

Facilitating Career Pathways for Low-Income Rural Students

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION AS A COMMUNITY CONNECTOR



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- Developing Key Partnerships
Michael Wilcox and Tanya Hall, Purdue University; Sheila Martin, APLU
- Identifying Workforce Assets and Needs
Mark White, University of Missouri
- Mapping Pathways to Economic Mobility
Michael Wilcox and Tanya Hall, Purdue University; and Paul Hill, Utah State University; Joy Moten-Thomas, Fort Valley State University
- Recruiting and Supporting Rural Learners
Jeff Sherman, Oregon State University
- Evaluation and Reflection
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Pilot project Teams:

- Crawford County, Indiana
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- Hempstead County, Arkansas
Terrie James, Hunter Goodman, and Tabatha Duvall, University of Arkansas
- Sevier County, Utah
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- Kenny Sherin, North Carolina State University
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Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color and veterans. Ascendium's work identifies, validates and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit <https://www.ascendiumphilanthropy.org>.



Introduction: What is FORWARD?

PURPOSE

The project's primary goal was to develop, test, and disseminate a model workforce development curriculum for Cooperative Extension Professionals (CEPs). The curriculum, which we have named *Future Opportunities for Rural Workforce and Rural Development (FORWARD)*, is designed to support CEPs working to address workforce development issues in rural communities.

In doing so, we expected to: build capacity for Cooperative Extension to serve as workforce development coaches and facilitators in rural communities, identify and address the needs of low-income workers and employers in rural communities, develop workforce pathways that reduce poverty and alleviate worker shortages, and leverage the Cooperative Extension network to scale improvements in rural community capacity to address workforce needs.

MOTIVATION

Our focus on rural learners and workers is motivated, in part, by the intersectionality between rural, first-generation, and low-income students and workers. In the United States,

FIGURE 1. FORWARD OBJECTIVES

- Build capacity for Cooperative Extension to serve as Workforce Development coaches and facilitators in rural communities
- Identify and address the needs of low-income workers and employers in rural communities
- Develop workforce pathways to reduce poverty and alleviate worker shortages
- Leverage the Cooperative Extension network to improve rural community capacity to address workforce needs

The FORWARD Curriculum is available at <https://cdextlibrary.org/resource-library/FORWARD>.

rural residents face challenges that differ from those faced by metropolitan residents. While each rural area possesses unique economic and demographic characteristics, some trends are common to many rural areas: slow-growing or declining population, slow-growing or declining employment, aging population, lower workforce participation rates, and higher rates of unemployment and poverty (USDA 2018). One issue at the root of many of these trends is the educational success of rural community members, specifically lower levels of educational attainment and lower rates of enrollment in post-secondary education. Although the college attainment rate in rural areas has increased since 2000, it still lags metropolitan areas. For example, 33 percent of adults in metropolitan areas hold at least a bachelor's degree, while only 19 percent of rural adults do (USDA 2020). This trend is continuing as rural students are less likely to enroll in college, with only 29 percent of 19-to-24-year-olds in rural areas enrolled in college compared with 47 percent of their urban peers. Also, rural students are less likely to complete college on time (Krupnick and Marcus, 2017).

Lower levels of educational attainment in rural communities translates into lower rates of employment and wages—trends that influence Cooperative Extension's other programs, such as small business development, family and consumer education, and community health and food systems. The Federal Reserve has shown that workers in non-metropolitan areas with a high school diploma or less suffer from higher unemployment rates than workers with similar education in metropolitan areas, while those with at least some post-secondary education do not. They also show that labor force participation rates are generally lower for nonmetropolitan areas, even among adults of prime working age. These differences are primarily concentrated in adults with no post-secondary education, whose labor force participation rates are falling compared to their metropolitan counterparts as employment opportunities for those without post-secondary education evaporate. According to an analysis by the Economic Policy Institute, recent wage gains have been greatest among those with at least some post-secondary education compared with those with none (Weingarden, 2017).

Providing accessible post-secondary skills training for low-income rural workers, including work-and-learn opportunities, can improve employment and wages while addressing worker shortages in rural communities, contributing to longer-term sustainability. But training providers should offer these skills in the context of career pathways that align major education, training, and workforce development programs to meet the skills needs of students, job seekers, and incumbent workers, as well as the skill requirements of employers. Career pathways



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provide students and job seekers a plan for acquiring and using their skills to improve their job security and economic mobility. Building capacity in rural communities to identify career pathways and address skills shortages will have a longer-term impact on labor market outcomes for rural workers.

Our focus on Cooperative Extension is due to the important role it plays as a non-stakeholder and unbiased facilitator, evidenced-based educator and purveyor of technical assistance in many rural communities, and its direct connection to post-secondary education. The 32,000 Cooperative Extension leaders and staff, employees of one of the nation's 112 land-grant institutions, are key parts of the communities' social and economic infrastructure. Extension professionals live in the communities they serve and provide connectivity to their land-grant universities' academic resources. In addition, they provide non-credit education resources to farmers, ranchers, communities, youth, and families throughout the U.S. The four main focus areas for Cooperative Extension activities include 1) 4-H and youth development; 2) agriculture and natural resources; 3) community and economic development, and 4) family and consumer sciences.

Because of their important role in educating the community, Cooperative Extension staff can be effective conveners of community stakeholders around workforce development issues. Career and workforce issues are natural extensions of CEP's responsibilities in informal education, economic and community development, and in youth development.

Recognizing both the need and the opportunity of workforce development, Cooperative Extension leaders are anxious to strengthen Extension's role and capacity. In a survey of Cooperative Extension Leaders in 2013, Workforce Development was one of the highest-ranking emerging issues. This result underscored the need to strengthen Extension's capacity to assist rural communities in addressing their workforce needs—particularly for limited-resource populations such as non-traditional and low-income students (Urbanowitz and Wilcox, 2013).

