

**Building Rural Libraries and Communities:  
White Paper Summary of a Statewide Meeting**

*January 30, 2008*

*East Peoria, IL*

**By Felix Chu and Timothy Collins**

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## **Introduction**

Rural counties in Illinois lag behind metro counties in most measures of economic prosperity and development, whether measured by employment growth, sales, or population change. Secondary school graduates often migrate to metro areas in search of higher education and better employment opportunities. Salary expectations associated with a college degree typically cannot be met in rural areas, so these students are unable to return to their home towns after college. This loss of potential workers makes rural areas less competitive in luring major employers, especially in a highly competitive globalized economy. Without high-paying wages, some small communities in rural areas can enter into a long-term downward economic spiral.

Low-cost housing in small rural communities also may attract poor residents and others with relatively few marketable skills. Many communities are attracting minority populations, including Hispanics with English as a second language, making them less attractive for traditional jobs. However, these new residents may also represent a prime source of entrepreneurs since they have access to markets and preferences that are not known by the primarily white business communities.

The economic development literature has shifted in the past decade from a focus on industrial recruitment to a greater emphasis on entrepreneurship. The main question, then, is how to increase employment opportunities, including self-employment, in rural areas to help them attract or retain more gainfully employed residents. Entrepreneurship programs focus on creating a culture or environment in which residents are willing to risk starting or investing in new businesses, some of which rely on the Internet to market their products and services. These types of businesses offer hope for revitalizing rural communities.

Entrepreneurship, especially during an “information age,” requires that potential entrepreneurs have access to relevant materials for researching and starting businesses as well as educational programming that encourages them to consider business careers at an early age. Policymakers now also recognize the value of an Open-source Entrepreneurship approach in which networking and collaboration are especially important in developing successful ventures (Chojnowski, 2006).

## **Project Background**

The global information age offers rural libraries the chance to take the lead in assisting citizens, business leaders, and public officials in building their communities. **Building Rural Libraries and Communities** is a pilot program funded with an LSTA grant through the Illinois State Library to build on and create a sustainable virtual network of resource providers and to inform local librarians and board members about opportunities to provide crucial information and leadership for local community and economic development in lagging areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this White Paper are adapted from a concept paper drafted by Norm Walzer, Director Emeritus of the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Chu is a professor of Western Illinois University Libraries. Collins is assistant director of the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs.

Libraries are especially well-positioned to provide a setting for this networking and collaboration to occur, if promoting entrepreneurship is a priority of the local library. In rural areas, many entrepreneurship materials may already be in the public library or are available through the worldwide web, interlibrary loan, and agencies such as the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA), university libraries, and other sources. Access to databases, magazines, book collections, networking seminars, and educational programs and materials from Small Business Development Centers, Entrepreneurship Centers, the IIRA web page, state development agencies, and other organizations provide an excellent start for providing information for business promotion—one that does not often now exist in smaller rural communities, especially for minority and poor populations.

The project builds on earlier work in rural Illinois (Walzer 1994; Walzer and Gruidl 1996; and Walzer, Stott, and Sutton, 2000) which surveyed public libraries in an attempt to help local libraries position themselves as community information sources to reverse community decline and stagnation. This study assessed the problem, but did not create a sustained network. Just as public libraries have been vital to the education of the masses, we believe rural public libraries are vital to rural community and economic development. In lagging communities, the public library is often one of the few services these areas support as families leave for better opportunities in metropolitan areas. For this reason, the importance and potential of rural libraries will continue to increase in the future if they are well-prepared for the challenge of building a community culture that sustains entrepreneurship and other important community development activities.

At present, there is no single local source of rural community and economic development information. As community information leaders, however, rural librarians can, with understanding of the issues and solid support, guide both youths and adults to trustworthy community and economic development resources. Along with school librarians and other stakeholders, they can take an active role in conversations crucial to the future of their communities. Networking of resources will provide a more cost effective and efficient information resource for rural community and economic development, at the same time linking into wider Illinois State Library efforts to improve access to information and services.

