



# *Stronger Economies Together*

Strategies for Building New Economic Opportunities

Introduction

Lionel J. Beaulieu and Rachel C. Welborn, Editors



# Table of Contents

## **Module One: A Snapshot of SET**

Lionel J. Beaulieu, Southern Rural Development Center, Mississippi State University

Sharon Gulick, University of Missouri

## **Module Two: Regional Economic Development 101**

Sharon Gulick, University of Missouri

Marion T. Bentley, Utah State University

## **Module Three: Building a Strong Regional Team**

Neil Linscheid, University of Minnesota

James Goodwin, Western Rural Development Center, Utah State University

## **Module Four: Developing Your Vision and Goals**

Lionel J. Beaulieu, Southern Rural Development Center, Mississippi State University

## **Module Five: Examining Current Demographic Features of Your Region**

Alison F. Davis, University of Kentucky

## **Module Six: Exploring Opportunities for a Stronger Regional Economy**

Alison F. Davis, University of Kentucky

Michael Wilcox, University of Tennessee

## **Module Seven: Exploring Regional Assets and Barriers**

Lionel J. Beaulieu, Southern Rural Development Center, Mississippi State University

Michael Wilcox, University of Tennessee

## **Module Eight: Planning for Success**

Rachel C. Welborn, Southern Rural Development Center, Mississippi State University

## **Module Nine: Measuring for Success**

Rachel C. Welborn, Southern Rural Development Center, Mississippi State University

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## *Introduction*

Finding ways to create, attract and retain jobs remains a challenging process in many rural counties today. This is especially true for counties that remain committed to a strategy of “out competing” their neighbors for economic opportunities, such as recruiting a firm to the area. Since many rural businesses must now contend with enterprises located across the globe, it is difficult to survive without linking resources into a more comprehensive economic development plan that builds on the region’s unique economic strengths and opportunities. In a nutshell, that is what the Stronger Economies Together (SET) initiative is all about.

SET is intended to help strengthen the capacity of communities/counties in rural America to work together in developing and implementing an economic development blueprint for their multi-county region, one that strategically builds on the current and/or emerging comparative economic advantages of that region. The materials contained in this document serve as the core resources needed to get SET off the ground in a region. It includes nine modules, an instructor’s guide, a participant’s workbook and a variety of key evaluation instruments that can be used to track progress and outcomes over time. Module topics include understanding the foundation of regional development, building a regional team, developing a regional vision and goals, exploring the region’s economic foundation and opportunities, examining assets and barriers and planning/measuring for success. Modules that delve more deeply into some topics presented in the core modules or add important new material to complement the nine basic modules are being released on an ongoing basis. We urge you to visit the SET Web site in order to stay apprised of new or updated resources being released as part of the SET initiative. Visit <http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/>.

We want to caution you that embracing the SET process is no easy task. Regional teams must work over an extended period of several months to produce a sound plan, one that is the product of many people, organizations and institutions working together to create a better future for their region and its communities. However, the hard work is well worth it. The payoff is not only the creation of a high quality regional plan, but also a rigorous timeline for getting the important work of the region off the ground and sustained over time. We wish you much success in this important endeavor.

Lionel J. (Bo) Beaulieu and Rachel C. Welborn  
Editors



## Using the SET Resource Materials

The nine modules serving as the core of the SET program should be used in a manner that best addresses the regional team's unique needs and capabilities. SET has been designed to offer you flexibility in terms of which modules should be delivered to the regional team with whom you are working.

We have developed a simple table that offers you some guidance regarding the mix of modules likely to be most meaningful to the team you are targeting, depending on the level of experiences of that regional team. Keep in mind that our recommendations are suggestive in nature. Ultimately, your "on the ground" knowledge will be key in determining which SET modules will be the best fit and the most valuable to the team as it seeks to develop and implement an effective regional economic development plan.

The accompanying chart is divided into three levels: **Novice**, **Intermediate** and **Advanced**. In many respects, SET was developed for teams classified as novice, brand new or relatively young teams seeking guidance on how to build and implement a solid regional economic development plan. At the same time, we do not want to undersell the value of the SET materials for teams classified as intermediate or advanced. Some modules will prove valuable to these teams, and we have provided insights on the modules they might find most beneficial.

When all is said and done, the individuals or organizations delivering SET should develop a good pulse of the regional team they will target. Building a strong rapport at the very beginning will help you get a better handle on the mix of SET modules that should be delivered to the team. While the SET materials are numbered in a specific suggested order, feel free to rearrange the order of the modules to better fit the team's needs. Moreover, we encourage you to include other training resources you may have that can add value to the SET materials.

