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Otsego County

Higher Education Needs Assessment

Summary Report

For

The Alpine Regional Education Center (AREC)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Jack Middleton, MSU Otsego County Extension Director, and Phil Alexander, District Extension Agent, Community and Economic Development, provided the administrative support and assisted in data collection from primary and secondary sources. Data entry was conducted by Susie Marshall, Sharron Kluck, Rudi Edel, Denise Gapinski, Phil Alexander, and Jane Cheney. Nicole Zayac assisted in data analysis and report preparation at the Agricultural and Extension Education Center for Evaluative Studies at Michigan State University. Funding for this study was provided by the Northeast Michigan Consortium.
INTRODUCTION

The Alpine Regional Education Center (AREC), which currently offers classes to more than 700 students through eight colleges and universities, is considering options for expanding its programs and physical facilities. This needs assessment survey was conducted in order to assist the Alpine Regional Education Center as it considers options. The survey aimed to provide information on the perceived needs of local business owners as well as the general public as they relate to AREC programs. In addition, the survey provides a measure of the willingness of these groups to provide financial support for the expansion of these programs.

This study was conducted to identify the perceived educational needs in Otsego County. It also identifies the gaps in the current program offerings and provides guidelines for AREC’s expansion to meet the needs of its constituency. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be useful for AREC as it tries to meet the continuing education needs of the people in Otsego County. In addition, the study aimed at assessing both the general public and local employers and business owners’ willingness to support AREC’s expansion to offer these educational programs.
METHODOLOGY

The survey

A Needs Assessment Committee consisting of AREC Board Members was formed to identify and prioritize the continuing education needs of Otsego County. The Committee Chairman was John Kluck. The Committee identified its information needs and the best methods of data collection. MSU Extension was invited to assist in this Needs Assessment. Sample survey forms and cover letters are included in Appendix A. The Agricultural and Extension Education Center for Evaluative Studies at Michigan State University was asked to assist in developing an instrument for data collection, analyzing the data, and writing the final report.

Method

Surveys were mailed to Otsego County home and business owners to gauge what they believe are the important programs and classes offered by AREC. About ten questions were asked each of the public and business owners/employers to assess their needs and interest areas in higher education.

The collected data were entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS/PC) for analysis. In this report, results are presented in frequency tables and graphic formats. Charts were created using Microsoft Excel and Harvard Graphic programs.

FINDINGS

Survey questionnaires were mailed to 5000 homesteads and 730 businesses in Otsego County. A total of 813 surveys containing usable data were returned. Of these, business owners and employers filled out 78 (9.4%), while household heads filled out 735 (14.7%).
The majority of household respondents work full time. Retired people comprised the second largest group, while the remaining groups made up less than 10% of respondents each.

Most respondents had some post-secondary education. Only 16% of respondents had no
education beyond high school. The age of respondents was more evenly distributed. The ‘younger than 25’ category comprised only 2% of respondents. The largest groups, ages 35-44 and 45-54, combined to make up over half of the respondents.

As indicated earlier, a total of 78 completed surveys were received from business owners and employers in Otsego County. The largest group of business respondents was those involved in the service sector. None of these respondents was involved in government, and 18% indicated that they do business in an area other than those listed on the survey.
Over one-third of these businesses employ between one and five workers. Fewer businesses (less than 5%) indicated employing more than 30 workers.

An open-ended question asked all respondents to comment on anything about higher education in Otsego County. Several people commented that they were generally unaware of AREC’s offerings. Most people who commented were supportive of expanding educational opportunities in the area. One respondent wrote:

Facilities for continuing education are an integral part in the growth of a community. With the major expansion and growth taking place in our area, it is imperative that we reflect that growth in the expansion of our educational options. AREC fills an important and ever-growing need in our community.

Others commented that it is important for the courses offered to be accredited and transferable to other schools. Moreover, some pointed out that the ability to complete a degree program should be an important consideration. Several people indicated that the area is ready for a college of its own. Another respondent wrote: “Gaylord needs an educational facility to meet the growing needs of Northern Michigan, in all areas of training not just degrees. I strongly suggest and would vote for a millage of what ever is needed. Offer more Down Link Training for Manufacturing and Hospitality.” A complete list of written comments is included in Appendix C.
How Much Interest is There in AREC Courses?

The findings of this study show that interest in all types of course offerings at AREC is high. When asked what type of programs should be offered at AREC, a higher percentage of local businesses expressed interest in offering all types of educational programs for their own benefit than that of the general public. However, when households’ total interest (Do they think that such a program should be available, even though they are not personally interested in it?) is considered, the proportion is about the same as that of business respondents.

Respondents’ level of interest in taking college or continuing education courses in Gaylord (Responses shown in Figure 7.) were compared by their employment status, educational level, and age category. Findings show that interest in course offerings is uniformly strong without regard to employment category. However, there appears to be a correlation between the level of education and interest in courses; more educated people indicated more interest in taking courses through AREC. In addition, older people showed less interest in course offerings than younger people did. However, several of them commented that they considered educational opportunities important for the community,
even if they would not be taking classes. One respondent wrote: “I am 80 years old and will not take
advantage of any courses but I am highly interested in making available to our young people and am
pleased that you would consider expanding our Education Center.”

