



# Cooperative Extension as a Transformative Intermediary in Rural Development



## Key Takeaways

- The Cooperative Extension System, present in all 3,000+ U.S. counties, is uniquely positioned to support rural communities facing economic and workforce development challenges.
- Cooperative Extension functions as a Connected Convener, in Teaching and Learning, and in Applied Analysis. These functions form a key articulation between land-grant institutions and the rural communities they are designed to serve.
- Three core approaches set Extension apart — a long-term generational perspective, a community-driven orientation, and a deeply place-based presence — producing outcomes other organizations struggle to replicate.
- Despite its potential, Extension risks underutilization due to fragmented funding, organizational silos, and difficulty communicating its impact.
- Unlocking Extension's full potential requires deliberate coordination to replace fragmented approaches with strategies that are collaborative, locally grounded, and impact-focused.

# Introduction

Many rural communities across the country are in the midst of profound transformation. Demographic shifts, increasingly rapid technological change, disruptions to their historic agriculture-based economies, constraints on infrastructure and services, and an evolving labor market are creating both opportunities and challenges that require coordinated responses[1]. The scale and interconnectedness of these forces exceed what any single

[1] [Rural America at a Glance 2024 Edition](#) | [USDA Economic Research Service](#)

institution, sector, or level of government can address alone, especially in rural areas where administrative capacity is thin. The Cooperative Extension System, deeply integrated into communities across the nation's more than 3,000 counties, stands out as a natural partner for helping rural communities navigate these complexities.

Extension was established by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 to carry out the public service mission of land-grant institutions, which puts university research to practical use in communities across the nation[2]. Because of their ubiquitous presence and legislative charge, Extension staff are in a unique position to partner with community members. Together, they can identify the community's needs and develop evidence-based solutions to meet them, ultimately aiming to strengthen the community's capacity and quality of life.

These deep community ties uniquely position Extension to act as a transformative intermediary, though the degree to which that role is expressed varies by context. In the complex task of community development, Extension has the essential resources and the community credibility to convene stakeholders, build their skills and capacities, facilitate their analysis and deliberation, tap needed expertise at the land-grant institutions, and support the co-creation of solutions. When that role is fully expressed, Extension does not just transfer resources; it amplifies and mobilizes existing community resources, transforming how development efforts get initiated and unfold.

This is a potential "superpower" for serving communities as they navigate accelerating change, especially in rural areas where access to resources is more dispersed[3]. Despite this potential, Extension is too often underutilized. This underutilization stems from a fragmented rural development landscape, an underarticulated value to possible collaborators and funders, organizational silos within the land-grant institutions hosting Extension, funding constraints, and challenges with demonstrating and communicating its impact.

To understand how best to tap Extension's full potential in rural development, NCHEMS conducted a multiyear effort to develop, test, and refine a guiding framework for how Extension can flexibly respond to rural community needs and, in so doing, build capacity for community, economic, and workforce development.

[2] The Cooperative Extension System is referred to in this paper as "Extension" for brevity.

[3] As discussed later in this paper, the focus of this project is on Extension's role in rural development. However, Extension provides services in both rural and non-rural communities.

In this report, we share findings gleaned from working with an advisory group and five project teams embedded within Extension efforts across the country[4]. We apply these findings to refine the framework, emphasizing Extension’s differentiated approaches to rural development that translate into the ability to act as a transformative intermediary — one that cooperatively amplifies community assets to achieve locally defined goals.



## About Cooperative Extension

At the core of Extension’s model is a locally-based, expertly trained Extension “agent” (also known as an “educator”). This agent collaborates with community stakeholders and campus-based faculty and staff to identify community needs, build networks, develop research-based products and curricula, and deliver relevant noncredit educational programs and services. This model extends back to the Morrill Act of 1862, when an initial set of land-grant universities was established to increase access to practical education and provide growing frontier communities with agricultural and mechanical knowledge[5]. Already oriented toward practical education, land-grant institutions were supported by

[4] A brief description of the projects is provided in the Appendix.

[5] [Image 535 of U.S. Statutes at Large, Volume 12 \(1860-1861\), 36th and 37th Congress.](#) | [Library of Congress](#)

Congress to expand their impact through a national system of Agricultural Experiment Stations in 1887 and, later, through the Cooperative Extension System established by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. The three pillars of the land-grant institution have since been: teaching, research, and extension[6]. The extension part of the mission delivers practical knowledge to the public nationwide, working in cooperation with states and counties to provide locally relevant services. Over time, the land-grant university system expanded to include some Historically Black Colleges and Universities through the Second Morrill Act of 1890, and some tribal colleges through the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994.

## Extension sees the trust of the community as the essential currency of its work.

Throughout its history, Extension has developed a strong programmatic footprint in agriculture and natural resources. These areas were key to the establishment of Extension and are still important to rural communities across the nation. However, technological advancements have significantly reduced the need for workers in the agriculture and mining industries[7]. Agriculture illustrates this trend clearly: in 1914, farmworkers accounted for 30% of the nation's workforce[8]. Since then, mechanization and modernization of farming practices have driven a sustained decline in the need for an agricultural workforce throughout the latter half of the twentieth century[9], and as of 2024, farmworkers make up 1% of all U.S. wage and salary workers[10]. Rural communities have experienced the negative effects of recent shifts in the agriculture and mining sectors more acutely than their urban counterparts, primarily due to their economies' heavy reliance on these industries, which have undergone significant changes in their fundamental production processes (see Figure 1). As rural economies shift, Extension is being called upon to meet a wider variety of needs.

[6] [Overview of the Cooperative Extension System | Congress.gov](#)

