

**State-Supported Small Business Assistance Programs:
An Examination of Small Business Centers in North Carolina**

By

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Executive Summary

Small businesses are an important part of the state-level economic development efforts. To promote small business growth many states, including North Carolina have developed programs to assist in small business creation, viability, and expansion. The Small Business Center Network is a business assistance program comprised of 58 Small Business Centers (SBC) located within each of the community colleges. The SBCs support business growth and development through community-based services for small businesses. This study is an examination of the services provided by the SBCs and the clients they serve.

Introduction and Background

Small businesses play an important role in the economic development and expansion of state economies. Small businesses increase gross state product, total state employment and state personal income.¹ The importance of these firms in North Carolina has grown as economic and structural changes in the state economy have shifted the labor market from the traditionally strong manufacturing industry to an increasing dominance of knowledge-intensive and service-sector activities.² In 2006, there were approximately 766,500 small businesses in North Carolina. Employer firms accounted for 192,800 of this total, up 3.3% from 2005, and 98.1% of the employer firms were small. Self-employment totaled 418,000 in 2006.³ The importance of small business growth has prompted many states, including North Carolina, to develop programs to assist in small business creation and expansion.⁴

In 1984, North Carolina created eight Small Business Centers (SBCs) designed to support business growth and development through community-based services and resources for existing and prospective small businesses. Today, the Small Business Center Network (SBCN) is comprised of 58 SBCs located at each of the community colleges. The SBCN works to increase the success rate and viability of small businesses in North Carolina. From Fiscal Year 2002-03 to 2006-07, the number of clients served by SBCs grew 5 percent to 70,448, while the budget increased by nearly 50 percent to \$5.7 million. The SBCs offer a variety of seminars, workshops and courses on the how-to of business operations including business planning, management, finance, marketing, and specialty needs. Each SBC is required to provide a core curriculum termed the “Small Business Development Series” as well as counseling services, resource and information centers, and network opportunities. In addition to the core curriculum, the SBCs are encouraged to address the needs of their local service area with specialized training. These expanded services include programs targeting regional industries such as motorsports, developing skills such as international marketing, or creating innovative strategies like the cultivation of micro-incubators. Although the detailed services vary by Center, the assistance includes a combination of consulting, counseling, training, and technical assistance.⁵ Counseling services and access to resource libraries are free of charge, but some courses, seminars and workshops require a registration fee. The purpose of the services is to give business owners skills for planning a new business and executing the plan as well as expanding the business or refining the business strategies for greater success.⁶

An important public policy question, particularly in today’s economic climate, is whether small business assistance programs are meeting the needs of entrepreneurs. This information can help policy makers and program administrators tailor their services to ensure the viability and growth of small businesses. This study provides a preliminary examination of the practices used by SBCs and considers them in relation to findings from a synthesis of relevant literature as well as a survey distributed to SBC clients.

Review of the Literature on Small Business Assistance Programs

The academic literature on business assistance programs includes the following topics: viability challenges and methods for addressing them, impact of assistance programs on business creation and maturity, and specific needs of the different types of clients and businesses served by assistance programs. A synthesis of the literature reveals an incomplete understanding of the effects of business

assistance programs. Much of the literature discusses methodological challenges in identifying the causal effect of assistance programs on business outcomes. These difficulties result in studies that are unable to draw causal relationships between assistance and success or to identify the essential elements of an assistance program such as what services to provide, how to provide them, and which programs are best for different types of businesses.

Studies have shown that one of the primary obstacles to starting a small business is insufficient capital and financing.⁷ It is also well documented that small business failure rates are high, especially in the first five years of operation. A summary of the literature finds that while external factors such as recessions and declining demand are related to business failure, the most commonly cited reasons for closure are inadequate planning, management incompetence, inability to secure financial resources, and failure to compete in the market.⁸

Much research has focused on strategies to prevent business failure, including small business assistance programs. The value associated with small business assistance is categorized into primary benefits, or those provided to the direct recipient, and secondary benefits, or the resulting gains in the form of increased sales, employment and profit.⁹ Studies on the impact of assistance programs have examined a number of outcome measures and emphasize the importance of the following services in mitigating the issues associated with business failure: strategic planning, managerial strategies, operating skills, and securing financing (Appendix B). The results find businesses that received help through business assistance programs had stronger survival and growth rates than their counterparts.¹⁰ Recent studies have expanded on this research to include examinations of the specific needs of different types of clients and businesses.

