



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Pennsylvania General Assembly  
**FROM:** Senator Gene Yaw, Chairman  
**DATE:** November 8, 2024  
**SUBJECT:** Executive Summary:  
**Connecting the Dots: Rural Public Libraries  
as Partners for Small Business and Workforce Growth**

On behalf of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, I am pleased to provide you with the executive summary of the research report, ***Connecting the Dots: Rural Public Libraries as Partners for Small Business and Workforce Growth***. The research was conducted by Xiaofeng Li, Ph.D., of the Pennsylvania Western University Clarion.

This study examines the current and potential role of public libraries in supporting small business development and workforce growth in rural Pennsylvania. The researcher used online surveys to sample librarians and conducted in-depth individual interviews with small businesses and residents in rural Pennsylvania. In total, 185 survey responses were received, and 19 individual interviews were conducted with small businesses and key community stakeholders. Derived from the research findings is a comprehensive list of resources for rural libraries.

Findings highlight a gap between available library resources and the needs of small businesses and residents. The study identifies the potential of libraries as vital partners in local economic development and suggests opportunities for collaboration with other organizations.

Policy recommendations include increased funding for libraries, enhanced staff training and program development, as well as proposed changes to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the Commonwealth Libraries' Five-Year Plan.

The full research report is available on the Center's website at [www.rural.pa.gov](http://www.rural.pa.gov). If you have any questions, please call my office or call the Center at (717) 787-9555.

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# Connecting the Dots: Rural Public Libraries as Partners for Small Business and Workforce Growth

By: Xiaofeng Li, Ph.D., Pennsylvania Western University Clarion.

This study examines the current and potential role of public libraries in supporting small business development and workforce growth in rural Pennsylvania. Online surveys sampling rural librarians and in-depth individual interviews with rural small businesses and residents were employed; 185 survey responses were received, and 19 individual interviews were conducted. Derived from the findings, a comprehensive list of resources for rural libraries was also developed.

## Key Findings from Librarians' Survey Responses

- **Technology services:** While most rural libraries offer technology services, few provide dedicated web resources for career development and small businesses. Almost half of the libraries provide digital skills training and support. Innovative spaces such as makerspaces with tools (e.g., sewing machines) and newer technologies (e.g., 3D printers) are limited in rural libraries.
- **Patron support:** On average, libraries report that about one-fourth of their patrons are small businesses and that they support approximately one-third of their patrons in workforce development through existing resources.
- **Business- and career-related resources:** Rural libraries rely heavily on Pennsylvania government resources for small businesses, which are available at no cost; some libraries do not purchase any other online resources.
- **Business- and career-related programs and classes:** 58 percent of the libraries provide programs and classes for small businesses (e.g., technology and digital tools for website design, search engine optimization, and e-commerce; financial management; marketing and branding; legal procedures and issues). Comparatively, 82 percent of the libraries provide workforce development programs and classes (e.g., job search skills such as resume writing or interview techniques, planning for educational expenses, careers and occupations, and English as a Second Language skills).
- **Partnerships:** Local businesses, government agencies, and other libraries were the primary partners for libraries in supporting small business and workforce development. However, collaboration with dedicated organizations like Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) or the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) is minimal.
- **Library challenges:** Over half of the libraries surveyed face challenges such as limited budget and staff, as well as a lack of knowledge/training among staff in supporting small businesses and workforce development.
- **Library needs:** Libraries desire more staff, staff training, and funds earmarked to address these challenges.

## Key Findings from Small Business and Resident Interviews

### *Current Role of Rural Libraries:*

- **Access to information:** Libraries are valued for providing internet access, books, databases, and software.
- **Learning center:** Classes, workshops, and training programs offer desired knowledge and skills for developing businesses and advancing careers (e.g., financial literacy, balancing a checkbook, customer service trainings, cooking classes, equipment operation classes such as how to use a metal detector).
- **People connectors:** Libraries facilitate networking and collaboration within communities.
- **Underutilized potential:** Many participants indicated they do not actively use libraries for small business or career-related purposes.

