PENN STATE LAUNCHBOX & INNOVATION NETWORK:
Lessons from Berks, Hazleton, and NCPA

This report is part of a broader research initiative which examines the dynamics of entrepreneurial ecosystems in rural and micropolitan areas of Pennsylvania, focusing on how anchor economies and institutions shape economic development, support entrepreneurship, and impact community resilience in the North Central Pennsylvania/Pennsylvania Wilds, Hazleton, and Berks regions. It highlights the role of the Invent Penn State LaunchBox Network, a strategic initiative aimed at fostering entrepreneurship and innovation across the Commonwealth.

Grounded in 41 key informant interviews across the four case studies, document and website reviews, and participant observation (see *Research Methodology* section below), this research provides new insights into how anchors, such as tourism and outdoor recreation in the Pennsylvania Wilds, manufacturing in Hazleton, and education and healthcare in Berks, contribute to sustainable economic development. It underscores the importance of place-based entrepreneurial support systems, highlights the potential for innovation and business growth in often-overlooked regions, and offers recommendations to inform policy and practice that strengthen long-term community resilience. This summary report highlights findings for the LaunchBox and Innovation Network.

The Penn State LaunchBox Network is a cornerstone initiative of the Invent Penn State program, established to generate economic development and innovation across Pennsylvania. By creating a network of community-centered entrepreneurship hubs, the LaunchBox system provides critical resources such as business mentoring, legal and marketing support, and technical assistance tailored to the needs of local entrepreneurs. Each LaunchBox is uniquely adapted to its community, reflecting the diverse economic landscapes and cultural identities of the regions they serve.

The Berks, Hazleton, and North Central Pennsylvania (NCPA) LaunchBoxes are prime examples of this adaptability. Located in urban, micropolitan, and rural areas, respectively, these LaunchBoxes address the distinct challenges of their regions while leveraging local assets to foster entrepreneurial growth.

Research Methodology

This research is based in interviews with entrepreneurial community members, capturing insights rooted in their lived experiences. It also draws on a review of relevant documents, publications, and websites, as well as direct observations gathered during researcher visits to each region. While these perspectives provide valuable firsthand accounts of each LaunchBox's impact and evolution, they are not all-encompassing. The findings reflect individual experiences and observations, and should be considered as part of a broader, ongoing conversation about entrepreneurship in the region.

Berks LaunchBox: A Hub for Social Entrepreneurship and Early-Stage Mentorship Support

The Berks LaunchBox is located in downtown Reading at GoggleWorks and plays a pivotal role in fostering entrepreneurship and innovation within the community. Initially recognized for its emphasis on social entrepreneurship and healthcare innovation, the LaunchBox has since shifted (since the spring of 2024) to better serve early-stage entrepreneurs through its makerspace, mentorship, and customer discovery programs. This evolution highlight's the LaunchBox's ability to adapt to the needs of the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, ensuring that it provides the most relevant and impactful support.

Through the makerspace, entrepreneurs work alongside engineers to develop their minimum viable products, gain critical feedback, and iterate their designs for market readiness. The LaunchBox also prioritizes customer discovery, helping startups validate their ideas and refine their business models to better align with consumer demand. While the LaunchBox previously explored healthcare innovation through partnerships with organizations such as Penn State Health St. Joseph, it has since moved away from this focus to avoid duplication of efforts with other regional initiatives. Instead, it has reinforced its role as a key resource for makers, innovators, and early-stage business owners.

Community-building initiatives, such as happy hours, coworking days, and mentorship programs, are some of the ways in which the Berks Launchbox strives to foster meaningful connections among local entrepreneurs, with the hope to mitigate the isolation that small business owners often face. As one entrepreneur noted, the LaunchBox is a "one-stop shop, from legal support, tech support, marketing support, and everything else," underscoring its comprehensive approach to supporting startups. Additionally, K-12 programming has become a growing strength, with the goal to further the LaunchBox's engagement with the local community.

