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Pathways to Prosperity Conference Blends Technology and Facilitation to Engage Leaders Statewide

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Abstract

Pathways to Prosperity (P2P) is a statewide economic development leadership conference that is hosted by Washington State University Extension (WSUE) and involves use of a unique hybrid delivery model to reach rural communities and revive economies. For P2P, WSUE uses technology to connect multiple sites simultaneously to provide a webinar featuring a national expert. Well-designed and adaptable activities facilitated by a local team address issues and opportunities introduced by the speaker. Regional leaders and stakeholders participate at local sites, allowing them to leverage the knowledge gained by applying it to their community goals and aspirations.

Keywords: conference model, community engagement, program implementation, economic development, workforce development

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Introduction

Reaching out to, and gaining conference participation from, leaders and constituents in multiple locations—especially in rural communities—is a challenge. Washington State University Extension (WSUE) addresses this challenge with Pathways to Prosperity (P2P), a statewide economic development leadership conference. P2P is achieved through an innovative distributed conference model by which a keynote is webcast simultaneously to regional sites and leveraged by site facilitators to guide local leaders in taking relevant action. Created initially as a method for addressing economic development topics, P2P is suited to any topic that requires local, regional, and/or statewide dialogue and problem solving. Our strategic approaches to creating tools for, preparing, and delivering the conference have helped hundreds of participants gain critical skills and knowledge that otherwise can be difficult to obtain due to limited time, long distances between communities, and tight budgets (Rozier Rich et al., 2011). WSUE's P2P is a proven, scalable, replicable model that helps individuals and sites overcome these

barriers and offers the benefits of a statewide conference without requiring rural business and community leaders to travel to a single venue. Capitalizing on Extension staff skills, abilities, and programming, P2P combines existing resources, readily available technology, and subject matter expertise, resulting in meaningful collaboration among natural partners in local communities and engagement by leaders in multiple locations.

Conference Format Design and Support

Extension has a history of assessing current issues and designing hands-on and distance educational programs to address them (Diem, Hino, Martin, & Meisenbach, 2011; Robinson & Poling, 2017; Rozier Rich et al., 2011). P2P leverages these skills with two core principles: connecting multiple sites simultaneously with technology and engaging local participants through intentionally designed activities that allow communities to turn knowledge into action. This conference model requires the combination of an attentive statewide planning team and a strong local support team. These teams play an important role in addressing three components of the conference:

- program and activity design;

- site selection, management, and support, including technology; and

- marketing and outreach.

Program and activity design is managed by an Extension-led planning team in collaboration with federal, state, and local agency partners, such as U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA-RD), Association of Washington Cities, Washington Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, and local economic development councils. This team chooses a topic and selects national speakers who provide content applicable to all sites (Hansen, Babine, & Viebrock, 2015). Following topic and speaker selection, innovative training materials are developed (Table 1). Exercises are based on the principles of adult learning (Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005) and deploy the use of group discussion, problem solving, case studies, and/or simulation exercises (Ota, DiCarlo, Burts, Laird, & Gioe, 2006). Sites are encouraged to adapt exercises to address local issues and engage regional partners and stakeholders in order to highlight their resources and offer positive examples.

Table 1.
Examples of Pathways to Prosperity Exercises for Rural Economic Development

Activity	Activity description
Find Your Local Entrepreneurs	A scavenger hunt–style activity identifies local entrepreneurs, creating a contact list for future work.
Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Brainstorm	This exercise identifies barriers to entry in business climate, infrastructure and assistance, and ways to support entrepreneurs.
Local Entrepreneurs Speak Up	A panel highlights existing businesses and identifies local barriers, challenges, and opportunities from an entrepreneur's perspective.
Developing a Regional Resource Guide: Where Are Our Services	Participants engage in a group discussion and brainstorm about business resources that are

and Resources?	currently available, using a grid format.
Improving Our Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Action Plans	Action steps related to the previously identified barriers and challenges are determined.

Site selection and support is critical to ensuring a geographic distribution of sites so that driving distances are short and regional resources can be shared. In addition to obtaining location assistance from Extension offices, we reach out to other partners, including chambers of commerce, economic development councils, and libraries. Engaged and organized local support is key to the success of these events.

