An Examination of the Impact of Economic Development Activities at a Rural Community College

A thesis presented

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Abstract

Rural community colleges sit at an important crossroads between academia, business, and government. Because of this unique position, they influence the economic development of the region in which they are located in many ways, and their external stakeholders often have unique and useful perspectives on this influence that can be utilized by the college to improve their economic development interactions. This qualitative, case study research examines these stakeholder’s perspectives, finding that their concerns are generally related to college outreach activities, college programming, factors that limit the college’s ability to influence economic development, and their own understanding of economic development. Using Romer’s New Growth Theory as a theoretical lens, this research finds implications for practice including developing mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships with external stakeholders, creating a regional economic development resource guide focusing on community college resources and services, and embedding external stakeholders onto curriculum advisory boards and other college committees to aid in communication and understanding.

Keywords: rural community college, economic development, external relations, workforce development, college outreach
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my mother, Sharon “JoJo” Singleton, who is an amazing example of perseverance and strength, and my father, Sam H. Singleton, Jr., who left this world entirely too soon.
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I would like to acknowledge the colleagues, family, and friends who supported me during the completion of this research. Your understanding of my time constraints, stress level, and juggling of priorities kept me grounded and moving forward. You supported me from various places – North Carolina, Georgia, Nevada, Virginia, Colorado, Wisconsin, and even the United Kingdom – and that support was invaluable. Special thanks to Sam, Tate, and John who waited years to call me Dr. Aunt Sara and their parents, Greg and Ashley, for believing in me.

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Thanks as well to the external stakeholders in eastern North Carolina who shared their experiences, time, and concerns with me in an open and frank fashion, so that I could complete this research and hopefully make a difference in the economic development of eastern, rural North Carolina.

Here’s to the land of the long leaf pine,
The summer land where the sun doth shine,
Where the weak grow strong and the strong grow great,
Here’s to “Down Home,” the Old North State!

-adapted from a poem by Leonora Monteiro Martin
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The role of a rural community college in economic development has traditionally been driving the economy by training potential employees with broader economic impacts: the money spent in the region that would not be spent if the college did not exist contributes significantly to the local economy (K. L. Pennington, Pittman, & Hurley, 2001). Most of the research on this topic, including seminal studies by Caffrey and Isaacs (1971), Alfred (1991), Budd (1996), and Gracie (1998), has used quantitative methods, in particular what has been identified as the economic impact model. This model has been favored by practitioners to explain the impact of institutions on economic development. Economic impact models are used by community colleges, and other entities, to explain the effect of their presence and activity on the economy in their service areas. It is usually explained as a factor that multiplies the raw dollars the college puts into the economy, in terms of salaries paid and dollars spent, into a more comprehensive dollar amount showing the multilevel spending of employees, students, alumni, and providers of goods and services (Caffrey & Isaacs, 1971).

Since the early 2000s, rural community colleges have increasingly been asked to expand their area of influence beyond economic impact and workforce development to include explicitly improving quality of life and community development. Research is needed to better understand how this expanded role affects the socioeconomic impact of these institutions. A majority of the research, identified through a comprehensive search of scholarly publications since community colleges became part of the American educational landscape in the 1960s, has quantitatively examined this subject, almost solely focusing on the economic impact in dollars of the institution(s) studied. That is, the actual money spent by the college multiplied by the factor determined in the economic impact model has been used frequently to express the economic
impact as a dollar amount. In short, even given the community college’s expanded role in comprehensive economic development that has become prevalent in the past two decades, research has remained focused on numbers. A consideration of the more holistic economic development influence must include factors that cannot be explained through statistical, quantitative methods. Qualitative studies are needed to probe questions about how a community college’s resources and services impact business expansion and relocation. Some of these specialized services and resources include: providing customized training to new employees; procuring opportunities for employees’ high school children to receive free college classes at the local community college; and/or supporting cultural events brought to a rural area by a college such as plays, concerts, or seminars. To acquire a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of community colleges in economic development, broadly understood, qualitative approaches are required to capture the experiences of external stakeholders such as business owners, economic development practitioners, elected officials, appointed government officials, non-profit directors, chamber of commerce staff, and others involved in the holistic economic development of the community.

In this context, this case study aimed to examine how key external stakeholders understood the economic development activities at a rural community college in eastern North Carolina. For the purposes of this research, economic development is generally defined as a set of activities intended to improve the economic welfare and quality of life for a community by producing and/or retaining jobs, growing incomes, supporting entrepreneurship, and expanding the tax base (Nickoli, 2013). Knowledge generated is expected to inform the practice of economic development by rural community colleges by helping to align the expectations of external stakeholders with the practices, programming, mission, and outreach of the community colleges.
This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research examining the influence of community colleges on regional economic development to provide context and background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed next, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research question are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework that served as a lens for the study is introduced and explained.

**Context and Background**

Community colleges fulfill many roles that other educational institutions either do not or cannot. They retrain incumbent workers, prepare students to go on to four-year universities, teach basic literacy, impart vocational skills for careers such as welding and machining, serve as centers of entrepreneurship and business development, and offer programs for personal enrichment such as sewing or piano lessons (Palmer, Colby, & Zwemer, 1984). Yet, they are the stepchild of education, garnering less publicity than K-12 and less funding than universities and colleges (Duncan, 2010). Even with these obstacles to overcome, though, community colleges play a key role in merging the needs of education, business, and government.

Community colleges have been proven to influence regional economic development (Amey, Eddy, & Campbell, 2010; Boggs, 2011; Budd, 1996; Bushnell, 1981; Felix & Pope, 2010; Gianini Jr., 1997; Grubb, W., Badway, N., Bell, D., Bragg, D. Russman, 1997; Nickoli, 2013; Palmer et al., 1984; K. L. Pennington et al., 2001; Ward & Clark, 2013), and they were included as an integral part of President Obama’s goal to once again lead the United States to rank as having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by the year 2020 (Duncan, 2010). This goal, known as the American Graduation Initiative (AGI), offered $2.5 billion for construction and facilities’ renovation at the nation's community colleges, $500
million to create new online courses, and $9 billion for innovation grants, with the ultimate objective of increasing the number of community college graduates by five million before 2020. The AGI proposed using these funds to offer training to the millions of students who could not afford four-year universities and to give re-training opportunities to older workers who need new skills (Shear & de Vise, 2009).

This increased focus on producing graduates means that it is more important than ever for community colleges to proactively participate in regional economic development to maintain this aspect of their mission. However, these institutions are tasked with far more than just graduating students. Garza and Eller (1998) described the importance of community colleges in the 1990s, asserting that community colleges would inclusively play a role in improving quality of life efforts in their communities; indeed, the authors asserted that they would even become the centerpiece of those efforts (p. 34). With the year 2020 fast approaching, the need exists to measure the success of the AGI. Therefore, this is an ideal time to look at the ways community colleges are taking part in economic development to assess their effectiveness and to provide the colleges with the information they need to become the “best of” colleges that Garza and Eller (1998) described.

However, much of the research on this topic is not current. A comprehensive scholarly literature search on the phrase “community college economic development” conducted in mid-2017 indicated that the majority of the research on the topic was at least 10 years old. As previously mentioned, most of the studies addressing these issues are quantitative; an strong need exists for qualitative research looking at the expanded, holistic role of rural community colleges, emerging since the early 2000s. Sixty-four percent of community colleges in the United States are in rural areas, serving 3.3 million students at 600 colleges with more than 800 campus
locations; rural institutions are the fastest growing sector of U.S. community colleges (“Rural Community College Alliance,” 2016). At the time this study was conducted, fewer than 10 studies had looked specifically at rural community college economic development activities since 2010, according to a comprehensive scholarly literature search. Therefore, this study was designed to contribute to the literature by examining qualitatively how key external stakeholders understood the economic development activities of rural community colleges, focusing on one leading rural institution.

**Rationale and Significance**

This study expanding research on the economic development activities of rural community colleges provides examples of positive economic correlation, strategies, and activities that external stakeholders at one leading college perceived as important to the administrators of the over 600 rural community colleges in the United States. Because the main economic development role of community colleges has shifted from workforce development to a more holistic role in improving overall quality of life in the community, it is essential for rural community college administrators to understand the perceptions of key external stakeholders such as elected and appointed government officials, economic development practitioners, chamber of commerce leaders, and managers from the local business and industry sectors.

Thus, a major goal of this study was to glean information regarding to what extent and in what ways the perceptions of the stakeholders lined up with the economic development mission and activities of the college. This data can be used to better align the college’s activities to the expectations of its stakeholders and to better educate the external stakeholders on the role and mission of the college in regional economic development. No research of this type, looking at the holistic role of a rural community college in regional economic development from the
perspective of external stakeholders, was found in exhaustive scholarly searches of the literature. However, practitioners of economic development have established that this breakdown of communication and understanding is one of the major challenges to working effectively with community colleges (K. Howard, professional communication, April 15, 2016).

The institution chosen for this case study is located in rural eastern North Carolina; it was deemed ideal for this research because the college’s leadership had worked proactively since 2011 to not only expand traditional economic development activities but to also contribute to community development and quality of life issues within its four-county service area (B. Tansey, professional communication, December 23, 2016). At the time this study was conducted, Beaufort County Community College (BCCC), just east of Washington, North Carolina, had the largest geographic service area of over 2,000 square miles of any community college in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS), and it included three of the most rural and impoverished counties in the state, Hyde, Tyrrell, and Washington (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Also included in the service area is Beaufort County, the location of the college’s main campus, and the island of Ocracoke, accessible only by ferry (College, 2016).

The dearth of research on this topic leaves rural community colleges at a disadvantage as they take on their expanded role in regional economic development. Community colleges already must balance their role as open access educational institutions charged with ensuring student success; they simultaneously provide the workforce training needed in their local communities and traditional college transfer programming for those intending to enroll in four-year institutions, personal enrichment programming for the wider community, and basic skills classes for individuals pursuing a high school equivalency degree (Boggs, 2011). Thus, research such as this study could essentially provide informed guidance and encouragement to community college
administrators, not simply to help them strengthen the daily economic development activities of their institutions, but also to assist them with information to update strategic plans and mission/vision statements to reflect the modern, holistic, economic development role they are increasingly being asked to fulfill.

The outcomes of this study have the potential to support academics and practitioners alike in understanding how rural community colleges have adapted to meet the changing needs of their communities; simultaneously, it can assist them in reframing their socioeconomic impact in terms of economic development activities. This joint understanding is important because it can allow colleges to interact more efficiently with external stakeholders to incorporate their direction regarding academic programming and areas of improvement for the college; this process can help college leaders to prioritize the allocation of budget expenditures and program development activities. From the external stakeholders’ perspective, this research can also simplify their interactions with the community college by clarifying the extent to and the ways in which how their expectations match up with the reality of the services and resources the college can provide.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

The problem of practice of this study examined focused on how key external stakeholders understood the economic development activities of rural community colleges. At the time this study was conducted, the scope of these activities had changed drastically over a 15-year period from a focus on economic impact and workforce development to a more comprehensive focus on overall quality of life in the larger community; the researcher thus considered it necessary to focus the research on bridging the gap between the existing expectations of external stakeholders and the activities of the colleges. Therefore, this study at Beaufort County
Community College and in its home-community aimed to examine how the external stakeholders understood the economic development activities of this rural community college. This qualitative case study sought to answer the following research questions: What are the perceptions of external stakeholders regarding the economic development activities of the rural community college that is the focus of this study? How do these perceptions line up with the economic development mission of the college? What economic development activities in which the college is engaged do stakeholders consider to have improved regional economic development, and which ones do they consider ineffective?

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

**Economic development.** Continual growth in the economic standard of living of a country or region. It is typically viewed as the increase of market and human capital and technological innovations (Deardorff, 2016).

**Workforce development.** Encouraging student enrollment in career pathways needed for the local, regional, and national economies. It is typically viewed as a main role of the community college and has been historically targeted towards development of technical skills needed to train candidates for specific job positions (D’Amico, Morgan, Katsinas, & Friedel, 2015).

**Community development.** Improving the overall quality of life within a community through a combination of asset, technology, and skills-based improvements (Young, 1997). From the perspective of a community college, this includes making a community more appealing for prospective businesses and employees by offering cultural opportunities as well as specifically contributing to the overall improvement of quality of life (Boggs, 2011).
**Economic impact.** The money spent in the region that would not be spent if the college did not exist (K. L. Pennington et al., 2001) as well as the overall economic influence of that spending, including jobs filled, the unemployment rate, and the cascading effects on other businesses (Gracie, 1998).

**Quality of life.** Quality of life is a concept that defines a community’s overall state of being. This state depends on a plethora of variables, including knowledge, culture, economic well-being, housing, and others (Matarrita-Cascante, 2010). From the point of view of a community college, quality of life is a factor many businesses consider when making the decision to expand or relocate in an area because of the variables it entails (Boggs, 2011).

**Rural community college.** Colleges granting associate’s degrees as their highest degree that are also not located geographically within a Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA) or Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA), respectively, according to the latest Census. In addition, institutions in a PMSA/MSA with a lower total population, or not geographically within in a PMSA or MSA, are classified by the Carnegie Foundation as rural-serving (“Rural Community College Alliance: What is a rural community college?,” 2016).

**External stakeholder.** For the purposes of this study, external stakeholders are defined as individuals or groups concerned with or impacted by the economic development activities of a community college who are not employed or appointed by the community college; they are also not tuition-paying students of the college either in a degree-seeking field or continuing education. Examples include economic development entities, elected officials, appointed governmental officials, chambers of commerce, economic development authorities, workforce development officials, workforce development boards, non-profit organizations, and organizations operating in rural areas such as North Carolina’s Rural Center.
**Internal stakeholder.** For the purposes of this study, internal stakeholders include all students, faculty, staff, administrators, and appointed trustees of the community college.

**Civic capacity.** The creation of social capital as required by the wants and needs of the people (Putnam, 1993).

The following section of this chapter includes a description and discussion of new growth theory, which served as the theoretical lens for this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Romer’s (1986) new growth theory was the theoretical framework that guided this research. New growth theory emphasizes that economic growth results from aggregate returns accompanied by new knowledge. Romer argued that ideas and knowledge are plentiful and that they develop from interactions between the two. His theory claims that this expansion of knowledge is very inexpensive; indeed, sometimes it has absolutely no cost, thus it argues the opposite of how goods and services are treated by the law of diminishing returns (Brue, 1993). The 10 main assumptions of new growth theory are as follows:

- economic progress emanates from technological transformation;
- technological transformation is endogenous in nature;
- market incentives have an essential role in determining which technological changes become available to the economy;
- innovation is a product of human capital;
- the aggregate amount of human capital is flat at any given time;
- innovations can be patented to the person or group that created the innovation;
- technology is a non-rival good;
new technology can be used multiple times by the innovator without added expenses and without lessening the value of the new good;

- the low or non-existent cost of re-using the technological innovation once created decreases the cost of producing new technology;

- investments made in research and development that lead to new technology likely had costs that were internalized by the innovator. (Romer, 1996)

These assumptions guide the elements explained in the following sections.

**Essential Arguments of New Growth Theory**

New growth theory is a view of the economy that incorporates two essential arguments. First, it views technological advancement as a result of economic activity. New growth theory is often called an “endogenous” growth theory, because it coopts technology into the market model, a key aspect of endogenous models (Romer, 1994). Earlier exogenous growth theories considered technology as an absolute, without any input or impact from the market: essentially, technology would continue to advance with or without market forces (Rivera-Batiz & Romer, 1991). However, new growth theory argues that technology is impacted by market decisions, a key factor setting it apart from previous and even more recent theories.

Second, new growth theory holds that unlike physical objects, knowledge and technology are characterized by increasing returns that drive the process of growth (Romer, 1996). Knowledge is considered to be a public or non-rival good, which means that it is a product that, once provided for one person or group, has no cost at all when shared or given to other people or groups (Rivera-Batiz & Romer, 1991). These types of goods can have increasing returns because, once they are created, they incur the same expense for one use or a million uses; examples other than knowledge include national security, the creation of a vaccine to control a
disease, or even the interstate highway system. This aspect of new growth theory is the most
essential for this research, given that the role of the rural community college is centered on being
both a knowledge and technological hub for its region. Acting as this hub implies that the college
actively invests in both knowledge and technology with the goal of increasing economic growth;
accordingly, new growth theory affirms, investment in these goods will have increasing, rather
than diminishing, returns (Firth & Mellor, 2000).

New growth theory was considered an ideal theoretical framework for this research
because of the direct connection between the role of the community college as both an
educational institution and economic development engine in its service area. The education
mission of the community college facilitates an expansion of knowledge that is critical in
improving overall human capital and in providing access to new technology for industries within
the region (Nickoli, 2013). The economic development mission of the community college
includes providing additional access to college resources and services for industries, businesses,
and entrepreneurs while simultaneously acting as an incentive motivator that can be tapped by
economic development practitioners and government officials for recruiting and retaining
businesses (Crowe, 2007). These missions are complementary, and they also align with the main
premises of new growth theory, which consider technological advancement as a result of
economic activity and the acceptance of knowledge and technological growth as non-rival, non-
diminishing goods.

**Critics of New Growth Theory**

New growth theory emerged in the 1980s during a period in which the world’s economy
was changing rapidly due to technological advances and the widespread access to knowledge
that came with those advances (Bade & Parkin, 2015). It was largely created in response to those
changes and to address the underlying assumption from previous exogenous models that knowledge and technology were not part of the market economy (Romer, 1993). Thus, many of the critiques of new growth theory focus on the main assumption of the theory, which is that knowledge and technology are not impacted by the law of diminishing returns (Hoffman, 2012). Other critiques cite as a weakness the lack of empirical support for the long-run growth rate that Romer used in the model (Brinkman & Brinkman, 2001) and the fact that the model does not consider any incentives programs that may be used in encouraging the expansion of knowledge and technology; in short, they claim new growth theory may not actually be a new idea (Firth & Mellor, 2000).

**Critiques based on the law of diminishing returns.** The main critiques of new growth theory challenge the concept that knowledge and technology growth are not subject to the law of diminishing returns. These critics argue that all goods are subject to diminishing returns in at least some circumstances, and they specifically argue that developing countries will see diminishing returns on knowledge and technological expansion in almost every scenario (Hoffman, 2012). This difference is likely due in part to the reality that developing countries are characterized by extremely low levels of investment in human capital and, in general, by challenging living conditions, such as poverty, unemployment, and insufficient housing; these factors can make it more difficult for the majority of the population to thrive in these countries (Soskice, 2014). However, many of these same critics do concede the point that these diminishing returns do not manifest themselves to the same extent – and sometimes not even at all – in industrialized nations, so the usage of this theory for this study is not negatively impacted by this critique.
Critiques claiming a lack of empirical support. A second critique of new growth theory is that it simply cannot be verified empirically because it relies on non-empirical inputs, such as an individual’s ability to become more knowledgeable and/or the concept of ideas as a marketable good (Brinkman & Brinkman, 2001). These critics assert that new growth theory is not actually an economic theory at all in terms of traditional economics, but rather a statement on the changing nature of economic growth in the latter parts of the 20th Century and the beginning of the 21st Century (Al-Ubaydli & Kealey, 2000). Thus, this critique does not appear to offer any reason to avoid the use of the theory for this study; precisely, this study is examining changes since 2000 in the ways community colleges have become active in economic development and external stakeholders’ perceptions of this shift.

Critiques based on shortcomings of the model. There are two main critiques of new growth theory based on the model’s shortcomings. The first argues that new growth theory does not consider any incentives used to spur technological or knowledge development, without which there may actually be diminishing returns (Brinkman & Brinkman, 2001). Second, many critics argue that new growth theory as a model is not new at all. Rather, they say, it is actually a return to a more laissez-faire economic model that cannot account for modern technological change and for the speed of the increase of knowledge in today’s world (Firth & Mellor, 2000).

