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Leveraging KT Strategies To Address Disparities in Access To Apprenticeship Programs For Youth in Rural Communities

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Julisa Cully: Hello everyone. My name is Julisa Cully, and I am the associate director at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. I am a woman with long dark hair wearing a blue blouse and jacket. And on behalf of my co-presenters and myself, I'd like to thank you for joining us today in learning more about the youth, the Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development Program, or as we will refer to it during the presentation, RYAD. On the next slide, I'd like to share information about our grant. The contents of this training were developed under the grant from the National Institute on Disability Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research, or NIDILRR, within the Administration for Community Living. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the administration of community living, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. Okay, on the next slide are photos of the three presenters left to right. We have De Brittany Humphrey, who is a knowledge translation manager at the Institute for Community Inclusion, and she is the PI on RYAD. In the middle you have myself, and I am one of the subject matter experts on the project. And lastly, we have Madison Graulty, a Makerspace coordinator for the Wyoming Vocational Rehabilitation. DeBrittany will be presenting on KT strategies use. I will give you an overview of the project, and Madison will talk about one of the state VR agency projects in Wyoming. Next slide please.

I am going to start with a brief overview of RYAD. I do want to make a note for those of you who are not from the United States, we are going to reference vocational rehabilitation, or VR, throughout the presentation. It is the federally and state funded program that helps people with disabilities secure employment. So on the next slide, there is a diagram of a circle on the left that depicts youth with disabilities. In the center are three common barriers, internet access, transportation and availability services that restrict their access to apprenticeship opportunities. And that's represented by the circle in green on the right. So I'm going to take just a couple minutes to share some data to help tell the story of why this work is so important. In the past 10 years, the federal government has invested over $244 million to modernize, diversify, and expand registered apprenticeship programs. Only 1.3% of apprentices nationwide, self-identified as people with disabilities. Now

we know that that's an underestimate, because some individuals choose not to report. That being said, though, peoples with disabilities represent only a drop in the bucket of those benefiting from apprenticeships.

Another fact, rural communities have higher rates of youth with disabilities. 17.7% in most rural counties, compared to 11.7% in urban counties. VR caseloads have a higher rate of transition age students, approximately 40% than their urban counterparts at 31%. And youth with disabilities face 2.6 times lower rate of employment than their adult counterparts. The youth also encounter compounding barriers to accessing and benefiting from apprenticeship programs, and these include the three that I previously named, transportation, internet service availability, also limited training and education options, and high competition for entry level jobs, which are typically what our youth would be going after. Next slide please.

RYAD's primary goal is to help build the capacity of VR agencies in the United States and their partners to create apprenticeship programs for youth with disabilities in underserved communities. The diagram on the slide has three circles depicting the capacity areas we are supporting - in blue collaboration and that teal green change, and in purple evaluation. So let's start with collaboration. We are working with VRA to identify and establish new partnerships or to expand their existing ones with workforce partners such as the Department of Labor, Education, the state apprenticeship offices and businesses. As participating, VR agencies implement their projects. They are engaged in planning meetings, resource allocation, discussion, training, development, and disability and apprenticeship education. At the systems level change VR agencies are working with their workforces. They are informing how accommodations can be incorporated into the existing apprenticeship models and are helping to make systems level change within their states.

An example of a simple change that has opened the doors for youth was flexing the work training schedule and accommodations for shorter work days by extending the duration of the programs. Oftentimes apprenticeship programs have very rigid requirements. They have to do 400 hours, it has to be completed within a year and a half. And so these simple tweaks really can open the door for youth that really need those types of accommodation. Another example is providing soft skills and technical one-on-one training as a precursor to apprenticeships. And this really makes it so that the youth with disabilities are much more competitive applicants for the open slots as well as having higher rates of success once they start the apprenticeship programs. We are also supporting systems change through the RYAD Toolkit, which contains growth specific implementation tools, which then will be shared with the national VR program. And that toolkit is currently live, and the goal there is to have broader adoption of the implementation tools. Lastly, on evaluation, we are supporting evaluation capacity building by providing guidance on data measures, pre-post implementation evaluations, and sustainability planning for the agencies.