The LaunchBox's downtown location enhances its accessibility and potential impact, tying it to the city's arts and cultural scene while creating a dynamic environment for creative and business-driven innovation. This integration of community, culture, and entrepreneurship positions the Berks LaunchBox to be a transformative force in the region.

Lessons and Challenges

While the Berks LaunchBox has worked to cultivate a strong presence, part-time staffing limits its ability to scale outreach and programming. By increasing staff hours and enhancing visibility through targeted marketing, the LaunchBox could amplify its reach and support more entrepreneurs. This challenge also highlights the broader need across the LaunchBox Network for sustainable operational models that allow for growth and adaptability.

The Berks LaunchBox demonstrates how a well-integrated, community-focused resource can benefit a region's entrepreneurial ecosystem, offering lessons in leveraging partnerships, fostering inclusivity, and addressing local needs.

Hazleton LaunchBox: Supporting Diverse Entrepreneurs Through Manufacturing and Culture

The Hazleton LaunchBox, situated in downtown Hazleton, implements inclusive programming tailored to a community's cultural and economic context. Its bilingual programming aims to provide accessibility for the city's predominantly Hispanic and Latino population, by breaking down language and cultural barriers that often deter participation. As one interviewee shared, "Anything we did in English, we did in Spanish," a commitment that reflects trust and engagement within the local community.

The LaunchBox's K-12 programming, including business plan competitions and dual enrollment courses, addresses systemic educational gaps to nurture the next generation of entrepreneurs. This emphasis on early exposure to entrepreneurship aligns with the region's demographics, where a large portion of the population is under 18. Additionally, its food and beverage entrepreneurship programs stand out as a success among interviewees, leveraging local interests and fostering businesses that align with regional economic drivers.

Lessons and Challenges

Despite its impactful initiatives, inconsistent hours of operation and limited staff restrict the Hazleton LaunchBox's accessibility and capacity. Expanding staffing and standardizing operational hours would strengthen its ability to serve the community consistently. This also highlights a broader lesson for the network: accessibility, both in terms of language and availability, is critical for engaging typically underserved populations.

The Hazleton LaunchBox illustrates how culturally responsive programming and a focus on community needs can foster trust, collaboration, and economic growth within a vibrant but sometimes underserved entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Image source: WVIA Public Media (Hazleton LaunchBox)

NCPA LaunchBox: Supporting Rural Resilience and Innovation

The NCPA LaunchBox, located in DuBois, serves a sprawling 7-county region, making it the only LaunchBox in the PA Wilds. Its regional focus uniquely positions it to address the challenges of geographic isolation and limited infrastructure common to rural areas. By partnering with over 50 organizations, the LaunchBox delivers diverse programming that supports K-12 education, workforce upskilling, and direct industry collaboration.

A standout feature of the NCPA LaunchBox, noted by interviewed LaunchBox staff and local entrepreneurs, is its *Idea Lab*; a unique resource that provides entrepreneurs with access to prototyping equipment and expertise. This service can be especially critical for entrepreneurs in manufacturing and other industries requiring physical product development.

In addition to its prototyping services, the LaunchBox focuses on workforce development initiatives, helping individuals transition from low-wage positions into higher-paying roles. These efforts foster economic mobility and resilience across the region, demonstrating the LaunchBox's attempts to drive innovation and supporting sustainable economic growth.

Lessons and Challenges

From our interviews and more formal conversations, we learned that the NCPA LaunchBox faces challenges in visibility and geographic accessibility, as some entrepreneurs remain unaware of its offerings. Additionally, the vastness of its service area limits its ability to provide consistent, in-person support. Addressing these challenges through enhanced marketing and virtual programming could significantly extend its reach.

The NCPA LaunchBox underscores the importance of tailoring resources to the regional characteristics, providing valuable lessons on how to address the needs of rural entrepreneurs while fostering place-based growth.

