Moving Communities FORWARD:
Creating Future Opportunities for Rural Workforce and Rural Development through Extension

By Sheila Martin, Ph.D., Association of Public and Land-grant Universities

Introduction

Welcome to FORWARD! You are probably reading this guide because you are interested in helping the communities in which you work, and their residents move FORWARD in tackling their workforce development challenges. This curriculum will help you work with communities to identify and address the career pathway needs of rural workers--particularly low-income rural workers—as well as employers in rural communities.

Purpose of the project

The purpose of this curriculum is to build cooperative extension professional's (CEP)'s capacity to serve as facilitators of workforce solutions in rural communities. Our focus on low-income workers is designed to support social and economic mobility for rural people and thereby improve the economic resilience of rural communities. Our focus includes both traditional low-income rural students graduating from high school and looking for their first career options and non-traditional low-income worker-learners such as displaced workers, incumbent workers in low-wage jobs, and those facing barriers to employment such as a history of incarceration.

This curriculum is designed to help you work with community stakeholders to design and implement career pathways that move low-income rural students and workers into and through pathways that lead to jobs in demand in local communities—with positive outcomes for low-income workers and employers. Low-income workers can learn about the opportunities available in their rural communities, the pathways of training and experiences needed to take advantage of those opportunities, and the resources available to connect them to the required training and experiences. Employers will develop an understanding of how they might recruit, train, and retain high quality workers that can fill available jobs and help companies grow.

Using this curriculum will help CEPs gain confidence in their ability to partner with workforce stakeholders and to generate broad agreement on the actions required to foster economic and social mobility for low-income workers and to meet the needs of rural businesses.

How and when to use this curriculum

Community objectives

You use this curriculum when:

- You have been asked by community leaders to assist in identifying the community's needs for workforce development.
- You see an underdeveloped workforce development eco-system in the community and limited effort to strengthen the ties across entities.
- You see the need to generate new opportunities for low-income workers and connect them with available jobs.
- You and the community leaders agree that Cooperative Extension can fill a gap by facilitating a community conversation about workforce development and job and training opportunities for low-income workers.

Participants and audiences

The local Cooperative Extension Professional

The key audience for this curriculum is the local Cooperative Extension professional who is working within a rural community to meet the needs expressed above.

The Cooperative Extension Specialists

The educator may call on Cooperative Extension specialists for assistance in customizing and delivering this curriculum. Specialists in labor market information, data analysis and mapping, workforce development, entrepreneurship, remote work, reaching Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, and evaluation may all be helpful.

Community leaders

The community's economic development, education/training entities and business leaders will be key to making this program a success. They must be willing to participate by examining and legitimizing workforce data and by sharing information about their workforce needs. A key point of identifying whether a community is ready for this curriculum is the willingness of the leaders to come to the table for a discussion of these needs and how to meet them.

Low-income rural workers and students

The curriculum is ultimately designed to help communities build strategies to move easily overlooked low-income rural workers and students into living wage jobs. It will be important for the strategies developed through this curriculum to motivate these workers and students and their families to participate so that they might learn about career pathways and the training and experiences that can lead them to a family wage job in their community.
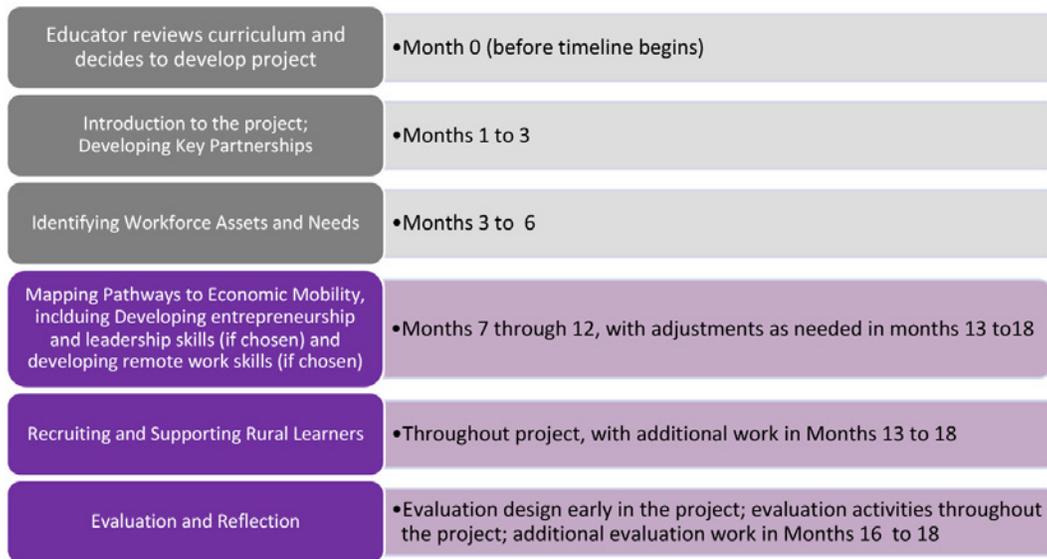
Implementation