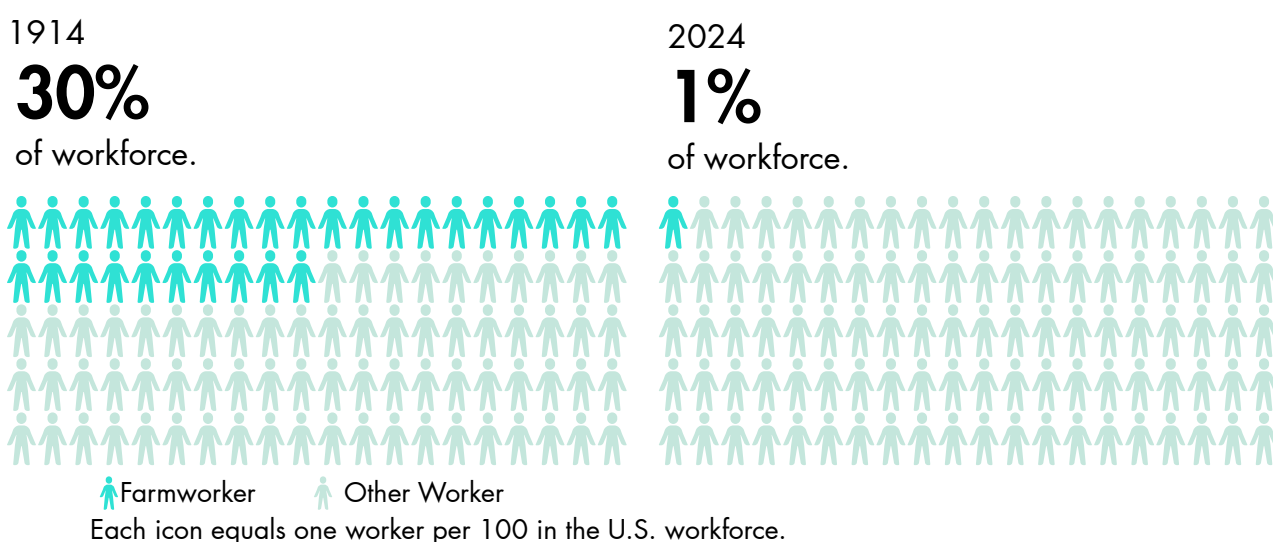
[7] ["Changes in the U.S. Economy and Rural-Urban Employment Disparities" | FEDS Notes](#)

[8] [History of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture | NIFA](#)

[9] [Farm Labor Update | USDA Economic Research Service](#)

[10] [Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey | Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)

## Figure 1: Farmworkers in the U.S. Workforce Trends



Despite the changing needs of rural communities and amendments to federal law that broaden the areas eligible for federal funding for Extension, responses have varied significantly from state to state and locality to locality. In many cases, Extension’s focus remains primarily on agriculture and natural resources, even as the range of needs it is well-positioned to address has expanded. In 2024, NCHEMS, with support from an advisory group of professionals in Extension and related fields of rural development, conceptualized a framework to understand Extension’s current and potential role in addressing the varied needs of the nation’s rural communities[11]. Over the summer and fall of 2025, NCHEMS worked with partners in the field and the advisory group to test and refine these ideas, including sponsoring five small experimental projects across several Extension sites[12]. These projects have informed a renewed vision of the framework presented in this report.

[11] [Empowering Rural Futures: Leveraging Extension for Community and Economic Development](#) | NCHEMS

[12] A brief description of the projects is provided in the Appendix. A list of all the Extension sites is also provided in Figure 3.



# Beyond Workforce Development: The Broader Rural Development Context

While this project initially focused on Extension's role in rural workforce development, the project's advisory group emphasized that workforce development is deeply interconnected with broader community systems, many of which have experienced underinvestment, particularly in rural areas. The advisory group also noted that Extension is already active in community, economic, and workforce development and is well-positioned to do more in these interconnected areas. This paper uses the term "rural development" to encompass both the geographic focus of this project and the importance of strengthening interconnected systems that support community well-being. This includes ensuring that residents have access to good jobs, essential services, and basic amenities that encourage them to remain in their communities, while also enabling employers to find and retain the workers they need.

Workforce development is often narrowly defined as skills training, connecting people to job opportunities, and responding to employer needs. Barriers to meeting workforce needs often stem from broader, structural challenges, such as inadequate transportation, housing, childcare, physical and mental healthcare, education, and access to broadband and other amenities, such as grocery stores and pharmacies. Upskilling and reskilling the workforce alone cannot overcome these interconnected challenges. Extension's distinctive assets are well-suited to address these broader challenges in collaboration with partners across other systems.



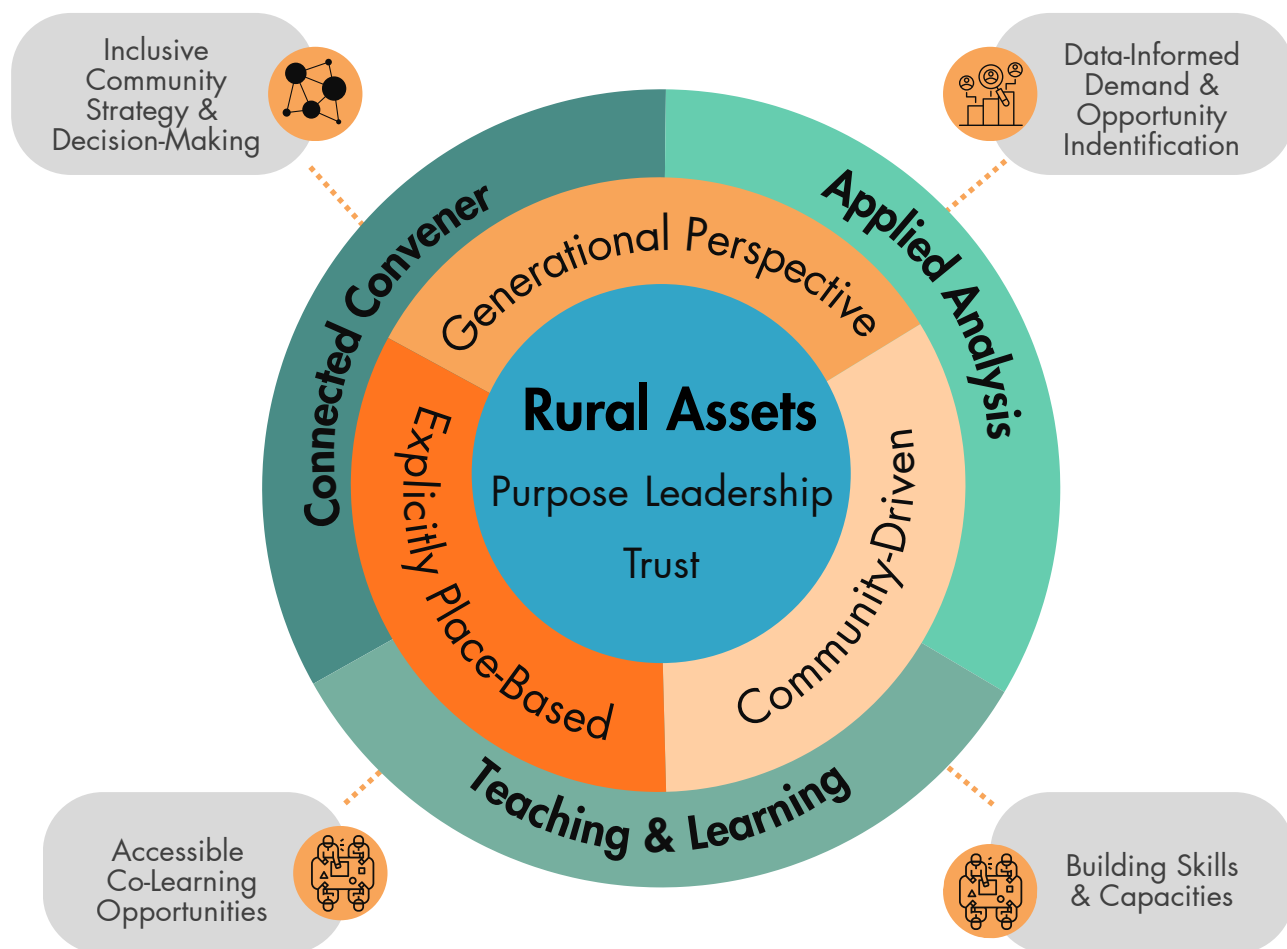
# Refining the Framework Through Application