WHERE WE STARTED

This is certainly not the first time that Cooperative Extension has participated in workforce development initiatives. We are building upon Cooperative Extension's previous experience with similar rural community development capacity-building programs such as the Stronger Economies Together (SET) and Rural Economic Development Innovation (REDI) programs. However, the specific goals of this program—designing and implementing career pathways



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that will meet rural workforce and low-income worker needs—required building new expertise and familiarizing CEPs with a new set of stakeholders, data, programs, and systems. In addition, this project expands upon Cooperative Extension’s experience with youth engagement and career development to target working with non-traditional student populations such as incumbent, displaced, and low-income workers. This project is increasing the number of CEPs who systematically build relationships with these non-traditional student populations, employers, and with the post-secondary training providers necessary to complete career pathways.

BUILDING ON THE EXISTING RESOURCES

Prior to developing the FORWARD curriculum, we scanned Cooperative Extension resources for existing curricula, tools, and other resources. As a result, we identified over 50 tools, guides, and programs that in some way address the components of the FORWARD model; we organized them in alignment with the curriculum elements to offer the authors of the FORWARD curriculum a baseline starting point for developing their curriculum elements. This resource is available as an addendum to the FORWARD curriculum on the Community Development Extension Library.

TESTING AND REVISING

Prior to putting a newly minted curriculum out to CEPs, we identified three pilot communities to vet the curriculum. The pilots provided immediate feedback that was valuable to reshaping the curriculum to improve its usefulness to the CEPs and their stakeholders. They also provided examples of implementation that may be useful for future adopters of FORWARD.



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The FORWARD Curriculum

This section briefly describes the FORWARD curriculum. The curriculum will be accessed through the [Community Development Extension Library](#) jointly hosted by [NACDEP](#), the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (NCRCRD).

INTRODUCTION

The FORWARD curriculum consists of five elements as shown in Figure 2.

DEVELOPING KEY PARTNERSHIPS

Extension educators begin with developing key partnerships because it helps them understand the workforce development ecosystem, identify the key stakeholders important to success, and understand how and why to build partnerships with these stakeholders.

Building partnerships is key to effectively addressing workforce challenges in rural communities. While this is true in all communities, it may be especially crucial in rural communities where resources are often limited. Upskilling the existing labor force is essential because population density is low, many communities have suffered a loss of working-age population, employers



PHOTO COURTESY OF USDA

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may have difficulty attracting new employees, and existing residents may have had limited opportunities for career exploration and development.

Over the past several decades, the landscape of who conducts training and how has changed substantially. Employers once conducted much of the training for their employees in-house. More recently, formal training programs have emerged, including workforce training within high schools and various federally sponsored workforce programs aimed at different populations, including the unemployed, dislocated workers, those affected by trade, low-income youth, recipients of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), and those requiring vocational rehabilitation. As the workforce training landscape became more complex, the federal government began requiring stronger collaboration among providers, including collocation at regional one-stop centers. In addition, many nonprofit providers offer workforce training services that may be funded by state and local government or through philanthropic donations. This complexity means that understanding the roles of local workforce system landscape and building partnerships with the key players is an essential part of the CEP’s preparation for doing this work effectively.

FIGURE 2. FORWARD ELEMENTS	
Developing Key Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Michael Wilcox and Tanya Hall, Purdue University; Sheila Martin, APLU
Identifying Workforce Assets and Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mark White, University of Missouri
Mapping Pathways to Economic Mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Michael Wilcox and Tanya Hall, Purdue University • Joy Moten-Thomas, Fort Valley State University • Paul Hill, Utah State University
Recruiting and Supporting Rural Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jeff Sherman, Oregon State University
Evaluation and Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheryl Burkhardt-Kriesel, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

IDENTIFYING WORKFORCE ASSETS AND NEEDS

Before a community can develop and implement a plan for assisting local workers and meeting the workforce needs of employers, they need a data-based understanding of the local labor market situation. Labor market information (LMI) is a critical tool for helping students, job seekers, employers, and local leaders navigate their local labor market. A shared understanding of the needs of employers, the opportunities available to workers, and the skills required to take advantage of those opportunities is essential to formulating and implementing an effective plan. In addition, the information can help each stakeholder group more effectively play their role in the system.

This element of the FORWARD curriculum lists the many sources of labor market information, the questions they can answer, their sources and how they can be used, and who will find them useful. It shows how to use these data to help a community answer important questions about workforce needs and assets. And, importantly, it helps CEPs understand how they can combine

these data with other data sources to gain a more accurate picture of the workforce landscape in their community.

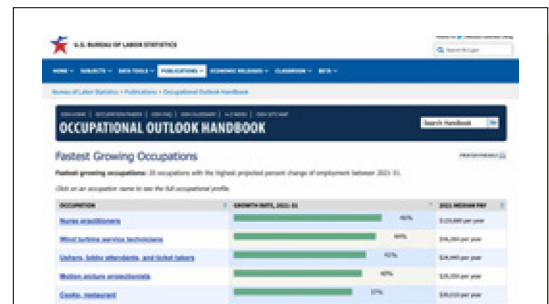
A strong working partnership with an LMI expert may be one of the most important partnerships for the CEP working in the workforce development area. Not everyone is good at identifying, accessing, manipulating, and presenting LMI data. While this curriculum will help CEPs understand the different sources and uses of LMI data, some CEPs may find that they need to identify an LMI expert at the state or local state data center or LMI agency to help them.