Research Design

The research for this study was completed in two parts. The initial phase was an online survey of the SBC Directors to identify the specific support services provided by each SBC (Appendix C). The study is based on the aforementioned notion that each SBC offers distinct support strategies resulting from the adaptation of a non-core curriculum to reflect the needs of their service area. Of the 58 SBCs, 49 of the directors responded to the survey, a response rate of 84 percent. Given the high response rate, the respondents were representative of SBCs in North Carolina.

The second part of the research studied the SBC clients. An online survey was distributed to a sample of SBC clients to capture their use of the program, satisfaction with services, and identify assistance needed from the SBC (Appendix C). A total of 4,653 clients were surveyed about their experience with the SBC. The list of clients surveyed was provided by the SBCN. The survey asked about the services used at the SBC, the perceived effectiveness of these services as well as opportunities for service expansion. The survey also asked about background information including their business experience and education levels. Of the 4,653 surveyed, 220 responded for a response rate of 4.7 percent. Thirteen of the 58 SBCs did not have a client respond to the survey.

Limitations of the Study

North Carolina's SBCs, like other small business assistance programs, offer a multiplicity of services to a diverse clientele. Although the Centers provide a similar core curriculum, they offer differing levels and types of additional support. The autonomous nature of the SBCs is designed to help each program meet the varying needs of their respective locations. Researchers often point to the influence of geographic location and exogenous variables on the needs and performance of businesses. Given the disparate characteristics, it is difficult to generally compare SBCs.

The survey results also exhibit important biases. First, although the entire population of SBC Directors was surveyed, only a small portion of the SBC clients received the survey. These clients provided their contact information and indicated their willingness to participate in surveys and studies. The survey of SBC Directors might be influenced by the self-reporting of data as well as the desire to be perceived as successful. The results of the client survey have biases due to self-selection into the assistance program, self-reporting in the survey, and the social desirability of satisfaction with the program and subsequent level of success. The low response rate on the client survey limits the ability to draw conclusions.

Findings

The survey results revealed important information about the clients of the SBC. The data also show the types of services used by the clients and the assistance they would like to receive (Appendix C). The current section applies the literature to discuss findings and their implications.

Profile of the Businesses Operated by SBC Clients

The top five industries occupied by SBC client businesses are: professional, scientific and technical services (15 percent); healthcare and personal services (13 percent); arts, entertainment and recreation (10 percent); retail services (9 percent); and manufacturing (7 percent). These findings reflect the state's shift from manufacturing to knowledge-based, service industries.¹¹ Additionally, the sole proprietorship is the most common type of business operated by SBC clients. Limited Liability Corporations and S Corporations were the second and third most common. Nearly all of these businesses employed five or fewer employees during a typical pay period in 2008. Businesses employing five or fewer employees are typically classified as very small. The highest percentage of businesses employed contractors, subcontractors, independent contractors or consultants. A notable percentage also employed full-time or part-time workers while a smaller portion reported employing day laborers or temporary staffing.¹² The worker classification has implications for the employment strategy of the state. As the state shifts into the service-based economy, many of these businesses employ fewer workers than those of the traditional manufacturing industry.¹³

Business Experience and When Clients Sought Assistance Services.

According to the findings of this study, SBC clients are relatively inexperienced business owners or managers. This is the first business or self-employment experience for 60 percent of the clients, and almost all founded their business. Over half of the clients have owned or managed their business for less than three years, and 25 percent have done so for less than one year. Of the respondents to the client

survey, 38 percent sought services from the SBC during the planning phase and 34 percent sought services during the start-up or implementation of the business. As mentioned, previous studies found that business failure is most likely to occur during the first five years of operation and the manager's lack of skill is a primary cause for the closure. Studies have shown that assistance during the very early stages of business development help mitigate the possibility of failure.

Services Offered by the Small Business Centers, Reported Satisfaction and Accessibility of Assistance.

