



Empowering Rural Futures: Leveraging Extension for Community and Economic Development



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Introduction

Effectively delivering postsecondary education has become increasingly important in an economy that demands upskilling and reskilling to keep up with rapid change. The large distances between households and education providers in rural and remote communities make this challenge particularly acute. Multiple iterations of public policies, beginning in the 19th century and continuing today, have been enacted with the intent of reaching people where they live with meaningful education and training.

One of the oldest of such programs, the national Cooperative Extension Service[1], was established in 1914 through the Smith-Lever Act (7 U.S.C. 341 et seq.). Cooperative Extension is a partnership among federal, state, and local governments through which campus-based faculty members and locally-based educators provide “trusted, practical education, to help people, businesses, and communities solve problems, develop skills, and build a better future” and “collect grassroots input to prioritize future research” at the land-grant colleges and universities to be responsive to local needs[2]. Today, Extension is still a fixture in all 50 states, six U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia, where it is operated by each jurisdiction’s land-grant university or universities. Extension has offices in or near most of the nation’s 3,000 counties[3] which is shown in Figure 1.

[1] In this paper, we use the terms “Cooperative Extension Service,” “Cooperative Extension,” and “Extension” interchangeably.

[2] <https://www.aplu.org/food-environment-and-renewable-resources/board-on-agriculture-assembly/cooperative-extension-section/>

[3] <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/about-nifa/how-we-work/extension/cooperative-extension-system>

