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Skill Up Tennessee: Job Training That Works

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Abstract. Employment and training services offered through Extension are part of and continue a long tradition of policy-focused employment and job training. This paper chronicles the successes of UT Extension's work as a third-party partner in the delivery of workforce development programming geared toward individuals receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. The paper begins with an overview of the federal program and a discussion of how Tennessee forged a state-level partnership for the delivery of workforce services. Data showing program success including number of participants served, supportive services offered, and economic impact are highlighted. Finally, lessons learned are outlined.

INTRODUCTION

Jobs and better jobs: from federal policies to state workforce development programs—and outreach delivered through Cooperative Extension—helping individuals obtain training, find jobs, and realize career goals is a priority across the board. In the wake of COVID-19, the United States faces a difficult question—how best to help workers who were displaced during the pandemic find meaningful work with living wages while also meeting the necessary manufacturing outputs and intellectual demands to advance economic growth (The White House, 2021). The task may seem daunting, yet through creative approaches, strategic partnerships, and a whole-of-government commitment, the United States can meet workforce demands to build the workforce of tomorrow. Extension should, and must, be a strategic partner in this exciting work.

The United States has a long tradition of policy-focused employment and job training programs. Starting in the 1930s, U.S. policy makers have viewed employment and job training programs as justified means to correct market failures and counterbalance inequitable access to employment, especially among low-income populations (Moffitt, 2016). Employment and training services offered through Extension have been and continue to be a part of this tradition.

Since the early days of Extension, Extension agents and volunteers have been involved in workforce development. The organization's capacity and the expertise of educators

and specialists that have partnered with Extension have been used to bring together diverse stakeholders around localized workforce issues (Hatch et al., 2018). Extension faculty have partnered with industry professionals to address the need for skilled labor (White et al., 2021). To address disparate unemployment rates between urban and rural communities, Extension has successfully implemented creative strategies such as remote work trainings (Hill et al., 2021). STEM programming has empowered youth and exposed them to new career paths—particularly those youth who are minorities in their fields of study (Compton et al., 2021). Extension and Extension partners support small businesses by facilitating unique funding approaches (Tampien, 2016). Extension has already laid the groundwork of excellence in workforce development; it is now up to us to build on, expand, and increase our investments in developing the workforce of tomorrow (Sherin et al., 2018).

This paper chronicles the successes of The University of Tennessee Extension's (UT Extension) work as a third-party partner in the delivery of workforce development programming geared toward individuals receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. The paper begins with an overview of the federal program funding this work and a discussion of how UT Extension forged a state-level partnership for the delivery of workforce services. Then, we offer initial markers of program success for consideration. Finally, we outline the lessons learned from the program in

an effort to advance Extension's capacity in workforce development.

SKILL UP TENNESSEE: PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND IMPLEMENTATION

SNAP has been a vital safety net for millions of individuals across the United States. In addition to its focus on nutrition assistance, SNAP includes employment and job training components designed to improve the self-sufficiency of SNAP participants (Rowe et al., 2017). Known as SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T), this program represents a partnership between the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS) and individual states to provide training and employment services to eligible SNAP participants (USDA-FNS, 2018). Established in 1985 by Congress, individual states and territories administer the SNAP E&T program through local service providers. The goal of SNAP E&T is to help SNAP recipients gain skills, training, work, or experience that will increase their ability to obtain regular employment and eventual self-sufficiency.

Eligibility for SNAP E&T participation is clearly defined by USDA FNS guidelines (USDA-FNS, 2018). Requirements for participation in this program include:

1. Individuals must be receiving SNAP benefits,
2. Individuals must NOT be receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash benefits, and
3. Program participants must be willing and able to work upon completion of the program.

In 2017, UT Extension became a third-party partner for the delivery of SNAP E&T services. Skill Up Tennessee is UT Extension's SNAP E&T program conducted in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the Tennessee Department of Human Services. The purpose of the program mirrors the goals of the national E&T program (Upendram et al., 2021).

Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Extension educators work within their counties to reach and recruit SNAP E&T participants who are interested in expanding their employment opportunities. Working with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the Tennessee Department of Human Services, program coordinators first verify that recruited individuals are eligible for participation. For those who are eligible, Extension educators and regionally-based career navigators offer a menu of services that include:

- Multi-session work readiness trainings to gain necessary knowledge and skills,

- Career navigation to help find the right job and temporarily provide ongoing support,
- Individual assessment to help an individual set and achieve employment goals,
- Supportive services to help pay for training and job searching, and
- Access to services—such as adult education, vocational technology training, and job retention services—to increase chances of success.

Once enrolled in the program, participants are assigned to a career navigator for case management services and career coaching. The career navigator works closely with participants to help them clarify their employment and career goals, identify barriers, and address challenges that may prevent them from successfully completing training or successfully retaining a new job. Research indicates that this model of coaching, combined with case management, is ideal for helping participants realize long-term success (Dunford-Stender et al., 2021).

