Center on Rural Innovation

# Advancing Digital Skilling in Rural America: Evaluation Report

# I. Executive summary

The Advancing Digital Skilling in Rural America project (2023–2025), funded by Ascendium and implemented by the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI), aimed to expand equitable access to technology careers for rural learners—particularly women, people of color, and low-income individuals. Over three years, CORI partnered with six diverse Rural Innovation Network communities—Ada (OK), Chambers County (AL), Cochise County (AZ), Selma (AL), Taos (NM), and Wilson (NC)—to strengthen local tech talent ecosystems by aligning employer needs, educational programs, and community support systems.

Guided by CORI's Tech Talent Development Theory of Change, the project helped local partners engage employers, assess labor market demand, map existing training assets, and build coordinated strategies for tech talent development. Across communities, CORI engaged over 90 employers, educators, and workforce partners through roundtables, surveys, and workshops, building shared understanding of challenges and opportunities in rural tech workforce development.

## Key achievements and impact:

**Community engagement:** Six communities were successfully onboarded, representing racially and geographically diverse regions.

**Employer and educator collaboration**: More than 90 employers and educators participated in the engagement process, identifying common needs related to job readiness, soft skills, and the alignment of training with real-world demand.

**Program innovation**: Three communities launched new employer-driven training initiatives; more than 140 rural learners enrolled in tech training programs; and several communities introduced new tools such as Taos's workforce readiness program and Wilson's GigEast Tech Talent & Job Board.

**Cross-community learning**: CORI facilitated peer convenings that built shared understanding, morale, and practical collaboration strategies across communities.

**Model development**: A scalable framework and interactive dashboard were developed to capture lessons learned and support replication in additional rural communities.

## Key insights:

Across communities, employers emphasized the importance of both technical and professional skills, calling for stronger coordination with educators and enhanced visibility of local tech career pathways. Training providers echoed these concerns, highlighting structural barriers such as limited career exposure, chronic absenteeism, and insufficient counseling resources. Both groups identified the need for earlier introduction to tech pathways, formalized educator–employer partnerships, and growth of non-degree credential pathways such as micro-credentials and apprenticeships.

## Overall impact:

The project made substantial progress toward Ascendium's goal of strengthening workforce pathways for rural, low-income learners. It demonstrated that building sustainable rural tech ecosystems requires more than creating training programs—it requires coordinated systems of employers, educators, and community partners working toward shared goals with clear feedback loops. The lessons and frameworks developed through this initiative now position CORI to support replication in rural communities nationwide.

# II. Introduction

## Project background and need:

Rural Americans make up 11% of the U.S. workforce but only 4% of the nation's tech workforce. This gap is even wider for rural residents from underrepresented groups, including women and people of color. Research from the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI), supported by Ascendium, estimates that there are more than 80,000 missing tech jobs in rural America (**Center on Rural Innovation, 2022**). That research also reveals two major barriers to growing rural tech employment: (1) limited awareness of tech careers and (2) training programs that often do not meet the specific needs of rural learners.

Rural residents consistently express interest in technology-related careers but lack exposure to tech work and clear pathways to entry. At the same time, many rural employers report challenges finding workers with digital or technical skills, while educators struggle to adapt programs to meet these evolving local demands. The challenge is not simply a lack of programs or talent—it's that these efforts often operate in isolation.

## Project goals and objectives:

The Advancing Digital Skilling in Rural America project, funded by Ascendium, aimed to help rural communities connect the dots between employers, educators, and other local partners to build stronger, more coordinated pathways for developing local tech talent. By identifying the key components of each community's workforce system, mapping existing assets, and facilitating structured conversations among stakeholders, the project sought to create shared strategies for growing tech talent from the ground up. Ultimately, the project's overarching goal was to help more underrepresented rural learners, particularly women, people of color, and individuals from low-income backgrounds, gain the skills, credentials, and connections needed to access high-quality, high-wage tech jobs.

**To achieve these goals, the project pursued five core objectives:**

1. **Select and support six Rural Innovation Network communities** for targeted, place-based interventions.
2. **Assess local employer demand for tech talent** by engaging businesses to identify the digital and technical skills they seek.
3. **Connect employers, educators, and workforce partners** to create a shared vision and coordinated local strategy for tech talent development.
4. **Support the launch of new employer-driven tech training programs** aligned with identified skills needs and labor market demand.
5. **Document a scalable and replicable model** for building equitable, community-led tech talent pipelines in rural areas nationwide.

# III. Project methodology and activities

The Advancing Digital Skilling in Rural America project was guided by CORI's Tech Talent Development Theory of Change, a framework designed to address the barriers rural learners face when pursuing technology careers. The approach progresses through inputs (support services, stakeholder engagement), initiatives (gap identification, asset mapping), and outputs (increased tech skills, workforce readiness) to achieve outcomes (higher certification rates, job placements) necessary for sustainable tech talent pipelines. The methodology for this project emphasized first assessing local labor market demand and training supply, and then connecting employers, educators, and workforce partners so they could build cohesive, inclusive, community-led tech talent ecosystems informed by ongoing collaboration.

## Community selection and onboarding

Community selection prioritized alignment with the Ascendium grant's focus on underrepresented populations, specifically expanding opportunity for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, women, individuals living at or below the poverty line, and those experiencing high rates of underemployment. Six pilot communities were chosen from CORI's Rural Innovation Network to ensure diverse geographic and demographic representation, and to test both city-focused and regional ecosystem models. Most selected communities were existing Network members with established relationships and local leadership capacity, which strengthened collaboration and the likelihood of success. Selma, Alabama, engaged through a separate initiative, was included as an emerging Network community to expand learning opportunities.

Each community underwent a structured onboarding process that included orientation sessions, goal setting, and the development of local leadership teams to guide implementation.

## Employer engagement and needs assessment

The employer engagement strategy centered on communities as the primary relationship holders with local businesses, with CORI serving as a capacity builder to help them develop comprehensive Employer Engagement Plans. This approach leveraged existing community infrastructure, encouraging local organizations to connect with SBDCs, chambers of commerce, and other groups with established business relationships.

Local teams then conducted outreach via email and community roundtables to assess employers' skills and talent needs. In communities with limited engagement infrastructure, such as Selma, the CORI team supplemented these efforts with direct outreach. This involved calling approximately 50 businesses and conducting in-person site visits to understand technical demands and regional nuances. Finally, the team facilitated workshops where engaged employers participated in live Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analyses to document their collective needs, challenges, and opportunities.

## Partnership and coalition building

After employer engagement established a baseline for labor market demand, the project expanded collaboration across the local ecosystem. CORI and community leads convened educators and training providers to map current digital and tech-skilling programs and assess their alignment with employer needs. Wraparound support organizations, including workforce boards, community nonprofits, places of worship, and youth-serving organizations such as the YMCA and Boys and Girls clubs, were then engaged to amplify awareness and reach. The process culminated in community-wide convenings that brought together employers, educators, and support partners to co-develop strategies for building the tech talent pipeline. This sequencing fostered ownership among stakeholders and laid the groundwork for ongoing collaboration beyond the project period. The team encouraged communities to establish feedback loops with primary stakeholders to continuously monitor and update information about employer skills demand, educator capacity to teach in-demand skills, and community organization effectiveness in promoting opportunities to job seekers and learners.

## Training program and ecosystem development

With local ecosystems in place, CORI and community partners conducted gap analyses to identify where local training programs aligned or failed to align with employer needs. When alignment existed, CORI facilitated connections between employers and educators to strengthen partnerships, refine curricula, and establish hiring pipelines. In cases where gaps were identified, the project helped communities partner with national training providers, including Google and Cisco, to introduce industry-recognized credential tech training programs. When educational programs existed with limited corresponding local job opportunities, CORI facilitated discussions with educators about the potential outcomes for program participants. This phase ensured that each participating community had access to relevant training pathways, that educators understood labor market needs, that employers knew about available talent pipelines, and that wraparound support services could effectively guide learners through the entire upskilling journey.

## Documentation and model development

Throughout the project, CORI collected qualitative and quantitative data from community partners to capture lessons learned, best practices, and key outcomes. This documentation process informed the development of a scalable, replicable model for building rural tech talent ecosystems. The model emphasizes continuous feedback loops among employers, educators, and community partners, helping to maintain alignment between workforce training and real-world demand. This structure ensures that even after project completion, participating communities can continue to update strategies, track outcomes, and adapt their efforts to sustain progress over time.