Figure 1: Map of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities

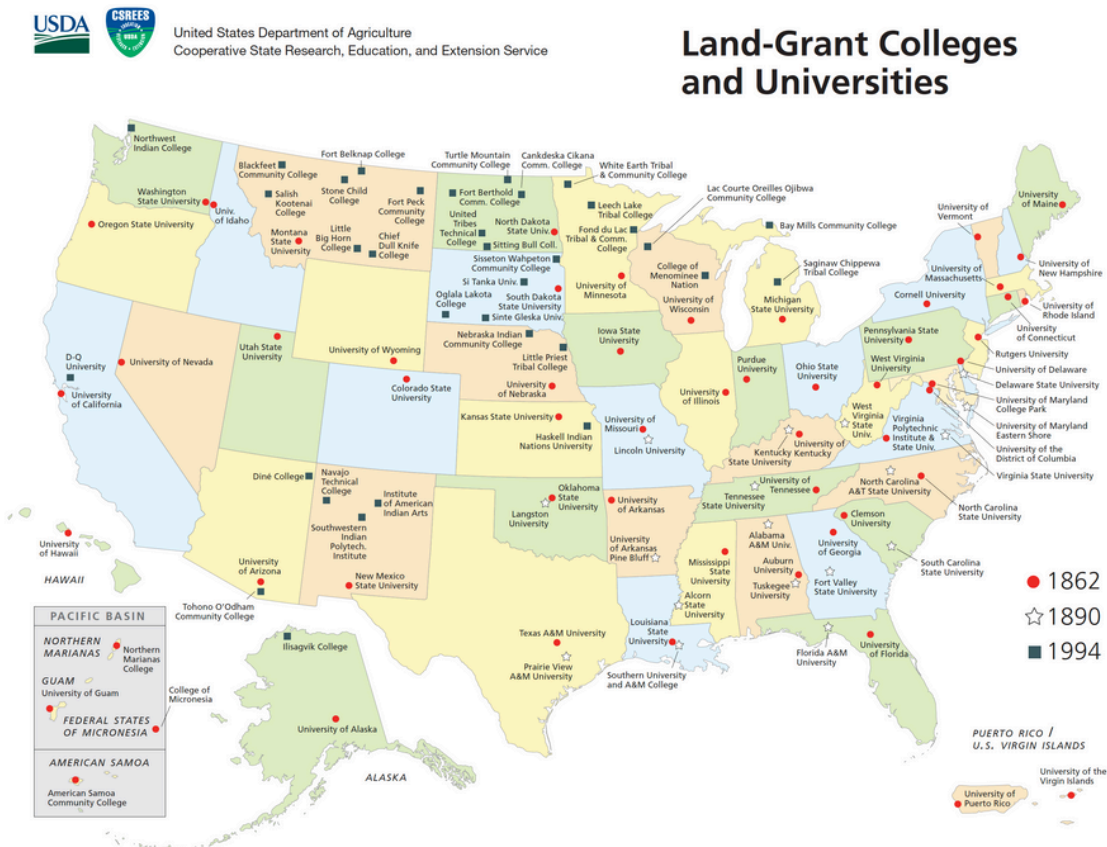


Photo from Montana State University and created by the United States Department of Agriculture Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service.

Nationally, Extension provides a broad array of noncredit educational services. In 2018, Extension made nearly 100 million direct education contacts with adults and youth[4], demonstrating its widespread impact and reach. Extension has similar program areas in each location, yet the services and educational content have varied over time and by location. These differences are influenced by state, local, and institutional policies, as well as adaptations to local context and needs.

At its core, Extension aims to be a partner in strengthening its community's capacity — not only to enhance the quality of life in the near term but also to equip the community to be viable and self-sustaining for generations to come. Extension is deeply embedded in

the communities it serves, fostering long-lasting relationships that allow for a long-term vision and impact. As a partner, Extension engages community members in a collaborative process that supports learning from one another. By appreciating the expertise and insights of residents, Extension ideally creates an environment where the local communities actively participate in shaping the educational services that meet their needs. This collaborative approach uniquely positions Extension to address emerging opportunities in community, economic, and workforce development in a relevant and impactful way.

With its expansive mission, historical impact, and strong ties to local communities, Extension has the potential to play a major role in community, economic, and workforce development (CEWD) [5]. This impact is especially powerful when Extension partners with community development organizations, economic development groups, workforce boards, other postsecondary institutions, community groups, and additional stakeholders. However, the role of Extension in CEWD policy and practice is not consistently well understood by this broader set of stakeholders. In some places, connections are tight; Extension services are a key part of providing workforce training and opportunities for people in rural areas. In other areas, connections appear weaker, and while Extension remains a valuable part of rural communities, its role in supporting CEWD may be more limited.

Furthermore, Extension's existing role and reach in the talent development pipeline is not often fully appreciated by state policymakers. State and federal postsecondary policy agendas inconsistently devote attention to the ways in which Extension already serves community, economic, and workforce development.

To support an improved understanding of Extension's role in CEWD, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) convened a nationally representative advisory group of experts from Extension, economic development, public policy, and related fields; the advisory group members are listed in an appendix to this paper. We asked this group to help us catalog assets in rural communities, discuss how Extension's strengths can address specific community opportunities, and explore how these assets can be deployed to further support CEWD. We also identified areas where barriers limit Extension's impact in CEWD efforts.

This paper offers an overview of the asset map and presents a guiding framework for how Extension can flexibly respond to CEWD needs in rural communities. We also provide promising examples that demonstrate how Extension offices are putting these strategies into action.

[4] Summary of direct contacts reported by extension offices in the 2018 annual reports submitted.

[5] In this report, we talk about community, economic, and workforce development together because they are interdependent pillars of prosperity. Strengthening any one of these areas naturally supports the others.

Rural Asset Map

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To better understand the strengths of rural communities, the advisory group began by developing an asset map. An asset-based approach complements a more traditional needs assessment by seeking to understand the contributions of individuals, organizations and networks in their communities. These contributions are then used to identify points of leverage and amplification for positive change.

No two rural communities are the same, of course, and therefore particular strengths and available resources can vary widely. However, the advisory group characterized **trust**, **purpose**, and **leadership** as key assets that are often broadly shared across rural communities in the U.S.

