

Project summary: Richland Library seeks a \$50,000 planning grant to create an innovative model of learning and entrepreneurship for rural communities that struggle with poverty; lack access to fresh food; that have low levels of high school graduation; and that lack access to economic and job development opportunities. As project lead of *"Fresh Food, Fresh Thinking: An Innovative Approach to Youth Development and Learning in Rural Communities,"* we plan to explore unconventional partnerships that support the potential development of a hybrid Farmers Market/Library to be designed and run by high school students. This planning grant will expand our partnership with Lower Richland High School and empower youth through hands-on job skills and entrepreneurship training, as well as provide access to library resources and fresh food offerings for the community at large.

Capacity, need and relevance: Richland Library is a trusted community partner. Our teen programming is focused on 21st Century skill-building, entrepreneurship, and college and career preparation. Additionally, our libraries are summer feeding sites and partners with FoodShare Columbia, which provides healthy food boxes for SNAP participants. The library offers cooking classes, free food boxes and kitchen equipment. We have a thriving community garden at one location and plans for another.

This summer, Richland Library opened and staffed the school library at Lower Richland High School (LRHS) to provide the community with greater access to library resources and computer usage for the entire summer. This partnership and the proven need for library services are what led to this proposal.

Since 2015, LRHS has had a Lifecycle Innovation Project through which it dehydrates and composts waste from the school and uses the results to fuel the vermiculture process - producing worm castings fertilizer. LRHS has worked to restore its greenhouses with a solar array and plans to use their own fertilizer to grow fresh produce. They plan to have their culinary students and students from other disciplines work with teachers to harvest the crops and cook with the yield.

Despite this innovative school program, student enrollment drops by nearly half between the 9th and 12th grades, indicative of a high dropout rate. Only a mere 57 percent of those who remain pass the state exit exam. LRHS is located in rural Hopkins, South Carolina, where the per capita income is \$24,537, and where 66 percent of the student body lives below the poverty level. This community is positioned between two library locations - one is 6 miles away; the other 13 miles. Community members have expressed a need for library services that are easily accessible for residents who lack reliable transportation and who need access to broadband and employment services. *Fresh Food, Fresh Thinking* will explore an innovative joint-use opportunity to expand the library's reach while keeping annual operating costs in check.

We believe our approach - to enhance life in rural communities with innovative, cost-effective partnerships - is one that is needed in South Carolina and beyond. The USDA's article, *Rural America at a Glance 2015*, tells us that rural poverty is highest among minority racial and ethnic groups, more so with female-headed families. It also reports that rural unemployment rates for the least-educated adults are higher and grew more during the recession, partly as a result of increasing demand for more highly skilled labor. The *Center for Rural Strategies* reports that broadband is not a luxury; it's a necessity as a building block for healthy communities. Unfortunately, less than half of rural adults have access to broadband at home, while two-thirds of metropolitan adults do. This innovative approach will address these challenges.

We believe the Farmers Market/Library concept has the potential to be a local community asset and national model designed to assist a community struggling with poverty, food insecurity, unemployment and lack of

transportation by creating a local vibrant place of learning, access to fresh food, and a stronger community identity.

Work plan and design: *Fresh Food, Fresh Thinking* is a community-driven effort to create an educational program for youth, and ultimately, an unconventional space that serves as hybrid Farmers Market/Library. We envision youth leading the design and development of the space and the business plan, thus gaining invaluable, hands-on experiences that sustain their interest in school and learning. We envision the community at large informing and supporting the students' vision.

With the library convening a host of potential partners—from local farmers, Clemson University's Cooperative Extension, to South Carolina Farm to Institution and the local faith community—*Fresh Food, Fresh Thinking* will explore the following questions: 1) Can we develop replicable programs that further expand the work of the Lifecycle Innovation Project, helping to create a youth entrepreneurial and small business development approach to creating more fresh food options in the community? 2) Can we apply the success and lessons learned from existing models (Mill Village Farms, Windsor Market, and Colleton County Museum and Farmers Market) to our project? 3) Is the Farmers Market/Library hybrid approach one that can meet the multiple needs of the community and appeal to key stakeholders? And 4) What should this Farmers Market/Library look like and where should it be located?

Fresh Food, Fresh Thinking will run July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2018 and include the following:

Student/Youth Educational Programs: Working with the STEM Coordinator/Lifecycle Innovation Project lead, we will develop in- and out-of-school programming for the 2017-18 school year that maximizes the library's resources. Our Teen Services Manager and certified Entrepreneurship Trainer will be the content lead for helping youth explore small and agribusiness development concepts. The content will be multi-disciplinary in order to engage students in culinary, shop and STEM classes.

Community Input: We will hire a part-time project coordinator who will provide support as we facilitate focus groups and community conversations. The project manager will work closely with the library's marketing and data analysis staff to gather information that will inform the concept development. Richland Library will regularly convene stakeholders to review data, vet findings and refine efforts.

Farmers Market/Library Concept Development: We will contract with an architect/community planner to work with the students to turn the ideas and concepts discovered through this planning grant into a design. We anticipate the design will expand access to learning for the entire community and potentially include specialized culinary classes; nutrition and food preparation; agribusiness and entrepreneurship; along with access to library resources and fresh food offerings from local farmers and the students.

Performance goals and outcomes: To develop replicable and responsive youth programming as we explore our capacity to partner with schools to enhance their curricula; to increase the knowledge of participating students about how to turn ideas and concepts into businesses; to increase access to library programs in Lower Richland; and to create a business plan/model and design concept for a Farmers Market/Library.

Budget: We estimate the total cost of the planning project to be \$88,000. The library will cover the cost of full-time personnel, marketing efforts, and purchasing software that allows us to map and interpret results. Half of the \$50,000 planning budget (\$25,000) will support contractual services for the community planner/architect; \$15,000 will support hiring a part-time project coordinator; and \$10,000 will support curriculum development, and materials and supplies for student support.