

Developing Talent in Rural America through Work-based Learning Experiences

By Mike Bartlett & Kimberly Hauge

As rural communities struggle to grow their economies and retain skilled labor, work-based learning experiences such as internships and apprenticeships offer a promising strategy to address workforce talent shortages and connect individuals to in-demand careers. To achieve scale, there are promising actions state policymakers can take to better align existing programs and resources to support economic development and educational attainment in the rural areas of their states.

Introduction: Rural America's Talent Development Challenge

While most urban centers have experienced robust economic growth since the Great Recession, rural areas have seen less growth, or have stagnated, with overall employment levels still below pre-recession levels.¹ Although there are complex reasons why rural regions may lag behind urban regions on this measure, an important contributing factor may be a lack of skilled talent, which can be measured in part by educational attainment. While educational attainment has improved in rural areas, the gap in attainment between urban and rural areas has increased. As of 2013, 51 percent of adults in non-metro communities have a high school diploma or less, compared to 39 percent in metro areas.² Such gaps are brought into sharp focus given the finding of a recent study that 95 percent of jobs created since the recession went to individuals with at least some postsecondary education.³

This attainment gap has implications for employment opportunities available to rural residents. A 2016 survey by the Manpower Group found that 46 percent of employers in the United States had difficulty filling jobs, with a lack of technical and soft skills found to be major barriers to meeting those needs.⁴ While these “skill shortages” affect both rural and urban areas, rural communities are less able to meet the need for skilled talent. As jobs in industries, from health care to manufacturing, increasingly require more skilled labor, communities that lack skilled talent in critical occupations can see reduced economic opportunities for their residents, and ultimately experience challenges to retaining and attracting businesses that rely on educated workers.

States have recognized the connection between economic competitiveness and educational attain-

ment and have responded with efforts to improve the access to, and the affordability of, postsecondary education. Rural communities often face specific challenges to strengthening postsecondary education, including funding disparities, fewer community colleges or community-based organizations focused on training or difficulty retaining skilled educators.⁵ Furthermore, when graduates are unable to connect their degree or program of study to a job in their community, they are less likely to remain in that community.⁶

While there is no single solution to these issues for rural communities, work-based learning—the connection of structured education with on-the-job learning—is a promising strategy that could address some of these challenges. State investment in and support for internships, apprenticeships, co-ops and other types of work-based learning can simultaneously support a state's goals for educational attainment and economic development in a way that is adaptable to the needs of rural communities. While there is a need for further research on this topic, states' experiences with work-based learning provide promising options to address specific barriers in rural communities.⁷

What is Work-based Learning and How Does it Build Talent?

Work-based learning is the connection of work and education experiences that help individuals advance along their career pathway. In practice, work-based learning represents a continuum of activities, including work experience, internships, co-ops, apprenticeships and on-the-job training. Partnerships between businesses and educational or training institutions provide authentic work experiences paired with relevant structured learning activities.⁸ For businesses, work-based learning is a

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

proven strategy for building a talent pipeline that meets their current and future workforce needs, reduces turnover and enhances their bottom line.⁹ For students and workers, work-based learning brings curriculum to life and provides the opportunity to develop skills that improve their educational outcomes and ultimately better connect them to jobs and economic prosperity.¹⁰ In addition to these benefits, work-based learning can potentially address several challenges unique to rural communities:

- **Supporting rural businesses:** Retaining talent can be an acute challenge for rural employers given the aging population and stagnant population growth for many rural areas.¹¹ Company-sponsored work-based learning can provide a way for rural businesses to meet their talent needs.
- **Meeting the needs of rural workers and students:** Compared to urban areas, rural communities have more job opportunities that require some postsecondary education but less than a four-year degree.¹² These “middle-skill” jobs can often be filled through work-based learning experiences such as apprenticeships or on-the-job training in partnership with local educational institutions. In addition to training the future workforce, adult workers can benefit from upgrading their skills to advance to better positions or reconnect to the labor market. Work-based learning supports learning and earning at the same time—an attractive alternative for older workers in rural communities and for individuals who cannot afford to attend school full-time.
- **Supporting rural education infrastructure:** The promotion of work-based learning also supports local schools and community colleges, which often play leadership and intermediary roles in rural areas. Many of these public institutions already are well equipped to support work-based learning and have connections to local businesses. By becoming involved in the integration of work-based learning into education programs, this strengthens educational institutions’ connections to their local economies.

How Can States Support Work-based Learning in Rural Communities?

Given the potential of work-based learning to strengthen state and regional economies, states have a role and interest in implementing policies and initiatives that “seed the environment” for locally-led work-based learning to take root and

flourish. States can also support and strengthen partnerships between economic development, education and workforce systems to better align state-level resources and programs to develop demand-driven work-based learning opportunities. Four strategies emerge from relevant research and the experiences of several states discussed in the 2016 National Governors Association, or NGA, Center for Best Practices publication *State Strategies to Scale Quality Work-Based Learning*.¹³ States can consider these strategies as they address specific challenges rural areas face in scaling work-based learning opportunities.