Trust

Within the first asset theme, trust, are the common characteristics of small towns and isolated areas that are centered on shared cultural identities. Superficial stereotyping of rural communities too often assumes racial, economic, religious and political homogeneity. While the realities of rural areas are much more complex and diverse, they can still combine to define a community identity. That shared identity is often a source of mutual understanding and resulting trust, catalyzing collaborative initiatives, facilitating partnerships and accelerating buy-in. Such trust further solidifies personal investment in the success of other community members. Extension often finds itself as part of the trust that permeates rural communities, not only because of its local footprint but also the fact that Extension staff are often highly engaged community members that have a track record of positive contributions to the local community. Extension educators themselves are often trusted, which extends to the information they disseminate within the community.

Rural Asset Map



Purpose

The second asset theme, purpose, acknowledges that small communities tend to have more convergent aspirations than urban areas. A shared purpose in rural towns is a corollary of trust; that is, the more one trusts that one's neighbors share one's goals and values, the more likely one is to be personally invested in their success. While small town residents are not singular in their beliefs, they are often united in a shared sense of community, pride and commitment to mutual support. This shared purpose manifests in cooperative commitments: with often little external support, rural communities become reliant on a shared ethos to contribute time, effort, expertise and personal or collective resources.

Leadership

The third asset theme, leadership, reinforces that a critical currency of rural communities is personal relationships. An inherent product of small-town living, where individuals are likely to know one another, leadership emanates from individuals based on personal connection and recognized expertise. This stands in contrast to urban communities where institutional connection, formal positions, and status carry more weight. Having fewer individuals available to take on important formal tasks also results in the diffusion of leadership roles to a greater share of the population, giving more individuals a shared experience in trying to carry out tasks on behalf of the community. Leaders emerge from trusted relationships in networks and sub-communities and are regarded as influential when they can harness relational trust and relevant expertise within their networks to achieve shared community purposes.

After developing the asset map of rural communities, the advisory group considered the ways in which these assets can best be supported by Cooperative Extension. In the section that follows, we explore the specific opportunities that Cooperative Extension has to build on these assets and support community, economic, and workforce development.

Land-Grant Universities and the Cooperative Extension Service

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By understanding how rural assets and currencies — trust, purpose, and leadership — are activated, partners in rural communities may achieve more positive results. Extension offices have been identified as uniquely effective institutional partners. While Extension offices have the resources and backing of major universities, they are simultaneously structurally and culturally embedded in the rural communities that they serve. Therefore, local Extension professionals are trusted to lead collaborative efforts and to contribute to initiatives led by others.

To better understand the ties between the past and present opportunities of Extension in workforce development, it is helpful to consider Extension's history. Land-grant universities (LGUs) were born to extend education and research beyond academic cloisters and into practical applications. Established by the Morrill Act of 1862, the history of LGUs is inextricably linked to land ownership — a concept that has been contested and adjudicated over time, with particular implications for displaced Indigenous communities. As part of this history, land-grant universities were provided funds from the sale or lease of lands declared to be federally owned to start colleges of applied sciences primarily in fields relevant to agriculture, mining, and other industrial fields.

Agriculture and mining were, at the time, the anchor industries of U.S. rural areas, and serving related occupations inherently served workforce needs. In 1890, Congress expanded land-grant funding to southern state universities established to serve Black students, and over a century later, in 1994, expanded further to include tribal colleges. The distinctions between 1862, 1890, and 1994 institutions continue to influence the development of Extension policy and practice, with funding disparities still impacting historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) today^[6].

Proving to be enormously popular, Congress expanded the LGUs' reach far beyond their main campuses through a national system of agricultural experiment stations (in the Hatch Act of 1887) and eventually through the Cooperative Extension System. In

[6] <https://tcf.org/content/report/nourishing-the-nation-while-starving-the-underfunding-of-black-land-grant-colleges-and-universities/>

cooperation with states and counties, Extension was established to provide locally relevant, publications, applied research, and other services directly to local communities. These efforts were primarily to disseminate the latest university research on agriculture and other areas of benefit to rural areas. Extension's core model centers on an expertly trained, locally situated Extension "agent" (alternatively called a "specialist," "educator," or "faculty"), who identifies local needs, builds community networks, develops research-based products and curricula, and delivers relevant educational programs and services.