*Above: Members of CORI's Tech Talent Development team with Gig East staff in Wilson, NC.*

# IV. Evaluation findings: Performance against target metrics

## PERIOD 1: 2023

| Metric | Target | Result |
|---|---|---|
| **1: Community onboarding** | 6 communities with large BIPOC populations selected and onboarded by June 2023. | CORI identified 6 Rural Innovation Network communities whose BIPOC populations exceeded the national rural share at 24.8% (see Table 1). As of June 2023, all identified communities were selected and onboarded into the program. |

**TABLE 1.** *Share of BIPOC population in selected communities compared to the national rural BIPOC share*

| Community | Community BIPOC share | National rural BIPOC share |
|---|---|---|
| Ada, Oklahoma | 38.22% | **24.8%** |
| Chambers Co., Alabama | 46.17% | |
| Cochise Co., Arizona | 45.92% | |
| Selma, Alabama | 73.49% | |
| Taos, New Mexico | 64.23% | |
| Wilson, North Carolina | 55.20% | |

| Metric | Target | Result |
|---|---|---|
| **2: Employer selection** | 12 local or regional employers that employ tech workers identified by December 2023 for each community, and hiring needs assessed. | CORI identified at least 12 employers in each community, achieving our goal. However, not all identified employers participated in the roundtable discussions. Table 2 shows the employers from each community that engaged in the roundtable discussions. |

**TABLE 2.** *Employers in program communities that participated in roundtables*

| Community (# of employers) | Employers |
|---|---|
| Ada, OK (7) | People's Electric Cooperative (PEC), Pontotoc Technology Center, WPS, East Central University, LegalShield, Byng Public Schools, Citizens Bank of Ada |
| Chambers Co., AL (4) | Hantal Alabama Corporation, John Soules Foods, West Fraser, Chambers County Development Authority |
| Cochise Co., AZ (9) | Arizona @ Work, Cochise College, University of Arizona, Agile Defense, General Dynamics Information Technology, Northrop Grumman, SOSi, Action Technology Services, Canyon Vista |
| Selma, AL (3) | Computer & Data Network Services, Selcom, UAB Health Center |
| Taos, NM (9) | Taos Ski Valley, CarePlanIt, Kit Carson Electric, UNM Taos, Holy Cross Medical Center, Taos County, Town of Taos, UNM-Taos Hive, Taos Pueblo |
| Wilson, NC (8) | Swabbot Solutions LLC, Imagination Station Science & History Museum, Colliers Engineering & Design, Katchi Financial Services, Wilson Economic Development Council, Wilson County Public Library, RIoT, Hubert Vester Auto Group |

| Metric | Target | Result |
|---|---|---|
| **3: Training partner selection** | 3 training partners identified for each community and program offerings assessed by December 2023. | CORI identified more than 3 training partners in each community (see Table 3). |

**TABLE 3.** *Training partners in program communities that participated in roundtables*

| Community (# of partners) | Training partners |
|---|---|
| Ada, OK (7) | Pontotoc Technology Center, East Central University, Byng Public Schools, Vanoss High School |
| Chambers Co., AL (4) | Southern Union State Community College, Point University, Lanett City Schools, Chambers County School District |
| Cochise Co., AZ (9) | Cochise College, University of Arizona, Buena High School, Cochise County Schools |
| Selma, AL (3) | Wallace Community College, Best Buy Teen Tech Center, Selma City Schools, Dallas County Schools |
| Taos, NM (9) | UNM-Taos, UNM-Taos HIVE, UNM-Taos PreK-12 Outreach, Taos Academy, Peñasco Independent Schools, Taos Pueblo Education and Training Division/ Workforce Program, STEMarts Lab |
| Wilson, NC (8) | Wilson Community College, Wilson Academy of Applied Technology, Wilson Forward, Wilson County Public Library, Dress for Success, Wilson Education Partnership, City of Wilson, GigEast |

## PERIOD 2: 2024

| Metric | Target | Result |
|---|---|---|
| **4: Employer needs assessment** | 36 employers have documented the tech skills and training demand by March 2024. | CORI received 47 responses from a survey to document demand. More details are provided in the Key Findings: Employer Roundtables and Survey section. |
| **5: Employer and training partner participation** | 24 employers, training, or community partners per community have expanded their understanding of tech skills training demand by March 2024. | 71 employers or training partners, and community partners participated in the training partner roundtables in total. The CORI team noted that it was difficult to track all of the different community partners that participated throughout the grant. More details are provided in the Key Findings: Employer Roundtables and Survey section and the Key Findings: Training Partner Roundtables and Survey section. |

| Metric | Target | Result |
|---|---|---|
| **6: Paid internship or apprenticeship programs** | 5 local or regional employers per community have worked with CORI staff to explore launching paid internship or apprenticeship programs by December 2024. | See detailed results below. |

**Result:** CORI met or exceeded the target in all six communities by engaging at least 5 employers or regional partners per site in exploratory planning for paid internships and apprenticeships. These conversations centered on a range of work-based learning options, including paid internships, Registered Apprenticeships, stipends, wage subsidies, and credit-bearing work-based learning as potential pathways toward fully paid placements.

In Wilson and Cochise County in particular, partners showed strong interest in Registered Apprenticeships and related instruction delivered through community colleges, with emphasis on wage progression and sustainable funding models. Several employers across communities progressed from preliminary discussions to developing draft program structures. For example, in Wilson, ApprenticeshipNC, and Watson Electric outlined a pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship pathway that integrates on-the-job training with formal instruction and wage advancement. Other employers—such as Johnson & Johnson and NOPAC—initiated internal planning for tech-adjacent internships tied to upcoming facility expansions.

In Cochise County, partners leveraged existing pipelines with Northrop Grumman, JROTC CyberPatriot programs, and Arizona@Work to explore apprenticeship-aligned pathways in IT and defense contracting. Additional communities drafted employer engagement plans and identified specific departments or roles that could host interns pending funding or internal approval.

| Metric | Target | Result |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **7: Community engagement** | 300 people per community engaged through local outreach efforts by December 2024 | CORI and local partners met the outreach target in all six communities, engaging well over 300 individuals per site through a combination of in-person events and digital outreach. Although each community tracked engagement slightly differently, counts generally included participation in employer and educator roundtables, Ignite Exchange (a series of small, cross-sector community meetings in Cochise County), alignment meetings, information sessions, and other local events, along with digital engagement such as email newsletter opens and click-throughs, social media reach, and online inquiries. |

## PERIOD 3: 2025

| Metric | Target | Result |
|---|---|---|
| **8: Shared vision and convening** | 43 employers, training providers, and local partners in each community to have a shared vision for local tech talent development by July 2025 | While the project team felt that participants in each community did have a shared vision, they noted that the goal of 43 participants with a shared vision in each community was not met. Participation was highly variable, and in some communities (e.g., Selma), the project lead noted that the total number of participants over the three years was well below 43. Additionally, the team noted that it was difficult to specify an exact number and to measure the shared vision. |
| **9: Participant enrollment** | 180 tech learners and job seekers have expanded their capacity to obtain tech employment by July 2025 | A total of 156 learners across the six communities participated in tech training and/or CORI's wraparound support services. Learners were counted toward this metric if they enrolled in a structured digital skills or technology training program and engaged in at least one support touchpoint—such as career coaching, resume or LinkedIn assistance, job-search workshops, or remote job-readiness sessions. Participation was distributed across all six communities, with most sites supporting cohorts of approximately 20–30 learners depending on local capacity, timing, and availability of training offerings. |

