

UT releases groundbreaking study on state of economy in Appalachia

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A strong community is not unlike a computer. It needs good hardware—transportation, housing and infrastructure—and software—education, health care, and workforce development.

A groundbreaking study conducted by University of Tennessee, Knoxville, researchers sheds light on the strengths and weaknesses of communities in Appalachia.

The report, “Strategies for Economic Improvement in Appalachia’s Distressed Rural Counties,” was conducted for the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), a regional economic development agency that represents a partnership of federal, state, and local government. It provides an understanding of the challenges confronting economic and community development efforts in ten rural counties and explains ways local governments, agencies, and community organizations plan and respond to challenging issues. It details how five formerly distressed communities improved their local economies and illustrates the issues confronting counties still classified as distressed.

A webinar with authors, representatives from the ARC, and Appalachian community leaders to discuss the report will be held in the coming weeks. Details related to the webinar will be announced soon.

“We hope this report will be useful to community leaders in comparable areas who can draw upon what others have done and upon our recommendations to form their own successful strategies,” said Tim

Ezzell, research scientist and lead author of the study. Dayton Lambert, agricultural economist at UT's Institute of Agriculture, and Eric Ogle, research associate, co-authored the report.

Researchers visited each community, met with local officials, facilitated discussions with community stakeholders, and collected qualitative and econometric data. The report examined factors such as location, transportation-focused development efforts, [communication](#) infrastructure, education, coal and other energy resources, and social barriers. The results are a mixed bag of success stories and challenges.

For instance, Lawrence County, Alabama, can attribute much of its transformation to aerospace investments in nearby Huntsville and Decatur, Alabama. Likewise, in Morgan County, Ohio, a business incubator provides students with vocational training and promises to hatch business ideas. Morgan and Bell counties in Kentucky, as well as Pendleton County, West Virginia, have made strides in promoting adventure tourism by forming strategic partnerships with government, non-profit organizations, and industry.

Location is often a key factor in a county's success. Non-distressed counties in the study generally benefited from proximity to growing urban areas. Greene County, Pennsylvania, for example, lies between the cities of Pittsburg and Morgantown, West Virginia. Local attitudes, however, may also play a role. Officials in Avery County, North Carolina, worked with non-profits and local colleges to promote entrepreneurship, spurring business development. Residents of Lawrence County, Alabama, credited pride associated with local contributions to the moon landings in helping change local perceptions about education and cooperation.

The study also points to the importance of schools and higher education institutions to the development of the region. Improvements in local

schools and the expansion of community colleges have played an essential role in boosting local economies. The study also found partnerships with colleges and universities bring important benefits to Appalachian communities.

“These institutions bring skills and new ideas that help energize local efforts,” Ezzell said. “Interestingly, the size of the institution doesn’t always matter. Small local colleges can, in their own way, be as beneficial as a major research university.”

Appalachia has made dramatic progress in the past fifty years. ARC has played a crucial role in this transformation, according to Ezzell.

“Improvements in the region’s ‘hardware’ have contributed to this progress,” he said. “As we continue with these improvements, we also need to invest in the region’s ‘software.’”

The report made several recommendations to ARC to continue progress. For example, communities and agencies at all levels of government should make rural broadband access a priority; small counties should consider shared government services and combined marketing and development programs.

“These recommendations are based on the case study findings and observations by local leaders and stakeholders,” Ezzell said. “It is our hope that they will be taken under consideration by ARC and leaders of rural Appalachian counties and other rural counties in America, because these findings can be applicable to them. These findings are important—albeit daunting—changes to turn the tide in these communities.”

Established by an act of Congress in 1965, ARC is composed of the governors of the 13 Appalachian states and a federal co-chair, who is

appointed by the president. Local participation is provided through multi-county local development districts. For more information, visit the [ARC website](#).

The full report is available [here](#).

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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