On the next slide, I'll highlight a couple of RYAD's core activities. We included a couple fun graphics showing people engaging in knowledge sharing, which

represents RYAD's three, integrated KT strategies, e-learning collaborative, the advisory groups, and the toolkit I described earlier. DeBrittany will talk a little bit more about the three strategies in more detail. I do want to note that each participating VR agency also receives individualized support from the RYAD subject matter experts like myself. We provide guidance and input on the model design, implementation strategies, and collaboration with their partners. We also, when needed, facilitate meetings and help them find and create tools and resources.

Okay, so on the next slide, this is where I'm going to kind of wrap up my piece, but we did want to share with you who we're working with. So here you have a map of the United States with a red dot on the states we are working with. While it's a small number, we are working currently with six agencies in five states, it has a good geographical representation of the Western central and eastern part of the country. The participating agencies are Arkansas Career Development Center and Rehabilitation Services, and they were brought on actually as we were writing the proposal to serve as a mentor. They have been working together to create pre-apprenticeship programs for over a decade. And one of the things for you, they don't know the VR system that well is they have come to the table much later with many agencies not even looking at that as a feasible model.

And those that have started to work really has been in the last, I would say five years. So Arkansas really was kind of ahead of the game then we're working with Idaho VR, they're still very early in design phase, and they are developing a pre-apprenticeship program to create a pipeline for registered apprenticeships within the forestry industry and their state. Maine Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired as well as their sister agency, the Division of VR, has been working with their state apprenticeship office for about five years and they are working with several registered apprenticeships on their expanding their diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

Vermont Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired is in the very early stages as well. They are consulting with various employers in IT industries to create a pre-apprenticeship program, HireAbility Vermont is working closely with state apprenticeships and existing Registered Apprenticeship programs to expand their reach. And lastly, Wyoming Division of VR is focused on developing pre-apprenticeship programs. They have piloted their model in one office, and Madison is going to talk a little bit more about that project. So looking, there is a question in the chat box, so I'm going to answer that before I hand it off to DeBrittany. "How much testing is done for the young adults? I'm 65, I still know what I want to do gracefully after my injury. I was tested a lawyer or a parking lawn attendant. So good exchange testing will narrow down the list. The program will be flexible enough to make changes six months, one year apprenticeship. And what type of testing, if anything better that I do?"

That's a great question. And for the youth, that is one of the things that we're finding and I think Madison, will really kind of get into that, is how many of us really actually knew what we wanted to do when we, at least in the United States, our schooling is a little bit different. And so he VR career paths look a little bit different.

One of the things that we're finding in our projects and our VR partners is the pre-apprenticeship model really addresses that because it gives youth an opportunity to say, "I think I'm interested in this." They get some hands, hands-on training. They get some badges or certifications and they get to do some hands-on training within an employment site, but they're not locked into," I've committed to this two year registered apprenticeship." And so if they decide this is not really something I want to do, an example is healthcare.

People say, "I want to help people, I want to go into healthcare." And then they get in there and they say, "I can't stand the sight of blood or fluids." And so it's early enough that then they go back to work with their counselors and they're like, "okay, what aspects of this job that I love, what things did I not like?" And they're able to make changes to their plan. Hopefully that answers your question, Eugene. So with that, I will hand it over Brittany who's going to talk about the KT strategies. And if we can move on to the next slide.

DeBrittany Humphrey: Thank you for that great overview, Julisa. Hi everyone, good afternoon. My name is DeBrittany Mitchell Humphrey, and as Julisa just highlighted, we're working together with six vocational rehabilitation or VR agencies who've collaborated with us throughout the entirety of this grant, from inception of the concept through to product development, implementation, and evaluation. This is what we see as our project's creation of an integrated knowledge translation, or KT approach. One that values collaboration and partnership, fosters mutual learning and co-produces tools and resources that are context specific, so specifically made and tailored to rural communities. So this section of the presentation will give you an overview of the who, the what, and the how we have used integrated KT strategies for this project.

So on the next slide, let's start with the WHO as an introduction. One of the primary KT goals of this project is resource development, both to better reach and inform key apprenticeship program partners. For this rural youth apprenticeship development project, we aim to produce tools and resources to help VR, or Vocational Rehabilitation agencies, better reach their key partners, including their own staff and workforce partners, youth with disabilities they serve in their communities and their families, and finally businesses within their communities.

On the next slide, so now, WHAT - what are we producing? One of our staple products of this project is the Rural Youth Apprenticeship Toolkit, which Julisa referenced earlier. The toolkit is designed specifically with and for VR agencies and combines tools and resources that are geared toward apprenticeship development for rural communities that face barriers. So Julisa just gave us a great overview of some of the barriers that are very real to rural communities, so rural communities that face barriers to accessing and implementing these programs specifically for youth in their communities.