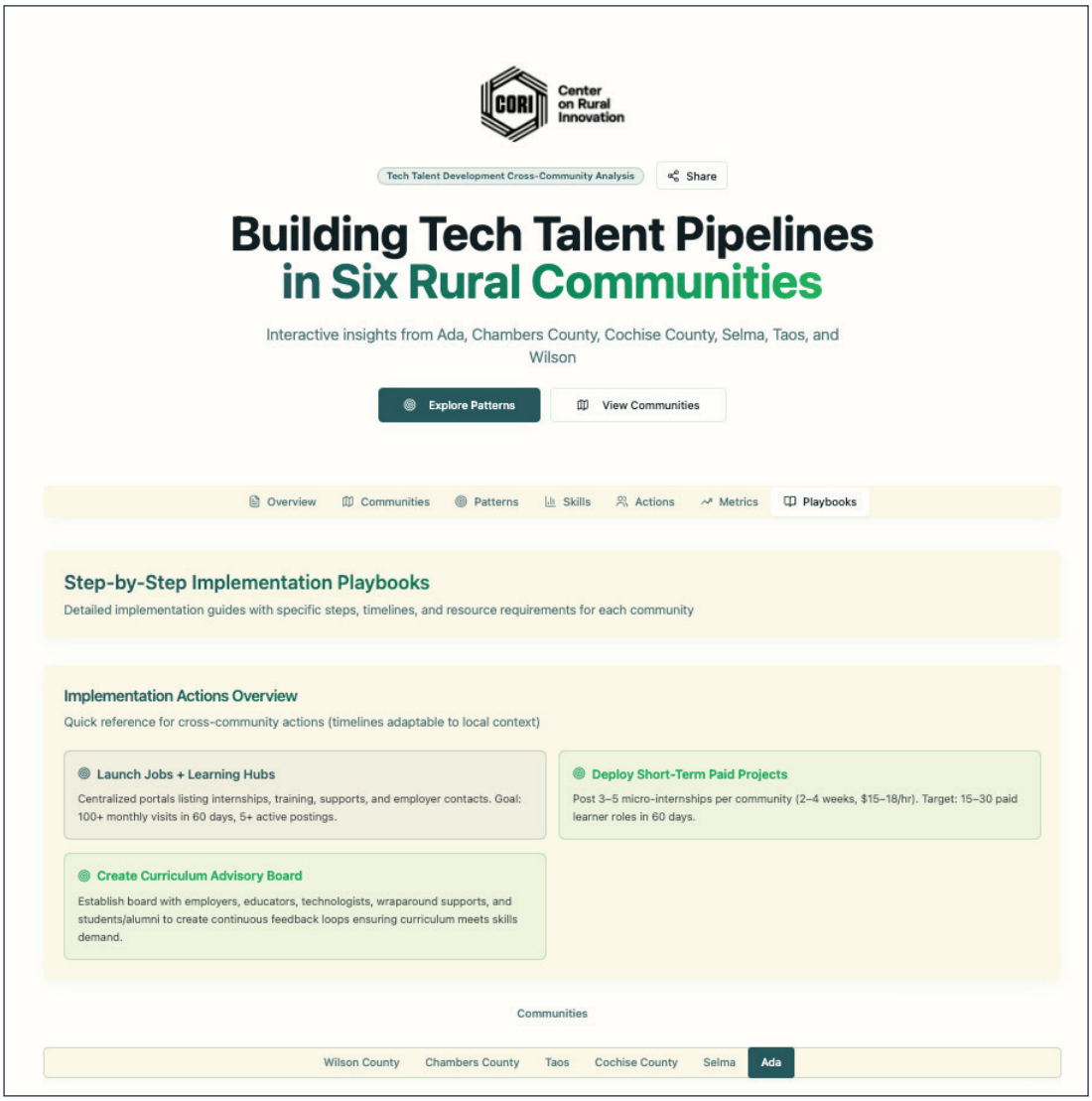
| Metric | Target | Result |
|---|---|---|
| **10: Employer-driven training programs** | 48 local or regional employers have launched or plan to launch a paid internship or apprenticeship program by July 2025 | See detailed results below. |

**Result:** Across the six communities, 34 employers indicated plans to launch an internship or apprenticeship aligned with local tech skill needs. Approximately half are actively developing paid models, while others are exploring stipend-based, hybrid, or credit-bearing structures that blend wages, tuition support, or academic credit to create viable work-based learning options. These employers span a wide range of sectors—including manufacturing, biopharma, IT and defense contracting, utilities, creative industries, and public-sector and education partners—demonstrating broad, cross-industry interest in expanding tech-related work-based learning opportunities.

Although this fell short of the initial target, the shortfall reflects the start-up nature of the initiative, capacity constraints in smaller rural communities, and the reality that early-stage ecosystem building requires deeper, more individualized support rather than rapid scaling. These experiences reinforced several key lessons: the value of earlier and more structured recruitment, the necessity of strong referral partnerships, and the importance of right-sized enrollment targets that balance depth of support with overall reach. Recruitment worked best when trusted messengers carried the invitation, suggesting that future phases may benefit from explicitly budgeting for and tracking community ambassadors or peer recruiters rather than relying solely on traditional marketing. Together, these insights highlight that the quality of engagement and depth of support matter more than raw headcount during the early stages of this work.

| Metric | Target | Result |
|---|---|---|
| **11: Replication and scalability** | By December 2025, the process developed and refined through this pilot will be documented for future use, with the goal of replicating the program in 10-12 additional rural communities | The CORI team built an interactive dashboard that includes playbooks, project findings, and insights that will be shared with communities (Figure 1). |

**FIGURE 1.** *Screenshot of the interactive dashboard with playbooks*



# V. Key findings: Employer roundtables and survey

## Summary of cross-cutting themes

Across all six communities, employers voiced consistent perspectives about the challenges and opportunities in developing rural tech talent. Although specific technical needs varied by region, employers most frequently cited web development, IT support, programming, digital marketing, database administration, and cybersecurity as priority skill areas (see Figure 2). Employers universally emphasized that soft skills such as communication, teamwork, reliability, and professionalism are equally, if not more, critical for long-term success.

**FIGURE 2.** *Employer survey results for tech skill needs*

**What digital and technical skills or jobs are you currently outsourcing, that you would consider hiring locally for if you could find qualified talent?**

*43 respondents*

A recurring theme was the misalignment between current educational offerings and local industry needs. Employers noted that students often graduate without the practical skills or work readiness employers require. Strengthening coordination between educational institutions and employers emerged as a key recommendation, including formalizing partnerships and jointly designing training curricula.

Employers also emphasized a significant awareness gap: many students, parents, and job seekers are unaware of local tech career options or how to access them. This lack of visibility led to calls for community-wide awareness campaigns, stronger career marketing, and more early exposure to tech pathways in schools.

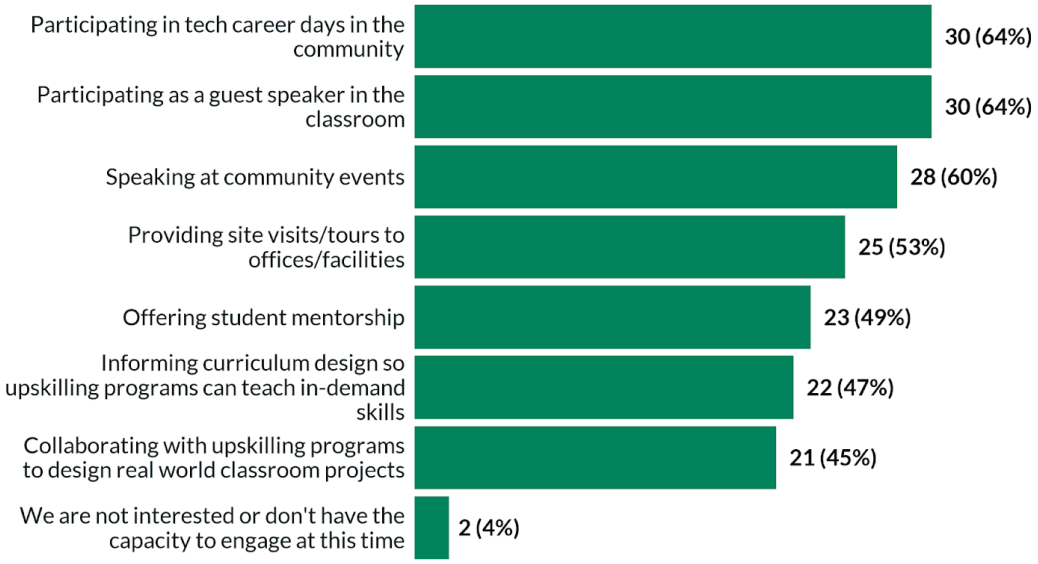
Rural-specific structural barriers, such as transportation constraints, smaller labor pools, and lower wage competitiveness, further compound these challenges. Transportation limitations restrict access to training and jobs, and lower local wage structures make it difficult for employers to compete with urban or remote salaries. Smaller labor pools also heighten recruitment challenges.

Overall, employers expressed strong support for alternative education-to-career pathways. They endorsed credential-based programs such as Security+, short-term bootcamps, apprenticeships, and portfolio-based hiring models. Employers agreed that four-year degrees should not be the only or preferred route to tech employment in rural regions. In the employer survey, most employers also showed interest in engaging in community activities and collaborating with training partners to strengthen the tech talent pipeline such as tech career days, speaking in the classroom and at community events, guided facility tours, mentorship, and informing curriculum (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3.** *Employer survey results for training partner collaboration and community engagement*

**What community engagement activities is your organization interested in? The details of each of these engagements will be outlined later**

*47 respondents*



## Site-specific highlights and recommendations

- **Ada, Oklahoma:** Employers highlighted major gaps in both job readiness and technical skills. Strengthening partnerships between East Central University and Pontotoc Technology Center could help align training with employer needs, providing specialized training programs in high-demand fields. Programs would benefit from integrating foundational professional skills, such as communication, interviewing, and workplace conduct, alongside technical instruction.
- **Chambers County, Alabama:** Educators face systemic pressures to prioritize testing, which limits time for hands-on learning. Employers recommended promoting bootcamps, micro-credentials, and portfolio-based hiring to validate real-world skills.
- **Cochise County, Arizona:** A shortage of career and technical education (CTE) instructors, many of whom leave for better-paying private-sector jobs, has weakened local training capacity. The region can counter this by incentivizing CTE teachers to remain, integrating industry certifications like Security+ into educational pathways, and leveraging partnerships with organizations like Arizona @ Work to provide certification vouchers.
- **Selma, Alabama:** Employers expressed interest in integrating technology into existing industries like healthcare and manufacturing. Formalizing partnerships and dialogue between UAB Health, Wallace Community College, and local employers could create clear, sustainable pathways into tech roles.
- **Taos, New Mexico:** Although Taos outsources roughly 80% of its tech work due to local skill shortages, assets like UNM-Taos HIVE offer strong potential. Building early career exploration programs and a centralized job board could help capture this untapped local opportunity.
- **Wilson, North Carolina:** Existing collaborations are strong, but organizational silos persist. The newly established Wilson Workforce Alliance and GigEast Tech Talent & Job Board are promising steps toward a more unified system for matching job seekers to employers.

