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Unique Conference Design Showcases Small Towns, Highlights Entrepreneurs, and Strengthens Capacity

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Unique Conference Design Showcases Small Towns, Highlights Entrepreneurs, and Strengthens Capacity

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Abstract. Michigan State University Extension (MSUE)'s annual conference, Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities (CEC), has served as a catalyst for entrepreneurial ecosystems across Michigan since 2012. Designed by MSUE for small towns, CEC has gained national interest as evidenced by the adoption of this conference model by four other Extension services. This article outlines the unique conference design, details the partnership between Extension and host communities, and explores conference evaluation data validating the need to continue this programming. Lessons learned and successes to date are provided to ensure readers learn the value this unique conference format has in Extension entrepreneurship programming nationally.

INTRODUCTION

This article highlights a place-based conference model developed by Michigan State University Extension (MSUE) known as Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities (CEC). CEC is an unconventional conference embedded in a small town with the goal of showcasing the host community, highlighting entrepreneurs, and strengthening organizational capacity. Designed to address several elements known to support small town entrepreneurial ecosystems, CEC focuses on networking, policy, human capital, culture, and support (Isenberg, 2010; Roundy, 2017). Additionally, conferences and other types of events can serve as the genesis for entrepreneurial networks (Case & Harris, 2012; cited in Roundy, 2017, p. 247). After describing the conference's unique design, we explain the roles of the host community, external partnerships, and evaluations. This unique conference design could be widely applied in Extension entrepreneurship programming.

CONFERENCE DESIGN

Launched by MSUE in 2012, CEC is *a conference for small towns held in a small town*. Unique in multiple ways, CEC works in partnership with a different host community annually and takes place from noon to noon over two days, typically in early October. Host communities are walkable small towns and range in population size between 2,500 to 10,000 people. Unlike traditional conferences based in a hotel or conference center, CEC embeds over 20 educational sessions within the businesses of a host community's downtown. For example, coffee shops, art galleries, breweries/restaurants, and museums, to name a few, have served as settings for educational sessions. The CEC schedule intentionally weaves 30-minute breaks between sessions so participants can network and patronize local businesses at a leisurely pace (see Appendix A).

CEC is designed to highlight success stories of local entrepreneurs within the host community in multiple ways. First, at the beginning of an educational session, local business owners are invited to briefly share a synopsis of how they began their business. Second, two local entrepreneurs are featured as plenary and closing keynote speakers. The keynote speakers are generally selected because their business has been rooted in the community over generations or because they are an entrepreneur with more recent influence, but they both have a strong connection to their local community. First-hand entrepreneurial stories relay both success and failure and portray

the “encouraging mindset and spirit of facilitation” critical to entrepreneurial ecosystems (Russell, 2006; cited in Butler, 2006, p. 112).

Finally, to strengthen a community’s organizational capacity, CEC’s promotional materials encourage communities to create a team to attend the conference. Teams typically range in size from three to five professionals and represent organizations charged with supporting local businesses and entrepreneurs, such as a chamber of commerce. Although a team is not required, this strategy can strengthen the attending team’s networks and resources and position them to host CEC in the future. Due to the unique design of CEC, prospective host communities are required to have attended at least one previous CEC event as a team. This practice ensures hosting communities can experience the unique conference design and unconventional format before taking on the role of a CEC host community.

MSUE AND HOST COMMUNITY ROLES

Partnership with the host community is an intentional part of the conference design and comes with pivotal responsibilities for both the host community and MSUE. Host community teams identify and secure a) local entrepreneur(s) to serve as keynote speaker(s), b) locations for educational sessions within local businesses and organizations, c) local sponsorships, and d) marketing materials to showcase the community to participants. The host community plays an integral role in selecting session venues based on interest, access, auditory challenges, and seating capacity for upwards of 20 participants. Ideally, the venue pairs with the session theme, such as an art gallery hosting an educational session on art as a community economic driver.

Within MSUE, programming and planning for CEC draws from several multidisciplinary teams. MSUE’s CEC planning team is responsible for a) selecting a host community, b) co-planning the event with the host community, c) securing educational session speakers from MSUE, d) managing registration, and e) ensuring the host community executes their responsibilities. To ensure both the MSUE team and the host community teams are in unison throughout the typical eight-month planning period, a liaison from each team serves both groups. The liaison position was created to address previous complications experienced in the early years of CEC.

Early in CEC’s tenure, MSUE failed to provide clear expectations to the host community team, resulting in missed deadlines for selecting venues and keynote speakers. When CEC was nearly canceled in that instance, the MSUE team formalized host community protocols. Established protocols actively guide the partnership by clearly articulating expectations to host communities in advance, requiring that the community send a team to a CEC conference prior to being considered as a host community, identifying a liaison to serve on both the MSUE and host community teams, and requiring the host community secure a predetermined amount of the conference costs in sponsorships to create greater ownership.