So on this slide, there are six different images projected on the slide that represent tabs within the toolkit that are partnering VR agencies specifically indicated as challenges they face to implementation in their communities. In our team, so our team is made up of knowledge translation staff, researchers, and evaluation staff.

So our team in turn collaborated with the VR agencies to build resources and tools in each of these identified areas that hopefully helps share some solutions and strategies across rural states and communities. The toolkit Julisa mentioned is now live on our website and can be accessed@ www.explorevr.org. And this website will be posted towards the end of our presentation.

So on the next slide we'll talk through how we use some of these integrated KT approaches in our project. And there are three strategies outlined on this slide that well position VR agencies and our project partners, so Mathematica Policy Research as well as Montana Rural Institute as co-producers of knowledge. So through one our learning collaborative for VR agencies, which I will explain next our advisory groups, which I'll also explain in detail next, and what we've established as an iterative product development process that we hope will enhance the relevance and usefulness of our tools for the rural communities that they are intended to serve. One example is the marketing efforts under the RYAD project. So one of the things that we learned early on in the project is that VR agencies in the communities that they served needed to know more about what apprenticeship programs are and some of the benefits of apprenticeship programs for youth with disabilities. And furthermore, instructions on how to access these apprenticeship programs and ensure that they are accessible for youth with disabilities.

So for each of the agencies that we worked with, we developed marketing materials that aimed at engaging businesses in the communities that engaged youth with disabilities and their workforce partners to inform all of the key stakeholders about apprenticeship programs. And we tailored each of the marketing materials to each of their communities. So once you've seen one rural community, you've just seen that one rural community. So we really paid special attention to the feedback that the agencies gave us about what's most relevant, impactful, and useful for them, and tried to integrate that into our overall KT strategy that focuses on tailored communication and outreach for each of the communities that we work with.

So on the next slide, I'll first talk to you about our advisory group. So we have a general advisory group with various rural youth and apprenticeship subject matter experts, knowledge translation professionals, representatives from the Department of Labor and other stakeholders. And the council meets twice a year and the goal is threefold as projected on the slide. So first is to provide input on the tools and resources that we're creating and how they can be used on a national scale. Secondly, we really want to create a network through which the information and tools that we're creating through this project can be disseminated and used within larger groups and systems. So Julisa mentioned earlier, one of our projects goals being Systems change. And so we see our advisory council as critical to helping us bridge that gap between what we're learning in the project and some of the national implications of our findings. And last, we hope that the Advisory Council, through the discussion of some of the findings and lessons learned from the project, ultimately helps to systems level policy and practice initiatives. We also disseminate information and lessons learned on emerging topics related to the field as a result of our meetings. And one example is a photo or a screenshot of a brief we created based on one of our meetings, which captured the perspectives of our council

members on the topic of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in apprenticeships.

So on the next slide, in addition to our General Advisory Council, we also partnered with the Center on Knowledge Translation Employment Research to produce a comic strip. And through that technical assistance, we were able to collaborate with the UMass Medical School's Youth Advisory Board who worked together with us to develop some key messages about apprenticeship programs that are youth geared, helped us to better understand what youth actually know about apprenticeship and how we can bridge the information gap about apprenticeship for youth. And also to create a youth network for both reviewing and disseminating information about apprenticeship. But we also met with the Youth Advisory Board several times and developed some rapport just to make sure that the scenarios that we were thinking about, the language that we were using, the format that we were envisioning were appropriate for youth with disabilities to meet them where they are on their understanding of apprenticeship programs. So on this slide, it's also a visual. It's one panel excerpt of the comic strip image we created, and it will be published on our website in the coming weeks.

So lastly, one of our integrated KT strategies or approaches that we use for this project is the Learning Collaborative for Vocational Rehabilitation agencies. The Learning Collaborative really provides a forum for ongoing communication between VR agency leaders and staff who might be developing apprenticeship programs, and KT knowledge translation staff like myself and Julisa, who are creating resources to support these efforts. We also at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) provide the needed infrastructure to enhance collaboration between VR agencies. And the slide shows just some key tenets of the learning collaborative, which includes communication, implementation support, problem solving, resource development, and research and evaluation. The goal of the Learning Collaborative in fostering these interactions is really to move beyond just disseminating research findings to fostering some real dialogue about challenges, about barriers, and solutions to implementing apprenticeship programs in rural communities. Just as the collaborative efforts between knowledge translation staff and VR agencies is critical, so is the information exchange from VR agency to VR agency. Speaking of, it is an honor that Madison from Wyoming, one of our partnering agencies is here with us today and I want to hand it over to her to describe their experience working on this project with this. Madison?