*Below: Delivering an tech ecosystem alignment workshop at the **Grow Ada** office in downtown Ada, OK*

Together, these insights reflect employers' readiness to engage more actively in the talent pipeline when structures for collaboration and communication are clear and accessible.

# VI. Key findings: Training partner roundtables and survey

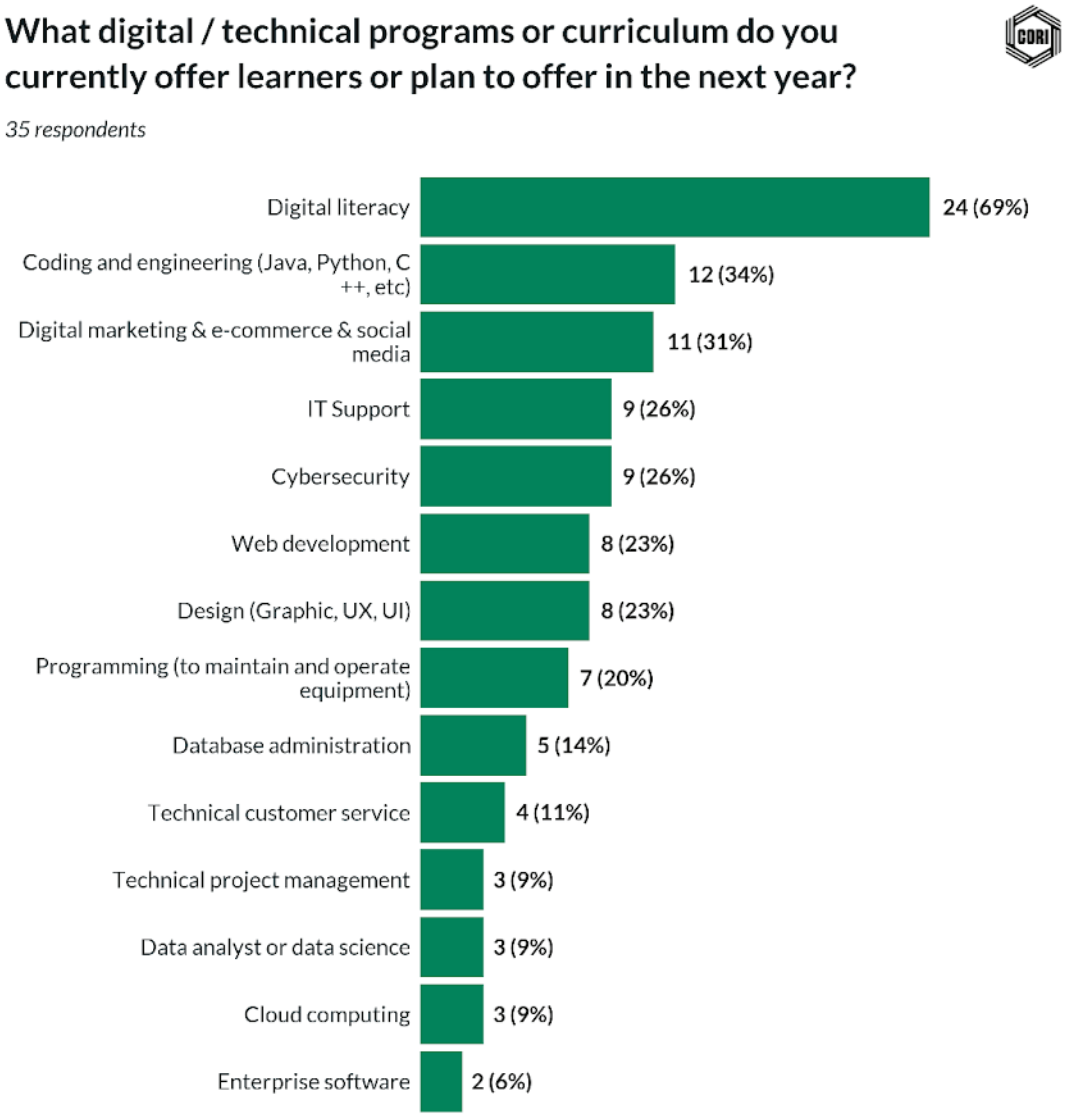
## Summary of cross-cutting themes

Education and training partners across communities echoed many of the employers' concerns while highlighting additional challenges on the supply side of the tech talent pipeline. Educators described a dual awareness gap: students and parents have limited understanding of local tech opportunities, and schools often lack the tools and industry partnerships needed to prepare learners for these roles.

Figure 4 shows the survey results for the current and planned technical training options offered by training partners. Although digital literacy is the most common offering (69%), it is foundational rather than specific to tech jobs, reflecting a baseline skill rather than a targeted pathway. This is important as approximately 92% of all jobs now require digital proficiency (**Shilcock et al., 2023**). Still, there is notable misalignment between training offerings and employer needs (see Figure 2). For example, web development is the top need that businesses currently outsource (53%), yet only 23% of training partners surveyed offer or plan to offer specific web development programs. About 40% of the employers surveyed currently outsource IT support and 26% outsource cyber security and would consider hiring locally, but only 26% of training partners offer these programs. Additionally, there are significant issues in the availability of training in programming to maintain equipment, digital marketing, database administration, etc.

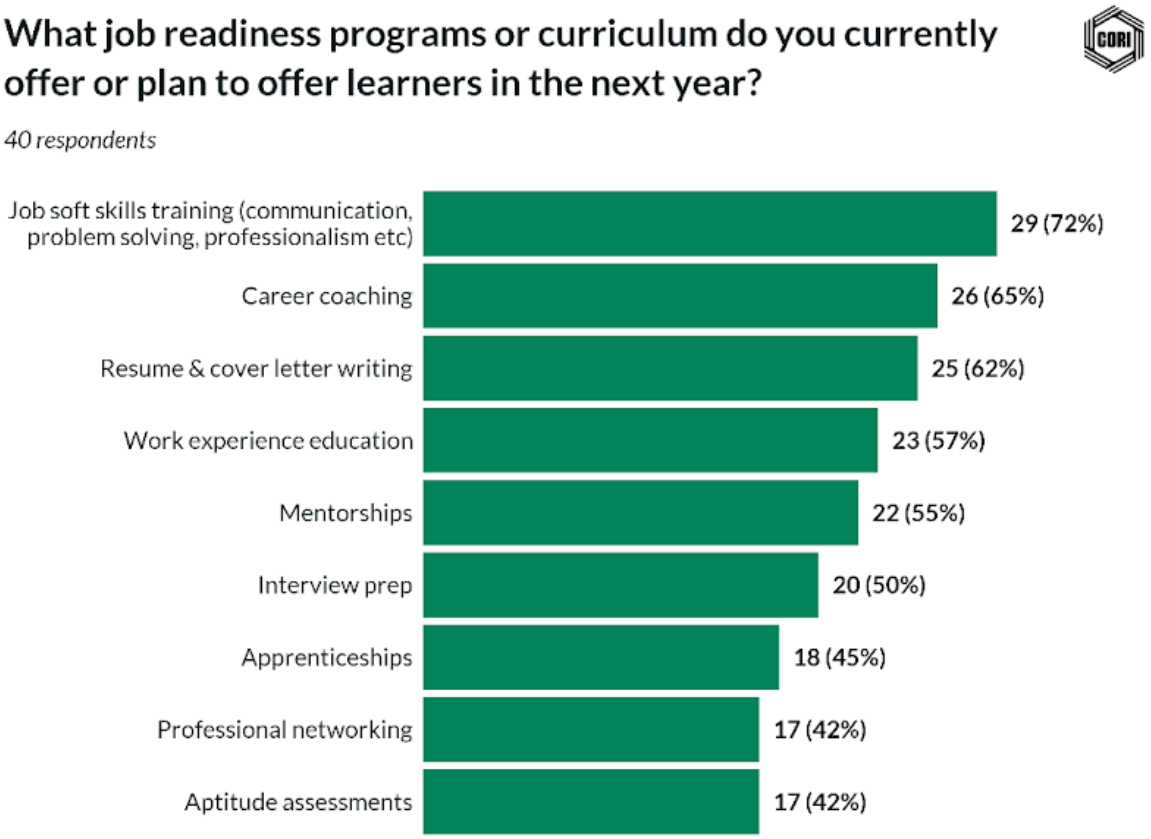
*Above: Hosting a tech ecosystem roundtable in Chambers County, AL at the **Circles of Care Center for Families.***

**FIGURE 4.** *Training partner survey results of tech skill programs*




Educators also reported widespread soft skill gaps, particularly in communication, reliability, and professional readiness, mirroring employer concerns. As Figure 5 shows, soft skills training leads current and planned training offerings. Chronic absenteeism, limited counseling resources, and late-stage career exposure further hinder progress. In many districts, a single career coach serves hundreds of students, and career exploration begins too late to meaningfully influence learners' decisions. Students need opportunities to discover technology careers much earlier, ideally in middle school or even elementary grades, to build genuine interest and commitment.

