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North Georgia College and State University
Mike Cottrell School of Business
Dahlonega, Georgia, United States

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The Center for the Future of North Georgia

Established in 2008, the Center for the Future of North Georgia (CFNG)\(^1\) was funded by a portion of the $10 million naming gift of businessman Mike Cottrell to the North Georgia College and State University business school. North Georgia College and State University (NGCSU) is a liberal arts institution located in Dahlonega, Georgia, a small historic town in the Blue Ridge Mountains. According to Max Burns, dean of the business school, the creation of the CFNG was the only stipulation Cottrell made in giving the naming gift. Cottrell envisioned the new center as “an applied research resource for the region's cities, counties, chambers of commerce, economic development authorities and other public and private entities\(^2\).”

The CFNG’s innovation-supporting activities focus on facilitating sustainable economic growth by bringing new businesses processes to local companies and organizations in the North Georgia region. NGCSU’s strategic plan strongly emphasizes community outreach, and as a result the university-level administration is highly supportive of the CFNG and its activities.

Faculty Engagement

The CFNG facilitates research projects by business school faculty in partnership with local businesses and other organizations to create knowledge that can help them develop and sustain growth over the long-term. Additionally, through the CFNG, faculty offer non-credit training for new and existing small businesses from various industries, including technology, restaurant franchise, safety consulting, dentistry, interior design, dry cleaning, elderly in-home care, etc. These training sessions are targeted toward helping the small business owners to develop and execute growth plans.

For example, in 2009, CFNG Director Ruben Boling led a class of ten local business owners in a NxLevel\(^3\) business training certificate course, which was offered in partnership with several North Metro Atlanta partners, including the Greater North Fulton and Cumming-Forsyth County Chambers of Commerce. NxLevel is a national program (for which Boling is a certified instructor) that includes business skills training for small businesses seeking to move beyond the start-up phase, providing guidance in marketing, bookkeeping, financial projections, and negotiating with lenders. It has been delivered to more than 120,000 entrepreneurs in 47 states. According to the company, existing business owners have reported average sales increases of 32 percent within one year of graduating from this program\(^4\).

CFNG is also involved in the North Georgia Network (NGN)\(^5\) Cooperative, which recently was awarded a $33 million grant from the U.S. federal government to extend broadband Internet infrastructure across 12 counties in the region\(^6\). The CFNG’s role, according to Burns and Boling, will be to help direct the use of
the grant money by performing economic impact studies, and ultimately to help build a high tech incubator/accelerator to attract knowledge-based companies that need broadband access to the North Georgia region.

**Student Engagement**

With the support of the CFNG, approximately 15 students each year are placed as interns in various regional public and non-profit organizations through the semester-long Intern Initiative. Students and the organizations they work with are required to define their respective expectations in advance of the internship, including the final output of the students' projects. Upon completion of the internship, students must also produce a write-up of their experiences, a daily log of their activities, and an 8-10 page research paper on a topic related to their experience.

A broader range of students choose to engage in service learning programs with local organizations, taking leadership roles in assisting them in the development of innovative training programs, marketing events, and general business execution. For example, through a management seminar course that includes a social media component, many students are engaged in assisting local small businesses in the innovative use of social media for marketing and business development. CFNG Director Boling notes that the number of students involved with the CFNG social media service learning initiative has grown, from 25 in the fall semester of 2009 to approximately 70 in the spring semester of 2010.

Other future plans to support regional innovation include possible cooperation with the School of Education’s Appalachian Studies Center (which focuses on persevering the heritage, history, culture, and art of the region) in an arts marketing program, whereby business students help to create opportunities for local residents to share their talents more broadly. The school is also exploring opportunities to host student-run entrepreneurial ventures in the university’s expanding retail space.

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End Notes