MAPPING PATHWAYS TO ECONOMIC MOBILITY

This element of the FORWARD curriculum helps CEPs and their community partners articulate pathways that learners and job seekers can follow to gain the skills they need to enter a career that will meet their needs for income and fulfilling work while filling employer workforce needs. A career pathway is a combination of education, training, and other services that meets the needs of industry and prepares an individual to be successful in a specific occupation or occupational cluster. It can provide clarity to job seekers on how to advance their career trajectory and provide a valuable tool to assist industry, workforce development, education, and other community partners to develop concrete processes for aligning their respective services to develop integrated pathways that make it easier for everyone to navigate.

Remote work may be an option for some rural workers. As part of the mapping pathways curriculum, we include a discussion of how to identify the opportunities for remote work that may be available in rural communities and resources for developing the skills that workers will need to be successful remote workers. Also, it provides advice to communities about how remote work can be facilitated through broadband, tax incentives, and co-working spaces.

In addition to remote work, microenterprises and small businesses comprise an important share of the rural economy. This means that entrepreneurship and leadership skills are important to the economy's ability to thrive. Entrepreneurship skills help entrepreneurs and their employees identify business opportunities, start successful companies, and lead communities in leveraging economic opportunities. This aspect of the Pathways module draws upon Extension programming in leadership and entrepreneurship to help communities consider how to provide these skills as a career pathway for people who may start as an employee in a microenterprise or small business and eventually become an entrepreneur.



A strong working partnership with an LMI expert may be one of the most important partnerships for the CEP working in the workforce development area.

RECRUITING AND SUPPORTING RURAL LEARNERS

Over the past several decades, many small and rural areas have struggled to recruit and retain rural learners and employees at the same rate as suburban and urban peers. The U.S. Census Bureau (2020) estimates that while rural areas declined by a half-percent between 2010 and 2020, urban and suburban areas grew by eight percent. However, as was seen in the “urban exodus” of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, there are reasons why some Americans may want to choose a more rural and small-town environment.

This loss of rural population means it is essential to recruit existing rural residents into career pathways that offer rural students and job seekers opportunities for social and economic mobility and rewarding careers while meeting the workforce needs of employers.

The CEP can work with community stakeholders to share information about rural career opportunities with students and workers who might otherwise not pursue them. By reaching out with programs specifically designed to recruit and train populations such as the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) community, the working poor, and the formerly incarcerated, the CEP can help these people achieve economic mobility while helping employers develop the skilled labor they need for success. Employers will also need assistance understanding why and how to recruit and work with employees that may have different cultures and life experiences than the existing workforce. These conversations offer communities the opportunity to address real issues, challenges, and divides that may keep some people from moving to or staying in rural areas.

This module includes information for the educator that will help them prepare to facilitate meetings with stakeholders to develop strategies for recruiting learners and workers into local careers and career pathways. It includes a slide deck and handouts with exercises to help the community understand how to make these opportunities more attractive to rural learners. It also includes case studies, examples, and contacts for rural workforce development programs focusing on low income and minority learners/workers.

EVALUATION AND REFLECTION

While some CEPs have experience with workforce development projects, many have not previously worked in this area. The FORWARD curriculum is new and is currently being piloted; each CEP will need to adapt the curriculum to their own environment. Therefore, the



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evaluation processes will provide great insight into the effectiveness of the curriculum and process and suggest needed adjustments. CEPs can anticipate three dimensions of evaluation. The first dimension is the an immediate assessment of curriculum as it is implemented; the second is identifying the work’s short-term impacts on stakeholders participating in the process; and the third is examining the longer-term impacts of the mapped pathways on the job seekers, employers, and the community.

The curriculum includes a summary of each of the three dimensions of the evaluation (immediate, medium-term assessment of pathways, and longer-term assessment of partnerships). It also includes a logic model that helps the educator understand the theory of change behind the FORWARD model. Finally, it includes a question bank that the educator can use to gather primary data from program participants.



The Pilot Projects

We implemented pilot projects in three rural communities to test the FORWARD curriculum. In recruiting the pilot projects, we looked for communities with:

- different levels of community capacity for collective action in economic and community development;
- different rural demographic contexts; and
- different structures of rural economies.

The three pilot communities are summarized in Table 1.

Hempstead County, Arkansas is by far the most racially diverse county of the pilot projects, while Sevier County in Utah is the most sparsely populated. Crawford County has the lowest median household income, while Hempstead County has the greatest percentage of the population living in households with incomes below the poverty level.

The three counties also have somewhat different economic strengths. Sevier County has relative strengths in mining and in the trade, transportation, and utilities sectors. Crawford County has strong employment in health care and trucking. Hempstead County has economic strengths in food processing, transportation, and health care.

The three counties are also dissimilar in their starting capacity for collective action in economic and community development. While they all have active economic development councils, they had different levels of community workforce development activity. The CEPs working in each county had different levels of involvement in the community and different levels of experience with workforce development issues. Thus, the curriculum was tested in a variety of conditions and contexts.

TABLE 1. PILOT PROJECT COUNTY POPULATION ESTIMATES AND SELECTED POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS, JULY 1, 2021

Characteristic	Crawford County, IN	Hempstead County, AR	Sevier County, UT	United States
Total	10,514	29,694	21,906	331,893,745
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino, %	95.3	53.0	91.3	59.3
Black or African American alone, %	0.8	30.3	0.5	13.6
American Indian or Alaska Native alone, %	0.5	0.8	1.6	1.3
Asian alone, percent	0.3	0.6	0.4	6.1
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders alone, %	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3
Two or more races, %	1.6	2.7	1.5	2.9
Hispanic or Latino, %	1.8	13.9	5.3	18.9
High School graduate or higher, persons aged 25 years +, 2016–2020	82.8	84.0	91.0	88.5
Bachelor’s degree or higher, percent of persons aged 25 years +, 2016–2020, %	10.5	16.0	20.9	32.9
Median Household Income (in 2020 dollars, 2016–2020), %	\$41,761	\$45,484	\$55,361	\$64,994
Persons in Poverty, %	15.6	18.7	10.0	11.4
Persons per square mile	34.4	27.6	11.3	93.8

Note: Statistics showing 2016–2020 are from the American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program (PEP), updated annually. [Population and Housing Unit Estimates](#)

Most of the pilots were recruited in the fall of 2021 but didn’t start meeting with community members until early in 2022. The pilots ran for about six months. To support the pilot project CEPs, we gathered the pilot educators and the curriculum developers for an orientation prior to the start of the pilots. We also held monthly team meetings during which each of the pilots shared what was going well, what was challenging them, and what they needed help with. The curriculum team followed up to help the pilot educators with resources and support.