**FIGURE 5.** *Training partner survey results of job readiness programs*




Despite these challenges, educators expressed strong enthusiasm for deeper and more formalized partnerships with industry. They called for mechanisms to co-design curricula aligned with local labor market data, embed digital literacy across subjects (not just electives), and expand hands-on and work-based learning opportunities. Figures 6 and 7 show the results of the training partner survey responses to questions about collaborating with employers and community engagement. It shows a strong desire to collaborate with employers on internships and apprenticeship programs, student mentorship, classroom speakers, informing the curriculum, and hosting career events (many of which were also reported by employers as activities they would like to collaborate with training partners on - see Figure 3). Structural barriers such as insurance and liability constraints currently limit internships and apprenticeships, but educators see these experiences as essential for building readiness.

**FIGURE 6.** *Training partner survey results for employer collaboration*

## List the initiatives you would be interested in collaborating with employers on in the future?

*39 respondents*

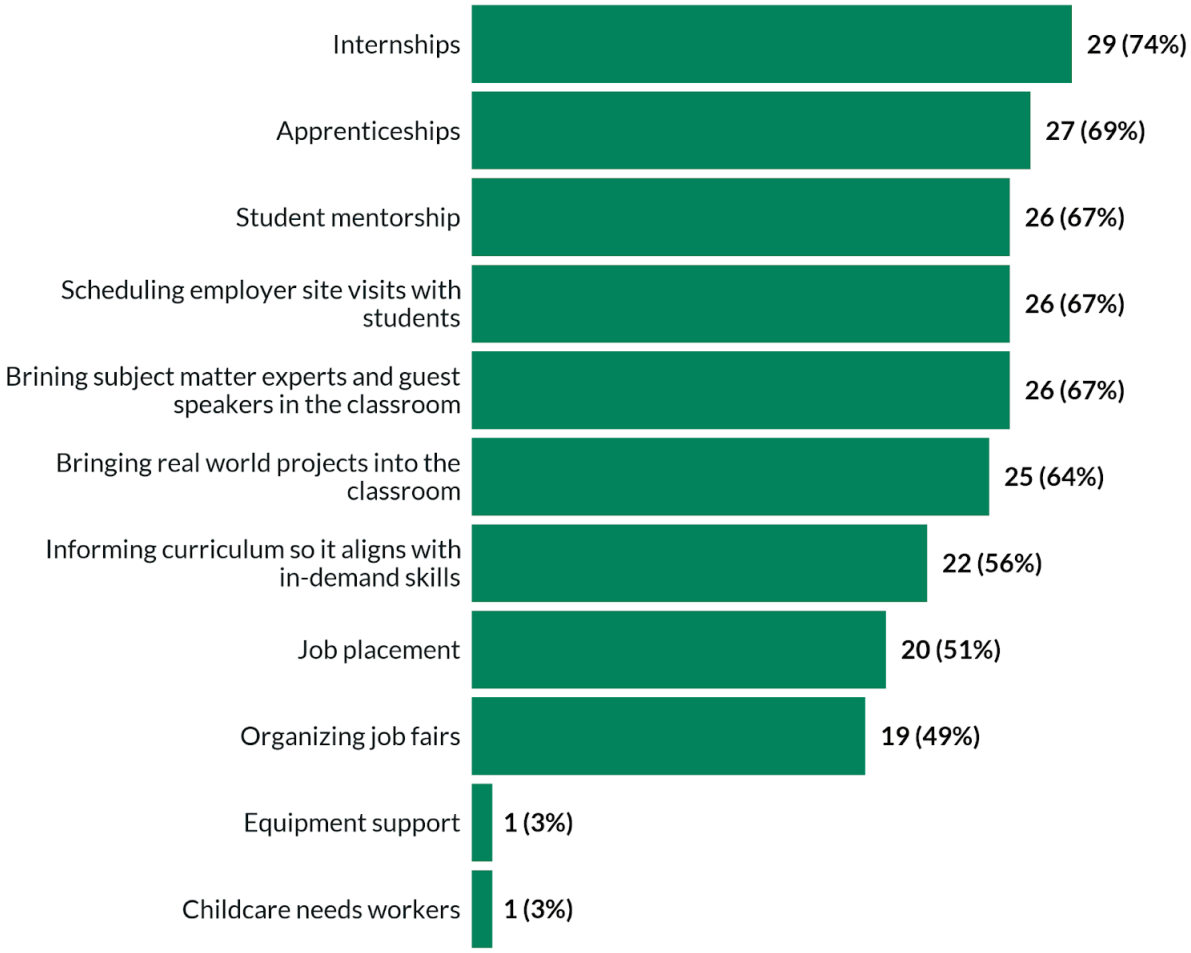
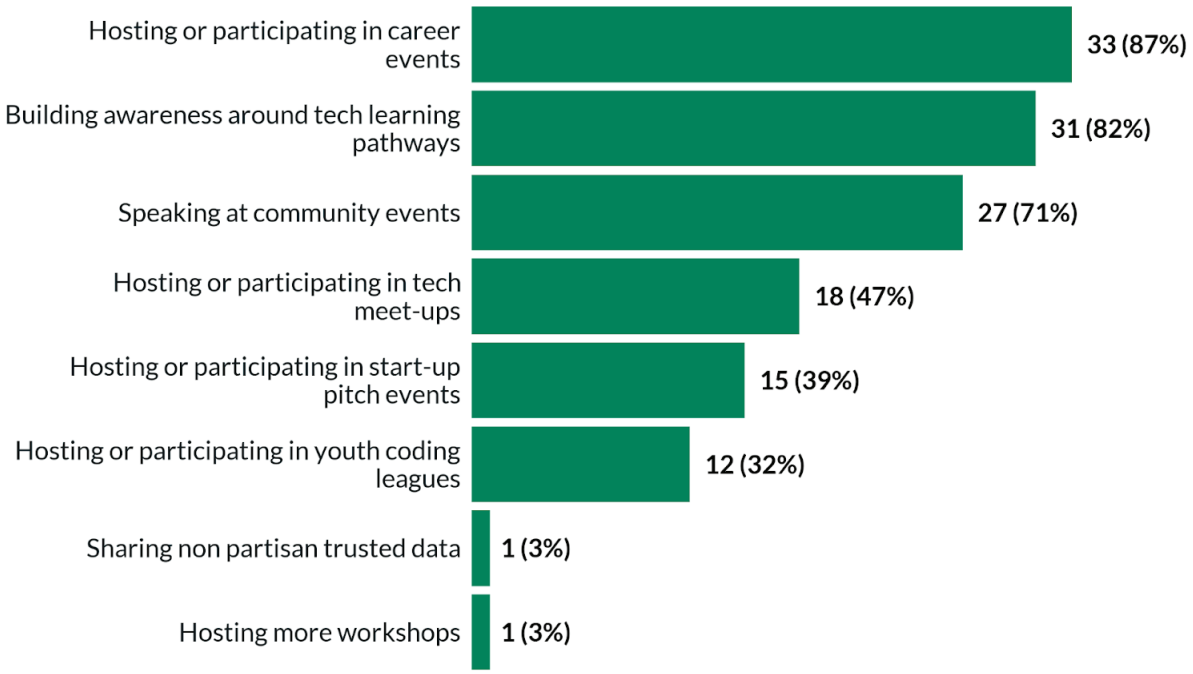


**FIGURE 7.** *Training partner survey results for community engagement*

## What community engagement activities is your organization or school interested in participating in? (The details of each of these engagements will be developed)

*38 respondents*




A central insight from these roundtables is educators' desire for a coordinated ecosystem—one in which schools, employers, and community partners share information, align resources, and jointly track outcomes. Several communities already have valuable building blocks that could anchor such systems, including Oklahoma's CareerTech network, Chambers County's "Teachers on Tour" initiative, and Cochise County's emerging IT certification programs. Building formalized partnerships could leverage these existing assets more effectively.

