STRATEGIES TO LAUNCH NEW RURAL AND COMMUNITY CENTERS
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Objective</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Findings</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define the Mission</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage with Communities</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner with Internal Stakeholders</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain Financial Support</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful Start-Up Strategies</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing COVID-19</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Client institution is interested in exploring how peer institutions established their rural and community centers, including successful strategies, challenges, financial considerations, and practice to connect academic programs with community partners. The data will be used to inform their own establishment of a rural center.

- Uncover strategies institutions have used to successfully launch or expand rural or community-focused centers.
- Understand the challenges centers have faced in launching a community or rural-focused center, and how these challenges were overcome.
- Identify how institutions use these centers to form partnerships with the community.
Hanover Research conducted twelve (12) in-depth interviews with stakeholders involved in launching or running rural or community-focused centers at their institutions.

Note:
Qualitative research is exploratory and designed to add insight and a depth of understanding to a particular question or topic. Qualitative findings provide commonalities and trends but are not intended to be statistically significant or to provide generalizable conclusions.
In preparation for launching its center, the institution should speak with key community stakeholders to identify and prioritize community needs. Use this research to inform the center’s mission, objectives, and initiatives.

Develop relationships with influential community leaders, economic stakeholders, and relevant government agencies to guide ongoing center activities and gain financial support.

Cast a wide net for funding, including federal and state grants, corporate endowments, and the sharing of academic department budgets for faculty-involved projects. Take the lead in aiding communities to obtain grants for local initiatives, which can then be used to fund the center’s work.
Enlist the support of faculty by promoting research opportunities through the center, as well as the potential for work-integrated learning opportunities for students in their academic programs.

Consider launching the center when the pandemic has stabilized to the point that stakeholders and funders have progressed beyond “emergency mode” and can consider partnering with a center. As an alternative, consider opening the center with an initial purpose of providing services that address short-term needs brought on by the pandemic. This approach will create positive relationships within communities that will help the center sustain itself when longer-term initiatives become possible.
KEY FINDINGS

• Centers provide a range of services to their communities, including:
  • Outreach projects that provide direct services to the public, such as health screenings,
  • Initiatives that support economic development,
  • Programs that provide education and training to community constituents, and
  • Research to identify community needs, measure the impact of programs, and support community grant acquisition.

• Participants attribute their success to having identified, engaged, and partnered with a wide range of external stakeholders, who consequently supported their centers, such as:
  • Community leaders: Community Foundations, Offices of Rural Community Affairs, mayors
  • Economic stakeholders: Chambers of Commerce, Economic Development Corporations, business leaders
  • Government agencies: lawmakers who need research to gain support for and evaluate their programs.
KEY FINDINGS

• **Centers cultivate partnerships with internal stakeholders at their institutions.** Participants noted success through buy-in from institutional faculty and administration. For example, faculty participate in center projects and build center-related learning opportunities for students into their programs. Members of the administration can help to promote the center to external stakeholders, assist the center in obtaining grants, and encourage faculty to take part in center initiatives.

• **Centers have implemented multiple funding strategies.** Participants spoke to a variety of funding opportunities that their centers leverage, including:
  - Partnering with federal, state, and local governmental agencies to obtain grants
  - Providing research data that communities use to obtain grants that will fund their center’s work
  - Obtaining endowments from corporations committed to local community development
  - Sharing academic department budgets for work conducted by faculty.
• A common challenge for participants when launching their centers was gaining the trust of communities, who often consider them “outsiders.” They addressed this challenge by initiating open and ongoing dialogue with community stakeholders and working with them to define and prioritize the community’s unmet needs. Some centers have formed advisory boards that include community stakeholders.

• Participants struggle with the uncertainties caused by the pandemic. Some have placed initiatives on hold, while others question the availability of future funding. Strategies for managing these uncertainties include:
  • Systematic use of video conferencing and phone calls to maintain positive relationships with stakeholders
  • Helping communities cope with the pandemic by conducting COVID-19-related research and initiatives
  • Realigning the center with the changing needs of communities resulting from the pandemic
  • Promoting the value a center brings to communities statewide in order to secure state funding.
DEFINE THE MISSION
The first step for developing a successful center is to define its mission. Participants established clearly stated goals which guided their choice of initiatives, which fall into several categories:

- Outreach Services
- Economic Development
- Education
- Research
- Entrepreneurship

Centers focus on one or more of these categories to varying degrees, with the ultimate goal of creating the most value for the communities they serve.