Toward the end of the pilot projects, each pilot educator provided feedback to the curriculum developers as explained below and reported on outcomes. Detailed pilot project Case Studies are included in the Appendix.

EVALUATING THE FORWARD CURRICULUM

To evaluate the curriculum, we employed three different types of review:

1. Pilot project review: We received feedback on the curriculum from the pilot communities on an ongoing basis and also asked them to perform a more complete review toward the end of their pilot projects.
2. Internal review: Each of the curriculum developers reviewed each of the curriculum elements aside from their own.
3. External review: Several CEPs with expertise in workforce development, curriculum development, and community engagement reviewed the curriculum and provided feedback.

In each case, the feedback was structured as follows:

- Are the learning objectives clear?
- Are the intended outputs and outcomes clear?
- Are there additional resources or information that should be included?
- Do you think the educator would understand how to take action using this section and their action steps?
- If not, how could it be clarified?
- Is the material understandable for the average Extension educator who does not know anything about workforce development?
- What additional technical assistance might be needed to deliver this section?

Reviewers also provided additional feedback directly in the curriculum drafts. This feedback was provided to the curriculum developers who revised their elements accordingly.

PRIMARY FINDINGS FROM THE PILOT PROJECTS

Building Capacity: Did the curriculum help build capacity for Cooperative Extension to serve as workforce development coaches and facilitators in rural communities?

In each case, the FORWARD curriculum built capacity for the CEPs to serve as workforce development coaches and facilitators in rural communities. Each of the pilot teams began at a different starting point in their understanding of workforce issues; however, all reported building knowledge, relationships, and tools that will help them continue this work in the future. In Crawford County, Tanya Hall was already familiar with workforce issues and the workforce development system but reported that she now has tools that can help her facilitate these conversations not only in Crawford County but also in other rural communities in Indiana. In Arkansas, Terri James already had strong relationships in the community, but she and Tabatha Duvall reported that the program helped them to develop a stronger understanding of the workforce development system in general as well as key partners and available resources in their community. They can better connect their community to resources essential to meeting the needs of workers, learners, and employers. In Utah, Kari Ure had a background in youth development but no understanding of workforce or economic development; she was also new to her community. She reported that she now has the relationships and understanding to help her



The FORWARD curriculum built capacity for the CEPs to serve as workforce development coaches and facilitators in rural communities.

develop grant proposals and other resources to help build on her youth development programs to address their career exploration and workforce needs.

Can using the curriculum help Cooperative extension identify and address the needs of low-income workers and employers in rural communities?

Each of the pilot projects worked with the “identifying workforce needs” module to help their community acquire data, understand the trends that the data identified, and discuss its implications for their rural communities. It is clear that most CEPs will need to partner with a contact in the local labor market information agency or an Extension specialist who has expertise in this area. However, the FORWARD curriculum helped them understand the questions that should be asked, the data sources that can answer those questions, and how to structure a conversation around that data that can lead to planning and action to address workforce issues.

Did the pilot communities develop workforce pathways that can help to reduce poverty and alleviate worker shortages?

While each of the pilots discussed possible workforce pathways with their stakeholders, none finalized specific pathways in the abbreviated timeline that they had available. However, the stakeholders in both Crawford County, Indiana and Hempstead, County Arkansas made progress with respect to understanding the concept of career pathways and considering what pathways would be the best to begin mapping. We expect this work to continue with the support of the CEPs in both cases.

One important connection made in all three pilots was that of the relationship between 4-H youth development programs and workforce development. CEPs working in 4-H will be valuable for identifying youth communities that can benefit from the career pathways developed using the FORWARD process. And, the “Recruiting Rural Learners” component of FORWARD can help them identify and recruit a wider diversity of young people into these career pathways. It also suggests methods for acquiring the cultural competency necessary to build relationships with BIPOC youth and their families. CEPs can adapt existing 4-H programs that teach soft, life, and tech skills as part of the career pathways approaches developed in these rural communities.



CEPs working in 4-H will be valuable for identifying youth communities that can benefit from the career pathways developed using the FORWARD process.

Does the curriculum leverage the Cooperative Extension network to improve rural community capacity to address workforce needs?

Our limited experience in these three communities indicates that the FORWARD curriculum is an effective tool for leveraging the cooperative extension network to address workforce needs. The best evidence for this conclusion is the forward momentum built in Arkansas to train additional CEPs in the FORWARD curriculum so that they might start building partnerships and addressing workforce issues.





Conclusions and Reflection

Rural communities across the United States face challenges in understanding their workforce issues and needs, developing career pathways, and connecting low-income learners with career opportunities. Many of these communities have limited capacity for addressing these issues. However, they all have access to CEPs tied to the resources of one of the 112 land-grant universities across the United States. The FORWARD pilot projects have demonstrated that the curriculum is one tool for expanding community capacity to address these challenges. The Cooperative Extension System and the thousands of CEPs working in rural communities can scale this effort, improving CEPs' ability to provide the leadership and connectivity necessary for forward momentum that can improve workforce outcomes for low-income rural students and workers. We expect that this curriculum will scale this capacity moving forward.