## Site-specific highlights and recommendations

- **Ada, Oklahoma:** Pontotoc Technology Center provides a strong foundation for employer-informed training within the CareerTech system. Embedding digital literacy across K–12 and expanding early exposure through dedicated career discovery classes and afterschool and middle school programs could strengthen this pipeline further.
- **Chambers County, Alabama:** Programs such as Teachers on Tour have increased interest in career and technical education (CTE). Partnerships with Southern Union State Community College, Point University, and Google's training programs show promise. Expanding STEM offerings and increasing career coaching capacity remain top priorities, though funding continues to be a challenge.
- **Cochise County, Arizona:** Although the region offers multiple CTE pathways (e.g., Software & App Design, Engineering), awareness remains low. Stakeholders recommended forming a county-wide coalition to create a centralized hub combining job listings, education opportunities, and wraparound supports, while cultivating local champions to promote tech careers.
- **Selma, Alabama:** Wallace Community College offers relevant training in cybersecurity, IT support, and web development, but direct collaboration with local employers remains limited. Formalizing partnerships with employers to inform curriculum design and expand internship opportunities would better align training with immediate job market needs. Establishing local employer representation on curriculum advisory boards and integrating soft skills development alongside technical training are essential to create a genuine pathway from classroom to local employment.
- **Taos, New Mexico:** The community faces a significant job readiness gap, driven by chronic absenteeism in K–12 (55%) and a pattern of candidates "ghosting" interviews. Given the small local talent pool, each "near-miss" candidate represents a valuable but lost opportunity. To address these challenges, partners should embed wraparound supports and job readiness training early in K–12 education, focusing on attendance, communication, and professionalism, and create a formal referral system among local employers to connect near-miss candidates with other job opportunities in the region.
- **Wilson, North Carolina:** Wilson Academy of Applied Technology and Wilson Community College offer relevant IT and cybersecurity programs, but participants identified fragmented pathways and gaps in employer engagement. Educators should prioritize restructuring the employer advisory board to meet more frequently with active local employers, ensuring the curriculum is informed by real workforce needs. Additionally, establishing clear navigation systems across existing programs, expanding internship and apprenticeship opportunities with liability protections for younger students, and building formal tech mentorship capacity within community organizations would strengthen the pipeline from classroom to employment.

Across communities, educators expressed that consistent collaboration and shared accountability with employers would significantly improve their ability to align training with regional workforce needs.

# VII. Qualitative outcomes and community highlights

*To examine how the project influenced local ecosystems, the CORI evaluation team conducted semi-structured interviews with community partners in each of the six participating communities.*

## CORI's role and support

Across all six communities, partners consistently described CORI as a *trusted collaborator, facilitator, and capacity builder*. Rather than directing activities, CORI provided structured guidance, resources, and expertise that helped communities identify their own goals and strategies.

A representative from Ada characterized the partnership as a *collaborative consultation "guiding the conversations and facilitating the workshops."* In Taos, participants described CORI as an invaluable connector to national networks: *"CORI is an incredible resource that exposes us to other rural communities doing the same thing."*

Partners also praised the team's responsiveness and flexibility. Selma's local lead reflected, *"They were always interested in our community—wanting to know what was going on and where they could fit in and help."* Similarly, a Taos partner emphasized, *"If I need help finding resources, or if I have a question, they're great about getting back to me. The CORI team has been really great."*

Crucially, communities felt empowered to chart their own course. As Rose Reza, Executive Director of UNM-Taos HIVE, explained:

*"CORI is a resource…they plant the seed. They provide us with this buffet of certifications, and we can decide what to take advantage of. I always try to take advantage of everything they provide, because there are always incredible key learnings."*

Together, these reflections underscore CORI's dual role: a guide and catalyst that builds local capacity while honoring community leadership and ownership.


*Above: A group photo of representatives from the communities participating in the Advancing Digital Skilling in Rural America project in Selma, AL*

## Highlights and bright spots

*Partners across the network identified several tangible benefits and bright spots that emerged through the Advancing Digital Skilling in Rural America project.*

- **Program creation and innovation:** In Taos, the initiative directly inspired a new five-session entry-level workforce development program. As one partner shared, *"One of the main things we've worked on—and it was definitely influenced by this initiative—is creating a workforce development program."*
- **Cross-sector collaboration and awareness:** Community convenings proved especially valuable for bridging gaps between educators and employers. In Chambers County, one participant reflected, *"When Ascendium first started, a lot of people were confused—they saw tech and thought, 'I don't work in a tech job.' But the CORI team did a great job explaining and simplifying that for everyone."* These sessions built shared understanding and broadened local definitions of "tech work."
- **Peer learning and connection:** Participants widely cited peer-to-peer learning as one of the most meaningful aspects of the project. CORI facilitated this exchange through two major events: the Ascendium Convening in Selma (April 2025) and participation in the Rural Innovation Network Summit (September 2025). The Selma convening brought together nine participants from six entities and was described as *"a powerful experience"* that renewed motivation. Chambers County partners said hearing other communities' stories *"gave us hope not to give up, because it's been rough."* Wilson participants echoed this sentiment, describing the convening as both energizing and therapeutic: *"There were times where it felt like a therapy session—everyone's so passionate about the work they do, and sometimes it's hard. We left with a full page of notes and ideas."* These convenings not only fostered professional development but also strengthened a sense of shared purpose and momentum across communities, creating a peer network that extended well beyond the grant period.

Together, these bright spots demonstrate how the Advancing Digital Skilling in Rural America project not only built local capacity but also strengthened relationships, trust, and collaboration across communities. The combination of new programs, cross-sector partnerships, and peer learning networks created lasting momentum that will continue to shape rural tech talent development beyond the life of the grant. In many ways, these outcomes reflect the project's core success: transforming isolated efforts into a connected ecosystem for rural innovation and opportunity.

*Above: A member of CORI's Tech Talent Development team with Taos HIVE Executive Director Rose Reza.*

# VIII. Challenges, lessons learned, and recommendations

## Persistent challenges

Across communities, partners identified several persistent challenges that limited engagement, slowed momentum, or constrained the depth of systems change achievable within the project period.

***Engagement fatigue and competing demands.***
In multiple communities, particularly Selma, participants described a saturated landscape of meetings, initiatives, and nonprofits, which contributed to meeting fatigue and reduced attendance at convenings. Stakeholders often needed more clarity on the purpose of each engagement and how it would directly benefit their organization or learners.

***Capacity constraints.***
Many local partners were operating with minimal staff capacity, making it difficult to sustain outreach, coordinate employer engagement, or maintain continuity during leadership transitions. These constraints were especially pronounced in communities where a single staff member managed multiple roles.

***Leadership turnover and organizational instability.***
Transitions within partner organizations disrupted progress and required additional time to reorient new staff to the project's goals and expectations. This often led to uneven engagement across the three-year period.

***Timing and duration of the grant.***
Across communities, participants emphasized that three years was not sufficient to achieve the kind of deep cultural and systems change required to build sustainable tech talent pipelines. As one Taos partner noted, "I can't tell you if you can solve that in three years based on how we were doing things."

## Lessons learned

***The value of a neutral convener and structured facilitation.***
A consistent theme across communities was the importance of CORI serving as a neutral facilitator—bringing employers, educators, workforce partners, and community organizations together in ways that no single local entity had the capacity or authority to do. Partners from Cochise County stated "you do need a third party, you just can't do it yourself. There's no way we could have ever done this by ourselves." This role helped reduce silos and build early trust necessary for coordinated systems change.

***Employer engagement must come first and stay continuous.***
The project's sequencing (beginning with employer needs before assessing training supply) was validated across all sites. Early employer discussions provided the foundation for subsequent work with schools and training providers and helped ensure that emerging pathways were demand-driven. Communities with the strongest early employer engagement (e.g., Ada, Cochise, Taos) made the most progress toward employer-driven programming.

***Soft skills and job readiness are as critical as technical skills.***
Employers universally emphasized persistent gaps in communication, professionalism, reliability, and workplace readiness. Training partners shared similar concerns, citing chronic absenteeism, limited counseling resources, and late exposure to career pathways. This reinforced the need for tech talent pipelines that integrate professional skills, not just technical training.

***Awareness gaps require earlier and broader interventions.***
Students, parents, and in some cases educators lacked a clear understanding of local tech career opportunities. Exposure to technology careers often occurred too late to influence learners' academic and career decisions. Earlier and more comprehensive awareness-building starting in middle or even elementary school is essential.

