



ACCELERATING COMMUNITY TALENT IN GREATER READING, PENNSYLVANIA

a study for the Berks County
Community Foundation

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Thomas P. Miller and Associates

Building Assets through Knowledge & Innovation

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About the authors

For information about the authors of this report, Thomas P. Miller and Roy Vanderford, please visit the website of Thomas P. Miller and Associates or contact the organization at 317-894-5508.

fit.

Those three letters are only achieved by a community that builds on a foundation of a clearly understood present and actionable strategies for the future.

The accompanying report provides a foundation on which to view Greater Reading's present talent pipeline. It examines the question of talent in the context of both Greater Reading and larger global and regional forces. This report focuses on strategy.

Strategies are not imposed and they are never final. They emerge and then evolve. This report summarizes the authors' impressions of Greater Reading's strengths, the wishes of its stakeholders, and the challenges that the community faces. Grounded in consensus, these strategies are meant to be starting points for Greater Reading as it manages its place in the global economy and the burgeoning mega-region of which it is so important a part.

ASSUMPTIONS AND KEY FINDINGS ABOUT THE TALENT PIPELINE OF GREATER READING

Assumptions

The strategies recommended for Greater Reading emerged from a set of consensus assumptions.

There is no healthy Berks County without a healthy City of Reading at the core.

A healthy City of Reading depends largely on improved outcomes from the Reading School District and a revival of Downtown Reading as a destination place for residents throughout the county and the larger region.

Improving the overall educational attainment level (across all levels from basic literacy to advanced degrees) is the key ingredient for the economic development infrastructure needed for success in the “new economy.”

Increasing the talent pool is most quickly accomplished by simultaneously “moving the needle” on the multiple fronts of:

- Attraction from outside the county
- Retention of high skills in the workforce and the college student population
- Re-engagement of adult population in further education and training
- K – 12 pipeline that delivers consistent source of ongoing talent consistent with emerging job requirements and economic development targets

However, any sustainable strategy for development must address improvements of K – 12 outcomes, particularly in the Reading School District.

Greater Reading must find its sense of place as part of the larger (and geographically expanding) “Greater Philadelphia,” not apart from it.

Solutions must involve more creativity in tapping into the strengths of the Latino population, and its leadership organizations, as an asset for local development initiatives.



Key findings

A number of important conclusions arose from the analysis in the accompanying report. Some of the most critical to strategy formation follow.

Berks County is a net exporter of workers to surrounding counties. In many cases the commuting is from outer-ring suburbs of Philadelphia (like Berks) to inner-ring suburbs of Philadelphia and corridors to New York City and Baltimore.

Berks County continues to experience residential growth from closer Philadelphia suburbs, driven largely by lower cost of living (particularly housing) in Berks.

In-migration to Berks County, while polarized between low-skilled and well-educated ends, results in an overall increase in average educational attainment level.

Nearly three-fourths of Berks County's population growth is from in-migration.

Berks County has experienced a large increase in Hispanic population. However, approximately three-fourths of its Hispanic population is native-born (2nd generation or greater).

Excluding the Hispanic component of the population (which is relatively young and skews the overall assessment), Berks County has the highest percentage of older workers (age 55 – 64) in the region.

Berks County also has a relatively high percentage, compared to other counties within the region, of young adult workers (age 25 – 34).

Within the region, Berks County has one of the lowest levels in the adult population for “high school diploma or better” – indicating substantial work to be done on improving basic literacy levels in the workforce.

Within the region, Berks County has one of the lowest levels of graduate degree attainment. Interestingly, this is mostly attributable to lack of physicians and attorneys at the “professional” level.

Berks County is somewhat stronger in the category of adults who have “some college” but did not complete. This is a possible opportunity for creative approaches to re-engage them in programs leading to degree completion.

There is wide variation between education levels of non-Hispanic and Hispanic adults, with less than half of the Hispanic adults holding even a high school diploma. This presents a huge opportunity for significant increases in overall educational attainment level in the county through focused efforts with this population segment.

Berks County continues to experience shrinking employment levels despite significant gains in population and the employed workforce. This is further indication of its movement toward a “bedroom community.”