## Importance of a Forming a Strong Training Team

Having quality training resources is certainly important, but having a top-notch team of trainers who can deliver SET in a highly creative and engaging manner is just as important. While SET contains a good bit of valuable information, it is important to avoid relying too heavily on the traditional "lecture-style" approach for communicating with your team. While sharing key information about each SET module topic will require some use of the lecture-type approach, balance this strategy with a good bit of hands-on activities, small group discussions, real life examples and more. Employing a variety of approaches is the best way to keep the teams interested and actively engaged throughout the series of nine training modules. Having SET trainers who can operate comfortably using these various delivery modes is essential.

## The SET Modules: What is Delivered Depends on the Capacities of the Regional Team

Nature of the Regional Team	Recommended SET Modules	Additional Insights
<b>NOVICE</b>		
<p>Team is a newly formed multi-county team that has never worked together.</p>	<p>Deliver all nine modules since it will help guide the formation of a broad based regional team and provide the knowledge and tools needed to build a strong regional economic development plan.</p>	<p>Check to see if the team has completed any relevant activities or products. If so, try to incorporate these into the modules at the appropriate time.</p>
<p>Team has been organized for less than a year; no effective regional economic development plan in place. Team lacks focus and direction.</p>	<p>Since the team appears to have struggled in getting a good plan together, it may be a good idea to deliver all nine modules. This will help put in place the important set of building blocks needed to create an effective team and well-designed regional economic development plan.</p>	
<b>INTERMEDIATE</b>		
<p>Team has been organized for one to three years, but has lost enthusiasm. Regional economic development plan needs to be refined, revised and revitalized.</p> <p>Team has been organized for more than three years. Team has lost focus and has no clear idea on how to get back on track.</p>	<p>It might be useful to start with Module Two to ensure the team is on the same page in terms of the nature of regional development. A modification of Module Three can be used to determine if a good mix of people and organizations make up the regional team. If the group has goals already determined, use Module Four to determine if they meet the criteria of “SMART goals.” If the group has not done regional asset mapping, then introduce Module Seven to the team.</p> <p>Even with intermediate groups, we strongly recommend that Modules Five, Six, Eight and Nine be delivered since these materials provide valuable insights on key population and socioeconomic data, current and emerging regional economic clusters, and ways to build and evaluate the team’s planned activities, outputs, and outcomes.</p>	<p>If the team has collected relevant data on the region, determine if the data duplicate or complement the data provided in Modules Five and Six. If you conclude that the data are relevant/appropriate, then see if the tools/activities included in the two modules can help the team make better sense of the data and whether the team’s regional economic development strategy might need modification in light of the data.</p>



Nature of the Regional Team	Recommended SET Modules	Additional Insights
ADVANCED		
<p>Team has been in place for more than three years. Regional plan has been developed, but is not being effectively implemented. The team needs to restore momentum.</p>	<p>Even good teams can suffer the “doldrums” after a while. It may be good to use Module Three to help reconstitute the team with a broad mix of people who can recharge the group and bring new ideas/ perspectives. You can use Module Seven to uncover some of the important people and organizational assets. That might be a good way to identify a pool of candidates who could be asked to join the regional team.</p> <p>Use Module Four to determine if the team’s goals might need revamping or fine-tuning. Then, determine if some or all aspects of Modules Five, Six, Eight and Nine should be delivered. It is possible, for example, that the group has focused too heavily on one cluster and has failed to realize that other clusters are present and/or emerging in the region. Furthermore, it is possible the team has honed in on the right cluster but not put together a really detailed plan and timeline for getting their efforts off the ground.</p>	<p>SET is continuously developing new modules designed to supplement the nine modules serving as the core of the SET initiative. These include modules on entrepreneurship, network analysis, the community-business matching model, financial options for supporting regional plans and principles of sustainable regional development. It is possible that some of these modules will be of value to teams classified as “advanced.”</p>
<p>Team has been in place for more than three years. Team remains active and continues to pursue a well-developed regional economic development plan.</p>	<p>SET is not likely to be a good fit for this type of regional team. We encourage you to explore products that are intended for a group operating at a high level of regional planning. One book you might want to consider is <i>Targeted Regional Economic Development</i>, edited by Goetz, Deller and Harris and Davis. The book is a 2009 publication by Routledge.</p>	



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