The assistance offered by the SBCs include business startup, growth management, operation skills, information technology, financial procurement assistance, resource center or library, opportunities for collaboration with businesses, and networking meetings with local business organizations. These services are considered the core of SBC assistance. The clients found each of the services very effective or effective, with start-up services receiving the highest percentage of clients finding it very effective. Some SBCs have expanded on these core services to provide additional training. The classes offered by these SBCs include non-profit management, "green" business concepts, customer service skills, human resource issues, and certification courses for specialized industries such as cosmetic arts.

Accessibility is essential to ensuring clients are able to use these services. Most SBCs are open between 40 and 50 hours a week and operate at least five hours outside normal business hours. A smaller portion is open between 35 and 40 hours a week. Additionally, 60 percent of the SBCs reported offering services in locations other than the community college in which they are based for at least five hours a week. The frequency of assistance delivery varied according to the type of service. The resource library was the most regularly offered service with nearly a quarter of the Centers offering access daily. Any particular service was most likely to be offered twice a year and monthly offerings were the second most common.

Demand for Business Assistance: Client Use of Other Sources

Survey respondents use several sources for businesses assistance in conjunction with the SBC. In addition to the SBC, the most commonly used support comes from other businesses or peers. The U.S. Small Business Administration and the Service Corp for Retired Executives (SCORE) closely followed. Private consultants and the Small Business and Technology Development Center (SBTDC) were the fourth and fifth most commonly used sources of assistance. After identifying these resources, the clients were asked to rank the effectiveness of these programs and services in comparison to the SBC. Of the top five most commonly used support services, only assistance from other businesses or peers and private consultants were deemed more effective than the SBC.

Additional Services Needed by SBC Clients

In the survey, clients were asked to list services they would like to receive from the SBC, but are not currently available or are not offered with sufficient frequency. The service needs are classified in the following categories: marketing and advertising, accounting and finance, personnel administration, operations, and other. Of the respondents, 29 percent indicated a need for marketing and advertising assistance, 22 percent need accounting and finance assistance, 18 percent need operations help, and four percent require personnel administration assistance.¹⁴ Another 15 percent have other needs including mentorships, hours outside normal business hours, and information technology assistance.¹⁵

Conclusion and Implications

1. SBC Clients Employ Few Workers, but Occupy Growing Industries

This study has important implications for the state's economic development strategy. The findings are consistent with recent reports on the state's workforce that emphasize the transformation of the economy from a manufacturing industry to a knowledge-based, service sector. This change results in the loss of jobs with family-sustaining wages, and much of the state is not creating enough jobs to meet employment needs. Communities are increasingly looking to entrepreneurship.¹⁶ Research has shown that small businesses are important in the renewal process of a changing labor market. Small businesses are adaptable to changes, and they are able to use the secondary labor market, including first-time entrants or individuals with low education levels, and develop the skills of these workers. The small businesses in this study occupy some of the fastest growing industries in the state, demonstrating the growth potential of both the industries and the businesses. However, the SBC clients employ few workers, indicating a potential shortfall in re-employment of displaced workers. SBCs could tailor their services to these growing industries and employ strategies for aiding employment growth.

2. SBC Clients are Inexperienced, but Seek Assistance Early

Research has shown that business failure is especially high during the first five years of operation, and some of the primary causes of closure are related to inexperience and inadequate business knowledge including management ineptitude, insufficient planning, failure to acquire financing, and lack of good managerial advice.¹⁷ As discussed in the finding most of the SBC clients are inexperienced and have owned their current business for less than three years. However, most seek assistance during the very early stages of development. Studies show that external assistance during the early stages of development can have a significant impact on the formation and success of the business. Businesses that sought services during these early stages had higher rates of implementation, growth and survival.¹⁸ An entrepreneur's intentions to start a business and the decisions made before execution form the structures, strategies and goals. In turn, these decisions influence the viability and growth of the new business.¹⁹ Studies have shown firms that participated in assistance programs enjoyed a higher rate of survival and growth than the general population of small businesses.²⁰ The relative inexperience of business owners and the timing of assistance delivery should be considered by SBC Directors in the development of their outreach and client services.

