



RURAL
PATHWAYS
to Prosperity
Conference



PICTURED: P2P Participant/D. Hansen

INNOVATIVE APPROACH BRINGS TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES TO RURAL AREAS

Washington Rural Pathways to Prosperity Conference “SMALL BUSINESS IS EVERYBODY’S BUSINESS” Achieves Wide-Ranging Success Using a New Model of Delivery

By Debra Hansen, Monica Babine, and Margaret Viebrock

Imagine attending a conference that costs a fraction of traditional statewide events – where you don’t have to travel out of your area, you have access to national, regional and local expertise, you strengthen local relationships, and at the end of the day you have begun taking steps to enhance community vitality.

There are many complex community and economic development issues that rural communities and their leaders are trying to overcome, yet limited time, excessive distance, and inadequate budgets make it difficult for these leaders to participate in a “single destination conference.” Those same challenges often make it impossible to bring national experts to rural areas. Following traditional, in-person, single location statewide offerings in 2010 and 2011, WSU Extension Community and Economic Development staff began exploring new approaches to meet the needs of rural leaders for access to the valuable knowledge and skills required to address these challenges and economic opportunities.

In 2013, efforts began to leverage lessons learned from the use of WSU’s Distributed Conference Model (DCM) developed for the successful Women in Ag Conference (see sidebar). The result: Rural Pathways to Prosperity, a statewide economic development conference, offered in Washington. It was organized at the state level by Extension and agency partners, and facilitated at the site level by community leaders. DCM is based on two core principles: Connect multiple sites with technology and engage local participants into action.

The Distributed Conference Format

This daylong conference model begins with an interactive webinar delivered by a national expert who provides content that is relevant to all of the geographically dispersed sites. Issues specific to each conference site are addressed by local facilitators through activities where they put the knowledge gained into action.

This model provides an opportunity to inspire, form regional networks, establish new relationships, and engage with a national expert. As noted by one participant, “More locals participate in the conference so the advice received spreads a lot further across the area. They also network with each other, getting to know local people that they hadn’t met before.”

When asked about the benefits, 95 percent of respondents prefer this regional model of delivery, one participant said, “... this kind of conference is accessible for remote/rural locations such as ours. If it were not available, many of our attendees would not have been able to benefit from it.” While another noted, “The smaller group gave us more of an opportunity to hear from others what challenges they are facing. It was a great afternoon activity that engaged the whole room. A statewide event would not allow such personal interaction.”

This hybrid delivery model bridges the gap between a typical, centrally located event where people must travel from all parts of the state, and an online webinar or prerecorded video presentation that is often viewed by individuals sitting at their desks. DCM engages existing resources (a local site, and site host), readily available technology (Microsoft GoToMeeting, and digital projection equipment), a subject matter expert, and a group of local and regional community members. A key benefit of DCM is summed up by this attendee, “This tool

is particularly suited to rural communities where resources are limited.”

Applying this to Economic Development: Pathways to Prosperity (P2P)

After surveying community and economic development professionals from across the state, “Small Business is Everybody’s Business,” was selected as the conference theme. In 2013, Becky McCray, co-author of “Small Town Rules,” presented about how to enhance the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The success of that conference led to expansion on that topic in 2015 with Erik Pages, EntreWorks, who focused on the importance of entrepreneurs in rural communities and shared ideas about how local leaders can support them. One participant stated, “The keynote provided enough good examples of ways to support entrepreneurs that our group was able to identify some doable actions to take. We just need to make sure we follow up.” The conference also was a good opportunity for businesspeople to get together with other area residents and resources to discuss concerns. Another was inspired, “Learning to recognize the variety of small businesses and entrepreneurs in the area that one might not otherwise consider. Their impact on the community is just as important as the larger, more obvious businesses.” In Figure 1 you can see that both Erik’s content and preplanned facilitated local activities were well received by participants.

Concerted Team Effort

The success of this conference delivery method is dependent on a concerted planning effort, which includes the development of the program, detailed agendas, facilitator guides, Extension-designed activities, coordinated marketing materials and associated training, mentoring, and support.

Crafting a strong planning team of diverse agencies from across the state ensures a wide variety of support and avenues for marketing the program. In addition to Extension faculty and staff, partners involved with planning and delivery included:

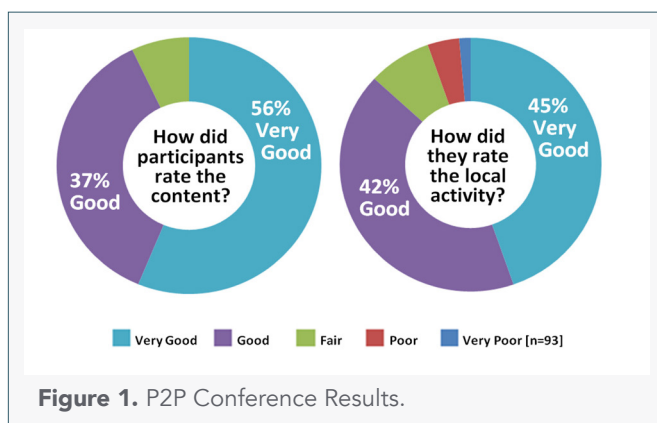
- Washington State Department of Commerce
- Association of Washington Cities
- Washington State Workforce Education and Coordinating Board
- USDA Rural Development
- Many local Economic Development Councils and Alliances

These partners helped support the conference through promotion, sponsorships, attendance, and have committed to provide assistance in the future. An example of this is the local leader who immediately after the conference ended took the USDA staff to see a facility in town in need of renovation.

Statewide planning was critical; however, the success of the event relies heavily on having very engaged and organized local assistance. At each site, three main roles are required – a site manager, a session facilitator, and a technology coordinator. Clearly understanding the goals of the program and how best to market it within the local community will help the event be successful.

High Return on Investment for Extension and their Partners

Minimal dollars were expended to bring this conference to rural communities across the state. The contribution of staff time spent on conference development, training, and outreach activity was achieved through Extension and partner agencies working together. Like the local participants, conference partners did not have to expend significant travel or training dollars, did not have to spend any nights away from home, and were all able to help provide resources and links to local action-oriented members of the communities being served. “P2P was a great springboard for Extension to bring further economic development resources to our rural communities. This organized forum will create an updated economic development strategy,” states Extension Director Clea Rome. “It created a new opportunity for me to bring statewide and local resources together in one, focused conversation,” added Extension Director Sheila Gray.



The Association of Washington Cities (AWC) offered Certificate of Municipal Leadership (CML) credits for elected officials, which helped with an added incentive for these community leaders to increase their awareness of the role of local government in economic development. There were over 30 elected officials across the state (eight at one site!). As an example of how this effort worked out, in Stevens County two mayors, a city council member, and a planning commission member participated in the conference. Mayor Knauss of Chewelah was thrilled to engage with ten local constituents in attendance and the first Chewelah Entrepreneur Networking Group meeting was set before the end of the conference.

Washington State USDA Rural Development motivated staff (program and area directors, the State Director, and loan specialists) to attend, resulting in USDA participation at ten locations. USDA staff was able to gain valuable Community and Economic Development experience by engaging with local and regional community and economic development experts in identifying and supporting rural entrepreneurs; they participated in developing local action plans; made new contacts; and shared information about resources available through USDA programs. One staff stated, "P2P was very successful for my own thought processes and views of rural business but also an excellent opportunity to get USDA Rural Development resources out there in the community and share how we can assist."

High-Impact, High-Tech, High-Touch, Low-Cost Model for Statewide Conferences

The Distributed Conference Model (DCM) offers a solution to challenges reaching rural communities. Using technology, and designing appropriate facilitated activities, this model can be modified and used in other venues. It provides Extension or other event organizers with a conference method that can be replicated without everyone needing to become an expert in the topic area. County Extension Director, Carrie Backman stated, "Living in a rural place where folks are pretty far from traditional conference venues, we don't get a lot of exposure to this caliber of material and speakers. This model allowed us to reach new people with new ideas, and helped spur conversation on doable action items on local economic development. Bringing in experts using this delivery model could help solve many of our other pressing issues."•

women in agriculture Conference

Empowering the Individual to Achieve Goals and Manage Risks

The Distributed Conference Model (DCM) was developed by Margaret Viebrock, WSU Extension, for the 2012 Women in Ag Conference. Now in its fourth year, the 2015 program had over 650 women farmers who learned marketing skills and enjoyed networking opportunities at 26 locations across four states (Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington).

Each year a national expert kicks off the conference by presenting a webinar on a relevant or emerging issue for women in agriculture. Topics have included financial planning, risk management, and adapting to change. Following the keynote, local resource providers lead women farmers through experiential exercises, focused on building knowledge and honing skills. Each farmer completes a two-part My Personal Action Plan form; one part for the planning committee to collect data for follow up activities and the other for the farmer's use. Said one participant, "I used my Personal Action Form and accomplished just about everything I planned to do. That was a great idea to write it down with a date to get started!"

Follow-up workshops in select locations are tailored to be more in-depth and specific. A dedicated website, electronic newsletters, and social media contacts throughout the year keep women producers engaged, supported, and successful. Between conferences, the program offers webinars presented by eXtension on topics recommended by participants, plus local workshops and facilitated opportunities for women to network with other farmers in the area. "Without this DCM, most participants would not have access to this level of national expertise nor the critical support network the conference offers for local opportunities to work together, share concerns, and strengthen their farm management and farm-family role," says Viebrock.