***Sustained educator-employer structures are essential.***
Across communities, educators expressed strong interest in deeper collaboration but lacked formal mechanisms to engage regularly with employers. Structured partnerships, such as curriculum advisory boards, regular roundtables, or shared data dashboards, are needed to maintain alignment between labor market demand and training pathways.

## Recommendations for future programming

***Provide greater upfront clarity on expectations and deliverables.***
Partners emphasized the need for clearer early communication about goals, responsibilities, deliverables, and reporting requirements. This includes clearly outlining the full project plan at launch so communities can plan staffing and engagement accordingly

***Strengthen logistical supports to boost engagement.***
Communities recommended offering more flexible meeting times, including evening sessions that allow educators and employers with daytime constraints to participate. Additional lead time for convenings was also requested to improve attendance.

***Expand peer learning opportunities.***
Participants repeatedly highlighted the value of cross-community peer exchange and requested more frequent opportunities, such as quarterly learning sessions, to share challenges, successes, and emerging strategies.

***Support long-term, incremental systems change.***
Given the time required to build trust, shift culture, and align stakeholders, future efforts should include sustained support over longer periods. Multi-year funding that extends beyond three years would allow for deeper adoption of best practices and stronger integration of new models into local systems.

# IX. Conclusion

The Advancing Digital Skilling in Rural America project confirmed that building tech talent pipelines in rural communities is not solely a training challenge; it is a systems challenge that requires trust, coordination, and shared visibility. As a neutral convener, CORI played a pivotal role in bringing together employers, educators, and community partners who rarely operate in the same space, helping them align around common goals and begin moving from fragmented efforts toward integrated, community-led ecosystems that can support digital skilling over time.

While rural communities continue to face persistent challenges, including limited awareness of tech opportunities, workforce readiness gaps, and resource constraints, the project demonstrated that coordinated local leadership, cross-sector collaboration, and national technical assistance can drive meaningful progress. The lessons from this initiative extend well beyond the participating communities, offering a practical, replicable model for strengthening rural tech talent pipelines nationwide.

A particularly meaningful insight from the project was the power of cross-community peer learning. Convenings such as the Selma meeting and the Rural Innovation Network Summit created rare opportunities for rural leaders to learn from one another, compare challenges, and exchange practical strategies. Participants described these sessions as energizing, validating, and even therapeutic—reinforcing that shared learning across communities accelerates problem-solving, strengthens morale, and builds a network of practitioners who continue to support each other beyond the grant period.

Ultimately, this project reflects the powerful alignment between CORI's mission of creating opportunities that empower rural people to thrive in the tech economy and Ascendium's dedication to eliminating barriers so learners from all backgrounds can access the transformative power of education and training.

**By strengthening coordinated, community-led pathways into technology careers, this initiative helps lay the foundation for a more inclusive and innovative future—one in which all rural learners have equitable access to opportunity and the support needed to realize it.**


*Above: Hosting a tech ecosystem workshop with the **Arizona Regional Economic Development** organization in Sierra Vista, AZ*

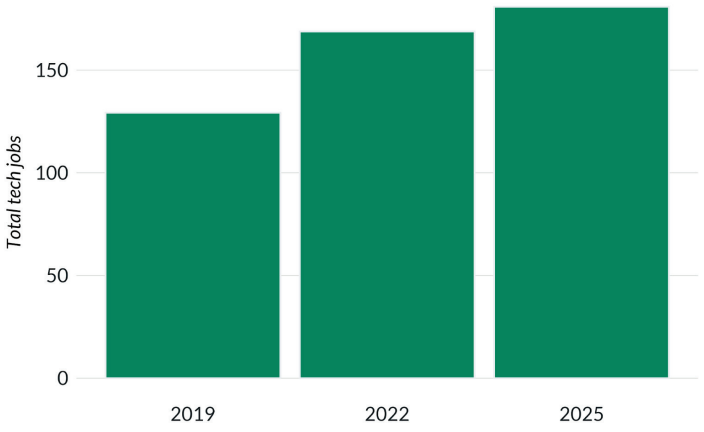
# Appendix: Change in tech jobs and tech-adjacent jobs in the six communities

**This appendix provides additional analysis and context about the regional employment landscape in which this project operated, supporting evaluation findings presented in the main report.**

An analysis of tech and tech-adjacent job trends from 2019–2025 shows that while overall employment patterns remained relatively stable, several communities—particularly Ada, Cochise, and Taos—experienced modest growth in tech-adjacent roles. These communities also had the strongest early employer engagement, suggesting that local industry anchors and early ecosystem coordination create conditions favorable for incremental growth. Across all sites, tech-adjacent roles grew more visibly than core tech roles, reinforcing a key theme from employer and educator roundtables: rural tech opportunity is often embedded in sectors such as healthcare, utilities, advanced manufacturing, and defense contracting rather than in traditional software or IT firms. While the grant period was too short to expect major shifts in employment levels, the stability of the data and the modest upward trends in several communities align with the broader insight that sustainable tech talent development requires long-term, coordinated systems change.

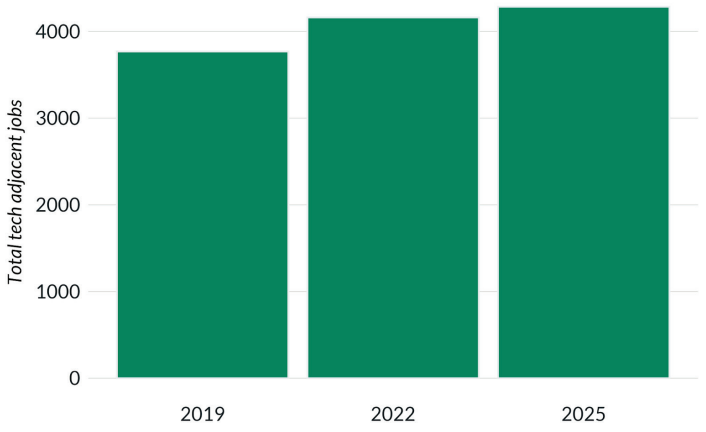
## Ada, OK (Pontotoc County)

**Total tech employment in Pontotoc County, OK**




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation

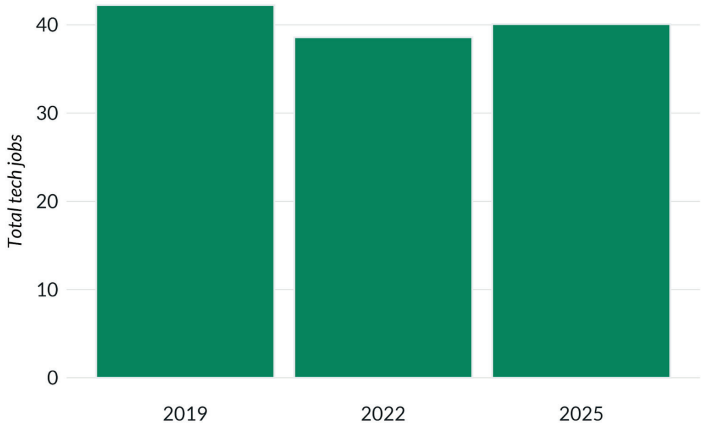
**Total tech adjacent employment in Pontotoc County, OK**




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation

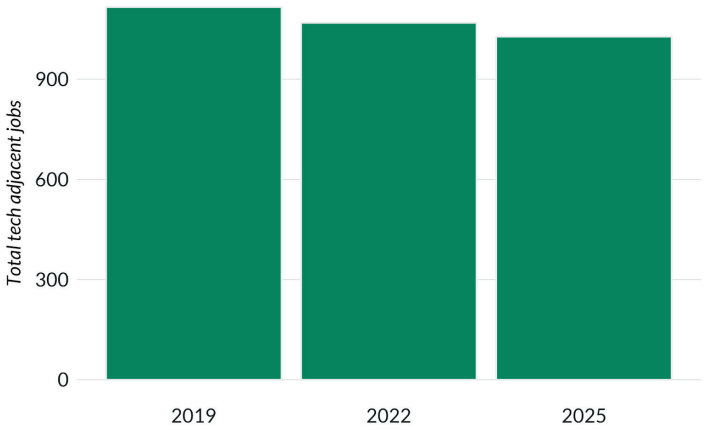
## Chambers County, AL

### Total tech employment in Chambers County, AL




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation

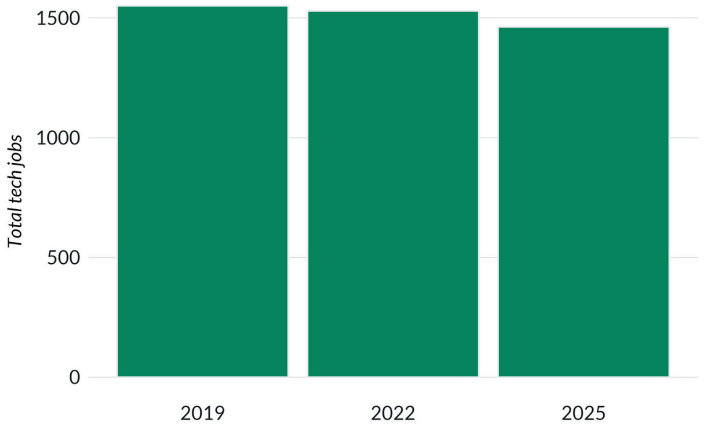
### Total tech adjacent employment in Chambers County, AL




