

College and Community in Partnership

The Furniture College at Letterfrack

Stuart A. Rosenfeld

Ten years ago, a community-owned development center in Ireland partnered with a technical college to create a local institution that could revitalize both a community and a lagging furniture industry cluster. Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and Connemara West, a community-owned economic development organization in western County Galway, joined forces to build a new college to introduce craft and design principles, entrepreneurship, and new production technologies in an effort to breathe new life into the industry.

In 1988, Ireland's Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), Ireland's closest equivalent to a community college, and Connemara West (CW), a rural community-owned development organization in the village of Letterfrack, embarked on an innovative path to revitalize the local economy and create new opportunities for youth. In the late 1980s, Connemara, a scenic but remote area in western County Galway, had virtually no industry, a declining population, an official unemployment rate of nearly 22 percent (and an unofficial rate of about 50 percent), and few job opportunities for its youth. Many young people left school early and very few enrolled in higher education. The best hope for enterprising local youth was to migrate to Ireland's urban areas and seek

employment in the many foreign-owned branch plants.

Connemara West looked to furniture manufacturing for its future, partly because it already had a successful woodworking program for disadvantaged youth and a vacant facility—a former boys' reformatory. Taking on furniture production, however, was a risk because it required much higher skill and management levels and therefore higher education levels than did woodworking. Ireland's furniture industry was weak in comparison to other European countries, and the government had essentially given up on it. One official hearing about the effort commented that "getting technology into furniture would be a waste." Nevertheless, the community and college believed there was a market niche for quality Irish furniture, and, unlike much of Ireland's growth economy, the sector was indigenous and had potential for entrepreneurial opportunities in rural areas. The CW believed that better-educated workers could help make

this industry more competitive, that the rural location could capitalize on the natural beauty of the area, and that the industry, by attracting applicants and companies, could spur economic development in the community. Because success depended on skills, CW's first and most important partner was the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT).

After considerable analysis and discussion, CW and GMIT—advised by a consultant from Denmark—formed a partnership to design a furniture college that would deliver a high-quality, postsecondary degree program in furniture design and manufacture, and to make the college internationally renowned for skills in modern furniture design and technology. The title "Furniture College" was agreed upon by the partners to demonstrate the shared interests, but it has no legal standing; the college is part of GMIT.

The college has grown substantially since 1990, when the first national certificates were con-

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Student at the Furniture College, Letterfrack, fashions a box as part of a program that teaches both hand and machine furnituremaking skills. Photo courtesy The Furniture College, Letterfrack, Ireland.

ferred, and since 1992, when the college received 380 applications for just 15 places. By 1997, the program enrolled 27 students and offered 2 certificate programs (1 in furniture design and manufacture and 1 in furniture production), as well as a baccalaureate program in furniture technology. By 2000, the college had 85 students, and in 2002, enrollment is projected to reach 160. Applicants to the certificate programs must have a good grasp of math and science plus, preferably, previous work in sciences, computing, engineering, technical drawing, and art.

Since the program emphasizes entrepreneurship and design, students are expected not only to understand furniture materials and processes but also how to manage an enterprise and sell its goods. Besides wood, students are encouraged to creatively incorporate copper, steel, plastics, and fabrics in their furniture design. They also learn to apply computer-based technologies necessary to their craft to achieve high-volume production.

As the college developed, it added a research and development institute, and more directly diffused the technologies being taught to its students into the industry. This, it was anticipated, would solidify Letterfrack's claim as the furniture skills and technology center of Ireland. Forbairt, Ireland's Science and Technology agency, contracted

with an expert from the Danish Technological Institute to carry out a study of the industry and the potential for a technology center at Letterfrack. In 1997, a Furniture Technology Center was established at the college, funded by Forbairt. In 1999, the Furniture Restoration Center opened, also as a separate legal entity from the college, and college students now are engaged in restoration work for the National Gallery of Ireland.

The college has a remarkable record in attracting and selecting good students and helping them find employment. Applicants far outnumber openings, and the recruitment of students from all over Ireland and abroad speaks to the reputation of the college and the community. Students are easily placed after graduation. The new bachelor's degree program enables students with certificates to continue their education, and many now do.

The program's entrepreneurial spirit has yielded results. Since 1990, graduates have successfully started 15 new businesses in Ireland that incorporate design and innovation into high-quality and artfully crafted products. By integrating management, marketing, and administrative skills with technical and design skills, the Furniture College enhances its graduates' entrepreneurial capabilities.