Madison Graulty: Thanks, DeBrittany. I am a white woman with shoulder length curly hair wearing a purple blazer and a black shirt. Next slide, please. And I believe we need to go forward two more slides. There we go. One more please. Thank you. All right. So to determine the type of programming needed in Wyoming, we focused on areas within Wyoming that demonstrated either higher growth or a significant portion of the workforce nearing retirement, any region expected to see a high demand for workers. Our goal was twofold to identify these areas of high worker demand and to provide DVR populations with opportunities for meaningful employment. Simultaneously, we aim to supply the industries with well-trained, capable members

of the workforce. Ideally, a pre-apprenticeship would result in a continuation of the pathway onto a full blown Registered Apprenticeship program.

Through our analysis, we discovered that the construction industry added the most jobs in Wyoming between 2022 and 23. The sector was an ideal fit for pre-apprenticeship programs due to the wide range of trades in construction that already offer Registered Apprenticeships. Our target audience includes pre-employment transition students, age 16 to 24. Many individuals in this population are underserved, primarily due to Wyoming's, rural, isolated, and less densely populated areas. These students often lack access, as DeBrittany and Julisa commented on, to opportunities and resources, especially when they face additional barriers both in the classroom and the workplace, such as limited transportation options, lack of access to training facilities, and unreliable internet connectivity. Next slide please.

So on this slide we have an image of a pyramid divided into five different tiers. This represents a competency model of building upon different foundations. We utilize the Department of Labor's competency Model Clearing House to identify existing pre-apprenticeship models that outline the required competencies and skills for full-fledged Registered Apprenticeships. We then use these models to determine competencies for pre-apprenticeship. Our focus is on the foundational competencies found within the first three or four tiers of these models, and these were used to help develop the related instruction for our pre-apprenticeship program. After that, we vetted our badge pathway with industry experts from the construction sector, ensuring that the content created was relevant and accurate. And I'll get into kind of how that content was created and hosted here in a second here. The related instruction was then published on something called the Maker Access Pass platform, otherwise known as the map.

The MAP is a micro-credentialing system that allows learners to earn digital badges representing specific skills and competencies. So this platform is hosted on Canvas LMS. It offers flexible and accessible way to track and validate skill development, and also supports ADA-accessible formats including screen readers compatibility, keyboard navigation, customizable interface, and alt-text for images. And on the next slide here, we'll go into more detail on that. So the MAP's purpose originally was to provide free training via digital badges that grants users access to a network of Makerspaces and advanced technology. So the general community can earn digital badges through the MAP system once they demonstrate a certain level of competency on a particular tool or skill. This unlocks access to equipment such as 3D printers, laser cutters, CNC machines and more. The RYAD team recognized that the MAP had a means of developing coursework for transition students in pre-apprenticeship.

Following the structure of registered apprenticeship programs, students are required to complete both related instruction on the Maker Access Pass, as well as on-the-job training through a DVR sponsored work experience. So during this process, students earn competency badges in soft skills, which are critical because they lay the foundation to success in any work environment. These include things

like communication and work ethic as essential for long-term career growth and job retention. These badges are awarded after students engage with course content on Canvas and complete a series of quizzes. In addition to soft skills, students also earn hard skills badges, which they can apply directly to hands-on projects. The MAP program is central to this hands-on training, providing access to tools and technology that are free to learn and free to use for the makerspace community at large. We leveraged this model to ensure that students can gain valuable experience with real world equipment.

For example, a student pursuing a pre-apprenticeship in carpentry would have access to saws and power tools to work on projects as part of their related instruction through the makerspace. What also appealed to RYAD about the MAP program is its connection to a fleet of mobile makerspaces. These are housed in trailers. They contain a variety of tools and materials that are traditionally found in makerspaces. They can be deployed to remote areas, staying in a location for months at a time. This flexibility ensures that students in rural or underserved communities have access to the same opportunities as those in more urbanized regions. So once a student completes their related instructions, students participate in a paid work experience with an employer in their chosen trade, sponsored by the division of Vocational Rehab. Next slide please.