While the ongoing COVID-19 crisis slowed the pilot project teams, as we begin to recover from this crisis, it is more important than ever for rural communities to come together to identify strategies for moving low-income students and job seekers into career pathways that will generate economic mobility and address worker shortages. Cooperative Extension is prepared to help these communities move FORWARD.

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APPENDIX



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FORWARD PILOT PROJECT CASE STUDY

Crawford County, Indiana



PILOT PROJECT TEAM: *Purdue University Cooperative Extension*

Tanya Hall, Community Development Regional Educator

Michael Wilcox, Assistant Director and Program Leader for Community Development



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INTRODUCTION

Crawford County is a rural county in southern Indiana near the border with Kentucky. The county seat is the town of English, which lies about 50 miles west of Louisville, Kentucky. The county comprises wooded rolling hills that offer a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities, including within Hoosier National Forest. Aside from English, the county includes several small towns, all with populations less than 1,000. The population density is quite low, at about 34 people per square mile.

The county's 10,514 inhabitants are primarily white. The population has a lower-than-average high school graduation rate and college degree attainment rate. The median household income is about 64 percent of the national average, and over fifteen percent of the population resides in a household that has an income below the poverty level.

WHAT IS FORWARD?

Future Opportunities for Rural Workforce and Rural Development through Extension (FORWARD) is a workforce development curriculum designed to support Cooperative extension Professionals providing leadership and facilitation to address workforce development issues in rural communities. While developing FORWARD, the project team, led by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and the North Central Regional Rural Development Center, tested the curriculum in three pilot rural counties, including Crawford County, from December 2021 to August of 2022.

The FORWARD Curriculum is available at <https://cdextlibrary.org/resource-library/FORWARD>.

CRAWFORD COUNTY POPULATION ESTIMATES AND SELECTED POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS, JULY 1, 2021

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Persons in Poverty, Percent	15.6	11.4

Note: statistics showing 2016–2020 are from the American Community Survey 5-year estimates

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program (PEP), updated annually. Population and Housing Unit Estimates <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/crawfordcountyindiana,seviercountyutah/PST045221>

STARTING POINT

Before launching the pilot project, the project team had developed some good relationships in the county due to previous community development projects related to building residents’ capacity to advance leadership and economic development. The Cooperative Extension professionals working on the pilot project, Tanya Hall and Michael Wilcox, had a good relationship with the economic development director, Michael Thissen, and knew that he was interested in addressing the county’s workforce development challenges, yet he was unsure how to structure a collaborative project to address these issues. The FORWARD curriculum helped to define some processes for getting started. The county had just recently begun developing a relationship with the regional workforce agency and the economic development agency staff were unaware of any other workforce development resources within the county. The workforce agency has a very small staff, acknowledged limited past engagement in its rural counties within the region, and was supportive of Extension playing a convening role.

Tanya was motivated to apply the FORWARD curriculum in the county as a method for tackling the workforce development challenges, fostering a stronger ecosystem, and possibly bringing new partners to the conversation. She anticipated that the FORWARD process would build those relationships, increase awareness of the resources and activities taking place and how to connect them.

Developing Career Pathways

In April, the pilot team facilitated an employer roundtable and again presented the data. They discussed the labor demand and supply and presented examples of career pathways. They listened to the employers discuss their workforce needs and began working with them to develop career pathways and to map the resources that could be used to ensure that those pathways are available to workers and learners. This was followed by a briefing to the members of the Economic Development Council, who were supportive of the effort.

Recruiting Rural Learners

The pilot team planned their next step as conducting focus groups with rural workers and learners to discuss their challenges in their career journey, as articulated in FORWARD's "Recruiting Rural Learners" module. They decided to focus on younger learners from age 18 to 27. The data indicated that many young residents of the county across many levels of educational attainment leave the county for work; the pilot team had heard that many of these workers would rather find positions within the county. The pilot team worked with the local 4-H Extension educator to begin to plan a focus group with this group, and they plan to do this in the fall. They are also considering forming a young professionals group within the county to network these professionals together and present programming and career development opportunities within the county. This project is in the planning stages; it has been delayed by the departure of the economic development director with whom they have been working.

PROGRESS AND IMPACT

The pilot team lead, Tanya Hall, reported that her personal development from the FORWARD project consisted of developing a stronger understanding of how to structure an approach to addressing the workforce development challenges and identifying the most relevant workforce data that can inform the county's strategy. The county Extension educator gained exposure to workforce issues, key stakeholders, and built relationships that will help them continue this work beyond the project.

Participants in the project reported positive impacts on their own knowledge, connections, and actions, with participants reporting that they plan to take action on what they have learned. The pilot team feels that gaining the attention of the regional workforce agency was important, as was the development of stronger connections among the workforce stakeholders. The community's ability to advocate for and generate resources and programming to address their workforce issues was improved.

NEXT STEPS

As the project was coming to a close, the local economic development director resigned, which is a loss for the momentum of the project. However, the interim director was involved in the project and is supportive, and the connections that were made among other workforce

stakeholders will assist the community in carrying on with the program moving forward. The actions planned for the coming months include:

- Working with employers to articulate skills needs and career pathways in transportation and logistics;
- Collaborating with workforce resource providers to map out assets available to meet those needs; and
- Working with the 4-H educator to develop a young professional's network and gather information from them through focus groups and other events and to bring the Work Ready curriculum to the high school.

FORWARD PILOT PROJECT CASE STUDY

Hempstead County, Arkansas

Pilot Project Team: *University of Arkansas System Cooperative Extension Service*

Terrie James, Staff Chair, Hempstead County

Tabatha Duvall, Program Association in Community, Workforce, and Economic Development

Hunter Goodman, Assistant Professor, Community, Workforce, and Economic Development



WHAT IS FORWARD?

