When faced with the complex reality of a changing economy and tougher competitive environment, business and community leaders of the small, Midwestern town of Columbus, Indiana turned to the inspired wisdom of its most revered resident—J. Irwin Miller.

It was the civic-minded Miller, one of this century’s most successful industrialists and late chairman and CEO of Cummins, who believed that companies should not only be responsible to their shareholders—but to their communities as well. The visible expression of Millers’ beliefs are evident in the modern architectural treasures that punctuate the Columbus skyline. But, his core beliefs of using the power of place and community collaboration to solve grand challenges that span public, private, and social sectors, are key to what gave birth to the Community Education Coalition.

Business formed partnership with education

Born of people and passion for a civic process, the Community Education Coalition (CEC) today represents a 20-year partnership of education, business, and community leaders focused on aligning and integrating the Columbus, Indiana and region’s community learning system with economic growth and an improved quality of life.

CEC is a noteworthy, yet unexpected, example of private business stepping up to improve public education. The results thus far are evident in two major buildings, significant national recognition, and ongoing initiatives to bolster educational attainment for all in the small, primarily rural, southeastern Indiana communities it serves. It’s no accident that the built environment of the community propels CEC, and that many new and innovative ways of working formed out of the business community—significant partners in its founding.

**Education, Economic Opportunity, and Community**

In today’s dynamically changing economy, employers need more than ever an educated, skilled workforce to fill jobs and perform the requisite tasks. What exists is an insufficient number of adults with postsecondary degrees and certifications to fill those roles. This challenge is not exclusive to Columbus or its surrounding communities. But, in meeting the challenge, a public/private coalition was needed.

In 1997, a coalition was formed with community stakeholders and major businesses in collaboration with educators. Much like a three-legged stool, with the legs representing education, business, and community, each is required to meet the challenges. CEC then began its relentless focus on opening opportunities and providing access to skills building tools and education for the local and regional population. With CEC’s focus on increasing learning opportunities, the results include both brick-and-mortar buildings as well as life-building programs for its participants.

**Columbus Learning Center**

As one of CEC’s first projects, the Columbus Learning Center (CLC) opened its doors in the fall of 2005. This uniquely innovative arc-shaped building was designed by Kevin Kennon of Kohn Pedersen Fox Architects. He describes the building’s design symbolism: “The design of the Columbus Learning Center reflects the process of its coming-into-being. It symbolizes a dynamic community of strong individuals pulling together to shape building and landscape around the noble ideal of barrier-free learning.”

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**AMERICA’S SUCCESS DEPENDS ON GROWING OUR LOCAL, STATE AND NATIONAL TALENT POOLS...**

SAVVY LEADERS ARE ALREADY PAVING THE WAY TO DO THAT IN SOME UNEXPECTED LOCATIONS. COLUMBUS IS ONE OF THEM. OTHER CITIES SHOULD LOOK TO THEM FOR INSPIRATIONS—AND FOLLOW SUIT.”

—Jamie Merisotis
CEO Lumina Foundation
The CLC building could best be described as a “bridge” that conveniently spans the campus locating classrooms and student services for Indiana University Purdue University Columbus (IUPUC), Ivy Tech Community College, Purdue Polytechnic Institute, and WorkOne under one roof. Viewed by many to be a model of how higher education partners can collaborate, the Columbus Learning Center serves the needs of students, businesses, and communities. Within the CLC building stakeholder meetings are held, needs are raised, and analysis is made to launch the many projects and initiatives of CEC.

Five years after the CLC was dedicated, a second building, the Advanced Manufacturing Center of Excellence made possible by Lilly Endowment Inc. was opened to the public. It too is shared by IUPUC, Ivy Tech, and Purdue Polytechnic Institute for those pursuing education and training in Advanced Manufacturing, engineering, and technology-related careers.

TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMS
Clearly, CEC does not exist in a one-size-fits-all world. With technological advancements, manufacturers' talent requirements can change with the winds of consumer demand. Traditional students are increasingly being defined as non-traditional. And communities continue to desperately strive to be cultural magnets for economic growth. CEC programs and initiatives have been conceived to meet the current and future workforce needs of business, and to offer multiple educational pathways for all learners to become successful—which ultimately results in better outcomes for the community-at-large.

Because of the collaborative nature of CEC and CivicLab’s Stakeholder Engagement Process model, these programs and initiatives benefit from bimonthly meetings of a coalition of stakeholders—local business, education, and civic leaders to discuss challenges and formulate responsive solutions to address them.

Transformative programs supported by CEC include: STEM Seamless Pathway/Adult Education Consortium; Indiana University School of Art, Architecture + Design offering the J. Irwin Miller Architecture Program; Latino Education Outreach; Council for Youth Development; iGrad Program; Dream It Do It Career Awareness; After School Coalition; Early Childhood Education Network; and EcO Regional Networks (Advanced Manufacturing, Healthcare Network, and Attainment Network)

The EcO (Economic Opportunities through Education) Network connects key stakeholders and concentrates on areas of advanced manufacturing, healthcare and educational attainment in ten surrounding southeast Indiana counties.

 Recently, in recognition of the successes of the EcO programs, the national Lumina Foundation designated Columbus and its Southeast Indiana region as a national Talent Hub. This designation is given to communities that successfully organize and align themselves around goals that lead to an increase in postsecondary degrees and certifications that are earned.

With the Lumina Talent Hub designation, CEC will dedicate increased focus on educational attainment among the Latino and low-income populations that have no postsecondary degrees or credentials. This is a positive pathway that assists adults regionally who now will have the opportunity to increase their education levels, and improve their employment opportunities.

What these transformative programs and initiatives do best, is cultivate and grow a pool of talent serving a community by attracting investment, increasing personal prosperity, and creating a sense of place.

