

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

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Abstract: This study investigates the current and potential roles of libraries in supporting small business development and workforce growth in rural Pennsylvania. Online surveys from librarians and in-depth individual interviews with small businesses and residents in rural Pennsylvania were employed; 185 survey responses were received, and 19 individual interviews were conducted with small businesses and key community stakeholders. Findings reveal a gap between current resources for small business and career development available in libraries and the needs of small businesses and residents in rural Pennsylvania. The study shows the potential and capabilities of libraries as partners in the network of resources supporting small business and career development in rural areas. The study also identifies potential partnerships between libraries and other organizations to support rural economic development. Recommendations for policy considerations include annual appropriations for libraries to support curation of local information, staff training, program creation, and resources fostering innovation and partnerships. Additional recommendations for policy considerations include changes to both the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Amendments and the Commonwealth Libraries' next Five-Year Plan.

Key Words: public libraries, small business, career development, rural development

This project was sponsored by a grant from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania is a bipartisan, bicameral legislative agency that serves as a resource for rural policy within the Pennsylvania General Assembly. It was created in 1987 under Act 16, the Rural Revitalization Act, to promote and sustain the vitality of Pennsylvania's rural and small communities. Information contained in this report does not necessarily reflect the views of individual board members or the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. For more information, contact the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 625 Forster St., Room 902, Harrisburg, PA 17120, (717) 787-9555, www.rural.pa.gov.

Executive Summary

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 in 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 supporting 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 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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Introduction

Problem Statement

In the United States during 2018, two of every three new jobs were created in small businesses (Office of Advocacy of the U.S. Small Business Administration, 2022). However, defining a small business is a challenge (Anastasia, 2015). The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) employs a system of size standards and industry categorization to delineate small businesses. According to basic SBA requirements, most manufacturing enterprises with 500 employees or fewer and most non-manufacturing ventures with average annual receipts under \$7.5 million fall under the small business classification. In 2022, 99.6 percent of Pennsylvania businesses were small businesses and accounted for almost half of the state's workforce (Weaver, 2022). Research has found that the number of small businesses in rural areas is noticeably lower than in urban areas (Wilmoth, 2019). In recent years, there has been fluctuation in small business activity across rural Pennsylvania (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021b). The most recent U.S. Census data reveal an increase in the number of non-employer establishments, from 194,623 rural establishments in 2020 to 203,792 establishments in 2021. These establishments essentially represent one-person enterprises. Moreover, the latest County Business Patterns data from 2021 show establishments with one to four employees totaling 38,428, constituting 52 percent of all establishments in rural Pennsylvania. Additionally, the data reveal 15,705 establishments with five to nine employees and 9,535 establishments with 10 to 19 employees. Together, these three size categories accounted for 86 percent of all establishments with employees in rural Pennsylvania, and they represent 21 percent of all establishments with employees in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021a).

The growth of small businesses in rural areas can lead to the creation of job opportunities and subsequently bring people back into the workforce, leading to the development of the economy and sustainment of the rural workforce over the next 10 years in Pennsylvania. A review of current government policies and programs identifies numerous initiatives, grants, and assistance for rural small business development. However, what appears missing in current government policies and programs is the involvement of public libraries, especially those rooted in rural areas. Research has shown that public libraries have the capacity to play an important role in promoting small businesses and economic development through partnerships with others.¹ Thus, this study aims to address the gap in current policies and literature, urging the importance of libraries as partners in supporting small business development and rural workforce growth.

The federal and state governments have resources available for small businesses and workforce development. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development and the U.S. Small Business Administration offer programs, loans, initiatives, and grants to support rural businesses and communities. Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) are established in every state to provide business resources and support for

¹ In 2010, it was recorded that public libraries assisted 300,000 Americans every day with their job searching and provided services to 2.8 million small business owners and employees every month (Online Computer Library Center, 2010).

entrepreneurship. The Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) provides free resources like mentoring programs, webinars, and workshops. In total, SBDC and SCORE have more than one hundred local offices in Pennsylvania. Another government effort is the Pennsylvania Business One-Stop Shop; launched in 2018, it offers resources to help people start their businesses. Individuals seeking to start or expand their businesses or advance their careers but who may lack awareness of these resources or access to computers, the Internet, and continuing education opportunities can utilize libraries to bridge these gaps in supporting small businesses and workforce development. There are government programs and legislation, albeit limited, to address the role of public libraries in economic development and workforce growth. In 2014, Congress amended the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), in which the role of libraries in assisting local workforce growth was streamlined. Additionally, state library administrative agencies develop plans outlining library service goals for a five-year period. This requirement is part of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) Grants to States program, the largest source of federal funding for library services in the U.S. since 1956 (Institute of Museum and Library Services, n.d.). In 2017, the Office of Commonwealth Libraries developed a five-year plan that identified workforce development as one of its priorities (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2017). In the new five-year plan for the Commonwealth Libraries, workforce development initiatives are listed as potential activities for project areas related to library empowerment (Pennsylvania State Library, 2023).

While federal funding exists to support libraries in bolstering small business resources, it has not reached rural areas as effectively. The Institute of Museum and Library Services has awarded grants for this purpose since 2006, but only two of these projects specifically targeted rural libraries. This highlights the need for more funding in rural areas to empower their libraries to better serve small businesses and contribute to local workforce development.

Literature Review

Public libraries have served as cornerstones of American society for centuries. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a federal agency dedicated to advancing the role of museums and libraries in America, defines a public library as follows:

“A public library is established under state laws or regulations to serve a community, district, or region. A public library must, at a minimum, meet the following criteria:

- Contain an organized collection of printed or other library materials, or a combination thereof;
- Have paid staff;
- Have an established schedule during which the services of the staff are available to the public;
- Have the facilities necessary to support such a collection, staff, and schedule; and,
- Be supported in whole or in part with public funds” (Pelczar et al., 2021, p. 1).

A national survey by the IMLS shows that in federal fiscal year 2019, a total of 9,057 libraries or library systems met the federal and state definition of a public library; there were 16,607 central and branch libraries that were not bookmobiles (Pelczar et al., 2021). The national survey conducted in fiscal year 2017 showed that rural libraries served roughly 30 million Americans through roughly 4,000 rural library systems (Institute of Museum and Library Services, n.d.). According to this report, rural libraries provided more than 100 million books and 154 million eBooks. In 2017, rural libraries offered approximately 750,000 programs with 12.5 million attendees (Institute of Museum and Library Services, n.d.). Rural libraries are also key institutions in rural communities that provide internet access; survey data show that one in five library patrons use a computer connected to the Internet at a rural library (Institute of Museum and Library Services, n.d.).

The classification of rural libraries presents a nuanced challenge, with multiple methods employed for defining such areas. Federal government agencies like the Department of Agriculture, Department of Education, and Department of Health and Human Services all have different definitions classifying rural areas (Grimes, n.d.). Following the definitions developed by the National Center for Education Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau, the Institute of Museum and Library Services defines rural as “any areas beyond a U.S. Census designated urban area, characterized by its high population density” (Grimes, n.d.). Following this definition of rural, approximately 4,190 public libraries are situated in rural areas, constituting roughly 46.8 percent of the total number of public libraries (Grimes, n.d.). The Center for Rural Pennsylvania defines rural “based on population density, and areas with population densities less than 291 people per square mile are considered rural” (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, n.d.). “In Pennsylvania, there are 467 library locations, with 228 of these libraries in rural counties,” as defined by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (Office of Commonwealth Libraries, Bureau of Library Development, 2022).

A recent study published by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania finds that rural public libraries are trusted resources in their communities and have expanded their roles as book repositories, including the topics of small business development, entrepreneurship, and job searching (Grove & Brasher, 2020). While rural libraries often face challenges such as a lack of funding, staffing shortages, and smaller collections, this does not mean that rural libraries need to be isolated from other organizations and community support agencies. Instead, studies demonstrate the desires and benefits of collaborating with libraries. Real and Rose (2017) identified two successful partnership strategies at the local, regional, and state levels to improve resource availability for rural communities. Mehra et al. (2017) studied the role of rural libraries in the Appalachian region’s economic growth and co-created a toolkit with the state library. More initiatives have been launched through the collaborative efforts of public libraries to help build economies in rural areas (Hughes & Boss, 2021). In 2020, a national initiative, Libraries Build Business, was launched to help libraries provide programming and services to entrepreneurs and small business owners (American Library Association, 2019). Through this initiative, participating libraries developed business incubators, co-working spaces, makerspaces, classes and workshops for business topics, specialized equipment and

technology access, promotion and marketing assistance, and research and reference services to aid in navigating legal and business requirements.

Goals and Objectives

The purpose of this project is to investigate the current and potential roles of public libraries as partners in supporting small business development and workforce growth in rural Pennsylvania. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Develop a baseline study that describes the current practices and partnerships (including potential ones) through which small and rural public libraries in Pennsylvania support their local small businesses and workforce development.
2. Conduct a needs assessment of small business owners and residents who are developing businesses and careers at every stage.
3. Identify potential partnerships between libraries and other agencies in addressing the needs of supporting small businesses and rural workforce development.
4. Create a list of resources relevant to entrepreneurship and employment that can be used by rural libraries.
5. Contribute to the scholarly and professional conversation on small and rural libraries and their roles in small business development and rural workforce growth.