As rural areas in the U.S. have evolved, so too has Extension. Although commonly associated with agriculture, Extension expanded to home economics and food preservation during the Great Depression. Then, Extension later extended into youth development through 4-H and its project-based learning model. By the mid-1900s, Extension expanded into broader areas of rural economic development. Recognizing the system's impact around rural economic development, Congress established a system of Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs) within the national Extension system in the Rural Development Act of 1972. The RRDCs, campus Extension faculty, and regional Extension specialists collectively contribute to a modern cornerstone of the national Extension system, most frequently referred to as "community-economic development" (CED). CED is often regarded as the center of Extension's contributions to workforce development. However, the other common Extension program areas of agriculture/natural resources, family/consumer sciences, and youth development are frequently identified as contributing as well. In this paper, we expand the notion of CED to name and include workforce development efforts more directly.



1862

Morrill Act establishes LGUs.



1890

Congress expands land-grant funding to include historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).



1914

Smith-Lever Act creates Cooperative Extension service.



1972

Rural Development Act establishes RRDCs within national Extension system.



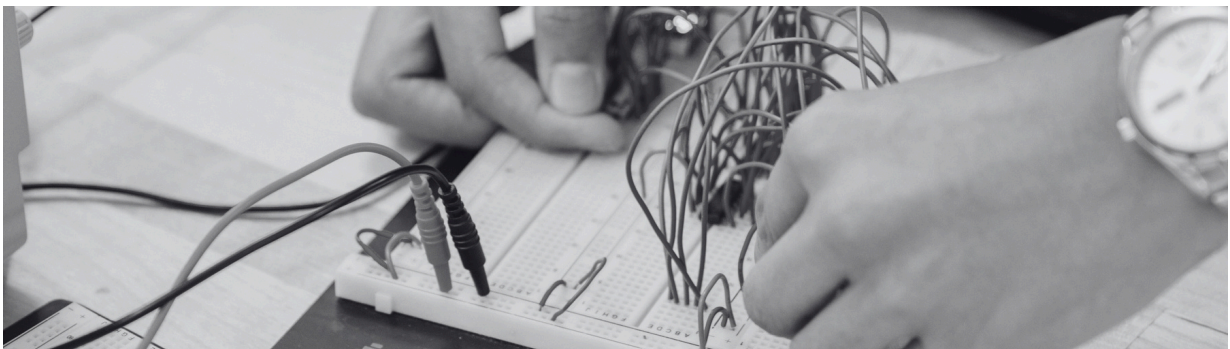
1994

Congress expands land-grant funding to include tribal colleges and universities (TCUs)