The framework describes three of Extension’s main functions in rural development. It provides stakeholders outside of Extension with foundational knowledge about how partnering with Extension can magnify their impact. At the same time, it offers Extension professionals language to more effectively communicate about those aspects of their work that extend beyond the specific Extension programs in which they are deeply engaged.

This framework situates Extension within a web of rural community assets of trust, purpose, and leadership. Trust enables partnerships and fosters shared purpose, and leadership is earned through relationships and recognized expertise rather than formal titles. Extension amplifies and mobilizes these assets by providing connection and convening power, facilitating teaching and learning, and supporting applied analysis.

NCHEMS solicited proposals from land-grant universities, Extension stakeholders, and regional rural development centers to execute short-term projects aligned to one of the three framework functions of Extension: connected convener, teaching and learning, and applied analysis. Five projects were selected and executed, serving as a real-world application of the framework. Each project is detailed in the Appendix. The projects surfaced elements of Extension’s approach that deserve greater recognition in the framework — the key “lenses” or approaches in orange in the visual below — and revealed both strengths and challenges in fully utilizing Extension’s capacities toward the larger goal of rural development. The framework is illustrated below, with each element described in the sections that follow.

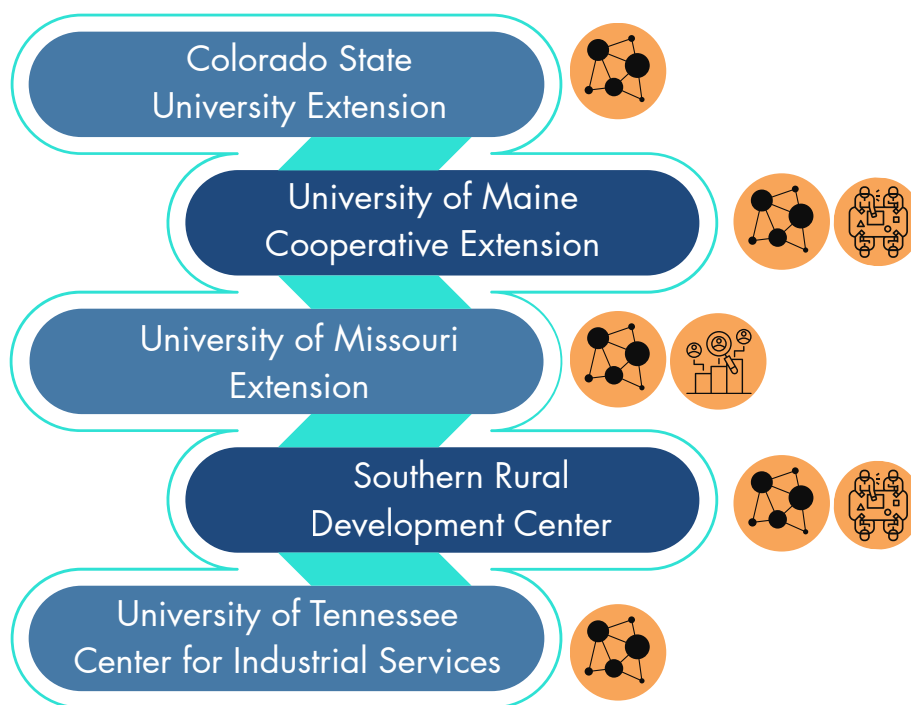
**Figure 2: Extension's Role as a Transformative Intermediary in Rural Development**



## Extension as a Transformative Intermediary

Through collaborations with project sites it became apparent that the initial framework under-recognized Extension's potential as a transformative intermediary. Likewise, it became clear that the distinct perspectives that Extension brings to its work are key to the success of the working group projects and deserve greater recognition within the framework. In this section, each of these concepts is discussed in greater detail.

**Figure 3: NCHEMS Experimental Project Sites**



## Transformative Intermediary

Entities in the transformative intermediary role do not just transfer resources; they magnify the resources the community already has. This is potentially an insufficiently recognized “superpower” of Extension for serving rural communities as they navigate accelerating change and a vast-but-disjointed landscape of rural organizations and resources. As such, NCHEMS is updating the framework by emphasizing Extension’s role as a transformative intermediary, having the community credibility to convene stakeholders, build their skills and capacities, facilitate their analysis and deliberation, and support their co-creation of solutions.

Extension operationalizes this role through three key approaches, or “lenses”: 1) an unusually long-term, generational perspective, 2) a community-driven approach emphasizing co-creation, and 3) an explicitly place-based orientation. While Extension uses many working methods, these lenses, when present, demonstrate a unique commitment to community relationships and often cultivate powerful networks of trust that enable particularly strong outcomes. These three key lenses are described in more detail below.

## Long-Term, Generational Perspective

Unlike entities that take a “fly-in/fly-out” approach to rural development, Extension works consistently in each community in the long term. Local Extension agents usually live in the communities they serve, increasing their understanding of the historical context and commitment to effective partnerships. Extension’s resulting perspective is unique; It thinks and works on a generational timescale to build sustainable communities. Extension’s rural development outcomes may also be particularly durable and viable as a result.

Working group project partners identified the importance of Extension agents having relationships with local workforce and economic development organizations, employers, and other postsecondary education institutions. Where these were already established, projects proceeded more expeditiously and generated greater engagement from local stakeholders. The Missouri project illustrates this well, as is explored under the Connected Convener function lessons in the next section.

## Community-Driven Approach

Extension often approaches rural development co-creatively in partnership with residents. This community-driven approach emphasizes responsiveness to community needs by tapping into each community’s unique assets and capacities and by holding community empowerment and self-sufficiency as the effort’s long-term goal.