Rationale for Using New Growth Theory

The most important aspect of new growth theory for this research is that it emphasizes that knowledge propels development. In short, the increasing returns of expanded knowledge propel economic growth and create a continual cycle of expansion, as exemplified in the following figure:
New growth theory gives meaning to the ongoing shift from a resource-based economy to a knowledge-based economy that has intensified since the early 1980s. As knowledge expands, the investment in human capital by community colleges becomes an investment in knowledge and thus an investment in the economy (Rivera-Batiz & Romer, 1991). The impact is similar for technological growth, especially in rural areas, because community colleges are often the first – and sometimes the only – institutions to adopt and apply new technology, especially in areas such as manufacturing (Maradian, 1989). It is quite common for rural industries to purchase machinery based on the technology that local community college students have learned to use in their coursework because it removes the need for additional training (K. Howard, professional communication, April 15, 2016). Because rural community colleges have increasingly become knowledge, technology, and community-impact hubs for their service areas, new growth theory accurately describes their role in the economic development spectrum, if they are placed at the center of the perpetual motion model of the theory, as shown in the diagram below, adapted to the community college context for the purposes of this study:

*Figure 1: Bade & Parkins model of new growth theory (Bade & Parkin, 2015)*
Figure 2: Rural community college positioning in new growth theory.

Given that the community college provides open access to education, skills training, business development, and other essential aspects of the economy, it clearly belongs at the center of this model. Individuals trained at the community college become both the employees and the employers of the region. Those who become employees come back to the college as needed to learn new skills, advance their personal development, attend cultural events, and sometimes to become the next generation of instructors. Those who become employers come back to the college to take advantage of business expansion services, attend seminars and workshops, learn about new technology, hire employees, and to mentor future employees or colleagues. There are also other sets of people beyond employees of industry or owners of businesses; namely, teachers, educational administrators, government officials, non-profit directors, chamber of commerce staff, and others who depend on the resources and services of the community college to make their organizations successful. For example, the training required to be a substitute
teacher in North Carolina is offered by the community colleges; the resources for workforce
development to help recruit a new business are centered at the community colleges; and the
expertise needed to help a non-profit make an impact on its clients is available from the staff at
the community college (Sink Jr. & Jackson, 2002).

Applying New Growth Theory to Current Study

New growth theory is an ideal lens for the current study because of the importance of
community colleges in improving human capital, developing knowledge, and growing
technology, especially in rural service areas. Its application to the current study occurred in three
main ways. First, the basic premise that knowledge is a non-rival, non-diminishing good guided
the way that the researcher viewed knowledge, the growth of knowledge, and its regional
influence on economic development. Second, the community college was considered the center
point of the perpetual motion model of new growth theory for its rural service area because it
was the only public institution of higher education serving this geographic region. Finally,
incentives offered by the community college and others for improving access to and use of new
technologies, as well as recruiting a skilled workforce in the region, were considered a normal
aspect of new growth theory based on the role of technological incentives described by Romer
(1996).

Knowledge as a non-rival, non-diminishing good. For the purposes of this study, it is
essential that the endogenous economic model of knowledge as a non-rival good not subject to
the law of diminishing returns be considered valid. Without these two specifications, the
expansion of knowledge and technology needed for economic development cannot be regarded
to have any impact on the economy of the region. Thus, the college can offer the act of sharing
knowledge and increasing the capacity of the region at the same or little more cost than it can be
provided to a single individual. Community colleges are public institutions of higher education dedicated to expanding knowledge and enriching lives, making knowledge as a non-rival, non-diminishing good a certainty of this research.

**Community college at the center of the model.** This research study probed the community college’s economic development actions from the perspective of external stakeholders; therefore, it positioned the community college at the center of the new growth theory model because the college represented the common entity connecting all of the stakeholders. All of the data gathered was analyzed with the role of the community college as the hub of the community, and the college was examined in light of its role as the purveyor of knowledge and promoter of technological growth for its service area.

**Role of incentives.** Incentives are used in economic development both to attract and retain businesses and to encourage those businesses to invest in emerging methods of development. The incentives typically offered by the community college include the training of employees for a specific skill or pathway to develop and offer customized training based on a company’s own processes and to introduce employees and employers to important innovations. While these are normal services and resources of a community college, economic development practitioners use them much the same as tax breaks and infrastructure planning as incentives to attract new or expanding businesses. Thus, it is essential to include incentives in new growth theory because the community college’s economic development activities cannot be fully analyzed without considering these types of incentives.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented an overview of the research examining the influence of community colleges on regional economic development to provide context and background to
the study. The rationale and significance of the study were also discussed, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the research. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research question were examined to focus and ground the study, including a list of definitions of key terminology informing the research. Finally, the theoretical framework that served as a lens for the study, new growth theory, was reviewed in detail including the basics tenets of the theory, critiques of the theory, the rationale for its use in this research, and an examination of its specific use as a theoretical lens.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The role of community colleges in regional economic development has expanded since the 1990s to include not only traditional elements such as workforce and business development but also more comprehensive services and resources (Nickoli, 2013). Especially in rural areas, community colleges also provide community development services through the activities of faculty and staff in the community, and they enhance the overall quality of life through cultural and personal enrichment offerings (Rogers & Ramsey, 2012). This study examined how key external stakeholders understood these economic development activities. Because the scope of these activities has transformed since the early 2000s, from a focus on economic impact and workforce development to a more comprehensive focus on overall quality of life in the larger community, it is essential to understand and examine the differences between the existing expectations of external stakeholders and the activities of the college. Through this examination, data was gathered to understand to what extent and in what ways the perceptions of the stakeholders lined up with the economic development mission and activities of the college. The information gleaned can be used to better align the college’s activities to the expectations of its stakeholders and to better educate the external stakeholders on the role and mission of the college in regional economic development. The purpose of this research, in this sense, was to examine how key external stakeholders understood the economic development activities of rural community colleges.

A review of the literature on this topic reveals a gap in the exploration of the perspectives of external stakeholders located in regions where rural community colleges play a significant role in economic development. The literature, however, does identify where rural community colleges have in the past contributed to economic development. They have undertaken: (a)
traditional roles such as workforce and community development, (b) quantitative measurement of influence known as economic impact, and (c) adopted holistic economic development strategies based on their unique nature of being rural community colleges.

This literature review examines these three strands, organized by theme to present the argument of discovery. A summary is then presented to develop the rationale for this study. This chapter also discusses the limitations of existing research and outlines how this study succinctly addresses deficiencies in the evidence.

**Traditional Roles of Community Colleges in Economic Development**

Traditionally, community colleges have engaged in two major types of economic development activities: workforce development and community development. These areas are traditionally not approached in a holistic manner; rather, they are bifurcated as two distinct activities managed by different groups within the community college. Each is addressed in depth in this chapter along with a conclusion to analyze the overall contributions of the literature in this aspect.

**Workforce Development**

Scholars have extensively addressed the subject of workforce development, a term used to describe the education and training of new and existing members of the workforce for the jobs available within a region (Gracie, 1998). In this context, many community colleges were formed as vocational and technical training schools, and today, they are still viewed as the most appropriate institution that can execute with flexibility the mission to develop human capital directly in response to workforce demands (Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006; Myran & Ivery, 2013; Velluzzi, 2010). Workforce development, once the sole economic development service of community colleges, combines many different activities into the goal of preparing employees for
available jobs (Stanley, 1996). This mission generally includes the following components: (a) identifying graduates in a discipline sought by a new company, (b) identifying students for internships and apprenticeships, (c) offering short-term training via continuing education to allow workers to update their skills and earn new credentials, and (d) assessing and re-training current members of the workforce for companies (Forde, 2002; Myran & Ivery, 2013; Nickoli, 2013).

**Identifying graduates from in-demand fields.** One of the most difficult aspects of workforce development is trying to forecast which fields are most needed in the regional economy to ensure graduates are available to fill open positions (Maradian, 1989; Nickoli, 2013). Community colleges use many techniques for this purpose, including reviewing job postings as well as viewing labor market trends, partnering with local workforce development boards, and collaborating with public schools and universities to provide the necessary pipeline for these jobs (Moussouris, 1998). Colleges rely heavily on adjunct faculty to deliver this training, and, many times they directly hire faculty from a company within the in-demand field (Boldt, 2013; Bosworth, 1997; Maisto & Street, 2011). Professors and staff also help to identify graduates from in-demand fields, providing career counseling to students. Colleges thus direct students to study within certain disciplines according to labor market information, information sessions with external experts, and human resources professionals; they also direct advising based on the availability of internships and apprenticeships that may lead to employment after graduation (Bosworth, 1997; Grubb, W., Badway, N., Bell, D., Bragg, D. Russman, 1997; Raughton, 1998).

Based on this information, forecasting employment needs from in-demand fields is an important aspect of workforce development. In fact, the role of community colleges in forecasting can be used as a guide for state economic development and workforce development
agencies regarding how to partner with business and industry (Bosworth, 1997). The scholarly literature on this aspect of workforce development is dated, with a majority published prior to 2005, based on a comprehensive search conducted in 2017. Perhaps this can be explained by the resources now provided through sources external to the colleges themselves, such as Economic Modeling Services International (EMSI). EMSI takes raw labor market data and repackages it into specialized reports and real-time online queries to help not just colleges but businesses and others to better understand workforce needs (Economic Modeling Specialists International, 2015). Rather than relying on peer-reviewed literature, community colleges get current data tailored to their specific needs from EMSI, which may account for the lack of recently published research on this aspect of workforce development. However, concerns about these reports generated in-house are prescient because these reports written by colleges are self-reliant and use data not audited by outside parties (Caffrey & Isaacs, 1971).

**Internships and apprenticeships.** A strong example of community college workforce development is the Quick Start program in the state of Georgia. Quick Start, a program of the Department of Technical and Adult Education (DTAE), partners with a company or group of companies to develop a certificate program for a needed occupation that integrates into an existing academic curriculum. One such program, Certified Manufacturing Specialist (CMS), offers students 160 hours of specialized training counting as fifteen credit hours toward an associate’s degree. Most importantly, though, the students complete on-site training with one of the companies that contracts with Quick Start to provide the CMS program. Thus, students can move straight from the CMS program into an entry-level position with a company, or they can complete additional course work for an associate’s degree and further opportunities with one of the Quick Start partner companies (Breeden, 2002).
Programs such as this exist in most community college systems and offer students an important bridge between academic training and real-world employment. Apprenticeship and internship programs are an integral piece of workforce development because they allow students to gain direct experience in a given industry prior to graduation. By doing this, students know what to expect from their chosen career, have opportunities to develop relationships with employers, and begin to develop important soft-skills related to employment (Bacdayan, 2008; Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Hlavna, 1992; Myran & Ivery, 2013). In addition, the partnerships built through these programs can also strengthen the college’s curriculum, offering information on the newest technologies and methodologies from the business sector (Myran & Ivery, 2013). In many cases, especially in career and technical fields, employees from local industry are often the adjunct instructors at the community college, creating a sense of cooperation in preparing students for the workforce and for other roles in community development (Wilson, 2010).

**Continuing education.** The phrase “continuing education” was actually coined by Thomas Jefferson and was meant to allow individuals to pursue additional educational opportunities while not disturbing their employment (Bassett, 1997). In regards to workforce development, the most often recognized type of continuing education offered at community colleges is training that leads to nationally recognized, third-party credentials (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Nickoli, 2013; Zacharakis, 2008). These non-credit courses offer training for specific needs that can be completed while individuals are still working full-time, thus improving the career possibilities for incumbent workers (Boggs, 2011; Maradian, 1989; Rogers & Ramsey, 2012). These courses can be offered through partnerships with employers or with workforce development agencies, or as a stand-alone effort of the college. They can be taught at the college or at a work site, and some of these courses are even taught via distance learning. Many times,
unemployed individuals can access this training at no cost because of the partnership between the community college and the workforce development agency (Forde, 2002). In addition, local employers are often asked to give input on particular skill sets they have found lacking in current employees so that these skills can be addressed in the continuing education training (Grubb, W., Badway, N., Bell, D., Bragg, D. Russman, 1997).

The role of continuing education in workforce development is critical to the overall influence of community colleges on regional economic development. By offering training to incumbent workers, community colleges increase the lifelong learning potential of individuals while also offering a highly skilled workforce to local industries (Dirkx, 1998; Julian & Kominski, 2011; Kelli, Mets, Jonsson, Pisuke, & Adamsoo, 2013; Nickoli, 2013). Other types of continuing education essential to workforce development include career readiness programming, human resources development, high school equivalency, and adult basic skills (Bragg, 2001). The largest lifetime earnings increase through this type of education occurs when individuals move from no high school diploma to a high school diploma and then some college; this component of the continuing education programming offered at community colleges is key to improving individual and group economic outcomes (Julian & Kominski, 2011).

**Assessment and retraining.** When companies introduce updated technology or equipment, they need to skill up their existing workforce. Community colleges assess the skills of incumbent workers and provide retraining and customized training directly at the workplace. For example, in Arkansas, this effort is exemplified by the partnership between Arkansas Tech University-Ozark Campus and Green Bay Packaging to develop a six-week training course for employees. The company pays its employees for the time they spend in class and offers promotion and pay increases tied to course completion (Nickoli, 2013). Partnerships such as this
are essential to enhancing the role of community colleges in workforce development, given that they rely on industry-academia collaboration and offer specialized training that improves career opportunities for incumbent workers (Hlavna, 1992). Many states have programs offering this type of customized training program as an incentive for recruiting and/or retaining businesses (Warren, 2000).

As early as 1991, a majority of community colleges were offering this kind of customized training (Lynch, Palmer, & Grubb, 1991). This activity, in the early 21st Century, was slated as part of the economic development incentive packages community colleges were offering to aid state and local economic developers in the recruitment and retention of businesses (Lassiter, 2013). Thus, assessment and retraining are activities that have become ubiquitous at rural community colleges. In this context, the scholarly literature on assessment and retraining has been identified as some of the most up-to-date of all research on the influence of community colleges in regional economic development. This is likely because of the important role community colleges have had in helping companies implement advanced technologies and in overcoming the negative impacts of the recession of 2007-2009 (Felix & Pope, 2010).

**Community Development**

Another way community colleges influence regional economic development is by providing resources and leadership in their community; they produce the environment in which local communities can thrive (Grubb, W., Badway, N., Bell, D., Bragg, D. Russman, 1997; Shaffer, Deller, & Marcouiller, 2006; Young, 1997). Community development is the means though which community colleges catalyze and energize change agents within their region (Jenson, 2003). These community development activities are hard to quantify because they are vast and usually narrative in nature; however, they are essential to economic development, and
they represent a significant contribution the college makes, especially in rural areas. One of the
main ways that community colleges impact community development is through the development
of civic capacity: in short, through the development of social and human capital needed for the
institution to become a change agent in the community (Jenson, 2003). This requires
collaborative efforts from colleges and community partners working toward a mutual goal of
community improvement. This includes offering resources to the community, countering the loss
of educational opportunity known as brain drain, and providing a unique identity to the host
community. Interestingly, brain drain in this sense does not represent the loss of educated
individuals to external migration; rather, it reveals the loss of capacity when individuals decide
not to pursue education at all (Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011).

There are several ways this is accomplished. First, the community college and its
employees have equal capacity to positively impact the community, both in terms of physical
resources and human capital. That is, the resources of the college are available to the community,
while the employees of the college also act as community resources. Second, community
colleges serve as a safety net for individuals who need education or training to better their own
economic opportunities. Finally, especially in rural areas, community colleges are one way that
the community can develop its own identity. The following sections address each of these areas
in terms of community college involvement in community development.

**Physical and human resources for community development.** Community development
can also be influenced by the community college providing physical and human resources to
stimulate economic development. This includes offering space for regional economic
development offices, small business centers, and incubation programs as well as encouraging
faculty and staff involvement in various aspects of the community from workforce boards to
coaching little league (K. Pennington & Williams, 2004). In many states, particularly in rural areas, all small business and entrepreneurship assistance is provided through the community college system (Budd, 1996). The community college may also offer resources such as offering plays, music groups, and special events that broaden the cultural engagement of the community (Boggs, 2011; Dougherty & Townsend, 2006). One of the most important parts of the community college is its people, and it is vital that those people be visible in the community as working towards the common goal of community improvement. Without the capacity to positively influence human capital development, the community college is unable to accomplish any of these tasks (Nespoli, 1991)

**The safety net and reducing brain drain.** Another aspect of community development is the community college’s role as a “safety net.” In this role, colleges improve the labor market outcomes for students who drop out of four-year institutions or who otherwise would not pursue education beyond high school. By improving these outcomes, the community college helps stem the “brain drain” phenomenon that is especially prevalent in rural communities (Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011). Community colleges in many parts of the United States are also where high school equivalency and adult basic education programs are found. By helping an adult get a high school diploma or the skills to qualify for a better job, they provide a different type of safety net for the community (Gianini Jr., 1997; Guy, 1999). As mentioned earlier in this literature review, this not only improves outcomes for the community as a whole but also improves outcomes for the individual who can progress professionally as an economic actor because they have access to the community college (Gianini Jr., 1997). This part of community development has not been researched at length in terms of its economic development impact.
Community self-identity. Community self-identity is yet another aspect of the community college impact on community development. Especially in rural areas, community colleges serve as an engine for developing community inclusiveness and pride. The colleges offer services that bring communities together including adult personal enrichment courses, lectures, tourism opportunities, and athletics. Colleges also offer a source of civic pride in rural areas, becoming entwined with the very understanding of the community’s image. This makes the role of rural community college leaders particularly important; indeed, they are in a sense de facto community leaders (S. Rubin, 2001). Similarly, community colleges help define the identities of rural communities, and they attract people who otherwise would not live in or visit the community (Miller & Tuttle, 2007). While colleges help identify a community, especially in rural areas, it is likely that they are also a gathering place for many groups of people in urban and suburban areas; this aspect is not adequately addressed in the economic development literature.

Conclusion

This section has examined the many traditional ways that community colleges impact both workforce and community development. The literature on workforce development reviewed focused on identifying graduates from in-demand fields, finding students for internships and apprenticeships, presenting short term training opportunities via continuing education to allow workers to update their skills and earn new credentials. This section also assessed the processes of re-training of existing members of the labor force to benefit a business that is partnering with the college. This strand of the literature review is the most extensive, likely because many community colleges were formed as vocational and technical training schools and focused on this mission almost exclusively until the early 1990s (Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006). The literature on community development first considers that the community college and its personnel
constitute a major resource in terms of human and physical capital. Second, it delineates how community colleges serve as a safety net for individuals who need education or training to improve their own financial prospects. Finally, especially in rural areas, community colleges, as the literature reveals, serve as an institution that shapes the identity of the region. The community development literature is not as thoroughly developed as the literature on workforce development, likely because community colleges did not take on this role until the late 1980s, whereas, they had been acting as workforce developers since their inceptions (Nickoli, 2013). The following section of this literature review considers additional ways that community colleges quantitatively analyze and present information to the public regarding their overall economic impact.

**Economic Impact Analysis**

This section of the literature review discusses the impact of community colleges in their role of influencing regional economic development. Community colleges run on a blend of tuition paid by students; appropriations from federal, state, and local governmental bodies; and grants, all which combine to signify not just individual but societal investment (Murphy & Katsinas, 2014). Because of this investment, researchers have shown interest in in quantifying the impact of community colleges as a way of explaining return on investment. This measure, known as economic impact, represents the combined direct and indirect impact on the economy of the community college’s payroll, purchases, and graduates (K. L. Pennington et al., 2001). Such studies typically look at the payroll of the community college, the translation of that payroll into purchases in the local economy, and the direct purchase of goods and services by the college (Dobrzeniecki, Poole, & Troppe, 2005; Gracie, 1998; K. L. Pennington et al., 2001; Ward & Clark, 2013). An example of how economic impact is portrayed graphically in Figure 3. It is
based on a report completed by EMSI on the San Diego Community College District’s Economic Impact Report:

*Figure 3: San Diego Community College District economic impact graphic representation (EMSI, 2016)*

In addition, some studies focus on the economic impact of a college’s graduates on the regional economy as another means of measuring economic development (Frost, 2011; Gracie, 1998). This measure of influence is often presented as either a dollar amount or as a multiplier effect, and sometimes both. Interestingly, the perception of this economic impact by community members is affected by the size of the college relative to the size of the region. Larger community colleges with larger economic impact are viewed more positively than smaller community colleges, even if the smaller college’s impact is relatively sized for its community (Boone & Gillett-Karam, 1996). The literature on economic impact typically looks either at methodology or gives a quantitative analysis of an existing economic impact study.
Methodology of the Economic Impact Model

Economic impact is the factor most often used to communicate the influence of community colleges on economic development to the larger regional community. This is likely because it is a number, either currency or multiplier effect, that can be easily explained to external constituents, rather than the more nebulous impact of workforce development or other measures of economic development influence (Alfred, 1991; Felix & Pope, 2010). However, because economic impact studies are often written and published directly by the college studying itself, they are sometimes viewed as biased (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). Because of this potential bias, it is likely that the use of economic impact studies to prove the influence of community colleges on regional economic development is not the most appropriate way to make the case. While the use of a number simplifies the effort, the community college plays so many roles in supporting economic development that perhaps these measures oversimplify the influence (Dobrzeniecki et al., 2005). However, community colleges continue to issue economic impact reports because they are easy for the general population to understand, and they offer a comprehensive dollar amount of impact that is usually an impressively large number (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). Most use a model developed by Caffrey and Isaacs (1971), although some do consider cash flow, multiplier effects, and human capital (Schuyler, 1997).