Local team support tools are developed and delivered by Extension and include preconference job descriptions, checklists, detailed agendas with scripts, facilitator guides, phone coaching, and webinar training for local team members (Table 2). Each site team includes three key roles: site manager, group facilitator, and technology coordinator.

Table 2.

Local Team Roles, Attributes, and Responsibilities

Role	Attribute(s)	Responsibilities
Site manager	Ability to engage regional stakeholders (i.e., businesses, agencies, institutions, elected officials, and community leaders) to prepare for and host the event	Conduct promotion and outreach, procure site, locate local topic resources, and encourage attendance
Group facilitator	Strong facilitation skills and ability to adjust or enhance activities to match the size and knowledge of the audience	Engage audience participation in predesigned activities
Technology coordinator	Ability to act as a single point of contact and knowledge of Internet, projection, and sound capabilities	Secure necessary hardware and software, ensure sufficient broadband, participate in preconference training, conduct a preconference tech check, and manage the technology during the event

Marketing and outreach for P2P is more complex than that for a traditional event because it includes statewide general outreach and coordinated regional site promotion. Extension manages statewide outreach to media, agencies, and associations, driving members of these entities to a central conference website that provides site location information and online registration. WSUE creates templates (e.g., flyers, news releases, social media) with consistent branding and content. These templates are customizable to allow for highlighting regional partners and including local event details.

Impacts and Evaluation Results

In 2018, 79% of the participants agreed that attending a local conference was preferable to participation in a large, one-site program. Benefits include low costs, efficient use of time, and strong community member attendance that results in local networking and partnership development. Evaluation data from the 2018 P2P conference show positive marks for the conference content and delivery model (Table 3). Two positive impacts realized by P2P partner organizations as a result of the 2015 conference are illustrative of the program overall. The Association of Washington Cities offered Certificate of Municipal Leadership credits for more than 30 elected officials participating across the state, and the USDA-RD Washington State director offered this assessment of P2P: "Our partnership with WSUE has proven to be a game changer for outreach and project implementation in the communities we serve. Our participation in the development and delivery of P2P allowed USDA-RD staff to engage directly with potential borrowers while gaining valuable learning in the field of rural entrepreneurship."

Table 3.

Evaluation Responses from the 2018 Pathways to Prosperity Conference ($n = 158$)

Evaluation variable	%
Topic[a]	
Facility	99.3%
Technology	97.3%
Webinar format	96.0%
Local resources	94.7%
Support materials	92.0%
National speaker's relevance to your community	91.8%
State leader's relevance to your community	95.2%
Usefulness of your local exercise and discussion	94.4%
Question[b]	
Did your group develop any action plans?	41.4%
Do you plan to stay involved and engaged?	55.4%

[a]Percentages indicate proportions of respondents who rated the variable good or very good. [b]Percentages indicate the proportions of respondents who answered yes.

The P2P format is replicable, adaptable, and scalable. P2P has been offered multiple times by WSUE (Table 4) and replicated in another state. P2P is scalable, leading organizers to be able to accommodate various numbers of sites and participants at each site and to adapt the event for implementation in any size community. During the 2017 Governor's Summit, site attendance ranged from 8 to 72, and the event was held in communities with populations of 350 to 213,000.

Table 4.

Site and Attendance Summary of Washington Pathways to Prosperity Conferences

Year and topic	Number of sites	Number of participants
2013 WSUE Entrepreneur Ecosystem	11	187
2015 WSUE Entrepreneur Ecosystem	18	301
2017 WSUE and the Governor's Office Summit on Workforce Development	27	1,201
2018 WSUE Workforce Development	21	542

Note. WSUE = Washington State University Extension.

Conclusion

P2P is a high-impact, high-tech, high-touch, and low-cost model for statewide conferences, with particular benefits accrued to rural communities that often are unable to locally access gatherings of such a caliber. The model has allowed WSUE to lead effective events without requiring local topic expertise. As WSU Wahkiakum County Extension director Carrie Backman noted, "Our rural community does not 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."

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