Image source: Penn State University (NCPA LaunchBox)

Image source: Penn State University (Berks LaunchBox)

Lessons Across the Penn State LaunchBox and Innovation Network

The collective experiences of the Berks, Hazleton, and NCPA LaunchBoxes provide valuable insights into how entrepreneurial hubs can adapt to and address the unique needs of their communities. These lessons not only highlight successes but also suggest opportunities for improvement, helping to strengthen the entire Penn State LaunchBox Network.

Bilingual and Inclusive Programming

Hazleton's efforts towards bilingual programming demonstrates the beneficial impact removing language barriers can have. By ensuring that all programming is offered in both English and Spanish, the Hazleton LaunchBox creates an inclusive environment that allows entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to fully engage with its resources. We found that bilingual and inclusive programming may also foster trust and increase accessibility, positioning the LaunchBox as a key partner in a predominantly Hispanic community. Other LaunchBoxes in regions with diverse populations could benefit from adopting similar inclusive practices to ensure equitable access to services.

Key Takeaway: Tailored, multilingual support is essential for fostering an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem, especially in culturally diverse regions.

Leveraging Local Collaboration

Interviewees revealed that collaboration with regional economic anchors amplifies the effectiveness of each LaunchBox. For example, the Berks LaunchBox has partnered with Penn State Health St. Joseph to drive healthcare innovation and social entrepreneurship, while the NCPA LaunchBox collaborates with industries to provide prototyping services and workforce upskilling programs. These partnerships not only magnify the resources available to entrepreneurs but also align LaunchBox programming with regional economic anchors.

Hazleton's strong efforts for community collaboration is another example of how partnerships can increase support. The Kitchen Incubator, supported by THinC, provides shared resources for food entrepreneurs, striving to address specific needs within the ecosystem.

Key Takeaway: Strong partnerships with local organizations, industries, and institutions can create opportunities for innovation and align LaunchBox programming with regional priorities.

Visibility & Outreach

A consistent challenge our research recognized across all LaunchBoxes is issues with visibility and outreach. Many entrepreneurs shared the sentiment of being unaware of available resources, as highlighted by one participant who described the NCPA LaunchBox as "a hidden gem." Hazleton's reliance on community-driven word-of-mouth referrals and Berks' staffing limitations also contribute to barriers in reaching potential users.

Addressing this challenge requires targeted marketing efforts, centralized resource hubs, and the development of clear communication strategies. For example, incorporating virtual programming and smartphone-accessible tools, as Hazleton has done, can provide resources to a wider audience. Additionally, investing in full-time staff could significantly enhance the reach and impact of each LaunchBox.

Key Takeaway: Proactive marketing, clear communication strategies, and increased staffing are critical to raising awareness and connecting entrepreneurs to resources.

Addressing Entrepreneurial Isolation

Entrepreneurship was reported to feel isolating by several interviewees, specifically in rural and underserved areas. The Berks LaunchBox's efforts to host happy hours and mixers exemplify how networking events can create a sense of community among entrepreneurs. Similarly, the Hazleton LaunchBox's collaborative ecosystem ensures that entrepreneurs feel supported by local partners and organizations.

By fostering connections among entrepreneurs, LaunchBoxes not only provide emotional support but also facilitate knowledge sharing and mentorship opportunities that are critical for business growth. Expanding these efforts across the network can help entrepreneurs feel more connected and supported.

Key Takeaway: Creating opportunities for networking and peer engagement helps combat the isolation often experienced by entrepreneurs and fosters a collaborative ecosystem.