Role of Extension in Rural Community, Economic, and Workforce Development

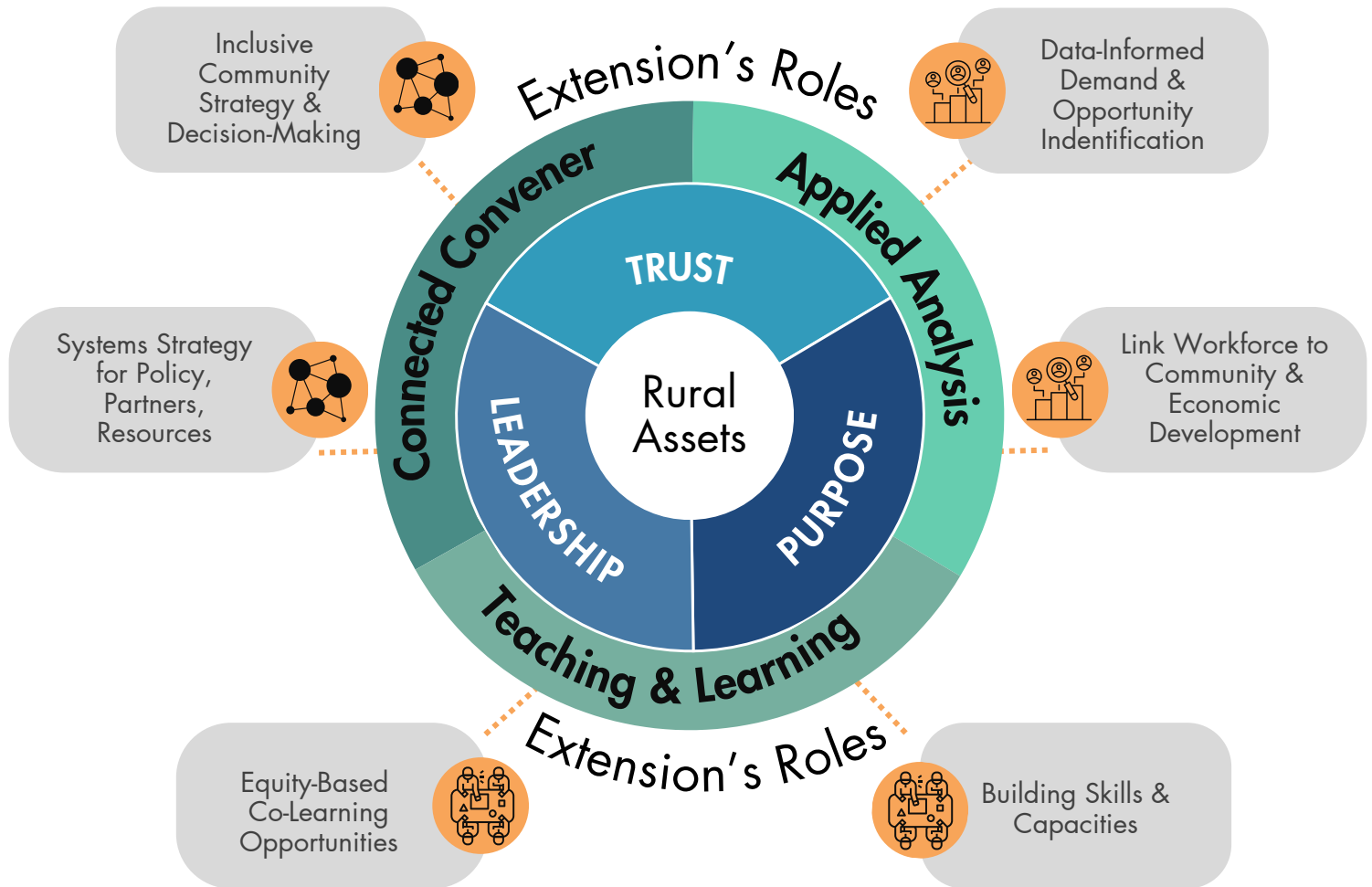
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Nationally, Extension provides a broad array of educational services that contribute to rural CEWD, with great variation from place to place. Against the backdrop of the rural community asset map, and together with the advisory group, we considered how Extension can best complement and expand CEWD. The framework, summarized in *Figure 2*, builds on two key premises: 1) Extension's core role is to partner with communities to inform and use the research of the land-grant university, and 2) Extension's work builds on the assets of the communities they serve.



The resulting framework — which builds on our asset map and synthesizes key insights from our advisory board — explores Extension's potential role in rural workforce development via three categories: *Connected Convener*, *Applied Analysis*, and *Teaching & Learning*. While this work is not definitive — well-informed experts might differ on optimal ways to combine or divide categories — the framework represents a starting point for collaborative work with NCHEMS, the advisory group, and project partners moving forward.

Figure 2: Framework of Role of Extension in Rural Workforce Development



CONNECTED CONVENER

The role of *Connected Convener* recognizes Extension's trusted role inclusively bringing together various community members, constituencies, organizations, and individuals in the pursuit of shared purposes. Rural Extension offices serve as local outposts of their land-grant universities, uniquely valued for their trusted role as inclusive facilitators that bring individuals and groups together for collaborating, strategizing, and learning. Examples of how Extension acts as a Connected Convener are described in Box 1.