The literature focusing on economic impact as the measure of a community college’s influence on regional economic development can be categorized as using either explanatory or quantitative methodology. The literature identified as explanatory generally attempts to describe how a college impacts the local economy in a way that an everyday reader can understand. Explanatory literature may also aim to explain the role of the community college in the local economy (Alfred, 1991; Frost, 2011; Gracie, 1998). Conversely, quantitative research studies
published in the literature use economic impact figures as a way to compare and contrast the success of colleges in influencing regional economic development (Jenkins & Bailey, 2006; Mejia, 2012; K. L. Pennington et al., 2001). In addition, quantitative research commonly attempts to produce models through which other institutions can better quantify their impact on their local economy (Caffrey & Isaacs, 1971).

Analysis of Economic Impact Studies

The second main thread of economic impact research seeks to quantitatively analyze existing economic impact studies. To do this, scholars have reviewed several elements of economic impact studies, including: (a) identifying the person(s) or group responsible for conducting the study; (b) determining how the study defined the institution’s service area; (c) developing a list of economic elements included in the study; (d) identifying the model used for the analysis as well as any variables; and (e) determining the college’s motivation for conducting the analysis or having it conducted (Manning & Viscek, 1977; Schuyler, 1997). Finally, these analyses have tended to consider whether the multiplier effect chosen for the study was appropriate (Gracie, 1998). To do this, they needed to attempt to put a dollar amount on the college’s human capital development, or the acquired energy, motivations, skills, and knowledge of individuals that can lead to the production of goods and services (Bowen & et al., 1977). This part of the analysis is often the most difficult to quantify; assigning a dollar value to these aspects of economic development is incredibly difficult, and Schuyler (1997) concluded that, because of this and other factors, colleges should not rely on economic impact alone but should supplement their scrutiny with qualitative analysis. This study has provided data and analysis that contribute to filling that gap.
Conclusion

The literature on economic impact, as this review delineates, first introduces the economic impact model as a quantitative method for determining a community college’s effect on its region or service area. The literature also addresses the more generic aspects including the various methodologies and frameworks used for economic impact analysis and the actual analysis of existing economic impact studies. While this type of analysis makes a contribution because it offers a simple way to demonstrate the economic impact of a community college, it misses the mark on explaining how and why this impact is important. Simply using numbers to explain impact does not incorporate the important narratives between the community college and its external partners in the regional economy. This aspect is a main anchor of the purpose of this research.

Economic Development at Rural Community Colleges

The final stream of literature related to this study considers the unique features and roles of rural community colleges related to economic development. Literature in this area began considering the holistic economic development role as early as the 1990s, recognizing that rural institutions are more comprehensive in nature in terms of their influence on the regional economy (Rosenfeld & Liston, 2000). The research in this area also considers the factors that make rural community colleges different than other institutions, such as geography, budget shortfalls, community need, and political maneuvering (Hicks & Jones, 2011); indeed, these factors commonly lead into an early adoption of more comprehensive economic development activities. Finally, the literature considers the impact of the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI), an effort started by the Ford Foundation in 1994 to strengthen both rural community
colleges and the communities they serve (Kennamer & Katsinas, 2011). Each of these themes is subsequently discussed in depth.

**Factors Unique to Rural Community Colleges**

As early as the 1970s, academics and practitioners alike noticed that rural community colleges faced different challenges compared to their urban and suburban counterparts. An early definition of what constituted a rural institution emerged from an American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) task force which defined rural community colleges as public institutions located in a population center under 100,000 residents and serving a broad geographic area (Vineyard, 1979). Some of the major challenges for these institutions, as identified by Pennington, Williams, and Karvonen (2006), include greater dependence on technology to reach students in remote areas, the constant search for external funding through grants because of generally lower numbers of tuition-paying students, reacting to shifts in community needs, recruiting qualified faculty and staff, and funding formula inequities.

In addition to institutional challenges, demographic variables vary significantly in different rural areas. For example, the large service area of some rural community colleges makes it difficult for students to physically commute to campus. While over 85% of the United States is considered rural, only 15% of the nation’s population lives in these rural areas (Miller & Kissinger, 2007). This geographic challenge only makes it more difficult for rural community colleges to recruit and retain not just students, but qualified faculty (Torres et al., 2013). To further the challenge, rural areas are often economically disadvantaged as well, leading to a lower tax base available to support the mission and activities of the college (Fluharty & Scaggs, 2007).
Finally, the areas served by rural community colleges are considered to have the least financial resources comparatively, yet the greatest social needs because they serve marginalized areas. These challenges make it difficult for these community colleges to make headway on economic development projects without significant partnerships and collaboration from the community (Jenson, 2003). The areas served by rural community colleges also often lack the potential to be innovative in solving problems and in assisting entrepreneurs. Practitioners call this a lack of “institutional thickness,” and it is likely caused by the ongoing marginalization of the people and businesses in rural areas. Institutional thickness in this usage is defined as the overall ability of a community’s government, business, industry, and education entities to come together to solve important problems (Amin & Thrift, 1994). This lack of institutional thickness is one of the most unique features that rural community colleges must overcome in order to positively influence regional economic development (Burgraff, 1999).

**Early Adoption of Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies**

Much of the literature on the community college influence on regional economic development available when this study was conducted examined the combined role of the college as a partner in a holistic economic development strategy. This strategy has generally focused on the importance of the community college acting as an important regional partner across the spectrum of economic development, including workforce development, economic impact, and community development; the strategy, however, also adds into other factors such as the importance of flexibility, acting quickly, being viewed as a neutral entity, and serving as an incubator for new businesses (Deggs & Miller, 2013; Fox & Pennington, 2009; Howley, Chavis, & Kester, 2013; Lane & Johnstone, 2012; Mejia, 2012; Nickoli, 2013; Toma, Grigore, & Marinescu, 2014; Velluzzi, 2010; Ward & Clark, 2013; Wilson, 2010). Within this subset of the
literature, while some scholars have focused on workforce development, there has been equal importance given to each of the other roles the community college fulfills as part of its economic development mission.

One phrase that emerges consistently in this stream of literature is “quality of life” which refers to the concept that companies are looking for more than just skilled workers. They also seek favorable taxation or financial incentives when making the decision to locate, relocate, or expand in one area. Rather, companies are looking for strong schools, access to cultural activities, shopping centers, good roads, and partnerships between the stakeholders involved in the relocation or expansion project. They simultaneously seek opportunities for workforce development for skilled workers, community development to benefit their employees, and institutions of higher education that can contribute to the workforce and the economy in terms of economic impact (Boggs, 2011; Nickoli, 2013; Porter, 2000; Shaffer et al., 2006; Toma et al., 2014).

Because this is the newest area of the literature examined for the purposes of this study it is also the area where the most remains to be discovered. However, almost all of the research published between 2012 and the time this study was conducted, in 2017 focused on the community college’s role in economic development; the emphasis, however, in the literature reviews rarely focused on the multiple roles enacted by these institutions and far less often from a holistic lens. While not every community college will combine all of these aspects of a holistic strategy, this stream of literature makes clear that community college economic development efforts now, and for future development, can no longer focus exclusively and primarily on workforce development.
Community colleges as early adopters of holistic economic development. Because of many of the challenges mentioned above, rural community colleges were early adopters of a more holistic economic development strategy than their counterpart institutions (Garza & Eller, 1998). By the early 2000s, many rural community colleges were changing their missions to include economic activities beyond workforce development to incorporate community and quality of life issues (K. Pennington et al., 2006). They did this out of necessity, to become better regional partners in improving economic conditions; however, they were also compelled to prove their usefulness as a change agent (K. Pennington & Williams, 2004). Rural community college presidents were increasingly asked to lead community initiatives. They then brought those community issues back to their colleges and found ways for the college as well as its faculty, staff, and students, to become more involved in overall community improvement (Amey, Jessup-Anger, & Jessup-Anger, 2008).

Since the early 2000s, when rural community colleges began this change towards a more comprehensive economic development strategy, this approach proved largely successful due to developing coalitions and partnerships that helped to bolster the institutional thickness that was challenging for these institutions to develop in more rural areas (Rogers & Ramsey, 2012). As seen in the literature, larger urban and suburban institutions have increasingly been following the lead of their rural counterparts in focusing on holistic strategies for economic development that include the hallmarks of traditional workforce and community development, but without assigning more importance to any one part of their strategy than another (Toma et al., 2014).

Rural Community College Initiative

The third and largest theme within this literature reviewing rural community colleges involves the impact of the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI). RCCI ran from 1994-
2001 as a demonstration grant program, investing $17.2 million in 24 rural community and tribal colleges (Kennamer & Katsinas, 2011). Its main goal was to help the institutions involved, which were all located in economically distressed areas, to design economic and community development practices to help initiate and facilitate local and regional partnerships to improve economic vitality (Deggs & Miller, 2013). The colleges chosen to participate were located in areas with high rates of poverty and low rates of educational attainment, typical of the areas served by rural community colleges (Garza & Eller, 1998).

One of the hallmarks of the RCCI was its redefinition of the meaning of access to education. Typically, community colleges have provided open access; however, for rural community colleges, attracting students remains difficult given that potential students face distinct challenges which include affording the cost of college, physically accessing the college because of often large service areas, and a lack of available high-speed internet for online education options (Hlinka, Mobelini, & Giltner, 2015). Rural community colleges have increasingly been compelled to think creatively about ways to help their students overcome these barriers to access; through the RCCI, some options were proven to be highly effective. Interestingly, these options have revolved around institutions working with regional partners to transform these challenges into opportunities. Some of the ways this has been accomplished included: fundraising for scholarships for books for students without access to financial aid; partnering with community service organizations and others to open satellite campuses and centers for colleges embracing a large and rural service area; and acquiring grants to upgrade fiber infrastructure for whole communities to expand access both to distance education and telemedicine (S. Rubin, 2001; Torres et al., 2013).
Conclusion

This section of has reviewed some of the unique challenges, actions, and opportunities delineated in the literature examining rural community college economic development. Clearly, as this review reveals, rural community colleges face a different set of challenges than their urban and suburban counterparts. Because of this, they have moved to more comprehensive economic development strategies sooner than other institutions existing outside of rural areas. These holistic strategies are increasingly being adopted by other community colleges nationwide. Rural community colleges have also been bolstered by seven years of hands-on experience and assistance documented widely in the literature through the RCCI. The final section of this literature review provides a summary of the literature, how it relates to the current research, and how the current research will strengthen the existing literature on this subject.

Summary

Based on the literature thoroughly examined for this review, it becomes evident that community colleges have long held a role in regional economic development in the United States. Further, this role has expanded in the past two decades from solely workforce development and training, adding in additional contributions to community development over time. First, the literature reveals, community colleges have learned that they could quantify their impact on the community by publishing economic impact reports, thus solidifying their place as a regional partner. Next, many added on the role of community developer, emphasizing their role as an important change agent for the community, not just in job creation and economic contributions, but also in enhancing community culture opportunities and overall quality of life. Literature examined when this study was conducted clearly revealed that these roles have converged into a holistic economic development strategy at some community colleges; this
strategy intersects the colleges with quality of life improvements and indicators in the areas they operate, which represents an expanded role and purpose for these institutions.

This holistic strategy has broadened to include the members of the community college community and the community at large aware of and involved in the college’s economic development role. No longer is economic development a task solely placed on the shoulders of presidents and workforce development personnel. With new developments, the task of promoting said development and service increasingly constitutes part of the job description of every member of a colleges’ faculty and staff. Similarly, the role of the college in regional economic development is no longer understood only by local economic development practitioners. Rather, it has become a frequent headline for the news media, a rallying cry for politicians, and a means of building consensus throughout the community and the stakeholders. This literature examining this shift, however, is limited. Many community colleges include economic development in their mission; however, they consistently only engage in workforce development without systematically addressing the other aspects of a holistic strategy.

It is clear from the literature reviewed that community colleges do indeed influence regional economic development. This influence has most often been categorized as either workforce development or as economic impact. Less often have researchers studied community development and rural community colleges in general and the ways in which they create community identity that cannot be measured solely via quantitative outcome analyses. Researchers are increasingly turning towards acknowledging the importance of the community college across each of these areas; this trend implies that those community colleges that successfully integrate holistically into regional economic development can best fulfill the
mission of the community college in the 21st Century, as demonstrated through early adoption of these strategies by rural community colleges.

The three streams of literature examined in this review are all critical to this study of the influence of rural community colleges on regional economic development. They are also irrevocably intertwined. The community college’s role in workforce development would be impossible without successful students who are able to access the college’s programs. Students need training to get jobs so that they can improve their own economic welfare and contribute to the regional economy. Communities need qualified workers to recruit and retain businesses. Businesses need highly skilled employees to make a profit. Communities rely on businesses making a profit for tax revenue. Tax revenue is one of the major local funding sources for most community colleges. The economic impact of the community college includes the spending of the college itself and its personnel. Thus, a cycle is present that requires everyone involved in economic development to work together, especially in rural areas faced with persistent poverty, to make positive impacts on the regional economy.

Workforce development has been slated as the hallmark of a community college’s influence on regional economic development. Community colleges were originally, in fact, envisioned as a place for workforce development. However, to review that influence as only workforce development creates a disservice to both the community college and its region. Including economic impact in this review of the literature is critical simply because it is so often used in marketing and promotional materials by community colleges as a straightforward way to break down their influence into a number. However, saying, hypothetically, that a college has a $335 Million economic impact or a 2.5 multiplier effect is disingenuous and out of context. Bias must be confronted here, given that many colleges complete their own economic impact studies
internally. Thus, this study strongly asserts that it is unrealistic to use economic impact as the sole measure of influence of these institutions on regional economic development. A more nuanced analysis, based on in-depth qualitative research, is required to comprehensively examine the full effects of economic impact; this must take into account the concrete experiences of individuals involved in holistic workforce and community development successes that show much more than a number.

In addition, it is essential to review the impact of the community college on community development. This part of the story is must be told not by the college, but by its community partners. Therefore, this study incorporates the argument made in the literature for the community college to take on a more holistic view of its role in regional economic development. This requires a dual analysis from the perspective both of the community college community and the community at large. Contextualizing this assertion, the purpose of this study was to make a contribution to the understanding of the role of community colleges in rural settings play in the overall economic development of their region(s), based on qualitative analysis of the perspectives of external stakeholders. This is a line of inquiry that had not been examined in the existing literature, when this study was conducted.

This exploration of the perspectives of external stakeholders has provided insights into the extent that and the ways in which the perceptions of the stakeholders line up with the economic development mission and activities of the college that was the focus of this study. This data can be useful in better aligning not only that college’s activities to the expectations of its stakeholders and in better educating the external stakeholders on the role and mission of the college in regional economic development, but it may simultaneously make a more general contribution to the strategizing of rural community colleges in the United States in general.
In this context, the purpose of this literature review was to understand rural community college involvement in regional economic development efforts. The literature clearly proves that community colleges have an important role in these efforts, and the focus in the literature examined on holistic involvement has opened a new area of study that offers important information not just to the community college but also to all of the stakeholders involved in regional economic development efforts. As more municipalities, regional coalitions, and state governments try to coax businesses to grow or expand their activities in their area, the role of the community college will continue to be particularly salient. Thus, assisting community colleges in understanding the perceptions of their external stakeholders is essential so that they may continue to be a relevant and influential regional partner.
Chapter 3: Research Design

This study aimed to understand how rural community colleges have adapted to meet the changing needs of their communities and how they have reframed their socioeconomic impact in terms of economic development activities. It directly examined how key external stakeholders in one prominent community college setting were understanding the economic development activities enacted by the institution, a rural community college.

This chapter is dedicated to describing the study’s research design; it simultaneously offers substantiation for the researcher’s methodological choices. The first section of this chapter explains the research approach more generally, moving from the overall methodological choice to the paradigm of inquiry; it then addresses the study design. The second part of the chapter focuses on the technical aspects of the study; it describes how it was conducted, including a consideration of ethical dilemmas, trustworthiness, and research validity, as well as positionality, and the limitations of the research.

This study addressed the problem of practice of how key external stakeholders, in one community college setting, understood the economic development activities of their rural community college. It is based on documentation that the scope of these activities had changed drastically in the prior fifteen years, moving from a focus on economic impact and workforce development to a more comprehensive perspective to support the contribution overall communities were making to the quality of life of many rural communities. It purposed to contribute to a deeper understanding of and to develop more comprehensive connections between the current expectations of external stakeholders and the existing activities of the college. It examined, specifically, the understandings of key external stakeholders of Beaufort County Community College regarding the economic development activities of this rural
community college. This qualitative case study sought to answer the following research questions: What are the perceptions of external stakeholders regarding the economic development activities of the rural community college that is the focus of this study? How do these perceptions line up with the economic development mission of the college? What economic development activities of the college are perceived to provide the greatest positive (and negative) correlation to improved regional economic development?

**Qualitative Research Approach**

This research study was designed though a qualitative, case study methodological approach. To better understand the researcher’s methodological choices, this section first discusses qualitative research as a whole; it then addresses the researcher’s paradigm of inquiry; finally, it provides specific information about case study methodology and its appropriateness for this research project.

Qualitative research attempts to gain an understanding of a given research problem from the perspectives of the specific population(s) it involves by examining their values, opinions, behaviors, activities, cultural perspectives, and backgrounds (Creswell, 2015; S. Merriam, 1991; S. B. Merriam, 1998). It differs most dramatically from quantitative research in that it pursues understandings of phenomena from a narrative position and often times involves the researcher with some stake in the outcome (Ely, 1991). Qualitative research explores the target population’s behaviors and perceptions in regards to the research topic using various paradigms of inquiry and methodologies. Typical tools used to uncover these behaviors and perceptions include interviews, focus groups, review of artifacts including media and official documents, and observations of the group being considered (Creswell, 2015; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The
results of qualitative research are descriptive, as compared to the predictive nature of results from quantitative research (Anfara & Mertz, 2006).

The qualitative approach was considered the appropriate choice for this research because it allowed the researcher to gain deep insight into the experiences, perspectives, and actions of the external stakeholders of the community college in question. The audience for this research includes community college administrators, college and university administrators in general, economic development practitioners, elected officials, chamber of commerce directors, business leaders, and community members. As described by Magnifico (2010), the research approach allowed the researcher to speak to these interested audience members as a peer and to start a conversation through which the researcher acted as both speaker and listener. Thus, these audience members interested in the outcomes of the research co-contributed to the analysis of experiences in higher education and were active in determining the research outcomes. The qualitative approach permitted the researcher to uncover rich details about the perspectives of the participants to construct a narrative that is both useful and adds to the scholarly literature on the subject of rural community college involvement in regional economic development.

**Paradigm of Inquiry**

For this qualitative study, the subject was approached from the perspective of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm emerged from phenomenology and hermeneutics (Mertens, 2010); research conducted from this framework attempts to understand the perspective and experiences of a group by intensely working with individuals from the group in question (Mertens, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivist-interpretivist researcher must reflect on the viewpoints of those participating in the research, and those reflections become an essential aspect of the research outcomes. This reflective stance allows the researcher to bracket
her own positionality; to understand her or his pre-conceptions; and to examine how those influence the research questions and outcomes (Ponterotto, 2005). This assumes that the research cannot be separated from the researcher’s experiences and potential biases, which is essential to the paradigm (Creswell, 2015).