Methodology

This project was carried out in two phases. Online surveys were used in the first phase, and individual interviews were conducted in the second phase. The study utilized the definition of rural counties provided by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania when selecting participants for this study (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, n.d.).

Phase 1: Online Survey

Online surveys were used to collect librarians' views on resources, services, partnerships, and needed support for small businesses and rural workforce growth.

To reach a representative sample, the researcher sent the online survey requests through two channels: 1) a listserv managed by the Office of Commonwealth Libraries (PAMailAll), and 2) contacts provided by the Pennsylvania Library Association. Because both channels reached a wide audience, survey questions on library type and county location were asked in order to exclude non-public libraries and non-rural counties. Participation was confidential and voluntary.

The online survey was built on SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool that the host university provided for research purposes. The types of survey questions included: 1) basic information about the participant and the library; 2) funding sources; 3) resources for small businesses and workforce development; 4) programs and services for small businesses and workforce development, along with successes and challenges; 5) existing and potential partners and library roles in partnerships, along with successes and challenges; and 6) needed support for small businesses and workforce development. The survey instrument is provided in Appendix A.

Phase 2: Interviews

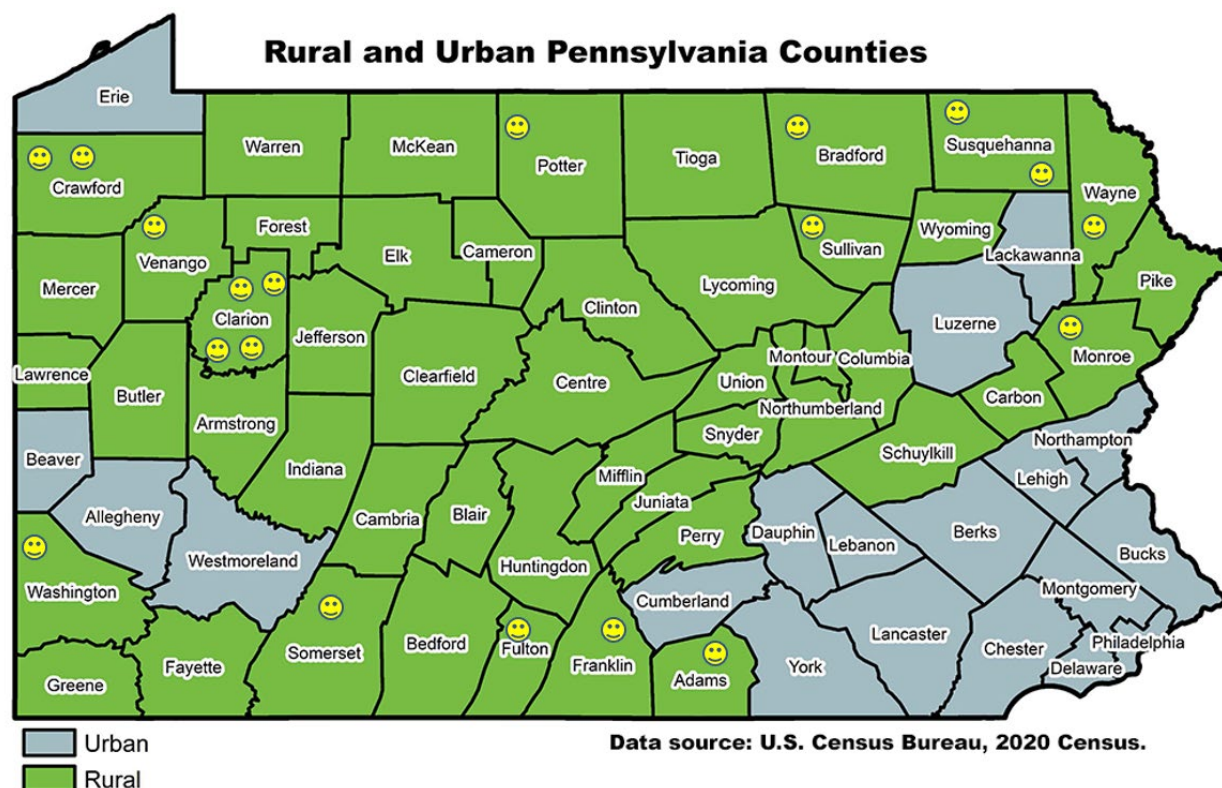
To complement the survey data collected from libraries, the second phase focused on getting in-depth interview data to unpack key community stakeholders' experiences and views on small businesses and rural workforce development, particularly their thoughts on the roles of libraries as partners in the network of support agencies. Participants included residents, small business owners, library users/non-users, and representatives from other community-based organizations.

Interviews were first designed as focus group interviews, with the intention of hosting group interviews in each of the seven geographic regions of Pennsylvania (Northwest, Southwest, Juniata Conemaugh, West Branch, Northeast, Lehigh Valley, and South Central) (Pennsylvania Library Association, n.d.). However, with two attempted group interviews that fell through and continuous challenges in finding a date and time that worked for all participants, the researcher decided to change the format to individual virtual interviews. While focus groups would enable interactions among participants, individual interviews allowed more in-depth conversations between the researcher and participants.

The researcher worked with library directors who indicated their support for this project and asked them to print and post the flyer for participant recruitment. These libraries included Meadville Public Library, Frank Sarris Public Library, Tyrone-Snyder Township Public Library, Barbara Moscato Brown Memorial Library, Susquehanna Free Library, Barrett Paradise Friendly Library, and Gettysburg Library. It is important to note that although the researcher made efforts to contact library directors and Chambers of Commerce in counties such as Centre, Mifflin, Juniata, and neighboring rural counties to recruit participants, no participants were secured from the central region of the state. This absence of participants from the center of the state suggests a potential gap in the representation of perspectives or experiences from this particular geographical area, which could impact the comprehensiveness of the study's findings. Further exploration or outreach efforts may be necessary to ensure a more balanced and inclusive representation of perspectives across all rural counties within the state.

Nineteen individual interviews were conducted. Among these participants were small business owners, job seekers, and active community members across various sectors, including landscaping, restaurants, brew pubs, real estate, occupational therapy, event planning, thrift stores, clothing stores, bakeries, grocery stores, website design, public speaking training, gift shops, and jewelry shops. The map below shows the counties represented by interview participants, with each "smiley face" representing a participant.

Figure 1: Location of Interview Participants



Data source: Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

Data Analysis

For quantitative data collected through the online survey, descriptive statistics were conducted to summarize survey responses. For qualitative data collected through open-ended survey questions and individual interviews, the researcher followed an inductive approach, using the constant comparison technique (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher openly coded the data, identifying initial codes, and then grouped them into categories based on thematic similarities. To ensure coding reliability, each excerpt was reviewed for fit within the emergent categories. These categories were then further organized to address the study’s research questions. For example, one category that emerged from the interviews was “social network,” which revealed participants’ needs of connecting with other small business and professional communities.

Findings

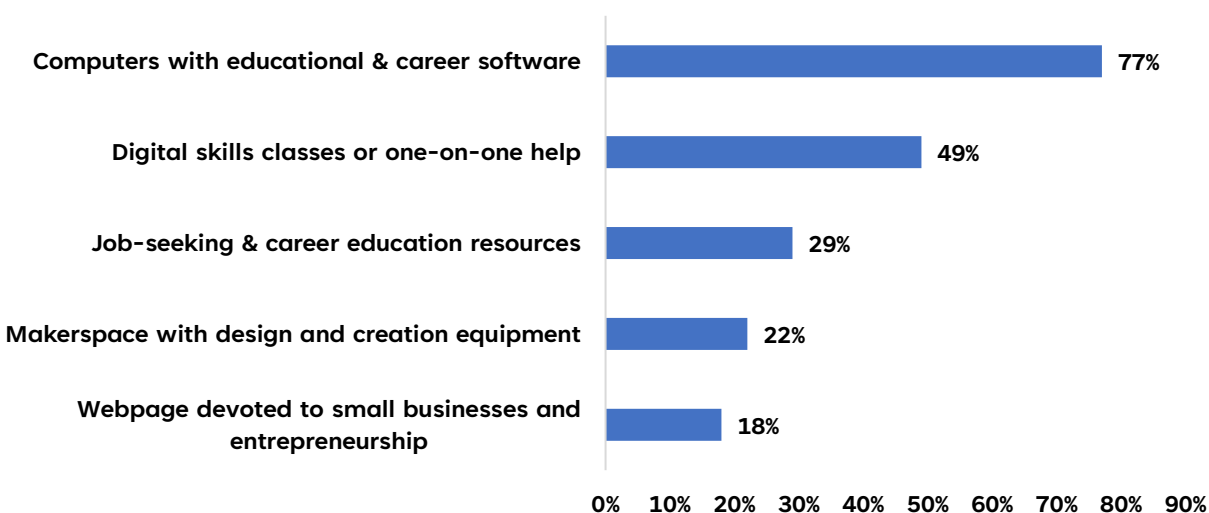
Summary of Online Surveys

A total of 185 survey responses were collected, resulting in a response rate of 73 percent. The margin of error for the survey, calculated at a 95 percent confidence level, is approximately seven percent. On average, participants spent close to eight minutes completing the survey. The following sections present key findings and insights derived from the survey data.

