

Workforce Forward 2011 Roundtable Discussion Summary

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FORUM OVERVIEW

The Southern Virginia Higher Education Center (SVHEC) hosted the regional *Workforce Forward 2011: A Forum on Education, Employment and Economic Development* (Forum) event on Sept. 23, 2010 at the Prizery in South Boston, VA. The purpose of the event was to provide a forum for employers, elected officials, economic developers, educators, training providers, and other workforce stakeholders to gather to discuss current and future employment data, trends, and needs with consideration for how to align SVHEC educational programs and services with those needs. Over 100 people from the Southern Virginia region representing four counties and two cities, attended the one-day forum.

The Forum's morning session included 1) presentations of current education and workforce training programs and initiatives at the SVHEC, and 2) a presentation of current national, state, and regional economic data and projections. During the afternoon session, Forum attendees participated in Roundtable Discussions, which were designed to gauge participants' reactions to the SVHEC programs and initiatives information and economic data projections shared in the morning session. This report summarizes major and minor themes that emerged during the Roundtable Discussion and contains implications of these themes relative to program planning at the SVHEC.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION PROCESS

Prior to the Forum, facilitators and notetakers were recruited and trained for the Roundtable Discussions. Assigned seating was not used; participants selected the table they sat at for the working lunch session. One facilitator and one notetaker were assigned per table. The facilitator guided the discussion according to a series of 6 scripted questions and the notetaker recorded participant responses using a document template provided on a laptop computer. Participants were provided a list of the questions as well as information about the SVHEC programs and initiatives, which they could reference during the discussion. Confidentiality of participants was maintained. Participants were not identified by name in the notetaking and nor were responses associated with individual participants.

QUESTIONS

All facilitators used the same scripted questions so that responses could be compared within and across groups. The questions were:

1. **General impression of the Forum thus far:** What are your initial reactions to what you have seen and heard thus far? What specific *words* or *phrases* come to mind?
2. **General impression of the data projections:** What are your initial reactions to the data? What specific *words* or *phrases* come to mind?

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3. **State-level Data: What's the temperature of the porridge?**
 - a. Based on your experience as workforce practitioners, how accurate are the data in describing the state situation? Hot, warm, or cold: *Very accurate, somewhat accurate, not very accurate*
 - b. Please briefly explain your answer.
4. **Regional-level Data: What's the temperature of the porridge?**
 - a. Based on your experience as workforce practitioners, how accurate are the data in describing the state situation? Hot, warm, or cold: *Very accurate, somewhat accurate, not very accurate*
 - b. Please briefly explain your answer.
5. **SVHEC Programming Gaps:** Based on your experience as workforce practitioners and after hearing the data projections, what programs should be offered at the SVHEC that are not currently being offered?
6. **SVHEC Programming Redundancies:** What programs do you think are redundant or unnecessary?

RESULTS

Seventy Forum attendees participated in the Roundtable Discussions, which were held immediately following lunch to maximize participation. Participants were distributed across 11 discussion tables, averaging six (6) participants per table (actual numbers ranged from 3 -10; See Appendix A for numbers of participants by table). Because the discussions followed lunch, there was no assigned seating and therefore no effort to control the mix of participants by sector represented (business, education, government, etc) at each table. An analysis of responses to each question follows.

1. General impression of the Forum thus far

Some words used to describe the Forum were “unique”, “forward thinking”, “innovative”, and “transformational. One participant noted that he lived in Indiana for twenty years and never saw anything like this forum in his community. Participant discussions about the Forum in general centered around four (4) themes: 1) Hope; 2) Forum as a “Wake Up” Call; 3) Community as change agent; and 4) Importance of collaboration.

Theme 1: In general, participants viewed the Forum as generating hope and excitement.

- “Seeing the number of people taking time out of the day to [attend this Forum] is encouraging.”
- “See the focus of the economy; sky is the limit.”
- “Opportunities to encourage people.”
- “It is exciting for me to hear about groups like this. For me, today is about seeing and learning what is going on.”

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- “Really positive and exciting!”

Theme 2: But, many also saw it as a “wake up” call to educators, business, economic developers, government, and citizens of the region.

- “More or less a 'wake up call'.”
- “Recognizing the needs.”
- “Excited about opportunities but surprised to see we are still where we were 7 years ago.”
- “It was alarming to see the education level of our population...We can't afford not to push education forward.”