So looking at our outcomes, of the initial seven students who signed up for the program, one is on track to complete the pre-apprenticeship pathway this fall. This student selected HVAC as his trade of choice and is currently preparing to complete a final capstone project before entering his DVR-sponsored work experience. Through this program, we've really learned the importance of flexibility in keeping students engaged and on track. As DeBrittany said, meeting students where they are is very important. By allowing them to progress at their own pace, we ensure that students can balance their program with schoolwork, extracurricular activities, personal commitments. This particular student, for instance, was able to take extended breaks for related instruction when he needed to. After taking summers off, he's now ready to complete his training and move on to his work experience.

DeBrittany Humphrey: Madison - really quickly, could you slow down just a little bit? You have plenty of time.

Madison Graulty: Yeah, absolutely.

Sure. Thank you for the note. So Canvas Learning Management System is where the MAP is housed. It's played a critical role in providing this flexibility. Canvas offers a range of accessible features. This includes screen reader compatibility, again, custom text sizes, keyboard navigation. And these features allow students to work independently through MAP badges and related content. With multiple formats available, the student can engage with the material and ways that best suits their learning style and schedule, which helps them remain committed to the program despite the ability to take breaks throughout. So the balance of flexibility during the instructional phase and structured real world experience during the work phase creates a comprehensive pathway that prepares students for the demands of the

job market while also supporting their individual learning needs during the training process. Next slide please.

Alright. Here are some of the challenges we faced in piloting this construction program. As I mentioned, we had seven students starting out, and we have taken that down to one student. So one of our key challenges that we faced was maintaining student retention and managing attrition rates. DVR counselors and teachers were instrumental in encouraging students to sign up for the program. But having discussions with these stakeholders, it became clear that there was a lack of understanding about the program's structures, goals, and potential benefits. This gap and understanding likely contributed to the lower than expected student participation and retention. And in response, the RYAD team worked on creating targeted promotional materials, specifically designed to reach different audiences including individual students, DVR counselors, and parents and other stakeholders. These materials aim to better communicate the value of these programs, explain the pre-apprenticeship pathways, and clarify the benefits of earning MAP badges.

And this is an ongoing area of focus as we continue to try to bridge that gap in understanding. Another challenge we faced was finding a sustainable entity to house the program. Up until the end of September, I was employed by the University of Wyoming as their makerspace vocational rehab coordinator. The University of Wyoming initially supported the development and housing of this RYAD program. However, as the program has progressed, the university has expressed a declining interest in continuing this partnership. Even prior to the end of contract is lack of institutional support at the university level, post obstacles to our outreach and expansion efforts, and without a strong partner to help champion the program, it became increasingly difficult to gain the visibility and resources necessary for broadening our reach across the state. So moving forward, finding a sustainable entity, whether public sector, nonprofit, or industry partners, it is important to insurance longevity and growth of the RYAD program. Fortunately, the content that has been published on the Maker Access Pass can be accessed by the public. So the work done creating this related instruction, particularly the soft skills development, can still be accessed by anyone entering the RYAD program.

Our third challenge is estimating time of completion. The original projection for completing the pre-apprenticeship program for an individual was about six to nine months. However, as we near the end of this pilot phase, it's clear that the timeline is a little bit longer than anticipated. Our student, who is on track to complete the program, will have spent about a year total cumulatively and then by the time he finishes. This discrepancy between projected and actual completion time stems from several factors, including the flexibility we built into the program to accommodate students and other barriers. And while this flexibility has supported student retention, it's also lengthened the time of the overall program. However, I would argue that time spent in the program is not the measure for success. I would say completion is much more important. In the future, refining our time estimates and better understanding students' pacing needs will be key to managing expectations, ensuring smoother progression through the pre-apprenticeship pathway. Next slide please.

Madison Graulty: Alright. And in planning for the expansion of RYAD program, we were looking for a new industry to develop pre-apprenticeship pathways for. We utilized data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Wyoming Workforce Services to identify high demand occupations projected to experience above average job growth, both in the short and long term. By focusing on these growth industries, we aim to create pathways that are aligned with Wyoming's future workforce needs, so benefiting both the students entering the program and the state as a whole. One of our key findings is that healthcare and social assistance stood out as sectors with higher than average growth, offering numerous opportunities for workforce development. These fields not only show a strong need for new workers, but also have the infrastructure to support pre-apprenticeship pathways, because many of these professions have an existing registered apprenticeship pathway. In addition to data analysis, the research conducted by the RYAD team was pivotal in shaping the direction of our program. Another stakeholder on the Wyoming side joined the team developing these pre-apprenticeship programs. Wyoming's Apprenticeship Office has utilized RYAD research that we conducted to develop related instruction in the medical field that has also been published on the Maker Access Pass.