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation

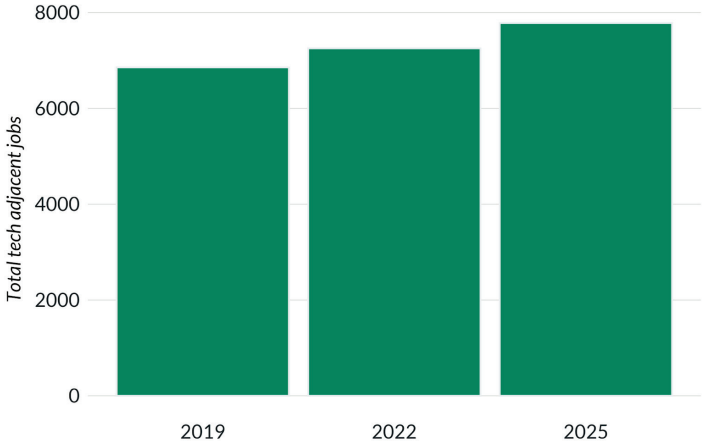
## Cochise County, AZ

### Total tech employment in Cochise County, AZ




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation

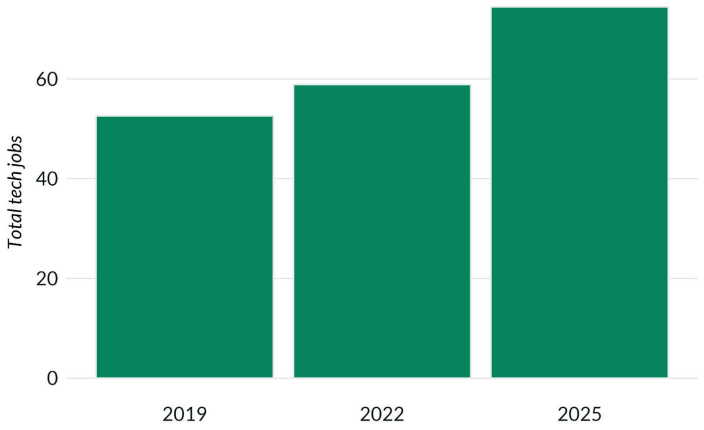
### Total tech adjacent employment in Cochise County, AZ




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation

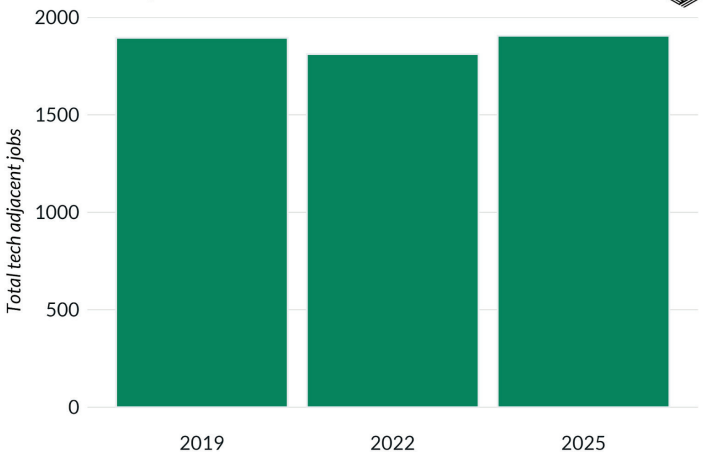
## Selma, AL (Dallas County)

### Total tech employment in Dallas County, AL




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation

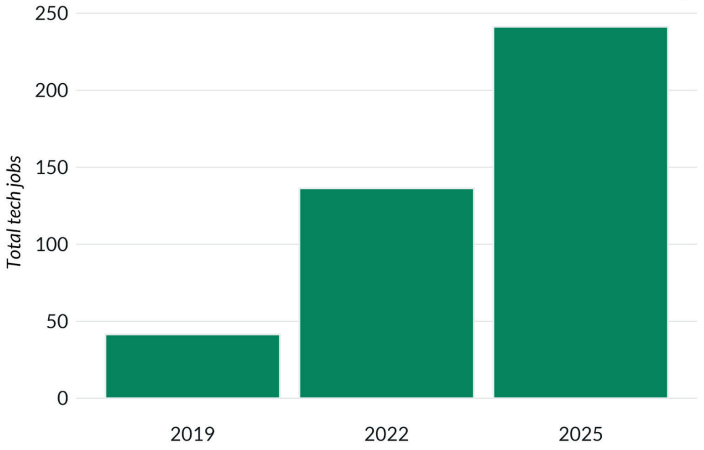
### Total tech adjacent employment in Dallas County, AL




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation

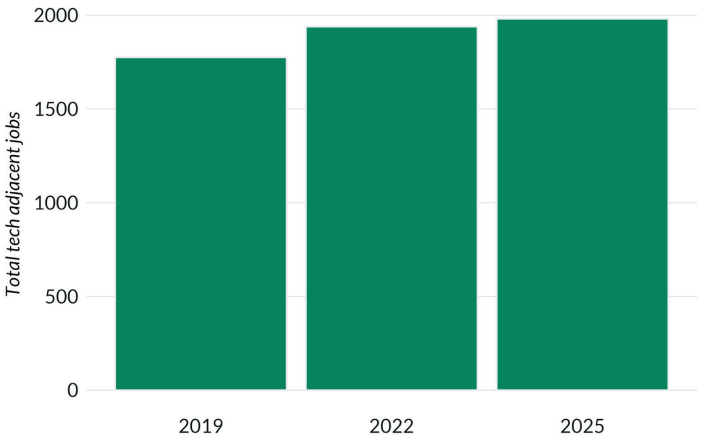
## Taos County, NM

### Total tech employment in Taos County, NM




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation

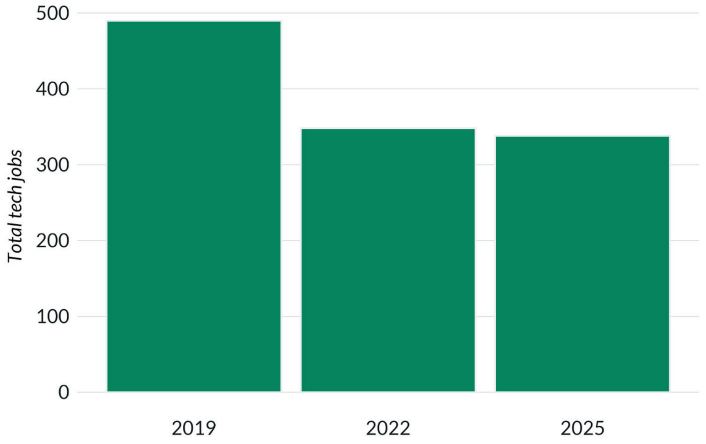
### Total tech adjacent employment in Taos County, NM




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation

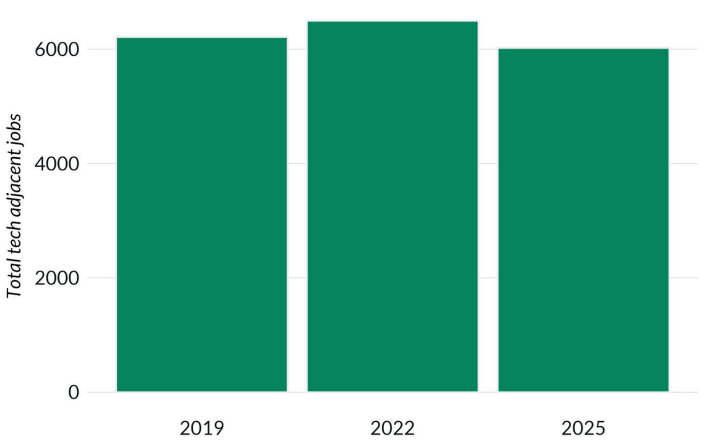
## Wilson County, NC

### Total tech employment in Wilson County, NC




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation

### Total tech adjacent employment in Wilson County, NC




Source: Lightcast Industries 2019 - 2025
Analysis by the Center on Rural Innovation