**Figure 7: Interest in AREC Courses**

![Interest in AREC Courses](chart)

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**When should classes be offered?**

**Figure 8: Employers’ Preference**

46% summer, 41% fall, 9% winter, 4% spring

**Figure 9: Households’ Preference**

34% summer, 23% fall, 30% winter, 13% spring

Both business and household respondents preferred offering AREC courses during winter or fall over
spring or summer. This preference is much more pronounced among the business respondents than
among the household respondents.

Employers and business owners expressed a preference for classes that were offered during weekends or in evenings. This could be due to a desire not to have courses interfere with the workday. Household heads similarly chose evenings as the most convenient time for classes, and more respondents indicated they could attend on weekends than weekdays. However, a greater proportion of households than businesses considered weekdays a convenient time for class meetings.

What classes should AREC offer?

Employers and business owners indicated a strong interest in course offerings in fields such as computers and technology, communication skills, work ethics, and interpersonal skills, showing less interest in areas such as construction and trade skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Course</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number (frequency)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td>Reading, grammar, writing, listening, telephone skills</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer and Technology</td>
<td>Spreadsheets, word processing, E-mail, data bases</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled Trades</td>
<td>Tool making, using calipers, blue print reading, machining, electrician</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
<td>Team building, leadership, team work, customer service, listening skills</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting Skills</td>
<td>Bookkeeper, budgeting</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Ethics</td>
<td>Attitude, desire to work and learn, pride in work quality, self motivation</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College and Technical Training</td>
<td>Business administration, computer science, nursing, dental technician, pre-engineering, small business training, law enforcement, corrections officer, fire science, emergency medical technician, auto service technician, aviation mechanics</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The general public was asked to indicate the types of courses it would like AREC to offer.
Computer science was also the most desired type of course among general public respondents, followed closely by business administration, small business training, construction trades, and nursing.

Among general public respondents, the least popular courses were in areas of public administration, dental technician, personnel management, corrections officers, music, speech and drama, history, fire science, aviation mechanics, and physical education.

The percentage of household respondents expressing interest in various courses follows:

- computer science (52%)
- business administration (42%)
- small business training (36%)
- construction trades (32%)
- nursing (30%)
- public school education (29%)
- general liberal arts (28%)
- emergency medical technician (26%)
- machine tool trades (26%)
- personnel management (25%)
- law enforcement (24%)
- general mathematics (24%)
- auto service technician (23%)
- grant writing (22%)
- pre-engineering (21%)
- general science (20%)
- health-fitness (20%)
- psychology (20%)
- pre-law (20%)
- auto-body repair (20%)
- tourism and recreation (20%)
- public administration (19%)
- dental technician (19%)
- personnel management (19%)
- corrections officer (18%)
- music, speech, and drama (18%)
- history (15%)
- fire science (14%)
- aviation mechanics (13%)
- physical education (10%).
Willingness to Support AREC’s Expansion

In order to expand its educational program offerings, AREC might have to expand its physical facilities. Doing so would require additional financial resources. When households and businesses were asked: “If there was a need to expand the educational facility that currently exists, would you be willing to financially support that expansion,” ‘undecided’ was the most common response. However, in both survey groups only 10% responded ‘no’, while 40% of households and 30% of businesses indicated a willingness to provide financial support. Although the largest group remains undecided on this issue, there does not appear to be strong opposition to the idea. Among those willing to provide financial support, an unspecified millage was the most popular option (indicated by 43% of households and 33% of businesses), while 14% of both groups indicated a willingness to “assist in finding other sources of support.”

Comparisons between respondents’ willingness to support AREC’s expansion financially and employment status, age, and education yielded the following:

- Among full-time workers, support for the program is strong; just over 40% expressed willingness to support the program, while just under 50% were undecided.

- Most unemployed respondents were undecided on this issue. However, it is worth noting that no unemployed respondent answered ‘no’ to this question.

- Students indicated a willingness to support the expansion.
• While about 20% of retired people were unwilling, the remaining 80% were split about equally between ‘yes’ and ‘undecided’.

• In general, respondents with more schooling were more willing to provide financial support.

• Younger respondents tended to be the most undecided about their willingness to provide financial support, while those in the ‘45-54’ age category were most willing (46.5%) to provide support.

• Although the oldest two age categories were least supportive, there were still twice as many ‘yes’ responses as ‘no’ responses among those aged 55 and older.

A few people commented on the funding issue. Some commented that taxes in the area are already high. Others suggested using the high school building to expand AREC’s programs, while one respondent commented that a new building would improve publicity. A few alternative methods of funding were suggested by respondents:

• charging enrollment fees or tuition;
• taxing resort rooms, meals, and other aspects of the local tourism industry; and
• applying for government grants.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are made:

• Computer course offerings should be expanded in all areas (computer science, spreadsheets, word processing, etc.).

• Courses in communication skills, work ethics, interpersonal skills, business, and trade skills should be offered.

• Courses should be held during fall and winter.

• Courses should be offered in the evenings.

• A millage, tuition and fees, and grants should be considered to fund AREC’s expansion.