

Recent Entrepreneurship Conference Focuses on Opportunities

The tagline “Nurturing the Entrepreneurial Spirit” rang true recently at the Southwest Arkansas Community College Consortium Entrepreneurship Conference along with Winrock International’s opening of its newest venture – a women’s business center in El Dorado. The conference brought over 150 participants together to hear from a variety of keynote speakers regarding the benefits of regionalism, small businesses, and entrepreneurship.

Small businesses have historically been a driving force in the nation, said Pat Brown, a representative from Gov. Mike Beebe’s office who works with the Arkansas Economic Development Commission. “Let me tell you some facts about your business,” she said, explaining that over the last 17 years, small businesses have been responsible for generating 65 percent of the national jobs and on an annual basis, small businesses pay 44 percent of the nation’s payroll. Small businesses also produce 13 times more patents than large patent firms. “Arkansas has a very, very successful track record when it comes to nurturing small businesses and growing them into large corporations,” Brown said. “Walmart and Murphy Oil, they all began with a great idea and a lot of hard work.”

“The future belongs to entrepreneurs,” said Annett Pagan, director of U.S. programs for Winrock. It’s an idea, she said, that El Dorado has accepted and embraced.

“One of the primary initiatives (of the consortium) is to provide economic development,” stated Dr. Barbara Jones, President of South Arkansas Community College. “We have worked with several initiatives and grants to develop programs, but another piece we thought was very important was providing training to be able to build small businesses. Many of our small communities have trouble attracting large industries, but you can start a small business anywhere.”

Rich Mountain Community College is one of the members of the consortium, and Dr. Wayne Hatcher, RMCC President, wholeheartedly agrees with the importance of small business and entrepreneurs in economic development. “We are working to provide the needs of the area with training opportunities. Education is a key to the success of entrepreneurs, and the consortium members are excited about the difference that can be made through partnering for the good of the region.”

Dr. Ed Franklin, executive director of the Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges, echoed Jones’ comments, and said, “Entrepreneurism is key” and that in order to make any real progress it’s necessary to move outside designated boundaries. “We’ve moved beyond city lines, county lines and even state lines,” he said. “If we’re going to do economic development, those lines have got to be repressed. We’ve got to work together and we’ve got to do what we can do to support existing businesses in the area and create an environment to grow small business in our region.” Not every community or college can take on all roles for everyone, but by specializing services, south Arkansas can compete on a global basis, Franklin said. “Each region can’t be all things to all people,” he said. “We’ve got to figure out what’s best for our region in terms of supporting existing businesses and creating new ones.”