Cooperative Extension works to diversify Nevada’s economy

In 2011, Louise Helton was looking for help with her business, 1 Sun Solar Companies, a Las Vegas electrical contracting company that specializes in rooftop solar energy installations for homes, businesses and government buildings. She knew her products would make fiscal sense for potential clients, but she needed help securing contracts. So when she heard that University of Nevada Cooperative Extension was offering a free, nine-month course for small business owners and entrepreneurs, she jumped at the chance to enroll.

A year later, Helton’s revenues have tripled, and she’s been able to forge key business relationships that previously seemed out of reach. She credits her success to Cooperative Extension and UNCE Economic Development Specialist Buddy Borden, who helped launch and teach the business-training classes.

“We learned cash-flow management, insurance and bonding, marketing, project estimating—that sort of nuts and bolts kind of information,” Helton says. “But we were also able to meet the actual people who we wanted to do business with: county commissioners, procurement officials and the heads of departments. We had one-on-one meetings with them, and we got to know them personally. You can’t put a dollar value on the opportunities that open up to you in a class like that.”


Borden has launched other programs in recent years. His business retention and expansion program identifies current business needs and barriers in southern Nevada that may restrict a business’s growth or encourage it to relocate. He works to help those businesses overcome obstacles so they’ll stay put and give jobs to Nevadans.

“A healthy economy depends on the well-being of existing firms,” says Borden, who facilitates the program in partnership with Clark County’s economic development department. “Sixty-five to 80 percent of all new jobs are created by existing firms, yet many communities discount the needs of existing businesses because they are already functioning there. Keeping a business is often easier than recruiting a new business.”

Strengthening the state

The Cooperative Extension is working to diversify and strengthen Nevada’s economy in a number of ways. For example:

• UNCE is working with the Nevada office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Rural Development and the Governor’s Office of
Economic Development to help rural counties diversify and improve their economies. The Stronger Economies Together program combines the community development expertise of UNCE faculty with detailed planning data to help the eight rural Nevada counties of the Western Nevada Development District collaborate on regional economic development.

- UNCE has several programs that help prepare Nevada students for the workforce. Mini-Society teaches business skills to youth 10-to-12 years old, an age that’s ideal for recognizing entrepreneurial opportunities, studies show. More than 4,000 students have completed the program. They design and develop their own society—creating a name, flag and currency—and they establish their own businesses to provide goods and services to their fellow citizens.

- UNCE’s Carl Dahlen, a leadership specialist, works with a variety of UNCE faculty on community assessments. When a community requests an assessment, a team conducts a series of listening sessions with various community groups, identifies strengths and weaknesses, and prepares a report to help communities plan their futures. The teams have completed 12 assessments in the last three years.

- Lander County Extension Educator Rod Davis works with a team to identify industries that might benefit by locating to former mining sites, where there is an established infrastructure but the land is no longer used for mining. That effort is part of his Lander County Sustainable Economic Development Program, which seeks to modulate the severe fluctuations in the Battle Mountain economy due to the rapid expansion and contraction of mining activity.

- In several communities around the state, Cooperative Extension educators have been instrumental in helping local leaders establish tourism initiatives. Eagles and Agriculture brings bird watchers to Douglas County during the early spring when tourism is traditionally slow. With the help of Marlene Rebori ’05Ph.D. (political science), extension community and organizational development specialist, White Pine County is looking to promote its recreational opportunities to tourists.

Helping a new generation of farmers and ranchers

Herds & Harvest is a new three-year Cooperative Extension program designed to help Nevada farmers and ranchers become more profitable. Some of the agricultural producers coming to Herds & Harvest seminars around the state are experienced, but many are new to business, including a small-acreage farmer near Logandale who increased his alfalfa yields by 76 percent after attending UNCE Alternative Crop Specialist Jay Davison’s presentation on optimum fertilization for grass and alfalfa.

Cooperative Extension educators in rural counties are increasingly offering Nevadans help with the business end of farming and ranching. Northeast Clark County Educator Carol Bishop ’06 (environmental and natural resources science), ’08M.A. (resource and applied economics) helps residents develop business plans to provide goods and services needed in her remote community and coaches farmers on how to design enterprise budgets. Lincoln County Educator Holly Gatziak helps farmers develop relationships with Las Vegas restaurants eager to serve locally grown produce.

“Helping Nevada producers ensures that our state can feed itself and purchasing power stays in our state,” says Cooperative Extension Central/Northeast Area Director Loretta Singletary.

Long-term economic development

Many Cooperative Extension economic diversification efforts have been going on for years. Tom Harris and the UNCE-supported University Center for Economic Development provide economic development research to rural and urban areas interested in community development.

“We look at identifying the next potential industry; what industry to look for,” Harris says. Many extension programs fortify budding and stable businesses in less obvious ways. Child care centers—a critical service for households with two working parents—depend on Cooperative Extension to provide their employees with free or low-cost professional development.

“Training is key,” says youth development specialist Jackie Reilly ’76 (child development), ’84M.S. (home economics). “Studies show that improving the skills and knowledge of child care providers measurably improves the quality of care children receive. The providers themselves develop more pride and satisfaction from their work.”

Cooperative Extension helps a wide range of contracting industries, from landscape installers at Lake Tahoe to radon mitigators and green industry professionals throughout the state. The training workers or contractors receive helps them build and expand their business but also allows them to provide a key environmental or public-health service.

Other UNCE programs save employers and governments money by helping seniors remain self-sufficient and keeping workers healthy. This year, for example, Cooperative Extension will launch “Eat Healthy, Be Active,” an online chronic disease and risk-reduction program emphasizing nutrition, physical activity and injury prevention. It targets employees who work for small companies that can’t afford high-quality health and wellness training but are nevertheless hurt by health-related absenteeism or declining worker productivity.

Louise Helton is not surprised to learn about the many programs that Extension is conducting. Even before she launched her own business, Helton turned to Cooperative Extension for help when she created nonprofit organizations addressing issues that affect Nevada’s Youth, including the state’s high school dropout rate and preschool education for at-risk children.

“I have always turned to Cooperative Extension to help others,” Helton says. “So it’s really no surprise that when I needed help for myself, Extension was also there for me.”
