

Storytelling: Blue Ridge University Leads in Regional Revitalization

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Storytelling: Blue Ridge University Plays a Major Role in Regional Revitalization. Starting early in our journey forward to 2030, we expanded and accelerated Blue Ridge University's role in regional revitalization: educational, economic, civic, and cultural. In recognition of this commitment, the region's economic development and quality of life became a key pillar in the University's 2030 Vision.

Why Read This? This story describes how the leadership of regional colleges and universities and metropolitan universities, like Blue Ridge University, can play a major role in the economic and civic revitalization of their regions. As this short case shows, this commitment can prove to be a powerful tool for building public support for transformed and more central roles for these institutions in their service areas.



The Story ***(Referenced in Chapter VII)***

As Blue Ridge University proceeded with its journey forward to 2030, our leadership team realized that the University could not succeed unless our region was revitalized. Adding to this challenge was the fact that this revitalization effort had to include not just education, but economic, civic, and cultural elements and that all of these elements were intertwined. To bring them together required fresh thinking and new sources of seed capital.

The First Five Years: 2021 to 2025

As Federal Programs to cushion the impacts of COVID and fund the US physical and social infrastructure became a reality, it was apparent that significant federal dollars would be invested in Blue Ridge University's service area. One of the aims of this funding was to

revitalize non-urban regions like Western North Carolina where Blue Ridge is located and increase their participation in and contributions to the 21st Century Economy. And although our local government included capable public servants, it was clear to all of us in our region that there was no one with the capacity to coordinate the effective utilization of federal economic development funds on this scale. We needed an experienced professional to lead and coordinate these efforts.



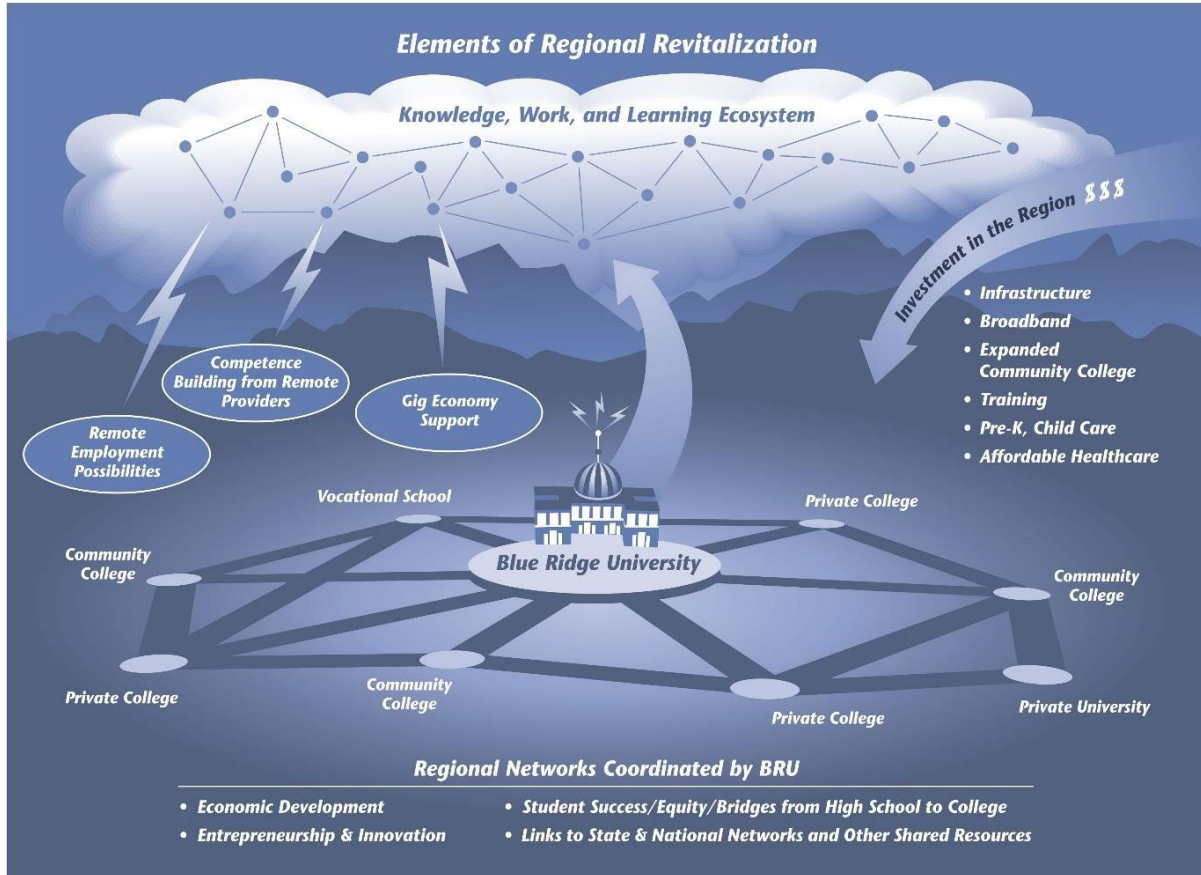
At about the same time, the Brookings Institution proposed that Washington fund 25 regional higher education institutions in economically distressed areas to play a leadership role in the economic development of their regions. With the assistance and endorsement of the North Carolina Department of Economic Development, Blue Ridge University applied for and received one of the first grants from this program. Our proposal recommended the creation of an office at our institution to design and build a network of educational and vocational institutions in our region for the economic and civic revitalization of northwest North Carolina.