Theme 3: Many participants noted that they saw the community (region) as a change agent.

- “Problems will not be solved in Washington; they will be solved locally.”
- “Government is helping big business, not small business.”
- “Community involvement is coming together to bring it [sic] to the table and solve these problems.”
- “Glad that the community is proactive rather than reactive.”

Theme 4: Participants frequently noted the importance of collaboration to improve the regional economy, and agreed that it is happening here across sectors.

- “The cross section of people at the Forum is a benefit...Getting a different perspective is important...‘crosspollination’”.
- “Some of our leaders are not focusing on the importance of education, some of the things students are missing, the support is not totally there, need to get the word out.”
- “Need to connect the dots.”
- “I love the collaboration and inclusiveness of what you're doing in economic development.”

Overall, participants expressed satisfaction with the Forum and appreciated the opportunity to attend. One noted that the Forum was “better than expected and broader, higher level”. Others commented that the Forum as “phenomenal”, the “speakers have been informative and interesting” and the Forum was “well-organized” with good use of technology.

2. General impression of the Data Projections

Participants expressed a range of reactions to the data presented during the morning sessions. Most found the data presentation to be “accurate” and “outstanding” in its level of detail and what it revealed; however, at least one person opined that the underemployment and unemployment numbers were probably low because of the number of small business owners who have gone under and would not necessarily show up on the unemployment rolls. Another stated that he would have appreciated knowing how many federal jobs were included in Chmura's (the presenter's) northern Virginia data.

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Many participants expressed alarm at the economic state of the region as shown in the data presentation, using words such as “wake up call”, “shocking”, and “scary”. Others observed that there were “no surprises” and agreed that the data showed “verifiable trends.” Recurrent themes among participant responses to this question included 1) surprise about data trends specific to the Southern Virginia region; 2) the dissection of the poor economic state of the region by specific causes; 3) the offer of prescriptive solutions to change the regional economy; and 4) a specific interest in keeping the people we educate and train here in the region, rather than losing them to jobs elsewhere.

Theme 1: Some participants expressed concern about the regional data trends as follows:

- “I was surprised by the gap between rural Virginia and northern Virginia. You would think we would absorb some of the successes of RTP (Research Triangle Park, NC).”
- “This area is really far behind the rest of the state in terms of rebounding from the recession. People lack the necessary education.”
- “Surprised to see that school teachers are so underpaid.”
- “Beginning teachers’ pay is low.”

Others were more optimistic:

- “We shouldn’t view other regions as our competition. Our competition is off shore.”
- “We are economically challenged but we have the resources and the human capital to improve.”
- “We may have a ways to go to bring some of the jobs back, but [I am] very optimistic.”
- “We have a lot of opportunities to be creative and adaptive and innovative.”

Theme 2: In dissecting the specific causes of current state of the regional economy, participants commented that:

- “I think Southside is underdeveloped educationally.”

Prescriptive solutions to the economic problems indicated by the data included:

- “Sustainability of the workforce is key.”
- “Social marketing needs to happen.”
- “Students and parents of today are very practical and our duty in education is to make sure we’re aligning to business and to their needs.”
- “More non-traditional college students are finally coming back to school. Education is the ticket that will allow that person to find employment and a better future.”
- “No one wants to talk about the fact that 60% of the students who come to community college must take remedial classes. A greater focus needs to be placed on K-12 education.”
- “The presenter’s forecast really hit home with me that we really need to find new opportunities in existing businesses.”
- “We need to reverse the trend [of companies closing down], not just re-train the employees. Not everyone can afford to go back to school.”
- “Hope to recruit more manufacturers to this area.”

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Theme 3: Participants offered prescriptive solutions to the shortage of skilled workers:

- [They need] soft skills...training needs to take place after high school [and before employment] because the employer isn't the "know all, fix all."
- "Sixty percent leave after the first 60 days, so now DG [Dollar General] runs [employees] through a temp service. People have no job readiness skills."
- "Substance abuse is a big factor; [need] substance abuse training. Pittsylvania County has the initial substance test and they pass, but [with] the random drug tests, they have to send someone home every week."

Theme 4: Comments about keeping educated and trained workers in the region included:

- "We have to give people reason to stay and reasons to come back."
- "[We need to]increase the population of trained people who can work in the region, not just train them and [see them go to] to another location."

