Ramping Up Rural Workforce Development: An Extension-Centered Model

Carolyn J. Hatch
University of Toronto

Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel
University of Nebraska

Kenneth Sherin
South Dakota State University

Ramping Up Rural Workforce Development: An Extension-Centered Model

Abstract

Workforce development is a growing need in rural communities. This article recognizes Cooperative Extension as a critical labor market intermediary in fostering local workforce solutions. It proposes a community-based approach with Extension at the center of a process for identifying key stakeholders, facilitating collaboration, and supporting data-driven decisions. Through participatory methods and economic analysis of local industries, our team engaged over 120 stakeholders from two rural regions in the Great Plains. Our findings show that Extension plays an important role in promoting cross-sectoral collaboration to address complex workforce issues, enhance community capacity, and mobilize local action.

Keywords: workforce development, skills training, community development, community-based approach, labor market intermediary

Carolyn J. Hatch
Senior Associate, Innovation Policy Lab
Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario
hatch.carolyn@gmail.com

Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel
Extension Specialist, Community Vitality
Professor, Agricultural Economics
University of Nebraska Extension
Scottsbluff, Nebraska
cburkhartkriesel1@unl.edu

Kenneth Sherin
Community Development Field Specialist
South Dakota State University Extension
Mitchell, South Dakota
kenneth.sherin@sdstate.edu

In the wake of the Great Recession, communities have lost skilled jobs and faced slow employment growth, with real median household income in 2015 at 1.6% lower than prerecessionary levels (Proctor, Semega, & Kollar, 2016). At the same time, the business community has become increasingly reluctant to invest in human capital, especially relative to lesser skilled workers. These forces have intersected to reduce the resources available for skill development, as neither employers nor government nor the workers themselves are able or willing to invest in skills training. Communities have felt the brunt of these impacts, with workforce issues escalating to the forefront of concern in many places (St. Clair, 2017).

Against this backdrop, workforce intermediaries and sector strategies have emerged to address skills gaps and advance local workforce development (Conway & Giloth, 2014). Workforce intermediaries are nonprofit organizations that mediate the relationship between employers and employees, with the primary goal of improving wages and career advancement opportunities, especially for less-educated and low-income individuals (Lowe, 2015). Workforce intermediaries have played an important role in bridging the needs of employers and workers and brokering resources and services to improve how businesses, workers, and other local actors come

together to respond to the demand of local industry clusters and regional labor markets.

Workforce intermediation holds particular resonance for rural areas of the United States, which face a decline in workforce vitality due to low education attainment, brain drain, slow employment growth, and high levels of poverty (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2015). The Cooperative Extension System has played an important workforce intermediary role over the years, fostering connections among workers, educational institutions, and employers and enhancing community leadership capacity; yet this intermediary role has not been discussed in the literature.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, we seek to recognize Cooperative Extension as a labor market intermediary critical for fostering dynamic workforce solutions in rural communities. Second, we describe a community-based approach to rural workforce development, with Extension at its center. This model recognizes Extension as a critical actor in fostering cross-sectoral collaboration to address complex workforce issues, enhance community capacity, and mobilize action.

The Expanding Role of Workforce Intermediaries

Structural shifts in U.S. labor markets in the 1980s and 1990s led to reduced manufacturing employment, diminished internal career ladders, the adoption of new technologies, and new occupational skill requirements (Hatch, 2013). A decline in unionization and increased fragmentation of the labor market were accompanied by the dismantling of traditional vocational training mechanisms in local education systems. Moreover, large employers pushed cost-control measures down the supply chain, making it difficult for smaller employers to invest in skills training (Conway & Giloth, 2014a, p. 9). This diverse and fragmented labor market led to the need for new bridging intermediaries to create much needed connections among workforce stakeholders. In particular, this has been the case for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups who face specific barriers to higher paying and better quality jobs (Osterman, 2000, 2014).