This posture contrasts with another common approach to rural development: A directive orientation, also known as a technical assistance approach, that defines and prioritizes a community’s needs based on externally established criteria and then allocates resources to achieve those goals.

A power imbalance among the stakeholders involved is embedded in the directive approach. Extension’s co-creative approach to rural development, however, can lessen the power disparity between Extension practitioners and community collaborators. This can allow for a greater (and perhaps more natural) range of relationships; interactions can be formal, informal, or anywhere in between.

When working in rural development — especially with Extension’s long-term orientation — these differences matter. Extension sees the trust of the community as the essential

currency of its work, and Extension staff take great care to earn social capital in the community, frequently investing in long-term relationships. Over time, these efforts yield greater license to engage with the community and serve its needs.

The Colorado project illustrates Extension's community-driven approach in action: listening sessions led by Colorado State University Extension surfaced specific ideas for helping rural Coloradans access better employment opportunities. They identified a need for short-term, postsecondary programs with in-person student support that prepare residents for rural jobs. The approach to meeting that need is being tailored to the local context, considering employer preferences for prospective employee training and pooling existing assets to expand access to relevant training opportunities for rural Coloradans.

## Explicitly Place-Based Orientation

Extension was originally conceived as a locally administered, locally focused service with a stable presence in communities. This embedded, place-based approach enables very community-specific methods and desired outputs; the result is the opposite of "cookie-cutter interventions." This positions Extension as a force for uniquely responsive, inventive rural development work.

While the five projects are nested in broader efforts that are still unfolding, it is clear that their long-term success will hinge on Extension's ability to leverage its embedded local presence to translate early momentum into durable, community-specific outcomes.

## Extension's Functions

The characterization of Extension's roles in rural development — Connected Convener, Applied Analysis, and Teaching and Learning — has continued to resonate with project partners as an effective way to conceptualize Extension's functions. As explored in the following sections, the projects provided additional lessons about the strengths and challenges impacting Extension's effectiveness as a transformative intermediary.



## Connected Convener in Practice

The Missouri project exemplified Extension's function as a Connected Convener, bringing together a variety of stakeholders to identify community needs and collaborate on strategies for meeting those needs by aligning and complementing community assets. Having strong existing relationships throughout the state surfaced as a critical factor in implementation. Regions where Extension professionals had existing relationships with local workforce development organizations and employers experienced greater engagement in regional workforce training summits than regions where those relationships were less well established. These summits were designed to collaboratively identify workforce needs and training opportunities to meet those needs, making participation from these stakeholder groups critical.

Extension's convening function also operates within its own professional networks, not just in local communities. For example, a project affiliated with the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) brought together Extension experts in community development across the country to create and deliver training on community development frameworks, building the capacity of Extension professionals and other partners to engage more effectively in rural development work[13]. This project drew on existing Extension networks — including project management support from the SRDC — that regularly strengthen collaborative work across Extension systems.



## Applied Analysis in Practice

Providing applied analysis is a natural role for Extension, given its history of putting research from land-grant institutions into practical use. This bridge between research resources and communities is particularly important in rural communities where the Extension agents are often the only community members with direct ties to a research institution.

State agencies collect and publish data on a wide range of issues affecting residents, including health, housing, education, workforce, and economic conditions. These data

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[13] The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) provides core funding for four Regional Rural Development Centers, established in 1972 to address rural development issues without regard to state boundaries.

are essential inputs for applied analysis supporting rural development. However, the availability and granularity of those data vary considerably from state to state, as a result of policy choices and agency-level capacity constraints, and affect the degree to which they can support the local analyses that rural development decisions require.

Even where robust data sources are accessible, Extension's ability to use them effectively varies widely due to differences in staffing capacity and familiarity with those sources. The projects illustrated this variability. Several of the project teams analyzed labor market data as a part of their work. In some projects, state-level labor market insights were readily available, but limited capacity slowed progress in conducting regional-level analyses needed to inform local decision-making.

Translating analysis into effective action also requires grounding it in the community context that people with lived experience can provide. Co-developing solutions with stakeholders is part of Extension's cultural DNA and is embedded in its required processes. Extension systems must report on their stakeholder input processes as part of their annual Plan of Work and report of accomplishments required to receive federal capacity funding under the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act (AREERA). This connection between applied analysis and stakeholder engagement is what positions Extension to move from data to decisions that speak to community priorities.



## Teaching and Learning in Practice

Extension has long served as an accessible entry point to knowledge and skill-building, providing free or low-cost noncredit learning experiences. The projects illustrated both the promise and the complexities of effectively carrying out the teaching and learning function, surfacing important lessons about the infrastructure needed to deliver and sustain high-quality learning experiences.

The University of Maine (UMaine) Extension project, shaped by the 2023 UMaine Extension needs assessment findings, focused on expanding access to business skills for small business owners. Working with the Maine Business School, UMaine Extension designed short, stackable microbadges that build foundational business skills to support more effective entrepreneurship — a particularly vital pathway in rural communities with

limited employment options. The project team recognized that content expertise alone was insufficient and that instructional design expertise was equally essential to creating learning experiences that effectively engage small business owners. Hiring a part-time instructional designer took several months — driven in part by funding cuts and hiring freezes affecting institutional operations — but the investment was critical to the project's learner-centered approach.