One participant notes that her center “can’t do everything,” and prioritizing initiatives leads to greater impact.

“We’re [...] focused in three areas, which are outreach, education, and research.”
- Anonymous

“The purpose is to improve the lives of rural communities in [the state] by connecting those communities with the resources of [the] University. And those resources might be student volunteers; it might be faculty applied research; it might be engaged teaching.”
- Anonymous

“We provide research and data-related services for the state [...] in order to better address the needs of the citizens”
- Anonymous
Centers provide outreach services to communities, based on local needs and center resources. Services range widely, including:

- **Health initiatives**, such as mobile health screening and patient visits by students in nursing or social work programs.
- Working with community groups to **help them obtain grants** for local projects.

### Health Initiatives

“That's a primary health screening, [...] just doing blood pressure, BMI, waist circumference, doing point-of-care tests for cholesterol, blood glucose, and then just doing primary care screening to see if they're struggling with any chronic diseases.”

-Anonymous

### Resource Coordination

“We have been engaged with 30 counties now, and we are a convener and a connector. [...] It was faculty, local Community Foundation, local business owners, and local citizens working together to put together a grant to establish a local food network and food sustainability hub, and business incubators.”

-Anonymous
Centers Support Economic Development

Centers provide communities with initiatives whose purpose is to enrich their local economies.

Some centers consult with businesses to help them plan for economic growth, while others work with communities to improve their economic infrastructure.

“We are setting up students as consultants on existing businesses to help with capacity building or sometimes with special projects to create and support the retention of jobs.” -Anonymous

“We had projects that worked with communities to, for example, establish a fish processing plant on the coast.” -Anonymous

“My favorite [project] is probably a food systems network that we’ve established. That has been really two full years in the making. We did a food conference that had 70 different growers and suppliers matched with large buyers.” -Anonymous
SOME CENTERS FOCUS ON ENTREPRENEURSHIP

“In the summer youth programs, it’s entrepreneurship education. So, for the younger students, it’s a lemonade stand program where they’re taught all the business basics.” – Anonymous

“We are specific to entrepreneurship in our center in a lot of ways. So, a lot of outreach, we teach workshops. And in the summertime, typically I’m teaching youth camp surrounding entrepreneurial skills and that sort of thing.” – Anonymous

“That project is student entrepreneurs that are launching their own small ventures in rural communities.” – Anonymous

Several participants report that their centers focus specifically on one aspect of economic development, entrepreneurship. Their goal is to inject new ideas and ventures into the community by educating constituents on how to commercialize their innovative ideas.

One center supports communities by having students at its institution launch local businesses.
Some Centers Focus on Education

Providing education is a key function for some centers. They utilize faculty or students to deliver educational experiences and training to members of the community. Correspondingly, students enrich their education through the work-integrated learning they receive by participating in center-run projects.

For the Community

- Workforce professional development
- Naloxone/stigma reduction training
- Music training

“A lot of [rural] places [...] you may be employing people in positions [...] where they may be underqualified. [...] We will help the state figure out ways [to help] and then deliver training for them.” – Anonymous

For Students

- Work-integrated learning
- Integration of center programs into courses

“We have been doing [music] performances in the communities that are intergenerational. Those have turned into masterclasses for high school students.” – Anonymous

“[Our program] is engaged teaching, where we work with faculty to get their classes out to communities. So their [students’] projects are a semester or a year long.” – Anonymous
Centers support communities through their institutions’ research capabilities. They employ a range of research methods, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and data analytics.

Research projects serve various purposes

- **Identify** the challenges, unmet needs, and priorities of the community
- **Collect and analyze data** needed for the community to apply for and acquire grants
- **Identify opportunities for and evaluate the impact of intervention programs**

“The research is [...] going out into communities and [conducting] interviews, focus groups, compile that information, develop a survey which then goes out to the community. And those results could maybe be for some kind of development [or] applying for grants.” –Anonymous

“We're doing adverse childhood experience research on entire school systems to see what the ACE scores are and helping to mitigate those, because they're so strongly correlated to substance use disorder and some other challenges.” –Anonymous
ENGAGE WITH COMMUNITIES
CENTERS ENGAGE WITH COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

To be successful, participants have conscientiously worked to create an assemblage of stakeholders who became supporters of their centers. These stakeholders provide advice, financial support, and promote the center within their communities.