Economic gardening (Hamilton-Pennell, 2007), is an approach to economic development that establishes deep roots in a community. It does not emphasize recruiting (hunting) for established businesses or industries, and offering them possible incentives. Economic gardening tries to establish a community culture or environment that nurtures the growth of local companies. With this approach, a community acquires assets, builds the infrastructure, and establishes connections from within to support entrepreneurial ventures.

### **Project Goals**

The **Building Rural Libraries and Communities** pilot program is designed to

- help rural public librarians learn about successful best practices used elsewhere;
- provide tools and train rural librarians to become more knowledgeable about resources to facilitate local community and economic development;
- build a regional consortium of library consultants, local librarians, and community agencies to support community enhancement initiatives, including WIU Libraries, Alliance Library Systems (ALS), IIRA, and the Western Illinois Entrepreneurship Center (WIEC) to:
  - provide pilot training programs to build capacity to respond more effectively to queries about entrepreneurship and community development;
  - promote rural libraries as crucial access points for information needed to support effective public and private develop decisions.

- enhance rural libraries' roles as local public spaces to hold meetings, educational training, and other activities related to community development and building a culture for entrepreneurship.
- provide two-way video capabilities to enhance the libraries' internet capacity for the librarians and their patrons.

For librarians statewide, the project ultimately will:

- expose librarians to best practices of libraries engaged in community and economic development through a one-day statewide professional development seminar and web-based training materials;
- provide high-quality, web-based educational and reference resources about community development, offering libraries a major window to the “outside world” in terms of information, technical assistance, and other resources, with a primary focus on entrepreneurship in the context of community development.

Through research-based knowledge, training, and local marketing efforts, along with backing from web-based resources, the 10 selected libraries are to expand their role as a public space to promote sustainable community and economic development, especially among minorities, poor residents, and recent immigrants. The libraries are to take an active role in addressing the declining economies in their communities and stand to benefit directly by marshalling local support for development to sustain themselves and their communities, including underserved populations.

This project does *not* make local libraries directly responsible for community and economic development. It leverages collaboration by WIU Libraries, ALS, IIRA, WIEC, and local business development organizations to build the capacity of libraries as efficient providers of quality materials to their patrons.

### **Statewide Meeting Summary**

On January 30, 2008, the **Building Rural Libraries and Communities** grant consortium held a statewide meeting at the Alliance Library System headquarters in East Peoria. More than 80 librarians, economic developers, and consortium representatives attended the session, which introduced participants to services available from IIRA, the concept of economic gardening, and the request for participation in the pilot program. An underlying goal of the meeting was to understand libraries' needs and opportunities in terms of staffing, current activities, and opportunities to develop a culture of entrepreneurship in their communities. Participants took part in a lunchtime roundtable and filled out an evaluation. Results of the discussions and evaluation results are summarized below.

### **Lunch Discussion Questions**

1. What economic problems and opportunities do you see in your community? In what ways could the library become a vital partner in community/economic development for both the short and the long term?

It is apparent that economic problems center on the lack of jobs or the lack of good-paying jobs. Contributing to this are employers leaving town for various reasons, including competition from abroad. In this climate of no growth or limited growth, the tax base that supports libraries is not expanding. Contributing to this may be tax caps such as those due to the Property Tax Extension Limitation Law (PTELL) which is “designed to limit the increases in property tax extensions (total taxes billed) for non-home rule taxing districts,” or space limitations for expansion due to surrounding farm lands and zoning regulations. Coupled to these economic problems are issues directly related to a viable workforce. These

include available and affordable housing, continuing education needs, and transportation to job sites. Libraries, often perceived as “neutral” sites, can be involved in improving the climate for economic growth.