Future Opportunities for Rural Workforce and Rural Development through Extension (FORWARD) is a workforce development curriculum designed to support Cooperative extension Professionals providing leadership and facilitation to address workforce development issues in rural communities. While developing FORWARD, the project team, led by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and the North Central Regional Rural Development Center, tested the curriculum in three pilot rural counties, including Hempstead County, from December 2021 to August of 2022.

INTRODUCTION

Hempstead County is in the Southwest corner of Arkansas near the Texas and Louisiana borders. The county seat, Hope, is about 30 miles from the border town of Texarkana, Arkansas, which has a twin city of Texarkana, Texas.

The county has a diverse population of about 20,000 inhabitants. About 30 percent of the population is Black and about 14 percent is Hispanic or Latino. The population of Hempstead County has a relatively low educational attainment rate with 84 percent of adults having a high school diploma and 16 percent holding a bachelor's degree or above. The median household income is 70 percent of the national average and almost 19 percent of the population is in a household that has an income below the poverty level. Hempstead County's population density is with about 28 people per square mile.

The FORWARD Curriculum is available at <https://cdextlibrary.org/resource-library/FORWARD>.

HEMPSTEAD COUNTY POPULATION ESTIMATES AND SELECTED POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS, JULY 1, 2021

Characteristic	Hempstead County, AR	United States
Total	29,694	331,893,745
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino, Percent	53.0	59.3
Black or African American alone, percent	30.3	13.6
American Indian or Alaska Native alone, percent	0.8	1.3
Asian alone, percent	0.6	6.1
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders alone, percent	0.2	0.3
Two or more races, percent	2.7	2.9
Hispanic or Latino, percent	13.9	18.9
High School graduate or higher, persons aged 25 years +, 2016–2020	84.0	88.5
Bachelor’s degree or higher, percent of persons aged 25 years +, 2016–2020	16.0	32.9
Median Household Income (in 2020 dollars, 2016–2020)	\$45,484	\$64,994
Persons in Poverty, Percent	18.7	11.4

Note: Statistics showing 2016–2020 are from the American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program (PEP), updated annually. Population and Housing Unit Estimates <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/hempsteadcountyyarkansas/PST045221>

STARTING POINT

Prior to launching the pilot project, Hempstead County Cooperative Extension staff chair Terrie James knew that workforce development was a priority for the county. She had been working in the community for almost ten years, and therefore understood the community context and had some connections relevant to workforce development. The county had just completed a five-year strategic plan called Thrive Hemsptead County, which was developed with the assistance of the Arkansas Economic Development Institute at the University of Arkansas Little Rock. The plan, which included strategic initiatives for education and workforce development, was completed in 2020 just before the rise of the Covid-19 pandemic, which delayed the start of plan implementation. As the pilot project team (Terrie James, Tabatha Duvall, and Hunter Goodman) began exploring the opportunity to be part of the FORWARD pilot project, they realized that the timing was very good. The community was ready to get started on implementation of Thrive, and there was new leadership at several key organizations in the region: the Chancellor at the University of Arkansas Hope-Texarkana (which is a 2-year community college), the superintendent of the Hope School District, and the Executive Director at the Hope-Hempstead County Chamber of Commerce. These new leaders needed an orientation and introduction to other key workforce players, and the Pilot Project Team saw this as an opportunity to play an important convening role. At the same time, the Hope School district had just kicked off a student internship program called Bobcats Work that

fit in well with the county’s ambitions for improving workforce outcomes for graduating high school students and would further their objectives for applying the FORWARD curriculum.

The Hempstead County team was also interested in understanding how Extension fit in to the county’s workforce development efforts. Cooperative Extension in Hempstead County had focused on Agriculture, 4-H Youth development and family and consumer science. They knew that this was a need in the county and that Cooperative Extension was playing a workforce role in other states. They saw a natural fit with their work with youth and an opportunity to bring resources to partners working with formerly incarcerated populations. The team was anxious to use the FORWARD pilot project as an opportunity to learn about workforce development and to build connections across these different activities.

TIMELINE OF STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS AND CURRICULUM APPLICATION

The Hempstead County team began considering this work in December of 2021. They started examining the curriculum and identifying the key stakeholders, using the template provided in the FORWARD curriculum. This was about the time the school district was getting started on Bobcats Work, the youth internship program. They began to talk with leaders in the local community about the potential for applying the FORWARD process.

Developing Key Partners

The project team met internally during January and used the template provided in the curriculum to identify the key partners they needed to work with. In February, they pulled together their first meeting of the stakeholder group that included about five people. They discussed the curriculum and identified shared goals related to building stronger capacity and connections around workforce development.