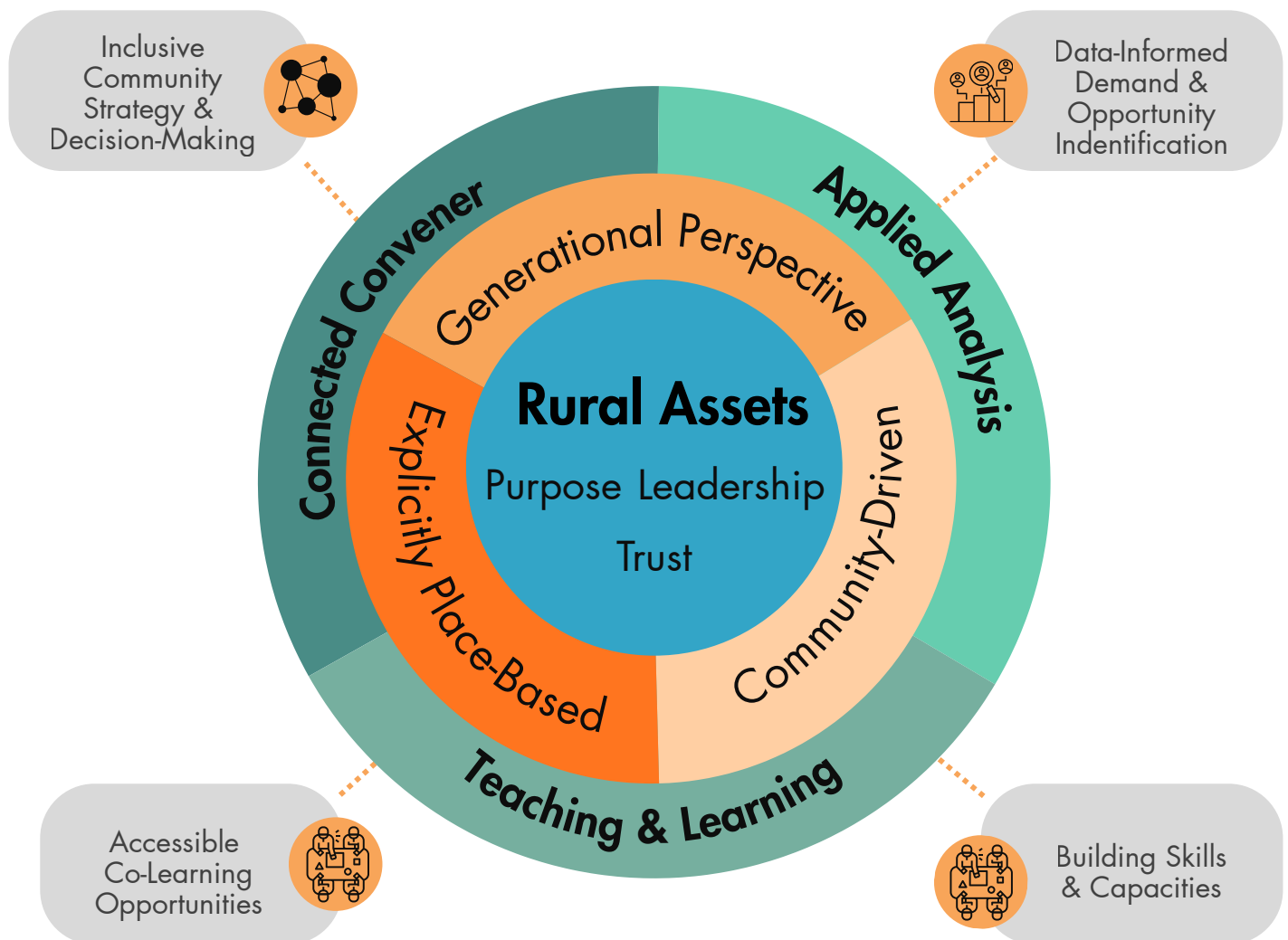
The Colorado project added another dimension, demonstrating the importance of grounding program design in both labor market data and direct community and employer input. Focusing closely on community preferences, occupational projections, and employer expectations enhances the likelihood that resulting workforce training programs will achieve the desired community engagement and outcomes, exemplifying Extension's community-driven approach in teaching and learning. Employer feedback also suggests that in a growing marketplace of short-term training options, the land-grant institution's reputation lends distinct credibility to credentials earned through Extension.

Two other projects illustrated that Extension's teaching and learning function operates at multiple levels. Beyond serving community members directly, this function extends to building the capacity of Extension professionals and partners. The SRDC-supported project brought Community Development 101 training to Extension professionals and partners, building shared capacity for rural development practice. The Tennessee project offered a different expression of this idea. Led by the University of Tennessee Center for Industrial Services (UT CIS), it worked to build workforce development skills while bridging silos between workforce developers, economic developers, and Extension. Together, these projects underscore that Extension's teaching and learning function is as valuable when directed inward — strengthening Extension's own capacity — as it is directed outward toward communities.

The projects made clear that Extension's effectiveness as a transformative intermediary varies significantly depending on the context and the degree to which Extension's distinctive lenses are expressed in the work: a long-term, generational perspective; a community-driven approach; and an explicitly place-based orientation. The lenses and functions are present to varying degrees depending on the context, but how the lenses are applied to the work will determine outcomes and the scale of impact. Effective use of

these lenses fortifies trust, leverages existing community assets, produces community-specific solutions, and builds community capacity — strengthening Extension’s ability to convene stakeholders; provide contextualized, applied analysis that supports decision-making; and engage in reciprocal teaching and learning that draws on community knowledge to develop relevant, durable, locally grounded solutions.

**Figure 4: Extension’s Role as a Transformative Intermediary in Rural Development**





# Integrating Extension into Rural Development Strategies

The challenges facing rural communities are too complex and interconnected for any single entity to address. Realizing Extension's full potential as a transformative intermediary in rural development requires examining the factors that limit its reach.

## Fragmented Strategies

The underutilization of Extension in rural development efforts should not be surprising, given the fragmented landscape of rural development. At the federal level alone, resources for rural development are spread across more than 400 programs originating from over 35 pieces of legislation, as illustrated in the figure that follows[14]. Ninety-three of these programs, administered by 13 federal agencies, exclusively serve rural communities.

