for General Motors and

Freightliner to keep their workforce current as job and industry needs change.

Workforce training isn't just an idea passed around in the economic development halls of southern Idaho. It's a well-established, reputable, tailored and successful regional partnership encompassing educators, businesses and community leaders. They have proven, time and again, what impact a dedicated workforce development program grown over decades can make in a community. 🏡

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