



# BUTLER COUNTY BUSINESS SENTIMENT – JANUARY 2022

## Executive Report

### Abstract

In January 2022, Institutional Research and Effectiveness at Butler Community College conducted their first Butler County Business Sentiment Survey. Overall, respondents are feeling optimistic about where their businesses are headed over the next two years. Moving forward, there is great opportunity to strengthen partnerships between area businesses and the college.

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## **Background**

Business sentiment, or pulse, surveys are utilized widely to take measure of the current business climate. Business climate includes business health and the perceptions of local business owners and operators as to what the health of the economy in the near future. Butler Community College explored the business climate in Butler County, Kansas in an effort to enhance programming, gauge business sentiment in the near future in terms of investment, revenue, and hiring, and thus better serve the needs of the area economy. To serve this purpose, a survey was designed to address the following research questions:

1. What is the current business climate in Butler County?
2. What are business owners' perceptions of the future business climate in Butler County.
3. How can Butler Community College enhance programming to better serve

specific business needs in Butler County?

## **Methodology**

The survey implemented was modeled after the US Census Bureau's Small Business Pulse Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). It consisted of short answer questions as well as four-point Likert scales to gather business responses regarding current business health and expected health in the near future.

The survey was available electronically and registered businesses were invited to participate via mail and email campaigns. Postcards and emails were sent to a database of business mailing addresses and email accounts associated with Butler County; this database is a proprietary asset of a commercial vendor of the college. It is important to note that the recipient lists were anonymous to the researcher thus making it impossible to control for duplicates. Thus, it is possible that the same business could have received multiple emails to separate addresses as well as postcards.

Electronic responses were collected for one month after email distribution. Participants were invited to share their contact information to be eligible for prizes but were able to leave their response anonymous if they choose to encourage open and honest data. The first six participants to complete the survey including contact information were awarded prizes that included items ranging from an iPad to gift cards.

**Findings**

After the survey closed, responses were tabulated by the researcher and included 70 completed surveys. While 12 respondents did not indicate which specific community their business was located in, an overwhelming number of the responses came from the county seat. A breakdown of responses by location is detailed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Responses by Location**

Location	# of Responses
Andover	3
Augusta	9
Benton/Towanda	1
El Dorado	44
Rose Hill	1

Butler Co/NA 12

Out of those 70 responses, a cross-section of economic sectors was represented that included health care, construction and restaurants. It is important to note that respondents could select as many industry categories as they felt applicable to their business. Table 2 below summarizes the respondent industry breakdown.

**Table 2: Responses by Industry**

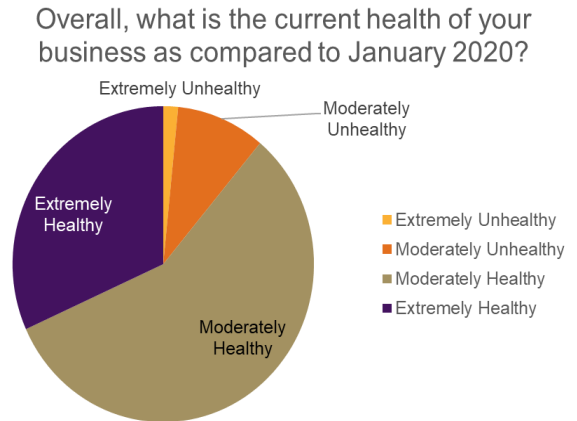
Industry	# of Responses
Advertising & Media	4
Agriculture, Fishing/Forestry & Pets/Veterinary	4
Arts, Culture & Entertainment	4
Automotive & Marine	6
Business, Legal & Professional Services	3
Computers & Telecommunications	1
Construction, Industrial Services, Mfg. & Transportation	8
Family, Community, Civic & Religious Institutions	5
Finance, Insurance & Real Estate	5

Government & Education	5
Health Care	9
Home & Garden, Shopping, & Specialty Retail	5
Lodging & Travel	2
Personal Services & Care	2
Public Utilities & Environment	0
Restaurants, Food & Beverages	7
Sports & Recreation	2
Other	5
No Answer	5

*Current Business Health*

When considering current business health, 88.89% of respondents indicated that their business was healthier than it was two years ago. Only one respondent indicated that their business was extremely unhealthy as compared to two years ago. Figure 1 showcases the overwhelmingly positive health of businesses in Butler County over two years prior to the survey.

**Figure 1: Current Business Health**



While still positive, slightly less businesses indicated that they have as positive an outlook on their hiring over two years ago. 65.52% of respondents indicated that they employed more paid workers than they did two years prior.