To take advantage of opportunities, libraries need to ensure a broader base of community involvement. Factors to foster this growth environment include the involvement of community leaders, both elected and non-elected. Long-term community sustainability depends on exposing young people to this process. Other factors include demographic variables such as immigration and single-parent families, the need for literacy, including English as a Second Language training, and continuing education for improving job skills.

Community involvement includes partnering with public entities such as city governments, chambers of commerce, and local economic development offices. Issues to be explored may include zoning requirements, building and space needs, or taxing issues due to PTELL which limits property tax increases. Social and private organizations may include the local Rotary chapter or the Polytalk program, which provides language interpreting services by volunteers.

Libraries can work with community leaders and library patrons. These include the city or county government, chambers of commerce, local economic development office, or other appropriate agencies. To get the information out about what libraries can do, libraries must cultivate working relationships with local media and other organizations such as Farm Bureau, senior citizens centers, daycare centers, or schools. Libraries can also provide basic information such as checklists for new businesses that include basic steps and contact information, for example, to city offices. Other materials can describe local needs, niche markets, how to advertise, or basic business principles.

Services that libraries can provide include Internet access to find out about job openings, information about employers, or fill out application forms. Improvement in this area may include wireless network and laptops for check-out to allow better use of space. In partnering with city/county organizations, libraries can provide meeting space and host workshops or information fairs, particularly about local businesses that people do not know about. Existing services that libraries may need include the “Polytalk Program” who provides volunteer language interpretation services. This is particularly important in the globalization of commerce. The intent is for the local library to become a conduit between local entrepreneurs and information and resources. One outcome may be for a community to grow its own entrepreneurs.

2. What individuals and/or organizations have you worked with already to support community development?

Answers varied by location. Some libraries are already working with their local Chambers of Commerce, economic developers, and other government agencies. Other organizations mentioned include Farm Bureau, historical societies, day care centers, senior citizens groups, Rotary club, University of Illinois Extension and other educational institutions, and historical societies. One library is also working with Hispanic Rural Health Committee. Also named were Service Corps of Retired Executives or Counselors to America’s Small Business (SCORE) and Next Generation. SCORE, a national nonprofit association, is dedicated to entrepreneur education and the formation, growth and success of small businesses. Project Next Generation makes recent technologies available to students who have limited access to computers.

3. If you consider these individuals and/or organizations as your primary stakeholders, who are other potential stakeholders in your community you want to partner with?

While some libraries already work with the organizations mentioned above, it is certainly not true for all libraries. The same agencies and offices are also named by other libraries as potential stakeholders. In addition, there are the non-elected officials and community leaders, and local businesses that don't participate in community events, particularly new businesses. There are also newer groups in some of the communities such as Hispanic children and families. For many libraries, there is a need to find out about stakeholders and get the information out through partnering with local media, using YouTube, or relying on non-elected community leaders.

4. What suggestions can you offer to Alliance, IIRA, and WIU Libraries to support your library in working with your community for both the short and the long term?

A conference such as this is a resource. Perhaps this can become an annual event. This, however, does not take the place of other avenues to disseminate information such as email targeted at specific sub-groups, workshops at locations that can better serve libraries in the southern part of ALS, or newsletters with calendar of events. These workshops can also be targeted at specific groups or topics. Where possible, background reading and other information should be made available before the scheduled events. Attending events in person has benefits that video or audio conferences cannot bring across. Alliance, IIRA, and WIU Libraries can help by making people aware of relevant information, providing opportunities for networking, and offering workshops for both librarians and board members on implementing new ideas and acquiring core collections of business reference resources. Continuing education may be targeted to the use of Web resources and communicating with people in appropriate agencies and offices who may hold resources and expertise. Help is also needed in developing Web pages targeted at library users who need basic information that outline steps in starting a new business. Librarians should be encouraged to attend meetings of local economic development groups. Many of these workshops or meetings may take the form of "train the trainers" so one librarian can train other librarians and staff.

5. Given what you have heard today what next steps might you take to be a full participant in community/economic development?

