

Patrick Henry Community College Crafts Initiative: A Work in Progress

By Cynthia Ingram

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Abstract

The author explains how her college has worked with other institutions as part of CraftNet, a program supporting arts and crafts education and business in the surrounding communities.

Patrick Henry Community College (PHCC) has found a new – and creative – way to support our local, rural economy.

We have collaborated with colleges from North Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia, Montana, Ohio, New Mexico, the United Kingdom, and South Africa to form CraftNet, an international network of community colleges partnering to develop artisan-based strengths into a sustainable growth sector. Regional Technologies Strategies, Inc. is the organizing agency for CraftNet; a non-profit organization, its mission is to assist rural community colleges in the promotion of economic development. CraftNet assists colleges in preparing youth and adults for employment and self-employment in industries based on regional arts and crafts. In the process, the program expands career opportunities for marginalized populations in rural settings such as ours.

Designing the Network

PHCC has capitalized on these goals through research, collaboration, and resource sharing.

Through research, we identified crafts that are popular and appropriate for our region. We asked (and received) support and input from various stakeholder groups in our area, including Reynolds Homestead, Piedmont Arts Association, Lynwood Artists, Artisans Center of Virginia, Purple Mission, and the area's public schools.

As the dean of Continuing Education and Workforce Development at PHCC, I headed the college's internal advisory committee for the initiative. First of all, we determined how a craft-based curriculum could enhance current programs at the college and support a creative, enterprise-based rural economy. For example, we looked for ways that a craft program could be embedded within a particular industry (program of study), in some cases by inserting design into the products for greater long-range economic development (i.e., business courses and general studies). We also determined ways that the college might expand existing programs to include crafts, such as pottery and metal works. Lastly, we developed a timeline for including the ideas from our external, craft-based advisory committee in our initiative.

Working together, the college's internal and external crafts advisory committee determined that career studies certificates were the most feasible options, in these seven areas:

- pottery,
- decorative painting,
- wood working,
- stained glass,
- quilting,
- weaving, and

- metal works.

The advisory board also concluded that a career studies certificate that included all of these crafts was not feasible, as a student would be unlikely to ever complete such a program, given the diverse nature of the different crafts and their coursework. The group also agreed that metallurgy and pottery would enhance the existing programs by increasing enrollments and making these programs more viable. Members of the internal advisory committee then researched and reported on these different crafts as we worked toward a list of relevant courses.

Local Benefits

PHCC introduced the crafts programs in April of 2004, offering the seven career studies certificates listed above (see bulleted list). We have already seen benefits.

Although our service region already boasted varied activities for artisans to showcase their craft, we needed formal educational programs to enhance artisan skills, to attract and to train new artisans, and to provide the business skills artisans need to better market their craft. For this reason, we have included a course in small-business management or entrepreneurship in each of the seven programs. By maximizing on the strengths of the region to promote artisans and their crafts, PHCC is determined to move the invisible cottage industry to more visible sites.

Through collaborating on this project, our entire community is becoming a better network. For instance, PHCC is now more closely aligned with area initiatives related to tourism and cultural development. We introduced CraftNet to our area chambers of commerce and departments of tourism and made presentations to numerous groups such as Congressman Boucher's tourism conference, the VCCS Chancellor's Retreat, Rotary, Kiwanis, and school boards. In turn, PHCC has learned more about the programs of these groups and how we can help them. We have also included community members on our newly established CraftNet advisory board (comprised of stakeholder groups, artisans, craft instructors and college staff). The college continues to seek out opportunities to promote this program among groups that support the arts.

Recently, we have increased enrollment in the crafts program by incorporating a dual enrollment opportunity for high school students. In Fall 2005, eleven students at one area high school enrolled in decorative classes at their school. Area high schools have also offered their carpentry and welding labs for metalworking and fine woodworking classes – which is a wonderful example of resource sharing.

Layout of our Facility

The craft programs are now being delivered in an off-campus 25,000-square-foot facility in the city of Martinsville, just steps away from a new toy museum. The site is perfect for our program.

PHCC's School of Craft and Design is equipped with carefully designed labs and instructional space to promote the best studio experience and to accommodate at least 15 students in a class. The pottery lab boasts 18 potters' wheels and two electric kilns. The weaving lab features 12 state-of-the-art triangle floor looms. Students of decorative painting and stained glass have access to the latest software and lab set-ups.