There is a large difference in the size of loss of manufacturing employment in the county compared to the size of loss of employed manufacturing workers who live in the county. This indicates a particular weakness of manufacturing in Berks and also indicates an ability of many of the manufacturing workers to obtain jobs in nearby counties.

Berks County exhibits a somewhat alarming decrease in both employment in the county and in the resident employed workforce in the Financial Services category. This requires further investigation, as this category has often been cited as a regional strength to build on.

While Berks County exports workers overall, it is a large importer of service workers to meet local needs. This presents an opportunity to determine the jobs that require imported labor and to create training and employment opportunities for local residents to move into them.

Looking at the overall mismatch between occupational employment levels in Berks and the occupations workers who reside in Berks have, in general higher-skilled talent (particularly in the Professional and Related category) commutes out of the county for employment every day.

The graduation rate of the Reading School District is clearly out of line with the other school districts in the county. The enormous size of Reading High School is quite likely a contributing factor, combined with a high percentage of students in the Reading School District needing more individualized and specialized attention. This presents another huge opportunity to increase educational attainment level in the county through strategies to create smaller schools or “schools within a school.”

The colleges in Berks County produced around 2800 bachelor’s and master’s level graduates last year, and an additional 500 associate’s degrees and technical certificates. This is a significant talent pool to target for retention in local jobs (if jobs exist that require these skills) and to promote economic development prospects.

There is a significant mismatch between the qualifications produced by the local colleges and the requirements of local employers of those skills. The colleges will continue to prepare students for export until local jobs are developed that require the higher skill levels.

The adult enrollment level in higher education is very low (only 2 % for ages 35 and older), and three-fourths of these are female. This presents yet another big opportunity for increasing overall educational attainment level through employer-based strategies and re-designed college offerings to attract the employed adult workers to educational programs leading to credentials and degrees.

ACCELERATING COMMUNITY TALENT: A STRATEGIC SUITE

The Initiative for a Competitive Greater Reading (ICGR) has laid out an ambitious and well thought out plan for economic development in Berks County. These options for local action are offered in full support of the initiatives laid out and under way in the ICGR, and with the understanding that “talent development” is the necessary infrastructure for the new economy and is the required enabler for the ICGR initiatives. Successful regions will be the ones who quickly move to broader and more engaging strategies than many of previous workforce development ones. Too often the term “workforce development” has been associated with a fairly narrow set of programs and activities at the low end of a region’s full range of human skills and quality jobs. Successful regions will move beyond such constraints in thinking and will view workforce development as managing the full range of skill (or talent) issues faced by their employers, economic development professionals, elected officials and other community leaders. They will also become proactive in convening and coordinating responses to the challenges faced in their regions.

Almost all regions are experiencing a talent crisis in some form. The world economy and the rules for succeeding in it are changing at a speed that is often difficult to grasp – and even more difficult to respond to. Thomas Friedman in *The World is Flat* states that “It affects everything - how communities and companies define themselves, where companies and communities stop and start, how individuals balance their different identities as consumers, employers, shareholders, and citizens, and what role government has to play. All of this is going to have to be sorted out anew.”

The economy is moving at warp speed driven by worldwide connectivity, instant communication, and immediate access to information. Yet, many states and local regions have not responded with the same speed. Workforce development and talent-building systems seem to have been built for an earlier time. Access points for job matching are built on “unemployment office” models; higher education has not been linked to employers’ needs for flexibility in delivery; K-12 schools encourage graduates to seek entry to 4-year schools without strong career guidance that would lay out the full range of post-secondary options and career opportunities available.

All regions are dedicated to economic development, but the interests of companies and communities are not the same. Companies create and send jobs wherever they can maximize profits. Governments desperately need to create jobs in their own jurisdictions. Friedman also notes that “The only way to converge the interests of the two...is to have a really smart population that can not only claim its slice of the bigger global pie but invent its own new slices as well.”

The crisis faced by all regions is how to create a population that is smart enough quickly enough to attract and create good jobs that are sustainable. The economic imperatives have created the urgency of need. The challenge in each region is to create an urgency of action that allows it to win in this new competition with new rules.

