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June 2006 marks the beginning of the fourth year of the Regional Center for Community & Economic Development at the University of West Alabama. In June 2003, the Center was created by University President Richard Holland, with the goal of expanding the involvement of the University in the life and development of the community.

During its first year, the Center witnessed a number of victories for the area, including the expansion of Mannington Wood Flooring at Epes and the initiation of a trucking program in conjunction with Shelton State Community College, along with several corporate partners.

The Center’s scope of operations expanded during its second year as it created and nurtured a network of collaborators and partners who jointly tackled many of the challenges facing the Black Belt communities of West Alabama and East Mississippi. One result of this effort was a two-state summit at the University, involving Governors Bob Riley and Haley Barbour and U.S. Congressmen Artur Davis and Chip Pickering, with the goal of developing a bi-state effort to enhance the region.

Year three witnessed further strides in regional cooperation as the Center conducted joint programs with various public and private entities. The Leadership Institute for Older Adults was organized in collaboration with the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission and a series of conferences for regional mayors was instituted.

The future holds great promise for the Center as it teams up with the University’s Small Business Development Center and local communities to expand economic and community development efforts throughout the region.
The Regional Center

Mission

The mission of the Regional Center for Community & Economic Development is to help facilitate community growth and enhance the quality of life in the region by collaborating with public and private entities and marshalling the resources of the University of West Alabama to such ends.

Goals

1. Utilize personnel and offices at the University of West Alabama to promote and coordinate community and economic development.

2. Assist academic administrators in the formation of degree and non-degree programs to prepare an educated workforce.

3. Establish a collaborative network of key people and organizations for strategic planning and action in the region.

4. Establish advisory groups to discuss issues that impact community and economic development in West Alabama.

5. Facilitate activities among community and economic development stakeholders in the region.

6. Develop an efficient information-sharing network for the region.

7. Promote and assist in the development of school-age and adult leadership programs in the region.
Year 1: A Beginning

Year 1 for the Center for Community & Economic Development began in June 2003 with the hiring of a Director and Assistant Director to establish the operation and begin pursuing organizational goals.

James Mock was chosen to direct the Center. Mr. Mock holds a master’s degree in Economic Development and is pursuing a Ph.D. in International Development. He brings to the University of West Alabama twenty years of progressively expanding experience in business management and community economic development.

Sanquenetta Thompson was named Assistant Director of the Center. Ms. Thompson is an alumna of the University of West Alabama, where she earned a degree in Business Administration with a minor in Marketing. She also holds a master’s degree in Public Administration from the University of Alabama-Birmingham. Ms. Thompson has a wide range of knowledge and experience in business, community organization and planning, and research design in public, nonprofit, and private sectors.

In addition to the establishment of general operational routines, the first year witnessed the formation of the UWA/Shelton State Trucking School. This school, formed as a joint partnership between UWA, Shelton State Community College, McElroy Trucking, and Sutlles Trucking, officially started instruction in January 2004 and graduated thirty-three students during its first year, placing them in trucking jobs in the region.

The first year also witnessed the formation of a joint Alabama-Mississippi partnership, which was solidified in a Leadership Summit at the University of West Alabama in February 2004.
With the formation of the Center came the merger of the West Alabama Regional Alliance and the University of West Alabama in a joint effort toward enhancement of the region. The Alliance is a grassroots initiative of citizens from the five-county area of Greene, Hale, Marengo, Perry, and Sumter Counties, who have banded together to work across geographic boundaries to advance the economic development, education, and tourism efforts of the region.

In December of its first year, the Center co-sponsored a Rural Development Summit in Uniontown that featured Congressman Artur Davis. More than 300 people gathered from across the Black Belt to participate in this Summit.

The Center's efforts at building a regional information network began with the introduction of a newsletter, The Facilitator, in the Fall of 2003, which was supplanted by the RCCED News in the Summer of 2004.

Year 1 continued with the Center's becoming more intimately involved with grassroots efforts within the community through work with Sumter County’s Health & Wellness Education Center and other community organizations.