It will take more time for the college to build productive links with industry, largely because Ireland's furniture companies still lack a collective vision—or the associational structures that might produce a vision. The Furniture College and Technology Center and its skilled workers and artisans, however, may change industry attributes and attitudes. Ireland's furniture industry is beginning to

show a new appreciation for the value of training, information systems, and professional management among employers and an emerging willingness to share information and cooperate. The overwhelming entrepreneurial aspirations of students may be the long-term salvation of the industry and region. If students receive the support they need, achieve their goals, and grow, the industry will receive a real boost.

The effects on the local economy thus far are attributable mainly to the college itself, not the students or technologies it produces. In the last 2 years, a number of staff members have located to the area (table 1), a trend likely to continue as Letterfrack's infrastructure and services improve to meet the needs of the new arrivals. There is now regularly scheduled bus service to Galway, and housing has been renovated and amenities expanded to accommodate the growing student body and faculty. Construction on the college in the last 2 years (some \$4.4 million) employs local contractors and brings other workers into the area, generating additional economic activity. Student involvement enriches the local community, and college facilities (e.g., library, evening classes, and sports facilities) are available to the community. Student housing and other facilities serve a growing tourist trade in the college's offseason.

Most graduates of the program, however, leave the area—not surprising since there are few local companies to employ them and young people often seek an environment with more social amenities. The real test, however, is whether some will later choose to return. As the new furniture technology center grows, it may create opportunities for new businesses in

Table 1

New GMIT employees, by work status and residence

Status	Residence	Number
Full-time	Living locally	2
	Commuting	3
Temporary full-time	Living locally	3
Part-time	Living locally	4
	Commuting	6
	Visiting (Temporary)	17
CW staff:		
Full-time	Living locally	2
Part-time	Living locally	3
Foodservice staff:		
Full-time	Living locally	2
Part-time	Living locally	2
Furniture technology center staff:		
Full-time	Living locally	2
	Commuting	2
Part-time	Visiting (Temporary)	3
Furniture restoration center staff:		
Full-time	Living locally	2

Source: Patrick Anthony Tobin, "Reviving a Community, Modernizing an Industry: Ireland's Furniture College," RTS, 2000.

the Connemara region. Nevertheless, there are some immediate effects on the community that are quite obvious. For example, by expanding the employment, young population, and visibility of the village, the college has given the community hope and a basis for economic growth. Furthermore, the furniture sector has broad appeal and long-term potential for Ireland because it is largely an Irish-owned industry that could provide a stable, continuing source of income and jobs, and it is likely to use local suppliers and invest its profits in the Republic of Ireland.

Prospects

The college has three sets of customers—the students, the community, and the industry. The students have a bright future. There are sufficient economic opportuni-

ties, though not necessarily in the region or even in Ireland, and many students have already set their sights on other locations and countries. Though many may leave to acquire new skills and contacts, they may later return to the area, as many Irish youth are doing now.

The community, which has already reaped benefits from the college, may also develop its own furniture industry base if it can attract the entrepreneurs among its graduates. The college is talking about forming its own local furniture company in the community and, in the near future, the CW may want to consider a new business incubator to give students a chance to share startup risks and establish markets.

The graduates of the college, who already have a strong relationship with industry, are beginning to

affect industry attributes and attitudes. The students are moving into key, influential positions, but their full impact will not become apparent until more students graduate and take management positions. In addition, many furniture companies are expressing interest in short courses, workshops, and seminars organized and delivered at the college or at company premises. This type of service combined with applied research programs could move the industry even more quickly.

Growth, however, also brings some undesirable changes. Fueled by the economic boom and the desire for rural resorts, the Letterfrack community has already experienced spiraling housing prices, and some new staff are now unable to purchase a home. Another challenge will be to meet the social and consumption needs of the youth influx, while avoiding student-driven homogenization that could change the nature of the Connemara West region. At its current levels, the student population is a huge asset and source of new wealth. A student body multiplied by three or four, however, may overwhelm the community culture.

Yet in total, the furniture college has been a very successful and unusual partnership between a college and community. By merging the objectives of community development and education for industry, the college has formed an effective team of people with different backgrounds, interests, and ambitions. And, by focusing its energy on one industry cluster, it has established a reputation for excellence that extends far outside the community. Furthermore, this partnership may be replicable under the right circumstances. **RA**