The proposed initiative, *Accelerate Community Talent (ACT)*, is meant to build the urgency and to ultimately implement a small number of targeted actions to more quickly fill the talent pool from multiple leverage points. The three words making up the title were all chosen carefully:



Accelerate emphasizes the need for higher speed of response;

Community stresses that solutions must be locally available to employers and the public – and there must be a sense of community that is strong;

Talent, as already mentioned, seeks to drive the conversation and strategies to the full range of response needed – from basic literacy to advanced degrees.

The following strategic options are presented in four categories:

ACT 1: Place Making—The New Infrastructure of Development looks at options for overall attractiveness of Greater Reading for its local residents, and for the type of talent that we need to retain and attract in the emerging knowledge economy.

ACT 2: Youth Engagement in Success Tracks explores options for implanting positive and realistic scenarios of the future into the minds of the emerging talent pool in the K – 12 pipeline, and giving students the means to achieve their dreams.

ACT 3: Proactive Talent Attraction provides options for aggressively promoting the area to the talent we want to attract, along with connectivity tools to assist.

ACT 4: Community Engagement to Create Our Future presents a starting set of community leadership options for talent strategies that can be championed by different groups in the Greater Reading area.

ACT 1: Place Making—The New Infrastructure of Development

A strategic suite of five elements comprise **ACT 1**.

Renew Reading Youth Group

The recent success of the “Renew PA Summit” convened at the Goggle Works provides a springboard to an ongoing young adult development group that can be tied in more formal ways to the Berks Economic Partnership. This provides a focal point for thoughtful consideration of the suggestions that emanated from the process. This can also tie strongly to the work of the Young Professionals Association.

Broad Survey of Area Youths

The results of the Renew PA Summit can be used to frame a comprehensive survey of local youths, including resident college students, to obtain further insights on the types of actions that need to be taken to create the amenities that will attract and retain young adults. Consideration should be given to engaging a specialized consultant, such as Rebecca Ryan of Next Generation Consulting, to create a more detailed assessment and action strategy (Pittsburgh has done such an assessment). The process itself can be used to raise community awareness, pride, and expectations.

Promote Greater Reading to Greater Reading

There should be a clear point of accountability for promotion of the area to local residents, in close cooperation with the ongoing efforts of Greater Reading Convention and Visitors Bureau to promote to outsiders. In many areas of the country, the local residents are less positive than outsiders about the assets of their own area. With an identified champion of an overall strategy, a platform is established for the “1000 Friends of Reading” as informed ambassadors and for the creation of other attention-getting initiatives (Indianapolis, for example, used a giant red steel arrow, that was moved around town to highlight various sites to promote to local residents).

Educational Corridor

As a companion to the ICGR corridor strategy, the five colleges can cooperate at the higher education level to jointly design and deliver a series of educational events and programs within the corridor (RACC already provides an excellent focal point to build on). At the high school level, such a strategy can also be used to develop activities that are oriented toward high school students, as some educators have reported that students outside of the Reading School District don’t naturally gravitate to the corridor and, even worse, sometimes fear the area. Obviously, the Goggle Works is a natural focal point.

Hispanic Entrepreneurship District

A focal point needs to be developed for sustained entrepreneurship in the Hispanic/Latino community. A physical hub with incentive programs for Hispanic business start-ups can start to build the base for a destination place that draws the public to a lively district of shops, restaurants and other businesses that set Greater Reading apart from other areas in the Greater Philadelphia labor market. It is not unreasonable to think that such a district can be the same kind of attraction in the broader region that an area such as Manayunk is closer to Philadelphia. Such a spot is also a natural for festivals and other events.

ACT 2: Youth Engagement in Success Tracks

A strategic suite of nine elements comprise **ACT 2**.

“Surround Our Schools (SOS)” Initiative

An overall structure can be built to provide a leadership framework for diverse groups to assist local school districts in achieving higher success rates. This option is predicated on the belief that educational outcomes are most quickly affected from the outside in (the broader community helping the schools) than from the inside out (the schools restructuring internally). The outside assistance can come from businesses, parent groups, college students, senior citizen organizations, and many others. A number of strategies are possible, and some are described below. An overall leadership structure would allow for objective “scorekeeping” and would be an attraction point for foundation grants, contributions, and other means of fund development.