Technology Services

Survey participants were asked about the types of technology services that their library offers that can be used for small businesses and workforce-related services. A majority of rural libraries (77 percent) offer dedicated software (e.g., Microsoft Office Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Adobe Photoshop, VLC Media Player, etc.) for educational, career, job placement, or workforce-related skills. A little less than half of the libraries (49 percent) provide classes or one-on-one technological assistance services to teach digital skills and improve digital literacy. See Figure 1 below for the types of technology services that libraries offer for small businesses and workforce-related services.

Figure 2: Technology Services



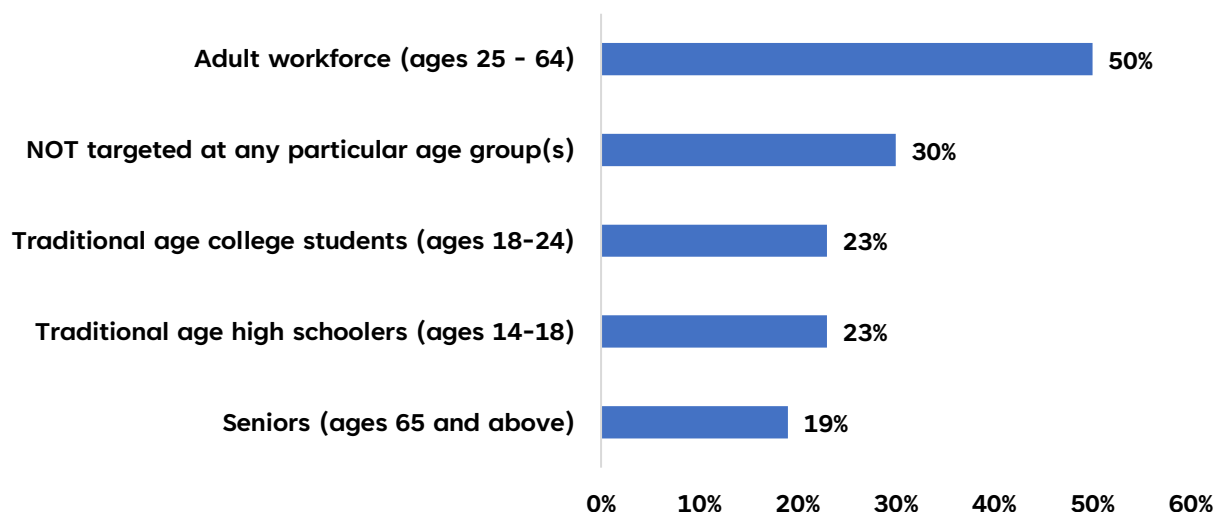
The survey results suggest a few potential opportunities for rural libraries, including expanding support for digital competencies, enhancing online presence and curated resources related to career pursuits and small businesses, and creating makerspaces to support technological literacy and encourage entrepreneurship.

Patron Support

On average, survey respondents estimated that about 25 percent of their libraries' patrons are small businesses, and 29 percent of all patrons were supported with workforce development in the past 12 months through library resources, programs, and services.

Participants were further asked to identify the age group(s) that their library workforce and career development programs or classes target. Half of the respondents indicated a focus on adult workforce development for individuals between the ages of 25 and 64. Additionally, close to half (48 percent) of respondents indicated their workforce programs and classes target traditional-age high schoolers and college students. In contrast, only 19 percent of respondents reported that their libraries provide programs or classes specifically designed to support older adults (ages 65 and above) in their career development, such as re-entering the workforce after retirement. Figure 2 below shows the age groups targeted by libraries' workforce development programs or classes.

Figure 3: Targeted Age Groups



This result demonstrates that rural libraries have a strong emphasis on assisting adults in their career advancement and skill enhancement, suggesting a potential opportunity for libraries to expand their offerings and cater to the needs of different age groups.

Small Businesses and Career Related Resources

When seeking information related to small businesses, close to half of respondents (45 percent) indicated that their libraries frequently use resources sponsored by Pennsylvania government offices, such as the *POWER Library* and *SkillUpPA*. These resources serve as valuable sources of information, guidance, and support for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Print or e-books are also frequently used by respondents (43 percent), highlighting the continued relevance and importance of traditional materials in providing business-related information and knowledge.

Similarly, when it came to information related to career preparation and development, both resources sponsored by Pennsylvania government offices and print or e-books were frequently used. Approximately 43 percent of respondents rely on resources sponsored by Pennsylvania government offices, and 45 percent of respondents utilize print or e-books. These resources offer valuable insights, job search support, and professional development guidance. Interestingly, a notable portion of respondents (21 percent) indicated that their libraries never specifically purchased access to other online resources, such as business databases, for small businesses. This indicates a gap in access to online resources that provide specialized information on topics such as market analysis. Addressing this gap could enhance the support available to small businesses and promote their success.

Businesses and Career-Related Programs

Close to half of respondents (42 percent) shared that their libraries do not provide programs or classes specifically tailored for small businesses. In contrast, a lower percentage (18 percent) reported a lack of workforce-related programs or classes. This

highlights the need for libraries to expand their offerings and prioritize small business support, especially considering the comparable percentages of patrons those libraries support in small businesses (25 percent) and workforce development (29 percent).

Among library programs or classes for small businesses, 26 percent of rural librarians surveyed noted that these offerings focus on technology and digital tools; programs or classes on financial and marketing topics appeared to be less commonly offered. Libraries could consider diversifying their programs to address these crucial aspects of small business development.

Approximately 40 percent of respondents reported that their libraries provide programs or classes on job search skills, including resume writing and interviewing techniques. Other program topics include planning for educational expenses, careers and occupations, English as a Second Language skills, and soft skills like on-the-job expectations, conflict resolution, and professional attire.

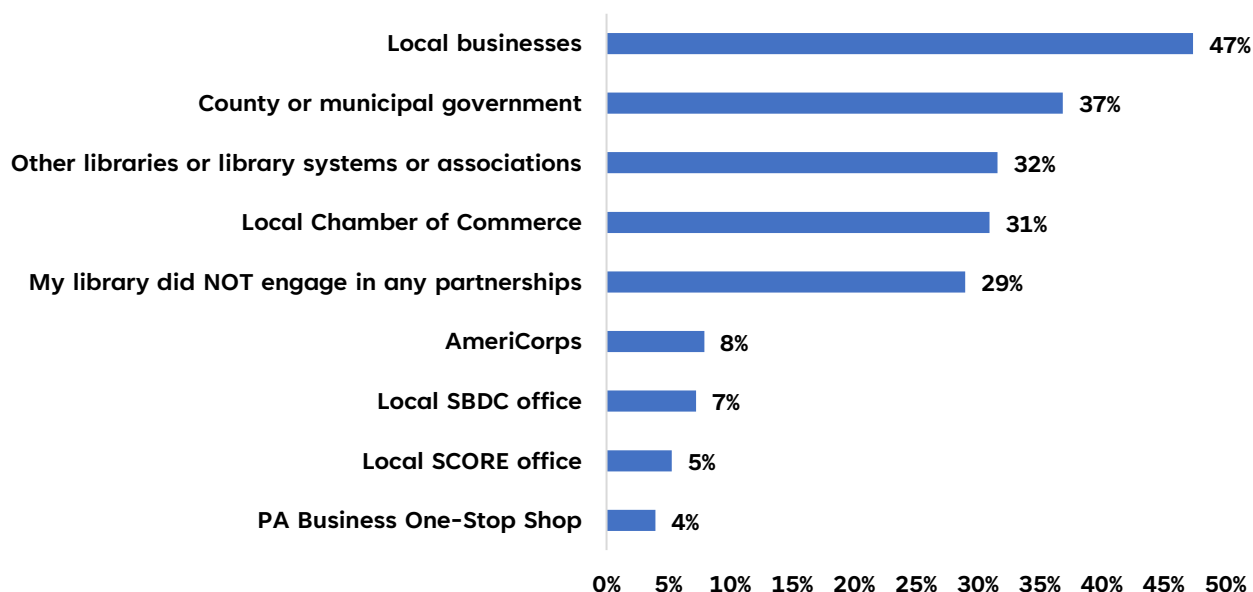
The survey reveals that the number of classes or programs rural libraries offered in the last 12 months varied from zero to 68, with an average of 27 classes or programs offered relating to small businesses, as reported by 85 respondents. In comparison, 117 respondents reported a range from zero to 69 classes or programs relating to workforce development, with an average of 23 in the last 12 months. These figures provide a glimpse into the overall program offerings, indicating a relatively active engagement in supporting both small businesses and workforce development in the last 12 months.

In terms of assessing the outcomes of current programs and services for small businesses and workforce development, the findings reveal that 33 percent of respondents reported that patrons found jobs as a result of these offerings. Notably, 25 percent of respondents indicated a lack of awareness regarding the outcomes of these programs or classes. This highlights the importance of conducting assessments and gathering feedback to better understand the impact and effectiveness of library programs.