Timelines

The pilot project participants tested this curriculum over the course of about five months. However, this was a very abbreviated schedule. Implementing each of the curriculum elements in your community will take time. A potential eighteen-month timeline appears below: the first six months are for planning and organizing (steps shown in grey), and the remaining year is for implementation (steps shown in purple). However, each community needs to assess its readiness and set the timeline accordingly. Your community may be more ready to jump in and move quickly through the process, or they may need additional time to become familiar with one or more of the curriculum elements. Therefore, you should adjust the timeline according to your community's needs. You should also be prepared to work on different elements of the curriculum simultaneously. For example, the evaluation component will need to be implemented throughout your project; similarly, identifying and recruiting rural students may need to begin months (or even years) before the students are actually taken through a curriculum in order to develop the partnerships necessary for success.

Not every community will choose to implement each of the curriculum elements. For example, entrepreneurship and leadership skills may be more important to some communities than others. These communities rely heavily on small business development and growth for their economic vitality. Others may decide that remote work should be an important part of their economic and workforce development strategy; others may discover that developing partnerships and strengthening the workforce development ecosystem is their priority.

Figure 1. An example timeline for a FORWARD project.

Educator reviews curriculum and decides to develop project	•Month 0 (before timeline begins)
Introduction to the project; Developing Key Partnerships	•Months 1 to 3
Identifying Workforce Assets and Needs	•Months 3 to 6
Mapping Pathways to Economic Mobility, inclduing Developing entrepreneurship and leadership skills (if chosen) and developing remote work skills (if chosen)	•Months 7 through 12, with adjustments as needed in months 13 to18
Recruiting and Supporting Rural Learners	•Throughout project, with additional work in Months 13 to 18
Evaluation and Reflection	•Evaluation design early in the project; evaluation activities throughout the project; additional evaluation work in Months 16 to 18

Participatory formats

As you design the timeline and format for your project, you will need to think carefully about the participatory formats you will use to deliver the curriculum to different audiences and stakeholders. In some communities, most of this work will be done within a community meeting of key stakeholders related to workforce and economic development. However, some of your work may be accomplished more effectively in one-on-one meetings. Our pilot projects differed in this respect depending on the comfort level of the workforce and economic development stakeholders with meeting together. Some parts of the curriculum may need to be executed during an after-school meeting with parents and/or students. Some may be delivered at existing meetings of community organizations. At times, you may need to conduct these meeting remotely, which will require that you work with remote collaboration tools.

Adapt the materials—including PowerPoints, worksheets, handouts and mapping tools—to the audience and the format you are using. A small meeting might not lend itself to a PowerPoint, but handouts of data sheets or pathways diagrams might be more useful.

FORWARD Curriculum Elements: Motivation, Context, and Summary

The curriculum includes the seven sections shown in Figure 2. Five of the sections are important for all communities (those shown in blue); two (Entrepreneurship and Leadership Skills and Remote Work) may be less important for some communities who choose different priorities in workforce pathways. Below, we offer some of the historical and policy context for each section.

Figure 2. Elements of the FORWARD Curriculum *Curriculum authors are listed in italics.*

Developing Key Partnerships *Tanya Hall, Sheila Martin, and Michael Wilcox*

- Develop the partnerships necessary to agree on plans, connect needs and assets, and identify and connect pathways.

Identifying Workforce Assets and Needs *Mark White*

- Use secondary and primary data to explore the community's workforce needs and assets.

Mapping Pathways to Economic Mobility,   *Tanya Hall, Michael Wilcox, Joy Moten-Thomas and Paul Hill*

- Given workforce needs and assests, determine viable paths and advancement within family-wage careers. Includes sub-modules for Building Entrepreneurship and Leadership skills and Supporting Remote Work.

