Access to higher education is a top issue for the nation, and a focal concern of many states as well. Today’s information-based economy needs educated employees, with more and more jobs requiring undergraduate or higher diplomas. Only 29 percent of U.S. working aged adults (25+ years old) today have this level of training, with considerable variation in the extent to which each state meets these goals (WICHE: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2016).

The thirteen member states of the Western Rural Development Center reflect these educational challenges. Rates of new high school graduates in 2014 who enrolled as college freshmen within a year ranged from 44.6 percent (UT) to 67.8 percent (CA). Of those enrolled, 2014 program completion rates ranged from 20.5 percent (NM) to 43.1 percent (WY) for AA degrees, and from 25.3 percent (NV) to 61.5 percent (WA) for four-year diplomas (WICHE, 2016).
“Despite recent educational gains among rural residents, rural college attainment remains 10 percent below the national average.”

Localities also vary substantially in access to post-secondary education, with rural communities especially challenged. Despite recent educational gains among rural residents, rural college attainment remains 10 percent below the national average (Player, 2015). Many factors likely contribute to that difference, including weaker college-going traditions among rural parents, lower family incomes, and early marriage and childbearing among rural residents (Carson and Mattingly, 2014). Additionally, much of the recent growth in college attendance has been among commuter students – a limited option in rural communities (Kim and Rury, 2011; McLaughlin and Shoff, 2014).

These concerns have implications for many aspects of community life. For communities, the problem is one of human capital – how will we build a workforce ready for today’s economy? For families the challenge may be cultural – how can we make college-going a norm in our family? Families’ concerns may be financial – how can we recruit the funds for our children to be adequately trained? Finally, the youth themselves face a life challenge – how can I develop the personal skills, educational foundation, and financial resources required for adult independence?

These multiple perspectives on higher education suggest the potential of a multidisciplinary approach, including fields of community development, youth development, family development, and family financial management (Shaklee et al., 2014). Fortunately, these are all areas of strength for Extension, with long roots in many communities. In fact, few other organizations and agencies have expertise in this diverse set of concerns. The present discussion considers ways for Extension to bring the resources of its several relevant disciplines to bear on the problem of higher education access and attainment.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
A trained workforce is vital to a community’s economic base, and essential for development, recruitment, and retention of new and established businesses. Communities can support post-high school education for their youth in several ways.

Teenagers work to fund future college expenses, but youth wages have shrunk in value in recent decades. Summer employment rates for teens have also dropped significantly in the last 40 years, down to 31.3 percent in 2014 (Goo, 2015). Local businesses can address this issue by developing options for part time and summer work in their hiring structure. They can also design apprenticeships and internships during scheduled breaks in academic calendars to help youth develop workplace skills. Such workforce training builds relationships with community youth, opening their eyes to the careers possible with post-secondary training.

Communities can help develop a norm of post-high school education for their youth through forums and discussions on college options, funding, and campus life (Devol and Krodel, 2010), as well as programs about alternative training routes. Young people involved in higher education can serve as peer counselors to help youth adapt to life away from home, providing guidance and support as the new students develop support networks of their own.
Many communities offer multiple scholarships for higher education. Communities can facilitate access to those funds through a single application process for the various scholarships, including a common application form and due date. Donor groups may want to coordinate award decisions, so funds are distributed optimally among the many deserving students.

**FAMILY DEVELOPMENT**

Families are a major force in shaping the aspirations of their children. Post-high school training is a family norm for many community residents, but others don’t share the tradition. Parents without a college degree (or high school diploma) may consider college to be out of reach, and may be unaware of other training options. However, youth in these families need to prepare for today’s job market in order to take on adult roles in the community.

Years of research demonstrate family practices that help youth develop the skills needed for success at school and work. For example, a habit of reading to children from an early age prepares young children for the first years of school. A regular family mealtime promotes communication among family members and reduces youth risk taking. Parenting styles built on limit setting and reasoning are associated with positive traits for children like problem solving, persistence, and resilience (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Prevatt, 2003). These are all core aspects of parenting programs taught by university Extension that can help parents raise children prepared for success in high school and post-secondary programs.

In addition, Extension can employ their extensive community connections to actively engage marginalized families in programs relevant to higher education. After-school programs, summer camps, and 4-H events are good venues to connect families with programs about the variety of post-high school educational options as well as viable funding schemes.

**FAMILY ECONOMICS**

Extension Family Consumer Science professionals have worked for decades with families on managing financial resources. Programs on retirement planning, for example, promote early saving towards financial security in the senior years. Post-high school training is another long term goal for families to fit into their savings plan. Research shows that even small savings accounts dedicated to education increase the higher education attainment of youth in low and moderate income families (Elliott et al., 2013).

Extension professionals can help families develop a funding base for higher education expenses, apprise them of affordable options for training, and counsel about educational loans. Programs can also target employed teens, helping them put aside funds for post-high-school training. Excellent publications are available in Extension on preparing for college, college expenses, loan programs, and savings strategies that Extension educators can use in developing programs to meet local needs (see search.extension.org or www.cyfernet.org). Successful Extension programs are available to support young adults in these critical transitions (e.g., Hines et al., 2011; Royer et al., 2005; Tifft, 2013).

**YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

Extension’s 100 years of 4-H has a proven record of training youth in the life skills required for adult roles. Recently, 4-H programs have broadened their reach to a more diverse client base through day camps, projects in day programming, and after school programs (Bunnell and Pate, 2006; Hoffman, 2011; Lerner, et al., 2009).

Activities of 4-H are designed to build foundational skills that will enable success in education and career, including personal responsibility, record keeping, problem solving, critical thinking, wise use of resources, decision making, planning, and communication (Hendricks, 1998). Entrepreneurship and leadership programs allow youth to work hands-on in program and business development, providing valuable experience for college and career. Youth in these programs can develop relationships with local leaders and business owners, opening opportunities for internships, apprenticeships, and jobs. Youth may fear the unknown when exploring colleges or moving outside of the home – a particular
problem for families new to college. Through 4-H, youth can travel outside of their home county, experiencing independent living while attending regional, state, and national youth conferences. Often such events take place on college campuses, providing an opportunity for a close look at college life.

Many state and county 4-H programs offer college scholarship programs to help youth and families fund post-secondary education. Experiences and community service offered in 4-H programs also strengthen youth applications for other financial assistance. In these many ways, 4-H provides tools, connections, and experiences necessary for post-secondary success.

CONCLUSION
The long history of work by Extension in these several areas make them a natural leader on community initiatives to increase post-secondary training for their youth. In many communities Extension is the sole organization with such a broad range of relevant expertise and experience. Extension can draw on strong relationships with organizations, businesses, and families to build collaborations to strengthen the path to post-high school training for local youth. Engagement with area educational programs will also be important for program effectiveness.

Program success requires consideration of local norms and resources in strategy development. Extension’s strong presence in small towns and rural areas will be especially useful, considering the underrepresentation of rural youth in higher education. Sensitivity to local concerns and family traditions can help communities build programs to reflect their own values and priorities, while moving forward to engage young people in the training required for success in today’s economy.

Engagement of university Extension programs in the issue of higher education access can demonstrate agility in addressing contemporary concerns. As the front door to the university in communities across the nation, Extension is a particularly appropriate leader for these concerns.

“Extension’s strong presence in small towns and rural areas will be especially useful, considering the underrepresentation of rural youth in higher education. Sensitivity to local concerns and family traditions can help communities build programs to reflect their own values and priorities, while moving forward to engage young people in the training required for success in today’s economy.”