Partnerships

Partnerships for small business-related services. Survey participants were asked to identify partners that their libraries engage with to deliver small business-related services. Figure 3 shows the results. The top four partnerships that libraries engaged in to deliver small business-related services in the past 12 months are local businesses (47 percent), county or municipal government (37 percent), other libraries or library systems or library associations (32 percent), and the local Chamber of Commerce (31 percent).

Figure 4: Partnerships for Small Businesses



Thirteen participants indicated other partners. Among them were the Regional Literacy Council, state representatives, the Rotary Club, the local merchants’ association, PA Career Link, university partnership grants, local workforce development boards, local adult literacy nonprofits, the Alliance for Workforce Development, civic groups and nonprofits, local entrepreneurial coaches, and school districts.

However, it is noteworthy that 29 percent of respondents indicated that their library did not engage in any partnerships for small business-related services in the past 12 months. Only a small percentage of respondents (7 percent) indicated partnerships with local Small Business Development Centers (SBDC), five percent with local Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) offices, and four percent with the Pennsylvania Business One-Stop Shop. These results suggest the need to encourage more partnerships with these organizations, which could enhance the support available to small businesses.

Survey respondents were asked to identify their partnership activities to support small businesses in the past 12 months. The top three partnership activities related to small businesses are partners using library space to provide services to small business owners or support providers (48 percent), partners making referrals to the library (44 percent), and partners providing small business information and resources to the library (43 percent).

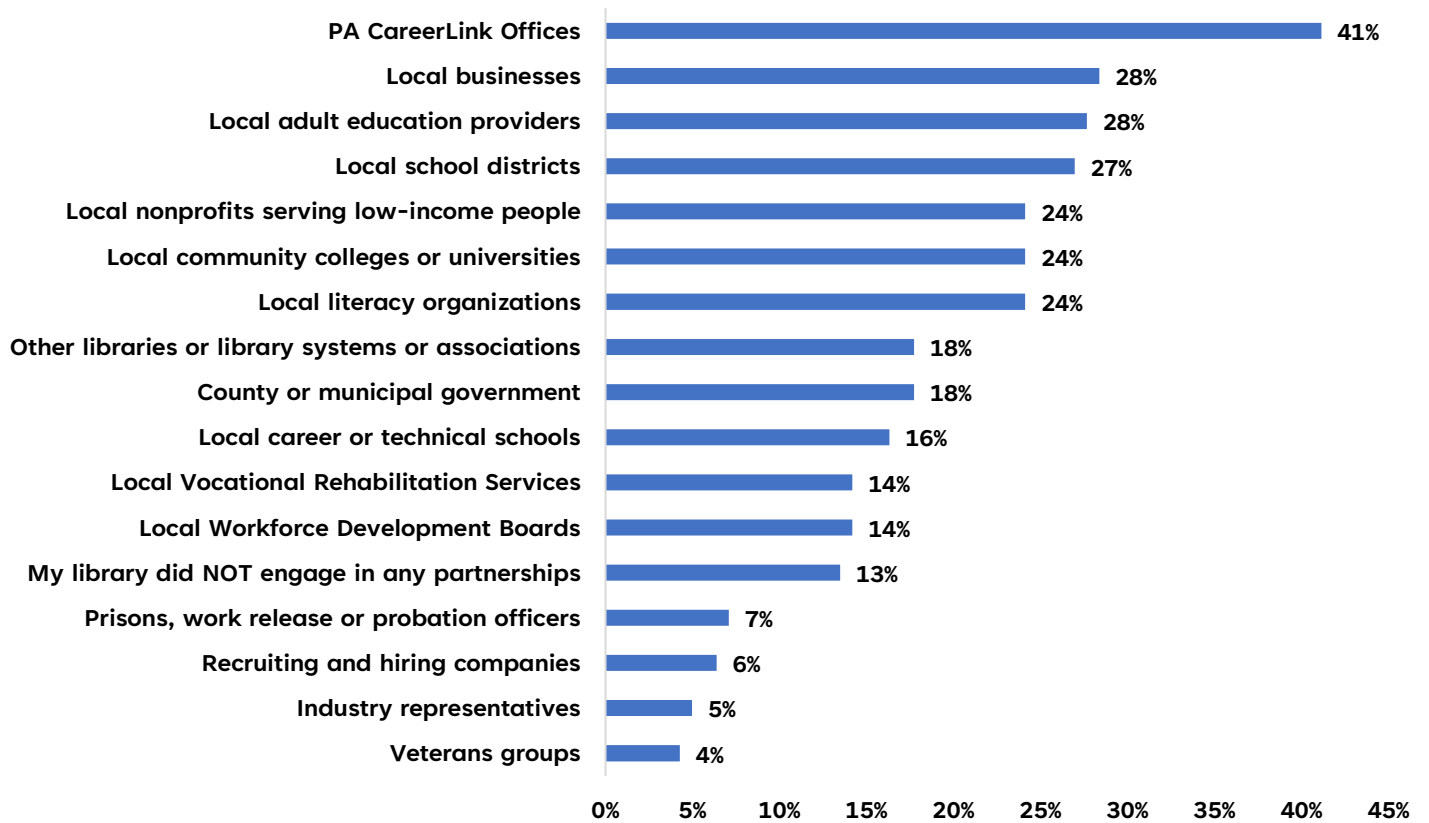
Table 1: Partnership Activities for Small Businesses

Partnership Activities	Percentage
Partners use library space for small business owners or small business support providers to provide services	48%
Partners make referrals to the library	44%
Partner provides small business information and resources to the library	43%
Library makes referrals to partner small business owners or small business organizations (e.g., SBDCs, SCORE offices)	27%
We meet to discuss how to support local small business and entrepreneurship	15%
Partner provides the library with funding for small business development (e.g., business planning, marketing, financial management)	14%
Partner trains library users about small business resources	12%
Library trains partner agency staff about library resources	12%
Library trains partner agency clients about library resources	12%
Library works with businesses to create a network for new business owners and entrepreneurs	9%
Partner trains library staff about small business resources	8%

These activities highlight the collaborative nature of the partnerships, with partners actively engaging with libraries to support small businesses. At the same time, there is an opportunity for libraries to take a more proactive approach to outreach and building partnerships with other organizations.

Partnerships for workforce-related services. Survey findings show that rural libraries worked with partners to facilitate the delivery of comprehensive workforce development support in the past 12 months. See Figure 4 for the list of partners. The top four partnerships that libraries engaged in were with PA CareerLink offices (41 percent), local businesses (28 percent), local adult education providers that are not a college or technical school (e.g., community centers, online education providers) (28 percent), and local school districts (27 percent).

Figure 5: Partnerships for Workforce Development



Survey respondents were further asked to identify their partnership activities to support workforce development in the past 12 months. The top three partnership activities related to workforce development partners providing information and resources to the library (55 percent), partners using library space for workforce agency staff to provide services (48 percent), and the library making referrals to partner agencies (35 percent).

Table 2: Partnership Activities for Workforce Development

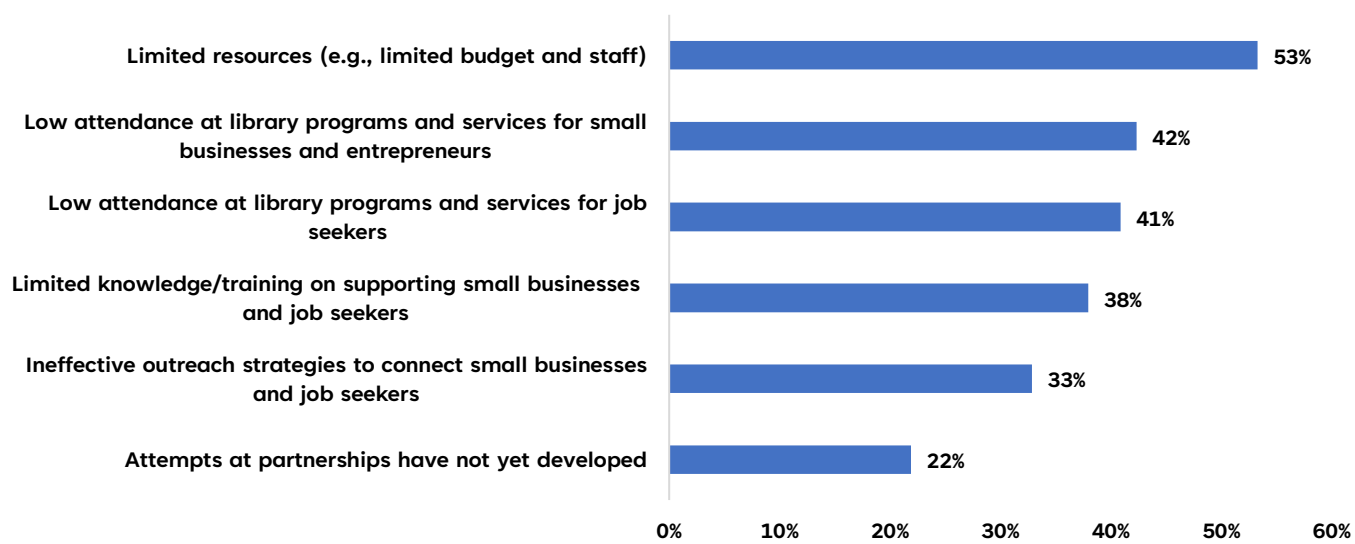
Partnership Activities	Percentage
Partner provides information and resources to the library	55%
Partner uses library space for workforce agency staff to provide services	48%
Library makes referrals to partner agencies	35%
Partner makes referrals to the library	33%
CareerLink centers or satellite CareerLink centers are located in the library	28%
Library employs low-income individuals through workforce agency training program	14%
We meet to discuss workforce development solutions	13%
Partner trains library users about workforce resources	13%
Library trains partner agency staff about library resources	13%
Partner provides the library with funding for workforce development	11%
Partner trains library staff about workforce resources	11%
Library trains partner agency clients about library resources	10%
Library works with businesses to identify or recruit workers	3%

The survey results on partnerships show that rural libraries leveraged local businesses, government agencies, and other libraries as their primary partners in supporting small business and workforce development. These partnerships involve sharing resources, providing physical space for partner services, and connecting patrons with specialized support. The survey also reveals potential opportunities for collaboration with dedicated organizations like Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) or Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE).

