



NORTH CENTRAL PA FINDINGS: Challenges, Strengths, and Pathways for Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Growth

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.

This summary report highlights findings for the North Central Pennsylvania region. Grounded in the larger research project which entailed 41 key informant interviews, document and website reviews, and participant observation, this study 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.

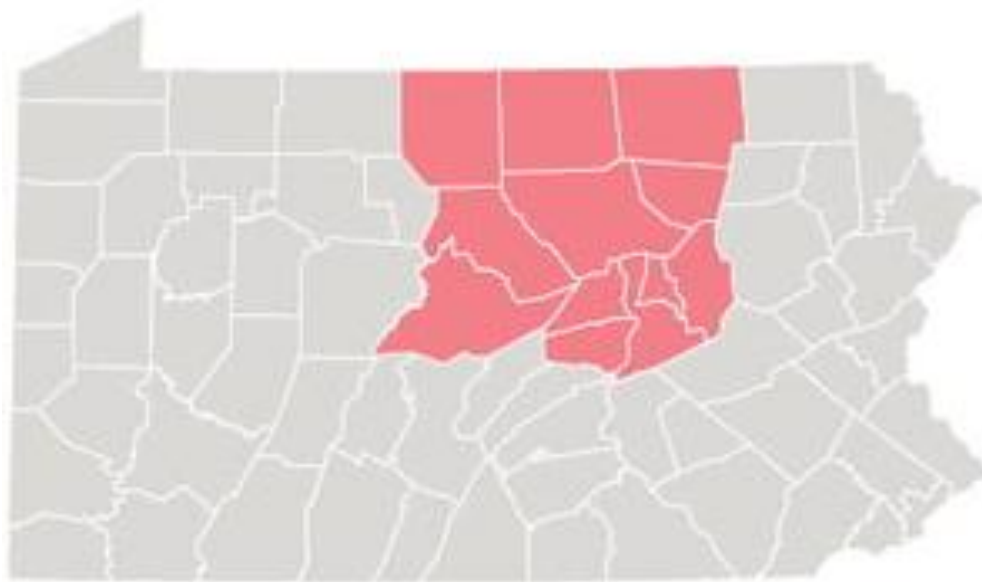


Image source: UPMC

The 12 county North Central Pennsylvania (NCPA) region is distinguished by its diverse landscapes, rich natural resources, and close-knit communities that foster a resilient entrepreneurial ecosystem. With a history rooted in industries like manufacturing, forestry, and mining, NCPA has evolved to integrate tourism and outdoor recreation as pillars of its economic growth. This report draws from the experiences of regional stakeholders to highlight NCPA's strengths, identify key obstacles, and provide actionable recommendations for supporting an entrepreneurial landscape that leverages local assets and community identity.

<i>Elevating Local Voices*</i>	2 Entrepreneurs interviewed	3 Community partners interviewed	1 LaunchBox faculty interviewed
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Methods This research is based on interviews with entrepreneurial community members, capturing insights rooted in their lived experiences. The findings in this report are based on this limited sample and are not absolute. While these perspectives provide valuable firsthand accounts of the ecosystem in NCPA, they are not all-encompassing. The findings reflect individual experiences and should be considered as part of a broader, ongoing conversation about entrepreneurship in the region.

a region with unique challenges...

The NCPA region faces distinct challenges as a rural area rich in natural resources but constrained by geographic isolation and infrastructure limitations. Long travel distances between communities make it difficult for businesses to access resources, connect with partners, and engage in support networks. These spatial barriers create pockets of isolation, particularly in northern counties like Potter and Tioga, where entrepreneurial resources are sparse. One entrepreneur captured this reality by stating:

"The communities up there are pretty isolated."

Entrepreneurs in NCPA often struggle to identify clear pathways to support, as the region lacks a centralized hub for navigating resources. Without a single point of access, business owners may face confusion in finding assistance and miss out on opportunities for mentorship, funding, or training. This fragmentation is further compounded by communication gaps between support organizations, with one community partner observing, "If a partner can't help, they sometimes don't refer you to someone who can."

