

Fourteen Tips for Cultivating your Entrepreneurial Community

What is an Entrepreneurial Community?

An entrepreneurial community is a community that intentionally acts to cultivate and support entrepreneurs. Focusing on building business and economic development from within is a key alternative strategy to industrial recruitment, which seeks to draw enterprise from outside of the community. In fact, it has proven to be more effective at job creation in more rural places that do not have the infrastructure to draw business and industry.

So, what makes an entrepreneurial community? Quite simply, they maintain the systems and processes necessary for fostering entrepreneurship, beyond physical infrastructures such as incubators and high-speed Internet. They also focus on “soft” infrastructures that are needed to support entrepreneurship: educational institutions that teach problem solving, supportive local government that creates effective policies, engaged community volunteers that improve the community and support local business, and well-networked support institutions and organizations who coordinate education, technical assistance, financing, mentoring, and networking.

This systems approach to community entrepreneurship requires a broad perspective of entrepreneurship, recognizing that multiple dimensions of a community contribute to an entrepreneur’s success.

Characteristics of Entrepreneurial Communities

While we may not classify all communities as “entrepreneurial”, most communities have some entrepreneurial characteristics that can be identified and nurtured, and perhaps developed into a legitimate and coherent strategy for local and regional economic development. It is helpful to think of these entrepreneurial qualities and characteristics along continuum of increasing awareness and commitment to entrepreneurial capacity as part of the community’s strategy to redefine and transform itself. Those characteristics include:

- Capacity and willingness to work together on community goals
- Leadership that can be mobilized for organizing community efforts
- Agreement that a difference can be made in the community that will impact its economic future
- Existence of entrepreneurs and potential entrepreneurs in the community
- Business friendly environment that encourages new business starts and that allows business expansion with a minimum of red tape and bureaucracy
- Nourishment of entrepreneurial activity through civic recognition and support
- Business and entrepreneurial development including training, mentors, networks, and other resources available for existing and potential entrepreneurs
- Financing support through community, regional and local investor resources
- Local and regional networks for business growth and expansion and for specialized assistance in such areas as marketing and international trade
- Civic entrepreneurship that redefines and transforms the community’s business culture



Fourteen Ways Communities Can Foster Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial communities must leverage resources to compete in the global marketplace. By sharing resources, communities and entrepreneurs can greatly reduce the costs of supporting and conducting business. Further, communities can expand the pool of human capital that can be leveraged by collaborating with other communities. Lastly, they can realize new opportunities to build off each other's products and services. The following are ten simple strategies that can help entrepreneurial communities leverage local and regional assets.

1. Create a vested public: By working together, communities can engage a broader public that is vested in entrepreneurship. Community leaders can start by engaging businesses, institutions, and residents in discussion about key needs and opportunities for supporting entrepreneurial growth.

2. Compile information about complimentary regional assets: If well marketed and coordinated, complimentary regional assets—natural amenities like trails and waterways, as well as historic and cultural amenities—can be used to draw more visitors, customers, and/or clients to a place to support local enterprises. Communities can start by inventorying assets.



3. Expand the pool of human capital that can be leveraged: Every community maintains a pool individuals, associations, organizations, and institution that maintain a wealth of skills, resources, hopes, dreams, desires, etc. Through collaboration and cooperation, communities can work together to share these resources instead of duplicating activities and functions.

4. Develop Information Directories: Universities, agencies, industry, and non-profits often maintain listings of business and economic development resources available throughout their respective region or state.

5. Share resources: Look for new ways for institutions, as well as businesses, to share resources. This can greatly reduce the costs for facilities, infrastructures, coordinating staff, technical expertise, etc.

6. Provide opportunities for entrepreneurs to build off each others business ideas/ventures: Businesses that perform complimentary functions invariably add to each others productivity. As an example, a recreational fishing outfitter can help to draw tourists who might also purchase dried foods from a local grocery store. Communities can help to foster linkages between entrepreneurs to help them to capitalize on each others assets.

7. Get the political powers-to-be to notice: Projects and activities that demonstrate multi-community collaboration are more likely to catch the eye of legislators, state and federal agencies, and other policy-makers, thus providing enhanced opportunities to leverage public support for entrepreneurial ventures.

8. Catch the eye of grantors and supporting organizations/agencies: Many granting agencies/organizations give preference to projects that demonstrate community and regional collaboration – this enables grantors to show broader impact for their dollars spent.

9. Utilize the media: Newspapers, circulars, community newsletters, public access cable, and public radio can be effective vehicles for raising awareness of entrepreneurship challenges and opportunities, as well as for sharing of stories of what community-entrepreneurial ventures have worked in other communities/regions.

10. Provide of hands-on trainings and workshops to entrepreneurs and to community leaders: Cooperative Extension, Manufacturing Extension Programs, Business Incubators, Small Business Development Centers, and other entities, are often willing to sponsor and implement workshops to provide community leaders, as well as entrepreneurs, with the skills and tools for strengthening business and economic opportunities at the community level.