Library Challenges

Participants were asked to identify challenges that rural libraries experience for providing programs and services to support small businesses and workforce development. More than half of respondents reported the challenge of limited resources in their libraries, including constraints in budget and staff. Figure 6 shows all the challenges by categories.

Figure 6: Library Challenges



These results suggest additional resources are needed for the development and delivery of comprehensive programs and services in these areas. It also appears necessary to encourage participation and raise awareness among library patrons about the availability and benefits of these programs. Additionally, the results underscored the importance of providing professional development opportunities and training sessions for library staff to enhance their understanding and skills in supporting small businesses and workforce development.

Library Needs

Participants were further asked to identify the most beneficial services, resources, and support for improving rural libraries' offerings for small businesses and workforce development. Among the most needed areas of support were more staff training, staff time, and earmarked funding. Additionally, participants (38 percent) indicated the need for more building space, such as makerspaces for programs. Participants (35 percent) indicated the need to build closer relationships with local organizations, such as SBDCs, PA CareerLink centers, SCORE offices, Chambers of Commerce, business owners, Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs), and adult education providers. Figure 6 shows the results by categories.

Figure 7: Library Needs

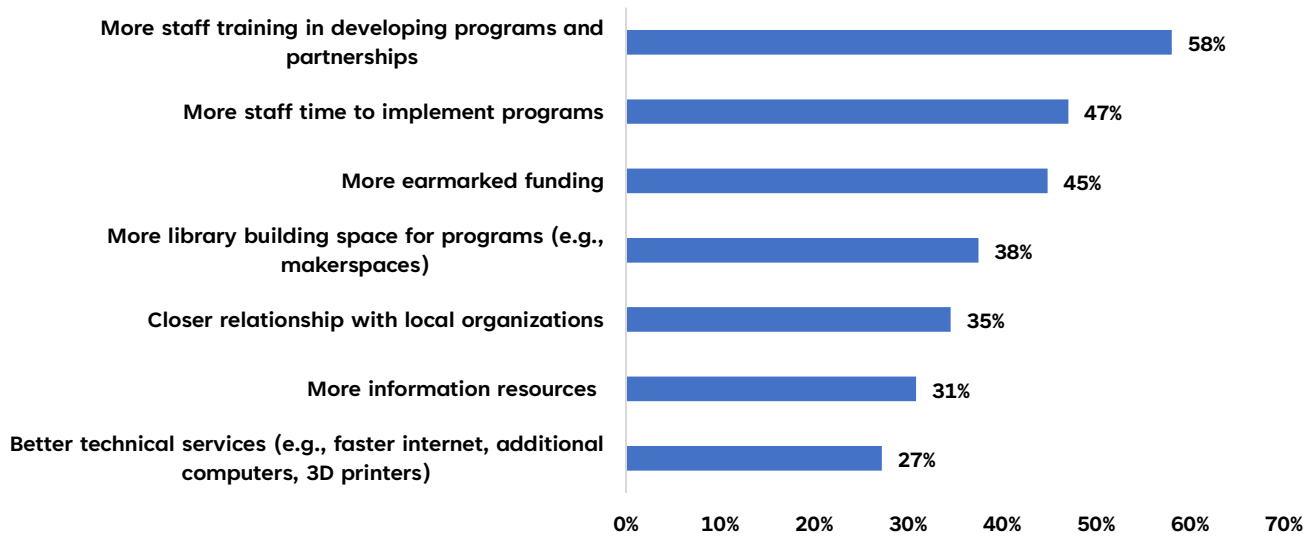


Table 3 further shows the differences between libraries with makerspaces and those without makerspaces in providing services for small businesses and workforce development.

Table 3: Makerspaces, Patrons, and Services

	Libraries with Makerspaces	Libraries without Makerspaces
PATRONS		
Percent of patrons receiving small business support	32%	23%
Percent of patrons receiving workforce development support	35%	27%
PROGRAMS		
Number of small business programs (average)	31	26
Number of workforce development programs (average)	31	20

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between makerspaces and the levels of services for small businesses and workforce development. The relation between these variables is not significant, $\chi^2 (3, N = 170) = 0.4866$, $p = .921826$, which suggests that libraries with makerspaces and those without makerspaces offer similar levels of services for small businesses and workforce development. There might be other factors influencing the level of services offered besides having a makerspace.

Furthermore, these survey results highlight the importance of ongoing professional development to ensure that libraries stay up to date with the latest trends and best practices in supporting small businesses and workforce development initiatives. Libraries need to explore strategies such as reallocating staff responsibilities, streamlining processes, or seeking additional staff support to address this challenge and ensure adequate time is dedicated to program implementation. Additionally, adequate financial resources are crucial for libraries to develop and sustain programs and services for small businesses and workforce development.

All of these library challenges and needs point to the current state of rural libraries struggling with generally limited resources, low program attendance for small businesses and job seekers, and a lack of staff expertise to support small businesses and job seekers. Rural libraries primarily desire more resources (i.e., more staff, budget, and building space), ongoing professional development opportunities, and stronger partnerships with local organizations.

Summary of Interviews

The preceding section draws upon survey data collected from librarians, while the subsequent analysis stems from individual interviews conducted with small businesses and community members in rural areas, presenting insights from two distinct sources. A total of 19 participants participated in the interviews. The average interview length was approximately 36 minutes. Inductive data analysis of the interviews reveals the participants' experiences and perceptions of the roles of public libraries in their small business development and career advancement. The final coding scheme is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Final Coding Scheme for Interviews

Themes	Categories
<i>Current Role of Rural Libraries</i>	• access to information
	• classes, workshops, and training
	• people connectors
	• underutilized potential
<i>Needs Assessment of Small Business Owners and Residents</i>	• skills development
	• information access
	• social network
	• improved rural communities
	• lifelong learning
	• financial resources and incentives
<i>Potential Role of Rural Libraries</i>	• expand information resources
	• develop educational programs
	• creating community social hubs
	• become human resource connectors
	• promote local businesses
<i>Potential Partnerships Between Libraries and Other Agencies</i>	• dedicated organizations for small businesses and economic development
	• local leaderships and community organizations
	• partnership challenges

Current Role of Rural Libraries

Rural libraries played various roles in promoting small businesses and workforce development. Each of these roles is further discussed in the following sections.

Access to Information. The role of libraries for providing access to information and the internet is strongly evident among participants. Participants use rural libraries for information in various formats—digital and print books, flyers, and online websites and databases in their processes of developing small businesses. For example, P#10 stated, “It helps to use and study customer trends... to know what the customer like [sic] at a particular point in time, or a particular year or month. Library also helps with business planning, providing resources on business planning.” P#12 emphasized the value of their libraries providing local information, thus helping small business owners to contextualize

their business plans. P#4 also emphasized the value of libraries providing trusted information, stating, “I just think about COVID when there was so much information out there, and it was hard to figure out who to listen to. The library is that trusted resource that does their best at finding someone to come in that could explain.” While most participants regarded libraries highly for the value of providing the public access to information and services such as paperwork assistance, their uses of libraries appeared to be a “come-and-go type” of interaction.

Classes, Workshops, and Training. Libraries also play a role as a source of continuing education and professional development. A few participants indicated that the classes (e.g., how to balance a checkbook), workshops (e.g., how to use a metal detector), and trainings (e.g., customer service training) that their libraries provide helped them in starting their small businesses. For example, P#6 stated, “There’s an [sic] adulting classes that are offered by the local library.”

People Connectors. Two participants indicated the role of the library as a community space and the librarian as a “people connector” (P#4). When libraries and librarians connect people, they help advocate for small businesses and what people do in the community. P#6 stated: “He [librarian] is a real big advocate of what we do.” This effort of increasing community awareness of what people do was mutual, as P#6 continued that “I try to be an advocate for what he does at the library system.”

Underutilized Potential. It also appears most participants do not actively use their rural libraries for the purpose of developing a small business or advancing their career. Several participants explicitly indicated that they either did not know libraries could have helped them with small business development or did not use libraries much in the process of developing their businesses or careers. One reason is that library resources are perceived as only for established businesses. For example, P#3 explained, “I haven’t found so many available resources through them for someone that’s looking to start a business. They’re more for businesses that are already established.” Another reason for not using libraries for business development is that libraries are perceived as kids-centered, thus being irrelevant for small business and career purposes. P#4 stated, “The library in town was most significant to me when I would take my young daughters there to play.”