Additional Barriers to Business Success Include-

- **Limited Financial Resources:** Entrepreneurs face challenges in accessing capital, often due to insufficient credit history, lack of collateral, or high costs. This prevents many from securing loans or moving past the idea stage of their businesses.
- **Marketing Gaps:** Many small businesses cannot afford to hire full-time marketing professionals, leaving them behind as digital platforms evolve.
- **Broadband Deficiencies:** Poor internet access limits digital engagement, creating barriers for entrepreneurs who rely on online tools and markets.
- **Outdated Programming:** Some community events fail to resonate with modern audiences, reducing their ability to attract visitors and drive economic activity.

Addressing these barriers through targeted investments in infrastructure, communication, and resource coordination will be key to overcoming these challenges and fostering sustainable entrepreneurial growth in the NCPA region.

...and extraordinary opportunity!

Despite its challenges, NCPA is bolstered by strong community ties and a sense of regional pride that drives entrepreneurial growth. Small businesses, local markets, and tourism-based enterprises play a central role in the economy, fostering a cycle where dollars remain within the community, supporting local jobs, and reinforcing essential services. Entrepreneurs in NCPA describe the benefits from participating in community-driven networks and institutions like the Small Business Development Center. One entrepreneur noted that described SBDC as “a huge resource for me,” with additional support from regional organizations like North Central that provide targeted assistance.

Sporting events and recreational activities also present significant opportunities for entrepreneurial engagement, creating hubs where businesses can showcase their products and connect with new customers. This dynamic aligns with the region’s potential to connect its entrepreneurial activities to natural and cultural heritage, attracting both locals and visitors alike.

This approach to place-based development strengthens community collaboration and ties businesses to the region’s assets, fostering growth that reflects NCPA’s distinct identity. By further investing in local initiatives, promoting regional collaboration, and leveraging its natural beauty, NCPA is well-positioned to expand its entrepreneurial ecosystem and ensure sustainable economic growth.

The Pennsylvania Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship

The PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship plays a critical role in supporting rural businesses in North Central Pennsylvania by providing essential resources, networking opportunities, and branding support. Entrepreneurs we interviewed in the region highly value the Center’s efforts to foster connections, offering a much-needed sense of community and collaboration in an otherwise isolated environment. This connectivity is especially important in a region where geographic challenges can hinder access to resources and opportunities.

The Center’s flagship business development program, PACE (Plan, Accelerate, Commit, Expand), equips artisans and small business owners with vital business skills and access to a supportive network. As one entrepreneur shared, “The PACE program gave me the skills I didn’t know I was missing.” This program encourages growth and collaboration among local creators, helping them thrive in a challenging rural market.

Aligning with the PA Wilds brand offers additional benefits, attracting eco-conscious visitors and strengthening the identity of local businesses. Entrepreneurs see this branding as more than a marketing tool; it’s a way to connect with the values and culture of the region. Another entrepreneur remarked, “It’s more than a logo; it’s being part of a community that cares about our environment.”

Partnerships with state parks and initiatives like the Wilds Cooperative of PA further amplify the visibility of local products and services, drawing in tourists who appreciate the region’s natural beauty and cultural heritage. By promoting sustainable growth and preserving the unique identity of North Central Pennsylvania, the PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship ensures that local businesses can thrive while remaining deeply rooted in the community.

North Central PA LaunchBox

The North Central PA (NCPA) LaunchBox, located at Penn State DuBois, is a vital resource for entrepreneurs in the PA Wilds, offering services tailored to the unique challenges of rural business development. As the first regional LaunchBox in the Invent Penn State Network, it extends its reach across seven counties (Cameron, Clarion, Clearfield, Elk, Jefferson, McKean and Potter) and partners with over 50 organizations to provide critical support for aspiring entrepreneurs. Recognizing the region's low population density, the LaunchBox has broadened its scope to address diverse needs, making it a key player in fostering place-based growth and economic resilience.

