

Connecting 'Entrepreneurial Enablers' Who Strengthen Communities

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KEYWORDS: Entrepreneurship, Higher Education, Economic Development.

In recent decades, the U.S. has experienced significant economic shifts as changes occur in technology, globalization and other societal trends. These economic changes have affected different areas of the country in different ways. For instance, many cities are thriving and enjoying the benefits of rapid growth and low unemployment due to the agglomeration effects of concentrated industry and labor market development. But many non-urban regions are having a harder time.

Many rural communities face not only this agglomeration issue but also other challenges rooted in human capital and the perception of opportunity. In the rural Midwest, for example, many young people with the education and expertise to make a difference (i.e. to serve as catalysts for economic change or new business development in their communities) leave to seek career and/or financial support for their ideas in more urban areas. This creates challenges for the "economic enablers": the economic development professionals working to foster business growth in non-urban regions. Enablers often find themselves frustrated with their lack of ability to influence this economic slide, and may doubt their ability to take calculated risks when making decisions about how the region can support emerging entrepreneurs.

It is against this backdrop that we organized a statewide conference connecting entrepreneurial enablers from across Minnesota. This article presents key findings and lessons learned from the experience.

Background

In 2015, the University of Minnesota Extension evaluated 10 entrepreneurship programs offered at other universities, with the goal of developing an entrepreneurship service program as part of its own community economics suite of services. The purpose was to identify potential Extension programming models that nurture, establish, connect and proactively support

innovative and entrepreneurial thinking among local businesses, residents and area youth. Some of the programs we studied were designed as fee-for-service coaching programs, while others offered free tools and resources entrepreneurs could access. Michigan State University's Extension model, in particular, provides programming related to community capacity building, especially support for community leaders who need tools and resources that foster entrepreneurial peer-to-peer environments within their communities.

The Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities (CEC) conference model was developed to offer those interested in supporting entrepreneurial development in their town an opportunity to network and share ideas. Conference sessions are offered during a two-day learning environment in venues throughout the host community. The event is unique in that it seeks host communities with a population of less than 10,000, to recognize efforts being made outside the urban hubs that are typically the center of entrepreneurial ecosystem development.

A two-day conference model encourages participants to share best practices, network, and build relationships with one another. Participants are also encouraged to share the successes and challenges they have faced as community leaders striving to establish entrepreneurial ecosystems in their communities. Our first conference took place in September 2019 and we expect to hold others annually in different entrepreneurial communities throughout the state of Minnesota.

The event

In 2019, University of Minnesota Extension, along with its statewide conference steering committee and local planning team, implemented Minnesota's first Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities (CEC) conference September 5-6 in Waseca, Minnesota. It



drew 142 leaders, stakeholders, decision makers, entrepreneurs, community champions and economic development professionals. Most participants were entrepreneurship enablers -- from local governments, local or regional non-profits, the for-profit sector and state or federal agencies. Conference presenters included entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial service providers operating in southern Minnesota and, in some cases, statewide.

The conference was modeled after a similar conference hosted by Michigan State University Extension since 2007. The UMN model is different because it has a statewide steering committee to help select the host community and plan and promote the conference. Another difference is that the Minnesota model has partnered with the Carlson School of Management to evaluate the long-term impacts of the inaugural conference.

Participants learned about programs that support entrepreneurship in Minnesota, including the following: BizLink North, Rochester Community and Technical Colleges' business start-up program, the FEAST Initiative of Renewing the Countryside, the FDIC's Moneysmart Program for Small Businesses, the KCEO program and several others. In these workshops participants learned about the inroads being made by each enabling organization to support entrepreneurs in the south central region of Minnesota. Each workshop was also prefaced by a brief introduction to the hosting business so participants had the opportunity to learn about their role and story in Waseca. During panel discussions some businesses were also able to provide more in-depth storytelling in different content areas. The content tracks for the inaugural conference included: Food & Agritourism, Gain & Retain Entrepreneurs, and Creative Re-use & Innovation.

Keynote speakers included Amanda Brinkman of Deluxe Corporation, a small business marketing company, and Tom Smude of Smude Enterprises, LLC. Brinkman discussed the role her Hulu show, *Small Business Revolution*, plays in revitalizing small businesses across the United States. Smude provided an overview of his business development and the resources his team used to grow the company. Participants attended breakout sessions at local businesses in downtown Waseca. Some of these locations included Awaken Vibrance, Trio-Coffee, Wine and Ale House, The Park Co-Working Space, and the

First National Bank of Waseca.

Creative collaborations

Conference planning was led by University of Minnesota Extension but engaged more than 20 individuals from the host community and organizations active in supporting entrepreneurs. Both the conference steering committee and the local planning team actively designed the program and promoted the event. Eight organizations also stepped forward as sponsors.

Additionally, faculty at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management expressed interest in evaluating the event. Extension staff are working with strategic management and entrepreneurship faculty at the Carlson School to implement an evaluation research plan for the 2019 conference that addresses the following aspects of entrepreneurial ecosystem development:

- Changes to the participants' sense of self-efficacy;
- The changes in connectivity between regional entrepreneurship enablers following participation in the conference;
- Follow-through by participants on implementation of new ideas learned at the conference; and
- Analysis of any changes in a basic set of entrepreneurship metrics, like number of new patents or new businesses established within participant communities post conference participation.

Initial Feedback

Participants' evaluation of the conference revealed their most valuable takeaways from the event. Notable feedback included the following:

- "Wonderful! Thoughtfully planned with engaging sessions and time for informal networking."
- "Most of the sessions were very practical—there were a ton of great resources available, but not enough people know about them!"
- "Session 4 at the Trio. I enjoyed listening to the story of the owners of Trio. It's nice to hear the real life experiences [of entrepreneurs]."
- "There are a lot of unique businesses downtown that were fun to see."

- “One of the best economic development conferences I attended!”

Lessons learned

The planning team learned several important lessons from hosting Minnesota’s inaugural Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities conference. These lessons included the following:

- Ensure conference venues are easily accessible and do not include special or automated building security measures. In Waseca, two facilities had such measures, which made access to the buildings cumbersome for participants.
- Highlight the value of having more entrepreneurs present at the conference rather than only service providers. Participants view presentations by actual entrepreneurs as both a powerful motivator and inspiration for their work as service providers. These type of presentations also serve as helpful resources on the technicalities of starting a business.
- In post-conference evaluations, attendees recommended having a more diverse set of entrepreneurs and service providers discuss what entrepreneurship means to them coming from a sub-culture within Minnesota.
- Other attendees asked for more workshops on how to market communities to entrepreneurs, how to build collaborative coalitions within communities, and more fiscal resources for local communities.
- Allow ample time for networking opportunities. Based on conference evaluations, participants valued additional time to connect with one another on workshop topics or with presenters to ask additional follow-up questions.

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[How Cities and Regions Can Become Thriving Entrepreneurial Hubs](https://eiexchange.com/content/77-how-cities-and-regions-can-become-thriving-entrepreneurial-hubs)
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Additional Search Terms: economic development, regional growth, conferences, helping small cities and towns become economically stronger, attracting business