Other introspective comments were:

- "imagine the feelings of the underemployed or unemployed if they saw this data", possibly referring to Chris Chmura's prediction that the southern Virginia economy will lag in recovery relative to the rest of the Commonwealth by 24 months.
- "very same thoughts [about being worried], I have two daughters, one in nursing, one in education, and I am in manufacturing. I am scared for myself."
- "I was a victim of the decline in textiles. I had to reinvent myself and thankfully I had a college degree."

3. How accurate is the state-level data?

Of the participants who were recorded as responding to this question, most acknowledged that they found the state level data to be very accurate (Table 1, below). Only 1 respondent was recorded as thinking the state level data was not very accurate; however, this person's comment seemed to indicate that he/she didn't actually think the data was inaccurate, but rather that the state level data masked the regional disparities. Other comments echoed the same sentiment as shown below.

- "Very accurate at the state level. The data is 'murky' at the regional level. How does the growth in Northern Virginia impact the rest of the state?"
- "Very accurate at the state level but not so at the regional level because Southside Virginia was already experiencing a recession before the rest of the state."
- "Virginia did better than most states probably because of the Northern Virginia workforce."
- "Reaffirms what everyone in Southern Virginia knows: that it's NoVA (Northern Virginia) versus the rest of Virginia."
- "Southern Virginia is third world compared to NoVA."

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- “NoVA takes advantage of being closer to DC, [but] not everything is equal. I do not want to live in Fairfax VA, I will not sacrifice my quality of life.”
- “More poverty and abandoned homes, or unlivable homes, seen here in Southside VA. Must find middle ground, people must be brought above the poverty level.”
- “Regional data requires more interpretation.”

Among those who found the data to be “somewhat accurate”, some cited methodological issues such as the lag time between data collection and reporting, and the fact that unemployment figures only report the number of people actually seeking employment and does not include those who have given up.

Table 1. How Accurate is the State-level Data

Participants Responding = 41

Very Accurate	Somewhat Accurate	Not Very Accurate
78% (32)	20% (8)	2% (1)

4. How Accurate is the Regional-level Data?

Two-thirds of the 36 participants who responded to this question considered the regional-level data to be very accurate, and the remaining one-third considered the data to be somewhat accurate (Table 2, below). However, one person pointed out that it is difficult to define “region”, and another pointed out that the data does not necessarily reflect the “immediate” (seasonal) needs within the region; for example, there is a currently an “immediate” need for tobacco processing. Another respondent stated that you can’t “snap-shot the local economy” and that we need to consider what is happening in the region’s neighboring counties in Virginia and North Carolina. Yet another respondent indicated that he/she was not clear about whether the employment data captured turnover or only growth (new jobs), pointing out that a number of teachers have retired due to budget cuts and that those vacancies offer job opportunity, even if they are not newly created jobs. Finally, one respondent asserted that “different local economies have different needs”.

Theme 1: Other themes that emerged focused on the low educational attainment in the region, the lack of job-ready employment candidates, and the lack of jobs. Respondents especially lamented the fact that students are graduating from high school without the basic skills they need to pursue a job or higher education.

- “Previously, 65% of black males did not complete high school; now they are graduating whether they are ready or not. Students who cannot read or write are being pushed through due to No Child Left Behind. Children are not being taught a trade...and no plans for higher education.”

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Theme 2: A number of participants commented on the lack of job-readiness, especially in the areas of basic literacy skills and “soft skills”, as well as motivation among jobseekers today.

- “What kind of job [seekers] do we have? Teenagers have no concept of time. Being ‘on time’ does not mean being in the parking lot; it means putting that first case on the belt.”
- “Attendance, accountability” [are important]; employers do not have to tolerate [poor on the job] behaviors. [We get] mainly high school graduates [with no reading or] basic math skills. They think [being] on time means they can leave earlier.”
- “[We need to] teach students that they can’t use words they use when texting for communicating on the job by email, letter, etc.”
- “Are people with a diploma [by definition] employable? To find 5 good candidates, you must interview 100 people.”
- “Money and working used to be a source of pride and drove people [to work].”
- “The older worker is motivated to work.”
- “The younger worker is not motivated.”
- “Riverstone had a free training to help people with resumes and employment skills, and only 4 people signed up.”
- “We can only help people who want to help themselves.”