Workforce intermediation emerged in the 1990s as local organizations sought new ways to connect communities to productive opportunities in their regional economies (Conway & Giloth, 2014b). It has become a popular strategy for promoting job creation among lower educated and disadvantaged populations (Conway & Giloth, 2014b; Giloth, 2004). Intermediary actors come in a variety of forms. Some prepare job seekers for labor market entry and advancement through targeted training (Ganzglass, Foster, & Newcomer, 2014; Lowe, Goldstein, & Donegan, 2011). Others establish close working relationships among local actors such as employers, educational institutions, and workers in an effort to influence local hiring decisions (Fitzgerald, 2004; Osterman, 2007). Others are geared to specific niches, such as industry research or policy advocacy. Their common ground is that all are focused on the broader efforts of furthering skill, career, and wage advancement within firms and expanding industry sectors for the benefits of economic development and economic inclusion alike (Conway & Giloth, 2014b).

Extension as Labor Market Intermediary: A Historical Perspective

Since the signing of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, Cooperative Extension has played a pivotal intermediary role in expanding local workforce development in communities, a role that has been neither discussed in the workforce intermediary literature nor explicitly acknowledged by workforce stakeholders and the Extension community. Since Extension's inception, Extension systems across the nation have been expanding knowledge to help meet citizen needs. To complete this mission, Extension professionals have relied on timely research-based content and group process skills to make connections with the people they serve. The knowledge base has mirrored the

evolving needs of society, from the initial adoption of new farm practices to today's inclusion of youth-based science, technology, engineering, and math opportunities (Gould, Steele, & Woodrum, 2014). Interpersonal and group process skills also have had to evolve, from the group management prowess needed for conducting Extension's early field demonstration projects to the technological savvy required for engaging with current web-based programming and real-time, interactive applications (Peters, 2002).

Efforts to strengthen and expand workforce skills have historically been addressed by Extension in several ways. For example, a specific need, such as technology training, has been incorporated into various program areas (Elbert & Alston, 2005). Another approach has been to target a particular workforce area, such as childcare, and provide knowledge and skills training (Durden, Mincemoyer, Gerdes, & Lodl, 2013). Still another avenue has been to focus on a segment of the population, such as youths, and provide career development opportunities (Rockwell, Stohler, & Rudman, 1984) or to work with low-resource families and identify needed support and services (Bowman, Manoogian, & Driscoll, 2002). In the early 1990s, the Extension model was used in the development of the national Manufacturing Extension Partnership program, a tool for providing small rural manufacturers the same access to academic innovations and knowledge as the traditional Extension program had done with agriculture (Maher & Spencer, 1997).

All these examples address specific workforce needs. But even given this experience, when Extension administrators were surveyed nationally in 2013, workforce development was tied for the highest ranking emerging issue (Urbanowitz & Wilcox, 2013). Obviously administrators felt that more should be done. One of the overlooked areas could be a broader community-based approach that includes local or regional dialogue and workforce planning. This is an opportunity for Extension to use its finely tuned core attributes, research-based content, and group process skills to help communities hold discussions, make plans, and act more strategically in relation to their immediate and future workforce needs.

Participatory Research Design: Engaging Rural Communities Across the Great Plains

We were members of a team of five researchers from Purdue University, University of Nebraska, and South Dakota State University who collaborated to establish a model rural communities can use to address workforce issues. For the pilot study, we chose two rural regions:

- six adjacent Nebraska counties, including Wayne County (population 9,500), which contains the regional hub of Wayne, and

- four adjacent South Dakota counties, including Beadle County (population 17,000), which contains the regional hub of Huron (Economic Modeling Specialists International, 2015).

These counties were chosen because their workforce issues were typical of rural communities in the United States: (a) demand for labor outpaces supply, a circumstance that is accentuated by outmigration, and (b) workers with the skills needed in the agricultural, manufacturing, and health care industries are not available.

A key part of the project included building capacity within the communities to empower them to mobilize for action regarding workforce issues affecting their economies. Therefore, we used participatory research design (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003) involving community stakeholder capacity-building focus groups. The use of focus groups (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) strengthened the stakeholders' relationships, thus increasing

their ability to accomplish change and action for their communities.