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm guides field research, such as interviews, focus groups, direct observation, participant observation, and artifact analysis, typical of qualitative research in general (Anfara & Mertz, 2006; Creswell, 2015). These methods allow the researcher and the participants involved in the study to interact collaboratively to craft the narrative that explains the research (Ely, 1991; H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Schwandt, 1994).

**Methodology**

The specific method of inquiry used for this study was a qualitative case study; this approach allows a researcher to explore "whatever bounded system is of interest" (Stake, 1994, p. 283). It is essential that the boundaries of the case are identified upfront and used throughout the research process to help keep the research focused on the research problem. The ultimate goal of case study methodology is to understand the boundaries of the case and the complexity of the behavioral patterns of the bounded system (S. B. Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 1994). There are three traditional types of qualitative case study as outlined by Merriam, Stake, and Yin; these approaches differ somewhat, and they simultaneously have overlapping commonalities (Yazan, 2015).

This case study used the approaches delineated by Robert Yin (1994) and Robert Stake (1994). Yin defined the qualitative case study research method as an investigation into a real-world phenomenon in its own context, where the borders between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined and where multiple types of data are employed (Yin, 1994). From Yin’s
perspective, the ultimate goal of a case study is to offer a detailed description of the context and data of the case (1994). However, from Stake’s perspective, the case study is intrinsic and produces more general knowledge (1994). Thus, because of the variety of audience members described above whose perspectives this narrative sought to include, it was essential to employ both of these types of case study research approaches to offer a comprehensive and descriptive narrative useful both to practitioners of economic development and academic leaders, as well as to college administrators, government officials, and business leaders.

This research study examined the perspectives of external stakeholders invested in the economic development activities of a rural community college. The boundaries of the case, therefore, were defined by both the college’s service area and the individual external stakeholders affected by the college’s economic development activities, who were interactively contributing to economic development in general. Data collection included interviews from various subgroups of experts that filled the requirement of theory triangulation as explained by Yin (2008, p. 120) and which provided evidence of their differing perspectives of the case; data collection also involved journal reflections, publicly available documents, media regarding economic development activities of the college, and participant observation in settings related to economic development. Thus, it was essential to understand the context of the case and to develop a general understanding of the perspectives and context of the case. This is another reason both Yin’s (1994) and Stake’s (1994) perspectives of qualitative case study were employed.

These variations allowed for the development of a descriptive yet generalizable case study applicable to the wide audience it intended to inform. For example, interview questions guided the participants to share rich details about their experiences with the community college
in terms of economic development outreach and services. Questions focused on specific interactions the participant had with the college and were developed to obtain a vivid picture of the participants’ perspectives of the college’s economic development activities. Because the participants represented a wide range of external stakeholders, the overall data collection process was conducted in a manner that was robust enough to offer pertinent information to the wide audience for which it is intended.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were drawn from the pool of individuals representing major parties involved in regional economic development, from a four-county service area, including representatives from government (both elected and unelected), economic development practitioners, chamber of commerce staff, business owners or managers, and local K-12 education administrators. The goal was to draw from these five categories and from each of the four counties in the college’s service area, for a maximum total of 20 participants. Because participants were limited to these categories of external stakeholders, the participants’ demographic profiles remained uncertain until specific participants were recruited.

**Sampling Technique**

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants for this study. A purposive sample is a non-representative subgroup of a larger group and is meant to serve a very specific need or purpose; in this case, the purposive sample included experts from each of the five groups identified as intrinsic partners in regional economic development (Vogt, 2005). Given that each of the groups represented a specific area of expertise in economic development, the specific type of purposive sampling used can be referred to as expert sampling. Expert
sampling is used when a study needs to gain the specialized knowledge of a group or subgroup of participants (Baker & Edwards, 2012).

**Sample Size Rationale**

By purposively choosing participants from the five areas of expert knowledge, the data was triangulated to provide a comprehensive view of the perspectives of external stakeholders on the economic development activities of the community college in question. The validity of case study research is related to the amount of detail and contextualization that is possible when only one or a small number of focal cases and issues are analyzed; thus, it is essential to adequately represent the important perspectives from the case (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015; Morse, 2000; Sandelowski, 1995). To ensure that appropriate levels of detail and contextualization were reached, the concept of information power was employed. This concept holds that as information that is more relevant is gleaned from the participants, lower total numbers of participants are needed. The information power concept is based on (a) the aim of the study, (b) sample specificity, (c) use of established theory, (d) quality of dialogue, and (e) analysis strategy (Malterud et al., 2015).

Thus, because the aim of this study was to understand the perspectives of external stakeholders related to the economic development activities of a rural community college, it was necessary to purposively sample experts from each of the college’s service area counties to gain both broad but specific perspectives on the subject. Through this sampling approach, this researcher assured strong quality of the information; if one participant did not provide rich descriptions and detail, a similar participant from another county offered additional data so that the depth of knowledge was still sufficient to offer both detail and context.
Participant and Site Specifications

Potential participants were contacted first via email from the researcher’s student email account, with a follow up via telephone to confirm the participant’s desire to participate, and to introduce the concepts of confidentiality and privacy related to their involvement in the research. These participants were identified based on their appropriateness for each of the five content types identified earlier in this section. For example, the first government official to be contacted in each county of the service area was the county manager, considered to have the broadest knowledge from the county governance perspective. These individuals either chose to participate, suggested another participant, or declined to participate in any way. Similarly, the counties in question each had one local economic development practitioner at the county level. These individuals were invited to participate, to suggest another participant, or to decline to participate in any way. Of the five categories, the only one where a large number of potential participants was possible was “business owner or manager.” In this category, workforce data was used to determine the largest employer in each county, and an appropriate individual at that business was contacted and invited to participate, to suggest another participant, or to decline to participate in any way.

Each participant was offered three options for the location of the interview: the participant’s office, a neutral site such as a study room in the local library, or a web conference. Interviewing techniques were developed based on Seidman’s (2013) protocol. Main points of this technique include listening as the most important aptitude in interviewing, asking exploratory rather than probing follow up questions, avoiding leading questions, keeping the participant focused, and asking for concrete details (Seidman, 2013, pp. 78–88). Prior to the interview, participants were asked to provide any artifacts they were willing to
share related to their experiences with the community college in relation to economic development. These artifacts were in part used to develop follow up questions and as data for the study.

**Procedures**

This section provides an overview of the procedures used for this study, beginning with Northeastern University’s (NEU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and continuing through participant contact, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, study reliability, research bias, and research limitations. Each of these areas are discussed in detail to provide an explicit outline of the case study procedures employed.

**First Steps**

Once NEU IRB approval was obtained, the researcher moved forward with contacting potential participants based on the purposive sampling techniques described above. The case study college did not require its own IRB approval because no faculty, staff, or students from the college were interviewed, nor was any data not publicly available on its website used for purposes of data collection and analysis.

Potential participants identified using the purposive sampling techniques described earlier in this chapter were first contacted via email from the researcher’s NEU student email account. This email included a brief overview of the study; an explanation of the importance of the research, not just for similar community colleges, but also for regional economic development practitioners; and an explanation of the steps taken to protect the privacy of participants, including a coding system used to keep confidential which county each expert represented, as well as pseudonyms for the individual. A coding system was also employed to maintain the confidentiality of the type of expert each individual represented. For example, a participant
might have been identified as Mr. Smith from county A, representing external stakeholder perspective 1. Only the researcher’s case study protocol and database would match up the county code to the actual county, the pseudonym to the individual, and the external stakeholder perspective code to the expert perspective. The notes in the case study database were kept in a matrix as described by Creswell (2013, p. 175).

Once this email was sent and noted in the case study database, three business days were given for response. For potential participants who responded by agreement to participate within three days, a follow up email was sent with further information on the study, a copy of the informed consent form (which was initially explained and introduced to the participant in the first follow-up phone call), and an inquiry into the participant’s choice of location, date, and time for the interview. If no response was received within three days, a follow up phone call was made to the potential participant. If the potential participant declined by either email or phone, a second participant from that expert category was contacted using these same protocols. This process was repeated until either a participant had been located or the available pool of participants from an expert category had been depleted. Printed and electronic copies of all communication with participants and potential participants were kept in the case study database, secured and using the protocols described later in this chapter.

Data Collection

Once the participant agreed to a date, time, and location for an approximately 60-minute interview, the process moved forward to data collection. Two business days prior to the scheduled meeting, the researcher sent, via email, a non-exhaustive list of potential main interview questions so that the participant had the opportunity to begin thinking about the major themes of the discussion. At the time of the interview, the informed consent form was collected.
Then, the researcher asked permission to record the interview electronically to most accurately represent the details of the interview conversation. In addition to the main questions sent ahead, the researcher developed a series of follow up and probing questions to elicit deeper meaning from the conversation, and she was able to delve into subjects of interest from the participant’s answers (H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Along with the electronic recording, the researcher kept field notes as part of the case study database. Handwritten notes taken during the interview were kept in hard copy and stored appropriately as described later in this chapter; they were also typed and added to the electronic database. The next steps that occurred after the interview are described in the following section.

Data Analysis

Once the interview was completed and field notes were transcribed within 24 hours of the interview, the electronic recording was sent to Rev.com for transcription. Once the transcription was received, the researcher reviewed in detail against the recording to verify accuracy. When this process was completed, the transcription was offered to each participant via email so that he or she could make any changes they wished to best represent their perspective. Once the participant returned the revised transcription, the researcher wrote a reflective memo on the changes to be included as a part of the case study database. This memo noted the changes made by the participant and how those revisions changed the tone, facts, and outcomes from the interview. This process was completed for each participant.

Next, the researcher read the final transcription on paper and made hand-written notes in the margins noting areas of interest and themes emerging at first read to become part of the case study database. At this point, the researcher uploaded an electronic copy of the transcription into MaxQDA, a qualitative research coding and extraction tool that was used to identify initial
themes; she then developed those themes into codes and sub-codes as described by Rubin and Rubin (2012, p. 230) and as represented in Chapters 4 and 5 of this study. Once codes and sub-codes were color coded within MaxQDA, for ease of identification throughout the transcription, they were sorted and ranked using the software to determine the weight of each theme once all of the interview transcriptions had been coded and sorted. MaxQDA offers visual representation tools that assisted the researcher in ranking the relevance of each of the codes and sub-codes as well as in defining tools to pull out of certain phrases that may have been used by more than one participant. Finally, these weighted and sorted codes allowed for integration of the data to be triangulated across participants; it simultaneously provided a source of fact checking to ensure the data extracted was deemed reliable.

**Ethical Considerations**

As mentioned previously in this chapter, the confidentiality of data and participants as well as the privacy of those participants were always of utmost concern to the researcher. At the same time, the researcher was cognizant that data needed to be preserved to assure a chain of evidence to allow for construct validity (Yin, 2008, p. 45). All paper documents including field notes, transcription notes, printed copies of transcriptions, printed information provided by participants, and informed consent forms were kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home office. Electronic copies of the interview transcriptions were offloaded from the mobile device and kept on a password protected computer along with all electronic documents, MaxQDA, and graphics created as part of the data collection and analysis process. These documents in sum comprised the case study database as described by Yin (2008, p. 46)
Trustworthiness

The goal of this research was to understand how rural community colleges were adapting to meet the changing needs of their communities; in this context, it also explored how they reframed their socioeconomic impact in terms of economic development activities. This study objective was accomplished by examining how key external stakeholders understood the economic development activities of a rural community college. However, it was necessary to ensure the study remained credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. Each if these areas of trustworthiness, thus, are discussed below.

Credibility. The credibility of this study has been accounted for through various methods. First, participants provided the credibility measure of member checking by reviewing the transcript(s) of their interviews. As described above, after the transcription, participants were given a copy of their interview text and were encouraged to make any changes necessary to make the transcription fully represent not just their words from the interview but also their intentions. Second, case study construct validity was accounted for by having multiple expert sources, maintaining a clear chain of evidence, and allowing the draft case study report to be reviewed by key informants including a subset of participants as well as college administration, much as described by Yin (2008, p. 45). Importantly, the chain of evidence does allow another researcher to recreate the study and its analysis in order to verify its validity via the case study protocol and database (Yin, 2008, p. 127).

Transferability. Transferability has been accounted for using thick and rich description. This involved the concept of including detailed narrative about the case site and the expert participants so that audience members reading the research would be able to determine whether the study outcomes would transfer to a different case location (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). Stake
(1994, p. 49) requires that, in case study research, this thick description includes numerous
details that are interconnected and that provide a detailed picture of the case site. This was
indeed accomplished, for the purposes of this study, through the combination of the review of
participant interview transcriptions, field notes from the researcher, and publicly available media
and reports about the college’s regional economic development activity.

**Dependability.** For case study research, dependability – or the need for the researcher to
make notes on any changes in the case setting and how they might have impacted how the
researcher conducted the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) – is accounted for through the use of
documented procedures, a case study protocol, a case study database, and rich field notes (Yin,
2008, p. 45).

**Confirmability.** As part of the case study database, the researcher wrote reflective
memos on the final version of each interview transcript and kept detailed case notes. In
addition, the researcher’s case study protocol and database include detailed notes about both
the processes of the research as well as the researcher’s activities, so that another researcher
could potentially recreate the study if needed.

**Potential Research Bias**

Positionality is the way in which one’s traits or characteristics define the point of view of
their research, including things such as demographics and ideology as well as how one deviates
from expected outlooks (Briscoe, 2005). In this case, various aspects of the researcher’s
background have an impact on her positionality as it relates to this topic.

While in high school, she was involved in local political campaigns and was interested in
how local and state government worked. Because of this, she served as a page in the State Senate
and the Governor’s Office of North Carolina. Because of these experiences, she learned at a
relatively young age the important role local and state government officials play in recruiting businesses, assisting existing businesses with expansion, and crafting policy to create an environment that leads to effective business development.

As an undergraduate, the researcher maintained her focus on politics and government, majoring in political science. She completed an internship at the North Carolina Rural Center, a non-profit organization focused on improving the lives of people in rural North Carolina through the “development, promotion and implementation of sound economic strategies” (“NC Rural Center Homepage,” 2015). While there, she learned that state tax incentives and other economic development decisions had a fundamental impact on the state’s rural community colleges in the mission of the Rural Center and thus on the regional economic development in general. After relocating to Georgia, the researcher was hired for a position at the University of Georgia’s (UGA) newly created Office of Economic Development. At UGA, the researcher was the program coordinator for economic development, responsible for managing the activities of the university’s Economic Development Leadership Council, developing relationships with local governments throughout the state of Georgia, working directly with industry and the state on business recruitment efforts, and partnering with Athens Technical College (ATC) on local and regional economic development projects where UGA’s directly involvement was needed.

This position was rare because the researcher straddled the divide between academia and business and was expected to collaborate with external agencies on an almost daily basis. For the four years prior to beginning this research project, the researcher worked at institutions within the North Carolina Community College System. This system is considered by many to be the birthplace of the community college’s role in workforce development (Boone & Gillett-Karam, 1996; Gracie, 1998; K. L. Pennington et al., 2001). When this study was conducted, she was
charged with creating a series of satellite campuses to allow her college to better meet the workforce and community needs of its service area.

**Recognizing and addressing bias.** The researcher believes, first and foremost, that economic development is an appropriate role for local and state government entities. Further, she supports the mission of community and technical colleges and believes that holistic economic development is an essential role of community colleges. Her biases can be catalogued from these three viewpoints.

This researcher believes economic development is an appropriate role for government. To do this effectively, it is essential to include sources – literature, individuals, other media, and theory – that support alternate views, including the view that public-private partnerships are a better vehicle for economic development than exclusively government-led efforts (Kolzow, 1994; Wierzbicki, 2000). When conducting interviews, care must be taken not to let questions, wording, expressions, or reactions convey my own opinions. Kezar (2002) suggested that the best way to avoid bias caused by perception is to be open to differing viewpoints, which is one reason multiple external stakeholder perspectives are sought in this research. It is essential that all interview questions are open-ended and allow the participants to share their thoughts.

The researcher acknowledges that her beliefs have been changed by her experiences. However, the literature shows that it is possible for her research to avoid those biases by being introspective, deliberate, and honest with both herself and the audience (Machi & McEvoy, 2012).

**Limitations**

This research may be limited because of its employment of a single theoretical framework and the focus on one case site. This research also only considers the topic of a rural
community college’s economic development activities and external stakeholders’ perspectives through the lens of Romer’s new growth theory, which posits that the growth of knowledge and technology as created by a community college greatly impact the economy of a region (Romer, 1994).

The final limitation is the uniqueness of the community college that serves as the case study site. It has the largest service area of any community college in North Carolina, thus creating geographic and demographic challenges that might not be a consideration at a different location. For example, the four counties in the college’s service area are vastly different, ranging from suburban to rural and including portions of the service area accessible only by ferry. While these unique characteristics do limit how the findings from this research can be directly correlated to a different area, this too opens up opportunities for follow on research to determine if, using the same case study protocol at a different case study site, similar or different findings would emerge. This is an area that the researcher intends to deeply consider further in her career.

Conclusion

This chapter described the study’s research design and presented substantiation for the researcher’s methodology. This research used a qualitative, case study methodological approach because it allowed the researcher to gain deep insight into the experiences, perspectives, and actions of the external stakeholders of the community college in question. The subject was approached from the constructivist-interpretivist perspective, which encourages field research such as the interviews, document analysis, and participant observation to be used in this study. By interviewing expert participants representing the breadth of the community college’s economic development activities across its four-county service area, the findings of the study have been triangulated to confirm its trustworthiness. Through the procedures described in this
chapter, the researcher developed data that is presented in the next chapter on the findings of the research and the researcher’s analysis of those findings.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this case study was to examine how key external stakeholders understood the economic development activities at a rural community college in eastern North Carolina. Knowledge generated from this research is expected to inform the practice of economic development by rural community colleges by helping to align the expectations of external stakeholders with the practices, programming, mission, and outreach of the community colleges. The researcher chose to use a qualitative case study methodology for conducting the research while viewing the topic from the theoretical lens of new growth theory. Interviews were completed with 13 participants, representing an expert sample of stakeholders from the college’s four-county service area. The areas of stakeholder expertise represented by the participants included: government, economic development practitioners, chamber of commerce, business owners or managers, and local K-12 education administrators. These interviews were designed to answer the study’s research questions: What are the perceptions of external stakeholders regarding the economic development activities of the rural community college that is the focus of this study? How do these perceptions line up with the economic development mission of the college? What economic development activities of the college are perceived to provide the greatest positive (and negative) correlation to improved regional economic development?

An in-depth analysis of the data from these interviews produced four overarching themes and 15 sub-themes. The first theme was College outreach activities, and the sub-themes within this area included Communication, Importance of individual personnel, K-12 partnership, College leadership, Need for partnerships, and Politics. The second theme was College programming, with sub-themes of Continuing education, Curriculum, and Small business. The third theme was Limiting factors and included sub-themes of Fiscal resources and Geography.
The final theme was *Stakeholder understanding of economic development activities*, and the sub-themes within this area included *Quality of life*, *Tourism*, and *Workforce development*. These themes are identified in Table 1 which also indicates the number of participant interviews that contributed to the designation of each theme. Interestingly, each of the main themes occurred within at least 10 of the 13 interviews, while the occurrence of sub-themes ranged from two interviews to 12.

Table 1
*Number of Participants Discussing Themes and Sub-themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. College Outreach Activities</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. Communication</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. Importance of individual personnel</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c. K-12 partnership</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1d. College leadership</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1e. Need for partnerships</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1f. Politics</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. College Programming</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. Continuing education programming</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b. Curriculum programming</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c. Small business</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Limiting Factors</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a. Fiscal resources</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b. Geography</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Stakeholder Understanding of Economic Development</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a. Quality of life</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b. Tourism</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4c. Workforce development</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chapter examines each of these themes and sub-themes comprehensively. Excerpts, quotes, and narrative description from the transcripts are used throughout this chapter to relate this data back to the research questions and the overall examination of the stakeholders’ perceptions of the community college’s economic development activities.
College Outreach Activities

The first theme identified during transcript analysis was College outreach activities. This theme represents the various activities of the college as it interacts with both the general public and external stakeholders, and it includes six sub-themes: Communication, Importance of individual personnel, K-12 partnership, College leadership, Need for partnerships, and Politics. Each sub-theme represents one distinct aspect of the college’s outreach activities as identified by the participants in this study. This theme and the sub-themes saturated the participant interview data, with rich discussion from the participants about the strengths, weaknesses, and areas of opportunity for the college, as well as ways that the college might improve its outreach efforts from the perspective of the stakeholder participants.

