

REGION TURNS TO AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT TO OVERCOME ECONOMIC
CHALLENGES FROM LOSS OF TOBACCO & TEXTILES

SMALL BUSINESS CENTER & EXTENSION PARTNER ON AG ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Vance-Granville Community College (VGCC) serves a region roughly an hour north of Raleigh – Vance, Granville, Franklin and Warren counties – that was hard hit by both the tobacco settlement agreement and the loss of American textile firms from North Carolina. The region suffers from a high average poverty rate around 27% and unemployment rates (averaging 8.5%) much higher than the state average. For several decades, the region’s farm economy was between 75-90% invested in tobacco, with a few other row crops; when the tobacco industry came to the settlement agreement, it wasn’t just the farms that were lost, but also the J.B. Taylor manufacturing plant. Coinciding with this, two large textile plants, Harriet & Henderson Yarn, closed as well, leaving hundreds seeking new employment.

Yet those challenges didn’t stop Kyle Burwell and Tanya Weary from trying to figure out new ways to help communities get back to work in their region. Kyle coordinates Human Resource Development (HRD) for the college, while Tanya directs the Small Business Center (SBC). College leadership has been supportive of devoting resources to agricultural economic development in the largely rural region, which is well-positioned to access markets in the Triangle and Triad regions.



Farmers on a visit to CEFS Research Farm in Goldsboro. Courtesy Kyle Burwell.

VGCC was one of the first community colleges to work with the NC Tobacco Trust Fund through the SkillUp program, which trained former tobacco and textile employees in new job skills. That background has shaped many of the programs they run today, from workforce development to training, and the finding helped cover costs for tuition, fees, books, and materials.

Now, the college is faced with new challenges, and is working to diversify their funding streams for such programs while still working to help alleviate what has become a generational problem of underemployment and poverty in the region. Kyle is working on revamping SkillUp to bring in new workforce

development programs, and Tanya is working within the NC REAL curriculum program to train new entrepreneurs and support small businesses in expanding and growing. Together, they pursued funding from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Rural Community College Alliance (RCCA) to launch a new program: Cultivating and Connecting Agricultural Communities.

DEVELOPING A PROGRAM TO MEET FARMER NEEDS

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In itself, the program was a partnership between the Small Business Center, directed by Tanya, and the Human Resource Development/Workforce Development Program, directed by Kyle. Taking these two leading resources and merging them together allowed them to reach out to unemployed, underemployed, and unskilled workers while also offering business assistance, encouraging entrepreneurship as a viable career change.



For small agriculture, that approach became the foundation for an Ag Entrepreneurship Program, which relied on the NC REAL curriculum and a partnership with local Cooperative Extension offices to train farmers in business skills needed to start or scale up small and mid-sized farms. The course covers topics such as business planning, marketing, financials, licensing, and other key components of a successful entrepreneurial strategy.

The course is taught by a farmer certified in the NC REAL curriculum – Carrie Harvey, of Harvey Hills Farm, a family-owned farm and registered nursery located in Oxford.

"The farmer-to-farmer learning component is really important," Kyle notes. "This makes it real for farmers, and they often learn as much from each other as they do from the materials. Having a farmer teach the program is really a great way to encourage learning on a peer-to-peer basis."

The program coincided with the opening of the new Vance County Farmers' Market building, a direct response to the growth of local agriculture and the demand for broader access to local foods. Many farmers were already participating in the farmers' market, but soon realized that they could do more to meet the new demand.

"We are focused on helping people understand how to make this into a business – a successful one," said Tanya.

VGCC runs two of these programs per year under a two-year grant from USDA and RCCA; the programs take place in different locations to accommodate farmers from across the region. They also supplement the business course with an option to attend the heavy equipment operator course that is required to meet safety standards at many farms and packing houses, through SBC at a low cost.

Kyle and Tanya worked closely with Extension to develop the program and understand what resources each agency could offer to the farmers in their region. Extension helped especially in finding speakers and guest instructors for particular classes that weren't in the SBC's areas of expertise. "We haven't really felt any competition or tension with our Cooperative Extension folks," Tanya says. "Everyone is busy, so we all try to work together. We are just happy to find places we can refer our growers to so they can get the support they need!"

FOLLOWING LEARNING WITH ACTION

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VGCC didn't just want to provide the educational tools farmers needed to scale up or expand their businesses, but to help them take direct action to do so. They put a special program focus on finding lenders who worked with small farmers, helping them with access to capital, and they also put additional emphasis on something many farms need to enter wholesale markets: GAP Certification.

GAP certification is a voluntary audit program administered by USDA that requires farmers to follow best practices for food safety when harvesting, packing, washing, and storing fresh produce. The program requires an all-day training in food safety principles, the creation of a food safety plan, and an on-farm audit to ensure that all practices are being implemented.



Kyle and Tanya coordinated funding for an additional incentive for completing the Ag Entrepreneurship Program: students who had been enrolled in either the Ag Entrepreneurship or Heavy Equipment Operator courses were eligible to receive up to \$900 each towards GAP certification costs. The grant funds are used to pay for audits and the training needed for audits. The NC Growing Together Project, housed at the Center for Environmental Farming Systems, provided a one-day workshop on GAP

certification that helped participants write a model food safety plan, understand what to expect during an audit, and prepare their farm's infrastructure and practices to help ensure compliance, and local Cooperative Extension offices provided additional training and support to participants.

CULTIVATING AND GROWING FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Although the Ag Entrepreneurship Program is now established under its two-year funding, Tanya and Kyle aren't finished. They're looking for new ways to continue reaching out to help the region find new opportunities for success – and relying on these new partnerships they have built along the way to help them get there.

"We want our communities to know that we are here as a support service," Tanya says. "There's a collective interest in all our counties in growing and rebuilding, and we see real opportunities for that through agriculture. If we keep building these kinds of partnerships and new resources, we can keep growing beyond this particular set of grant funding and really build on what we have already developed."

MORE INFORMATION

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NC GROWING TOGETHER PROJECT: RESILIENT LOCAL FOOD ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

LOCAL FOOD ECONOMIES INITIATIVE
Building Resilient Communities



NC GROWING TOGETHER

Connecting Local Foods
to Mainstream Markets

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Local economies benefit in a number of ways from revitalizing small agriculture and food entrepreneurship in their communities. Local governments, regional councils, and planners and economic developers have a unique opportunity to support the recruitment, retention, and expansion of area businesses through local agriculture efforts, and to build stronger and more resilient communities. NCGT supports those efforts by providing resources, and tools for local governments and small business assistance providers across the state. For more information, contact Emily Edmonds, NCGT Extension & Outreach Program Manager, at Emily.Edmonds@ncsu.edu or 828.399.0297.