

# Community Partnerships to Further the Role of Rural Public Libraries in Small Business Economic Development: A Case Study of Tennessee

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## Abstract

This brief paper identifies the community partnerships getting developed in a planning grant entitled “The Role of Rural Public Libraries in Small Business Economic Development in the Appalachian Region: A Case Study of Tennessee” (PLSB-TN) recently awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ National Leadership Grants for Libraries (Research Category) (October 2014 – September 2016) (URL: <http://scholar.cci.utk.edu/plsb-tn>). PLSB-TN involves collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback based on the needs, expectations, and experiences of small businesses and rural public libraries in the state. PLSB-TN research conducted so far includes preliminary planning activities, analyzing existing needs and feasibility, solidifying community partnerships, and developing initial work plans, blueprint, and strategic action plan prototype of a *Public Library Small Business Toolkit* that strengthens collaborations between various stakeholders involved. PLSB-TN is serving as a pilot case experience and assessment test-bed to expand strategies for the entire Appalachian region and other rural environments in the future.

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## 1 Introduction

This brief paper identifies the community partnerships getting developed in a planning grant entitled “The Role of Rural Public Libraries in Small Business Economic Development in the Appalachian Region: A Case Study of Tennessee” (PLSB-TN) recently awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ National Leadership Grants for Libraries (Research Category) (October 2014 – September 2016) (URL: <http://scholar.cci.utk.edu/plsb-tn>). PLSB-TN involves collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback based on the needs, expectations, and experiences of small businesses and rural<sup>1</sup> public libraries in the state. PLSB-TN research conducted so far includes preliminary planning activities, analyzing existing needs and feasibility, solidifying community partnerships, and developing initial work plans, blueprint, and strategic action plan prototype of a *Public Library Small Business Toolkit* that strengthens collaborations between various stakeholders involved. PLSB-TN is serving as a pilot case experience and assessment test-bed to expand strategies for the entire Appalachian region and other rural environments in the future.

## 2 Statement of Need

The Appalachian region has traditionally faced challenging economic, social, and cultural conditions that have adversely affected the population living in these areas (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2010; Mehra, 2014; Scruggs, 2010). Rural residents in the Appalachian region additionally face limited financial opportunities, extreme information poverty and unemployment, low information literacy levels and educational attainment, a lack of access to information technology resources, and other unique debilitating environmental circumstances (American Library Association Office for Literacy and Outreach Services, 2011; Mehra et al., 2014). Rural libraries have a strong potential role to play in economic

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<sup>1</sup> The U. S. Bureau of the Census defines “rural” as areas with fewer than 2,500 people and open territory (Economic Research Service, 2007). *The Encyclopedia of Rural America* defines the related concept of “nonmetropolitan” counties to describe the spread of housing developments outside the boundaries of metro areas that have no cities with as many as 50,000 residents (Rathge, 1997, p. 627), in addition to being non-urbanized (Office of Management and Budget, 1998). The word “rural” in this paper is used with regard to both the meanings.

development and sustainable economic viability of the Appalachian region (Mehra and Singh, 2015; Real, Bertot, and Jaeger, 2014).

### 3 PLSB-TN Summary Description

The overall project includes the following phases over the two-year period: *Phase 1*: Collecting quantitative and qualitative data about the roles of rural public libraries in Tennessee from the small business community and librarian staff stakeholder groups; *Phase 2*: Developing a blueprint of a *Public Library Small Business Toolkit* and a strategic action plan for its operationalization and implementation based on feedback of key partners. The project is serving as a pilot case experience and assessment test-bed for implementation at a national levels in all rural communities. The intended project audience is small businesses, rural library staff and managers/directors, library and information science (LIS) educators and students, rural economic council and chambers of commerce members, and small business entrepreneurs.

The following are some potential benefits:

- (1) *Rural small business community*: Both quantitative and qualitative data collected from small businesses about their experiences during economic crises and their involvement in the PLSB-TN process will help develop strategic partnerships with rural libraries.
- (2) *Rural library level*: Developing a blueprint of the *Public Library Small Business Toolkit* and a preliminary strategic plan for its operationalization and implementation will help Appalachian rural libraries and others reach out into the small business community and extend their role to provide meaningful and valuable services for them.
- (3) *Educational program level*: Action research experiences in the PLSB-TN will get integrated into the LIS classroom/curriculum and shared at local, regional, and national levels that will help train future professionals to provide better services in these areas.
- (4) *National level*: Experiences during this research planning grant activities are being shared in conferences and meetings of professional associations and published in professional peer-reviewed journals and monographs to inform and shape current practice of strategies, programs, and services that strengthen ties between public libraries and small businesses. The blueprint of the *Public Library Small Business Toolkit* and preliminary strategic action plan will provide initial versions of a product to be developed further and include appropriate resources and best practices. PLSB-TN will have an impact at regional and national levels serving as a pilot experience to expand using similar strategies for the entire Appalachian region based on availability of additional funding in the future.