3. SBCs are One of Many Assistance Sources for Small Business Owners, but More is Needed

This study finds that small business owners seek a multitude of assistance sources, and the SBC is one of many resources. This varied assistance can be beneficial as clients acquire knowledge from a breadth of experts. In seeking this assistance, clients indicated a need for more assistance with the administrative and operating aspects of their business. A study by James J. Chrisman and John Leslie found that clients benefit most when assistance includes a comprehensive focus on strategic, administrative and operating tactics. According to this study, entrepreneurs may not recognize the need for strategic planning and may over-emphasize their need for other services. In line with these findings, the clients in this study did not indicate a need for strategic planning assistance. The SBCs should encourage clients to participate in long-range planning assistance, in addition to administrative and operating services.

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- ¹ (U.S. Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, 2007)
- ² (North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2007)
- ³ (U.S. Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, 2007)
- ⁴ (U.S. Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, 2007)
- ⁵ For purposes of this study, technical assistance includes help with procurement of federal contracts.
- ⁶ Millsaps, George, Small Business Center Network Director. Personal interview. October 31, 2008.
- ⁷ (Blanchflower & Oswald, 1998)
- ⁸ (Gaskill, Van Auken, & Manning, 1993)
- ⁹ (Wood, Primary Benefits, Secondary Benefits, and the Evaluation of Small Business Assistance Programs, 1994)
- ¹⁰ (Chrisman, McMullan, & Hall, The Influence of Guided Preparation on the Long-Term Performance of New Ventures, 2005)
- ¹¹ (North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2007)
- ¹² The survey allowed business owners to indicate all types of workers employed with their organization.
- ¹³ (North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2007)
- ¹⁴ Some clients indicated a need for more than one assistance category. Each need was recorded separately.
- ¹⁵ (Chrisman & McMullan, Outsider Assistance as a Knowledge Resource for New Venture Survival, 2004)
- ¹⁶ (North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2007)
- ¹⁷ (Gaskill, Van Auken, & Manning, 1993)
- ¹⁸ (Chrisman & McMullan, A Preliminary Assessment of Outsider Assistance as a Knowledge Resource: The Longer Term Impact of New Venture Counseling, 2000), (Chrisman & McMullan, Some Additional Comments on the Sources and Measurement of the Benefits of Small Business Assistance Programs, 2002)
- ¹⁹ (Bird, 1988)
- ²⁰ (Chrisman & McMullan, Outsider Assistance as a Knowledge Resource for New Venture Survival, 2004)

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Appendix A

Variable Sources and Definitions

Business Startup: Seminars and workshops on business startup topics including How to Write a Business Plan, Financing, Market Development, etc.

Source: Small Business Center Network

Business-to-Business Networking and Collaboration Facilitation: SBCN partnerships with organizations that can assist businesses.

Source: Small Business Center Network

Business Growth Management: Training in growing businesses including management and supervisory skills, increasing efficiency of operations, etc.

Source: Small Business Center Network

Client: The person who uses a service, is directly impacted by a policy, or enrolls in a program.

Source: George Millsaps, Small Business Center Network Director

Counseling Services: Assistance on any business related question or issue, available on an “as-needed” basis.

Source: Small Business Center Network

Financial Procurement Assistance: Assistance in preparing financing proposals or enrollment in micro-enterprise loan programs.

Source: Small Business Center Network

Meetings with Local Organizations: Participation in meetings with local chambers, trade organizations, and service providers in sponsorship of business information meetings, expos, and conferences.

Source: Small Business Center Network

Normal Business Hours: Standard hours are defined as 9:00am to 5:00pm, Monday through Friday.

Data Source: Online Survey

Resource Center/Library: Access to printed and audiovisual materials, computer and software programs, Internet, and teleconference equipment.

Source: Small Business Center Network

Rural and Urban Designation: Metropolitan counties have an urban area of 50,000 or more, micropolitan counties have 10,000 to 50,000 people, and rural counties have less than 10,000 people.

Source: North Carolina Department of Commerce

Small Business: Firm with fewer than 500 employees.