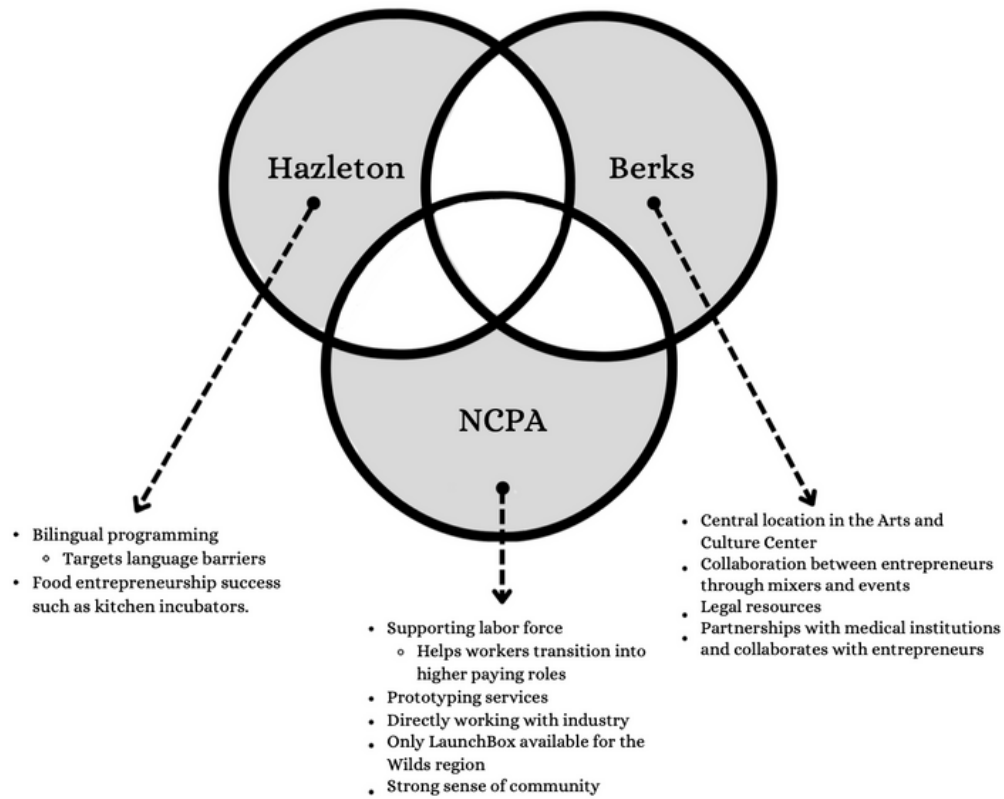## Supporting Development of a Resilient Workforce

The NCPA LaunchBox's focus on workforce development reflects the importance of aligning entrepreneurial support with broader economic resilience. Programs that upskill workers, such as those transitioning from low-wage to higher-paying positions, may not only benefit individual entrepreneurs but also strengthen the regional economy.

This approach can serve as a model for other LaunchBoxes seeking to address systemic challenges, such as unemployment or skills gaps, by integrating workforce development into their programming.
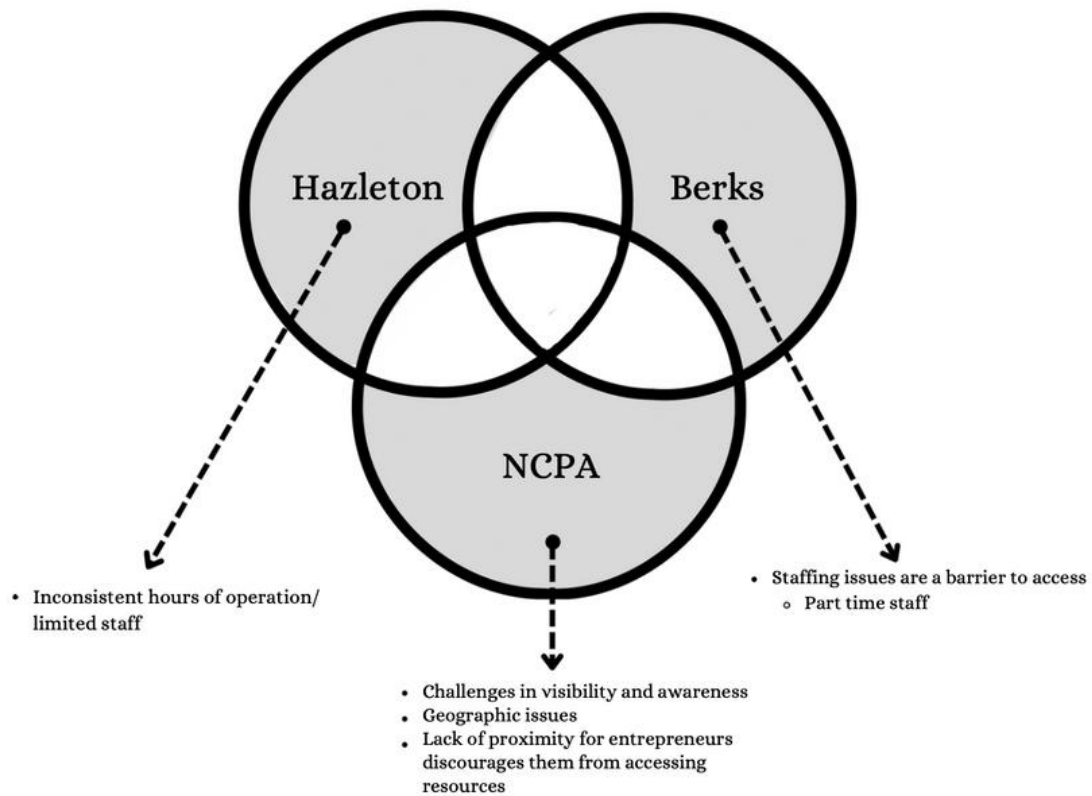
Key Takeaway: Integrating workforce development initiatives into entrepreneurial programming strengthens local economies and prepares regions for long-term resilience.

