

Main Street Academy

Training Volunteers and Leaders in a Community-Based Model

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What is Main Street Academy?

Main street is valued as an economic driver and it serves as a symbol of community well-being. Communities want their downtown to be attractive, economically viable and busy with people. Rural towns have suffered from disinvestment, loss of population and jobs, decline in retail due to online sales and sprawl development leading businesses to locate off main street. Small rural communities often do not have the professional capacity to maintain or revitalize their downtown. Designed for community leaders, volunteers and professionals, the three session Main Street Academy teaches main street revitalization. The academy takes place in communities in New Hampshire and Maine in different stages of revitalization. Main Street Academy components include:

- Extension staff teach, facilitate the learning and guide discussion on experiences and best practices.
- Local community leaders and volunteers serve as guest speakers and lead a walking tour to share the story of their main street revitalization.
- Topics include: business retention, vibrancy, community engagement, entrepreneurship, vacant buildings, housing, recreation and nature economy, funding & financing.
- Participants network with those in the academy and practitioners where the program is based.



Key Findings

- Main street is a symbol of health and vitality.
- Small businesses are important to main street and many business owners participate in revitalization efforts.
- The economic role of main street comes second to the role as the community center for vibrancy and civic pride.
- Communities need assistance getting started, building and maintaining momentum in main street improvement. There is a need to train volunteers and local leaders to do this work.

Implications and Next Steps

Extension Programming: In partnership with West Virginia State University, we have received a grant from the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development to explore Main Street Academy as a new initiative for Cooperative Extension in strengthening the economy, bringing vibrancy and expanding leadership in rural communities. Using a train-the-trainer approach, program staff will consider program elements to replicate or adapt for other states.

Economic and community recovery following COVID-19: The need for Main Street Academy and similar programming may have substantially increased due to the economic effects of COVID-19, especially on small, rural towns. While these effects are not fully known, employing Main Street Academy as part of a community economic development process seems likely given existing content and flexibility to add new content.



Exploring the Market for Main Street Academy

We participated in the National Science Foundation's I-Corps program to explore if Main Street Academy could be replicated in other states. Through the program, we conducted customer discovery interviews with 24 individuals who primarily represented New England cities and towns, Cooperative Extension, and funders. We asked the interviewees:

- Who values main street?
- How do main street efforts start?
- Who leads main street revitalization efforts?
- How leaders and volunteers gain skills around main street revitalization?
- How is main street connected to economic development?



Program Evaluation

47 people have participated in Main Street Academy

85% rated program as excellent through a post program online survey

Most valuable program components

- Walking tours
- Learning from other local communities
- Networking

Increased knowledge of downtown revitalization and community engagement

Participants intend to implement projects in the following themes: arts and creative economy; community engagement; finance, funding and grants; housing; leadership; recreation and nature economy; vibrancy; and volunteers.



More Information

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<https://extension.unh.edu/tags/main-street-academy>