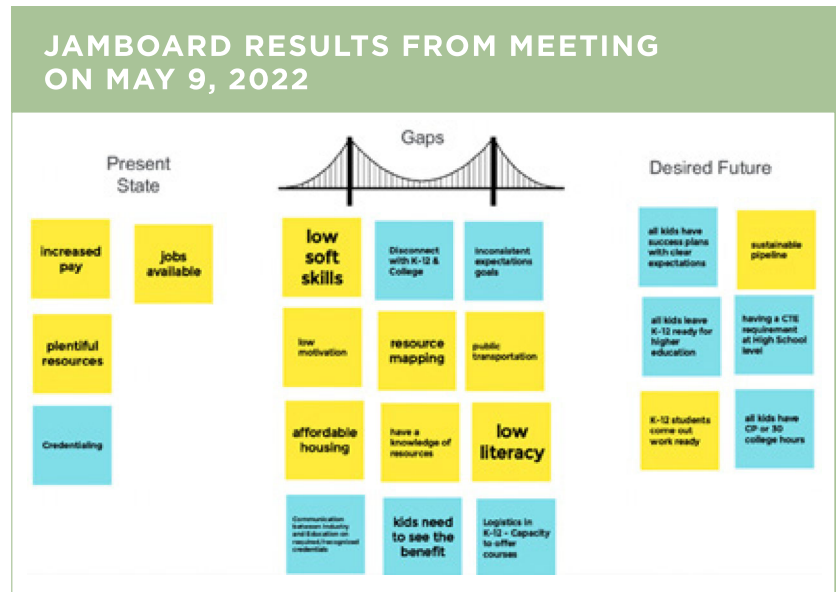
Identifying Workforce Needs

In March and April, the Pilot team met with a broader group of stakeholders (about 15 to 20 people attended each meeting) to review workforce data pulled with assistance from Purdue University Cooperative Extension. While many people were already aware of some of these data, it provided a level setting for people in the community. They were able to focus on three to four industries with occupations that had the greatest opportunities for family-wage jobs. They focused on trucking, manufacturing (especially food processing), nursing, and entrepreneurship, which had also been identified in the Thrive strategic plan. Tourism and hospitality were also discussed, but they decided to focus on the previous 4.

In April, a Bobcats Work “speed dating” meeting took place in which students in the program interviewed for internships with 16 local businesses. The pilot project team attended this event. The employers expressed a need for soft skills training, and the pilot project team was able to offer the school district a soft skills curriculum developed and used in other states by Cooperative Extension. Implementation of this program will provide these skills to a broader

set of students beyond those participating in Bobcats Work.

In May, the project team attended a County economic development meeting where they reviewed the workforce data and the steps the Pilot team has taken with employers to begin developing career pathways. They used a Jamboard to gather input and the discussion generated additional agreement about the workforce needs in the community, and a shared understanding of what skills people need to take advantage of the opportunities in their communities.



Recruiting Rural Learners

The pilot team was able to focus on two groups of rural learners: high school students (through the Bobcats Work program) and the incarcerated population. In May, they developed and executed a focus group with two groups of incarcerated individuals, one male, and one female. They used the FORWARD curriculum to lead conversations about the individuals’ barriers to employment. The findings from this focus group were shared with the jail system to inform their rehabilitation program.

Developing Career Pathways

In July, the pilot team met with employers to provide examples of career pathways as a stimulus for developing similar pathways in the region. This effort is just getting started in the areas of nursing and trucking. In May, the University of Arkansas Hope-Texarkana Chancellor received a \$15,000 grant to support entrepreneurship training. As this program is developed, the pilot project team will offer the Forward entrepreneurship career pathway as a resource.

PROGRESS AND IMPACT

The pilot team feels that a significant amount of progress has been made in several areas compared with where they were at the start of the project.

- The pilot team members developed a stronger understanding of the workforce development system in general as well as key partners and available resources in their community. They are better able to connect their community to resources that they know are essential to meeting the needs of workers, learners, and employers in their community. They have confidence that Extension has an important role to play

and that it fits naturally with their other roles in youth and leadership development and family and consumer sciences.

- University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension as an organization has become more aware of how powerful this work can be within rural communities. Dr. Goodman’s participation on the team provided a connection to Extension statewide, raising awareness of these issues for Cooperative Extension across the state. They plan to provide the curriculum and share their experience with additional counties across the state (see next steps).
- The community has achieved some shared understanding of their workforce needs, seen the capacity for Extension to offer resources needed by learners, and employers, and begun thinking about how mapping career pathways can better connect learners with the resources they need to take advantage of available job opportunities. They are working in a more coordinated fashion, outside of the silos that existed prior to the program.

NEXT STEPS

University of Arkansas Extension is developing a cohort approach to FORWARD with Arkansas Extension agents. They have about eight agents who are interested in implementing the FORWARD model in their home counties as part of an expanded effort to support workforce development in rural Arkansas. Terrie James will serve as an Extension Expert supporting the agents drawing upon her experience using the curriculum in Hempstead County.

FORWARD PILOT PROJECT CASE STUDY

Sevier County, Utah

PILOT PROJECT TEAM: *Utah State University Cooperative Extension*

Kari Ure, Extension Assistant Professor, Home and Community,
Sevier County Director

McKay Erickson, Extension Assistant Professor



INTRODUCTION

Sevier County is a large and very rural county in central Utah. The population density is very low, at about 11 persons per square mile. The county seat, Richfield, is its largest city, and lies about 160 miles south of Salt Lake City.

The county's population is overwhelmingly white. The population of about 22,000 has a higher-than-average high school graduation rate but a lower-than-average college attainment rate. The median household income is about 85 percent of the national average, and ten percent of the population is in a household that has an income below the poverty level.

WHAT IS FORWARD?

Future Opportunities for Rural Workforce and Rural Development through Extension (FORWARD) is a workforce development curriculum designed to support Cooperative extension Professionals providing leadership and facilitation to address workforce development issues in rural communities. While developing FORWARD, the project team, led by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and the North Central Regional Rural Development Center, tested the curriculum in three pilot rural counties, including Sevier County, from December 2021 to August of 2022.

The FORWARD Curriculum is available at <https://cdextlibrary.org/resource-library/FORWARD>.