Community Leaders
- Community Foundations, Offices of Rural Community Affairs, School Superintendents, Mayors, Healthcare Administrators

Economic Stakeholders
- Chambers of Commerce, Economic Development Corporations, “Main Street organizations,” influential businesses

Government Agencies
- State lawmakers, Health Departments, Extension Offices

“[We connect with] the Executive Director of the county’s Community Foundation, the Chamber of Commerce head, the head of the Economic Development Corporation, those three always. And then, if we’re looking at a city or town rather than a whole county, the mayor, the town council is important. And then, whoever the large employer or employers are in the area, the top two or three, involve them as well.” – Anonymous
Participants stress the importance of networking among relevant stakeholders. This enables them to build partnerships, maintain relationships, and identify new contacts, which will fuel a center’s growth.

A Community Liaison who focuses on healthcare issues describes a rigorous period of networking, which she considers typical.

“When we go into a county or a town, we will meet typically with four or five leaders in the community and then ask them, ‘Who should be at the table?’”
-Anonymous

“My partner [...] he’s also back and forth to Washington DC, figuring out how to maintain strong relationships with [the state’s] two senators and its one representative. And so it’s kind of a matter of figuring out who are people in positions of leadership that we should be partnering with.”
-Anonymous

“I went in the morning to an in-service that a statewide institution was putting on about vaping, and there were a lot of educators and health care providers who were interested in the topic. And so I just networked and talked with them. Then that afternoon I drove to a different county and met with a small health action coalition team, and then met with the YMCA director after that. Then the next day, I think I went to our local hospital. [...] Their Community Health Department team was meeting, [...] so I went to listen to what they were doing and met everyone there.” -Anonymous
PARTNER WITH INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS
Gaining the support of faculty is a key factor in creating a successful institution-based center. Faculty play a number of roles in center initiatives.

- **Perform research** for community development projects
- **Provide education** to the community in outreach efforts
- **Conduct research** to help the center obtain grants
- **Supervise students** engaging in community support services.

“I will find **key people around the campus** who I will maybe hire or buyout a portion of their time to release them from teaching, and I’ll **pay them to do research** in order to fill some of the functions of what we need for grants and contracts.” – Anonymous

“We gave **funding for a professor to design** a telehealth intervention for obesity in children. And so we're funding **his pilot project**, and if it goes well, then he can get more funding for that.” – Anonymous

“With the nursing clinicals, those **nursing instructors** have to go to those local sites to supervise **their students** who are **going out into the community**.” – Anonymous
Participants emphasize the value of partnering with their administrations. Institutions provide resources and services that support their centers; correspondingly, centers deliver value back to the institution.

**Institution’s value to center**
- Provide **office space** for the center
- Help **fund** center salaries and programs
- Facilitate **grant acquisitions**
- **Encourage faculty** to take part in center programs

"The university has agreed to cover [the center’s] salaries." – Anonymous

"We have officer-sponsored programs for some advice and assistance with grants we apply for.” – Anonymous

**Center’s value to institution**
- **Enhance institution’s image** among communities
- **Expand** student recruitment and enrollment at the institution

“[The university] doesn't have [extension offices across the state]. And so the center has allowed the university to make those connections in rural areas. It could help with enrollment and recruitment, but, overall, trying to assist communities improve. And then it is a hub for the overall image of the university.” – Anonymous
There’s this rural town that they wanted to connect a local pond to their trails downtown. And so the students [...] designed a plan, created the budget, all that. [...] Another one is doing way-finding signs. And so it’s actually working with a graphic design class to design the signs around this small rural town [...] so they are aesthetically pleasing.” – Anonymous

“[Student participation] can be something like a home visit for nursing students. That’s what kind of has happened in the health world or combining social work students with nursing students when they do home visits.” –Anonymous

Some institutions enable faculty to integrate their center’s initiatives into degree programs.

- **Students benefit** by gaining real world experience through work-integrated learning projects
- **Communities benefit** by the services these students provide
- **Centers benefit** by having additional resources for project work.
GAIN FINANCIAL SUPPORT
Federal and state agency grants supply centers with much of their funding. These grants reach the centers by two channels:

- **Awarded directly to the center** to fund its initiatives
- **Awarded to community-based organizations**, who then use grant monies to pay centers for their project work.