There are three areas in which libraries may take part. They involve matters internal to the library, communicating with the outside community concerning library services, and partnering with community and other outside agencies. As a follow up, conference attendees were given a postcard to list goals. These were to be mailed back later to each person as a reminder for participation in the economic development of their communities.

The most important suggestion is continuing education for librarians and library staff to help them realize the importance of the services they can provide to local businesses. These include learning more about the community, such as basic demographic information, existing and projected needs of businesses, and mechanisms for sharing that information with users. One option is to build a database of local and home-based businesses in the community. Another is to make spaces and services more available, such as meeting spaces for businesses and broadband for Internet access. Care must be taken in scheduling so library events do not conflict with community events.

To make sure that the availability of services is known within the community, a library can produce brochures highlighting resources available to businesses. To make the information more relevant, a library can examine the mission statements of local businesses to better target and frame the available resources in reaching out to these businesses. Also to be considered are business fairs and roundtable discussions for business leaders. Both are mechanisms not only to make everyone aware of the range of

businesses available and sharing ideas, but more importantly for libraries to understand what is needed and formats for the delivery of resources and services. Another option for communication with the community is for librarians and library board members to serve on community committees, be involved with the chamber of commerce, and hosting local events such as agricultural education activities. Also available are tools such as WebJunction or other sites for online communities to promote the local library and create coalition with other libraries and industries.

In trying to establish services for libraries, it is necessary to keep the lines of communication open with IIRA, WIU Libraries and ALS. Use what they can offer and make library needs known. It is also necessary to contact other state and regional agencies such as Illinois Entrepreneurship Network (IEN), Illinois Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) and Economic Development Council (EDC). One option for creating a library community may be to schedule regional library tours as community events, including meeting board members, mayors, or other community leaders.

### **Conference Evaluation**

The evaluation form has two parts (Appendix). The first is a set of ten statements for which conference attendees chose a value between 1 and 5, 1 for Strongly Disagree to 5 for Strongly Agree. The second part is for comments relating to the conference topic. Out of 46 forms, 27 are from librarians or other library employees, 11 from non-librarians, and 8 with no indication.

The means for the total population range from a low of 4.22 to a high of 4.71, meaning that there is generally strong agreement with all statements. When those means are broken down for librarians and non-librarians, the range is from 4.07 to 4.78 for librarians and 4.45 to 4.73 for non-librarians. Statistical testing, however, indicates no statistically significant difference between the means from the two groups for each statement.

The strongest agreement among librarians is for statement 5 (Investment of public dollars on libraries produces a positive return). For non-librarians, the strongest agreement is for statements 4 (Supporting libraries is an indirect cost of doing business and contributes to business and community climate) and 7 (Helping businesses can produce a larger tax base for supporting libraries). Statement 9 (I have a better understanding of strategies for community economic development in a rural environment) also shows strong agreement for non-librarians.

Statements with bigger disagreements for librarians are 7 (Helping businesses can produce a larger tax base for supporting libraries) and 10 (have a better understanding of how libraries can support local businesses). For non-librarians, statement 3 (Libraries can help in improving the local workforce for community economic development) shows disagreement.

So it is reasonable to say that both librarians and economic developers agree that librarians have a role to play in local economic development. While librarians agree that libraries produce a good return on investment (statement 4), they have difficulty relating to producing a larger tax base (statement 7) when local development succeeds. The non-librarians understand this indirect aspect of the process.

These preliminary observations are also reflected in the written comments. Librarians seem to be looking for directly applicable procedures or templates. For example, one comment was for more case studies and further exploration on how libraries can help, especially in agribusiness. Another cited the conference as encouragement to “sitting at the table” for community affairs. Non-librarians, however, see the presentations as “very practical,” but perhaps going into more detail than librarians can or want to absorb, thus being “overwhelmed.”