This partnership has been extremely beneficial. It allows us to access this high quality instructional material. It's still adaptable to our audiences, and it also demonstrates how programs originally designed for disability services can have a broader impact on the community as a whole. So the infrastructure, accessibility, and adaptability required to support individuals with disabilities are also incredibly valuable for broader populations, especially those in rural or underserved areas. By ensuring that these credentialing processes are inclusive and adaptable, we're able to offer meaningful workforce development opportunities to a diverse range of students, benefiting not only those with a disability, but also the state's workforce at large.

Through this combination of data-driven planning, collaborative partnerships, and a commitment to accessibility, we're confident that RYAD can continue to expand in a way that meets both the needs of Wyoming's industries and the diverse populations that we serve. Next slide, please. All right. So some of the benefits and resources from working with the Learning Collaborative through the RYAD program. As DeBrittany touched on the Institute of Community Inclusions' Explore VR Toolkit has been an invaluable research resource in developing our pre-apprenticeship program. It offers a wealth of tools and strategies that have helped us across various stages of program development, from employer engagement to student support. I'd say one of the most impactful resources in the toolkit has been the business engagement strategies. When searching for employers to host students for work experiences, the toolkit provided clear models on how to develop effective partnerships with these businesses.

These models not only demonstrate how pre-apprenticeships benefit students, but they also outline the value that pre-apprentices bring to employers. It helps us communicate the mutual benefits more effectively. Another key resource in the toolkit is the comprehensive guide on how to best support employers once students are in their work experiences. Not only how to support employers, but how to

support pre-apprentices going through the program. This includes strategies for setting expectations, providing mentorship, and ensuring that employers feel well prepared to support pre-apprentices in a meaningful way. In terms of outreach, the tool includes marketing and communication materials, such as the comic strip that we saw earlier in the presentation. They're helping us build stronger relationships with community partners, DVR counselors, potential employers, and students themselves. The professionally designed outreach materials by ICI have allowed us to present the program in a polished and compelling way, which helps us communicate its benefits to a broader audience.

The ICI Toolkit also offers insights to the barriers of populations served by pre apprenticeships might face. There are dedicated resources on how to support students throughout this process. It identifies challenges they might encounter, offers guidance to both mentors and students. And these tools have been crucial in making sure that we can address those barriers early on and ensuring that students have resources that they need to succeed. Overall, the ICI toolkit has given us the framework resources and support to build more robust, accessible, and impactful pre-apprenticeship program. Next slide. One of the most valuable aspects of participating in the Learning Collaborative through the Institute of Community Inclusion is the exposure to a wide range of perspectives and experiences. As you saw on the MAP, we had five different states representative in this learning collaborative. All of us have our own perspectives on what our communities need. All of our communities are unique and different despite being classified as rural.

So at our regular meetings, we have the opportunity to discuss our ongoing projects, share our successes, and address challenges that we face, provide a platform for problem solving, for brainstorming. It allows us to tap into the collective knowledge of the group. And in this collaborative environment, I've connected with peers who are working on similar programming in different regions. These connections have proven to be valuable for resource sharing and the exchange of ideas. We've been able to work together to address challenges that our communities face, often drawing on different approaches that have been successful in other regions. By learning from one another's experiences, we've been able to enhance our own projects and discover new solutions to challenges that these programs and students participating in these programs have faced. For example, how the Learning Collaborative has directly influenced our work through the Wyoming RYAD expansion.

The idea for this initiative came from discussions with other members of the collaborative who have faced similar workforce development needs in their own areas. Their insights have helped us shape the direction of our expansion efforts, ensuring that we could address the unique challenges of rural and underserved communities. This peer-to-peer support and shared expertise offered by the Learning Collaborative has been an essential part of the program's success. The ability to connect with knowledgeable individuals who have shared goals and a diverse range of experiences has allowed us to make informed decisions and push our projects forwards in ways that we hadn't originally anticipated. And with that, I will conclude my portion of the presentation, and I believe that opens us up to Q&A.