A MODEL FOR THE FUTURE
The work of CEC is successful because it seeks to align the goals of education with business and utilizes data to help move forward. In 2012, Columbus was the number one metropolitan statistical area (MSA) in the nation for job growth. It ranked fourth in the nation for GDP growth and had the lowest unemployment rate of any MSA in the State of Indiana. The city’s average weekly wages are thirty percent higher than the rest of the state. Weekly wages for workers in the manufacturing sector are forty percent higher than the state average.

All told, Columbus has shown that the quality of place has the power to attract and develop great pools of talent. And that talent, in turn, has built a regional community of true excellence based on the process of collaboration. ■
**Regional Eco Network**

Eco Network focuses on increasing educational attainment by creating a regional system of life-long learning linked to the economic sectors that are the most well-paying in Southeast Indiana—currently advanced manufacturing and health care. Stakeholders involved include education, community foundations, industry representing more than one hundred manufacturers and all seven hospitals, workforce, government, and community leaders. Eco is the largest of the Community Education Coalition’s regional initiatives.

The work of Eco is defined by 3 goals:

1. Move residents up at least one level in education, training, and/or job.
2. Coordinate a regional learning system.
3. Be a catalyst for regional leadership and collaboration.

**Early Childhood Education**

Responding to assessments showing that a third of children entering Kindergarten were inadequately prepared, a three-year pilot project was implemented within Bartholomew County in 2010 and focused on the benefits of Early Childhood Education. While continued funding via property tax assessment has been unsuccessful, the project remains an ongoing agenda item for the Early Childhood Consortium.

**Lumina Talent Hub Designation**

In September, 2017, Community Education Coalition (CEC) and its Eco Network initiative received a designation by Lumina Foundation as a Talent Hub, one of 24 communities across America to be so designated. This designation acknowledges Eco Network’s exemplary status among peer communities, and elevates the region’s effective work to create systemic change for postsecondary learners to a national level.

The Lumina Talent Hub grant supports a regional initiative focused on increasing the educational attainment rate of adults with no college education in Southeast Indiana. The initiative will provide specific supports to help remove barriers to educational success for Latino and low-income adults, in partnerships with employers, Ivy Tech Community College and our region’s Adult Education providers.

**iGrad**

With the region’s high school dropout rates hovering at 16%, a Community Impact Project sponsored by the Community Education Coalition and conducted by Cummins Six Sigma professionals developed an initiative to intervene and mentor middle school students at risk of failing high school. Utilizing Six Sigma analytical tools, iGrad was designed in cooperation with Ivy Tech Community College-Columbus, Cummins Inc., Bartholomew County School Corporation, and Flat Rock-Hawcreek School Corporation.

iGrad provides graduation coaches to work with students in grades 8-12 to ensure they receive the academic, social, health, and community support needed to successfully complete high school and enter college. It’s an effort to shift the culture, so that these students know they are part of a team that will do “whatever it takes” to ensure their success. Success is reflected in the number of students that self-refer, and the challenge is securing enough coaches to meet the need.

**Latino Education Outreach**

The Latino Education initiative both identifies and seeks to close the educational gaps facing the Latino population in Southeast Indiana. At the same time, the Latino Education Outreach Program, a public/private partnership, provides a full suite of services to Latinos and their families.

Two counties in the region have the most significant Latino populations due to their manufacturing base and a maturing Latino community. With support from the Community Education Coalition, they are addressing the current challenges of the education and workforce systems by working together with industry and education leaders to develop strategies and programs intended to increase the education attainment levels of the Latino community.
The success that CEC has brought to the people of Columbus and region it serves, relies on the strength of its partnerships. These are the different initiatives that have resulted from partnerships with business, education, and civic leaders:

**EcO Network**
- Launched in partnership with Heritage Fund - The Community Foundation of Bartholomew County and Southeast Indiana's community foundations, the EcO Network is CEC's most comprehensive initiative. The EcO Network consists of education, business, and community leaders coordinating the region's learning system with economic growth and quality of life. This work has been generously supported over the years by Lilly Endowment Inc.

**Lumina Foundation Talent Hub Designation**
- CEC and EcO Southeast Indiana are designated a national Talent Hub by Lumina Foundation in September, 2017.

**IUPUC, Ivy Tech Community College, Purdue Polytechnic Columbus**
- Start up and growth of Business, Education, Nursing, Computer Technology, Mechanical Engineering Technology, & B.S. in Mechanical Engineering

**Columbus Learning Center**
- On September 16, 2005, Columbus dedicated the first shared-use facility in the state among Indiana University, Purdue University, Ivy Tech Community College, WorkOne, and the community. Designed by lead architect Kevin Kennon and a team from Kohn Pedersen Fox, the building's ownership, operating, and financing is unique in the State.

**SoAA+D**
- Indiana University formed a partnership with CEC to establish an educational center in downtown Columbus specializing in art and design, known as the Indiana University School of Art, Architecture + Design Columbus, as well as the founding of the J. Irwin Miller Architecture Program.

**Advanced Manufacturing Center of Excellence**
- Shared by IUPUC, Ivy Tech, and Purdue Polytechnic Columbus, the center contains classrooms, teaching laboratories, and support services for students and employees pursuing education and training in Advanced Manufacturing and technology-related careers. With support from Cummins, and designed by world-renowned architect Cesar Pelli, the center is home to a Meteorology Lab for use by students and the region's employers.

**CivicLab**
- An Institute for Civic Collaboration
  CivicLab creates the frameworks that form the foundation for the practice of community collaboration. CivicLab's approach is to learn what makes community collaboration work at its best, document the discoveries, and teach and share the practices broadly.

—Aaron Renn, Urbanophile

For more information, visit EducationCoalition.com