Inclusive Community Strategy and Decision-Making

Extension is regarded as an expert, trusted facilitator and may have a role to play in supporting strategy development and decision-making among disparate networks of employers, industries, educational institutions, workers, and other stakeholders. Extension professionals support economic development by helping communities integrate local knowledge, diverse community voices, and university research. To do so effectively, they leverage their broad geographic presence, cultural connections, and trusted relationships.

Systems Strategy for Policy, Partners and Research

Extension is often the natural leader to address issues when there is an absence of leadership or a need to align the work of multiple regional organizations. The results of taking leadership in this convening role could include regional, systems-connected strategies that inform public policy, community investments, and long-term plans shared among community partners.

Box 1: Examples of Extension's Role as a Connected Convener



The National Digital Education Extension Team (NDEET) builds on and strengthens partnerships nationwide in joint efforts to help communities unite around the importance of broadband infrastructure and its applications for individuals, businesses, communities, and economic growth. NDEET supports communities in exploring options to expand broadband access, provide resources to stimulate broadband development, and offer ideas and tools for boost broadband adoption[7].



Montana State University Extension and the Montana Department of Commerce's Montana Main Street Program co-hosted an event called The Road Show in September of 2024. During The Road Show, rural community leaders, volunteers, regional agency leaders and others came together to hear panels and facilitated conversations about building capacity, creating partnerships, and inspiring small towns to take on significant projects. The event is part of Montana State University Extension's Reimagining Rural program[8].



West Virginia University Extension offers facilitation sessions year-round. These sessions include community and organization visioning facilitation[9].

[7] More information about NDEET is found at <https://srdc.msstate.edu/e-commerce/about.html>

[8] Read more about the gathering here: <https://www.montana.edu/news/23913/rural-volunteer-leaders-invited-to-participate-in-community-development-gathering-sept-17-18-in-miles-city>

[9] For a list of West Virginia University Extension facilitation offerings and contacts, visit <https://extension.wvu.edu/community-business-safety/community-development/leadership-facilitation>.



APPLIED ANALYSIS

The role of *Applied Analysis* describes how Extension puts university research to practical use by partnering with the community to co-identify its needs, and then co-develop research-based solutions to meet them. Often the only representatives from a research institution in rural communities, the Extension professionals are trained in various skills such as quantitative and qualitative analysis. They have abundant access to data resources, thereby bringing a unique skill set and resource to communities. The University of Missouri's Extension program exemplifies this role as described in Box 2.

Data-Informed Demand and Opportunity Identification

Extension professionals may support capacity building for workforce development stakeholders to better collect, interpret, and apply their own data. They also enhance efforts by providing additional data sources, such as university-developed data and data available from state Departments of Labor and Economic Development, along with sophisticated analytic techniques to benefit community partners. These analyses can identify existing and future workforce opportunities with links to regional community-economic development strategies.

Link Workforce to Community-Economic Development

Products of this analytic role include data-informed reports, presentations, visualizations, and other products that help map future pathways for communities to develop a thriving workforce.

Box 2: Examples of Extension's Role in Applied Analysis



University of Missouri Extension's Exceed program offers consulting for communities, governments, nonprofits and others on projects related to regional economy evaluations, rural economy growth strategies, and economic impact analysis^[10]. For example, the Exceed program prepared a report for BioSTL, a nonprofit in St. Louis, Missouri, that integrates public and proprietary data sources along with stakeholder feedback. The report presents a labor market analysis of the plant, life, and medical sciences for the St. Louis regional economy^[11]. Stakeholder engagement provided an opportunity for co-learning through which almost 60 regional public and private sector stakeholders and the Exceed team were able to augment the knowledge they each had and inform the content of the report.

