Community Partnerships to Further the Role of Rural Public Libraries in Small Business Economic Development: A Case Study of Tennessee (PLSB-TN)

Introduction


PLSB-TN involves collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback based on the needs, expectations, and experiences of small businesses and rural public libraries in the state.

PLSB-TN research conducted so far includes preliminary planning activities, analyzing existing needs and feasibility, solidifying community partnerships, and developing initial work plans, blueprint, and strategic action plan prototype of a Public Library Small Business Toolkit that strengthens collaborations between various stakeholders involved.

PLSB-TN is serving as a pilot case experience and assessment test-bed to expand strategies for the entire Appalachian region and other rural environments in the future.

Statement of Need

The Appalachian region has traditionally faced challenging economic, social, and cultural conditions that have adversely affected the population living in these areas [1; 2; 3]. Rural residents in the Appalachian region additionally face limited financial opportunities, extreme information poverty and unemployment, low information literacy levels and educational attainment, a lack of access to information technology resources, and other unique debilitating environmental circumstances [4; 5]. Rural libraries have a strong potential role to play in economic development and sustainable economic viability of the Appalachian region [6; 7].

PLSB-TN Design

PLSB-TN includes the following phases:

Phase 1: Collecting quantitative and qualitative data about the roles of rural public libraries in the small business community and librarian staff stakeholder groups;

Phase 2: Developing a blueprint of a Public Library Small Business Toolkit and a strategic action plan for its operationalization and implementation based on feedback of key partners.

The intended project audience is small businesses, rural library staff and managers/directors, library and information science (LIS) educators and students, rural economic council and chambers of commerce members, and small business entrepreneurs.

PLSB-TN Plan

The PLSB-TN has potential benefits to the (1) rural small business community, (2) rural libraries, (3) educational programs.

The project goal is to research the role rural public libraries play in economic development and economic growth based on the needs, expectations, and experiences of small businesses and rural public libraries with a focus on Tennessee as a pilot case setting. The project objectives to achieve this goal are:

- Objective 1: Based on the perspectives of Tennessee’s small business, what are their information needs, expectations, and experiences and what past and current role have rural public libraries played in assisting these agencies towards economic development?
- Objective 2: Collect feedback from Tennessee’s rural public libraries regarding existing services and programs they provide to small businesses.
- Objective 3: Based on the data collected from small businesses and rural public libraries propose a blueprint towards informing the design and development of a Public Library Small Business Toolkit.

Community Partnerships

The table below identifies the community partnerships in the PLSB-TN that have been significant to achieve the various project objectives. In addition, the PLSB-TN partners have played a major role in various grant activities and include representative of Tennessee’s: 1) Blount County Public Library; 2) Clinch River Regional Library; 3) Holston River Regional Library; 4) Sevier County Public Library System.

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<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Project Activities</th>
<th>Partners</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative data collection from representatives of Tennessee’s small business community about their information needs, information challenges, use of information resources, and how rural public libraries can assist them in managing their small business.</td>
<td>Tennessee’s small businesses; Members from Tennessee’s Chambers of Commerce representing its nine regions; Representatives of Tennessee’s Small Business and Economic Development Councils and related agencies.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative data collection from representatives of Tennessee’s rural public libraries regarding existing services and programs they provide to small businesses.</td>
<td>Tennessee’s rural public librarians and staff; Members of the Tennessee State Library and Archives; Members of state, regional, and local library associations; State library data coordinators and others.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Community feedback and analysis of the draft blueprint of the Public Library Small Business Toolkit to develop a strategic action plan for its operationalization and implementation.</td>
<td>The PLSB-TN Advisory Board consists of project partner representatives. It also includes: 1) Teri T. Braham; 2) Jane E. Brindley; 3) Tammy Ford, Blount Partnership; 4) Virginia Hardwick, Staff Solutions and Workforce Development MFG; 5) Meg Harrison, Clinton Public Library; 5) Kirk Kirk, Sweetwater Public Library, 6) Lauren Long, Madison County Public Library; 7) Marissa Sneed, Sevier County Public Library Systems.</td>
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Conclusion

Expected outcomes of the PLSB-TN include: (1) Providing generalizable data on how rural public library practice empowers communities. (2) Developing a blueprint and preliminary strategic action plan based on datasets systematically collected from the small business and rural library communities towards economic development and economic growth. (3) Laying the foundation for advancing study of the expanding role of public libraries on economic development.

The role of community partnerships has been significant in conducting the various PLSB activities and moving forward towards generating maximum impact and achieving project outcomes. The collaborative work will help inform policy formulation with a vital e-government role public libraries serve. The synthesis of research can also inform how public library and other stakeholders in rural environments may pool resources, plan jointly, and look across needs to achieve economies of scale, better services, and more resilient communities.

References