11. Incorporate community entrepreneurship principles into K-12 curriculum: While adults are often set in their ways, youth tend to be more impressionable with new ideas and concepts. By introducing youth to entrepreneurship skills at an early age—skills such as problem solving, customer inquiry, and iterative idea development—they will develop stronger skills and understanding that may help them to start new ventures later in life.

12. Invest in existing entrepreneurs: The best messengers to convey the importance of entrepreneurship as a strategy for building community wealth are the entrepreneurs themselves. By providing them with resources to be successful, communities are actually creating good messengers who can draw from real-life experiences to convey to build the case for entrepreneurship.

13. Support the Arts: New research suggests that not only do the arts contribute directly to the economy, but there is a spillover effect that may be even more important. The design orientation that artists exhibit trickles out to benefit other sectors of the economy, thereby improving the products and services of all businesses.

14. Invest in Broadband Infrastructure: Broadband is one of the biggest factors in determining how well communities are able to capitalize on transformations taking place in the global economy. Without high speed Internet access, communities will not be able to attract key economic sectors such as legal and financial services, technology, marketing, technology, manufacturing, etc., let alone have success at retaining the enterprises that they currently maintain.

Sampling of Resources for Supporting Entrepreneurship in New Hampshire and Beyond

While most communities maintain a wealth of resources for supporting new and existing entrepreneurs, all communities can benefit by tapping into resources from outside of the community. Some external resources are physical in nature, such as grants, use of facilities, or infrastructure. Others are human in nature, such as technical assistance, information, and administration. Below are some common resources that communities might consider utilizing to strengthen their entrepreneurship infrastructure:

- US Small Business Development Center (business planning, development, and maintenance assistance): <https://www.nhsbdc.org/about>
- Local Chambers of Commerce of Commerce. See New Hampshire Directory at: <https://www.visitnh.gov/seasonal-trips/getting-here/chambers-of-commerce>
- Community Development Corporations. To learn more about CDC's, go to: <https://community-wealth.org/strategies/panel/cdcs/index.html>
- Economic Development Corporations/Councils. To learn more about EDCs in New Hampshire's Economic Development Corporations/Councils, go to: <https://www.nhallianceonline.com/>
- Regional Planning Agencies. To learn more about New Hampshire's Regional Planning Commissions, go to: <https://www.nh.gov/osi/resource-library/regional.htm>
- Community Loan Funds and Micro-Credit Providers (NH Community Loan Fund, Community Development Finance Authority, North Country Investment Corporation, Hannah Grimes, etc.)
- US-Small Business Administration (loans, legal/regulatory information, etc.). For more information about US-SBA, go to: <http://www.sba.gov/>

- State Departments of Economic/Business Development. See National Directory of State offices at: <https://www.eda.gov/resources/> and New Hampshire Department at <http://www.dbea.nh.gov/>
- Municipal Economic Development Departments
- US Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Program (financing, small grants, technical assistance, etc). For more information, go to: <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/>
- Business Incubators (startup assistance, infrastructure, etc.). See NH Business and Economic Affairs Directory at: <https://www.nheconomy.com/start/free-business-advice/business-incubators>
- Maker Spaces (shared tools, equipment, space, and resources): <https://www.nhbr.com/list-of-nh-makerspaces/>
- New Hampshire Charitable Foundation (entrepreneurship fund, networks, etc.): <https://www.nhcf.org/>
- Non-profit Organizations that Assist with Business Planning and Development. (e.g. NH Service Corps of Retired Executives: <https://scorenh.org/>)



State and municipal incentive programs for business/entrepreneurial development:

- Opportunity Zones (See NH Business and Economic Affairs resource on opportunity zones): <https://www.nheconomy.com/grow/opportunity-zones>
- Tax Increment Financing (TIF): See following factsheet for description of TIF's: www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/documents/Tif_forWeb.pdf

Other Education, training, and capacity building programs for supporting entrepreneurs:

- High School Career Technical Education (CTE) Programs: <https://www.ccsnh.edu/>
- Community Colleges. For more information New Hampshire's community colleges, go to: <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/>
- University-based Business Development Training Programs and Continuing Education Providers (e.g. UNH Professional Development & Training, Magnusson Center at Dartmouth College, etc.)
- Private Professional Training Programs (e.g. chef school, photography institute, job-shadowing programs, apprenticeship or internship programs, etc.)
- Energizing Entrepreneurs Program (E2): <http://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/>

About the Author

Charlie leads UNH Cooperative Extension's Community & Economic Development department, whose mission is to cultivate civic leaders; foster participation in community decision-making; revitalize downtowns; and help communities leverage resources to grow the local and regional economy. In his capacity as Program Leader, he works with his Extension colleagues to provide civic leaders with training, educational resources, and technical assistance with economic development, business engagement, leadership, and tourism and recreation.

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