The LaunchBox focuses on three primary areas of service:

1. **K-12 Education:** Programs designed to educate the next generation of entrepreneurs and cultivate future business leaders.
2. **Workforce Upskilling:** Initiatives aimed at equipping workers in low-wage or automating positions with skills for higher-paying roles.
3. **Industry Collaboration:** Partnerships with businesses to provide specialized support, including prototyping services unique to the area. As one participant noted, “A lot of our entrepreneurs utilize [the LaunchBox’s] services, like making prototypes, and that’s a unique thing to this area.”

For more details on the NCPA LaunchBox's full range of initiatives—including its Industry 4.0 Academy, workforce upskilling programs, and entrepreneurship education—visit [NCPA LaunchBox](#).

Despite its strengths, the LaunchBox faces significant challenges with visibility and outreach. Entrepreneurs appear to be unaware of its offerings, even though it provides specialized resources like prototyping and business development. One LaunchBox employee revealed, *“Most people don’t know what the LaunchBox has to offer... I didn’t have any idea until I started here.”* The lack of awareness limits the LaunchBox's ability to connect with entrepreneurs who could benefit from its services.

Geographic distance also presents a barrier, particularly for entrepreneurs in remote counties who find it challenging to access in-person resources. To address these issues, increasing targeted marketing efforts, expanding virtual programming, and exploring satellite locations could help the LaunchBox reach more entrepreneurs and fully realize its potential as a hub for innovation and economic growth. By building on its existing strengths and addressing accessibility challenges, the NCPA LaunchBox can continue to drive entrepreneurial success and community-centered development in North Central Pennsylvania.

Tourism & Outdoor Recreation as an Economic Anchor

Tourism and outdoor recreation anchor North Central Pennsylvania's economy, leveraging the region's natural beauty and rich cultural heritage to drive economic activity. Visitors are drawn year-round to attractions like the Allegheny National Forest, rolling hills, and scenic waterways, as well as events such as the Bavarian Fall Fest and local fairs and community festivals. This influx of tourists sustains a variety of local businesses, including accommodations, restaurants, recreational outfitters, and retail shops, creating a ripple effect that supports the broader economy.

Beyond recreation, the region emphasizes eco-tourism, ensuring that tourism growth aligns with conservation efforts and the preservation of natural resources. This balance allows NCPA to attract both nature enthusiasts and cultural tourists while maintaining the landscapes and communities that define its identity. Local sporting events and festivals also provide opportunities for entrepreneurs to showcase their products, further integrating small businesses into the tourism ecosystem.

By anchoring its economy in tourism and outdoor recreation, North Central Pennsylvania is not only boosting regional activity but also fostering a sustainable model of economic growth that respects and highlights its natural and cultural assets.



Image source: Bavarianfallfest.com

Opportunities for Sustainable Growth

To foster a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem in North Central Pennsylvania, strategic improvements in infrastructure, accessibility, and collaboration are critical. These opportunities build on the region's existing strengths and address its unique challenges to create a more robust and sustainable environment for businesses. Key areas for action include:

- **Expanding Broadband Infrastructure:** Reliable internet access is essential for modern business operations, from engaging in digital markets to accessing online training and networking opportunities. Enhancing broadband connectivity across rural areas of NCPA will empower entrepreneurs to participate fully in the digital economy, driving growth and innovation.
- **Centralizing Resources for Entrepreneurs:** Establishing a centralized online hub or physical resource center will simplify access to critical support for entrepreneurs, including funding opportunities, training programs, and partnership networks. Such a resource would address the fragmentation of services and create a more streamlined pathway for business growth.

- **Strengthening Awareness and Outreach:** Many entrepreneurs remain unaware of the resources available to them, such as those offered by the NCPA LaunchBox and other regional partners. Enhanced marketing efforts and coordinated outreach strategies will ensure these resources reach their intended audience, helping businesses leverage programs that support growth and resilience.

For More Information:

Community members and entrepreneurs looking to learn more about available resources or connect with local support organizations can reach out to:

- PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship: hello@pawildscenter.org
- DuBois LaunchBox: NCPALaunchbox@psu.edu
- Penn State Small Business Development Center (SBDC): sbdc@psu.edu

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.

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