1. Find and share what’s already working for rural areas:

While there are examples of work-based learning partnerships in many rural communities, they often operate in isolation or are disconnected from other programs or local institutions, making it difficult to capture and share the knowledge and best practices from these partnerships. Governors and state agencies are well-positioned due to their statewide perspective to identify and elevate rural work-based learning programs and disseminate information to rural communities about how other similar areas have implemented workable solutions. In Iowa, the governor’s STEM Advisory Council gives annual awards to strong partnerships between businesses and schools, including work-based learning programs, with several of those being in rural communities.¹⁴ These programs are featured at annual meetings and on the governor’s website as best practices, which includes program contact information and communication tools.

2. Reduce barriers in funding and policy:

One barrier rural communities may face in scaling work-based learning is difficulty accessing funding through statewide pilots or grants. State programs designed to support such efforts may be less accessible to rural communities due to grant requirements that require minimum grant amounts, favor more densely populated areas to achieve greater impact, or cumbersome application processes that favor those with more resources to expend on the application process.¹⁵ To address these challenges, states may consider lowering minimum funding amounts or reviewing urban and rural grants separately.

Recognizing that such barriers vary considerably from community to community, listening to rural

communities articulate their specific barriers or challenges is critical. For example, in Minnesota, the governor's Workforce Development Board conducted meetings with business and education partners in three different regions to discuss workforce shortages and the impact on the community. Two of the regions are primarily rural. These meetings resulted in identifying key barriers, building trust and establishing the structure needed to bring together local partners to work on local solutions with support from the state.¹⁶

3. Leverage technology to improve access:

As work in many fields becomes increasingly digitized, students and individuals in rural communities have a new opportunity to use technology to access work-based learning opportunities. Some states are launching virtual work-based learning programs that allow rural students and businesses to participate despite geographical limitations. For example, West Virginia launched a Simulated Workplace Program in 2013 that allows students to acquire in-demand workplace skills despite limited on-site opportunities in their communities.¹⁷ This program was designed and launched in response to industry demand for programs that build in-demand skills in rural communities.

Technology can also increase access to policymakers and provide an avenue for rural communities to have their voices heard in shaping the goals, objectives and strategies for scaling work-based learning. State officials participating in an NGA Center policy academy on this topic found that the perspective of rural businesses, schools and other stakeholders may be left out because of the time commitment and cost of travel to participate in meetings and strategic planning. Washington is addressing this concern as part of a governor's Work-Based Learning Summit by hosting the event in 24 virtual sites across the state. The virtual sites will provide those who are unable to travel to the state capitol with the opportunity to watch the event live and, more importantly, participate in facilitated conversations.

4. Target resources and incentives:

Smaller companies are more prevalent in rural communities, and they often struggle to set up and operate work-based learning programs because of the up-front costs of program development.¹⁸

States can help businesses by providing incentives or technical assistance to overcome specific barriers. This assistance can be monetary or non-monetary, such as tax credits, grants, train-the-trainer courses or the provision of liability and insurance protection for work-based learning participants. For example, 12 states and territories offer tax credits to employers for hiring apprentices: Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Guam, Louisiana, Missouri, Nevada, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.¹⁹ States can also bring together groups of small businesses or community colleges to act as intermediaries to reduce the program development burden on businesses.

In areas where work-based learning opportunities are limited, states can provide incentives to education institutions to spur their active involvement. For example, in September 2016 the Indiana Department of Education used federal funds to provide career and technical education, or CTE, grants to 15 CTE districts and four post-secondary institutions to support the development or expansion of work-based learning programs specifically targeting rural areas.²⁰ To ensure the long-term impact of work-based learning for students and workers, states can also support rural communities as they develop and expand the use of credentialing systems. Community colleges often lead this effort. States may need to provide additional support to these leading credentialing institutions in rural areas because of increased concerns regarding access, cost and volume.²¹

Conclusion

While there is no single solution to address the talent and educational attainment needs of rural communities, work-based learning is a promising strategy states can explore to address rural communities' challenges in preparing a skilled workforce. While more research specific to rural areas is needed, the work-based learning model holds promise for meeting the specific needs of business, students and adults in rural areas. Several states are implementing statewide work-based learning strategies that include specific approaches to address the concerns of rural communities, and these strategies could be adapted by other states.

Notes

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¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹See i.

¹²Young, Justin R. *Middle-Skill Jobs Remain More Common Among Rural Workers*. Issue brief no. 63. Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire. Spring 2013. Accessed March 7, 2017. <http://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1195&context=carsey>.

¹³See viii.

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¹⁵Tom Vilsack. Tom Vilsack to White House Rural Council, October 5, 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/images/Rural%20Policy%20Learnings%20Memo.pdf>.

¹⁶State of Minnesota. Governor’s Workforce Development Board. *Minnesota Momentum: Aligning Opportunities and Resources for Minnesota’s Workforce*. 2017. Accessed March 7, 2017. http://mn.gov/deed/assets/gwdb-annual-report_tcm1045-276827.pdf.

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