A couple of centers have developed strong enough relationships with state lawmakers to be included as a “line item” in the annual budget.

“They're federal grants from HRSA, from SAMSA that we have grants from. All of our [grants] are in substance-abuse related areas and workforce development and training. It's all in sort of figuring out how to help communities become healthier communities.” – Anonymous

“We are a line item in terms of the university's state budget from the General Assembly. [...] We're evolving as well working with communities. [...] We know that there are other grant opportunities available. Then, it's really about connecting and helping communities get those grant funds.” – Anonymous
Some centers secure funding from their affiliated institutions. Salaries may be covered, and department budgets used to pay faculty for center-conducted programs.

One center obtains monies from attendance at an annual economic forum hosted jointly by the Economics and Management departments and the center.

The [institution’s] center was launched with a large endowment from a foundation. Those funds have carried the center through its early years and continues to pay for salaries.

“We are a part of our College of Business, [...] and so [...] we rely a lot on their [financial] support.” –Anonymous

“We've put on a forum every year that involves faculty from [the Economics] department and the Management department. [...] I would say Management and Economics have been big for us, and we have the income that comes from [the forums].” –Anonymous

“We were established with a large grant, a multimillion-dollar grant from [a] Foundation. And so in addition to paying staff salaries, it pays for travel to communities.”

–Anonymous
SUCCESSFUL START-UP STRATEGIES
Participants indicate that a crucial step in launching a center is to determine what communities, themselves, perceive to be their most important unmet needs they would like addressed. They recommend that research be conducted with key stakeholders to identify which projects would be the most meaningful. Some have built advisory boards with institutional and community stakeholders to guide initiatives.

“Collect as much information as you can. Learn everything you can as you gather all this information from different people. [...] Figuring out these different strategies is a good first step. And I would just spend time identifying whether [...] we're going to be in rural economic development or we're going to be in multiple lanes.” – Anonymous

“Do your research ahead of time. Make sure what you're offering is in line with what people are looking for. And get a really solid team like an advisory council in place that you can go to. And involve a lot of different people. So if you're on a campus, involve some students and the community members and some administrators.” – Anonymous
One of the challenges participants faced when starting their centers was building trust with the communities they would serve. Community stakeholders were skeptical that university-based research centers would understand their needs, their culture, and fully act in their interests. Participants recommend several strategies to achieve community trust.

**Partnership**
- Get to know the communities from the start, and truly listen to their perceived needs

**Commitment**
- Impress upon communities that the center is committed over the long term

**Empathy**
- Employ staff that is connected to the community and its culture

**Recognition**
- Share credit with communities for project successes

“I think the biggest challenge is the process of trust-building. And no matter what, you are an outside entity in a rural community. They tend to be tight-knit, and so we have really relied on relationships to leverage other relationships.” -Anonymous

“I have a lot of staff [with a] [...] strong state connection, and they understand the state well. [...] As they were born and raised in a small town in [our state], that provides them with a certain amount of street cred.” - Anonymous

“I think understanding what problems your state is facing and making the university relevant to begin to help address those problems is an important first step in order to make sure that those folks trust that you know what you’re doing.” - Anonymous
Centers have implemented a number of strategies to obtain funding. These strategies range from partnering with key stakeholders to thorough researching of grant opportunities.

**Government**

Partner with governmental agencies on high priority projects, leveraging the credibility of being associated with a respected institution.

**Communities**

Seek pay-for-service projects with communities. The center identifies grant sources and conducts research to support communities’ grant acquisitions.

**Corporations**

Seek endowments from corporations that have voiced a keen interest in supporting the well-being and growth of local communities.

**Institutions**

Form partnerships with academic departments to share budgets when implementing center-sponsored projects involving faculty and students.
Several participants advise that an institution starting a center **focus on community needs that align with the institution’s research and academic strengths.** This will help position the center in the minds of stakeholders, define the boundaries of its mission, and maximize community outcomes.

One participant notes that becoming known for certain types of initiatives - one’s “cornerstone projects” - helps to gain traction with funders.