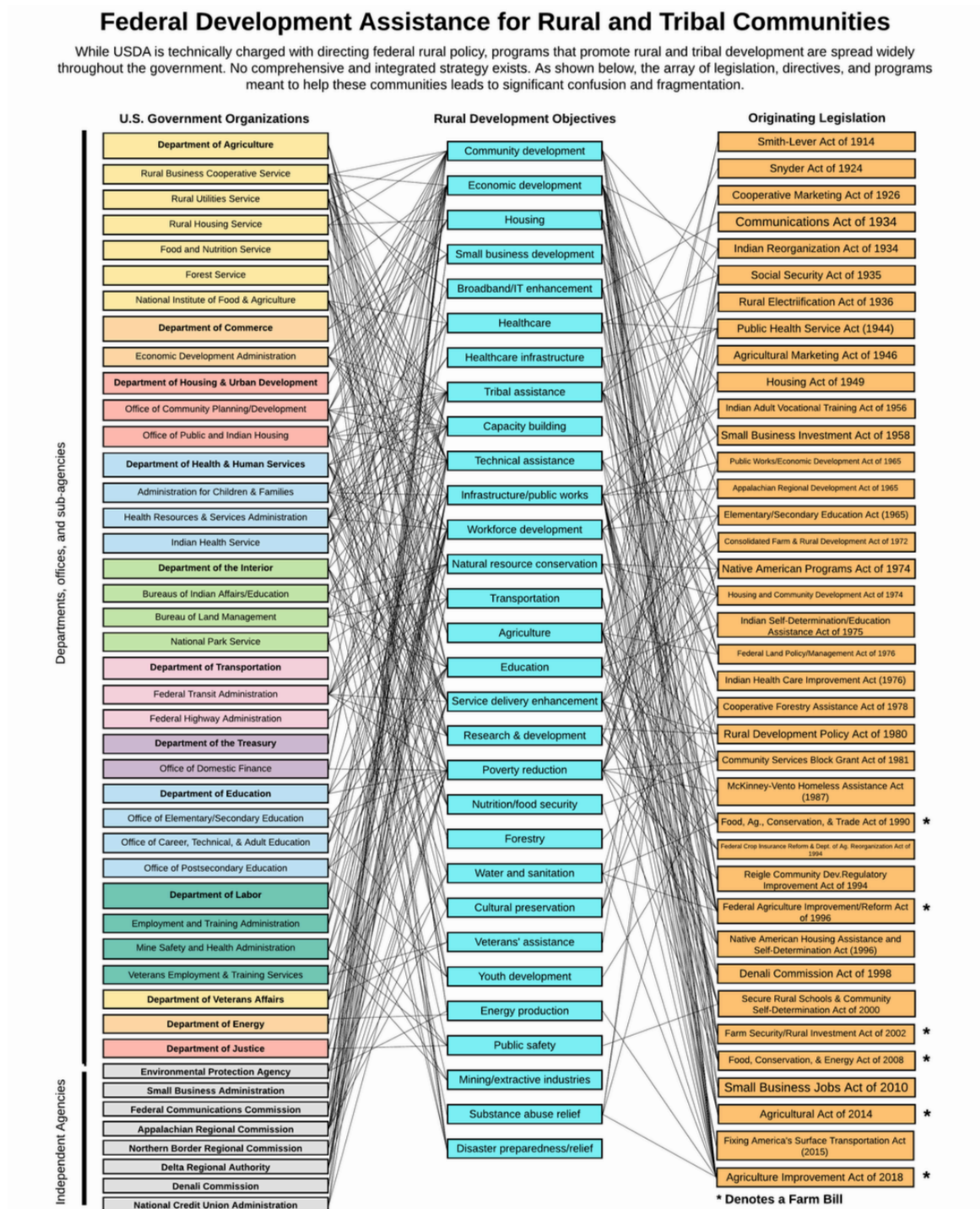
This complex landscape creates barriers for all types of communities. Still, rural communities face particular challenges related to funding formulas and eligibility requirements that often work against them, and their administrative capacity to navigate opportunities is much more limited.

These issues impede the ability of rural spaces to leverage Extension effectively. But they also highlight an opportunity for Extension — with its extensive physical footprint across the nation, place-based expertise, long-term perspective, and collaborative approach — to be more intentionally integrated into rural development strategies. Making Extension a more central partner in rural development necessitates stronger strategic planning and action at various levels.

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[14] [Reimagining rural policy: Organizing federal assistance to maximize rural prosperity](#) | Brookings Institution brief by Tony Pipa and Natalie Geismar (2020)

## Figure 5: Federal Development Assistance for Rural and Tribal Communities per Brookings Institution Analysis



## Resources for rural development are spread across more than 400 programs originating from over 35 pieces of legislation.

A strong, integrated strategy helps partners in rural development work together rather than past each other. Without one, work towards shared goals may be perceived as competition, which may diminish the potential impact of all partners. This tension often emerges when there is no shared framework defining complementary roles, and, consequently, potential partners may inadvertently undermine the progress of others. For example, land-grant universities offering sub-associate credentials in areas of high workforce demand through their Extension services can be viewed by community colleges as unwelcome competition since workforce preparation is central to their purpose. At the same time, the land-grant institution is responding to a real and unmet need for workforce preparation with resources it uniquely possesses that it believes are wholly appropriate for that purpose. A comprehensive strategy would reframe this as a shared challenge, acknowledging that rapid technological change is outpacing any single sector's capacity to fully address the need, and that coordinated credentialing pathways are more likely to meet the rising demand for workforce training.

Even within Extension, there are opportunities to enhance strategic alignment and implementation. With strategies developed at Regional Rural Development Centers, the state level, program area level, and other levels, Extension could strengthen processes for assessing needs, soliciting stakeholder input to understand both the underlying needs and the solutions communities are seeking, implementing solutions, assessing outcomes, and holding partners accountable. An approach worth considering is developing clearer protocols for how strategies at different levels connect and inform one another, ensuring that local insights shape rather than get overridden by higher-level planning.

## Lack of a United “Brand”

Extension’s place-based, community-driven orientation has resulted in an ecosystem of distinct state Extension systems across the U.S., each shaped by its context. This adaptability is critical for meeting local needs. However, in the absence of a strong effort to communicate its overarching value, this variability has made it difficult to build a unified “brand,” diminishing Extension’s visibility as the impactful partner it can be. A unified brand would be expressed as a consistent, recognizable sense of what Extension is and what it does — not a collection of programs, but a distinctive approach and set of functions that can be applied across a wide range of community needs. Without a unified brand to guide their understanding, people tend to understand Extension through their own personal experience with it, resulting in deep familiarity with one program area while having little sense of the breadth of what Extension offers elsewhere. The framework NCHEMS developed responds to this challenge by describing Extension’s functions and lenses in terms that potential partners can recognize across contexts, making it easier to understand how Extension could strengthen rural development efforts.

## Organizational Silos

Within land-grant institutions, there are a variety of organizational silos that can create barriers to Extension reaching its full potential. The land-grant’s tripartite mission of teaching, research, and extension has often been managed through structural divisions that have led to Extension operating in relative isolation from other institutional functions and priorities.

There are potential benefits to this isolation, including the ability for Extension administrators to make decisions with fewer layers of bureaucracy, but there are also drawbacks worth examining. This isolation can limit Extension’s access to institutional infrastructure that could enhance its services and could lead to duplicating resources that could be better shared. Some institutions are working to bridge these divides. For example, the University of Maine recently restructured, placing the Division of Lifelong Learning under the leadership of the Dean of Extension. This organizational change is improving shared access to instructional designers and an online learning platform, enabling more robust learning experiences.

Extension systems also have various layers in their organizational structures. While they help manage the extensive work carried out by Extension, these layers can result in silos across program areas, geographic service areas, and roles. These silos can create missed opportunities for integrated approaches to complex community challenges. Stronger emphasis on formal processes that facilitate coordination across layers, rather than relying solely on individual relationships, could strengthen Extension's ability to respond to community needs.

