

## The Community

Owensboro-Daviess County, a small metropolitan area on the banks of the Ohio River in Western Kentucky, is home to about 93,000 people. Owensboro is a cultural and economic hub for the surrounding, largely rural area. The largest employer is the Owensboro Medical Health System (OMHS), serving eight counties in Kentucky and southern Indiana and employing more than 3,000 people. The second largest employers are education systems: the Daviess County Public Schools, Owensboro Public Schools and Owensboro Community and Technical College combined employ more than 4,000 people.

The city is home to the two public school systems mentioned above and is in close proximity to several rural school districts in surrounding counties. The Catholic Diocese of Owensboro operates numerous schools in the metro area and nine surrounding counties. Owensboro has two independent, four-year postsecondary institutions: Brescia University and Kentucky Wesleyan College. In addition, Owensboro Community and Technical College (OCTC) offers two-year degrees. Graduate programs are offered at local sites by Western Kentucky University and Murray State University.

## History of Community Engagement with Education

Community engagement in education in the Greater Owensboro area began some 25 years ago when the Citizens Committee on Education was established to bring a community college to the city. That effort was successful, and the organization has served as an advocacy group since that time. A recent initiative of the Citizens Committee, “The Learning Community,” is designed to encourage lifelong learning by urging organizations and businesses to sign a Learning Contract pledging their support through such activities as providing tuition reimbursement to employees and granting employees flex time to volunteer in schools.

The Owensboro Regional Alliance was formed in 1999 as a partnership of regional leaders in education, business and industry in Daviess County and three surrounding counties. Dr. Nick Brake initially represented the Daviess County school system on the Alliance; later, as dean of OCTC, he chaired the group, playing a key role in keeping the Alliance alive over the years. School superintendents and representatives from the community college and industry also have participated in this initiative. The Alliance initially focused on improving the transition from high school to college and technical careers. By 2002, the group began to develop a P-16 focus—in keeping with the funding support it received from the state Council on Postsecondary Education to serve as the area’s P-16 council.

Alliance activity has fluctuated over the years, depending on leadership. Initially, the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) funded a part-time executive director—an administrator from the Owensboro Public Schools. Business and industry became more involved, and various initiatives were undertaken to link schools with businesses. These included a “teachers in the workplace” program designed to bring teachers into area businesses to learn about workplace skills; and Discover College, which seeks to improve the community’s college-going rate by enrolling high school students in college classes.

A leadership change led to a relatively dormant period for the Alliance, but the organization has undergone a recent revival with Brake assuming the position of president of the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corporation, a public-private partnership that serves as the economic development agency for the area. Brake believes that involving the local economic development agency is critical to creating a shared vision. The Owensboro area encompasses a diverse system of school districts and communities, and there are a number of issues related to postsecondary education. (The only four-year institutions are private colleges and some community members support locating a four-year public institution there.) Given this diversity, a shared desire for economic development can unite the community.

Using the leverage provided by his role at the Economic Development Corporation, Brake hired Helen Mountjoy as Executive Vice-President in 2006 and designated part of her work to serve as a staff member for the Alliance. Mountjoy had just finished a lengthy term on the Kentucky Board of Education. She was well-known and well-respected in business and education circles across the state and in the Owensboro community. The Alliance again received a grant from the CPE to serve as a P-16 Council,

and is now known as the Greater Owensboro Alliance for Education. After this research concluded, Mountjoy was named Secretary of the Kentucky Education Cabinet by Governor Steve Beshear. Tracy Marksberry, executive director of the Learning Community, subsequently assumed the role of Alliance staff person with the Economic Development Corporation continuing as the lead agency. It is hoped that this partnering of two agencies that are heavily invested in the work will ensure the Alliance’s long-term viability.

## The Greater Owensboro Alliance for Education

A total of 36 members serve on the Alliance, representing all area school districts, all area postsecondary education institutions, workforce development and adult education programs, business and industry, labor unions, government and community organizations. Attendance at the Alliance’s quarterly meetings averages 28. Representatives of each of the member organizations come from the highest levels of the organization: school superintendents, college presidents and deans, chairs/directors of community organizations, CEOs of businesses and the county judge-executive and mayor. When this research was conducted in spring 2007, Daviess County Judge-Executive Reid Haire and Marilyn Brookman, dean of Owensboro’s Western Kentucky University program, served as Alliance co-chairs. Other active participants in the organization include representatives from the Owensboro Medical Health System (OMHS), the Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer* and BellSouth.