### *Small Business and Resident Needs:*

- **Skills development:** Trainings on diverse topics (e.g., marketing, especially digital marketing; customer services; accounting/finance; communication; management; and computer skills) are needed in specific small business- and workforce-related skills.
- **Information access:** Reliable and curated resources are needed for business-related decision-making (e.g., number of employees needed, business location, start-up costs), navigating complex application processes for grants and loans, and providing information about local communities and events.
- **Social networks:** Strong social networks are needed to provide support and mentorship for both businesses and individuals.
- **Improve rural communities:** Growth in the quantity and variety of businesses along with growth in the number of younger residents to fuel the prosperity of rural communities.
- **Lifelong learning:** Continuous access to educational opportunities is necessary for personal and professional growth.
- **Financial resources:** Grants, loans, and other incentives (e.g., tax incentives and subsidiary rates for business equipment) are needed to provide vital financial support for business ventures and training.

### *Potential Roles of Libraries:*

- **Expand information resources:** Curating small business-specific resources, career development, and community needs.
- **Develop educational programs:** Offering targeted workshops, classes, and training programs to address identified skill gaps.
- **Create community social hubs:** Fostering a welcoming space for networking, events, collaboration, and sup-

porting social connections.

- Become human resource connectors: Partnering with relevant organizations to link community members and individuals with business and career experiences and support.

- Promote local businesses: Highlighting local entrepreneurs and businesses within libraries and through community outreach.

*Potential Partners for Libraries:*

- Economic development organizations, such as AmeriCorps, Pennsylvania CareerLink, Chamber of Commerce, Economic Alliance, Small Business Association (SBA), Small Business Development Centers (SBDC), and the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE).

- Local leadership and community organizations such as community foundations, local businesses, lawyers, and marketing firms.

- Educational institutions such as local universities, colleges, and technical schools.

*Recommendations for Library Budgets and Programming:*

- Curate information for businesses and local communities in various formats.

- Allocate funds for learning resources and provide training across various business- and career-related topics, such as customer service, accounting/finance, communication, management, marketing, and computer and information literacy.

- Support initiatives that leverage library spaces for public events, community meetings, and social gatherings, fostering the role of libraries being community hubs for information and networking.

- Invest in equipment, training, and programs that encourage business idea incubation, creativity, collaboration, and innovation among all ages through library makerspaces and innovation hubs.

- Provide funds and support for library staff to engage in ongoing professional development.

- Provide incentives for library staff to go beyond library communities and seek partnerships with local and regional organizations that support small business and career development, and rural economic development.

- Provide incentives and support for library staff to participate and take leadership roles within committees from local to regional and state levels, increasing opportunities for collaborations across different sectors and industries.

- Provide competitive salaries and benefits to attract and retain library

professionals with experience and training.

*Recommendations for the Next Five-Year Plan for the Commonwealth Libraries:*

- Strengthen the role of libraries as the primary place for information, organizing trustworthy and accessible information effectively to alleviate information overload prevalent on the open web. For example, libraries may curate a list of resources on grants that support starting a small business that is relevant to local economies.

- Emphasize the role of libraries as a central hub for local information and resources, establishing referral programs and cultivating partnerships with organizations at local, regional, and state levels.

- Expand the role of libraries in providing lifelong learning opportunities by fostering partnerships with local entrepreneurs, experts, businesses, and organizations beyond library communities.

- Transform library spaces into dynamic community hubs for social engagement, networking, and incubation for business ideas and innovations.

- Prioritize the training and growth of library professionals to equip them with the skills needed to navigate the evolving information landscape effectively. For example, library staff may need training on what business resources are available through government agencies such as SBDC.

- Increase community awareness regarding the services of libraries

and the capacities for partnerships, ensuring that the community at large is informed about the diverse resources and services provided by libraries.

*Recommendations for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA):*

- WIOA could consider incentivizing and allocating funds to support partnerships between existing WIOA programs and rural libraries, such as designating rural libraries as satellite sites for existing programs, leveraging the role of libraries in local communities to understand local needs and resources in economic development. By fostering this synergy, WIOA can maximize its impact by extending services into underserved rural communities and tapping into the unique resources these libraries offer.

- WIOA could provide grant programs for libraries to take leadership roles in establishing partnerships with small business organizations and workforce development agencies.

- WIOA could integrate language to encourage small business organizations and workforce development agencies to collaborate with libraries for outreach efforts.

- WIOA could recognize the potential capacities of rural libraries as community hubs and support their development in this role with funding for library spaces and technologies needed for the incubation of business and innovation ideas.

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