The insights from Berks, Hazleton, and NCPA LaunchBoxes reveal both unique and shared strengths, as well as region-specific and overlapping challenges. To further illustrate these findings, the following figures summarize key themes that emerged across the three sites:
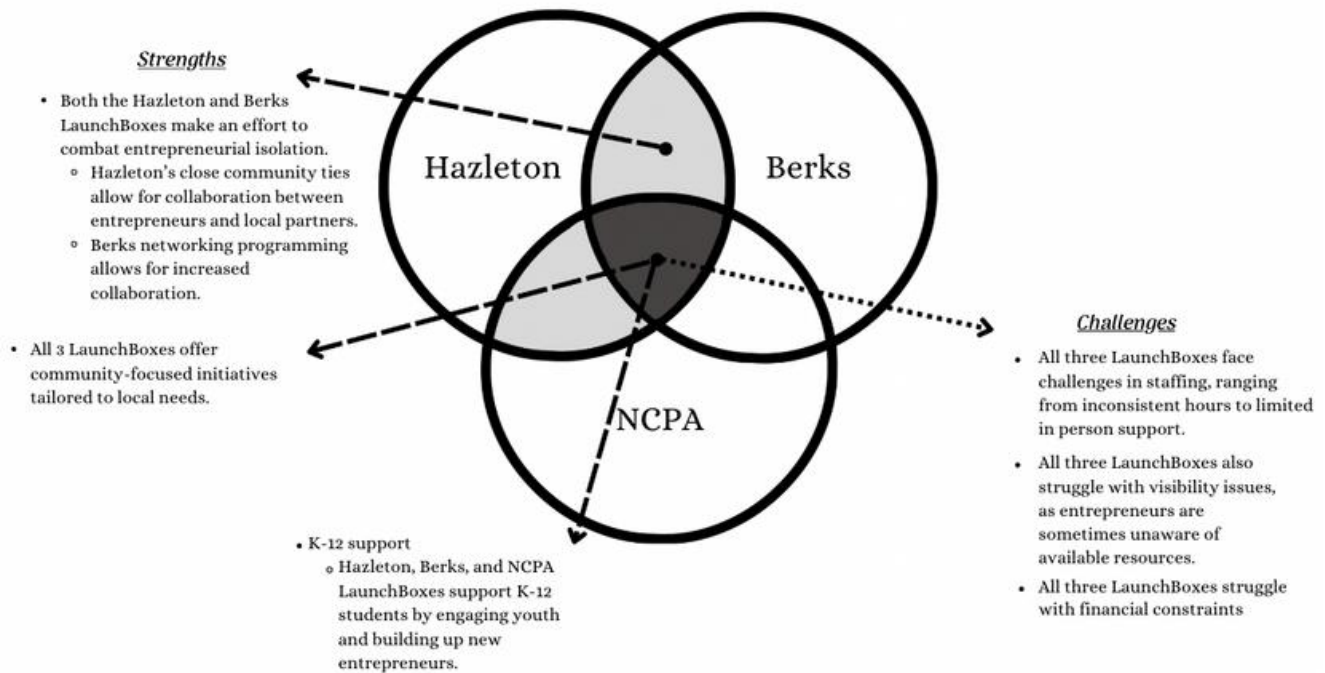
Figure 1. Strengths