Year 1 reached a new height when the Center began preparing informational booklets tailored toward economic development for businesses and communities in the region.
Year 2 began with a flurry of activity, as the Center became more closely linked with area partners. Among the activities was the coordination of a series of mayor’s conferences for the region, the development with numerous partners of the Alabama Assets Building Coalition, and the establishment of an existing business program in conjunction with the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama.

This year also saw the expansion of Mannington Wood Flooring, doubling its employment in the region.

Year 2 can be characterized as “the year of relationship building,” as the Center dramatically increased its collaboration with partnering organizations.

One such effort was a series of Leadership Institutes for Older Adults, held in collaboration with the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission.
Year 2 also saw a dramatic increase in the public profile of the Center and its operations were widely publicized in a variety of media.
Year 3 witnessed an upsurge in the Center’s support for community efforts with the regular production of informational booklets, designed to enhance economic development initiatives of individual organizations and cities.

In addition, 2006 saw a second series of Leadership for Older Adult seminars conducted in cooperation with the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission.

The Center’s goal of regional cooperation was further achieved with the development of a joint partnership between the Greene and Sumter County Industrial Development Boards, involvement with the York Industrial Board, the assumption of project management responsibilities with the Black Belt Action Commission, and participation with numerous other groups in joint initiatives.
Year 3: Attracting Revenue

Year 3 also saw the Center’s increasing involvement in the formation of area community service organizations and in assisting these organizations in achieving 501 (c) 3 status.

Another major highlight of Year 3 was the naming of Ken Walker as the Director of the University’s Small Business Development Center. Although not directly a part of the Center, the SBDC is the primary engine for small business development in the region. The addition of Mr. Walker greatly enhances the overall efforts of the University to positively affect the economy of the area.

Mr. Walker, who was formerly the Director of the Business Development and Urban Economic Research Center at Alabama State University, brings 18 years of business development experience to UWA. Mr. Walker holds a master degree in Human Resources Management from Troy University and a B.A. degree from Alabama State University in Public Relations with emphasis in Business Management.

The range of Center activities also broadened during 2005-2006, with staff involvement in programs of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, the Southern Consortium of University Public Service Organizations, the Chamber Association of Alabama, and the Kettering Foundation, among others.

2006 also witnessed further development in the Alabama – Mississippi partnership in that local economic developers and Center staff held regular consultations and the partnership captured a $15,000,000 Workforce Innovation in Rural Economic Development (WIRED) grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

The Conference of Mayors received a boost with the invitation to meet with Governor Bob Riley and Congressman Artur Davis on separate occasions.
The future of the Regional Center for Community & Economic Development will be primarily driven by the ever-changing needs of the community and the University. There will, however, be certain underlying functions and responsibilities that will remain consistent despite the changing needs of its stakeholders.

Leadership

A continuing need within all communities is the identification and development of competent and capable leaders. The Center envisions an ongoing effort to support leadership development among existing civic and governmental leaders, as well as to nurture future leadership among upcoming generations.

Information Network

Central among the Center’s functions will be the ongoing development of a regional information network designed to ensure the dissemination of vital information and to minimize duplication of effort in the region.

Community Outreach

The involvement of the University faculty, staff, and other resources in the community will remain a primary goal of the Center. The aim of this goal is to bring to bear the resources of the University in a united effort with community leaders to enhance economic and community development within the region.
Business Development

In partnership with the University’s Small Business Development Center, the Regional Center will continue to promote small business development and nurture entrepreneurship in West Alabama. In addition, it will continue to support community efforts aimed at industrial recruitment, tourism development, retail development, existing business expansion, and other forms of business development.

Regionalism

The collaboration of community stakeholders will remain the primary thrust of the Center. Maximizing the capabilities of numerous public and private organizations, the Center will continue to forge bonds of unity with partnering organizations in a mutual effort toward common goals.

The Regional Center was established to promote community and economic development in the region. We eagerly look forward to partnering with you in a joint effort to enhance the community. Please call upon us if we can be of service to you.

Regional Center for Community & Economic Development
UWA Station 41 • Livingston, Alabama 35470
(205) 652-3417 • (205) 652-3774 fax • rcced@uwa.edu