The MSUE and host community teams actively seek partnerships with entities such as state agencies and/or nonprofit organizations to support the conference. For example, in 2019 Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) co-sponsored CEC for the first time. MEDC staff led educational sessions and provided targeted marketing to Michigan’s Main Street communities. The resources from MEDC and other partner organizations frequently come in the form of educational content expertise, conference sponsorship dollars, and state and national promotion.

EVALUATION AND METHODS

The conference attendees receive an evaluation at the end of the conference to assess learning and gauge intent to apply the information learned at CEC (see Appendix B). Each attendee receives a paper evaluation during the closing keynote speaker session. Organizers encourage completion of the evaluation during closing remarks, and MSUE staff collect evaluations at the exits. A survey link with the evaluation is sent out a week after the conference to give those who were not able to complete a paper survey another opportunity to complete the evaluation. Between 2012 and 2019, the overall evaluation response survey rate for CEC was 42%.

As of 2019, ten Michigan communities have hosted the CEC conference. Since its start in 2012, 1,006 individuals have participated in the CEC conference representing Michigan’s 83 counties, 12 other states, and two countries. Over this period, participants overwhelmingly confirmed (98.7%, $n = 306$) that they liked the approach of holding sessions in downtown businesses. A majority (90.8%, $n = 351$) of the participants reported that they planned to create or expand community-based activities or initiatives to support local business and entrepreneurs.

The MSUE planning team made minor refinements to the evaluation tool in 2019 to remove items not yielding new insights and to reframe other items to assess intended application of knowledge gained. At the 2019 conference, the most recent in-person event, 27% (n = 27) of participants completed the evaluation. Of these respondents, 100% agreed or strongly agreed that “educational sessions were engaging” and the “content presented is replicable in my community.” As part of the evaluation, participants were also presented with a list of potential actions to take as a result of their participation in CEC such as “integrate tourism and natural resources into economic strategy” and “provide youth entrepreneurship programming” (see Appendix B). Attendees from the 2019 CEC indicated a total of 80 anticipated actions on the evaluation. As an example, the city of Alma, Michigan learned about a library hot-spot rental program during an educational session at CEC 2019. They applied this knowledge to create their own program just ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic and aided students learning from home who would not otherwise have had internet access (K. Phillips, personal communication, April 20, 2020).

CONCLUSION

In summary, CEC’s unique conference design is highly engaging and supports participants’ ability to replicate ideas and knowledge learned at the conference. The partnership between the host community and MSUE plays a fundamental role in the success of CEC. Conference planning protocols designed by MSUE ensure that small town hosts and local entrepreneurs are highlighted while ensuring that participating individuals and teams receive content that strengthens their capacities to create strong entrepreneurial ecosystems. MSUE’s CEC model has garnered national attention within Extension and, as a result, has been replicated in four other states (Table 1). As of 2021, universities in three additional states are in the planning stages of delivering their first CEC conference. MSUE’s CEC model should have a place within Extension programming nationally as a collaborative approach to strengthening small town entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Table 1. Other States Engaging the CEC Model

State	Year Launched CEC Conference	Planning for CEC Conference
University of Nebraska	2017	
South Dakota State University	2018	
North Dakota State University	2019	
University of Minnesota	2019	
University of Missouri		x
Pennsylvania State University		x
University of New Hampshire		x

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APPENDIX A. SAMPLE AGENDA FOR CEC CONFERENCE

Day 1	
11:00 am	Registration/check-in with lunch and networking
12:00–1:00 pm	Opening session and keynote speaker
1:00–1:30	Travel to breakout sessions located in various businesses downtown
1:30–2:15	Breakout session 1
2:15–2:45	Travel to breakout sessions
2:45–3:30	Breakout session 2
3:30–4:00	Travel to breakout sessions
4:00–4:45	Breakout session 3
4:45–5:30	Break
5:30–7:30	Reception and networking event (heavy appetizers). Participants are encouraged to have dinner elsewhere and continue networking.
Day 2	
7:30–8:30 am	Continental breakfast
8:30–9:00	Warm-up, wake-up, idea sharing! 30 ideas in 30 minutes
9:00–9:15	Travel to breakout session
9:15–10:00	Breakout session 4
10:00–10:15	Travel to breakout session
10:15–11:00	Breakout session 5
11:00–11:15	Travel to keynote location
11:15–12:00 pm	Keynote speaker and wrap-up
12:00	Evaluation and adjourn

APPENDIX B. SAMPLE EVALUATION FOR CEC CONFERENCE

Which of the following do you plan to do as a result of your participation in this program? (Check all that apply.)

- Seek out more knowledge on economic and workforce trends.
- Provide youth entrepreneurship programming and resources.
- Apply knowledge on agriculture, arts, and/or cultural development towards economic development strategies.
- Integrate tourism and sustainable natural resource use into economic strategy.
- Make use of new and/or existing regional and community assets.
- Apply talent attraction and retention strategies toward community and economic prosperity.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The educational sessions were engaging.				
I have increased my knowledge about entrepreneurial ecosystems.				
The content presented is replicable in my community.				
New connections at CEC can help me bring these practices to my community.				
This conference was a good value.				

Do you have any other feedback about the conference?