HOMEGROWN TOOLS
for ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Homegrown Tools tells the story of small towns that have successfully stimulated private investment and job creation. The tool is meant to connect public officials, practitioners, and researchers to successful small town economic development strategies and inspire small towns to leverage their unique assets. Homegrown Tools is managed by NCGrowth, an EDA University Center at UNC Chapel Hill, in partnership with the UNC School of Government, the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, the NC Rural Center, and the UNC Department of City and Regional Planning.

Caldwell County, North Carolina

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Keys to Economic Recovery from COVID-19

This case study was developed by NCGrowth and the ncIMPACT Initiative as part of the Testing the Keys for Economic Recovery project supported by the North Carolina Policy Collaboratory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with funding from the North Carolina Coronavirus Relief Fund established and appropriated by the North Carolina General Assembly. Learn more about project findings, upcoming webinars, case studies and resources at https://go.unc.edu/KeystoRecovery.

Synopsis

In Caldwell County, North Carolina several partners came together to bridge the digital divide and support students when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute leveraged an existing relationship with Google to improve broadband access and obtain 75 Chromebooks. Doing so allowed high school and community college students to continue their coursework remotely uninterrupted, ensuring continuity in the county's talent development pipeline through the pandemic.

Points of Interest	County Data
Population (2020)	82,178
Municipal budget (2020)	$84,928,387
Per capita income (2018)	$22,495
Median household income (2018)	$42,072
Poverty rate (2018)	15.9%
Minority population (2018)	8.5%
Proximity to urban center:	70 miles to Ashville, NC
Proximity to interstate highway	19 miles to I-40

Introduction

Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute (CCC&TI) was in the middle of a great year for recruitment and retention of students when COVID-19 hit. CCC&TI students were heavily impacted by the public health restrictions as many work part-time or full-time and have childcare responsibilities. Balancing these challenges threatened their ability to continue coursework during the pandemic and it quickly became clear to CCC&TI leadership that more resources were needed to support students in the transition to virtual coursework.

CCC&TI first consulted with the county health department and other healtcare entities to understand the scope of the problem. CCC&TI also surveyed students and conducted outreach through social media to understand their needs. They found 111 students in curriculum courses without internet access, 78 without devices, and 40 lacked both. Based on this information, leadership reached out to Google to explore techincal solutions. The college has a longstanding relationship with Google and their history of collaboration and trust made it easy to work together to address this emergency need.

The Community and its History

Caldwell County is in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in North Carolina. Historically the county relied heavily on manufacturing, and manufacturing still comprises the largest industry by employment in the county with 9,102 people employed1. Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute is a public community college serving Caldwell and Watauga counties with two campuses (one in each county), located in Hudson and Boone. In 2017, CCCT&I had 3,459 enrolled students, 36% of whom were enrolled full time.

The college's relationship with Google began in 2007, when Google announced it would create a data center in Caldwell County. College representatives visited company leadership in Mountain View, California and developed a tailored workforce development program called the IT Institute. The program prepares students for jobs in the industry, even beyond the local Google data center. Having Google participate in program development ensures that the program meets their needs as a local employer, but also that the curriculum stays current with industry changes, making graduates more competitive in the industry broadly.
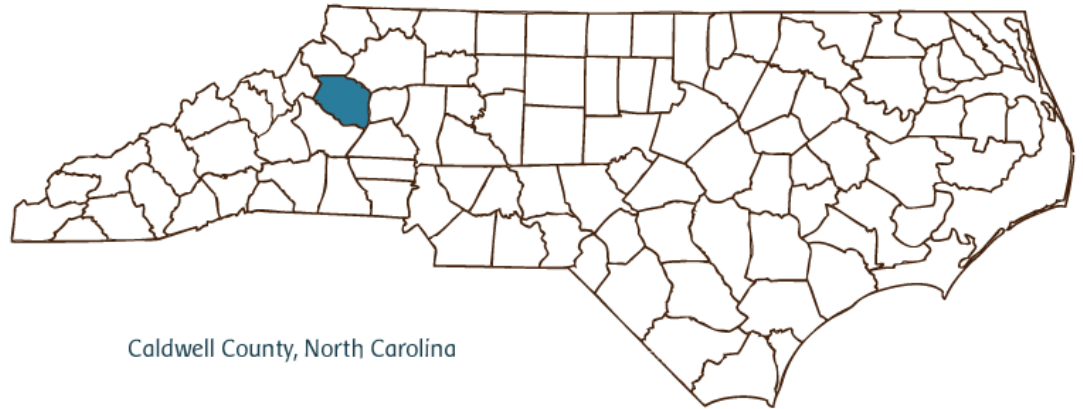
Caldwell County, North Carolina