### 4 Project Design

The PLSB-TN goal is to research the role of rural public libraries play in economic development and economic growth based on the needs, expectations, and experiences of small businesses and rural public libraries with a focus on Tennessee as a pilot case setting. The project objectives to achieve this goal are:

Objective 1: Based on the perspectives of Tennessee's small businesses, what are their information needs, expectations, and experiences and what past and current role have rural public libraries played in assisting these agencies towards economic development and economic growth?

Objective 2: Collect feedback from Tennessee's rural public libraries regarding existing services and programs they provide to small businesses.

Objective 3: Based on the data collected from the research (as above) a blueprint towards informing the design and development of a *Public Library Small Business Toolkit* is getting proposed.

### 5 Community Partnerships in the PLSB-TN

Table 1 identifies the community partnerships in the PLSB-TN that have been significant to achieve the various project objectives (so far). In addition, the PLSB-TN partners have played a major role in various grant activities and include representative of Tennessee's: 1) Blount County Public Library, Maryville (<http://www.blountlibrary.org/>); 2) Clinch River Regional Library, Clinton (<http://sos.tn.gov/products/tsla/clinch-river-regional-library>); 3) Holston River Regional Library, Johnson City (<http://sos.tn.gov/products/tsla/holston-river-regional-library>); 4) Sevier County Public Library System, Sevierville (<https://www.facebook.com/SevierCountyPublicLibrarySystem/>). These agency representatives

and others have formed a PLSB-TN Advisory Board that assisted in developing data collection protocols, distributing surveys to small businesses and public libraries in their regions, and identifying interview participants. They are also providing feedback from small businesses via their community affiliations and librarian groups to develop drafts of the blueprint of the *Public Library Small Business Toolkit* into a strategic action plan.

Sr. No.	Project Activities	Partners
1.	Quantitative and qualitative data collection from representatives of Tennessee's small business community about their information needs, information challenges, use of information resources, and how rural public libraries can assist them in managing their small business.	Tennessee' small businesses; Members' from Tennessee's Chambers of Commerce representing its nine regions; Representatives of Tennessee's Small Business and Economic Development Councils and related agencies.
2.	Quantitative and qualitative data collection from representatives of Tennessee's rural public libraries regarding existing services and programs they provide to small businesses.	Tennessee's rural public librarians and staff; Members of the Tennessee State Library and Archives; Members of state, regional, and local library associations; State library data coordinators and others.
3.	Community feedback and analysis of the draft blueprint of the <i>Public Library Small Business Toolkit</i> to develop a strategic action plan for its operationalization and implementation.	The PLSB-TN Advisory Board consists of project partner representatives. It also includes: 1) Teri T. Brahams, Executive Director, Economic and Workforce Development, Pellissippi State Community College ( <a href="http://www.pstcc.edu/bcs/about.php#.VmSs0b_nqT9">http://www.pstcc.edu/bcs/about.php#.VmSs0b_nqT9</a> ); 2) Tom Davis, Dayton City Library Board of Trustees Chair, Clyde W. Roddy Public Library ( <a href="http://www.daytontn.net/library.php">http://www.daytontn.net/library.php</a> ); 3) Tammi Ford IOM, Vice President, Blount Partnership ( <a href="http://www.BlountPartnership.com">www.BlountPartnership.com</a> ); 4) Virginia Hardwick, Market Development Manager, StaffSolutions and Workforce Development MFG; 5) Meg Harrison, Library Director, Clinton Public Library ( <a href="http://clintonpubliclibrary.org/">http://clintonpubliclibrary.org/</a> ); 5) Kira Kirk, Director, Sweetwater Public Library ( <a href="http://www.sweetwaterpubliclibrary.org/">http://www.sweetwaterpubliclibrary.org/</a> ), 6) Lauren Long, Librarian; 7) Marissa Snead. Systems Business Coordinator and HR Sevier County Public Library Systems ( <a href="https://www.facebook.com/SevierCountyPublicLibrarySystem">https://www.facebook.com/SevierCountyPublicLibrarySystem</a> ).

Table 1. Community partnerships in the PLSB-TN.

## 6 Conclusion

Expected outcomes of the PLSB-TN include:

- (1) Providing generalizable data on how rural public library practice empowers communities.
- (2) Developing a blueprint and preliminary strategic action plan based on datasets systematically collected from the small business and rural library communities towards economic development and economic growth.
- (3) Laying the foundation for advancing study of the expanding role of public libraries on economic development.

The role of community partnerships has been significant in conducting the various PLSB activities and moving forward towards generating maximum impact and achieving project outcomes. The collaborative work will help inform policy formulation with a vital e-government role public libraries serve. The synthesis of research can also inform how public library and other stakeholders in rural environments may pool resources, plan jointly, and look across needs to achieve economies of scale, better services, and more resilient communities.

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