In each state, Extension staff leveraged existing relationships with community champions in each of the counties and worked with them to involve a wide array of community stakeholders in the focus groups. The focus groups were populated with a total of 123 representatives from industry (68), education (11), economic development (11), community groups (8), local citizenries (11), and state and local governments (14).

Through a total of 14 guided discussions (two rounds each with seven groups), local knowledge of workforce issues was shared. We presented a review of economic analysis based on driver industries and occupations at the community focus group meetings. The combination of local stakeholders and data-driven analysis formed the foundation and framework for our community-based approach.

A Community-Based Approach: Key Elements to Workforce Vitality

Through participatory engagement and data review, three key elements to workforce vitality were identified. Research revealed that an effective community-based approach involves the right parties at the table engaged in a tailored planning process geared to the needs of workers. At the same time, it is also based on the occupational and labor market demands of the most competitive industries in the regional economy.

Identifying Stakeholders

The first element involves identifying the local workforce development stakeholders, casting the net widely to promote social and economic inclusion. Along with the local education system, the most critical training partner is industry, including employers that value training for their employees, trade associations, industry organizations, and chambers of commerce. Yet many employers have become increasingly passive in investing in local training, adopting practices that undermine a high-skill strategy (Hatch, 2013). An effective community-based approach is one that recognizes the importance of local employers' stepping up to the plate to become full partners in the community planning process by

- expanding in-house and on-the-job training programs,

- providing leadership in the development of local outreach and training initiatives based on the most competitive industries in the regional economy, and

- partnering with institutions and actors in their supply chains and industrial clusters to address workforce and training challenges collaboratively.

Given the breadth of activities spanning the workforce domain, other important stakeholder groups (those with expertise and decision-making power and individuals most affected by local action) include

- workers—incumbent workers, unemployed and underemployed workers, special-needs populations (such as veterans, disabled persons, immigrants, women), mature workers, future workforce members;

- private and public educational institutions—local school districts and boards, local schools (kindergarten through grade 12) and 2- and 4-year postsecondary institutions, state government, adult education resource providers;

- community-based organizations;

- government agencies—policy makers, workforce development organizations, state and local funding sources; and

- economic and workforce developers.

Adopting a Collaborative Model

The second element, working collaboratively, is not a new approach in community development (Biddle & Biddle, 1965; Christenson & Robinson, 1980; Robinson & Green, 2011). Yet the implementation of such a framework—one that taps into multiple viewpoints and ways of thinking, leverages diverse skills and knowledge throughout the community, and accesses an array of resources—is increasingly important in addressing workforce-related problems. For one thing, complex workforce skills issues require diverse ideas and creative problem solving. As well, broad involvement by traditionally underrepresented groups such as youths and immigrants is essential, not only for tapping into a diversity of ideas and unique perspectives on possible solutions but also for ensuring inclusion of groups that are integral parts of the current and potential workforce, especially in high-demand industries. Community workforce issues cannot be solved by individuals and organizations acting independently; rather, an effective approach calls for a host of community stakeholders getting involved, sharing resources, defining the issues, and taking action.

Pursuing a Data-Driven Approach

Workforce intermediation is part of a broader sector- and cluster-based workforce development approach geared toward organizing the training of workers in the context of an industry sector or cluster (Porter, 1990), recognizing the dynamic nature of regional economies and labor markets, and seeking to shape change within that context. Therefore, labor market data, the final element, are essential for analyzing the quantity and quality of jobs available so that community actors can influence how those jobs might or might not be accessed by particular populations, enabling communities to respond to industry needs and, in turn, shaping workforce opportunities in the future. Data are increasingly important given the expansion of globalization and the changing nature of economic activity in firms and communities and across the rural landscape. We focused on three types of data to better understand the growing industry sectors and competitive clusters in the pilot study area: demographic data, industry data, and occupation data (for more information, see "Bridging the Skills Gap: The Importance of Labor Market Data" at http://ruralfutures.nebraska.edu/skills-gap/the-importance-of-labor-market-data/).