**Owensboro Alliance Key Partners**  
 BellSouth  
 Greater Owensboro Chamber of Commerce  
 Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corp.  
 IBEW 1701  
 Green River Area Development District  
 Owensboro Medical Health System  
 Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer  
 Daviess County Government  
 Owensboro City Government  
 The Learning Community  
 Citizens Committee on Education  
 Hager Educational Foundation  
 Public Life Foundation  
 Audubon Area Head Start  
 Brescia University  
 Kentucky Wesleyan College  
 Owensboro Community & Technical College  
 Western Kentucky University, Owensboro Campus  
 Daviess County Public Schools  
 Diocese of Owensboro Schools  
 Hancock County Public Schools  
 McLean County Public Schools  
 Ohio County Public Schools  
 Owensboro Public Schools

All the people are dedicated and sincere in what we are doing. We have a group [that] people feel comfortable in, and they want to be involved. We know we are trying to do something worthwhile, so it’s a sense of belonging. You have your superintendents, college presidents—it is a significant group in terms of who is in the room, so you have to say those are the leaders in our community. People feel good about coming into a group like that and that they can freely give opinions and people will listen to them and not put down their ideas. That is a healthy situation and people want to be part of it.

Owensboro Superintendent Larry Vick

## Structure and Focus

The focus of the Alliance’s work is to ensure a seamless transition from high school to college and/or the workplace, and from postsecondary education to the workplace. The Alliance developed five major initiatives and formed a committee to lead the work of each:

- Teachers in Technology program, headed by an Economic Development Corporation staff person
- High school/postsecondary math project, led by the OCTC Dean and the Daviess County High School principal
- Curriculum Roundtable discussions between K-12 and postsecondary representatives, chaired by Brescia University’s academic dean and the Daviess County Schools’ curriculum coordinator
- “Rigor and Relevance discussions” among various stakeholder groups, organized by the *Messenger-Inquirer* editor and the business chair at Kentucky Wesleyan College
- High school health science program, led by the Director of Discover College, the Owensboro Medical Health System, and Owensboro High School.

## Alliance Initiatives

**Teachers in Technology program.** A revival of the Alliance's original "teachers in the workplace" program, this initiative recruits a cadre of about 25 educators from area high schools and colleges each year. These educators make two to three day-long visits to area businesses to learn more about job opportunities and the skills needed to perform these jobs. Prior to the visit, employers receive guidelines on how to structure the visit. At a visitation in the fall of 2007, 21 teachers from high schools, postsecondary institutions and adult education programs visited two establishments for a half-day each: a bio-processing plant and a factory that prepares and ships food items. Participants gave the experience favorable reviews, indicating that they intended to incorporate what they learned into classroom instruction, and/or share the information with students or colleagues. Said one teacher, "I have shared with senior students the fact they need to improve their math skills. They were stunned to learn that Algebra 2 is considered as basic math in the business world."

**Rigor and relevance discussions.** The rigor and relevance initiative is a series of discussions with four stakeholder groups: high school teachers, high school students, postsecondary education faculty and community business leaders. The purpose of the discussions is to determine to what extent those groups hold the same understanding of "rigor," "relevance" and "relationships."<sup>1</sup> Two meetings were held in spring 2007. Participants were divided into stakeholder groups, and rotated among four different stations. At each, they responded to questions about what rigor, relevance, relationships and a successful high school graduate look like in practice. Generally, all groups supported the concepts of rigor, relevance and relationships in high schools and believe more active involvement from the business community is needed to make the high school experience more relevant. There was general agreement that high school students should possess strong moral values, a strong work ethic and academic competence.

**High school health science program.** A partnership between the P-12 school systems, Owensboro Community & Technical College and the Owensboro Medical Health System explored the possibility of creating a high school health science program to enable high schools students to prepare for health careers. This initiative was created, in part, to fulfill OMHS' anticipated need of more than 500 new nurses over the next five years. During 2006-07, members of this committee learned about a similar partnership in another city, sponsored a workshop for representatives of the three partner groups and developed a health science program that began in the fall of 2007 at Owensboro High School, Hancock County High School, and Owensboro Community & Technical College.