Recruiting and Supporting Rural Learners *Jeff Sherman*

- Use community connectins, existing programs such as 4-H, and new programming to recurit and support rural learners into and through career pathways.

Evaluation and Reflection *Cheryl Burkhart-Kreisal and Tanya Hall*

- Evaluate results for continuous improvement of workforce partnerships.

Developing Key Partnerships

Context

This part of the curriculum provides a starting point for the educator and the community to work together to build the partnerships necessary for success in the remainder of the project. It explains which partners must be at the table and their formal and informal roles in the workforce development system.

Building partnerships is key to working effectively to address 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 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 a variety of federally sponsored workforce programs aimed at different populations including the unemployed, dislocated workers, those affected by trade, low-income youth, recipients of 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 local workforce system landscape and building partnerships with the key players is an essential part of the Cooperative Extension Leader (CEL) preparation.

Content summary

This module provides information about the formal workforce development system and explains the key roles that different community groups and partners play in the formal and informal workforce development system. It provides an example of an environmental scan and a readiness assessment to determine where the community needs to begin this journey. It includes examples of agreements that may be necessary to develop the collaborations that can address workforce development needs, and it offers exercises and assessments to help the educator decide the degree to which partnerships already exist or need to be formed. It provides example PowerPoint slides for the educator to introduce the project and the role of partnerships in addressing workforce needs.

Learning objectives

1. Improved understanding of the national/state workforce development system.

2. Increased awareness and understanding of community workforce development partners and their areas of expertise at the local and regional level.

3. Improved understanding of the current level of interaction between community partners.

4. Enhanced understanding of local workforce development landscape through the eyes of a job seeker with regards to existing challenges, opportunities and sources of information

Audiences

The audiences for this part of the curriculum include all of the partners, i.e., community leaders, who will be necessary for success with the project. Those populations include:

1. Education and training providers, including
   - Community colleges and other higher education institutions.
   - Cooperative Extension.
   - Secondary education schools including school board members.
   - Vocational programs (career and technical education).
   - Adult education centers.

2. Businesses and business organizations
   - Human resources professionals from lager businesses.
   - Small business owners
   - Economic development organizations and chambers of commerce.

3. Community partners
   - Social service providers
   - Legal and corrections
   - Labor department (state and regional unemployment, training, and labor market information offices)
   - Rural transit groups
   - Nonprofits that provide support services, including training and wrap-around services such as childcare, transportation and other supports

4. Potential key influencers, such as elected officials and cultural navigators that can provide connection with cultural groups

Identifying Workforce Assets and Needs

Context

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. The information can help each stakeholder groups more effectively play their role in the system.

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 you to understand the different sources and uses of LMI data, some CELs may find that they need to identify an LMI expert at the state or local state data center or LMI agency to help them.

Content summary

This module 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 your community answer important questions about workforce needs and assets, and it help educators understand how they can combine these data with other data sources to gain a more accurate picture of the workforce landscape in their community.

Learning objectives

- Understand how to use labor market information to answer important questions about workforce development needs, assets, and issues.
- Understand the different sources of labor market information, what questions they answer, where to find them, and how to use them.
- Understand how to incorporate qualitative data into regional workforce analysis to offer a more complete picture of workforce needs and assets.
- Understand how to guide community stakeholders toward setting workforce priorities using these data sources.

Audiences

This module is targeted toward the extension educator and specialist who may be working together to present information to the community to help them understand their workforce needs and assets. The module has a many different audiences:

- Community leaders will use this information to inform decisions regarding workforce training and economic development investments. For this audience, the module includes a PowerPoint deck that provides an example of how to present these data.
- Students and jobseekers who use LMI to find occupations that best meet their needs and the training they need to get those jobs
- Employers benefit from understanding these data and how to use them to identify where they might find skilled workers and what they must pay them to attract them to their company.
- Educators and counselors are interested in data that helps them guide students to occupations that will meet their needs and interests.
- Education and training providers use LMI to help determine the courses and programs they offer.

Mapping Pathways to Economic Mobility

Context

This element of the FORWARD curriculum helps extension educators and their community partners articulate pathways that workers/learners 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.

This module also includes curriculum that can be used in communities that prioritize entrepreneurship or remote work as a career pathway. In many rural communities, small businesses provide a large percentage of jobs and preparing a worker to fill roles in small businesses may also help them to eventually start their own businesses. Some communities may find that remote work can be a viable strategy for creating opportunities for low-income workers. This module helps communities assess whether this is a good strategy for their community and how they might advance it.