SEVIER COUNTY POPULATION ESTIMATES AND SELECTED POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS, JULY 1, 2021

Characteristic	Sevier County, UT	United States
Total	21,906	331,893,745
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino, Percent	91.3	59.3
Black or African American alone, percent	0.5	13.6
American Indian or Alaska Native alone, percent	1.6	1.3
Asian alone, percent	0.4	6.1
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders alone, percent	0.2	0.3
Two or more races, percent	1.5	2.9
Hispanic or Latino, percent	5.3	18.9
High School graduate or higher, persons aged 25 years +, 2016–2020	91.0	88.5
Bachelor’s degree or higher, percent of persons aged 25 years +, 2016–2020	20.9	32.9
Median Household Income (in 2020 dollars, 2016–2020)	\$55,361	\$64,994
Persons in Poverty, Percent	10.0	11.4

Note: statistics showing 2016–2020 are from the American Community Survey 5-year estimates

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program (PEP), updated annually. [Population and Housing Unit Estimates https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/seviercountyutah/PST045221](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/seviercountyutah/PST045221)

STARTING POINT

Prior to launching the pilot project, Kari Ure was new to Cooperative Extension and new to the county. Extension positions in the county had experienced a lot of staff turnover, and Kari’s position had been vacant for about six months before she started. Extension stakeholders in the county were anxious for Extension to restart their traditional responsibilities for 4-H, family and health and wellness and agriculture. They were concerned that taking up a new project related to workforce development would dilute the more traditional work, and they were not accustomed to the thinking of Extension as a facilitator for economic or community development. At the same time, the county’s Economic Development Council was just restarting its own planning work that had been delayed due to Covid. This was the situation in which the Pilot Project team began its FORWARD work.

Kari was motivated to join the FORWARD cohort as an opportunity to learn about workforce development and about the needs of her community and also to build important stakeholder relationships as she settled into this new position. Her colleague McKay Erickson was also new to Extension. He left the county before the project was completed.

TIMELINE OF STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS AND CURRICULUM APPLICATION

The pilot team began exploratory meetings in November of 2021. They faced initial hesitancy from the community as concerns emerged that this would dilute the more traditional Extension work that had been delayed during vacancies. The team decided to officially join the pilot cohort and began meeting with the other pilot grantees in December.

Identifying Key Stakeholders

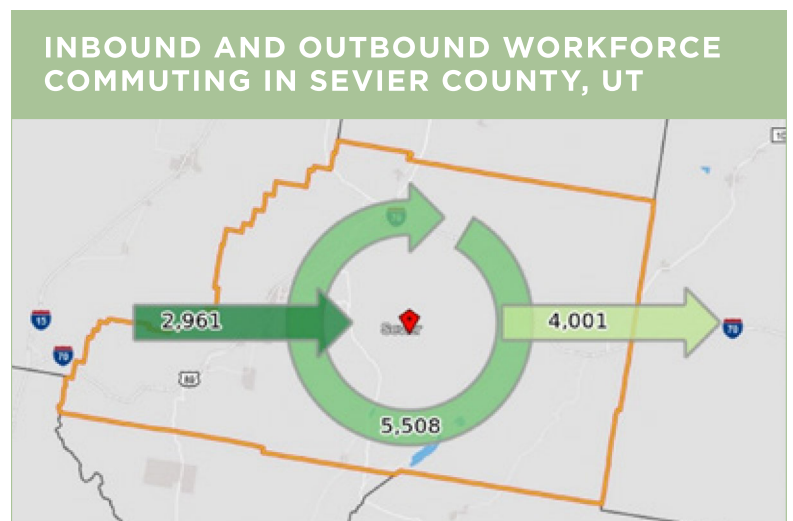
The Utah pilot team held their first official meeting as a pilot site in January where they worked with the Economic Development Director to identify the stakeholder list and consider the opportunities for applying the curriculum in the county. Additional on-on-one meetings followed as the pilot team built appetite for and momentum behind an effort to identify the needs of both the employers and workers in the community and to address them by developing and executing career pathways.

Identifying Workforce Needs

As the pilot team pursued the workforce data described in the “Understanding Workforce Needs” component of the curriculum, they learned that the state’s regional economist might be available to help pull together and present the data. The economist had never been to the county and had never shared these data before. The project team facilitated a meeting in June during which several stakeholders reviewed the data and the group discussed its interpretation for workforce issues in the state. They agreed that health care and manufacturing were two key areas of need and opportunity. Mining was also identified as an industry that is a strength in that area of Utah. The information was shared with other stakeholders who could not attend the meeting but were interested in helping develop a career pathways strategy.

Developing Career Pathways

From the data presentations and discussions, the stakeholder group decided that it would be fruitful to focus on career pathways in manufacturing and health care. They discussed the importance of youth career exploration and educational opportunities and began thinking about how they would map the progressions through high school and post-secondary training and experiences. One important discussion focused on giving young adults more opportunities to build careers in the county; the data showed



that most young adults leave the county for training and careers, although some mid-career individuals do move back to the area.

Recruiting Rural Learners

Although the pilot team did not implement this curriculum, they have discussed the need for youth career exploration, experiences, and programming that will make them aware of the local career opportunities. They also identified a group of workers in a nearby county—also very rural—that are about to lose jobs as a large meat processing plant shuts down. They see this as an opportunity to move these workers into a career pathway in manufacturing or even health care if they can develop career pathways and the training programs that will be required.

PROGRESS AND IMPACT

Kari feels that personally she has gained a great deal from the experience. She has learned about workforce development and her community and has built the contacts and the trust that will be required to make progress in the future.

She has also observed changes in her community's ability to work together. The program contributed to the community's understanding of their workforce challenges and assets. She has helped connect the key stakeholders to build awareness and understand the resources that Extension and other providers can bring to the challenges of workforce development.

Although the community began the process without much foundation in place, she believes they have built some of the understanding, trust, and connections necessary to develop the pathways and recruit youth and adult learners into the career pathways.

NEXT STEPS

Kari is working with the Economic Development Director to conduct a more current and complete needs assessment and to gather more systematic, current data before identifying career pathways. Only a fraction of businesses was reached with the last needs assessment; most were long-established, rather than newer businesses.

Kari also has been in contact with the governor's office, which made her aware of an opportunity to apply for grants for developing the career pathways. She is looking for opportunities to apply more traditional Extension programming such as youth development and health and wellness programming to these challenges. She is also looking into how she can work with employers and their employees to deliver Extension programming to incumbent workers to improve retention through career advancement.



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