Needs Assessment of Small Business Owners and Residents

Data analysis identified a number of small business owners and resident needs. These needs encompass desired business and workforce skills, information access, social networks, improved rural communities, continuing education, grants and loans, promotion of rural businesses, digital toolkits, and incentives. Each of these need categories is further described in the following sections.

Skills Development. When participants were asked what desired skills they needed for people working in their industry and business, many of them emphasized the skills of customer service, accounting/finance, communication, management, marketing, and computer and information literacy. In addition, participants identified desired mindsets for anyone starting their own business or looking for jobs, including professionalism, commitment, entrepreneurship, flexibility, and creativity.

When participants discussed the marketing skills needed, many of them emphasized the need to promote their business through their own websites and online platforms, such as social media sites. P#13 indicated needing to have “someone that helped me to advertise.” P#14 shared his observation: “Generally speaking, it’s technological divide... There’s people that don’t get technology... And from my experience is a lot of these small businesses... don’t have websites; they don’t have social media campaigns. They had this business. But they’re not marketing it in 21st century, because they just don’t have the basic skills to even potentially get into a Zoom meeting.” P#14 further stressed the need to make digital toolkits available for small business starters and job seekers at no cost or for a low fee, because the cost “just on the subscriptions alone for a business is crazy.”

Information Access. Many participants clearly indicated their needs of information resources for business planning and management, as well as grants and loans that would help them get their own businesses started. Particularly, many participants expressed needing guidance for grant and loan applications. For example, P#13 stated, “some people don’t even know how to do all these things... I had to... do a lot of researches [sic] to be able to get to where I am to be.” Similarly, P#10 stated, “I don’t really have anyone who... directed me on how to go about it.”

Data analysis further reveals three desired characteristics of information that participants looked for. The first characteristic of information is locally relevant, especially pertaining to Pennsylvania. For instance, P#3 stated, “Finding anything local would obviously work with someone trying to start a local business.” Secondly, participants need information that is visible and easily accessible. P#1 stated, “People don’t know, not everyone knows how to access those type things.” The third character of needed information is that it is trustworthy.

Social Network. Participants wanted to have a social network that provided local support, ranging from in-person events and membership organizations to mentors. Through local social networks, small businesses and job seekers may find resources and make connections. Participants expressed the need to connect with mentors or agencies that have business experience and expertise. P#3 stated, “I am still working on finding a mentor. As I said, I talked with the previous business owner who I worked for, and he could be a good fit for that. But as far as in the surrounding area, I haven’t found someone yet that, like I said, be a mentor throughout the process who has maybe gone through the same process in the surrounding area... So, I continue to plug away [sic] it, though.”

Improved Rural Communities. In discussing what small businesses and residents need in rural areas, participants pointed out problems in their communities and their desires for improved rural communities. P#1 stated, “The buildings are all dilapidated. The streets need repair. It’s just depressed in that.” Participants indicated a need for more industries and businesses, such as hardware stores, bookstores, laundromats, and grocery stores with more selections. The need to attract young people to rural areas and have a growing population was also expressed by participants. In order to improve the general attractiveness of communities, some participants suggested internet hubs and more programs to effectively address drug addiction.

Lifelong Learning. Participants identified continuing education needs in rural communities to gain certificates for employment and re-enter the workforce. While participants tried to teach themselves, they also looked for online education programs, workforce trainings, and other experiential learning opportunities. Participants want to have well-rounded training or multiple directions for career advancement. As P#2 stated, “Just want a broad spectrum... so if that doesn’t work, I’m trained in this. I can try this.”

Financial Resources. Participants experienced several challenges related to grants and loans when they first needed capital to start a business. These challenges included not being aware of any available grants or loans, not getting guidance and assistance to apply for grants and loans, and limitations on grants and loans preventing participants from applying. Thus, they need accessible grants and loans. For example, P#10 stated, “I’d really appreciate a government loan or grant... seminars and workshops... if those are accessible to me, I think I’ll really be appreciative because in a business we need finance to expand.”

Incentives. Participants expressed the need for incentives for small business and career development, such as tax incentives and subsidiary rates for business equipment. For example, P#4 stated, “If the town came together and said, ‘you know what I really do want to see is a restaurant here. How can we go out and find somebody to fill this space?’ I wish there was like a bit more... I guess incentives for people to get involved with it, because it does take a tremendous amount of money and time and risk. And so if there were some incentives to get started, or maybe there was a landlord that says, ‘Hey, I will work with you for the first two years until you get on your feet,’ that would be incredible... you know tax incentives, even just on a local level, that could encourage people to take part in our town and to take some responsibility, and, you know, take advantage of the opportunities that we have.”

Potential Role of Rural Libraries

Expand Information Resources. While participants recognize the role of libraries as information providers, they mostly want their libraries to provide more business information (e.g., industry, market and consumer analysis, advertising) and “more advanced information... to make room for other people who are not [sic] opportune to get this wider knowledge and also advance in some aspects” (P#12). Particularly, participants see the potential of libraries being a one-stop shop for grant opportunities, local information, as well as rules and regulations. Having librarians who know communities and being on site to provide assistance for information searching made this potential even more ideal. For instance, P#1 stated: “Maybe the library could be a place to do more research and to find out what’s available for us in our community, and help us to know about what’s out there, as they come along from county and from state, even national type of grants and things.”

Develop Educational Programs. In addition, participants expect libraries to provide more educational programs, either one-time events or series of classes and workshops. Topics identified by participants include:

- business classes (e.g., business mindsets, filing taxes, trading options)

- makerspaces that encouraged science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) learning
- themed resources and activities (e.g., garden outdoors, landscaping)
- career trainings for young people (e.g., electrical wiring, carpentry, customer service, cooking)

Creating Community Social Hubs. Another commonly mentioned potential role for a rural library is as a social hub in communities. Social hubs promote networking through “small business support groups...” and “co-working space” (P#13). This may “play a big role in building up businesses and towns and encouraging people to move to the town... bringing people together” (P#1). This role would be also different from what organizations such as the SBDCs provide, as P#19, a SBDC representative, explained: “we are not ever really going to have like a business book club or a spot for businesses just to come and gather and talk to each other, or something like that. It’s just not SBDC that does [sic] stuff like that... I think that a gathering place, like, comes to my mind, like there must be opportunity there.”

Become Human Resource Connectors. While reference services have been a long tradition and core service in libraries, this potential role emerged from participants’ interviews that emphasized the connection to other human resources with experience and expertise, rather than text-based information resources. For example, P#2 stated, “They might be able to help you connect with other people.” P#1 envisioned those libraries “maybe having more access to someone volunteering to be at the library to help people do... [sic] they sure they might say, well, you know, we’ll have people for you... Some people don’t have cars, they can’t get out of town, and so to be able to stay local is very valuable sometimes.”

Promote Local Businesses. Some participants see the potential of using libraries to incubate business ideas and promote small businesses. For example, P#7 stated, “I think it would be a great opportunity for someone starting these small businesses to offer one of those one-time classes at the library where they then offer a free service to people to educate, but also in a way that’s also advertising and marketing.” P#2 expressed similar interests, stating, “I might be able to go into the library and say, ‘Hey, I’m a certified recovery specialist. I’d like to hold a session on this and see how many people we can bring in.’ There could be a world of opportunities at a library.”

Potential Partnerships Between Libraries and Other Agencies

Drawing upon personal experiences, interview participants discussed many potential partners for libraries to support small businesses and workforce development. The first category of potential partners involved organizations that are dedicated to promoting economic development, supporting businesses (particularly small businesses), and facilitating employment and entrepreneurship. Participants identified agencies such as AmeriCorps, Pennsylvania CareerLink, Chambers of Commerce, Economic Alliance, Small Business Association (SBA), Small Business Development Center (SBDC), and Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE).

In addition, participants identified the potential of partnering with local leadership and community organizations such as community foundations, local businesses, lawyers,

and marketing firms. Educational institutions were also recommended by the participants, including local universities, colleges, and technical schools. P#6 stated, “we have a local technical school that could maybe do something at the library.” Participants had positive ideas about the potential partnerships that libraries could build, as P#13 stated, “if you could collaborate with most educational institutions [sic] and government agencies and business organizations [sic], local business organizations [sic] around the community. Yeah, it’s good work.”

Challenges and barriers in building these potential partnerships also emerged in the interviews. Limited funding on both ends for libraries and other agencies appears to be a major barrier. P#15 expressed the concern, stating, “Because it’s a small one. It’s out in the rural area, underfunded or very small amount of funds.” P#1 also stated, “You’ll have to have the funds to do collaborations on projects and things like that. I definitely know that fundraising is challenging for the local libraries.” Several participants also pointed out the lack of awareness of what libraries can offer to small businesses and communities.