The Strategy

CCC&TI implemented several initiatives in their response to COVID-19. Google was involved early on and volunteered to provide hardware for students in need. The college sent out a survey and determined many students lacked hardware and access to broadband at home. To address hardware needs, Google donated 75 Chromebooks to CCC&TI that could be loaned to students on a semester basis. In the fall 2020 semester, all Chromebooks are in use by students.

In addition to hardware, county leadership expanded broadband access through mobile hotspots. Mobile Wi-Fi hotspots were first piloted in Caldwell County in 2016 when Google ran a pilot project called "Rolling Study Halls." Through this program school buses were equipped with Wi-Fi so that students who did not have broadband access at home could do their homework while riding to and from school. Beyond Caldwell, this program is now in more than 16 school districts across the country. In March 2020, the program doubled in Caldwell County, with 31 bus hotspots deployed as stationary public Wi-Fi providers. The buses parked in church parking lots, public parks, and other accessible places, in parts of the county where internet access was limited or unavailable. The signal broadcasted from the bus reaches 300 feet and is open for anyone to use. Other partners critical to this effort include the Education Foundation, Caldwell County Schools, City of Lenoir, Town of Granite Falls, and Town of Sawmills.

About one-third of CCC&TI's students are high school students taking dual enrollment credit courses. Qualifying high school juniors and seniors can enroll in CCC&TI classes for free, earning college credit while in high school. Prior to the pandemic, a USDA Connect Grant was used to make these classes more accessible by installing videoconferencing capabilities in high schools, increasing enrollment in CCC&TI courses by eliminating travel and technology barriers. CCC&TI's efforts during the pandemic maintained continuity for these students as well.

Finally, the college also provided direct grants to students to help them continue their coursework. The college also received an additional $20,000 from the state's Finish Line Grant Program. This program, started in 2018, helps community college students who are at least halfway through their coursework with grants of up to $1000 per semester. These funds can cover unplanned expenses like medical bills, childcare, or car repair. Additionally, the college has an emergency fund through their foundation that provides supplemental support to meet student needs.

The Outcomes

- 75 laptops donated for student use, and 31 Wi-Fi hotspots installed throughout the county.

- Positive campus climate and improved communication indicated through continued surveys and weekly open meetings.

- Increased enrollment for the fall 2020 semester in comparison to 2019, despite the challenges created by the pandemic.

How and Why the Strategy Works

Keeping in mind that the strategy is still early on, there are several unique aspects of the process that made it successful.

Stakeholders were immediately involved in the process. The community college first reached out to healthcare leadership to understand the scope of the problem before designing their response. The college surveyed students to understand their needs and continues with followup surveys to make sure needs are met as the pandemic continues.

Leveraging historic partnerships enabled quick action. CCC&TI has an established relationship with Google, built on mutual benefit. The trust and cooperation established over many years made it easier for CCC&TI leadership to discuss needed student support with Google, and for Google to quickly make a commitment.

Channels were quickly established to share information. County leadership holds a daily debrief to address any changes that took place the previous day. Additionally, weekly meetings are held to get input and feedback from the broader community.

Lessons Learned from the Story

Cultivating industry relationships based on trust and collaboration can lead to robust community support when it is needed most. CCC&TI was able to work with Google, Caldwell County Schools, and the Education Foundation of Caldwell County. These organizations previously worked together and knew that continued partnership would benefit students during the pandemic.

When handled well, crisis situations can strengthen partnerships and community cohesion. The work county leaders did to keep everyone informed of the developing pandemic situation and available resources served to improve the connections between partners. Each organization leveraged unique strengths and new synergies became clear as responses developed. For example, providing broadband access to students also helped the county better serve job seekers who lacked internet access as well.

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