Source: Small Business Administration

Appendix B
Reference List of Small Business Assistance Program Studies

Study	Program	Data Type	Program Variables	Outcome Measurement	Covariates	Findings
Econometric Analysis						
Bates (1995)	General	CBO Database	Assistance by multiple programs	Survival	Demographics, capital, time started business, industry	Performance is different for non-minority-owned and minority-owned businesses
Chrisman and McMullen (2004)	SBDC	Four surveys of SBDC Clients (N=159)	Hours spent on SBDC counseling	Survival rate	Demographics, size, industry	Positive effect on business performance
Chrisman, McMullen and Hall (2005)	SBDC	Four surveys of SBDC Clients (N=159)	Hours spent on SBDC counseling	Sales and employment figures	Demographics, industry, service area	Positive effect on business performance
Weinstein, Nicholls, and Seaton (1992)	SBIR	Census of SBI clients (N=57)	Census data	Participation	Business knowledge, practicality of knowledge	Positive evaluation
Mean Comparison						
Chrisman (1999)	SBDC	Survey of clients (N=2,025)	Participation	Starting rate, employment sales	n/a	Positive effect of business performance
Chrisman et al (1990)	SBDC	Survey of Clients (N=188)	Participation	Type and amount of assistance, perceived service value, start-up propensity	n/a	No gender difference in value and effect on business performance
Chrisman and Carsrud (1991)	SBDC	Survey of Clients (N=139)	Participation	Type and amount of assistance, perceived service value, start-up propensity	n/a	No racial/ethnic difference in value and effect on business performance
Chrisman, Gatewood, and Donlevy (2002)	SBDC	Survey of Clients (N=8,703)	Participation	Starting rate, employment, sales, perceived money value of service, client evaluation	n/a	No urban/rural difference of effect on business performance
Chrisman and Katrishen (1994)	SBDC	Survey of clients (N=1,820)	Participation	Sales, employment, tax revenue	n/a	Positive effect of business performance

Study	Program	Data Type	Program Variables	Outcome Measurement	Covariates	Findings
Chrisman and Leslie (1989)	SBDC	Survey of clients (N=76)	Participation	Sales growth, profit added	n/a	Clients benefit more from administrative and operating assistance than from strategic planning, comprehensive approach is best
Chrisman and McMullen (2000)	SBDC	Survey of clients (N=169)	Participation	Client evaluation, survival rate, time to break even, starting subsequent businesses, business size	n/a	Positive effect of business performance
Descriptive Analysis						
Nahavandi and Chesteen (1988)	SBDC	Survey of clients (N=106)	Participation	Client satisfaction, impact on sales, profit, net worth, employees	n/a	Clients very satisfied with assistance, lack of need and consultant experience are primary reasons for not implementing recommendations
Rocha and Khan (1984)	SBI	Survey of local SBI (N=17)	Participation	Implementation, type and degree of impact	n/a	Clients very satisfied with assistance, cost and riskiness are primary reasons for not implementing recommendations

Appendix C
Summary of Key Survey Results

		Client Survey
1	Sole Proprietor	41%
2	Limited Liability Corporation	25%
3	S Corporation	25%
4	General Partnership	2%
5	Limited Partnership	0%
6	Franchise	0%
7	Non-Profit	1%
8	Other	7%

	Industry	Percent of Client Businesses Occupying the Industry	Employment as Percent of Total Employment	Wages as Percent of Statewide Wage
1	Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	15%	4.37%	148.37%
2	Healthcare and Social Assistance	13%	12.89%	101.53%
3	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	10%	1.48%	67.84%
4	Retail	9%	11.48%	65.09%
5	Manufacturing	7%	13.97%	119.5%

		Director Survey	Client Survey
1	1-5 employees	87%	91%
2	6-10 employees	5%	3%
3	11-20 employees	5%	3%
4	20+	3%	3%

Appendix C
Summary of Key Survey Results

Table 4: Years of experience owning or managing a business, including current business.	
Less than 1 year	24%
1-3 Years	29%
4-6 Years	12%
7-9 Years	9%
10-15 Years	9%
More than 15	16%

Table 5: Point in Development or Growth of Business when Services were Sought	
Planning	38%
Start-up	34%
Growth Management	21%
Other	7%

Table 6: Hours a Week SBC is Open for Assistance	
Less than 35 hours	0%
35 to 40 hours	39%
40 to 50 hours	55%
More than 50 hours	5%

Table 7: Hours a week SBC is open outside standard business hours	
None	13%
1-5	58%
6-10	24%
11-20	5%
20+	0%

Table 8: Services Clients Would Like to Receive or Need Offered More Often	
Accounting and Finance	22%
Marketing and Advertising	29%
Personnel Administration	4%
Operations	18%
Other	15%

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Author: mpalab

Keywords:

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