Discussion and Policy Considerations

Summary of Current and Potential Role of Rural Libraries

To summarize, the study identified roles that rural libraries play in supporting small business and career development. First, rural libraries provide access to information resources (e.g., books, flyers, databases) for business development and career advancement. Second, rural libraries offer classes, workshops, and trainings helpful for business development and career advancement. Third, rural libraries and librarians help people connect with other human resources and advocate for small businesses in their communities. Yet, it is important to note that most participants use libraries for general information needs, not actively for small business or career development. Hence, the current role of rural libraries in supporting small business and career development appears to be limited. Findings from librarians’ survey responses aligned with interviewees’ experiences. The study shows several factors contributing to the current limited role of libraries in small business and career development, including limited budget and staff, lack of knowledge of business development among staff, and perceived lack of pertinent resources for small businesses among residents.

As shown in the findings, small business owners and residents need development of desired business and workforce skills; business information that was locally relevant, visible, and trustworthy; social networks; improved rural communities; continuing educational opportunities; accessible financial resources; and other incentives for small business and career development. By addressing the needs identified in this study and expanding their services and programs, libraries can become vital hubs for economic growth and community development.

Potential roles of rural libraries to support small business and career development are identified in this study. These potential roles enhanced and enriched existing roles. They are as follows:

- The first role is to provide more business information (industry, market and consumer analysis, advertising), grant opportunities, local information, and rules and regulations.
- The second role is to offer more business classes (e.g., fostering entrepreneurial mindsets, guidance on filing taxes, knowledge on trading options), makerspaces, literature-themed activities, and career trainings for people.
- Third, with the changing information landscape, rural libraries need to enhance their roles as community gathering spaces. Libraries have the capacity to create social hubs for networking, small business support groups, co-working spaces, and community events.
- Next, libraries could potentially play a stronger role in connecting people with experts and resources.
- Lastly, libraries could potentially play a role in promoting small businesses through support for incubating business ideas, offering space for business classes and workshops, and promoting local businesses through library events and resources.

Overall, rural libraries have the potential to play a much larger role in supporting small businesses and career development in rural communities.

Recommendations for the Distinct Role of Rural Libraries

Findings of this study suggest several distinct roles of rural libraries in supporting small business and career development.

Central Information Hubs

Public libraries across Pennsylvania offer internet access to all patrons (Office of Commonwealth Libraries, Bureau of Library Development, 2022). This connectivity can be critical for rural entrepreneurs and job seekers, providing them with essential information resources to thrive in the digital age. In addition, rural libraries complement dedicated organizations such as SBDCs through providing locally relevant resources and ensuring easy access for their communities. Rural libraries should leverage their presence and established trust within communities to become a first “go-to” place for information, resources, and network building for small businesses, job seekers, and residents. More importantly, rural libraries should curate resources and programs specific to the local economy, industries, and challenges faced by local community members, which may not be available in organizations such as SCORE or SBDC.

Being the central “go-to” place for information also means that rural libraries should collaborate with these existing resources like PA One-Stop Shop and SBDC to know what information, databases, and resources they offer, so libraries can refer patrons to utilize those resources. This effort will benefit both rural residents and these existing organizations, increasing people’s awareness of what resources are available. In this role, rural libraries become a more active member in advocating for policies and initiatives that support rural economic development and entrepreneurship at the local, state, and national levels.

Rural libraries can provide a distinct role by enhancing their existing strengths as information-rich institutions. Particularly, rural libraries should expand their access to business-related resources (either human or information resources), partner with local businesses and organizations to curate relevant content, and network with local entrepreneurs and experts.

Community Social Hubs

Another recommendation for the distinct role of rural libraries is to enhance their role of creating a community gathering space where people can come in for a business book club or a spot for business owners just to come and gather and talk to each other.

Business Incubation and Innovation Hubs

Rural libraries should embrace the maker movement in library communities to provide communities a space for hands-on creativity, incubation of business ideas, and networking with like-minded people. While many libraries in urban areas have opened makerspaces and provided access to tools and technologies (e.g., 3D printers, vinyl cutters, sewing machines) that people may otherwise not have access to, rural libraries can meet this potential with necessary funds and supports. This role may foster a culture of innovation within rural communities.

Recommendations for Library Budgets and Programming

Rural libraries have the capacity to play a crucial role in addressing the needs of small business owners and residents. Derived from the findings, the study provides the following recommendations for annual library expenditures. It is also important to note that while funding is not the only solution, it serves as a critical first step to address challenges rural libraries have experienced.

- Allocate funds for curating business information and local community information in various formats.
- Allocate funds for providing trainings and acquiring learning resources 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 as 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 support for librarians and library staff to engage in ongoing professional development.
- Provide incentives for librarians to go beyond library communities and seek partnerships with local and regional organizations that support small business, career development, and rural economic development.

- Provide incentives and support for librarians 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 Next Five-Year Plan for the Commonwealth Libraries

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed 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 might curate a list of resources on grants that support starting a small business.
- 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 the incubation of 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

The potential roles of rural libraries identified in this study can potentially inform amendments to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in several ways:

- WIOA should 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 and leveraging libraries' role 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 and capacities of rural libraries as community hubs and support their development in this role with funding to transform library spaces and upgrade technologies needed for the incubation of business and innovation ideas.

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Appendix 1



Connecting the dots: Rural public libraries as partners for small business and rural workforce growth

INFORMED CONSENT

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KEY INFORMATION

Library administrators and library staff are invited to participate in a grant research project funded by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Each library service location is invited to complete one survey. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may stop at any time.

The purpose of the study is to understand resources, programs, services, and partnerships that public libraries provide in supporting small businesses and workforce development. In this study, you will be asked to answer up to 19 survey questions. It is estimated that completing the survey will take about 12 minutes.

The study has no potential risks. As a token of appreciation, respondents who complete the survey will have the opportunity to enter a drawing for one of fifteen \$20 gift cards. Please note that entering the drawing is entirely voluntary and will not affect your ability to participate in the survey. Your response helps ensure that results are representative and the conclusions reflect the views of librarians throughout the Commonwealth. Aggregated results will be shared with members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly who may use them to inform policy or funding.

SECURITY OF DATA

The online study is completely anonymous; you will not be asked to share any information that could identify you. The survey is NOT linked to IP addresses. Individual responses will not be published, only the aggregated data. If you choose to enter the gift card drawing by providing your email address, please rest assured that all information will be handled in a confidential manner to the extent provided by law. Only the principal researcher will have access to your email address, which will be used solely for the purpose of sending you the digital gift card.

Remember, taking part in this study is voluntary. If, while taking the survey, you feel uncomfortable or no longer want to participate, you may stop at any time. To stop taking the survey, you may either: (1) proceed to the last page of the survey and press "Submit," or (2) if you wish to exit the survey, close your browser completely. The PennWest University Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the research records. The study results may be shared in aggregate form at a meeting or journal, but there is no identifiable information to be revealed. The records from this study will be maintained for a minimum of three years after the study is complete.

Information collected for this research will not be used or distributed for inclusion in any future research projects. If you have questions about the research or a research-related injury, you can contact xli@pennwest.edu. If you have a question about your rights as a research participant that you need to discuss with someone, you can contact the [PennWest University Institutional Review Board](#).

By clicking on the "I agree" box and continuing with the survey, you acknowledge that you have read the informed consent and are at least 18 years old. Also, you acknowledge that you agree to participate in the study and have the right not to answer any or all the questions in the survey. Finally, you acknowledge that your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may exit the survey at any time without penalty. If you would like a copy of this informed consent, please print this screen or contact xli@pennwest.edu.

1. Please indicate that you have read this letter of informed consent and agree to participate in this research study by checking yes in the box below.

Yes No



Connecting the dots: Rural public libraries as partners for small business and rural workforce growth

2. Currently, what types of technology services does your library offer that can be used for small business and workforce-related services? Check all that apply.

- Computer(s) with software dedicated to educational, career, job placement or workforce-related skills (e.g., Microsoft Office Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Adobe Photoshop, VLC Media Player, etc.)
- Makerspace with design and creation equipment and materials (e.g., 3D printer, sewing machine)
- Webpage devoted to small businesses and entrepreneurship
- Webpage devoted to job-seeking resources and career education resources and information
- Classes or a one-on-one tech help service to teach digital skills and improve digital literacy
- I don't know
- Other (please specify)



Connecting the dots: Rural public libraries as partners for small business and rural workforce growth

3. Please estimate the percentage of patrons in the past 12 months that your library has supported in their small businesses and entrepreneurial endeavors through library resources, programs, and services.

A horizontal slider scale for estimating the percentage of patrons. The scale is a light gray bar with a white circle on the left and a white square on the right. The bar is marked with "0" at the left end, "50%" in the middle, and "100%" at the right end. The slider is currently positioned at 0%.



Connecting the dots: Rural public libraries as partners for small business and rural workforce growth

4. To your best estimation, how often do you or your staff use the following sources to get information related to small businesses (e.g., market analysis, licenses and permits, business plan development, grants, insurance)?

	Never	Occasionally (a few times a year)	Frequently (a few times a month)	I don't know.
Publicly accessible websites on the Internet without paywalls	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Resources sponsored by Pennsylvania government offices (e.g., POWER Library and SkillUpPA)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other online resources purchased by libraries	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Print or e-books	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other (please specify)



Connecting the dots: Rural public libraries as partners for small business and rural workforce growth

5. What small business related topics has your library covered through classes or programs in the past 12 months? Check all that apply.