Additionally, Extension's unique funding mechanism, discussed more fully below, can also be isolating, whether within the land-grant institution or as part of a state strategy to boost talent development. Beyond the silos that sometimes separate Extension from other major priorities within a land-grant institution, few state-level policy discussions seem to conceive of the potential utility of Extension's wide network in meeting state goals[15]. This leads to states failing to recognize Extension as an integral part of the postsecondary education delivery system and to recognize the instruction conducted through Extension in the funding models used to allocate state funds to institutions. This reflects a broader shortcoming in state policy that fails to fully incorporate Extension as an asset to assist in the achievement of other state goals.

## Funding Constraints

The ability to draw from various funding sources is a strength of Extension systems. But it also introduces challenges related to the various requirements and expectations tied to funding streams, as well as challenges posed by fluctuations in funding levels.

Government funding for Extension takes two main forms: 1) capacity funding, also known as formula funding, and 2) competitive funding. Federal capacity funding for Extension is allocated annually by Congress and is administered primarily by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). Federal capacity funding amounts are determined through a formula set by federal legislation. Federal capacity grants typically require a dollar-to-dollar nonfederal match.

There are two important caveats related to eligibility for capacity funding. Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) that are part of the land-grant system are not eligible for federal

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[15] [Cooperative Extension in State Policy: Roles, Structures, and Opportunities for State Higher Education Leaders](#)

capacity funding or state funding. Instead, noncompetitive grants for TCU land-grant institutions (LGIs) take the form of interest earnings from the 1994 Institutions Endowment Fund that are distributed to eligible institutions according to formulas in statute and provide less funding on a per institution basis[16].

Also, law has permitted USDA NIFA to waive nonfederal match requirements for 1890 Historically Black Colleges and University (HBCU) land-grant universities (LGUs). While this helps HBCUs receive federal funds even if they lack the nonfederal match, it reduces the pressure on states to provide funding for Extension services at HBCU LGUs. In practice, not all 1890 HBCU LGUs receive the state match that 1862 LGUs consistently do receive[17].

In addition to capacity funding, Extension systems can pursue competitive grants, awarded through peer-review processes for specific projects from a variety of agencies, with USDA's Agricultural and Food Research Initiative serving as the largest source.

Counties and other local governments represent another potential revenue stream for Extension. Local funding is not required by federal statute, though some states do require a local funding match.

**A strong, integrated strategy helps partners in rural development work together rather than past each other.**

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[16] [Farm Bill Primer](#) | [Congress.gov](#)

[17] ["1890 Land-Grant Universities: Background and Selected Issues"](#) | [Congress.gov](#)

Beyond government funding sources, revenue streams include project-specific grants and fee-based services. Grants from foundations, corporations, and agencies typically impose restrictions on fund use, potentially limiting responsiveness to community priorities. In efforts that require patching together funding from a variety of sources, requirements on how funds can be used can add to the complex work of implementing solutions.

Each funding source carries distinct restrictions that shape, and sometimes limit, Extension's capacity to address local priorities. These varied restrictions constrain the flexibility Extension needs to respond nimbly to evolving community needs.

## Challenges with Demonstrating Impact

Extension's capacity to serve as a transformative intermediary in rural development is also hampered by challenges in capturing and demonstrating its value across its three functions.

Extension's documentation challenge in its teaching and learning functions also limits Extension participants' ability to leverage their learning done through Extension to advance their educational and/or professional goals. This problem is particularly acute in rural areas, where Extension may be the primary entry point to educational programming. The scale of Extension's reach, with nearly 100 million education contacts in 2018<sup>[18]</sup>, suggests the magnitude of learning that could be enhanced by more systematic documentation approaches for the noncredit education Extension offers at low or no cost. As detailed in NCHEMS' brief [Recognizing Extension Learning: Pathways to Credit and Career Advancement](#), Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) and skills validation approaches can help overcome documentation challenges that limit the value of learning done through Extension.

The AgriProspects grant from NIFA is an example of progress being made. Through this grant, a skill attainment clearinghouse is being developed. However, the effort is focused solely on agricultural workforce development at this time.

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[18] Summary of direct contacts reported by extension offices in the 2018 annual reports submitted. Reports since do not have this level of detail, as it is no longer required.



## Concluding Reflections

NCHEMS has spent the last couple of years getting to know the shape and functions of an often overlooked resource: the Cooperative Extension System. Our goal has been to expand awareness of the ways that Extension has contributed to meeting the highly varied needs of regions and communities scattered across states, particularly in rural communities where its historic focus on agriculture and natural resources has been most impactful and where challenges for community development are often the most acute. Engagement with Extension professionals from diverse settings through the creation of an advisory group, countless in-person and virtual opportunities, and financial support for five working group projects, NCHEMS has broken new ground in beginning to understand the role Extension has played, and could play in the future, in helping to support rural development. This project has also helped raise the profile of Extension in state-level policy conversations in ways that hold promise for more effectively leveraging assets to achieve state goals for thriving communities and residents.

At the outset of our work, we relied on an advisory group to help us construct a conceptual framework to guide the project and to build our understanding of the role and function of Extension. Through the working group projects, NCHEMS tested and refined that framework to enhance an understanding and articulation of Extension's distinctive contributions to rural development, as a tool to help existing potential partners better appreciate what collaboration with Extension makes possible. The framework is particularly useful for policymakers who want to harness the full potential of Extension to address various needs in rural development. It can also benefit leaders of postsecondary institutions who are looking to collaborate more effectively to meet talent development requirements. Additionally, it serves funders interested in unlocking opportunities for community development, as well as Extension leaders who aim to expand their impact and improve their effectiveness.

Extension brings to this moment of rapid change something it has built over its long history that is difficult to replicate — deep community trust rooted in a long-term commitment, a community-driven approach, and an explicitly place-based orientation that together enable co-developed solutions that respond to community-identified priorities. These assets position Extension well to increase its impact on the interrelated systems that shape rural quality of life. Fully unlocking Extension’s potential in rural development will require greater coordination across partners and within Extension itself. It will depend on replacing fragmented and siloed approaches with strategies that are deliberately collaborative, locally grounded, and oriented toward demonstrating meaningful impact.

**Extension does not just transfer resources; it amplifies and mobilizes existing community resources, transforming how development efforts get initiated and unfold.**



## **NCHEMS’ Extension Resources**

**[Serving Rural America Through Land-Grant Colleges & Universities: Unlocking the Workforce Development Potential of Extension Services](#)**

*Throughout this project, NCHEMS produced several briefs, blogs, published articles, and a 50-state scan for Extension leaders, state higher education officers, institution leaders, and Extension practitioners. Check out the page linked above to view all these resources.*



# Appendix - About the Working Group Projects

NCHEMS, with financial support from Ascendium Education Group, awarded funding and in-kind support to implement one or more components of the framework to five projects. Eligible recipients were defined as land-grant institutions, Cooperative Extension services, rural economic development organizations, or other nonprofit organizations that currently work with or have demonstrated potential to work with Cooperative Extension services in their area. Partnering with the five working group sites provided NCHEMS a window into different aspects of Extension, including its partnerships, approach, and offerings, which informed revisions to the framework. A brief description of each working group project follows.