From the data discussed and analyzed within this theme, several conclusions became apparent and are discussed at length in the following section. First, stakeholders had compelling perspectives on the ways the college had been communicating with them as well as the timing and manner of those communications. Second, individual personnel from the college, from senior institutional administrators to middle management, and from faculty to staff, were well known to the stakeholder participants; the stakeholders’ interactions with college personnel were an integral aspect of how the participants perceived the college’s effectiveness in terms of economic development activity. Third, the partnerships with K-12 school districts throughout the college’s service area were perceived as the most valuable feature of the college’s outreach activity and demonstrated the college’s strengths in terms of economic development initiatives. Finally, the stakeholders understood that external factors such as politics and politically motivated decision making sometimes restricted the college’s ability to successfully participate in all regional economic development activities.
Communication

The Communication sub-theme represents data retrieved from the transcripts of the participant interviews that focused on the ways the college communicates both with stakeholders and the public as well as stakeholder concerns with these methods of communication. This sub-theme was found in 12 different segments contained in four transcripts. Many of the stakeholder responses focused on a perceived weakness in the communications strategy of the college regarding the frequency of communication received from the college and a lack of timely communication directly with college personnel.

In terms of a perceived weakness in the college’s communications strategy, Ms. Lyon, one of the county managers who participated, noted that often the college was not effective in communicating to the public what programs were available, especially in terms of workforce development programming. She noted: How could we help the community college spread the message of, hey, we're training local workers on how to do this?” This comment reflected her perspective regarding how her organization might have been able to help the college share this type of information. She did not appear to think the college was purposefully keeping programming information private; rather, she expressed that perhaps they were not aware of some of the means of communication that perhaps could be more effective than traditional print media. Mr. Rhodes, a business representative, was also concerned about the manner in which the college was communicating in general, particularly when it needed the expertise of his organization or was trying to arrange opportunities for partnership. He felt that many times college personnel relied on email when a phone call would have been more expedient and informative. He also expressed that the college only contacted his organization when they needed him, rather than keeping a more open and consistent flow of communication active.
In addition to concerns about communications strategy, participants also expressed that the college sometimes had unclear lines of communication; in short, it was not always assigning a responsive point person for stakeholders. Mr. Silver, an economic development practitioner, when asked about economic development projects he had worked on with the college and areas where the college had room for growth, noted:

Maybe they could think about assigning one person to be the point person for economic development issues? I think that would be good just because there have been so many changes that I feel like I’m bugging the hell out of [college employee name] often asking her who I should talk to. That would probably be helpful.

He was not the only stakeholder to express similar concerns. Another participant commented that he had found one person at the college whom he could count on to always return calls and emails, so no matter the project, he always contacted that person when he needed specific, timely action from the institution.

**Importance of Individual Personnel**

The second sub-theme related to the theme *College outreach activities* is the *Importance of individual personnel*, which directly relates to the comment on communication above and the choice of stakeholders to work with individuals from the college with a proven track record of successful partnership. This sub-theme was found in 12 segments across six transcripts, though the names of individual personnel were mentioned in 10 of the 13 transcripts, indicating that, even when the personal relationship was not consequential for economic development, relationships between college personnel and stakeholders were present.

These relationships were mentioned by both business people who participated, whose comments comprised seven of the 12 segments where the sub-theme was found. When asked
about the college’s strengths in economic development activities, Mr. Rhodes said, “Definitely the people.” He went on to mention three specific college employees whom he found to be essential in his business’s interactions related to economic development, and without mentioning names, he also spoke highly of the curriculum instructors in a specific program that was training employees for his industry. Similarly, Mr. Jackson, also a business representative, knew the name of the curriculum coordinator in the program most closely related to his industry and mentioned that this college employee had reached out to him, not just when the college was creating this curriculum program, but also to serve on its advisory committee. He also mentioned two college vice presidents by name who had been good partners on economic development related projects.

Other data from the interviews included mentions of individuals from both continuing education and curriculum programming who were important for economic development projects, but who also noted the importance of college personnel in community activities. Participants discussed personnel who served as volunteers, coaches, or board members as well as personnel who helped organize community festivals and events. Mr. Tate, one of the county managers who participated, also remarked on the personnel put in place by the previous president, saying: “It all changed when [name omitted] became president. We never saw people from Beaufort out here in [name omitted] county before these new people were hired.”

**K-12 Partnership**

The third sub-theme of *College outreach activities* related to the importance of a strong partnership with the local K-12 education systems. This sub-theme was found in 29 segments across 12 transcripts, indicating its importance to the vast majority of the stakeholders participating. The transcript data focused on K-12 partnerships and on the importance of the
college and the schools in its service area working together to create programming both to improve high school graduation rates and to improve the skills of the workforce; however, it also included many references to the Career and College Promise (CCP) dual enrollment program for all qualified high school students and the Early College High Schools (ECHS) in the counties, with one ECHS co-located on the college’s campus.

In terms of workforce preparation, the data revealed that stakeholders were interested not just in the technical aspects of workforce development, but also in leveraging the K-12/community college partnership to expose younger students to career possibilities. In describing this aspect of the partnership, Dr. Johnson, a school system superintendent, said the following:

We have our students visit the local community college three times. They do it in the second grade, fifth grade and eighth grade. People said, “Why in the world, second and fifth grade?” Our idea is we want their eyes to be opened about things maybe they see but they don't understand yet. Then as they start hearing about stuff, they remember they [visited] the welding program at the community college and they saw this going on, or, “That sounds a lot like what I saw happening when I did my tour at the community college.”

In addition to the above comment, Dr. Johnson also focused on the expansion of CCP pathways to include career and technical education programming as well as more traditional general education college transfer options. He credited this change with keeping students more interested in their classes while in high school, thus not only encouraging them to complete high school, but also giving them opportunities to earn stackable college credentials to make it easier for them to complete a diploma or degree at the community college after high school graduation.
Several participants spoke about the importance of the development of ECHSs in three of the counties in the college’s service area, co-located either five or two days a week at the college. All three participating school system superintendents mentioned the importance of the ECHS, but the significance of these initiatives was also brought up by business owners, government officials, and chamber of commerce staff participating in the research. Even an economic development practitioner remarked on the importance of the ECHS as one means of attracting businesses to the area because of its status as the highest performing public school in northeastern North Carolina.

**College Leadership**

The next sub-theme related to *College outreach activities* was *College leadership*. This sub-theme represents data from the transcripts concerning the executive leadership of the college, past and present; its Board of Trustees and Foundation Board; and concerns about employee turnover related to college leadership. This sub-theme was found in 20 segments within seven of the transcripts. Though the number of transcripts was relatively low, the information contained within the segments was rich with personal narrative and incredibly detailed, noting high levels of stakeholder engagement from the stakeholders who mentioned it.

There were both positive and negative comments from stakeholders concerning the past and present executive leadership of the college and its impact on the college’s economic development activities. Dr. Johnson expressed his satisfaction with both the previous and current presidents of the college throughout his interview, frequently pointing out specific projects for which executive leadership was crucial and the benefits of both that leadership and the willingness of the college’s two recent presidents to partner with his district. Perhaps most telling, he said this of the college’s leadership proficiency and teamwork:
My experience has been that whatever role they feel like they can play and plug in, large or small, they've been willing to do that. I think when you leave your ego at the door, and you come in and you're just willing to be a member of the team and do what needs to be done, then things move much more quickly and efficiently, and that's been my experience here.

Similarly, Ms. Lyon and Mr. Moore, both county managers, also frequently expressed their approval of how the college’s executive leadership had worked with their organizations for economic development projects. Mr. Moore was especially impressed that the new president came to visit with him to discuss how the college could best work with his organization, within just a few weeks of being hired to his position. Ms. Lyon, meanwhile, mentioned several times the importance of the college’s previous president in encouraging other senior staff members at the college to become more involved in the community, including becoming members of the chamber of commerce board, joining the Business and Industry Innovation Council, and the Committee of 100.

However, several of the participants found the executive leadership of the college lacking in the ways members partnered on economic development projects. Most vocal of this group was Ms. Craft, representing a local chamber of commerce, who stated, “And unfortunately, the [college] had a horrible president for a while and I think that set the area back tremendously on what could happen [for economic development activity].” On the other hand, however, Ms. Craft stated that she had a positive opinion of the college’s new president and felt like the college would be a better partner than they had been previously.

Other participating stakeholders expressing negative opinions of the college’s executive leadership in terms of participation in economic development were Mr. Rhodes, Mr. Silver, and
Mr. Tate. They all three mentioned concerns about the previous president’s impact on employee morale and retention, which were also echoed by Ms. Craft. Mr. Tate stated, “I also worry that they’ve had a lot of turnover in employees recently as well as a president who didn’t stay there very long.”

**Need for Partnerships**

The final sub-theme of College outreach activities was the Need for partnerships. This subtheme generally represents data from the participant interviews concerning the importance of working together as a region to improve the overall economy, but it is also specific to the data about the importance of the college understanding the need to partner with stakeholders to assure its economic development activities are most impactful. Within the sub-theme, topics mentioned in the data included the Business and Industry Innovation Council, building and repairing relationships, making use of local content experts, and becoming more aware of the needs of local stakeholders. This subtheme was found in 42 segments within nine of the transcripts. Though mentioned in approximately 75% of the participant interviews, the number of times it was mentioned was the highest of the college outreach activity subthemes.

The importance of the Business and Industry Innovation Council was mentioned by several of the stakeholder participants but was particularly important to participants located within the county where the group met. One participant explained:

> To me, it's collaborating and connecting with the community colleges to try and build a talent pipeline. It's not limited to the community college, you know it's other businesses. You know like the Workforce Development Board, connecting with them to try to think out of the box or keeping people local and building and developing people.
Others from this county also considered the importance of this group helping the community college connect with other economic development stakeholders and allowing the college to share important services and resources with other stakeholders.

Also, within this subtheme, several participants mentioned the need for the college to either build or repair relationships within the community. In terms of repairing relationships, the data focused on relationships mainly with stakeholders in the outlying counties in the college’s service area that perceived that they were not receiving services equal to those offered in the county in which the college is located. An example from the data stated that the college ought to “recognize that level and that outreach needs to be coming. That's what I want [the] community college to be doing.” Ms. Craft also stated her concerns in this area, which were related to her comments on executive leadership mentioned in the previous subtheme, remarking that relationships damaged by previous leadership officials would have to be repaired by the college’s current president. She went on to explain that she thought the college’s new president would be able to repair those relationships that had been damaged by a lack of both tact and follow-through by the college’s previous leadership.

However, the bulk of the data for this subtheme focused on the overall need to build stronger relationships with stakeholders throughout the college’s four county service area. When asked about the community college’s role in regional economic development, Ms. Lyon stated, “I think from the hands-on standpoint, it’s working with our economic development, it's working with our partners to help have those relationships and foster those relationships.” This sentiment was expressed across the data, extending into the types of stakeholders the college deemed it should engage (businesses, government, public-private partnerships, economic development related working groups, non-profits) and how the relationships built with those stakeholders
could benefit the college’s ability to impact the region’s economy and thus improve its economic
development efforts.

In this regard, several participants spoke about a lack of back and forth engagement with
the college, meaning that they perceived the college was successfully sending its personnel and
resources out into the community, but it was not always inviting the community and stakeholder
resources back into the college. Speaking about the need for business people to be more involved
with the college, Mr. Rhodes said:

I would say as probably one of the largest if not the largest employer, perhaps making
sure that we are on the strategic planning board or [someone from the business should be
on the Board of Trustees]. Because again, I think that we're probably gonna [sic] help
them decide what jobs we need, we can start employing them. Also, we're gonna [sic] be
employing a lot of the folks that come out of the college proportionately.

This sentiment was also expressed from individuals representing government, the chamber of
commerce, and K-12 school stakeholders.

Also within this sub-theme, a good bit of the data concerned the stakeholders’
perceptions that the college needed to be aware of local community needs. Participants remarked
on areas where the college was more successfully integrating with local business and industry to
understand what training programs were needed (continuing education), but also on areas where
stakeholders were concerned that the college’s offerings were not matching up optimally with
the needs of local businesses (curriculum programs). Ms. Craft, Mr. Silver, Mr. Jackson, and Ms.
Mason – a chamber of commerce director, economic development practitioner, business owner,
and county manager, respectively – remarked on the strong outreach from the college’s
continuing education division and staff’s capacity to better understand workforce needs and to
customize programming offered to the diverse workforce sectors of the counties in the college’s service area.

At the same time, though, Ms. Craft, Mr. Jackson, Ms. Barber (a chamber representative), and Mr. Moore (another county manager) expressed concerns about how well the college’s curriculum programming, and specifically curriculum instructors, understood the workforce needs of local business and industry. While praising the level of instruction and the training received by students, the participants questioned whether the instructors spent enough time interacting with industries to customize instruction for what local businesses needed; they questioned whether some high dollar equipment purchases were necessary for student instruction when the equipment purchased was not in use even within the state of North Carolina, much less the college’s service area. Ms. Craft stated:

But I don't know how much the professors and other people are getting into these businesses and seeing… Clearly, I think that there's still a...I still think there's a gap there, of professors truly understanding what goes on day in and day out in some of these manufacturing businesses.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Ms. Lyon, who shared that she understood why the instructors in the mechanical engineering program wanted to train students on the most up-to-date equipment, but she wondered if that training might be encouraging more students to look for jobs in other geographic areas where more high-tech equipment such as that used in the curriculum instruction could be found, rather than looking for jobs locally.

Politics

Finally, within this sub-theme, participants spoke often about the perceived impacts of politics and political maneuvering on the college’s ability to successfully impact regional
economic development. These concerns covered many areas, beginning with the effects of the
cyclical nature of elections, which meant the college and other stakeholders had to continually
educate county commissioners from four counties on the benefits the college was providing. This
was persistently necessary, participants noted, to assure that the commissioners would continue
to provide local funding to supplement state funding as required by the NCCCS and state law;
they also mentioned a perceived lack of support and understanding of the role of community
colleges at the level of the state of North Carolina General Assembly.

All four of the government officials participating in this research expressed a belief that it
is difficult to continually help newly elected county commissioners understand the funding
model. The model, this researcher observed, was a unique one when this study was conducted,
whereby the county was consistently responsible for facilities’ needs at the college campus as
well as for providing the various resources and services from the college that were benefiting the
counties’ economic development efforts. Ms. Lyon remarked, “So it's that work to try to help
them see the large picture…a broader picture from the 4 year election cycle because some
politicians notoriously are looking at their next election cycle.”

In addition, government officials, chamber of commerce representatives, and K-12 public
school stakeholders also remarked on the likelihood that the state community college system
would soon need to consolidate some of the smaller colleges, such as Beaufort County
Community College, to make it financially feasible to continue to have community college
operations throughout the state. This skepticism about the likelihood that smaller colleges would
be swept up into regional colleges was perhaps best expressed by Mr. Moore, who said: The day
has already come, which I think we acknowledge and [discuss] the continued viability of having
58 community colleges in this state.”
Conclusion

The first theme found in the data from the participant interviews was College outreach activity, containing sub-themes of Communication, Importance of individual personnel, K-12 partnership, College leadership, Need for partnerships, and Politics. Several important conclusions have been drawn from this theme. First, stakeholders had strong concerns about how and when the college communicated with them, both generally regarding college resources and services, but also specifically in terms of how they could reciprocally partner with each other. Second, both the college’s executive leadership and other individual personnel were very visible to stakeholders; specific interactions left lasting impressions that impacted how stakeholders perceived the college’s effectiveness in impacting regional economic development. Third, the partnerships with K-12 school districts were perhaps the most important aspect of the college’s outreach activity and showed off the college’s strengths in terms of economic development. Finally, the stakeholders recognized that outside forces such as politics and politically motivated decision making sometimes limited the ability of the college to successfully participate in all economic development activities throughout its service area.

The data clearly revealed that the stakeholder participants were concerned with many aspects of the college’s communications strategy. From participants expressing that they never knew who to contact, to the manifestation of their lack of understanding of the college’s services and resources, to them feeling like the college was not including stakeholders enough in the development of programming, the data clearly revealed that the college’s communication approach was a concern to stakeholders. To address the perceived inadequacies in the college’s communication regarding economic development, stakeholders interviewed suggested that college personnel should consult with them to determine the most effective methods and modes
of communication to work best with this subgroup of the community. Indeed, it was observed that the communication method that was working best for recruiting students might have not been ideal for communicating with economic development stakeholders. In addition, when developing new programs or creating working groups regarding economic development, participants advocated that the college should have been comprehensively including a range of stakeholders from the community and indeed from all of the counties in its service area to be effective

A second area of emphasis from this theme was the importance of individual personnel to external stakeholders, ranging from the college president to other senior staff, but also including various staff and faculty members. It seemed likely these strong personal connections were related to the rural area the college serves, with the number of economic development stakeholders limited by population and demand. It was clear that the stakeholders were concerned with the executive leadership of the college and had high expectations for the involvement of the new president, not only in economic development activities, but also in the community more generally, including all four counties of the service area. However, the majority of daily relationships mentioned by the stakeholders were with middle management staff and with faculty members, so the importance of the college taking these relationships into account when working on economic development projects emerged; the institution, it was revealed, would benefit from providing support for employees making extra effort in the community by acknowledging their importance to external stakeholders.

Third, and very clear from the data in this theme, was that the partnerships with K-12 schools in all four counties of the service area were integral to the college’s economic development activities. A variety of stakeholders noted the impact of the dual enrollment Career
and College Promise program and the early college high schools established in each county of
the college’s service area in partnership with the college. In fact, each type of stakeholder
included as an expert participant mentioned one or both of these topics when discussing the
college’s important economic development activities. This partnership appeared strongest with
the school system that had its ECHS co-located permanently with the college and that shared the
home county with the college, which can be considered an expected outcome. This school
system was actively looking for ways to expand these partnerships and to expose their students at
an early age to the opportunities provided by the college. However, some of the outlying
counties expressed some weaknesses in their K-12 partnerships, most specifically in needing
more on-site instruction rather than almost total dependence on distance learning. The data
suggested that the college would benefit from continuing to grow the K-12 partnership in its
home county while searching for practical yet innovative solutions to strengthen this partnership
in the outlying counties.

The final area of emphasis from this theme was the impact of politics and political
decision making on the economic development outreach activities of the college. Many of these
concerns were out of the college’s control, such as the cyclic nature of county commissioner
elections, the political climate of the counties it was serving, and the concern from many
stakeholders that the college would eventually become a satellite campus for a larger, regionally
located college, potentially impacting the level of services available or even breaking up the
college’s service area and spreading it between multiple regional community colleges. However,
many stakeholders supported the viewpoint that the college should have been working on
establishing stronger relationships with both local and statewide elected officials to more
successfully share the narrative of their economic development impact and to offer those
officials a better understanding of the unique challenges of a rural-serving community college. Further, and going back to the subtheme about the need for better communication, the importance of the college communicating with stakeholders about the political challenges it was facing was prevalent, particularly because of the possibility that those external stakeholders might have relationships and partnerships that could be brought to the table in benefit of both the college and the region.

Throughout the theme of College outreach activities, areas of strength and opportunity for Beaufort County Community College were highlighted from the data gathered from stakeholder participants. In general, participants expressed satisfaction with many of the college’s outreach activities while offering suggestions for ways the college could improve this aspect of its economic development impact. Many also expressed some concerns about past decisions and procedures that may have negatively impacted the college’s relationships with external stakeholders. The participants observed that it would be necessary for the college to take specific actions, as detailed above, to strengthen these relationships and expand outreach activities. The next theme found in the data focused on stakeholder perceptions of the actual programming provided by the college, as opposed to how it was advertised, communicated, and exposed.