### **Issues for Further Exploration**

Among issues identified during the lunch discussions and in the evaluations, many involve broadening discussions between librarians and community leaders on the future of their communities. Tasks such as initiating or continuing dialogues between librarians and economic developers require time commitments and local resources such as meeting spaces. This also applied to organizing staff development sessions. To further interactions, financial resources are needed for materials and technology for programs such as production of brochures, business fairs, workshops, or other outreach endeavors. Resources are also needed for networking, especially with external agencies. Examples include ALS, IIRA or WIU support in Web design, newsletters, system-wide workshops or annual conferences.

Taking a brief view of “gardening” in “economic gardening,” one begins to realize connections and relationships that may not be apparent. In order to prepare the community bed for gardening, foremost is to prepare the soil and ensure continuous sources for water and other nutrients. Thus the basic infrastructure such as a tax base for long-term financial health, personnel to till the soil, and communications channels such as broadband for Internet access to aerate the soil cannot be overlooked. Given the local environment such as climate and soil, the type of plants or businesses that can thrive is limited. Recruiting an outside business will not work if it requires a different environment to flourish. One may then think about niche markets as those plants that will thrive in the local environment, provided it is not considered a “weed” in the marketplace. Community relations may then be viewed as establishing pathways among individual garden spots so that all parts may be reached and maintained. Starting a new business is like starting a garden spot. Whoever is responsible must learn to prepare the soil and tend the garden so it becomes productive. Then the person must market the product to return some resources for the next cycle. The final point is to realize that the garden will change according to environmental changes.

### **Recommendations**

- Comments from librarians and economic developers suggest the need to open and improve communications between the two groups. This presents an opportunity for the State Library and the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) to work more closely to:
  - Disseminate information in communities throughout the state
  - Coordinate meetings between directors of library systems, regional DCEO offices, and Small Business Development Centers to open channels for exchanging information and ideas about disseminating information
  - Sponsor statewide or regional conferences on the relationships between libraries and community economic development to share experiences and build networks for the two groups
- The new website dedicated to economic development resources for librarians needs to be enhanced to include a gateway for economic developers and entrepreneurs. This can be accomplished by studying ways to blend the State’s small business portal and the librarians’ site into a seamless access point.
- The State Library can provide increased economic and community development resources for librarians and their patrons by increasing its holdings of on-line databases and reference materials. These references also could be of value to DCEO field staff.

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Appendix

**Libraries and Community Economic Development  
January 30, 2008**

Library/Municipality:

Title:

**Please rate the following statements on a 1 to 5 scale, from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).**

1. I understand the role that entrepreneurs play in community economic development.  
Strongly disagree   1       2       3       4       5       Strongly agree
  
2. Libraries can provide information to local entrepreneurs that help them grow their businesses.  
Strongly disagree   1       2       3       4       5       Strongly agree
  
3. Libraries can help in improving the local workforce for community economic development.  
Strongly disagree   1       2       3       4       5       Strongly agree
  
4. Supporting libraries is an indirect cost of doing business and contributes to business and community climate.  
Strongly disagree   1       2       3       4       5       Strongly agree
  
5. Investment of public dollars on libraries produces a positive return.  
Strongly disagree   1       2       3       4       5       Strongly agree
  
6. Libraries must reach out to the business community and create a business-friendly organization.  
Strongly disagree   1       2       3       4       5       Strongly agree
  
7. Helping businesses can produce a larger tax base for supporting libraries.  
Strongly disagree   1       2       3       4       5       Strongly agree
  
8. Libraries should create partnerships with other stakeholders in local community economic development.  
Strongly disagree   1       2       3       4       5       Strongly agree
  
9. I have a better understanding of strategies for community economic development in a rural environment.  
Strongly disagree   1       2       3       4       5       Strongly agree
  
10. I have a better understanding of how libraries can support local businesses.  
Strongly disagree   1       2       3       4       5       Strongly agree

**Please use the back of the page for additional comments.**