

## **Housatonic Community College: An Urban Renewal Success Story**

*In 1996, Housatonic Community College was relocated to downtown Bridgeport, CT in an attempt to revitalize a major portion of the city. This was a daunting task, and HCC had to overcome many hurdles to achieve its mission and become an engine for workforce and economic development in Connecticut's poorest city.*

### ***The Invisible Community College***

Ten years ago, when Dr. Robert “Rab” Thornton became Dean of Outreach Services at Housatonic Community College (HCC), the college had slow enrollment growth, very little interaction with the local business community, and low visibility in the state legislature. His duty was to reverse this trend and effectively “make an invisible college visible.”

Thornton quickly realized that one of the problems behind this was that the college primarily focused on enrollment figures when talking about its community value, and not on what stakeholders were truly interested in—economic revitalization, bottom lines, and return on investment. They were not communicating because they were speaking completely different languages. This discovery spurred Thornton to redirect HCC’s outreach efforts by looking for new ways to communicate the college’s real value to the community and state.

### ***Speaking the Stakeholders’ Language***

Thornton’s search led him to adopt EMSI’s Socioeconomic Impact (SEIM) study as a major part of his solution. The SEIM is based on a framework designed specifically to measure a community college’s return on investment to the local economy from student, taxpayer, business perspectives.

EMSI’s report took on a key role in communicating HCC’s value. Although Thornton always knew that the college contributed to the economy, he realized that “if you have something good, but nobody knows about it—you don’t have anything good. With the SEIM we were able to express what we contributed to the region—in terms that everyone can connect with—the dollar sign.” When the college’s first SEIM study was completed in 2001, it showed that HCC’s return on investment to the city of Bridgeport was \$60 million per year. Thornton quickly implemented a highly successful awareness campaign based on the results.

Through Thornton’s efforts, the college began to build a stronger relationship with the local business community, gain approval from the legislature, do a more effective job of marketing the college to area residents, and fulfill state-mandated accountability measures.

### ***From Sidelines to Spotlight***

Among the many positive applications of the SEIM for HCC, two in particular stood out: accountability and awareness.

## 1. HCC Surpassed Accountability Requirements

The SEIM study effectively demonstrated that HCC was indeed making a positive fiscal impact in the city of Bridgeport. This simple message showed decision-makers that HCC was staying accountable to the city and its taxpayers. In fact, Valerie Lewis, Former Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Higher Education, referenced the SEIM when she said that HCC “...provides a strong report model for use by any of our community colleges and is a fine example of how one community college is proactively addressing accountability in ways that go beyond those mandated.”

## 2. Reliable Information Created a Powerful Message

With the quantitative results of the SEIM study, Thornton had good news that resonated with everyone, and people paid attention. He began taking students to the legislature to spread the word of HCC’s contribution to the economy, and legislators listened.

To get the point across, HCC created a public awareness campaign with a “check” made out from HCC to the “Taxpayers of Bridgeport” for \$60 million. This simple piece of paper proved to be a powerful way to get important stakeholders to literally stop in their tracks and listen to the college’s message, whether they were busy legislators, business owners, mayors, board members, or state officials. Soon nearly everyone recognized HCC as “the \$60 million community college.”

## HCC Still Looking Ahead, Not Back

Today, HCC is known as a powerful economic engine, and downtown Bridgeport shows the results with \$1.9 billion currently invested in downtown community development due to HCC’s presence. HCC is in the process of doubling the size of its campus with a \$53 million expansion, which Thornton believes is a direct result of their use of the SEIM. The student population has also been affected by HCC’s increased visibility, more than doubling in the last ten years from 2,000 to over 4,600.



HCC’s most recent SEIM study shows that they pump \$264.7 million into the economy of their eleven-town service area every year. Thornton says that other colleges can learn from his early struggles and apply the lesson that he had to learn the hard way: Quantify the college’s value in terms your stakeholders understand, and then commit to spreading the word.

## In the Media

*NOTE: At the time these articles were published, EMSI provided services to community colleges as "CCbenefits." After reorganization in 2007, EMSI dropped the CCbenefits name.*

["Landmark Study Shows Urban College Economic Impact."](#) *The Business Times*, March 1, 2002.

Dembicki, Matthew. ["A Simple Message Is Critical in Economic Impact Studies."](#) *Community College Times*, June 7, 2007.

## About EMSI

Economic Modeling Specialists Inc. (EMSI) is a professional services firm that offers integrated regional data, web-based analysis tools, data-driven reports, and custom consulting services. EMSI has served thousands of workforce, education, economic development, and other policy professionals in the U.S., Canada, and the United Kingdom, and the company's web-based **Strategic Advantage** research and analysis suite has thousands of subscribed users across the U.S. For more information, call (866) 999-3674 or visit [www.economicmodeling.com](http://www.economicmodeling.com).