Aggressive Implementation of Career Pathways

The State Department of Education recently circulated new guidelines for multi-level implementation of career guidance in the local school systems. There appears to be broad acceptance of these guidelines among local educators, and a county-wide strategy for implementation could be a good focal point for cooperation among local school districts, and could also provide a base for other programs and initiatives.

Smaller High School(s) in Reading School District

A number of education studies point to the desirability of smaller high schools as a means for higher student achievement. Reading High School faces the dual problem of its large size (possibly the largest in the state) combined with its transient, low-income student population. The district should explore the possibility of dividing the current high school into smaller ones and/or creating “schools within a school” to create smaller communities of students and closer relationships between students and teachers, and among students themselves. A logical organizing device would be occupational communities, which also has the advantage of providing natural connecting point for employers (see next item).

Knowledge Economy Career Clubs

With strong support from the business community, specialized career clubs can be developed within high schools and middle schools. This not only provides a platform for mentoring, job shadowing, internships, and other business/education connections, but it also provides an opportunity for activities that cross school districts and activities that connect to local colleges. Clubs of this sort can provide the basis of “schools within a school” mentioned above, and for the formation of entire magnet schools or programs. These would be part of the implementing mechanism for the recently-released Department of Education career standards. As with the broader need to move from a narrower workforce perspective to a broader career one, these clubs would help at the secondary school level in moving from a narrower vocational education perspective to a broader career approach for both college and non-college bound students.

Expansion of Dual Credit Programs

An overall strategy across all education and age levels is needed to make entry to the next rung of education easier by giving students and workers a head start. Expanding dual credit opportunities for high school students can be an effective means of exposing them to college and giving them a credit boost going in. While affordability is sometimes a barrier for low-income students, this provides an excellent target for scholarships. This is also an opportunity for local colleges to expand their current efforts to expose local high school students to their campuses.

Packaging Career Information

A major problem with students (and their parents) is the inability to see clearly the future job opportunities that are emerging in the knowledge economy in Greater Reading. This weakness provides an opportunity for local colleges, the Workforce Investment Board, and others to create a Career Information Council that would coordinate efforts in projecting job and skill requirements and in packaging the information for wide distribution to students, parents, and the existing workforce. The state’s Labor Market Information Unit would also be a willing participant, and it is already the source of much of the data. The local council would not duplicate that work but rather would work on more creative ways to get information into the hands of users.

High School Dropout Recovery Initiative

To the extent possible, high school dropouts should be connected immediately to programs and services for alternate routes to education, such as GED and Adult Basic Education programs. This is also an opportunity for activities under the “SOS” structure referenced above, as many school dropouts can be identified while they are students, well in advance of actually dropping out.

College Dropout Recovery Initiative

One area identified in the research data was a higher than expected percentage of local adults who had “some college” but had not completed a 2-year or 4-year degree. This would appear to be an opportunity for capturing the college dropout and providing information and incentives for return to educational programs.

Technology “Spotlight”

The business community can get more involved in the promotion of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) efforts in the schools. There are a number of school-based technology programs that can be supported by the business community. Funding can be pooled for mini-grants to promising programs aimed at promoting technology-based awareness and skills advancement within the schools.

ACT 3: Proactive Talent Attraction

A strategic suite of five elements comprise **ACT 3**.

Coordinated College Internship Program

Research on internship programs suggests that college students who participate in internships with local employers are much more likely to stay in the area upon graduation than students who don’t participate. While the local colleges have their own programs, sometimes multiple uncoordinated programs within the colleges themselves, there appears to be a real opportunity for a coordinated Greater Reading Internship Program as a means of retaining the college talent.

Expanded “Welcome Wagon” Initiative

Berks County continues to experience a large influx of residents from other counties within the Greater Philadelphia region. Many of those residents come to the county with the kinds of skills we are trying to attract, yet many transplants have reported the difficulty in “breaking into the community.” It may be desirable to create a better welcoming process as we identify new residents from other areas. Beyond the traditional give-aways, we may want to consider a stronger emphasis on the Greater Reading downtown corridor, educational opportunities, and employment prospects within the county (as some of the transplants are residing here and working in other areas).