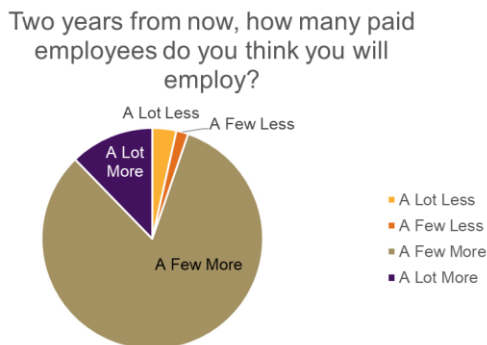
Respondents were asked to share, in their own words, what they felt was the largest contributing factor to their change in their business’ performance over the last two years. Overwhelmingly, most businesses cited COVID-19 as having the largest impact on their business health. Interestingly, some businesses attribute the pandemic to strengthening their business such as those in mental and physical health care and real estate. Other businesses attributed the qualifications and availability of employees as well as effective management, inflation, supply and demand,

community engagement, and increased marketing as the major factors contributing to the health of their businesses. Several businesses cited increased marketing, especially through online avenues such as social media, as having a positive impact on the health of their business.

*Future Business Health*

Respondents indicated that they felt very positive regarding their businesses over the next two years. Almost 95% of respondents said that they had a positive outlook on how their business would perform over the next two years. Furthermore, 82.46% of respondents indicated that they would be hiring “a few more” paid employees over the next two years. Figure 2 breaks down responses regarding the number of paid employees over the next two years.

**Figure 2: Future Employment**



Furthermore, 84.75% of respondents indicated that they would be investing more in their businesses over the next two years. Those who said they were planning to invest more in their businesses over the next two years were also asked what area or areas they planned on investing in. Most respondents stated that their investments would be in the form of more people with over 40% of respondents selecting that option.

Lastly, respondents were asked to describe in their own words what they felt the most important contributing factors would be to their business’ health over the next few years. Not surprisingly, business owners were looking forward to moving past the COVID-19 pandemic and were hopeful that they will be able to do so soon. The second most cited contributing factor included management and employee factors. Business owners discussed the importance of effective management along with the ability of qualified employees.

*How Can Butler Community College Help?*

Most respondents felt that they would be hiring more employees in the upcoming years, but cited that the availability of qualified applicants would have a large impact on their ability to do so.

So, they were asked how Butler Community College could help them meet their training and hiring needs. Most respondents said that they were excited for increased opportunities to work with the college through active one-on-one engagement regarding training needs, internships and volunteer opportunities.

### **Analysis**

While the response rate for the survey was not as high as desired, it is important to consider response rates for similar tools (Gerber, 2021; McElvy Partners, 2021; Missouri Economic Research and Information Center, n.d.). Specifically, Gerber (2021) reported that 511 business were surveyed from Missouri, a state with a population of 6.15 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a). Comparatively, Butler County, Kansas has a population of 67,380 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020b). The response rate for this survey as compared to other tools is much higher.

That being said, it is important to increase participation among Butler County businesses, especially small businesses and those outside of El Dorado and Augusta. Future studies should focus on increasing participation in Butler County's other communities to gain a more wholistic picture of business health across the county.

To do so, future studies can focus on outreach to small businesses in the smaller cities within the county to encourage participation and gain feedback from area business about how to better measure and fit their needs.

Overall, respondents indicated that they feel more confident in their businesses than they did in January 2020 despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Several business owners indicated that the pandemic shifted their focus and made them rethink their day-to-day operations, but they were generally in a better place overall than two years prior. Moving forward, businesses are optimistic about where they are going over the next two years. Respondents indicated that they plan to grow their businesses, specifically through increasing the number of paid employees over the next two years. The hopeful outlook is encouraging as the community faces unmet needs in several sectors such as housing, healthcare, and product availability.

Given the optimistic outlook of businesses as well as their needs for qualified employees over the next two years, Butler Community College is in a promising position to help meet those needs as well as grow enrollment. Several businesses indicated that they were very excited

increase partnerships with the college through internship and job placement opportunities for students. Specifically, there was interest in healthcare and skilled trades along with other science-related fields. It is imperative that Butler Community College utilizes this opportunity to better serve the community through partnering with local businesses.

### Conclusion

This study, the first of its kind to be implemented by the institution, explored the current business climate in Butler County, Kansas in an effort to enhance programming and better serve the needs of area businesses. While small response rate limits the generalizability of the study, this survey was able to gain very specific and valuable information regarding the population that the college serves.

Overall, Butler County businesses are very optimistic and are looking to grow their businesses over the next two years. And local employers are saying that they need help finding qualified applicants to meet their needs. This means that Butler Community College is in a great position to not only support our community, but also grow our enrollment to meet those needs.

### References

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