Building the Bridge: A Workforce Planning Process

Once we had identified and considered the key elements to workforce vitality, we developed a community planning process that pulled together and complemented the stakeholder input. The community-based process, which we termed "building the bridge," relied on a macrolevel framework that incorporated social methodology and applied it to a community issue (Morse-Moomaw, 2016). The three stages of the process involved divergent, transformative, and convergent thinking (Jones, 1970). Through the process, we broke down an issue into components, sought out new information and encouraged discussion around different viewpoints (divergent thinking), and then teased out alternative ideas and possible actions (transformative thinking). Finally, we

facilitated discussion of trade-offs, development of plans, and prioritization of action items (convergent thinking).

Embedded in this framework, at a micro level, were the core components of the action planning process, which intentionally involved the elements of workforce vitality noted earlier. The process included (a) reviewing the current situation, specifically looking at identifying assets; (b) using data in the decision-making process; (c) exploring what the opportunities could be; and (d) deciding on a path and a plan which ultimately would lead to the implementation of actions (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Workforce Planning Process

Not only at the beginning but during the entire process, we asked, "Are the right people around the table? Is anybody missing?" This tactic helped keep the key stakeholders connected to the discussion and potential actions as the process evolved over time.

Each of the four components of the action planning process was guided by group discussions that incorporated the primary facilitation "prompts" or directed statements outlined below (Rural Futures Institute, n.d.).

Identify assets: *What are they now, and what could they be?*

In the workforce—

What are the available skills, talents, and expertise?

In education—

What local, regional, and online resources are available?

Who are the educators with the passion and experience in this area?

What training programs are in place?

In business—

What are the industry clusters?

Who are the leaders with the desire to address the issue?

What are the on-the-job training programs?

Use data: *What are the local and regional data that support decision making?*

Local data—

Are there sources already available, such as business expansion and retention surveys, Chamber of Commerce inventories, or in-house business surveys?

What is needed to attract and retain employees?

What is needed to connect local youths to local opportunities?

Outside data—

What sources, such as state economic development agencies, regional development districts, and proprietary data sources, should be accessed?

What are the growth sectors?

What skills are needed?

What kind of training is available, and who is delivering it?

Identify opportunities: *What are the short- and long-term actions/investments?*

Short-term—

Are there simple actions that, if implemented, could have long-term impacts?

Are there actions that are already in place that could be strengthened?

Long-term—

In terms of workforce, where does this community want to be in the future?

What could a workforce "pipeline" look like?

Develop/implement an action plan: *What are the priorities?*

How do local community assets, available resources, and partnerships link together?

*What is the best mix of short- and long-term opportunities?*

What is going to happen, who will do it, and when will it be completed?

Discussion and Conclusion: An Extension-Centered Model

Extension systems have functioned implicitly as workforce intermediaries even though seldom has this term been used or the action publicly acknowledged. Technology training, professional development, and career exploration are just a few examples of how the organization has intervened to address workforce-related issues. Extension has a track record of response and added value in the workplace. But there is more the organization can and should do. In this time of workforce skills transition, Extension has the capacity, skill, and experience to facilitate the community process that brings community stakeholders together to look at this multidimensional issue.

Many communities are at a pivotal point where they realize the need to look beyond individual workforce "fixes" and holistically envision their community through the eyes of current and potential employers and employees. Our research project demonstrated that the role of community-focused organizer is a critical intermediary function that fills a void. It is a natural fit for Extension to be at the center of a process that identifies key stakeholders, facilitates a collaborative process, and supports data-driven decisions (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