In addition to providing dedicated training and instructional space for each of the programs, this craft facility also offers the community a place where local artisans can sublease space to showcase and produce their work – onsite, in view of the community. These professional artisans work in the same facility as our PHCC students, thereby providing our students with first-hand knowledge of the business side of their craft.

This partnership is gaining support. The city and a local foundation are encouraging local artists to relocate their studios and dwellings in store fronts along Main Street in the downtown area. This same foundation regularly funds initiatives that the community endorses for better quality of life – and PHCC's School of Craft and Design is in the center of this activity.

Fine Tuning the Program

This academic year, 59 students are enrolled in our craft programs: 10 students in the beginning stained glass class, 10 in advanced stained glass, 7 in pottery, and 18 in quilting., 9 in decorative painting and five in fine woodworking – 18 more students than in Spring 2005. We expect the programs to flourish as we continue to market these crafts to our region.

In addition to promoting the career studies certificates, PHCC has decided to offer shorter-term training in a non-credit format. This will attract people who may not be able to make the time commitment that traditional schedules require.

Although the program is in its infancy stages, students have responded enthusiastically. Many students have focused on the

personal benefits – the increase in their craft skills – while other students mention additional aspects. For example, a student studying quilting remarked, “This program has assisted me in recertification,” and arguing that PHCC should offer more such courses for art-teacher recertification. A student in stained glass explained that this program “offers another opportunity for social interaction, and . . . [the chance] to make a project.” A student in stained glass stated, “This program is helping to broaden my knowledge of procedures in cutting.” One of the pottery students exclaimed, “I have discovered my ability to create – I feel more confident because I can do something!” In discussing their plans for using the training they have acquired at PHCC, the student responses range from pleasure to competition to starting a small business.

PHCC crafts students want to see the program flourish. Some have recommended more student displays of their completed projects in art shows, high schools, and future classes, as a means of promoting the program itself. They have suggested that we target craft places in our promotions, and that we post bulletins on college websites and sponsor an information seminars.

Craft instructors are equally enthusiastic and supportive. They have contributed greatly through their careful attention to the many details of lab setups and attending to student needs. When asked if the crafts program will enrich the community, Amanda Donely, a stained glass instructor, replied, “Yes! These programs provide access to instruction in the fields of fine craft not available before in the area.” She continued, “This program can be the foundation for a viable artisan community here – fostering networking, economic development, and artistic growth, [from] beginners through professionals.”

Most of these instructors have 20 or more years of professional skills – from teaching at other craft centers and schools, to experience as a producing crafts person, to serving as juried members of a craft guild, to participating in craft shows, gallery shows, and special exhibits. Our quilting instructor, Christina Oostheck, said, “I bring 20 years of quilting knowledge to this program. There are a scant number around to teach quilting, and through this effort there will be more people to pass the knowledge along to their children.” The instructors feel that the crafts programs will enrich the community through collaborations with the various guilds and artisan groups. Mary Dashiell, our pottery instructor, noted, “The crafts program provides access to instruction in the fields of art not available before in this area, thereby fostering a foundation for a viable artisan community, and boosting economic development through tourism.” Donna Rorrer, our decorative painting instructor, stated, “Crafts present a person with many creative and technical challenges that use a different part of the brain from intellectual studies or many everyday activities. Being able to pass this knowledge along to others is very rewarding to them.”

The Next Step

The Crafts program is an exciting initiative that has come along at a time when our area needed some additional alternatives for training workers for the new economy.

The greatest challenge continues to be identifying qualified instructional support and finding the funding needed for us to meet all of the program’s objectives. However, CraftNet has offered our college an opportunity to work with some experienced professionals in crafts and engage in dialogue with others who are developing similar programs internationally. This network has been a tremendous assistance to us as we develop our crafts program, our work in progress!

Dr. Cynthia Ingram is dean of continuing education and workforce development at Patrick Henry Community College and one of its representatives on CraftNet. She also serves as Vice Chair on the Martinsville City Public Schools Board, chairs the West Piedmont Business Development Center (a regional small business incubator), and is a member of the Franklin County Workforce Development Consortium Board.

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