**High school/postsecondary math project.** This initiative brings together math instructors from Daviess County High School and OCTC to develop and refine high mathematics courses. The long-term goal is to reduce the number of students who must take developmental math courses in college. The short-term goal is to ensure consistent expectations for student performance across all levels of education and to develop courses that offer the necessary underpinnings for college success to those students whose test scores indicate that are not prepared for the next level. The committee developed a plan for a high school math curriculum sequence that was piloted at Daviess County High School during the 2007-08 school year.

**Curriculum roundtable discussions.** The Alliance hosted a series of roundtable luncheons for P-12 and postsecondary faculty to create closer ties between these two groups. The roundtables brought together the academic deans of the four local colleges and universities with curriculum supervisors in the six P-12 school districts. Roundtable discussions includ-

ed updates from each institution as well as discussion topics identified by the chairs and circulated prior to each meeting. The luncheons proved to be so popular that participants suggested moving from a quarterly to a bi-monthly schedule.

## Challenges

The Alliance has faced several challenges over the years, some of them ongoing:

- **Designating someone to lead the work:** In past years, the Alliance did not always have a paid staff person. An Alliance member commented, "We floundered when we did not have anyone whose job it was to make sure we met and stayed on target." The Alliance's recent revival has been due largely to the work of Helen Mountjoy. Her departure challenged the Alliance to maintain momentum, but leaders hope they have created a viable structure by partnering with the Learning Community to provide staff.
- **Dealing with turnover:** In addition to Mountjoy's leaving for a new position, other leaders in the group have recently retired. Maintaining momentum in the face of turnover within multiple partner groups is an ongoing challenge.
- **Turf issues:** The Alliance has had to work through turf issues prevalent among the various levels of the education system, as well as between the educational system and "outsiders."
- **Active participation of all stakeholder groups:** Regular attendees at Alliance meetings are heavily weighted toward educators. Some members suggested that a stronger business presence is needed and that the group needs representation from parents and students.
- **Need for measurable, timely results:** While Alliance initiatives hold great promise, it is unclear whether there are concrete structures in place to ensure that the initiatives are having an impact. In addition, business and community leaders tend to expect faster results than the education system is accustomed to delivering. The challenge for the Alliance will be to forge some consensus about what results are reasonable, and within what time frame.

## Reflections

When this group first started, we were a very disjointed delivery system. The voc-tech system and the community college system and the school systems were cordial, but there was no commonality, very little shared resources or research. There was very little exchange between peers and...people were not working together in any way, shape or fashion to ensure that we provide our citizenry with transferable credentials from one institution to another. We would not even accept each other's English classes. And what I see now is a greater understanding and respect for a common vision.... Now we are actively removing barriers for our own citizens to get ahead.

Cindy Fiorella, Dean, Owensboro Community & Technical College

The Alliance has existed in some form for seven years, but the initiatives and focus described above have been in place for a little over a year. Therefore, it is too soon to expect long-term results. What has been successful thus far is that major stakeholders have gotten involved and stayed engaged in the work. Alliance meetings have attracted top leaders from the various partners, and many of them help manage the nitty-gritty work of implementing the initiatives. The continued engagement of these leaders suggests that the Alliance has, at a minimum, succeeded in creating a structure for networking and holding substantive conversations that appear to be leading toward the Alliance's long-term goals. Whether the Alliance can maintain that momentum—or whether the current work will be another chapter in the ebb and flow of school-community engagement—remains to be seen.

<sup>1</sup> Current high school reform models are shaped around the idea that to effectively engage students, high schools must offer rigorous and relevant coursework and students must experience supportive relationships with faculty and fellow students.

One thing [the Alliance has] done is bring people together to look at how we define rigor, relevance, relationships and how do we know when we see it? The reports that they made in the Alliance meeting are really exciting. Another thing is they are having luncheon meetings with the people in the schools that are responsible for curriculum development and the academic deans of the local colleges so that there is a conversation going on about what curriculum needs to be and where we are successful and not. A math committee is looking at requirements that there be a [high school] math course every year, and the number of HS students who have to take college remedial courses. A professor at OCTC and the principal of DCHS have developed a curriculum they are piloting to see how things will go. The one that is exciting for our industry is a study of the process of health sciences. We were looking at results of the people who signed up for the ACT and said they were interested in health careers, but there was no preparation in the high schools. So Owensboro High School has developed a class that they are offering this fall, and every unit was filled to the max. So that is exciting. All of those things could have occurred without the Alliance, but I think the Alliance brought the people together to build support and make contacts.

Joe Overby, Owensboro Medical Health System