Content summary

This module includes a description of a career pathway and describes a process for building them. It includes the following tools:
- A set of questions that CEPs should ask businesses to help them (and you) better understand their skill needs.
- A process for designing career pathways in partnership with the audiences listed above.
- Examples of career pathways for specific occupations.
- A description of a career pathway for people who want to support or create a microenterprise of their own. This section also discusses the importance of connecting the economic development strategy for supporting microenterprises with the career pathways offered.
- A guide for assessing your community's potential for using remote work as a workforce development strategy.

Learning objectives

The learning objectives for this module are:
1. Increase knowledge about career pathways, purpose and how they are created.
2. Develop strategies to work with community leaders/businesses to develop career pathways.
3. Improve awareness of how training/education programs are aligned to meet career pathway needs.
4. Enhance understanding of how to implement the developed career pathway in the community.
5. Increase awareness of existing industry career pathways and ways to incorporate unique pathways related to small businesses and remote work.

Audiences

The audiences for this module are:
- Community businesses that need to think comprehensively about their expectations for their positions and clearly define the necessary and realistic skill requirements.
- Students and job seekers who need a career development roadmap to take the guesswork out of understanding how they can progress in a career in the community's industries.
- Community partners (workforce development, education, human services and related systems) who need a process for better aligning and integrating the sources and resources needed by job seekers and workers to advance in their careers.

- Policymakers who are considering what the community's priorities should be for investments in career pathways that will lead to good opportunities for the location's workers.

Recruiting and Supporting Rural Learners

Context

Over the past several decades, many small and rural areas have struggled to recruit and retain rural learners and employees at the same rate of 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 learners 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 to students and workers who might otherwise not pursue them. By reaching out with programs specifically designed to recruit and train populations such as the BIPOC community, the working poor, and the formerly incarcerated, the partnerships organized by the CEP can help these people achieve economic mobility while helping employers develop the skilled labor they need for success. At the same time, these communities have the opportunity to address real issues, challenges, and divides that may keep some people from moving to or staying in rural areas.

Content summary

This module includes information for the educator that will help them prepare to facilitate meetings with stakeholders to help them develop strategies for recruiting learners and workers into local careers and career pathways. It includes a slide deck and handouts with exercises that will 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 that focus on low income and minority learner/workers.

Learning objectives

1. Identify community strengths and weaknesses impacting the recruitment and retention of job seekers and learners.
2. Increased understanding of challenges face by BIPOC and Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) populations.
3. Increased awareness of resources and approaches being used to improve recruitment and retention of job seekers and learners.

Audiences

- The extension educator that is working with the community to improve their recruitment of rural workers and learners.
- Stakeholders working with the educator to recruit rural learners and job seekers into career pathways in their communities.

Evaluating FORWARD Activities

Context

While some CEPs have experience with workforce development projects, many have not previously worked in this area. The FORWARD curriculum is new and each community will need to customize it for their own community. Therefore, the evaluation processes will provide great insight into the effectiveness of the curriculum and process. Extension professionals can anticipate three dimensions of evaluation:

1. An immediate assessment of each curriculum module;
2. A check-in process evaluation based on stakeholder input to assess how well the work is progressing; and
3. Longer-term ripple effects mapping.

For the pilot projects taking place during 2021-2022, the short timelines limited the opportunities to gather feedback on the mapped pathways from job seekers; however, future users of the FORWARD curriculum will have the opportunity to track their impact on job seekers over a longer period of time.

Learning objectives

- Understand best practices on evaluating effectiveness of the FORWARD program.
- Identify ways to gather input from stakeholders on the community process, curriculum and existing situation.
- Conduct a ripple effect mapping exercise to gather the longer-term outcomes of the FORWARD program within the community.
- Learn common metrics that can capture Extension outcomes and impact for program reporting purposes that can be elevated to state and national levels.

Audiences

The main audience for this module is the extension educator who will implement evaluation protocols to identify outcomes and impacts from the FORWARD program.

Content summary

The curriculum includes a summary of each of the three dimensions of the evaluation (immediate, stakeholder input, outcomes via ripple mapping). It also includes immediate assessment documents and a logic model that helps the educator understand the theory of change behind the FORWARD model.

Identifying Additional Programs and Resources

Throughout the curriculum, additional resources have been identified that assist the educator in connecting the community to other resources. In addition, APLU has developed a summary of previously existing workforce development resources created by or for Cooperative Extension. That summary is available here.