The basic outline of the Northwest North Carolina Regionalization Network (NNCRN) we proposed and ultimately implemented is portrayed in Figure 1.

As the figure shows, the Network's base is a well-defined grid connecting the higher and vocational institutions in the region. The Network coordinates the allocation and use of investments in education, training and healthcare coming from federal, state, and private investments into the region.

In addition to networking higher and vocational education in the region, the grid is connected to new providers in the knowledge, learning and work ecosystem and uses these connections to provide remote employment in our region, bring competence-building capacity from distant locations, and support region residents' participation in gig economies elsewhere. The Network also orchestrated regional economic development, entrepreneurship and innovation support, high school to college bridging, and linkages to state and national networks supporting and informing economic and technological development. It goes without saying, of course, that no such network had existed before this one was formed.

Figure 1 – Regional Network for Economic and Civic Revitalization



We began building the Network with an invitation to key regional employers and workforce educators from all sectors in the region. This group of 42 persons came together and participated in Planning from the Future Backwards and Crafting Expeditionary Strategy exercises for what would be the NNCRN service region. University faculty and staff involved in training students for the workforce also attended. The kickoff speaker for this strategy session was Dr. Joann Price, the North Carolina Secretary of Commerce. Her comments inspired session attendees and led to a request that a cross-functional coalition be formed to refine and implement the proposed economic development network.

Dr. Price was so impressed with the planning effort that she agreed to co-chair the cross-functional coalition—designated the Northwest North Carolina Regionalization Network (NNCRN) --and to provide support from her office to develop a model in our region that could guide all North Carolina regional universities in their efforts to build similar networks. We, in turn, agreed to use some of the Brookings-inspired federal grant to support a small professional economic development staff that would be based on our campus that would support regional economic development in our region and statewide.

This staff was headed by Teri Clemente, an extraordinarily well-qualified economic development professional from the Atlanta Area. Teri grew up in Carsonville and returned to the region because she felt it was a better place to raise her family. To say that we were extraordinarily lucky to have her is truly an understatement. In the seven years she had been with us, she has built a world-class staff. Teri and her staff used their Brookings grant funds (\$5 million), federal infrastructure funds and state and regional funding to build a regional network that has become a state and national leader in regional economic development, in no small part because they have created a system in which the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts.



The upshot is that by 2025 the key economic and workforce development players met monthly to jointly address the needs of business and industry in the region, that the faculty and administrators involved in the region's educational institutions have come together to coordinate their responses to requests for workforce education and infrastructure programs, and that the State Department of Commerce—augmented with federal funding—has supported the development of a number of model programs that have since been implemented across the state.

The positive response from business and industry leaders has been most gratifying, but another high point has been the active participation of NNCRN faculty and their willingness to adapt their programs to the needs identified by the NNCRN Coalition. Residents of the region have been very supportive of these economic development efforts and over 2550 are now participating in the more lucrative gig economy operating outside of the region without having to move to those locations.

The 2025-30 Period—Economic Development Growth Accelerates

Many students, faculty, and alumni are also involved in employment, innovation, and commercialization activities associated with our research park and its business development center. Using telepresence, we involve many learners at other institutions and business leaders from other communities in these activities, which have become a key ingredient in regional revitalization and economic development. Over the past decade, such activities have spread across the world as developed countries are striving to spread economic success to rural areas and regions that prosperity has left behind.

The NNCRN Network has continued to pay significant dividends for our region and now, because of its recognition by state and national economic development leaders, it has become a force in Charlotte and statewide. Several national and international companies have chosen to locate facilities in our service area because of the highly responsive workforce development capacity the Network has built in record time. This, more than anything else, is a case of a group of workforce development entities coming together to respond to employer needs rather than putting together uncoordinated and warmed-over packages of off-the-shelf solutions. And, of course, these companies have brought new employees and significant growth in our tax base.

Perhaps most gratifying is that our relationships with local, regional and state government have improved significantly. When we appear before legislative committees, the hearings often begin with a genuine expression of appreciation for some service we have provided from their members and a request for additional help. Gone are the days that our appropriations requests were dead on arrival. Our funding from the state has gone from 17 to 25 percent of our budget. Not something I thought I would see in my time.