An Extension-Centered Model
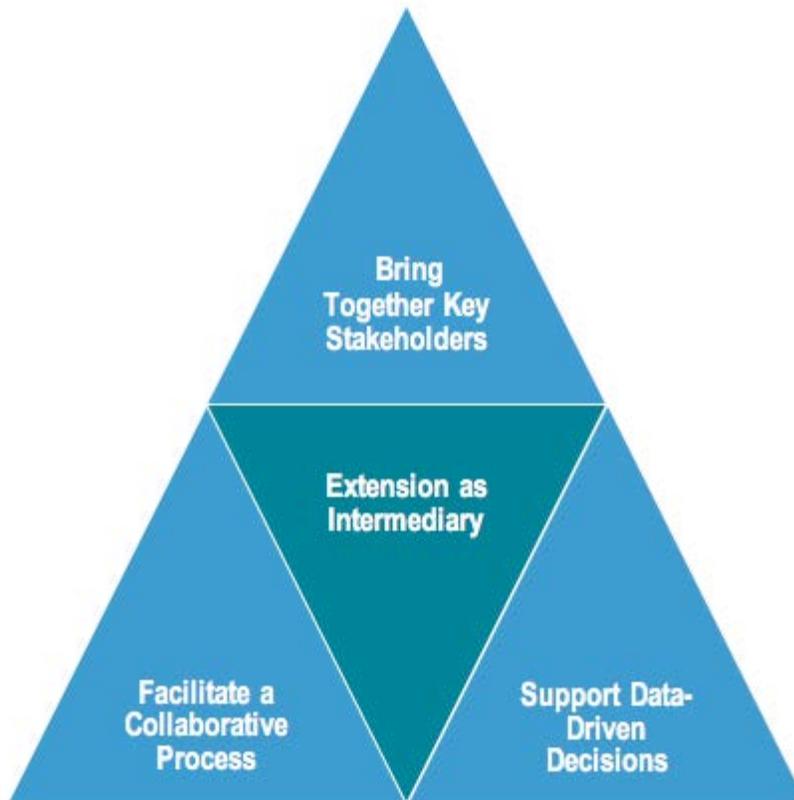
In summary, using intrinsic organizational assets, Extension can add significant value to the workforce skills gap issue in the following ways:

- Continue and expand efforts to identify opportunities to incorporate skill-based training, especially technology training, into available programming. Extension has a rich history in this area, but more opportunities exist to collaborate with both the public and private sectors in efforts to reach new audiences.

- Work with local leaders and build leadership capacity—endeavors Extension is well known for—so that issues such as workforce development rise to the top of community discussions and infiltrate community decision-making processes.

- Leverage Extension linkages with schools and educational institutions, business and industry, and the community to lift up local workforce issues. Extension is often seen as a neutral third party, so a role as a convener may be the perfect fit in many community situations where no one seems to be stepping up and "owning" this responsibility.

- Function as the facilitator of a community-wide conversation, maximizing the intermediary role, to go beyond individual workforce challenges to a more comprehensive, strategic, and long-range plan of action.

Extension is well positioned to meet this grand challenge. It is time for Extension to explicitly foster holistic community engagement, enhance community capacity, and mobilize action to create dynamic workforce solutions. It is a unique opportunity for the nationwide system to fulfill a broader and more strategic role.

References

Bergold, J., & Thomas, S. (2012). Participatory research methods: A methodological approach in motion. *Qualitative Research Forum*, *13*(1). Retrieved from http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1801/3334

Biddle, W. W., & Biddle, L. J. (1965). *The community development process: The rediscovery of local initiative.* New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Bowman, S. R., Manoogian, M., & Driscoll, M. D. (2002). Working with rural employers: An interagency partnership. *Journal of Extension*, *40*(4), Article 4RIB1. Available at: www.joe.org/2002august/rb1.php

Brydon-Miller, M., Greenwood, D., & Maguire, P. (2003). Why action research? *Action Research*, *1*(1), 9–28.

Christenson, J. A., & Robinson, J. W. Jr. (1980). *Community development in America.* Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.

Conway, M., & Giloth, R. (2014a). Introduction. In M. Conway & R. Giloth, *Connecting People to Work: Workforce Intermediaries and Sector Strategies* (pp. 1–19). Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Conway, M., & Giloth, R. (Eds.). (2014b). Connecting people to work: Workforce intermediaries and sector strategies. Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Durden, T. R., Mincemoyer, C. C., Gerdes, G., & Lodl, K. (2013). Extension's capacity to deliver quality early childhood professional development. *Journal of Extension*, *51*(5), Article 5FEA8. Available at: https://joe.org/joe/2013october/a8.php

Economic Modeling Specialists International. (2015). *Emsi 2015.2; QCEW Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, Self-Employed, and Extended Proprietors* [Data set]. Retrieved from http://www.economicmodeling.com/

Elbert, C. D., & Alston, A. J. (2005). An evaluative study of the United States Cooperative Extension Service's role in bridging the digital divide. *Journal of Extension*, *43*(5), Article 5RIB1. Available at: https://www/joe.org/joe/2005october/rb1.php

Fitzgerald, J. (2004). Moving the workforce intermediary agenda forward. *Economic Development Quarterly*, *18*, 3–9.