“Return to Reading” Initiative

This can be a somewhat passive or a very aggressive effort. At a minimum, we should provide an option for visitors to the most-used web sites to obtain information on jobs and educational opportunities in the county. On a more proactive basis, we can systematically identify former residents of Berks County (employees, student alumni clubs, and others) and provide them information on opportunities in the county with the ongoing message that “we want you back.”



Scholarships Tied to Required Residency Period

A strategy that has been used in some geographic areas, particularly rural ones where there are shortages in key professions (such as doctors), is to award scholarships with the requirement of a certain period of residency following completion of the degree. The State of Indiana is currently considering a version of this by tying state lottery earnings to scholarships, with a post-graduation state residency requirement.

Job and Education Information at Tourist Spots

When we think about tourism and destination spots in the county, we should always think about promoting job opportunities, education, and housing options – along with quick links to more information for those who are interested.

ACT 4: Community Engagement to Create Our Future

A strategic suite of seven elements comprise **ACT 4**.

Alliance for Regional Stewardship Model

If not already participating, local leadership should consider active involvement in the Alliance for Regional Stewardship (www.regionalstewardship.org). In doing so, Greater Reading can join others in a learning network for sharing information and strategies aimed at regional vitality and growth. The organization seems particularly well-suited to Greater Reading's needs, as it is based in Philadelphia and often works with colleges and universities as hubs for the model in regions

across the country.

“Ready Reading” Initiative for Public

A key part of any education-raising strategy that reaches the scale needed for success is a public awareness and engagement campaign. Such a campaign needs to make citizens aware of the emerging opportunities in the knowledge economy, the skills needed to seize the opportunities, and most importantly the next steps that each citizen can take to move a rung upward on the skills ladder. The campaign should present a variety of featured success stories, demonstrating ease of entry for a wide variety of circumstances, from high-school dropout to advanced degrees. The public awareness can also be combined with incentives to help move to the next step – such as dual credit (for high school students), academic credit for work experience (for working adults), and clear articulation agreements among post-secondary institutions.

“Ready Reading” Initiative for Employers

Any successful effort to engage the current workforce in a skills “step up” initiative must involve employers in new and creative ways. Local colleges can work more closely with employers on strategies to re-skill and re-deploy existing workers in their companies. Re-deployment strategies are underutilized by most companies as part of their arsenal of HR tools (more information can be obtained from Retensa, a New York-based employment retention consulting organization). Employers can more aggressively promote internal employee career planning and access to education – help on strategies can be obtained from the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), based in Chicago, for example. Employers can also help to promote skill-building by use of instruments such as Work Keys, by referral of non-qualified applicants to skill-building programs, and by requiring new hires who are school dropouts to work toward GEDs as a condition of employment. Many employer-based initiatives are best done on a sector-by-sector basis.

Colleges Engaged Directly in Economic Development

Local colleges, either independently or collectively, can work on more direct ties to local and regional economic development. The Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania (AICUP) has a draft economic development strategy that proposes goals and strategies for college engagement in economic development. Colleges can also be more aggressive in working with local economic developers to attract companies who can use student populations, both current students and graduates, in the region.

Organizing Business Spin-Offs from Large Employers

Large companies are often in a position to “spin off” other companies as they make internal decisions to buy rather than produce certain products and services. They can sometimes assist existing employees to start new companies, with the original employer being a primary first customer.

Patent Contributions for Business Start-Ups

Companies sometimes have patents that they are willing to give up to new business start-ups. This can be independent of, or connected to, assisting employees in spinning off companies (cited above).

Senior Engagement Initiative

The data indicates that Berks County has a high percentage of older workers. There is an opportunity to work on strategies to retain older worker talent through a variety of options, from senior placement programs, to retraining, to organized volunteer programs, such as SCORE. There are good examples of colleges and universities becoming more involved in such strategies, and also seeing older adults as a growing market for tuition and even residency programs. The University of Indianapolis provides a good starting point for looking at university-based engagement strategies with its Center for Aging and Community.



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