- Business planning and strategy (e.g., market research, competitor analysis, and financial planning)
- Marketing and branding (e.g., social media marketing, email marketing, and content creation)
- Financial management for small business (e.g., sources of funding, accounting software, and taxes)
- Small business legal procedures and issues (e.g., business registration, copyright)
- Technology and digital tools (e.g., website design, search engine optimization, and e-commerce)
- Networking events for small business owners and entrepreneurs
- We did NOT provide programs or classes for small businesses
- I don't know
- Other (please specify)



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6. What is the total number of programs or classes related to small businesses that your library has offered to the public in the last 12 months?

A horizontal range slider control. The slider bar is light gray with a white circular knob on the left. The scale is marked with "0" at the left end, "100" in the middle, and "200" at the right end. A small square box is located at the far right end of the slider.



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7. Please identify partnerships, if any, in which your library has engaged to deliver small business-related services in the past 12 months. Check all that apply.

- Local Chamber of Commerce
- Local SBDC (Small Business Development Center) office
- Local SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives) office
- Local businesses
- County or municipal government
- PA Business One-Stop Shop
- AmeriCorps
- Other libraries or library systems or library associations
- My library did NOT engage in any partnerships to deliver small business-related services
- Other (please specify)



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8. In the past 12 months, what have been some of your small business partnership activities?

Check all that apply.

- We meet to discuss how to support local small business and entrepreneurship
- Partner provides the library with funding for small business development (e.g., business planning, marketing, financial management)
- Partner provides small business information and resources to the library
- Partners make referrals to the library
- Partners use library space for small business owners or small business support providers to provide services
- Partner trains library staff about small business resources
- Partner trains library users about small business resources
- Library makes referrals to partner small business owners or small business organizations (e.g., SBDC offices, SCORE offices)
- Library trains partner agency staff about library resources
- Library trains partner agency clients about library resources
- Library works with businesses to create a network for new business owners and entrepreneurs
- I don't know
- Other (please specify)



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9. Please estimate the percentage of patrons in the past 12 months that your library has supported in their employment and career development through library resources, programs, and services.

A horizontal slider scale for estimating percentages. The scale is a light gray bar with a white circle on the left and a white square on the right. The bar is marked with "0" at the left end, "50%" in the middle, and "100%" at the right end. The slider is currently positioned at the 0 mark.



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10. Provide your best estimation of how often you or your staff use the following sources to get information related to careers/occupations, colleges/technical schools, planning for educational expenses (e.g., financial aid), and test preparation support such as high school equivalency diploma, college-entrance or occupational exams.

	Never	Occasionally (a few times a year)	Frequently (a few times a month)	I don't know.
Publicly accessible websites on the Internet without paywalls	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Resources sponsored by Pennsylvania government offices (e.g., POWER Library and SkillUpPA)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other online resources purchased by libraries	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Print or e-books	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>			



Connecting the dots: Rural public libraries as partners for small business and rural workforce growth

11. What workforce development related topics has your library covered through classes or programs in the past 12 months? Check all that apply.

- Careers and occupations
- Colleges, career/technical schools
- Planning for educational expenses (including financial aid)
- English literacy skills
- English as a second language skills
- Soft skills such as on-the-job expectations, conflict resolution, dressing for success
- Specific job skills such as customer service, computer software
- Job search skills such as resume writing or interviewing
- Information about potential employers, companies, and organizations
- Networking events, fairs or expos for employees, workforce agencies and potential employers
- Support for employers seeking workers
- We did NOT provide workforce-related programs or classes.
- I don't know
- Other (please specify)



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12. Use your best estimation, what is the total number of programs or classes related to workforce development that your library has offered to the public in the past 12 months?

A horizontal range slider input field. The scale starts at 0 on the left, with a circular knob positioned at the beginning. The scale has numerical markers at 100 and 200. The slider bar extends to the right, ending in a small square box. The entire slider is contained within a light gray rectangular border.



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13. At which age group(s) are your library workforce and career development programs or classes targeted? Check all that apply.

- Traditional age high school students (ages 14-18)
- Traditional age college students (ages 18-24)
- Adult workforce (ages 25 - 64)
- Seniors (ages 65 and above)
- Our workforce development programs and classes are NOT targeted at any particular age group(s)
- Other (please specify)



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14. Please identify partnerships, if any, in which your library has engaged to support workforce development in the past 12 months. Check all that apply.

- Local Workforce Development Boards
- Local Vocational Rehabilitation Services
- Local businesses
- Local adult education providers that are not a college or technical school (e.g., community centers, online education providers)
- Local literacy organizations
- Local school districts
- Local career or technical schools
- Local community colleges or universities
- Local nonprofits serving low-income people
- County or municipal government
- PA CareerLink Offices
- Veterans groups
- Prisons, work release or probation officers
- Recruiting and hiring companies
- Industry representatives
- Other libraries or library systems or library associations
- My library did NOT engage in any partnerships to support workforce development
- Other (please specify)



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16. What have been the outcomes of your current programs and services for small businesses and workforce development? Check all that apply.

- We had an increased number of attendees at library programs and services for small businesses and entrepreneurs.
- We had an increased number of attendees at library programs and services for job seekers.
- Patrons reported that they were better prepared to open or expand their businesses.
- Patrons reported that they opened or expanded their businesses.
- Patrons reported that they were better prepared for the job market.
- Patrons reported that they found jobs.
- We formed new partnerships with other organizations to support small businesses.
- We formed new partnerships with other organizations to support job seekers and employers.
- Based on my experience, our library is perceived as a primary resource for small businesses.
- Based on my experience, our library is perceived as a primary resource for workforce development.
- I don't know
- Other (please specify)



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18. What services, resources, and support would be most beneficial to improve your library's services to small business and workforce development? Check all that apply.

- More staff time to implement programs
- More earmarked funding
- Better technical services (e.g., faster internet connections, additional computers, 3D printers)
- More information resources (e.g., online database resources, books)
- More staff training and assistance in developing programs and partnerships
- More library building space for programs (e.g., makerspaces)
- Closer relationship with local organizations (e.g., [SBDC](#) centers, [CareerLink](#) offices, [SCORE](#) offices, Chamber of Commerce, business owners, [LWDBs](#), adult education providers)
- I don't know
- Other (please specify)



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19. Identify potential partners that your library has the capacity to work with to deliver programs and services for small businesses and workforce development.



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20. Please select the county in which your library is located.



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THANK YOU

Thank you for taking the time to participate in the survey! As a token of appreciation, respondents who complete the survey will have the opportunity to enter a drawing for one of fifteen \$20 gift cards. This is completely optional, and your responses will remain anonymous. If you would like to enter the drawing, please provide your email address below. Your email will only be used to notify you if you win the gift card and will not be shared with any third parties. Each participant who chooses to enter their email address will be assigned a unique number, and we will use a random number generator to select the winning numbers. The winners will be contacted by email by the end of May. Thank you again for participating in our survey and good luck!

21. Would you like to enter our gift card drawing? If so, please provide your email address below.

Appendix 2

A Comprehensive List of Resources for Rural Libraries

Participants shared a wide range of resources for rural libraries to consider in supporting small businesses and workforce development.

- Economic development and business support:
 - Government agencies:
 - [Small Business Administration \(SBA\)](#): Loans, grants, counseling, and training resources for small businesses.
 - [Small Business Development Center \(SBDC\)](#): Free business consulting, training, and resources for entrepreneurs and small businesses.
 - [Service Corps of Retired Executives \(SCORE\)](#): Free mentoring and business advice from experienced business professionals, and low- or no-cost webinars and online workshops for various business topics.
 - [AmeriCorps](#): Grant programs for community development, youth programs, and volunteer initiatives.
 - [Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development \(DCED\)](#)
 - [Pennsylvania Business One-Stop Shop](#)
 - [Pennsylvania CareerLink](#): Job training and placement services, career counseling, and workforce development programs.
 - Local organizations:
 - Economic Alliance: Collaborations with local businesses and organizations to promote economic growth.
 - Chamber of Commerce: Networking opportunities, business resources, and advocacy for local businesses.
 - Community Foundation: Grants and funding opportunities for local initiatives, including small business development and workforce training.
 - Local businesses: Partnerships for workshops, mentoring programs, and product promotions at the library.
 - Local lawyers and marketing firms: Local services for small businesses in areas like legal advice and marketing.
 - Educational institutions:
 - Local universities, colleges, and technical schools: Workforce development programs, continuing education courses, and partnerships for library programming.
 - Online learning platforms: Coursera, Edx, Udemy, etc., offering a wide range of business and technical courses.
 - Additional resources:
 - [USDA Rural Development](#): Grants and loans for rural businesses and communities.

- [Association for Rural & Small Libraries](#): Resources and best practices for rural libraries.
- [National Federation of Independent Business \(NFIB\)](#): Advocacy and resources for small businesses.
- [Reference and User Services Association Business Reference and Services Section](#)
- [Encyclopedia of Small Business](#)
- [Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs \(DDAP\)](#) (for individuals seeking careers in drug and alcohol rehabilitation services)

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