

by Mary K. Grant, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts



# Building a Workforce from Preschool Up

*A Western Massachusetts Commitment*

**Large-scale** manufacturing is disappearing from New England, and creativity and innovation are the new drivers of the economy. Can local communities adapt? In the Berkshire Hills of Western Massachusetts, organizing stakeholders was seen as the first step. That is why two years ago, civic, legislative, cultural, and educational leaders came together to explore the barriers to a strong Berkshire economy and develop solutions.

Above: Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts Berkshire Hills Internship Program intern Sara Gately leads an art project at the Kidspace gallery in Mass MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art).

## A Berkshire Coalition

One barrier has been education levels. The new and emerging economy is no longer characterized by large manufacturing companies but rather by small- to midsize businesses in technology, specialty manufacturing, travel and tourism, arts, culture, and health care, to name a few. This increasingly knowledge-based and technology-oriented economy brings with it new opportunities and challenges. It calls for skills and educational achievement different from what helped residents succeed in earlier times.

The concern that the Berkshires—despite rich natural, cultural, community, and educational resources—might be left behind inspired local leaders to act. An intensive assessment of the county's economic strengths and weaknesses was conducted. Demographic changes, the departure of large companies with steady career paths and good salaries, a college-completion rate that lagged behind other Massachusetts communities—all presented challenges. With a wide range of stakeholders signing on, a blueprint for the future called the Berkshire Compact for Higher Education came into being.

The next step was to identify values and goals that could guide the development of strategies. Compact members agreed that progress would depend on a countywide effort to invest in a strong educational continuum—one that would encourage and reward innovation, raise aspirations, ensure access to education, promote lifelong learning, and take advantage of technology's ability to open or widen the doors to education.

It is well documented that higher levels of education translate into higher levels of earning and that the more years of education people have, the more engaged they are in their communities. So it stands to reason that a well-prepared workforce, equipped with the skills to adapt to a rapidly changing, global economic environment, improves a region's competitive edge. As

one study has noted, "Given the economic realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, providing opportunities for residents to prepare for, enroll in, and succeed in postsecondary education is vital to the health of our communities, our states, and our nation."<sup>1</sup>

The Compact goal of investing in a strong educational continuum reflects the group's determination to help individuals and the economy simultaneously. The factors defining a region's competitiveness keep changing and will continue to do so, but a defining issue will always be one closely tied to education—namely, the quality and depth of the labor force. Jobs follow people, and a region must ensure that its residents have the skills to compete.

## The Berkshire Compact's goal of investing in education reflects the group's determination to help individuals and the economy simultaneously.

Regions always benefit from better education and more jobs. Residents do, too. Indeed, according to the report "Education Pays 2004," the link between postsecondary education and individual earning capacity is strong: "In 2003, full-time workers with four-year college degrees earned approximately 62 percent more than full-time workers with only a high school diploma. Americans with high school diplomas earned an average of \$30,800 a year while those with bachelor's degrees averaged \$49,900 per year."<sup>2</sup>

## A Higher Reach

Compact members want to transform a culture in which the educational endpoint is a high school diploma into one that views

a minimum of 16 years of education and lifelong learning as the norm.

Believing that educational aspirations are often set in childhood, the group advocates an educational system that links early childhood education, grades K-12, and higher education. To guide the next year of work on the educational continuum, they have developed a model called the Berkshire Passport.

Under the Passport, all Berkshire County students, beginning in elementary school, would engage in a series of progressive educational experiences. Those experiences would extend and enrich classroom learning with college visits, summer learning camps, and college-level coursework. They would get students thinking earlier about a brighter educational future. To encourage aspirations, the Compact is exploring incentives such as scholarships for students who accomplish Passport milestones.

Work has begun on a survey of all public school students in grades 6 through 12 to get their perspective on the educational barriers to a better future and to guide the development of new strategies. Other initiatives include one by Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA), which has been bringing in middle school students for campus visits and is planning to expand to include elementary students.

Meanwhile, the Compact members are working to identify funding for college and technical programs and for assistance to families that face daunting financial barriers. Government commitment to strong, sustained funding of public higher education is a critical piece of the puzzle, so reversing state and federal student aid reductions is a key goal. Compact members also want to see the Commonwealth increase investment in technological infrastructure and networks in the Berkshire region, where many small, rural communities lack even basic Internet access.

The Compact also emphasizes the role



William Mulholland, of Berkshire Community College, addresses Berkshire Compact members Ann Claffie (Berkshire Visitors Bureau), Maureen Baran (Williamstown Savings Bank), Pam Malumphy (Massachusetts Office of Business Development), and David Crane (Excelsior Printing) at a higher education subcommittee meeting in October.

of employers in lifelong learning. Employer-driven training initiatives can be supplemented by external programs, especially if employers encourage employee participation by providing scholarships or flexible schedules. A new associate's degree program in manufacturing, developed between McCann Technical School, Berkshire Community College, and InterPrint is one example of successful partnering.

The Compact, working with the Regional Employment Board, has also identified best-practice internship programs for both high school and college students to introduce them to career opportunities, and to help create a pipeline of talent for permanent postgraduate employment. MCLA responded to the needs of the creative sector with a program called B-HIP—the Berkshire Hills Internship Program—that links young talent with cultural and creative

sector employers. And a recent graduate of the program in arts management and former B-HIP intern is now a full-time development employee at a major local theater company. MCLA also is launching a Fast-Track degree program to support adult learners in completing a bachelor's in an expedited fashion.

Some of these initiatives have immediate, tangible impacts, while other effects will require a longer-term perspective. The year 2008 will see Berkshire Compact members working on baseline measurements for evaluating progress toward milestones.

### Long Term

Following commencement this year, MCLA identified 30 graduates who found employment in Berkshire County. Although the Compact may not be able to take full credit for the accomplishment, the partnership between business and education that has

resulted from months of intensive work is clearly important.

There are no economic development shortcuts. The best tax and regulatory incentives for companies to locate in a region cannot compensate for the quality and depth of the labor force. Today that quality and depth depend on access for all to higher education. The Compact signers believe that Massachusetts must make a bigger commitment to higher education if it wants to keep current population losses from snowballing into broader economic decline.

The challenge for the Compact now is to advance the strategies it has identified and energize the political will. A continued spirit of collaboration and creativity will serve the county and the state well.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "The Governance Divide: A Report on a Four-State Study on Improving College Readiness and Success" (working paper, Institute for Educational Leadership, National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research, Palo Alto, California, September 2005).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.ecs.org/html/Document.asp?chouseid=5664>.