Theme 3: Participants also pointed out that there are currently few job opportunities, and that it is difficult for the under- and unemployed to remain hopeful and motivated.

- “Because of hopelessness, people are falling into drugs and other things that feed the hopelessness. [These] problems are symptoms of the lack of hope; they are overlooking opportunities to improve because of the lack of hope and depression.”

Table 2. How accurate is the regional level data?

Participants Responding = 36

Very Accurate	Somewhat Accurate	Not Very Accurate
67% (24)	33% (12)	0% (0)

5. SVHEC Programming Gaps

It was clear from the responses that participants are familiar with some aspects of the educational programming offered through the SVHEC, but few were familiar with the entire spectrum of offerings. Many suggestions were given for courses and programs of study already offered by the SVHEC and its educational partners, including:

- 1) Industrial maintenance (DCC)
- 2) Education (Early childhood education/childcare, special ed, elementary education)
- 3) Information Technology

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- 4) Trades (HVAC, electricians, welders, plumbers, auto mechanics)
- 5) Professional Business Services (project management, accounting)
- 6) Soft Skills/Work Ethics (SVHEC, Tri-County, & DCC)

Several participants commented that the SVHEC is doing a good job aligning the training programs with industry needs for this area.

However, other suggestions were offered for programming not currently offered, but it is not clear if these suggestions were anecdotal or data-driven:

- 1) Biotechnology
- 2) Green energy/construction
- 3) Weatherization
- 4) Tourism, culinary arts, hospitality
- 5) Small business development, business plans, marketing
- 6) Robotics
- 7) Landscaping
- 8) Mental health (not just nursing)

Many participants advocated for inclusion of more non-credit computer literacy courses among SVHEC program offerings, citing the difficulties that older students/workers have with technology when they return to school for education or training. Others focused their comments on the importance of offering more certificate programs, especially for trades and hospitality curricula, so that people in those industries could earn higher wages and be more competitive in the job market.

6. SVHEC Programming Redundancies: What programs do you think are redundant or unnecessary?

Most participants who commented stated that they saw no redundancies in current educational and job training programming at the SVHEC. Several cited the collaborative relationships among the SVHEC, its educational partners, other community-based organizations, and industry for the success in avoiding redundancy. However, a few asked about the practical value, in terms of employability, of some humanities programs, such as Asian Studies, Women's Studies, and History ("what are you going to do with it?"). These comments sparked lively debate at one table, with several participants defending the humanities, especially history, as being important to professions such as teaching and to "make a much [better] rounded individual."

A similar debate occurred at a separate table, this time revolving around the usefulness of the Associates Degree in Human Services. A participant representing the regional health system pointed out that the hospital can't hire someone with that degree, because there is really nowhere in the hospital to employ them; they would need to get a four-year degree. Others

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disagreed, arguing that a Human Services degree is good preparation to perform customer service and is useful in many other areas. One participant suggested that the SVHEC find out from its graduates which programs have served them best.

It is noted, that the specific programs included in this discussion (Human Services, Asian Studies, Women's Studies, and History) were not presented as SVHEC programs and initiatives during the morning session.

SUMMARY

The Roundtable Discussions elicited both consensus on many topics and diversity of opinion on others. There was broad agreement to the accuracy of the state and regional data presented by Dr. Chris Chmura, as well as agreement that the SVHEC program offerings are robust and well-aligned with industry needs. The participants were deeply engaged in the discussion process and offered valuable insight as to the job training and education programming most needed in this region.

Several issues arose during the roundtable discussions outside of the six scripted questions. The issues that arose included barriers to education, including lack of transportation, childcare, and technology skills; infrastructure problems with the current regional economy such as the unemployment benefits sometimes equaling or exceeding the low wages offered in many jobs; and strategies to engage k-12 students in education and career planning earlier than is currently occurring. A refreshing sentiment was echoed by many participants. The sentiment expressed was the need and desire to work together as a community and regionally to solve our education and economic problems: "We need to collectively agree to work together." Several participants recommended that the Forum be held again: "When can we do this again? Let's talk about this and reason together, let's get people mentally engaged."

APPENDIX A

Number of Participants By Table

Table	1:	6
Table	2:	10
Table	3:	5
Table	4:	7
Table	5:	8
Table	6:	7
Table	7:	7
Table	8:	0
Table	9:	5
Table	10:	6
Table	11:	3
Table	12:	0

TOTAL: 70 participants