*Photo of the NCHEMS project team and working group members.*





## COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

Listening sessions led by Colorado State University Extension (CSU Extension) surfaced a clear need for short-term, postsecondary programs with in-person support that expand access to better employment opportunities for people in rural Colorado. In response, CSU Extension commissioned an employer study to inform the development of programs addressing the community's needs, gathering feedback from employers on their openness to hiring individuals with micro-credentials, understanding employer preferences regarding curriculum, and gauging their willingness to host apprenticeships.

Initial findings indicate that employers view the current market for micro-credentials as saturated and of uncertain value. However, they expressed that the potential value of these short-term programs could be greater if reputable higher education institutions lead the effort with meaningful input from employers on the curriculum and learning objectives. Employers also noted, however, that they have no time to contribute to program development.

This work is developing a model for partnerships among Extension, rural community colleges, employers, and regional workforce centers that address the needs of job seekers and labor shortages. Early findings from employer engagement reveal that land-grant institutions' established reputations can enhance employers' trust in the micro-credentials they offer. Next steps for CSU Extension include developing the curriculum as well as coordinating with the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment to access Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA) and apprenticeship funds to support these efforts.

### Primary Function Exhibited



**Connected Convener** through convening stakeholders to identify needs, develop programs, and fund programs that are responsive to the needs of job seekers and employers.



The needs assessment conducted by the University of Maine Cooperative Extension (UMaine Extension) in 2023 identified the financial well-being of small businesses as the top unmet need in the category of business and community. In response, UMaine Extension enhanced its partnership with the Maine Business School, combining Extension's outreach expertise with the business school's academic expertise to develop learning experiences tailored to the needs of Maine's small business community.

UMaine has developed and launched three learning experiences designed to build foundational skills for small business owners, and two others are in development. These learning experiences are designed to be stackable toward higher-level credentials and positioned to translate into academic credit via the new UMaine Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) policy.

The success of this partnership serves as a model for Extension partnerships with other academic units as well as the development of Extension programming with intentional pathways into continued learning and academic credit. Next steps for UMaine Extension include launching the additional two learning experiences under development and engaging with established support networks, such as trade publications and local chambers of commerce, to advertise these program offerings.

## Primary Function Exhibited



**Connected Convener** through partnering with the Maine Business School to meet a community-identified need, and **Teaching and Learning** through developing and delivering the learning experiences.



# Extension

*University of Missouri*

The Missouri Chamber of Commerce's Workforce 2030 report documented a widening technical skills gap across the state. In response, the University of Missouri Extension (MU Extension) hosted six regional workforce training summits and one virtual workforce summit.

The workforce training summits engaged participants from public, nonprofit, and private sectors. Presenters provided attendees with relevant data on key workforce training trends. Roundtable discussions identified workforce training gaps, available resources to address those gaps, and other unmet needs that contribute to labor shortages. The data gathered through the summits will inform MU Extension's programming priorities going forward.

These workforce training summits demonstrate Extension's strong convening and facilitation infrastructure and its ability to draw on its own resources and expertise to magnify the community's knowledge of the challenges and potential solutions. Next steps for MU Extension include follow-up visits in spring 2026; completing a comprehensive analysis of unmet workforce training needs; launching a FORWARD curriculum cohort to build regional workforce engagement capacity among Extension professionals[19]; and seeking to expand credit for prior learning opportunities for Extension participants.

## Primary Function Exhibited



**Applied Analysis** through presenting findings from state data analysis of workforce demand, and **Connected Convener** through convening regional stakeholders to identify workforce training gaps and other unmet needs that impact labor shortages.

[19] The purpose of the [FORWARD Curriculum](#) is to build Extension professional's capacity to serve as facilitators of workforce solutions in rural communities.



## Southern Rural Development Center

A group of community development Extension specialists across the U.S. observed that many Extension professionals lack formal training in community development fundamentals. With project coordination support from the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC), the team developed Community Development 101 (CD 101) training to strengthen a national network of Extension professionals equipped to support community development.

The workshop on community development concepts and application was delivered at the June 2025 National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP) Conference, the July 2025 Community Development Society (CDS) meeting, and the November 2025 Virginia Cooperative Extension Central District conference.

This project exemplifies the Regional Rural Development Centers' (RRDC) support of collaborative partnerships of Extension experts across state lines to address complex rural development issues through capacity-building. As next steps, the team is preparing to deliver additional workshops and is finalizing the peer-reviewed curriculum, with narration, that will be hosted online for broader practitioner access.

## Primary Function Exhibited



**Connected Convener** through bringing together experts in community development, and **Teaching and Learning** through developing and delivering Community Development 101 workshops to develop community development capacity.



Center for Industrial Services  
INSTITUTE *for* PUBLIC SERVICE

University of Tennessee Center for Industrial Services (UT CIS), a university-based economic development agency, identified a gap in training for workforce developers in Tennessee. In response, UT CIS developed the Tennessee Workforce Development Academy.

The course informs participants of current workforce trends, best practices in workforce development, and provides networking opportunities. UT CIS offered scholarships for University of Tennessee (UT) Extension professionals to receive workforce development training.

This project has created momentum for establishing a collaborative partnership between UT CIS and UT Extension and has resulted in cross-training opportunities. UT CIS plans to continue collaborating with UT Extension on economic and workforce development initiatives, recognizing that partnering with UT Extension significantly expands its reach, given that Extension agents are embedded in all 95 counties in Tennessee.

## Primary Function Exhibited



**Connected Convener** through UT CIS' recognition that partnering with UT Extension expands its reach.

## Acknowledgements



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Ascendium Education Group® is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization driven by the belief that learning after high school gives people the power to build better futures. Our national philanthropy focuses on increasing opportunities for learners from low-income backgrounds to achieve upward mobility through postsecondary education and workforce training. We partner with organizations whose objectives align with our core strategies to expand opportunity, support learner success, and connect and align systems. Our grantees include postsecondary education and workforce training providers, intermediaries, researchers, and media organizations from across the U.S. To learn more, visit [ascendiumphilanthropy.org](https://ascendiumphilanthropy.org).