“I think my best advice is to stay asset-focused. So, build on what the communities want and what they have as well as what your higher education institution can uniquely provide.” - Anonymous

“'At what level of both academic and research practice are you going to engage that?’ Is this an undergraduate, small liberal arts school, in which case, they're basically doing rural community development? Is it a regional, or a church-based, larger liberal arts institution? Then, they could be doing some community development and some economic development.” - Anonymous
"The provost has been the champion, and that has been critical because, really, in order to launch the center successfully we needed to have someone high enough in the power structure to be using it as a talking point for a long period of time so it didn't get forgotten, and looking for ways to get the right people involved. And I would say probably for 18 months, I doubt she gave a public address anywhere without mentioning in some way the center. So, I mean, it's been incredible, and access to Deans, access to Vice Provosts and Vice Presidents and the President himself. So that's been really critical." -Anonymous

One participant stresses the crucial role her provost played in launching the center and sustaining its status as a valued institution. The provost not only backed the center’s mission and initiatives, but actively promoted the center to both internal and external stakeholders. This support has enabled the center to maintain its success over the long term.
MANAGING COVID-19
Participants express uncertainty about how their centers will function under the conditions forced upon them by the pandemic. Projects have been paused for the summer, new proposals have “dried up,” and future initiatives are in question.

One participant has taken the proactive step of “reformulating” his center’s mission to adjust to the changing needs of the communities he serves.

“They elected not to do any projects this summer, which would have been an ideal time to do those things, but our campus was in its lockdown mode. [...] I understand they have some projects lined up for in the coming year, perhaps not as many as anticipated in this current climate of uncertainty.” –Anonymous

“We’ve agreed to enter into six months of conversations with communities and government organizations and community organizations to begin to understand, ‘How do we reformulate some of our activities, our research?’” –Anonymous
BECOME ADEPT AT REMOTE PARTNERING

“We're now getting very comfortable, and everybody else is getting very comfortable with Zoom or some Skype or some version of that. That wasn't the case, and so that's great.” –Anonymous

“We're still doing everything we were just virtually. So our client meetings are now Zoom calls. And we did have a community schedule where we typically would have gone to them and had in-person focus group interviews and that sort of thing, but instead, we used Zoom. [...] I made phone calls and [...] asked questions and recorded it. So we were able to keep what we always do, just a different method than normal.” -Anonymous

Participants point out that, historically, community engagement has been most effectively conducted through in-person contact. Center staff hold meetings “over coffee” with stakeholders to identify needs and scope initiatives, and research projects are often conducted in the field.

These traditional interactions have given way to group video meetings and phone calls. Although not ideal, centers have become competent engaging remotely with stakeholders, a requirement under the new norm.
Given economic uncertainties among grant providers, as well as their own institutions, several participants voice concern over future funding of their centers. Several participants mention “working the Rolodex” to identify new research opportunities.

Interestingly, another participant adds a longer-term strategy - ensuring that key stakeholders understand the widespread value that centers provide. By promoting her center’s successes, she hopes to justify and establish ongoing state funding.

“I think it's leveraging any communication with anyone in your Rolodex, if you will, and to start opening those doors. [...] It could be engaging in conversation with your local city and county leaders to get some insight. They could have some initiatives going on that aren't really broadly public known. “ - Anonymous

“The university is beginning to tell what is a very true story, which is that through the center's work we are having deep impacts in our state on quality of life, on workforce attraction. [...] We also are increasing our student retention within the state, because we have students who are experiencing life in these rural communities and seeing the vision that is developing there and they want to stay. And so our hope long term is that we will get a line item in the [...] state budget.” –Anonymous
Centers have worked to maintain their status among community stakeholders by providing a range of pandemic-related services. These initiatives support business planning and help communities manage their challenges under COVID-19.

- Informing businesses how to obtain government stimulus funding
- Designing plans for businesses to recover financially from the pandemic
- Building Community Health Improvement Plans that can hold up during a pandemic
- Creating a symptom tracking app to help communities prepare for any future waves of infection
- Using research data to measure, by industry, the economic impact of COVID-19.

“We have, for instance, done a partnership with our business school that has taken on 100 businesses throughout the state [...] and helped them generate plans to recover financially from COVID and also do their reopening plans.” - Anonymous

“We just developed this vulnerability scale showing that certain [...] communities are more vulnerable than others. And so we're sharing this with decision makers and saying, 'Okay, these are the places that you need to worry about the most.'” - Anonymous
Thank you.