[10] See more information at <https://extension.missouri.edu/programs/exceed/projects-work-with-us>

[11] Read the report at https://www.biostl.org/files/uploads/BioSTL_Labor_Market_Analysis_FINAL_1.pdf



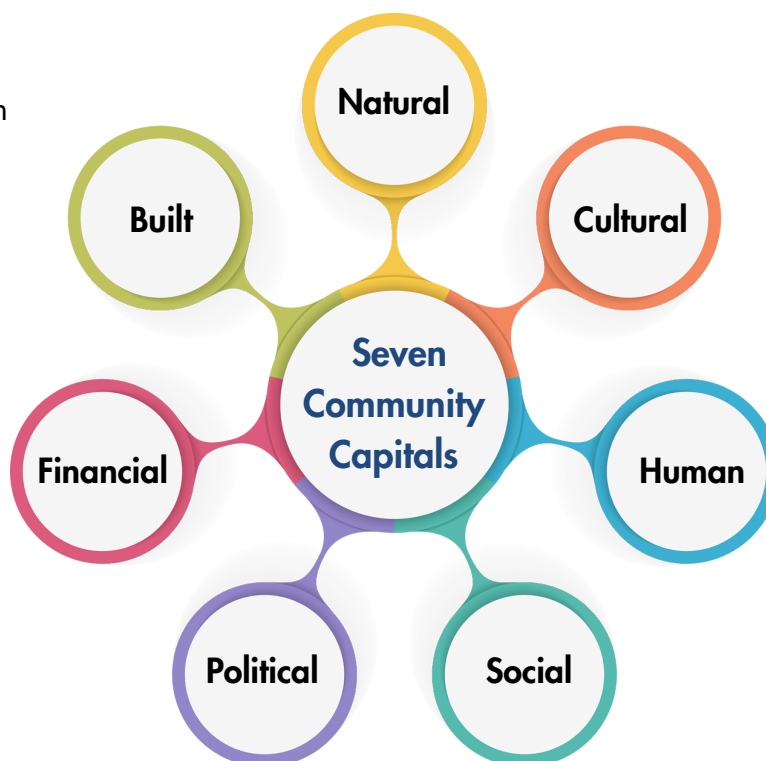
TEACHING AND LEARNING

The role of *Teaching & Learning* highlights the central charge of the land-grant university to disseminate knowledge. The core purpose of situating Extension offices in nearly every county of the country was to develop meaningful relationships to co-identify, co-develop, and co-produce knowledge. This approach allows Extension to learn from communities and partner with them to make LGU research practical and useful. Many Extension programs exemplify this; two are explored in Box 2.

Equity-Based Co-Learning Opportunities

Extension's teaching in the rural workforce development context includes direct instruction for current or future workers, often in skill areas that apply to a wide variety of industries. Extension often develops learning experiences for community members, leaders, organizations, and partners. These capacity-building learning experiences often aligned toward the seven community capitals for promoting vitality and sustainability[12] as depicted in Figure 3. Teaching and capacity building are often coupled with activities closely associated with convening and analysis.

Figure 3: Seven Community Capitals for Promoting Vitality and Sustainability



[12] For an example description of the community capitals model, see <https://cdextlibrary.org/resource-library/promoting-community-vitality-sustainability-the-community-capitals-framework/>.

Building Skills and Capacities

University-based Extension is recognized for principles of equity in its educational services, ensuring broader outreach, access, and adaptations to serve individuals and communities who often have limited access to other opportunities.

Box 3: Examples of Extension's Role in Teaching and Learning



Prairie View A&M University Extension's Rural Workforce Academy provides hands-on skills training and job placement assistance at no cost in fields such as certified nurse assistance, cybersecurity, low voltage electrical, and construction [13].



Utah State University Extension's Rural Online Initiative provides training to prepare people in rural areas for remote work, increasing the job opportunities they might consider that would allow them to continue living in their communities [14].

[13] For more information about Prairie View A&M University Extension's Rural Workforce Academy, see <https://www.pvamu.edu/cafnr/rural-workforce-academy/>.