Hazleton
- Bilingual programming
  - Targets language barriers
- Food entrepreneurship success such as kitchen incubators.

NCPA
- Supporting labor force
  - Helps workers transition into higher paying roles
- Prototyping services
- Directly working with industry
- Only LaunchBox available for the Wilds region
- Strong sense of community

Berks
- Central location in the Arts and Culture Center
- Collaboration between entrepreneurs through mixers and events
- Legal resources
- Partnerships with medical institutions and collaborates with entrepreneurs

Figure 2. Challenges

Hazleton
- Inconsistent hours of operation/ limited staff

NCPA
- Challenges in visibility and awareness
- Geographic issues
- Lack of proximity for entrepreneurs discourages them from accessing resources

Berks
- Staffing issues are a barrier to access
  - Part time staff

Figure 3. Common Strengths and Challenges

Strengths

- Both the Hazleton and Berks LaunchBoxes make an effort to combat entrepreneurial isolation.
  - Hazleton's close community ties allow for collaboration between entrepreneurs and local partners.
  - Berks networking programming allows for increased collaboration.
- All 3 LaunchBoxes offer community-focused initiatives tailored to local needs.

Hazleton

Berks

NCPA

- K-12 support
  - Hazleton, Berks, and NCPA LaunchBoxes support K-12 students by engaging youth and building up new entrepreneurs.

Challenges

- All three LaunchBoxes face challenges in staffing, ranging from inconsistent hours to limited in person support.
- All three LaunchBoxes also struggle with visibility issues, as entrepreneurs are sometimes unaware of available resources.
- All three LaunchBoxes struggle with financial constraints

Recommendations and Network Wide Opportunities for Growth

Sharing these lessons across the Penn State LaunchBox Network may enhance the collective impact of the initiative, while continuing to address the unique needs of each region. Key opportunities for growth include:

- **Creating a Unified Marketing Strategy:** Develop a network-wide branding and outreach campaign to increase visibility and streamline access to resources.
- **Scaling Successful Programs:** Expand initiatives like Hazleton's bilingual programming, NCPA's prototyping services, and Berks' healthcare collaborations to other regions.
- **Strengthening Connections Between LaunchBoxes:** Facilitate knowledge-sharing between LaunchBoxes to promote best practices and foster innovation across the network.
- **Increasing Full-Time Staff Support:** Address staffing challenges to improve outreach, programming, and engagement at each LaunchBox.

Through these efforts, the Penn State LaunchBox Network can continue to empower entrepreneurs, drive innovation, and contribute to the economic vitality of communities across Pennsylvania.

This report is part of a series of entrepreneurial ecosystems research briefs prepared by undergraduate research assistants and faculty members based in Penn State's Center for Economic and Community Development: Olivia Karoly, Maggie Fechtman, Emma Walker, C. Daniel Azzara, and Theodore R. Alter.

Penn State's **Center for Economic and Community Development** is an applied research and engagement center dedicated to strengthening local and regional development in Pennsylvania and beyond. The Center works with and for communities to address pressing issues they face by connecting them with information about the issues facing their communities. The Center is housed in the College of Agricultural Sciences' Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education. Visit us online: aese.psu.edu/cecd

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