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A University and Community Partnership for
Enhancing Rural Business Performance and Sustainability: The Iowa Retail Initiative

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Introduction. Iowa's rural downtowns and independent retailers are a struggling and underserved sector of the state's economy. Iowa's retail sector accounts for 5.8% of the state's GDP and provides 11% of employment (Iowa Community Indicators Program, 2015). Although the number of independently owned, rural businesses has increased in the past 10 years, there is still a critical shortage of entrepreneurship in many rural communities. These observations parallel state level issues and needs identified throughout rural America. Iowa, for example, is continually seeking ways to develop and enhance the economic climate of its rural communities in the face of agricultural and global market change (Iowa Economic Development Authority, 2015). Rural communities and businesses are in need of fresh approaches aimed at enhancing business and community growth, entrepreneurship, resilient response to change, and sustainability.

Iowa State University (ISU) currently provides some assistance to rural retail business entities, but efforts have been fragmented and inconsistent. A partnership focused on coordinated retail outreach was proposed to better communicate the value of ISU's efforts and create greater impacts for Iowa communities. Effective partnerships between communities, universities, businesses, residents, and government entities are critical to community growth and innovation. Such collaborations allow for greater reach of programming and offerings, sharing of knowledge and expertise, and maximizing of resources and impacts for all stakeholders (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Research indicates a number of benefits can develop from successful university-community partnerships such as: new learning insights for students, better community practice for involved businesses, career opportunities and enhancement for involved individuals, improved quality of teaching and learning experiences, increased opportunities for student employment, additional visibility of programming and access to funding and information for all involved parties, higher rates of business start-up and commercialization for the community and university, and enhanced academic outputs for faculty (Amabile, Patterson, & Wojcik, 2001).

Project Model and Approach. To address the need for a more coordinated approach to rural retail business assistance, we proposed and received significant funding for a university-community partnership model called the Iowa Retail Initiative (IRI). The IRI unites university researchers, faculty, Extension professionals, students, and community partners to fulfill the university's land grant vision of combining science, technology, and creativity to improve the quality of life in Iowa by creating thriving rural communities. The IRI provides a means for collaboration across university boundaries to assess business/community needs and provide targeted assistance to retail, apparel, and other fiber-related businesses in areas such as: financials, management/HR, marketing, promotion, customer development, technology/multi-channel, visual merchandising, assortment planning, store design, brand management, downtown environment, streetscape design,

and community branding. The IRI approach also develops integrated rural business assistance materials and provides train the trainer modules and workshops. For example, a one-day Retail Academy was developed for community partners (i.e., County Extension Programs, Chambers of Commerce, Economic Development Associations) to better assist rural businesses and communities with their retail needs. Specific programming approaches embedded in the community partnership model include: 1) Community-based student consulting projects for retail, apparel-related, service, and hospitality businesses, 2) Development of regional retail advisory network, 3) Social media and web-based training materials, 4) Train the trainer materials for Extension, Chambers of Commerce and other retail business assistance specialists, and 5) Retail Academy workshops for community leaders and business owners in the community setting.

Results/Outcomes. Being a part of the solution for Iowa retailers may be one of the greatest impacts of IRI. With numerous organizations assisting small businesses, ISU faculty and Extension and Outreach are uniquely placed as a viable network for access by Iowa retailers. As IRI works with other universities, SBDCs, SCORE chapters, and Main Street Iowa, we will evolve as a valuable partner with unique services to offer Iowa retailers. The development of the IRI leverages ISU and Extension and Outreach resources and networks to provide a model and the tools needed to gain optimal benefit from outreach program efforts. This university-community partnership enriches the quality of business assistance that can be offered to rural Iowa businesses and communities while providing enhanced learning experiences for students.

Conclusion and Implications. The IRI is a model university-community partnership program that can be replicated in other states by networking with Extension or other community business assistance groups. The IRI model strengthens the accessibility of assistance for rural retail and apparel/fiber-related, pure service, and hospitality businesses as well as the scope and impact of retail and technical assistance provided to Iowa communities. The IRI model not only provides a vehicle to address rural business needs, but also includes methods for enhancing student learning through ISU faculty-led student outreach teams. Students bridge the gap between the classroom and community by learning directly from and working with business owner mentors, creating a win-win situation for students, ISU, Extension and Outreach, and Iowa communities.

References

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