Collaborative Innovation through the Dwayne Peaslee Technical Training Center

Before August of 2015, businesses in Douglas County, Kansas had to send employees outside of the county to receive technical training. Community individuals who desired technical training had to travel as well. This not only created an inconvenience for Douglas County residents, but deterred new businesses from developing in the area. In 2014, community members decided it was time to act. With the help of leaders from the City of Lawrence, Kansas, the Economic Development Corporation of Lawrence and Douglas County (EDC), Lawrence Unified School District 497 (USD 497), the Chamber of Lawrence, Kansas (the Chamber) and numerous local businesses, Douglas County created the Dwayne Peaslee Technical Training Center, or Peaslee Tech.

Peaslee Tech aims to close the technical training gap in Douglas County through their mission as “…a catalyst for economic growth, providing technical training to a diverse community of learners to meet the current and emerging needs of our communities and employers.” Peaslee Tech envisions a community with a technically skilled workforce that fosters retention, expansion and attraction of business. Douglas County knew for many years that there was a technical training gap in the community, but became acutely aware of the issue when the city of Lawrence was passed over as the new location of a German manufacturing company. Lawrence was the company’s top choice for its community appeal, professionalism, presentations and infrastructure, but lacked a technical education facility. The company was estimated to provide 101 jobs over the first five years with an average annual wage of $44,000. This would have been a great win for Douglas County, and the loss drove home the need for a technical training facility.

The concept of a collaborative technical training effort was not new to Douglas County. Community leaders attempted to get the required approval from the nearby university before, but were previously shot down. The arrival of new university administration allowed the group to finally get the project started. Douglas County collaborated with nearby community colleges, the Chamber, the City of Lawrence and the EDC to apply for the Department of Labor’s Trade Area Adjustment Community College & Career Training grant, or TAACCCT. However, in order to qualify for the grant, the group needed to acquire a facility. The EDC invested $750,000 for the down payment on about ten acres of land, including a 77,000 square foot, underutilized and poorly maintained industrial building. As part of the purchase, the owners of the land donated a parcel to USD 497 so they could build their College Career Center (CCC) on the same campus as Peaslee Tech and further collaboration efforts. The EDC invested an additional $300,000 for fees and maintenance of the facility.

Once the property was purchased, the collaborative group applied for TAACCCT. They estimated it would provide about $8 million to renovate, staff, and equip classrooms and labs. The grant would not, however, cover renovations of shared spaces like hallways and bathrooms. Hugh Carter of the Chamber of Lawrence estimated the building would require an additional $1.2 million in renovations. He approached Douglas County, the City of Lawrence and the EDC for these funds and they were awarded. Unfortunately, however, the project did not receive the TAACCCT grant. Peaslee Tech’s budget went from $9.2 million to $1.2 million with one decision, but project leaders decided they had to continue. With almost a 90% budget cut, they scaled back and miraculously renovated the building anyway, for a total of $1.2 million. The complete facility includes administrative offices, labs, classrooms and rental space, which serves as a source of revenue.

Acquiring and renovating the facility required the largest portion of funds, but supplying the building with equipment was an expensive task as well. The community responded with support. The Chamber provided furniture and funding for grant-writers. Local businesses—Luminous Neon Art & Sign Systems, Plastikon Health Care, Big Heart Pet Brands, Hallmark Cards, B.A. Green Construction Inc., Berry Plastic, RD Johnson Excavating and Entrematic—donated funds, services, office equipment and more. In 2015 the Smitty Belcher family, which owns a large mechanical, electrical and plumbing company in the area, funded the addition of a heating, ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) training lab. All of these donations prepared Peaslee Tech for students. It only needed one more thing: the training it was built to provide.

Peaslee Tech provides training by contracting community colleges and technical schools. Johnson County Community College, Flint Hills Technical College and Neosho County Community College offer technical training certificates at Peaslee Tech. Students pay tuition directly to the community colleges through which their programs are offered. The colleges pay faculty to instruct the courses, invest in equipment for the labs and market the programs. They also pay administrative personnel to staff their respective offices at Peaslee Tech and provide advisors for students as needed. In return, Peaslee Tech allows the colleges to hold classes at the facility for little to no rent while they become established in the first two years.

Johnson County, Flint Hills and Neosho County are not the only higher education partners involved with Peaslee Tech. Metropolitan Community College offers Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) trainings for local businesses and Pittsburg State University offers teacher trainings for the educators at the site. Peaslee Tech educators teach career-building courses that are free to the public due to a sponsorship by Emprise Bank. They also instruct short, noncredit industry courses like motor drives, programmable logic control, supervision and hydraulics.

Peaslee Tech was created to close the technical training gap in Douglas County and the City of Lawrence and it is clearly achieving this goal. Before Peaslee, businesses and individuals had to travel outside of the county in order to receive technical training. Now they can attend affordable training courses locally. More than three hundred students enrolled in courses offered at Peaslee from July 2016 to December 2016, doubling enrollment from the first year of operation. Students can receive certification in OSHA, construction, HVAC, welding, industrial engineering technology, career development, automotive technology (starting Fall 2017), and computer and academic skills. All credit certificate programs are acknowledged by the Kansas Board of Regents. In addition, all of the schools that Peaslee Tech partners with are accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. Ramon, a student studying HVAC, gives testament to the work being done: “I see myself as becoming a professional HVAC technician and one day I want to own my own business and Peaslee Tech is giving me the tools to make that happen.”

Technical training is Peaslee’s goal, but not its only positive outcome. Another result is their partnership with other local community services, like USD 497 and the Lawrence Workforce Center. The Workforce Center has a mission similar to Peaslee Tech’s and is located in the same building, making their services incredibly accessible to Peaslee Tech students. The USD 497 College and Career Center is located on the same land, offering a unique arrangement described as a higher education campus. High school students and adults alike easily access resources from both facilities.

The higher education campus with Peaslee Tech is a great outcome, but the building also represents a triumph for the community. Rather than build a new structure, Peaslee Tech leaders decided to renovate a rundown facility, choosing to work for sustainability instead of allowing it to degrade. They modernized the building and use a majority of the space for training, but they also lease sections of the building to local businesses such as the Workforce Center. The community’s Senior Resource Center is leasing space while their building downtown is being renovated and API Group, a foil, film and laminate company, leases a section of Peaslee Tech for their manufacturing work as well.

Douglas County gained invaluable knowledge from the implementation of Peaslee Tech. They learned about the county’s needs for training in manufacturing, construction, automotive technology and other technical fields. They gained a better understanding of how community colleges can cooperate once a philosophy of mutual sharing and support is developed as the organization’s culture. They learned that it takes time for a community to adequately understand the great opportunities that exist for young citizens, who can build excellent careers in technical areas. Most importantly, Douglas County learned more about how individuals and companies can help guide local government to make good decisions, not only about Peaslee Tech’s training programs, but in all areas of a community.

Peaslee Tech is a unique arrangement in the United States and serves as a great resource for the community. Luke, a student studying industrial engineering technology, said, “[Peaslee Tech is] very hands-on and small classes allow a lot of one-on-one with the teacher… I look forward to seeing this place grow.” Sam, a high school student studying construction, said, “I chose Peaslee Tech because I saw it as an early opportunity to advance myself in what I wanted to do.” Students are clearly pleased with Peaslee Tech, and so is the community. Douglas County will watch with pride as the community supports Peaslee Tech’s growth in the coming years.