[14] More information about Utah State University Extension's Rural Online Initiative is found at <https://extension.usu.edu/remoteworkcertificate/>



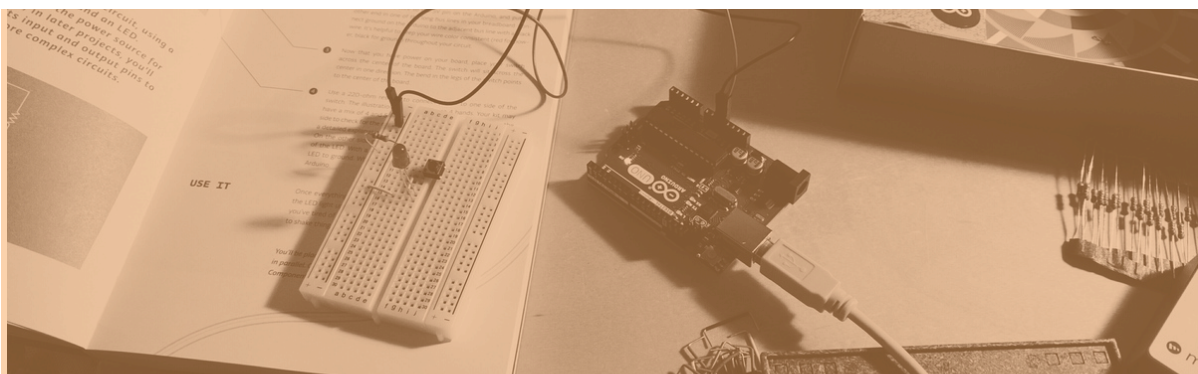
Next Steps and Applications

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As explored in this framework, the work of Extension is far-reaching, varied, and pivotally important to communities across the nation. At the same time, Extension is not consistently well-known by a broad range of stakeholders for its current or potential role in community, economic, and workforce development. Nor is its potential for contributing to state education and workforce development consistently recognized in state and federal higher education policymaking circles. Elevating the understanding of Extension's contributions is a first step in increasing the impact that Extension has in these areas.

Moving forward, NCHEMS will continue to partner with the advisory group and a broader range of Extension practitioners to better understand how the work of Extension can be meaningfully woven into CEWD efforts. We will explore the policy and resource conditions that have enabled successful Extension efforts and will further identify areas of work that hold particular promise. Particular attention will be paid to policy and resource conditions that are optimized to catalyze impact. Conversely, we will also seek to identify the barriers that block successful implementation of Extension initiatives.

Further, a handful of sites will be selected for grants and in-kind support from NCHEMS to demonstrate applications of data-informed workforce development strategies. This working group of demonstration sites will explore the role of applied analysis in depth, examining the proposition that Extension can uniquely add value to rural workforce development efforts. Individuals interested in joining the demonstration sites are encouraged to reach out to NCHEMS.





Final Thoughts



Connecting people in rural areas to postsecondary training and workforce opportunities has long been a challenge; and one that state- and federal-level public policy has attempted to improve. Cooperative Extension is perhaps the longest-standing example of these efforts, working over its 100+ year history to disseminate knowledge and skills to people in counties across the nation. At the same time, its role in community, economic, and workforce development is not well understood by all stakeholders, which risks dampening Extension's potential impact.

Through convening a group of thought leaders in Extension, rural education, public policy, and economic development, NCHEMS is working to better understand the role Extension currently plays, and may expand into, within community, economic, and workforce development. We've presented a framework of how Extension's role could be understood, through convening, data and analysis, and teaching and learning that builds on rural assets. Moving forward, NCHEMS will continue to work with Extension stakeholders to apply this framework and expand our learning about promising practices for Extension to adopt.



Appendix

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) appreciates the contributions, insight, and feedback from the advisory group. The advisory group's efforts assisted in producing this report and developing this framework. Their continued efforts in this project will lead to greater collaboration and understanding of the role of Extension in community, economic, and workforce development, and how Extension can support more people in rural communities. Any errors, omissions, or oversights in the report are solely the responsibility of NCHEMS.

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