

# Supporting a Rural Workforce



## Small Business Innovation Research Training Initiative

The RRDCs, with leadership from the Western Rural Development Center, are coordinating a national project in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR), National Institute for Food and Agriculture and Dawnbreaker. This program will provide outreach, training, and technical assistance for individuals desiring to write proposals for SBIR grants. A curriculum will be developed and delivered in face-to-face meetings in 8 pilot states. The goal is to increase awareness and understanding of the SBIR program, improve the quality of proposals, help participants understand how to apply for SBIR grants, increase participation by minorities, women and other underserved populations, and help successful applicants manage their awards.

## Innovation, Competitiveness, and Economic Prosperity in Rural Areas

The Northeast Center has received a new grant to examine the role of innovation in supporting entrepreneurship and small business competitiveness in rural areas. This builds on a long history of research on the causes and economy-wide effects of rural entrepreneurship. In addition, the NE Center has developed a new measure of latent innovation that suggests higher levels of such activity in many rural areas than was previously recognized.

## Business Innovation in Rural Areas

In 2016, with funding from the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS), the Northeast Center established an award program that provided three research teams with access to a new data set to explore ways in which business innovation is happening in rural areas, and its impact on rural communities and regional economies. Members from each of the funded teams presented their findings in two special sessions co-organized with ERS at the North American Meetings of the Regional Science Association, and papers will be made available on the NERCRD website. <http://aese.psu.edu/nercrd/news/2016/recipients-of-rural-innovation-grants-program-announced>.

## Strengthening Economic Resilience in Appalachian Communities

The economies of many counties in the Appalachian Region have historically depended on a few dominant industries, such as mining or manufacturing. In recent years, Appalachian coal production has plummeted, with devastating effects on families and communities. Using state-of-the-art research methods, focus groups, and community-level surveys, this project, in collaboration with the Northeast Center, investigates best practices, strategies, and policies that local leaders can use to enhance the future economic prospects of coal-impacted communities throughout the Region. The Northeast Center developed the first consistent county-level measure of resilience ever produced for the United States. A recent output from this effort includes: Boettner, F., E. Fedorko, E. Hansen, C. Gyovai, S.J. Goetz, Y. Han, A. Collins and B. Zimmerman, (2017). Strengthening Economic Resilience in Appalachian Communities, Technical Report to the Appalachian Regional Comm., Wash., DC, 135pp.

## Regional Economic Development as a New Theoretical Framework

Indiana University in partnership with the Northeast Center, and funded by the Economic Development Administration, is building models and analytical tools that will enable policy makers and practitioners to craft development strategies and policies tailored to a region's characteristics and capacities. The research team will expand theory about regional economic development to include more comprehensive data and a diverse array of academic disciplines, and will build a complex computational model that integrates data science and regional economic science. In addition to drawing on traditional socioeconomic data and methods, data from unconventional sources such as social media, mouse clicks and data extracted from websites via web-scraping tools will be used.

### **Workforce Issues: Collaborating to Build Extension's Capacity**

Globalization has laid the foundation for an increasing skills gap in the US labor market. Attracting and retaining talent, both in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) areas as well as in vocational skills, is an increasing concern. Led by the North Central region, a team of Cooperative Extension Service professionals are working collaboratively to: 1) initiate a regional Extension dialogue on methods to support the development of local workforce skills at the community level; 2) identify and inventory current workforce development resources, primarily within Extension; 3) identify programmatic and research gaps that would help communities better address workforce skill issues; 4) modify resources for multi-state use and consider ways to make resources available in a "one-stop shop". A summary document is here: [http://ncrcrd.msu.edu/uploads/files/Workforce\\_Issues.pdf](http://ncrcrd.msu.edu/uploads/files/Workforce_Issues.pdf)

### **Asian American Pacific Islander Limited English Proficiency Resource Center**

The North Central Center is home to the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Limited English Proficiency Resource Center. Established in 2015, the Center's mission is to work nationally to provide AAPIs with limited English proficiency access to USDA resources through education and technical assistance to help improve and build successful farms and rural enterprises. The Center is supported by USDA agencies including Rural Development, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Food Safety Inspection Service. The project website is: <http://www.hmongusda.info/>

### **Workforce Investments with a Regional Lens**

The Southern Center, in partnership with USDA Rural Development and Cooperative Extension Service leads the Stronger Economies Together initiative, over 100 multi-county regions strong. A sampling of regional place-based workforce development approaches from 2016 SET regions include: (1) **Rivers Confluence, Iowa** - completed the Confluence Region Workforce Development Resource Database that will inform businesses and potential employees in the region of opportunities; (2) **Kerr-Tar Region, North Carolina** has incorporated soft skills trainings into all Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Youth workforce programming to address targeted industry training needs; (3) **Partners for Progress Region, Nebraska** received a USDA Rural Development Rural Business Development Grant to fund a number of projects including conducting a business assessment, conducting small business workshops, and hosting a small business/tourism conference. To learn more, visit <http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/>

### **Strengthening Retail in Rural America**

Given recent declines in rural jobs related to manufacturing and mining, many rural places struggle to maintain quality jobs for its workforce. An often overlooked opportunity within the effort is the potential for jobs related to retail. The Southern Center recently secured funding from the Walmart Foundation to explore the potential for strengthening rural retail workforce training efforts as a way of strengthening the local economy as a whole. Cooperative Extension Services in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Kentucky will participate in this pilot initiative.

### **Potential Rural Impacts of Pension Reductions:**

This study, led by the North Central Center, explored the exposure of rural communities to the rising risk of public and private pension fund insolvency. As rural communities continue to grey, America's heartlands will increasingly rely on pension incomes to drive their economies. The statuses of private and public pension funds were reviewed and analyzed to relate changes to larger regional impacts. The report is available here: [http://ncrcrd.msu.edu/uploads/files/Pension\\_Report\\_17.pdf](http://ncrcrd.msu.edu/uploads/files/Pension_Report_17.pdf)