Ganzglass, E., Foster, M., & Newcomer, A. (2014). Innovation in community colleges. In M. Conway & R. Giloth (Eds.), *Connecting people to work: Workforce intermediaries and sector strategies* (pp. 301–324). New York, NY: Aspen Institute.

Giloth, R. P. (Ed.). (2004). *Workforce intermediaries for the twenty-first century.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Gould, F. I., Steele, D., & Woodrum, W. J. (2014). Cooperative Extension: A century of innovation. *Journal of Extension*, *52*(1), Article 1COM1. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/2014february/comm1.php

Hatch, C. J. (2013). *Skills gap or training gap? The role of manufacturing firms in solving the skills problem*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Center for Community and Economic Development.

Jones, C. (1970). *Design methods: Seeds of human futures.* London, England: Wiley-Interscience.

Lowe, N. (2015). Reskilling urban manufacturing: Workforce solutions from the inside out. Retrieved from http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Reskilling-Urban-Manufacturing.html

Lowe, N., Goldstein, H., & Donegan, M. (2011). Patchwork intermediation: Regional challenges and opportunities for sector-based workforce development. *Economic Development Quarterly*, *25*(2), 158–171.

Maher, T. J., & Spencer, M. P. (1997). Manufacturing Extension: A role for CES? *Journal of Extension*, *35*(5), Article 5COM2. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/1997october/comm2.php

Morse-Moomaw, S. (2016). Improving local results: Fusing community design and community development. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, *47*(5) 670–682.

Osterman, P. (2000). *Securing prosperity: The American labor market: How it has changed and what to do about it.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Osterman, P. (2007). Employment and training policies: New directions for less skilled adults. In H. J. Holzer & D. Nightingale Smithy (Eds.), *Reshaping the American workforce in a changing economy* (pp. 119–154). Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Osterman, P. (2014). The labor market context for employment and training policy. In M. Conway & R. Giloth (Eds.), *Connecting people to work: Workforce intermediaries and sector strategies* (pp. 21–38). New York, NY: Aspen Institute.

Peters, S. (2002). Rousing the people on the land: The roots of the educational organizing tradition in Extension work. *Journal of Extension*, *40*(3), Article 3FEA1. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/2002june/a1.php

Porter, M. E. (1990). *The competitive advantage of nations.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Proctor, B. D., Semega, J. L., Kollar, M. A. (2016). *2015 income and poverty in the United States.* U.S. Census Bureau Report Number: P60-256. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2016/demo/p60-256.html

Robinson, J. W. Jr., & Green, G. P. (2011). *Introduction to community development: Theory, practice and service learning.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Rockwell, S. K., Stohler, R. F., & Rudman, L. E. (1984). How 4-H helps career development. *Journal of Extension*, *22*(3), Article 3FEA1. Available at: https://joe.org/joe/1984may/a1.php

Rural Futures Institute. (n.d.). Bridging the skills gap: Community process and collaboration. Retrieved from http://ruralfutures.nebraska.edu/skills-gap/community-process-collaboration/

St. Clair, N. (2017). *Investing in America's workforce: Report on workforce development needs and opportunities.* Philadelphia, PA: Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia.

Urbanowitz, S., & Wilcox, M. (2013). Examining Extension's capacity in community resource and economic development: Viewpoints of Extension administrators on the role of community resource and economic development in the Extension portfolio. *Journal of Extension*, *51*(5), Article 5FEA2. Available at:

https://www.joe.org/joe/2013october/a2.php

U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (2015). Rural America at a glance: 2015 edition. Economic Information Bulletin 145. Retrieved from https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/eib145/55581_eib145.pdf