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## Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Using a Crisis to Localize Your Rural Economy

By CED Program Interns & Students

Article: <https://ced.sog.unc.edu/using-a-crisis-to-localize-your-rural-economy/>

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Imagine that the employer your community has depended on for decades shuts down unexpectedly. Suddenly, ten-thousand people are now out of work and the local economy is in flux as residents begin searching for employment in neighboring municipalities. How do you respond to the sudden uncertainty and loss of stability?

Some economic development literature expresses the importance of taking advantage of such situations because they present a chance to get creative and take risks that local officials might otherwise be less inclined to take. In response to the type of crisis described above, young leaders in one rural Ohio community responded with an innovative approach aimed at “re-localizing” their economy by growing local businesses, the local food economy, and local energy systems.

Two young natives returned home and founded a nonprofit, Energize Clinton County (ECC), to facilitate the community’s response to the firm’s closure. ECC founders wanted to take control of their community’s future and combat policies that cause leakage and erode rural economies. The ultimate goal is to create an environment that supports small businesses and promotes entrepreneurship. Energize Clinton County’s leaders hope to solve problems such as unemployment and food and energy systems through a “mass localism” movement that appropriately considers the county’s unique needs and resources.

This approach creates linkages between the organization’s five focus areas: local business, local energy, local food, local places, and local talent. One interesting component of ECC’s strategy is the Clinton Community Fellows program, which is the cornerstone project for the local talent focus area. Rural towns often cite “brain drain” as a reason for declining economies, as talented young natives take flight to urban areas. The Fellows program was created to fight the phenomenon that has persisted since the 1970s. Local talent is cultivated by partnering young professionals—usually recent college graduates—with local businesses to develop projects that align with the focus areas. Since 2010, sponsors have helped fund the placement of 17 fellows with 50 businesses, completing nearly 7,000 hours of business development work.

Fellows assist with business development needs, such as creating business plans, to help business owners achieve their objectives during the 10-week program. Participants also get opportunities to network and volunteer in community service and other activities while strengthening professional skills and potentially finding opportunities for long-term employment in the community. The Fellows program is not only an asset to local businesses, but it also serves as an excellent way to build strong connections between young people and Clinton County by building a sense of pride in the community and a desire to stay and make a difference.

The ultimate goal of the program is to create a connection between fellows and their community that will inspire participants to stay and make a difference. So far this goal has been met as each fellow has expressed a new positive perspective about Clinton County. ECC’s initiatives are bolstered by other efforts to create a community that appeals to all generations, including hosting a young professional’s roundtable and generating a survey to learn about young people’s



decisions on where to live, work, and play. Community leaders understand the need to retain young, highly skilled talent as the workforce ages and to compete with larger metropolitan areas

This fellowship program can serve as a model for rural communities in North Carolina that want to retain young talent and harness local entrepreneurship. The Energize Clinton County nonprofit has found innovative, creative ways to rebound after a crisis and create a new vision for the future. Projects spurred by the bottom-up approach center around the five focus areas that will hopefully bring about effective, sustainable change and growth.

You can learn more about Energize Clinton County and the Clinton Community Fellows Program [here](#).

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