



THE VIEW

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MAYBE IT'S TIME TO THROW SOME MONEY AT EDUCATION

BY
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Nauseating is a word that comes to mind when the plight of education is considered in Mississippi's budget cutting environment. Perhaps it is because the platitudes are tossed around so casually. Often we too easily accept clichés because they sound so logical when uttered. Two examples come to mind. The first one holds that “you can't solve the problems of education by throwing money at them.” The second one maintains that in these tough budgetary times that all should share equally in the pain. Let us dig a little deeper into these bits of wisdom.

It was an enlightening experience a couple of weeks ago to be able to sit in on the annual legislative conference of Mississippi's community college presidents. To say the least, it was a sobering exercise. In this era when greater emphasis is being placed on brain power and creativity than ever before, we in this poorest of states have perhaps reserved our most daunting of educational tasks for our community colleges. Not only do we ask them to add knowledge to those who will move on to our universities and beyond, we also ask them to open wide their doors to virtually anyone who wants one more chance to become a productive member of the workforce. We ask them to assure ever more technical business and industry that from this milieu of mostly rural Mississippians that they will provide a capable workforce. At the aforementioned conference not a single president flinched at such a daunting task because they are accustomed to shouldering that load. But the concern was palpable as to how these leaders would be able to deliver all that was expected of them in the face of exploding enrollments and declining revenues.

Coincidentally, just a few days later I had occasion to see first hand how things have unfolded on the human capital development front in a similarly rural environment. Somerset Community College is located in Somerset, Kentucky. Much of Kentucky beyond urban Louisville and Lexington bears many similarities to rural Mississippi. Indeed when found on the map Somerset is decidedly isolated. Bowling Green is a hundred sparsely populated

miles to the west and a two-lane ride over the mountains into eastern Kentucky coal mining country lies to the east. Access from the north or south of Somerset is similarly difficult.

Nevertheless, that isolation is only geographic. That is because the innovative people of Somerset, Pulaski County and the surrounding counties and towns have found many ways to do business with the rest of the world and indeed the rest of the world is coming to Somerset. After only a few hours there it became clearly evident that the two major catalysts responsible for making the area a model of rural development success are Somerset Community College and Kentucky 5th District Republican Congressman Hal Rogers.

Somerset Community College, like most all of Mississippi's community colleges, is strategically positioned to be a "beach head" for economic and community development for this rural region of Kentucky. Congressman Rogers, who is unmistakably a conservative Republican, nevertheless makes no apologies for his efforts in targeting tens of millions in federal dollars to the region in the name of workforce development and the creation of the jobs necessary in employing such a workforce. Congressman Rogers fingerprints are everywhere in the 5th District. Many of the projects and facilities brought home by Rogers are noteworthy in their potential to position the workforce in the region for the next level of technical occupations and not just to fill those that are currently in existence. Perhaps the crown jewel of Congressman Rogers' efforts is the palatial Center for Rural Development which contains the largest communications technology capability in Kentucky. The Center adjoins the main campus of Somerset Community College. Rogers also used his position as Chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee to bring the National Center for Hometown Security to the region. So many high tech enterprises and development groups have gravitated to the region that the area has picked up the name "Silicon Holler".

Additionally, Congressman Rogers heralds the opportunities made available through his directing \$579 million in flood control projects to many of the once vulnerable towns in the 5th district. Even in these troublesome economic times there is a distinct sense of optimism emanating from Somerset Community College and its surroundings.

What were the lessons learned in my short stay at Somerset Community College? First, Congressional earmarks that are well targeted are of enormous benefit to job creation and work force development. Kentucky Congressman Hal Rogers and our own Senator Thad Cochran and others in the Mississippi delegation have shown that they understand this formula. Secondly, advancing the cause in this increasingly technical world does indeed take money. Finally, as demonstrated by Somerset Community College and its surroundings, if you build it they really will come.

Mississippi's community colleges are similarly strategically located and are poised with the same potential as Somerset. All Mississippians will be losers if we fail to find a way to "throw some money at them."

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