College Programming

The second theme identified during the process of transcript analysis and coding focused on the various programs the college offered that had an economic impact on the stakeholder participants. Sub-themes within this theme included: Continuing education programming, Curriculum programming, and Small business services. Each of these subthemes represented an
important aspect of college programming identified by the external stakeholders as having a specific impact on the college’s economic development activities.

In the discussion and analysis in the following section, the stakeholder participants’ interview data led to several key findings. First, the stakeholders were well informed about the programs offered by the college, especially when those programs were directly related to the participants’ areas of interest and responsibility, and when they had strong relationships with appropriate college personnel in those areas most closely related to their business, industry, or role in economic development. Second, stakeholders from the college’s home county were more likely to mention specific programming than those from the outlying counties of the college’s service area. When stakeholders from the outer counties mentioned programs, they were more likely to indicate concerns about programming than those stakeholders in the home county, indicating a potential weakness in terms of outreach to the outlying counties. Third, the college’s small business programming was consistently perceived to be of high value by stakeholder participants both in terms of program content and personnel, possibly providing a model that could be used in other program areas.

**Continuing Education Programs**

The *Continuing education* subtheme represents data retrieved from the transcripts of the participant interviews that focused on programming offered by the college’s continuing education division. This sub-theme was found in 19 different segments contained in eight transcripts. Participants mentioning this subtheme offered first person experiences working with the college’s continuing education division either through participating in programming, using services to benefit their organization, or participating in economic development projects through which continuing education resources and services were impactful to the project.
Within this sub-theme, participants remarked on specific skill-based programming, adult basic education, and customized training offered to companies. Within these areas, the participants also mentioned the quality of interactions with specific continuing education personnel, as outlined in the previous theme. When commenting on skill-based programming, also known as occupation extension programming, participants highlighted successful programs offered by the division and how those programs impacted either their own organization or another organization with which the participant was familiar. Specific programs mentioned included public service training for first responders, human resources development classes to help potential employees develop soft skills, the National Career Readiness Certificate training, and various personal enrichment classes. While Dr. Johnson specifically remarked on the division’s “ability … to quickly assemble a team and meet a need that exists within the workforce,” Mr. Tate mentioned that the continuing education division had successfully offered several training programs in one of the outlying counties, saying the division had done a “really great job of trying to learn more about our county and offer classes here locally that benefit our citizens.”

In addition to the skills-based training, participants also spoke about the importance of the adult basic education programming offered by the continuing education division. This programming included high school equivalency preparation, English language acquisition classes, and basic skills classes to allow adults to improve their reading and math skills. Importantly, at least one participant from each of the outlying counties mentioned that the college had started offering adult basic education at one or more of its locations in those counties. Mr. Moore summed up the importance of these classes, saying:
I think the first night they came here to do a basic education class and there were people lined up at the door at [location name withheld], it finally dawned on them. This is not some vast wasteland. These are people who want the opportunity but can’t get in the car – if [they have] one – and drive one hour to [college main campus] to get that.

Finally, participants remarked on the importance of customized training offered by the continuing education division to specific economic development projects. This training was often mentioned as an important incentive in recruiting or retaining business and industry within the county’s service area, specifically when existing employees needed training on new equipment being brought in to a local company, or when a business was expanding into a new area of emphasis. Customized training was also cited by one economic development practitioner as one of “the most important pieces of the puzzle” for a rural region to use to attract businesses to the area.

**Curriculum Programs**

The *Curriculum programming* subtheme represents data retrieved from the transcripts of the participant interviews that focused on programming offered by the academic affairs division. This subtheme was found in 25 different segments contained in seven transcripts. Participants mentioning this subtheme were knowledgeable about specific degree-granting academic programs that impacted the economic development of the region. In addition, several participants had worked with individual instructors to customize curriculum instruction to address the needs of local industry, specifically in the mechanical engineering and welding programs. Finally, some participants were concerned that, while certainly worthwhile, some of the course work in academic programs was preparing students for jobs not available within the college’s service area.
Each of the seven participants that mentioned curriculum programming were specific in their comments, mentioning degree programs such as college transfer (Associate of Arts and Associate of Science), mechanical engineering, welding, agribusiness, criminal justice, and nursing. Two participants mentioned serving on advisory committees for curriculum programs (agribusiness and nursing). Others displayed knowledge of program pathways within curriculum programs, such as Mr. Rhodes, who mentioned how unique and important the RN to BSN (RIBN) program in nursing was because it allowed a high school student to complete an associate’s degree and bachelor’s degree in nursing within four years with only one application to nursing school needed, even though the student attended both the community college and East Carolina University.

In addition to knowledge of programs, multiple participants mentioned working directly with curriculum program instructors to adjust skills and technology taught in their degree programs to match the needs of local businesses. Four participants specifically mentioned working with individuals in the mechanical engineering program to align curriculum to industry needs and even inviting faculty from this program to meet with economic development prospects that were considering relocating to the area or expanding operations in the region to provide information about the skills learned and technology used in the program. Mr. Silver noted, “The machining [mechanical engineering] program has been a great partner willing to come to the table to support potential projects; [faculty name] always seems excited to be sure what he is teaching is what we need here in [county name].” Two other participants mentioned the welding program, noting the need for welders because of the aging of the workforce and the willingness of welding program faculty to spend time with regional businesses that were helping match graduates to positions and were working on a new apprenticeship program.
Finally, within this subtheme, part of the data indicated concern that some of the technology being used, also within the welding program, while state-of-the-art, was not in use at any businesses within the region; thus the concern arose that students were being trained for jobs away from the college’s service area. Two participants mentioned a recent grant for a type of robotic welder slated to be integrated in the welding curriculum, with one saying, “I think it is great that they can get the newest technology at [the college], but I worry that students will be disappointed when they graduate if they are expecting local companies to have that same technology, because they don’t.”

**Small Business**

The *Small business programming* sub-theme represents data retrieved from the transcripts of the participant interviews that focused on programming offered by the college’s Small Business Center. This sub-theme was found in 10 different segments contained in five transcripts. While found in a minority of the transcripts, the data on the importance of small business programming to the college’s economic development activity was rich with detail and showed the significance of this type of programming for the region.

Participants who mentioned small business programming typically referred to the staff of the Small Business Center by name, exemplifying their personal relationships with the Center. For example, Ms. Craft, relating the importance of the college’s small business programming, said:

I feel like [staff name] does a good job with small business center. When I look at economic development and see something, a lot of people look at big business and big manufacturing and all that, where I tend to look more towards, you know, small businesses [under 50 employees]. I look a lot at your mom and pop stores, or your
entrepreneurs, and that sort of thing. [Small business staff] do a good job of providing some good sound seminars for people, some business plans, some of those sort of things... I feel like that's a strength.

Other participants also spoke highly of the small business programming and its importance to the region, particularly participants from the outlying counties of the college’s service area, who mentioned that, years before they had satellite locations in their counties or offered other programming there, the Small Business Center was already regularly offering classes and seminars for local businesses.

**Conclusion**

The second theme identified from the research data involved the various programs the college offered that were perceived by participants to provide economic development benefits. Subthemes within this theme included *Continuing education programming, Curriculum programming, and Small business services*. There were several important conclusions drawn from the analysis of the data within these subthemes. First, stakeholders had a very good understanding of many of the college’s programs, both from the continuing education and curriculum areas, especially in areas directly related to their industry sector or to a functional role within their organization, indicating strong engagement efforts to educate stakeholders about relevant college programming. Second, stakeholders from outlying counties were less likely to mention specific programming than those from the college’s home county. When they did mention programs, they were more likely to indicate concerns about programming, showing that the college appeared to have a weakness in terms of outreach to the outlying counties, particularly regarding curriculum programming. Third, in the transcripts, where small business
programming was mentioned, the stakeholders perceived that the program and its staff offered exceptional programming options as well as providing excellent service.

The first conclusion drawn from the data analysis of the college programming was that stakeholders were very knowledgeable about programming related to their area of work. For example, participants from the healthcare sector often mentioned the nursing program while participants from a chamber of commerce were likely to mention small business programming. From continuing education programming, participants often spoke of adult basic education programming, such as classes for students seeking their high school equivalency degree. From curriculum programming, meanwhile, the most often mentioned programs were mechanical engineering, nursing, and welding. These results indicate that the college has been very successful in engaging with content experts and in forging important relationships to allow them to positively impact the various aspects of economic development in various areas.

One negative outcome from this high level of engagement was that participants shared their concerns about specific methods and modes of instruction, such as the oddity of a recent robotic welder acquisition. In addition, when a participant did have a negative interaction with a particular program, he remembered not just the program, but the individuals involved and the circumstances, indicating he would be less likely to engage with the program in the future. Because of the rural nature of the college and the importance of individual relationships established from the first theme identified, the importance of the college avoiding negative interactions with stakeholders was clearly emphasized; it was essential to assure that these types of adverse associations would be less likely to occur. In addition, the data revealed that the college should consider offering professional development training to all employees – though specifically to those likely to interact on economic development projects – on the importance of
maintaining positive relationships with external stakeholders. Additionally, attention was given in the interviews to the essential role of the college in regional economic development as well as to how particular programs impacted economic development.

A second conclusion was that the college was much more successful in sharing information about specific programs with stakeholders from its home county than with stakeholders from the three outlying counties. The lack of engagement and knowledge about programming from the outlying counties should be a concern for the college; emphasis on it indicated that the college’s communication plan, also mentioned in the first theme from the analysis, needs to include strategies to better engage college content experts with stakeholders in the outlying counties of its service area. Better engagement and specific targets for networking within these counties would benefit both the college and the economic development stakeholders.

Finally, the stakeholder participants perceived the small business programming to be one of the most impactful resources of the college in terms of benefitting economic development activities. Based on this and data regarding positive perceptions of small business personnel, the final conclusion for this theme is that the small business center had developed an effective mode and manner of impacting regional economic development, one that had the potential to serve as an example for other areas of the college.

Throughout the College programming theme, the data indicated many areas of strength for the college in terms of offering programs that stakeholders perceived positively impacted economic development, while also leading to the conclusion that there was definitely room for growth, especially in educating stakeholders in outlying counties about programming. The next theme focused on factors that limited the college’s perceived ability to impact economic
development, as contrasted with its outreach activities and programming identified in the first two themes, respectively.

**Limiting Factors**

The third theme identified during the process of transcript analysis and coding identified the factors that limit the ability of the college to influence regional economic development as perceived by the stakeholder participants. Sub-themes found in this data collection and analysis process included: *Fiscal resources* and *Geography*, and each of these subthemes offered important data from the point of view of the economic development stakeholders on ways the college’s ability to impact economic development was limited, in some cases in circumstances beyond the college’s control.

In the following section, the data from the participant interviews is presented, and several conclusions are drawn. First, though recognized by the participants as a problem beyond the scope of the college, participants noted a lack of state support for financial incentives for economic development as a chief concern and a factor limiting the college’s ability to influence regional economic development. Second, the stakeholders exhibited an unanticipated awareness of the college’s enrollment decline and its impact on the college budget, explaining some of their concerns about the manner in which the college was offering resources and services resulting from lower budgets caused by falling enrollment. Third, the combination of the rural nature of the college’s service area combined with infrastructure limitations and poverty made it difficult for the college to effectively serve all of its constituents. Finally, the stakeholders recognized the importance of the college and its programming in stemming outward migration of young adults, especially as they sought higher education and training for employment.
Fiscal resources

The Fiscal resources subtheme represents data retrieved from the transcripts of the participant interviews that indicated that the college’s ability to assist with economic development projects was limited by fiscal resources such as budget, number of personnel, and even land. This subtheme was found in 16 different segments contained in eight transcripts. Data included in this subtheme included both direct and indirect recognition by participants that lack of appropriate fiscal resources limited the ability of the college to positively impact regional economic development. Numerous participants mentioned circumstances where fiscal resources were a limiting factor in the resources and services offered by the college. Specifically, multiple participants mentioned the importance of financial incentives to encourage businesses to relocate or expand. While the participants recognized the importance of non-fiscal incentives offered by the college, such as customized training and human resources development, they also remarked upon a lack of both tax incentives and “hard cash” available to the counties in the college’s service area. As Mr. Moore explained:

But the economic development partnership for North Carolina is useless. It's incurably useless. To me, colleges are going to have to acknowledge that it's useless, and it may help the I-85 corridor, but it does not help northeastern North Carolina. They've got to step up... That fallback position [of tax incentives], don't go there with me on that. Because it's not going to work. Small counties have been ignored by that.

In addition, some participants discussed specific activities they would have liked to have seen the college involved in, and they realized fiscal resources were a limiting factor. Dr. Taylor, a school superintendent participant, mentioned this in discussing partnerships, indicating that the college’s fiscal limitations, especially in terms of ability to hire new personnel and start new
programs, for example, had limited his school system’s ability to partner with the college on a federal grant opportunity to train students for careers in advanced manufacturing.

In addition, Ms. Craft remarked on the budget constraints of the college, indicating that decreases in enrollment were likely a “new normal” and had resulted in a reduction in force for fiscal years 2016 and 2017 that had been widely shared in local print media. Others also mentioned their concern about the decreases in enrollment and budget implications. Ms. Lyon was very specific with her concern, stating: “I worry how the college’s continued enrollment decline will impact how much they help on these [economic development] projects. I’m not sure how we could replace them.” Mr. Silver offered similar concerns that the role of the community college in local economic development was one that no other local partners could possibly step into in the near future; meanwhile, Dr. Mann, another of the school system superintendents, remarked on the college’s declining enrollment with concern.

**Geography**

The geography sub-theme represents data retrieved from the transcripts of the participant interviews that indicated that the geographic setting of the college’s service area limited the college’s ability to effectively impact regional economic development. This subtheme was found in 42 different segments contained in 12 transcripts. This subtheme represents a tremendous amount of data that indicated that the college had struggled to overcome both its rural nature and the extreme size of its service area. All but one of the stakeholder participants, during the interviews, referred to distance, the size of the college’s service area, the difficulty of being located an hour or more from the college, and other concerns related to geography. All five types of stakeholders were represented in the comments regarding geography, while even respondents
located in the college’s home county expressed concerns about the size of the college’s service area and the difficulty of covering such a large geographic area with limited staffing and funding.

The size of the college’s service area and related difficulties represented specific concerns found in the data. These ranged from questions about why a particular county was assigned to Beaufort’s service area as opposed to a different community college that was geographically closer, to frustration with the college due to its inability to effectively serve the outlying counties, to concerns about the college’s reliance on distance education technology as a mode of instruction. Dr. Parker, the fourth school superintendent who participated, was perhaps most outspoken about this concern. Describing the North Carolina Community College System’s service area definitions, Dr. Parker stated:

They also have to think about the counties like this that don't have a community college physically located in their county. What's best for this county? Are you making things worse for this county by trying to hold onto a community college in a place where you don't need one?

Ms. Mason, meanwhile, summed up the concerns related by stakeholders from the outlying counties, explaining her frustrations with how much the college’s physical location was limiting what it was able to achieve in her county. She described: “Out of sight, out of mind, we are over an hour from BCCC, so I think it is easy to forget about us.”

Another area that troubled participant stakeholders was the lack of satellite campuses or centers in all of the counties in the service area, and what many stakeholders considered an over-reliance on distance education to serve residents in these regions. Mr. Tate and Mr. Jackson both commented on their county’s lack of a physical presence in terms of a satellite location. Their comments revealed their knowledge that the other two outlying counties currently had satellite
centers and their frustration that a similar facility had not been started in their own county.

However, even in the two counties where the college was offering a physical presence, concerns from stakeholders persisted about the type of programming offered at those centers and about the part-time staffing at the locations: “Well we would love to see them offer more classes in the center here. It is only staffed part time right now.” This comment stood out because of the body language of the stakeholder, who actually stood up to find an email he had printed and to show that he had emailed his concern about these hours to the college’s new president. He also voiced concerns about the college’s reliance on distance education in the county’s high school, stating: “[The college] consistently says they would want to use distance education methods [to serve our students] and that’s not the answer we want to hear to every request for services.”

Finally, because all counties in the service area, at the time this study was conducted, were considered rural and had stagnant or declining populations, stakeholders voiced concerns about these impacts on the economic development of the region. Ms. Mason related the concerns she had when deciding on her own child’s choice of college after high school, noting that no option existed for his desired major in eastern North Carolina. When he finished college, she related, he never considered returning to his hometown, even though there were appropriate jobs available in his field. She said this made her consider that, when young people left the area to further their education, they generally did not ever return; that made her realize how important even having the community college was, because at least it was offering an option for some students to get training within the region for jobs locally.

Conclusion

The third theme identified from the research data involved the limitations to the college’s ability to influence regional economic development. Subthemes within this theme included
Fiscal resources and Geography. There were several important conclusions drawn from the analysis of the data as reflected in these two subthemes. First, a lack of state support for financial incentives for economic development was a major concern for many of the stakeholders; it also represented a concern that was beyond the scope of the college or even the community college system to address. Second, the stakeholders displayed surprising knowledge of the college’s enrollment decline and its impact on the college budget, using these issues to explain some of their concerns about the manner in which the college was offering resources and services. Next, the sheer size of the college’s service area, much less the stark poverty throughout most of the counties, was making it nearly impossible for the college to effectively and efficiently serve all of the populations seeking its assistance. Finally, the stakeholders recognized that the college was indeed an essential resource that had the capacity to stem the outward migration of the younger population.

The first conclusion drawn from this theme was that the stakeholders recognized that state policies offering financial incentives for economic development projects limited the ability of the region to attract new business and expand existing business. They also were clear that this limitation sat far beyond the scope of the college, but when asked about their concerns with area economic development prospects, this concern came up consistently, especially among the county managers, chamber of commerce staff, and economic development professionals that were interviewed. This conclusion was important because it revealed that the stakeholders understood that the community college’s influence on economic development was sometimes limited by factors beyond their control. No matter the incentives the college brought to the table, including customized training, curricular realignment, or human resource development, without a
strong state-level plan for incentivizing economic development, it was hard for the counties within the service area to recruit new businesses or expand existing operations.

The next conclusion drawn from this theme was that the stakeholders were incredibly well-informed about the college’s existing challenge of declining enrollment, leading them to adjust their expectations of the method and manner in which the college was able to assist with economic development related resources and services. The stakeholders, without explicit advice from the college, adjusted their expectations based on their knowledge that there had recently been a reduction in force at the college. This action showed that the stakeholders paid close attention to news about the college and considered how that news would impact their relationship with it. However, one must wonder why the college had not directly addressed this issue with important stakeholders, because it was possible that the stakeholders had lowered their expectations; in fact, the data revealed that the college’s budget problems had not impacted most of the resources and services that influenced regional economic development. Because of a lack of communication – tying back to the first theme from this research – the stakeholders took steps that may not have been necessary.

The third conclusion from this theme was that the NCCCS needed to review existing service areas assigned to each of its 58 community colleges, because citizens had doubts that the established alignment of service areas, particularly one as large and rural as Beaufort’s, was serving their best interests. One of the county seats in the college’s service area was almost a two-hour drive from the college, while it was located only 30 minutes from a different constituent institution in the NCCCS. Several of the stakeholders questioned why the system was still operating using a 50-year-old structure when so much had changed in terms of technology. Because of the rapid expansion of technology available for both distance learning and online
education, the option emerged that the system might set up a standardized timeframe for review of service area boundaries, as well as a review of the administrative and facilities costs of running 58 institutions when many of the smaller schools were facing extreme declines in enrollment and reduction in services available to residents.

The final conclusion from this theme was that stakeholders in the college’s home county perceived that its location in their county was a tool that worked to stem outward migration by offering educational opportunities and job training locally, rather than requiring those interested in furthering their education to leave the area for that purpose. This perception was limited to stakeholders in the county where the college was located, leading to further questions about whether the college’s four-county service area had been equally benefiting from falling under the auspices of a community college, or whether this benefit solely existed in the area closest to the college. While it was an important benefit, the county where the stakeholders recognized it was located represented the one county in the service area not experiencing rapid population decline, which may be related to the reality that it had been hosting the college’s home location.

