

Nebraska Library Commission: Library Innovation Studios (Transforming Rural Communities)

Why this case matters

In rural communities, it is common to hear a version of the same constraint: “We would love to run more skill-building programs, but we do not have the staff or the budget for a full makerspace, and we cannot build everything from scratch.”

Nebraska’s Library Innovation Studios project is a useful proof point because it shows what can happen when a library system is given a structured model: training, certification, and a repeatable way to deliver hands-on programming across many small sites.

What the program is

Library Innovation Studios was a multi-year initiative hosted by rural and small libraries in Nebraska. The project focused on providing access to equipment and training, with a consistent certification approach and shared statewide supports.

What was reported (key outcomes)

The Nebraska Library Commission reports several concrete outcomes from the project: - 2,709 individuals/makers were certified to operate equipment across the studios. - 35 rural and small libraries participated as host sites. - Over 320 pieces of equipment were acquired, with an estimated total value exceeding \$450,000.

Why it worked (operationally)

This case is less about any single piece of equipment and more about the operating model.

1) Shared scaffolding made participation feasible

Small libraries did not need to invent training, certification, and program operations from scratch. A shared approach reduced staff burden and increased consistency.

2) Repeatability created momentum

When a program can be repeated and improved, it becomes easier to staff and easier to justify. Repeatability turns “pilot energy” into ongoing community value.

3) Skill-building created a natural bridge to entrepreneurship

Hands-on creation is often the first step toward microbusiness activity. People make, test, improve, and eventually sell or offer a service. The project reports that participants made and sold products and started businesses, which aligns with the “maker to market” pathway that many libraries want to enable.

Replication notes (how another library could start)

You do not need a statewide makerspace grant to learn from this.

Transferable ideas: - Choose a small set of repeatable program formats (training, open lab time, showcase). - Standardize what “completion” means (a certification, a prototype, a finished artifact). - Track a few outcomes that stakeholders understand (trained participants, return visits, completed projects).

How Value Lab can support this kind of program

Innovation Studios demonstrates a core principle: libraries can deliver distributed programming when they have a repeatable model and shared scaffolding.

Value Lab applies the same principle to entrepreneurship programming by providing: - a structured pathway patrons can follow over multiple sessions, - staff-light facilitation resources so delivery is consistent, - and outcome signals that are easier to summarize for stakeholders.

Sources

1. Nebraska Library Commission: Library Innovation Studios (grant/program page): <https://nlc.nebraska.gov/grants/innovationstudios>