As the participants and their career navigators identify challenges, the career navigators work with the state program staff to utilize program funding to support participants in addressing those challenges. For example, program funding used to assist participants may pay for transportation, training supplies, books, or equipment. Funding may also cover costs associated with the job search, essential uniforms and supplies, and licensing. The cost of one textbook, the gas for a final trip to an internship placement, or scrubs required for starting a new job can be the difference between achievable career goals or out-of-reach career dreams. The support of the career navigator and financial supports help participants continue on their path to career success.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

In 2020, 360 individuals pre-registered for the SNAP E&T program, out of which 292 were eligible. Including participants already engaged in the program from 2019, a total of 398 individuals participated in Skill Up Tennessee. Table 1 provides a break-down of participants by service. It is important to note that many participants take part in multiple educational services offered through the program.

Table 1. Skill Up Tennessee Participants by Service Received

Service	Number of Participants
Vocational Technology	244
Work Readiness Training	93
Job Retention	38
Adult Education	3

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Table 2. Supportive Services Offered

Supportive Service	Number of Participants
Gas cards	74
Tuition/training assistance	40
Uniforms	32
Assistance purchasing textbooks	29
Work equipment	21
Childcare assistance	12
Other (testing fees, drug screenings, background checks, etc.)	28

Table 2 provides an overview of the supportive services offered to participants. A total of 61 participants earned industry-recognized certifications and/or credentials.

We conducted an economic impact analysis of the Skill Up Tennessee program using IMPLAN. IMPLAN is a model that provides descriptive measures of the economy—including output, employment, and value-added—for 546 industrial sectors. Total industry output refers to the value of production by industry per year. Employment represents the total number of wage and salary employees, as well as self-employed jobs in a region, of both full-time and part-time workers. The total value added is all income to workers paid by employers; self-employed income; interests, rents, royalties, dividends, and profit payments; and excise and sales taxes paid by individuals to businesses.

In 2020, the program's direct output in training participants across Tennessee was an estimated \$605,120. With multiplier effects (indirect and induced impacts), the total estimated economic impact of the Skill Up Tennessee program is an estimated \$1,191,317. For every dollar of direct output from Skill Up Tennessee, the total economic impact on the state's economy is \$1.97 (Upendram et al. 2021).

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Skill Up Tennessee is working to connect participants with support and resources to help them gain the training and skills needed for employment. Recruitment and programmatic efforts continue to increase, especially in unserved and underserved regions of the state, which improves workforce opportunities for residents.

Program outputs demonstrate that the current model of partnership between Extension and state agencies is working. The beauty of such a model is found in the strategic synergy that occurs when organizations are engaged in a common goal: employment and self-sufficiency for limited-resource individuals. Extension is a partner that allows the state's workforce agency to expand its reach into rural areas of the

state, especially those areas that may be farther from the network of career development centers. In turn, funding available through the workforce agency allows Extension to provide the support participants need to progress in their training journey. Using Extension's place-based strength means Tennesseans have more opportunities for education, job training, and career advancement. Together, all organizations involved are helping Tennesseans realize their employment goals while setting them on a path for reaching their career dreams. Such work is impactful and rewarding.

The partnership currently in place is still young—only about six years old. To our knowledge, UT Extension is one of only a few, or perhaps the only, Extension organization to currently have a formalized third-party partnership for the delivery of SNAP E&T services. Yet, this partnership model is easily replicated. Below, we offer a few of the lessons we have learned in hopes that these will inspire others as they look to move into this space.

UTILIZE AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Costs associated with training, testing, uniforms, licensing, transportation, and childcare can prevent individuals with limited resources from reaching training and employment goals. To be truly effective, workforce development programming targeting limited-resource populations should be comprehensive, helping participants identify and address barriers to training and employment. Participant supports available through SNAP E&T offer Extension educators the financial capacity and ability to address these barriers.

INVOLVE COUNTY EDUCATORS

For a workforce development program to be successful, it must be integrated into the Extension system and championed as part of the Extension culture and scope of work. In order to provide support and buy-in for the Skill Up Tennessee program, Extension educators were instrumental in helping to conceptualize the program—offering feedback on pathways and challenges for program implementation in their respective communities. Additionally, all FCS Extension professionals are encouraged to use a portion of their time to engage in workforce development programming, specifically Skill Up Tennessee programming. Thus, the entire Extension FCS program demonstrates commitment to this most important effort.

UTILIZE THE EXPERTISE OF OTHERS

Partners are key. This project would not have been successful if not for the strategic and technical assistance offered by our state partners. Their patience, depth of knowledge, and willingness to engage in what seemed like countless phone calls, emails conversations, and Zoom meetings supported our success.

PILOT TEST

Skill Up Tennessee was not implemented overnight. Instead, the program was first pilot-tested in two regions of the state. This pilot test proved valuable by allowing the state team to work through any issues regarding billing, budgeting, and grant management. Additionally, it allowed agents, career navigators, and the state team to develop a system of communication and engagement that worked for those involved from Extension while meeting the needs of the clients.

SHARE SUCCESSES

The model shared above is currently implemented in Tennessee through the Skill Up Tennessee program, and it works. This model demonstrates the power of state agencies, partnered with federal funding, to address critical needs facing the state's economy and families. As such, it is imperative that those running the program share their successes. These successes can serve as a springboard for other Extension systems as they look to adopt a similar model. The successes realized in Tennessee could soon be realized across other states, and career success among limited-resource individuals in Tennessee could soon lead to successes on multi-state, regional, and national scales.

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