The final theme to be addressed is the stakeholders’ understanding of economic development. Contrary to the previous themes, this theme related less to the stakeholders’ specific interactions with Beaufort County Community college and more to their overall understanding of economic development terms, strategies, and goals.

**Stakeholder Understanding of Economic Development**

The final theme identified during the process of transcript analysis and coding was the stakeholders’ working knowledge of economic development policy, process, and content. This understanding defined what the stakeholders considered to be an economic development activity and thus what resources and services they were looking for from the college. Sub-themes found
in this data were *Quality of life, Tourism,* and *Workforce development,* and each of these sub-themes represented a component of economic development that emerged from the data as important to the stakeholders. This theme was found in 12 of the 13 transcripts.

From the data presented in the following section and the analysis of that data, two important conclusions were drawn about the stakeholders’ understanding of a rural community college’s role in economic development. First, stakeholders in this rural area viewed economic development holistically, considering quality of life and tourism to be vitally important aspects of the region’s economic development strategy. Second, the participant stakeholders showed a deep understanding of workforce development strategies and procedures as well as the important role of the community college in workforce development, especially in a rural region such as the college’s service area.

**Quality of Life**

The *Quality of life* sub-theme represents data retrieved from the transcripts of the participant interviews that indicated that quality of life was an important consideration in economic development projects. This sub-theme was found in 15 different segments contained in 10 transcripts. The stakeholders who mentioned quality of life issues when asked about important factors related to the improvement of regional economic development efforts included all four of the school superintendents interviewed as well as all four county managers, a business owner, and an economic development professional. Their comments focused on multiple aspects of quality of life, including the ways that the college was improving the quality of life for area residents, as well as the types of quality of life issues that recruiters and companies considered when working on economic development projects.
Several of the stakeholders brought up ways that the community college was improving the quality of life for area residents, and these stakeholders represented two of the college’s four counties, specifically the home county and an outlying county. Aspects of the college that the stakeholder participants considered positively impacted quality of life for area residents included the importance of the nursing program; healthcare outcomes in the region; providing opportunities to K-12 students that improved the outcomes of the public-school system; and cultural activities such as festivals, concerts, and speakers hosted by the college and its foundation. Participants realized that these wide-ranging factors all impacted quality of life and that all were an important aspect of the college’s economic development impact on the region.

Ms. Craft mentioned quality of life several times, including references to the college’s walking and exercise trail open to the public, a recent concert performance to benefit the college’s foundation, and healthy cooking and eating classes held both for adults and children. Similarly, Dr. Johnson spoke of the frisbee golf course completed at the college, and he remarked on students from a nearby university travelling to the college’s campus just to play that course. While these types of activities have not always been considered as aspects of economic development, it was clear that the participant stakeholders did take a more holistic view of economic development as reflected in their appreciation of these types of resources and activities.

The second way quality of life was mentioned was in terms of the types of quality of life issues that economic development consultants considered when suggesting a location to a client. In mentioning this issue, Dr. Mann said:

If you want families to come and stay here, for instance, if we recruit positions or professionals, it's not as much about what they're doing at work, which is important, but
it's the importance of their families, so if you're moving to Washington, what do we offer for the families. You want young people to come, to what sports activities, swimming, what are those extracurricular things that are important to families. It’s all a piece of the puzzle.

Similarly, Dr. Johnson and Mr. Silver also mentioned that companies look not only for tax incentives and a skilled workforce, they also seek a place where people want to raise their families.

**Tourism**

The tourism subtheme represents data retrieved from the transcripts of the participant interviews that indicated the importance of tourism in regional economic development. This sub-theme was found in four different segments contained in two transcripts. While this may seem like a minor aspect of the data, it was mentioned by both of the chamber of commerce staff who participated in the research, indicating the importance of tourism to economic development from their perspective. The chamber participants spoke of festivals and events that drew tourists to the area as well as natural attractions such as the Pamlico River, Pamlico Sound, and Atlantic Ocean, as well as hunting preserves and several state and national wildlife refuges. When these participants spoke of economic development, the importance of tourism was clearly evident. As explained by Ms. Barber, “We don’t have any big industry here, I mean our biggest employers are the school system and the prison, so tourism is important.”

**Workforce Development**

The *Workforce development* sub-theme represents a majority of the data retrieved from the transcripts of the participant interviews mentioning aspects of their understanding of economic development. Workforce development in the data was considered from the vantage of
its overall appearance as the centerpiece of economic development policy, but also from the perspective of specific workforce development initiatives at the college. This subtheme was found in 34 different segments contained in 12 transcripts.

All of the participants who explained their understanding of economic development mentioned workforce development or specific workforce development initiatives and partners. Ms. Craft spoke specifically about workforce challenges in rural communities, mentioning how changing technology led to some local industries going out of business while others had to retool and retrain workers to remain relevant. She also mentioned specific instances where the community college had proven integral in workforce development, including working with the regional NC Works office (a branch of state government focused on workforce), sitting on the local workforce development board, and having local industry represented on curriculum advisory boards to ensure the college’s program offerings aligned with the needs of local businesses.

In terms of the role of the community college in workforce development, Dr. Johnson summed up the responses of many of the participants, explaining why it was important for the community college to be integrated into economic development projects. He stated:

I think the ability for them to quickly assemble a team and meet a need that exists within the workforce has been impressive. I think if they weren't doing that, I don't know who would do it. I don't think Workforce Development could do it. I don't think [person’s name] could do it by himself. I think they lean on the expertise that the community college has, not in just putting programs together, but the expertise that a person there has, the content knowledge and the technical skills that are in place. There's just not, in
this county or probably any other. If you're not dealing with the content and the curricular part, you're missing a big piece of what you would need.

His understanding of the various ways the college influenced economic development was clear, and his sentiment that the role of the community college could not be replaced by any other local partner made a striking contribution to the data.

**Conclusion**

The fourth theme identified from the research data was the *Stakeholders’ understanding of economic development* in terms of both policy and procedures. Sub-themes within this theme included *Quality of life, Tourism, and Workforce development*. There were two important conclusions drawn from the analysis of the data within these subthemes. First, in this rural area, the stakeholders looked beyond just jobs to quality of life and tourism when considering how to improve their economic development outcomes. Second, the participant stakeholders had a great depth of knowledge about workforce development and the importance of the community college in successful workforce development, especially in a rural area.

The importance of quality of life and tourism to economic development is an important conclusion because it shows that, at least in the area covered by this study, traditional economic development looking almost solely at workforce development was no longer sufficient to meet the needs of economic development prospects of the local community. In this rural area, with a lack of interstate highways, railways, and airports able to move freight, softer skills were essential as were softer aspects of economic development policy. While workforce development is certainly a crucial aspect of economic development, stakeholders in rural areas cannot ignore quality of life issues when working to improve their economic development prospects.
However, as mentioned, workforce development remained perhaps the most important part of rural economic development. The various ways the college integrated into the regional workforce development infrastructure became apparent based on the data gathered, as did the importance of the college to how the region was approaching economic development. In fact, all of the other main themes from the research – college outreach, college programming, and limitations to economic development – ultimately fed into the workforce development flow for the region. In many ways, every activity undertaken by the college, every day, in every county in its service area, powered the workforce development engine for the region. This understanding is crucial to the final conclusions from the data analysis, which follow.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine how key external stakeholders understood the economic development activities at a rural community college in eastern North Carolina. Approaching the topic using qualitative, case study methodology, the researcher asked the following questions: What are the perceptions of external stakeholders regarding the economic development activities of the rural community college that is the focus of this study? How do these perceptions line up with the economic development mission of the college? What economic development activities of the college are perceived to provide the greatest positive (and negative) correlation to improved regional economic development?

Romer’s (1986) new growth theory was used as the theoretical framework for this research. New growth theory emphasizes that economic growth results from the aggregate returns accompanied by new knowledge, and the most important aspect of new growth theory for this research was that it emphasizes that knowledge propels development. New growth theory was chosen as the lens for the current study because of the importance of community colleges in
improving human capital, developing knowledge, and growing technology, especially in a rural service area such as the region that was the focus of this case study (Rivera-Batiz & Romer, 1991). The basic premise that knowledge is a non-rival, non-diminishing good guided the way the researcher viewed the activities of the community college in terms of influencing regional economic development. Other aspects of new growth theory, such as having the community college as the axis of knowledge expansion and economic growth in the region, and the importance of incentives for expanding the economy, provided a lens through which the researcher could better understand the participant stakeholders’ perceptions of the college as an economic development engine, their understanding of economic development, and their discussions of priorities for economic growth.

This chapter presented the findings from an analysis of the interview data. Thirteen interviews were completed during the month of November 2017. Interviews lasted between 25-75 minutes, based on the willingness of each participant to expand on responses and their knowledge of the economic development activities of the community college in question. Each interview was transcribed by an online transcription service, and when the completed transcript was returned to the researcher, the contents of the transcript were checked against both the researcher’s handwritten notes as well as the interview recording.

All of the transcripts were verified based on the researcher’s notes, and each was sent to the appropriate participant for their review for accuracy and to edit the transcript as needed to ensure the data correctly matched the participant’s intended response. No changes were made by any participants, and all confirmed their belief that their transcript characterized a fair and accurate representation of their interview. This process of member checking was an important aspect of confirming the credibility of the data. Case study construct validity was accounted for
by having multiple expert sources and maintaining a clear chain of evidence, as described by Yin (2008, p. 45). Importantly, the chain of evidence was detailed to allow another researcher to recreate the study and its analysis to verify its validity via the case study protocol and database (Yin, 2008, p. 127). In addition, the researcher wrote a reflective memo on each transcript and kept detailed case notes. The researcher’s case study protocol and database include detailed notes about both the processes of the research as well as the researcher’s activities, so that another researcher could potentially recreate the study if needed to provide confirmability. Transferability was ensured by the use of thick and rich description about the case site and the expert participants so that audience members reading the research would be able to determine whether the study outcomes might transfer to a different case location (Creswell, 2013, p. 252).

Once all transcripts had been returned and confirmed by the participant, the researcher began a multistep process for data analysis. First, the researcher read the final transcription on paper and made hand-written notes in the margins noting areas of interest and themes emerging which became part of the case study database. These notes were entered into the case study database kept by the researcher. Next, the researcher uploaded an electronic copy of the transcription into MaxQDA, a qualitative research coding and extraction tool that was used to identify initial codes; she subsequently developed those codes into themes and subthemes as described by Rubin and Rubin (2012, p. 230). Once the themes and sub-themes were color-coded within MaxQDA for ease of identification throughout the transcription, they were sorted and ranked using the software to determine the weight of each theme once all of the interview transcriptions were coded and sorted. The researcher used MaxQDA’s visual representation to rank the relevance of each of the themes and subthemes and to determine where lesser-seen themes might work within one of the main themes. Finally, these weighted and sorted themes
were used to triangulate the data across participants, and they provided a source of fact checking to ensure the data extracted was reliable.

Four main themes and 15 subthemes emerged from this analysis process. The first theme was College outreach activities, and the sub-themes within this area included Communication, Importance of individual personnel, K-12 partnership, College leadership, Need for partnerships, and Politics. The second theme was College programming, with sub-themes of Continuing education, Curriculum, and Small business. The third theme was Limiting factors and included subthemes of Fiscal resources and Geography. The final theme was Stakeholder understanding of economic development activities, and the subthemes within this area included Quality of life, Tourism, and Workforce development. Various conclusions were reached within each of the thematic areas.

Within the first theme – College outreach activities – conclusions revolved around the ways the college interacted with stakeholders, strengths and weaknesses of those activities, and the impacts on regional economic development. The stakeholders were very knowledgeable about the college and offered strong opinions on the college’s outreach activities. Likely because of the college’s rural nature, stakeholders had personal relationships with many college personnel, and thus many interactions were facilitated through those relationships rather than through more formal channels. These relationships probably helped the college overcome what many stakeholders considered an insufficient communications strategy. However, the stakeholders recognized that strong relationships with local K-12 school systems within each of the counties in the college’s service area were essential not just to their relationship with the college, but also to the college’s ability to positively influence regional economic development, even as the stakeholders noticed ways that politics and politicized decision making sometimes
negatively impacted that same ability. Clearly, the college’s relationship with local public schools was perceived as its strongest outreach activity as well as the most important aspect of its effect on the economy.

From the theme *College programming*, the conclusions drawn starkly outlined the different perceptions of stakeholders from the college’s home county versus those living in the three outlying counties. Stakeholders from the home county knew more about specific programming both within continuing education and curriculum areas than did those from outlying counties, and they also were more likely to view programming as a strength of the college’s economic development activities. However, the college’s small business development activity was clearly a strength across the whole service area, with both personnel and programming consistently mentioned in a positive manner by stakeholder participants.

The third thematic area, *Limiting factors*, led to conclusions about ways the participants saw that the college’s capacity to influence economic development was limited, due to reasons including a lack of financial incentives from the state government, the college’s declining enrollment that led to lower overall budget, and the sheer size of the service area, which made it difficult to effectively serve all areas. The participants recognized that some of these factors were out of the college’s control, but they expressed concern nonetheless regarding the college’s ability to comprehensively carry out its mission within those restrictive conditions. In addition, there were clear differences in how the stakeholders viewed these limitations based on the individual’s county of residence, a concern seen across multiple themes.

Finally, the last theme was the participants’ *Understanding of economic development strategies and policies*, both in general and specifically related to their interactions with the college. The participants emphasized the importance of workforce development, especially in
terms of the college’s economic development activities, but they also took a more holistic view and included quality of life concerns into their understanding of economic development. However, only those participants whose work involved promoting tourism noted it as a part of economic development. This aspect of the data was especially interesting given the college’s location near many tourist landmarks. Other participants noted that those landmarks existed without connecting tourism to economic development, leading to the conclusion that they did not consider tourism to be an economic development activity.

Chapter 5 discusses these findings as they are situated within the current literature; it examines their relation to and implications for practice; and, finally, it suggests other possible topics for future investigations emerging from this research.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this case study was to examine how key external stakeholders understood the economic development activities at a rural community college in eastern North Carolina. The research was conducted using qualitative case study methodology while viewing the topic from the theoretical framework of Romer’s new growth theory (1994), which posits that cumulative returns on increased knowledge drive economic growth and create a continual cycle of expansion. The case study approach was the appropriate methodology for this research based on Yin’s (1994) defining characteristics of case studies, including that they represent an empirical examination that explores a current experience within its actual context, such as examining the stakeholder’s perceptions of a college’s economic development activities, which was the focus of this study.

In the course of this research, interviews were completed with 13 expert stakeholders from the college’s service area, including participants representing the following categories: government, economic development practitioners, chamber of commerce, business owners or managers, and local K-12 education administrators. The goal of these interviews was to answer the study’s research questions: What are the perceptions of external stakeholders regarding the economic development activities of the rural community college that is the focus of this study? How do these perceptions line up with the economic development mission of the college? What economic development activities of the college are perceived to provide the greatest positive (and negative) correlation to improved regional economic development?

The analysis of this interview data produced four overarching themes and 15 subthemes. The first theme was College outreach activities, and the subthemes within this area included Communication, Importance of individual personnel, K-12 partnership, College leadership,
Need for partnerships, and Politics. The second theme was College programming, with subthemes of Continuing education, Curriculum, and Small business. The third theme was Limiting factors and included subthemes of Fiscal resources and Geography. The final theme was Stakeholder understanding of economic development activities, and the subthemes within this area included Quality of life, Tourism, and Workforce development.

This chapter details how these themes inform the main findings of the research, and it situates those findings within the existing literature on the topic. Once each finding has been addressed, the rest of the chapter will address the implications of each of these findings for the practice setting, offer specific examples of how these findings can be used in practice, and propose areas for potential future research revealed by the current study.

**College Outreach Activities**

Stakeholders perceived that the college should be a major partner in regional economic development activities both in terms of being a resource for workforce development and by impacting the quality of life of individuals in the region, including various outreach activities. This perception was in line with the college’s mission, which states that the college is “committed to providing accessible and affordable quality education, effective teaching, relevant training, and lifelong learning opportunities for the people served by the College” (“BCCC Vision, Mission, and Goals,” 2013) with strategic directions to:

- Provide courses and support services for personal enrichment and lifelong learning centered around the community’s civic, economic, and cultural needs;
- Support new and existing partnerships with employers, organizations, educational institutions, and economic development agencies to promote the College as a cost effective training resource;
- and Collaborate with business and industry leaders to introduce cutting edge
technologies and provide educational programs which meet the demand for employees (2017).

The importance of the college to regional economic development was seen throughout the development of this theme. The participants spoke directly about how various outreach mechanisms of the college were effective in some circumstances and not in others in supporting the college’s economic development mission. Several important findings were drawn from this data. First, stakeholders provided compelling perspectives regarding the ways the college was communicating with them as well as the timing and manner of those communications. Second, individual personnel from the college, from senior institutional administrators to middle management, and from faculty to staff, were well known to the stakeholder participants; indeed, the stakeholders’ interactions with college personnel constituted an integral aspect of how the participants perceived the college’s effectiveness in terms of economic development activity. Third, the partnerships with K-12 school districts throughout the college’s service area were perceived as the most valuable feature of the college’s outreach activity and demonstrated the college’s strengths in terms of economic development activities. Finally, the stakeholders understood that external factors such as politics and politically motivated decision making sometimes restricted the college’s ability to successfully participate in all regional economic development activities.

Throughout the theme of College outreach activities, areas of strength and opportunity for Beaufort County Community College were highlighted from the data gathered from stakeholder participants. In general, participants expressed satisfaction with many of the college’s outreach activities while offering suggestions for ways the college could improve this aspect of economic development impact. Many also expressed some concerns about past
decisions and procedures that may have negatively impacted the college’s relationships with
external stakeholders. The participants observed that it would be necessary for the college to take
specific actions, as detailed in Chapter 4, to strengthen these relationships and expand outreach
activities.

Because only scant research existed at the time this study was conducted on community
college economic development influence from the perspective of external stakeholders, it is
difficult to situate these findings within any current literature. Certainly, research has addressed
the importance of the various types of outreach done by community colleges as part of their
economic development mission (Bacdayan, 2008; Blanchard, Casados, & Sheski, 2009; White,
Cruz, Ellern, Ford, & Moss, 2012); however, because none of this research has considered the
perspective of the external stakeholders, it does not provide strong support for any one of these
individual findings from within this theme. Indeed, while there is some general research about
the importance of community colleges partnering with various educational institutions including
K-12 school systems (K. Pennington & Williams, 2004), even that research has examined the
subject from the perspective of the community colleges’ executive leadership.

These findings directly correlate to several recommendations for practice to be
considered later in this chapter. These recommendations consider the areas of both strength and
opportunity for the college considered in this study, including the reliance of external
stakeholders on personal relationships with specific college employees, the desire of external
stakeholders for those relationships to be reciprocal rather than one-sided, and the tremendous
importance of the K-12 partnerships in the college’s service area in economic development
activities.
The next section considers the importance of college programming to the stakeholder participants in this research and discusses important findings related to this theme.

**College Programming**

The stakeholder participants’ interview data led to several conclusions in relation to the College programming theme. First, the stakeholders were well informed about the programs offered by the college, especially when those programs were directly related to the participants’ areas of interest and responsibility; these individuals had strong relationships with appropriate college personnel in those areas most closely related to their business, industry, or role in economic development. Second, stakeholders from the college’s home county were more likely to mention specific programming than those from the outlying counties of the college’s service area. When stakeholders from the outer counties mentioned programs, they were more likely to indicate concerns about programming than those stakeholders in the home county, indicating a potential weakness in terms of outreach to the outlying counties. Third, the college’s small business programming was consistently perceived to be of high value by stakeholder participants both in terms of program content and personnel, possibly providing a model that could be used in other program areas. Throughout the College programming theme, the data indicated many areas of strength for the college in terms of offering programs that stakeholders perceived positively impacted economic development, while also leading to the conclusion that definite room for growth existed, especially in educating stakeholders in outlying counties about programming.

Again, because of a lack of existing research considering the perspective of external stakeholders, it was not possible within the scope of this study to directly situate these findings within current scholarly works. However, a great deal of research concerning the more general importance of community college programming, both from continuing education and curriculum
programs, can be considered relevant. The phrase “continuing education” was actually coined by Thomas Jefferson, and the concept of continuing education was that an individual could pursue additional educational opportunities while not disturbing their employment (Bassett, 1997). Most often, continuing education is thought of as training that leads to a nationally recognized, third-party credential in a short time frame (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Nickoli, 2013; Zacharakis, 2008).

The literature is clear that the role of continuing education in workforce development is critical to the overall influence of community colleges on regional economic development. By offering training to incumbent workers, community colleges increase the lifelong learning potential of individuals while also offering a highly skilled workforce to local industries (Dirkx, 1998; Julian & Kominski, 2011; Kelli et al., 2013; Nickoli, 2013). In addition, the literature considers others types of continuing education important in economic development including career readiness programming, human resources development, high school equivalency, and adult basic skills (Bragg, 2001). Because the existing literature documents that the largest lifetime earnings increases occur when individuals move from no high school diploma to a high school diploma and then some college, this component of the continuing education programming offered at community colleges is key to improving individual and group economic outcomes (Julian & Kominski, 2011).

In terms of curriculum programming, the existing literature also addresses its importance in the economic development mission of the community college. While not as broadly mentioned as continuing education programming, programming leading to a degree or diploma is also recognized as a factor in improving regional economic outcomes. For example, apprenticeship and internship programs offered as part of associate’s degrees are an integral piece of workforce development because they allow students to gain direct experience in a given industry prior to
graduation. By doing this, students know what to expect from their chosen career, have opportunities to develop relationships with employers, and begin to develop important soft-skills related to employment (Bacdayan, 2008; Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Hlavna, 1992; Myran & Ivery, 2013). In addition, the partnerships built through these programs can also strengthen the college’s curriculum, offering information on the newest technologies and methodologies from the business sector (Myran & Ivery, 2013), as was noted by the stakeholders in the current research. Also, especially in career and technical fields, employees from local industry often serve as adjunct instructors at the community college, creating a sense of cooperation and reciprocity in preparing students for the workforce and for other roles in community development (Wilson, 2010).

Interestingly, while participants in this study spoke at length about the importance of the Small Business Center for regional economic development, this was not a finding that could be situated within the existing literature on this subject. This is likely because different states handle this type of programming through various state agencies, not always through the community college system.

These findings directly correlate to several recommendations for practice to be considered later in this chapter. These recommendations include the development of new procedures for curriculum program advisory committees, especially regarding high dollar purchases of equipment that may not currently be in use in the college’s service area as well as a thorough analysis of the services and activities of the college’s Small Business Center, in order to replicate its successes in both outreach and programming.
The next section discusses limiting factors perceived by the stakeholders that constrained the ability of the college to effectively influence regional economic development. It also situates those findings within the existing literature.

**Limiting Factors**

The theme *limiting factors* led to several findings important for this research. First, though recognized by the participants as a problem beyond the scope of the college, participants noted a lack of state support for financial incentives for economic development as a chief concern and a factor limiting the college’s ability to influence regional economic development. Second, the stakeholders exhibited an unanticipated awareness of the college’s enrollment decline and its impact on the college budget, explaining some of their concerns about the manner in which the college was offering resources and services as being a result of lower budgets caused by falling enrollment. Third, the combination of the rural nature of the college’s service area combined with infrastructure limitations and poverty made it difficult for the college to effectively serve all of its constituents. Finally, the stakeholders recognized the importance of the college and its programming in stemming outward migration of young adults, especially as they sought higher education and training for employment.

These findings are important to this research because they show that the stakeholder participants were able to recognize that it is not possible for the college to act in a vacuum; that is to say, factors outside of the college’s control sometimes make it hard for them to meet stakeholders’ expectations in terms of economic development activities.

Again, while there is a lack of research considering this topic from the perspective of external stakeholders, there is actually a good deal of research available about the challenges faced by both rural and small community colleges that is in line with these findings. Some of the
literature considers the unique role of rural community colleges. Especially in rural areas, community colleges serve as an engine for developing community inclusiveness and pride (Miller & Tuttle, 2007). Rural community colleges offer services that bring communities together, including adult personal enrichment courses, lectures, tourism opportunities, and athletics. Colleges also offer a source of civic pride in rural areas, becoming entwined with the very understanding of the community’s image (Garza & Eller, 1998). It makes the role of rural community college leaders particularly important; they are in a sense de facto community leaders (S. Rubin, 2001). Similarly, community colleges help define the identities of rural communities, and they attract people who otherwise would not live in or visit the community (Miller & Tuttle, 2007).

However, there is also a great deal of literature discussing the difficulties faced by rural community colleges, and these challenges were the reason for the national Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI). RCCI ran from 1994-2001 as a demonstration grant program, investing $17.2 million in 24 rural community and tribal colleges (Kennamer & Katsinas, 2011). Its main goal was to help the institutions involved, which were all located in economically distressed areas, design economic and community development practices to help initiate and facilitate local and regional partnerships to improve economic vitality (Deggs & Miller, 2013).

RCCI considered some of the same concerns brought up by stakeholder participants in this research based on the geography of the college’s service area, including difficulties in attracting students because of the challenge they faced in physically accessing the college; indeed, in these cases, the size of the service areas is vast and there exists a lack of available high-speed internet for online education options (Hlinka et al., 2015). Rural community colleges have to think creatively about ways to help their students overcome these barriers to access, and
through the RCCI, some options were proven to work. Interestingly, these options all revolved around working with regional partners to evolve these challenges into opportunities. Some of the ways this was accomplished included fundraising for scholarships for books for students without access to financial aid, partnering with community service organizations and others to open satellite campuses and centers for colleges embracing a large and rural service area, and writing grants to upgrade fiber infrastructure for whole communities to expand access both to distance education and telemedicine (S. Rubin, 2001; Torres et al., 2013). Given the extreme interest of the stakeholder participants in the potential for this study to help the college overcome these limiting factors, it is likely that some of these strategies from RCCI would be beneficial to the college considered in this research.

These findings directly correlate to several recommendations for practice to be considered later in this chapter. These recommendations include new procedures for the North Carolina Community College System to introduce regular, systematic review of service areas to determine appropriate access for all counties in the state, the suggestion that all community colleges serving more than one county should open satellite locations in each county they serve, and the use of the RCCI as a tool to improve economic development interactions and influence at the case study location.

Nevertheless, it is clear that factors such as geography and fiscal resources greatly limit the manner in which rural community colleges influence regional economic development. In the next section, findings are discussed relating to the stakeholders’ understanding of economic development policy, strategies, and procedures.
Stakeholder Understanding of Economic Development

Two important findings come from the data related to the stakeholders’ understanding of a rural community college’s role in economic development. First, stakeholders in this rural area viewed economic development holistically, considering quality of life and tourism to be vitally important aspects of the region’s economic development strategy. Second, the participant stakeholders showed a deep understanding of workforce development strategies and procedures as well as the important role of the community college in workforce development, especially in a rural region such as the college’s service area.

The importance of quality of life and tourism to economic development was an important conclusion because it revealed that, at least in the area covered by this study, traditional economic development looking almost solely at workforce development was no longer sufficient to meet the needs of economic development prospects of the local community. In this rural area, with a lack of interstate highways, railways, and airports able to move freight, softer skills were essential as were softer aspects of economic development policy. While workforce development is certainly a crucial aspect of economic development, stakeholders in rural areas cannot ignore quality of life issues when working to improve their economic development prospects.

This finding is found in most of the newer (last ten years) research on the role of rural community colleges in regional economic development. Because of many of the challenges mentioned throughout these research findings, rural community colleges were early adopters of a more holistic economic development strategy (Garza & Eller, 1998). By the early 2000s, many rural community colleges were changing their missions to include economic activities beyond workforce development to include community and quality of life issues (K. Pennington et al., 2006). They did this out of necessity, to become better regional partners in improving economic
conditions, but also to prove their usefulness as change agents (K. Pennington & Williams, 2004). Rural community college presidents were asked to lead community initiatives and then brought those community issues back to their colleges, finding ways for the college, as well as its faculty, staff, and students to get more involved in overall community improvement (Amey et al., 2008).

Since the early 2000s, when rural community colleges began this change towards a more comprehensive economic development strategy, this approach proved largely successful due to developing coalitions and partnerships that helped to bolster the institutional thickness that was challenging for these institutions to develop in more rural areas (Rogers & Ramsey, 2012). As seen in the literature, larger urban and suburban institutions are now following the lead of their rural counterparts in focusing on holistic strategies for economic development that include the hallmarks of traditional workforce and community development, but without assigning more importance to any one part of their strategy than another (Toma et al., 2014).

However, as previously mentioned, workforce development was recognized by the participants as the most important aspect of their region’s economic development strategy. The various ways the college integrated into the regional workforce development infrastructure were apparent based on the data gathered, as was the importance of the college to how the region was approaching economic development. In fact, all of the other main themes from the research – college outreach, college programming, and limitations to economic development – ultimately fed into the workforce development flow for the region. In many ways, every activity undertaken by the college, every day, in every county in its service area, powered the workforce development engine for the region.
Workforce development comprises the bulk of the existing qualitative literature on rural community college influence on economic development. The literature certainly focuses on the fact that many community colleges were originally formed as vocational and technical training schools, and today they are still viewed as the most appropriate institution that can execute with flexibility the mission to develop human capital, directly in response to workforce demands (Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006; Myran & Ivery, 2013; Velluzzi, 2010). The workforce development mission generally includes the following components: identifying graduates in a discipline sought by a new company, identifying students for internships and apprenticeships, offering short term training via continuing education to allow workers to update their skills and earn new credentials, and assessing and re-training current members of the workforce for a company (Forde, 2002; Myran & Ivery, 2013; Nickoli, 2013). Without a doubt, these are many of the expectations that surfaced from the interviews with participant stakeholders in this research of the activities the community college should foster for regional economic improvement.

These findings directly correlate to the recommendation for practice considered later in this chapter. These recommendations consider how knowledgeable external stakeholders might be utilized to review and improve the ways that the college offers economic development resources and services.

Next, these findings will be summarized by considering how they answered the research questions for the case study.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this case study was to examine how key external stakeholders understood the economic development activities at a rural community college in eastern North Carolina. This research was designed to answer three questions. First, what are the perceptions of external
stakeholders regarding the economic development activities of the rural community college that is the focus of this study? Second, how do these perceptions line up with the economic development mission of the college? Third, what economic development activities of the college are perceived to provide the greatest positive (and negative) correlation to improved regional economic development?

The answer from this research to the first question is that external stakeholders had high expectations about both the quality and the quantity of economic development activities at Beaufort County Community College. This question was answered throughout each of the themes and subthemes found in the data, in both explicit and implicit ways; they culminated in the findings above that stakeholders perceived that the college was an integral partner in regional economic development activities both in terms of being a resource for workforce development but also for impacting the quality of life of individuals in the region. This finding is in line with the existing literature about the important role of community college’s in regional economic development activities. The second question was also answered directly through the stakeholders’ responses regarding the types of activities and outreach they expected from the college. This perception agreed directly with the stated and published economic development mission of the college, in that the activities for outreach and programming discussed by the participants were indeed included in the official mission and strategic directions of the college. In addition, the existing literature makes it clear that economic development is an accepted part of the missions of community colleges in general (Grubb, W., Badway, N., Bell, D., Bragg, D. Russman, 1997; Bragg, 2001; Ayers, 2002).

The answers to the third research question were distributed throughout the research data. As addressed in the findings, programming from the Small Business Center, K-12 partnerships,
and significant personal relationships with individual college personnel were the economic development related activities that provided the most positive correlation to the stakeholder participants. Poor communication strategies, declining enrollment, and damaged relationships were the areas the stakeholders perceived to cause the most negative correlation to the college’s ability to influence the region’s economy. However, none of either the positive or negative correlations are specifically mentioned in the existing literature, suggesting that these considerations may either be specific to the institution studied for this research or may need to be considered for future research.

The next sections look at just that, probing first the ways that the findings of this study can inform current practices for rural community colleges in economic development activities, and second, delineating the need for future research that has become apparent as a result of this study.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the conclusions above, there are several important recommendations for implementation into current practice at rural community colleges. These recommendations are presented as observed within the findings, organized by the thematic areas of this research.

**College Outreach Activities**

From the theme *College outreach activities*, several recommendations for practice based on this research emerged, some of which came directly from participant interview transcripts. First, it is essential that rural community colleges know their stakeholders and establish mutually beneficial relationships with them. These relationships have the capacity to significantly improve reciprocal communication flow and strengthen the stakeholders’ understanding of the resources, services, and abilities of the college. This could be accomplished by working with the groups of
expert stakeholders identified in this research to hold networking events, individual meetings, and to develop communication plans that include contingencies for economic development activities. In addition, it is essential that the college’s personnel visit the stakeholders at their business locations, rather than always expecting the stakeholders to come to the college. Second, rural community colleges must develop strong partnerships with their local K-12 school district(s) with a focus on workforce development. As shown in this research, this may mean starting with children younger than middle school learning about the opportunities at the community college and getting exposure to technology and other resources. These partnerships not only help encourage more students to stay in school to complete the high school diploma, they set up students for jobs after high school with minimal further training from the community college. Third, because personal relationships are so important and stakeholders have long memories when interactions do not meet their expectations, it is important that rural community colleges institute professional development training for all employees – not just those in jobs with an overt outreach role – on appropriate ways to maintain and grow relationships with external stakeholders. Within the data for this research, many times the employees who stakeholders mentioned were not those one would have expected to be known to the external economic development stakeholders; others who need to be included in building a robust and outreach-oriented community college team include administrative assistants, adjunct faculty, and others without an official outreach role.

**College Programming**

From the theme *College programming*, there are two recommendations for practice resulting from this research. First, because stakeholders mentioned concerns with programs utilizing technology not available in the local region, community colleges should consider
having stakeholders on curriculum program advisory committees give input about the purchase of new equipment for instruction. In cases where the advisory committee thinks a new technology should be included in instruction that is not currently in use in industry in the region, the college should create a communication plan to explain to external stakeholders in that curriculum program’s corresponding industrial sector how the new technology is beneficial to local workforce development. Second, because stakeholders spoke so highly of the college’s small business programming, the college should examine the activities that are working in this program (and in other programs at other colleges that stakeholders hold in high esteem) and use them as an example to improve operations in other programmatic areas.

**Limiting Factors**

There are several recommendations for practice from the theme *Limiting factors*. First, as recommended from the stakeholder participant data, the North Carolina Community College System should undertake a regular review of the 58 service areas that cover all 100 North Carolina counties to ensure each assigned service area college is the best choice for the counties it covers, especially in the areas where two or more counties are included in one service area. This review should include not just demographics and geography but also stakeholder input from all of the counties included in a college’s service area. Even though no changes may be made, this process would ensure that the concerns of stakeholders about the size and coverage of service areas are heard and taken into consideration. Second, because of stakeholder concerns about a lack of college interaction and opportunity in some of the outlying counties, the college should consider opening a satellite location in each of its service area counties. Even if only staffed part-time, these locations would provide a face for the college in each of the counties as well as a pre-determined location for occasional classes or the offering of economic development
related resource activities. Third, based on the documented successes of the RCCI in the existing literature, the college should consider implementing appropriate strategies proven to work to improve economic development resources and services through the work of RCCI. Finally, because of stakeholder understanding of the limitations of fiscal resources both at the state and college levels, the college should create an economic development resource prospectus that could be shared with both current economic development stakeholders and individuals considering the area for business relocation or expansion. The prospectus would need to outline the specific resources and services provided specifically by the college and not impacted by funding, or a lack thereof, from other sources.

**Stakeholder understanding of economic development.** The theme *Stakeholder understanding of economic development* led to one recommendation for practice based on the findings of this research. This study found that stakeholders were well-informed about the policies and strategies used in economic development as well as the resources and services available from the college. Based on this, the college should capitalize on the various experts in the different aspects of regional economic development to undertake a review of its related services and resources for quality improvement purposes. The participant stakeholders in this research offered numerous ideas in the interview data for improving either access to the college’s resources, the manner in which those resources and services were offered, or the college’s economic development relationships in its service area. The college should take advantage of the external stakeholders’ interest in their activities to undertake a process of continual improvement and growth.

**Overarching recommendation for practice.** Based on the above recommendations for practice and the findings of this research, it is clear that there are a large number of important
external stakeholders involved in directing, accessing, and evaluating the economic development activities of the community college.

Figure 4 offers a graphic representation of rural community college positioning within new growth theory as first explained in Chapter 1. This model shows the rural community college’s role in regional economic development’s fit within Romer’s new growth theory. With the community college providing open access to education, skills training, business development, and other essential aspects of the economy, the college clearly belongs at the center of this model. Individuals trained at the community college become both the employees and the employers of the region. Those who become employees come back to the college as needed to learn new skills, advance their personal development, attend cultural events, and sometimes to become the next generation of instructors. Those who become employers come back to the college to take advantage of business expansion services, attend seminars and workshops, learn about new technology, hire employees, and to mentor future employees or colleagues. There are also other sets of people that make remarkable contributions beyond employees of industry or owners of businesses; these groups include teachers, educational administrators, government officials, non-profit directors, chamber of commerce staff, and others who depend on the resources and services of the community college to make their organizations successful. For example, the training required to be a substitute teacher in North Carolina is offered by the community colleges; the resources for workforce development to help recruit a new business are centered at the community colleges; and the expertise needed to help a non-profit make an impact on its clients is available from the staff at the community college (Sink Jr & Jackson, 2002).
Taking into account the theoretical lens of new growth theory and the overarching results of this research showing the importance of the reciprocal relationships between rural community colleges and external stakeholders, the researcher has created a new model to show those relationships within this framework. Much like the theoretical framework of this research, new growth theory, this model places the community college at the center of the interactions as the source of innovation, action, and resources; it simultaneously stresses the importance of the external stakeholders. While the stakeholders certainly have interactions with each other, this model suggests that the community college is the appropriate partner, with the resources and personnel required, to serve as the hub of the region’s economic development infrastructure.
Figure 5: Community college & external stakeholder positioning in new growth theory.

This section considered recommendations for practice; the next section will address recommendations for future research.
Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the recommendations and findings above, as well as the way that this research fits into the existing scholarly literature on this subject, two recommendations for future research are presented. These recommendations address the dearth of research considering the perspective of external stakeholders, the lack of information about both positive and negative correlations of specific community college economic development activities, and the need to verify some of the findings from this research.

First, because no qualitative research existed prior to this study considering external stakeholders’ perspectives on the economic development activities of rural community colleges, it appears evident that more research should be done focused on this perspective. Additional research would serve as a check on the findings of this research as well as a source to review its transferability and confirmability. This is essential to determine if the external stakeholders’ perspectives that provided the data for this case study were unique to the location and boundaries of the case or if they might be similar to external stakeholders of other rural community colleges. Specifically, similar research considering different rural community colleges with service areas of varying size would be of interest because, as noted in the findings, the physical size of the service area in this case study was a major factor in how the college was able to service the economic development needs of its stakeholders. Similarly, research considering external stakeholder perspectives at urban and suburban institutions might offer interesting comparison and contrast with the findings of this research.

While the need for more research considering external stakeholders perspectives appears to be the most pressing future project in this area, there is also a need for future research that
examines specifically positive and negative correlations of particular community college economic development activities. The large amount of quantitative research on this subject has almost exclusively been limited to considerations of the overall fiscal economic impact of the college, its expenditures, and expenditures arising from its students and activities. None of it has considered specific activities such as small business or continuing education programming as standalone influencers of the region’s economy. The pairing of quantitative research on specific programming and services with qualitative research looking at that same programming would provide a unique and heretofore unseen consideration of how specific rural community college resources and services influence regional economic development. Specific services and resources that should be considered for this paired research, based on the current study, include small business services, continuing education programming, customized training, curriculum programming, outreach methods, and K-12 partnerships.

These types of research would be appropriate for publication in journals such as the Community College Review, Journal of Rural and Community Development, Journal of Research in Rural Education, Community College Journal of Research & Practice, and New Directions for Community Colleges, as well as other resources. Because of the current emphasis on the importance of community colleges in impacting the nationwide workforce, there is likely much interest in future consideration of these topics.
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