



Oil Region Venango Campus Transformation

Preliminary Vision Report – July 2025



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Executive Summary

In response to the closure of the Pennsylvania Western University (PennWest) Venango campus and the subsequent acquisition of both the former college and adjacent Venango Catholic High School properties, the Oil Region Alliance (ORA) launched a transformative initiative to reimagine these community assets. With a mission to promote prosperity in the Oil Region through the development of historical, educational, natural, and recreational destinations, ORA recognized the strategic potential of these well-located, well-built campuses to serve as a catalyst for regional renewal.

The Hill Group was engaged to facilitate a visioning and discovery process grounded in community engagement, research, and asset analysis. This Phase 1 effort focused on understanding the regional context, assessing the physical assets of the campus, and gathering broad-based input from residents, employers, educators, nonprofit leaders, and civic officials. The planning process included dozens of interviews, focus groups, public meetings, and an in-depth review of economic and demographic trends.

Findings from this process revealed both the community's desire to preserve the legacy of the Venango campuses and its hopes for a revitalized future. Stakeholders articulated a vision for a dynamic, multi-use community campus that advances workforce readiness, technical training, intergenerational education, family and elder services, arts and cultural programming, recreation, and housing. Several consistent themes emerged, including strong demand for employer-responsive training programs, family support services such as childcare, accessible recreational amenities, and the preservation of community identity and pride.

Simultaneously, ORA's organizational priorities—anchored in education, economic development, and heritage tourism—align closely with these community aspirations. The physical capabilities of the campus, including academic and residential facilities, a recreation center, flexible office space, and a strategic location along the Justus Trail and Allegheny River, make it uniquely suited to support this vision.

As the initiative transitions into its next phase, ORA and its partners will formalize a campus transformation framework, engage in strategic and business planning, and begin piloting early initiatives. A phased approach is recommended: short-term efforts should focus on occupancy and financial sustainability through selective leasing; mid-term strategies will center on marketing, partner engagement, and tenant alignment; and long-term plans will institutionalize programming aligned with regional needs, supported by ongoing data gathering and responsive planning.

This report lays the groundwork for a bold, collaborative reinvention of the Venango campus—one that honors its past, meets today's challenges, and creates new opportunities for generations to come.

Introduction

The former Venango campuses have long stood as cornerstones of education and community identity in Oil City. Their closures in 2024 marked a pivotal turning point, ushering in both the end of an era and the beginning of a transformative opportunity. What followed was a deliberate, community-centered effort to preserve the site's legacy while reimagining its future potential.

Background on the Campus Closure

The ORA launched its campus transformation initiative in response to the closures of the Venango campus and Venango Catholic High School – two longstanding and well-equipped educational institutions that had served Venango County for more than six decades. These closures, both occurring at the end of the Spring 2024 semester, marked not only the conclusion of an era, but also the start of a concerted effort to preserve their legacy and repurpose their physical assets for continued community benefit.

For much of its history, the Venango campus was a thriving hub of postsecondary education, offering degrees and training in nursing, business, and technical fields. The community's support for the campus remained strong throughout its existence, with families, employers, and donors viewing it as a critical path to advancement. As recently as 2014, enrollment peaked at 594 students, a reflection of its regional value. Over time, however, broader demographic shifts and declining state system enrollments prompted university leaders to relocate several successful programs from the Venango site to Clarion's main campus. These moves, made in an effort to consolidate costs and streamline operations, gradually reduced Venango's enrollment, which fell to just 95 students by Fall 2023, with nursing as the only remaining academic program.¹

In January 2024, Pennsylvania Western University (PennWest), created through the 2022 merger of Clarion, Edinboro, and California universities, announced its intent to transfer ownership of the Oil City campus to the Oil Region Alliance. Although the transfer remained pending final legislative and State System approval, it represented a strategic opportunity to preserve the site's value as a community resource. ORA emphasized that the campus would remain "an educational entity" while expanding its uses to include workforce development, tourism, recreation, heritage, and the arts.²

Across the community, the closure was met with both concern and resolve. Residents voiced fears about losing a vital institutional anchor but also rallied around the idea of renewal. Petition drives, public planning sessions, and deep community engagement efforts underscored the widespread commitment to shaping the campus's future. A feature article in *The Derrick* noted that ORA moved quickly to protect the legacy of the campus, preserving iconic facilities such as Frame Hall, Montgomery Hall, Suhr Library, the gymnasium/auditorium, and more than 65 acres of wooded land.³ The campus's indirect river access and direct connection to the Justus Trail made it a unique asset for future redevelopment.

¹ Walzak, 2024.

² Schackner, 2024.

³ Plan Would Transfer Venango Campus to ORA, 2024.

In a parallel development, the community also witnessed the closure of Venango Catholic High School in 2024. Following an emotional final commencement for its graduating class, the diocesan institution closed its doors, ending a tradition of Catholic education in Oil City that had lasted more than sixty years. Recognizing the importance of preserving this site as well, ORA acquired the Venango Catholic property in February 2025, nearly doubling the overall campus land base to 110 acres. This strategic consolidation not only preserved valuable recreational and educational assets such as the school's gym and athletic field but also reinforced ORA's broader mission of protecting community heritage, honoring donor intent, and creating a vibrant, multi-use campus capable of serving generations to come.⁴

Project Objectives and Process Overview

The closure of the Venango campus and Venango Catholic left behind well-built, underutilized physical assets and a palpable desire across the region to see it reborn with purpose. Recognizing this, ORA pursued a strategic visioning process that would be thoughtful, inclusive, and grounded in both data and community will.

The Hill Group was engaged to facilitate this effort, beginning with a foundational phase of research and engagement structured around four core objectives:

1. **Frame the Opportunity** – Identify and explore the full range of potential uses for the campus.
2. **Assess the Regional Landscape** – Analyze demographic, educational, labor force, and economic trends to understand present-day needs and conditions.
3. **Establish a Shared Vision** – Conduct deep community engagement to align emerging ideas with community needs and aspirations.
4. **Structure Future Projects** – Translate findings into a plan for continued strategic and business planning.

The process emphasized the importance of designing a campus that adds value to the regional ecosystem, not by duplicating existing programs or institutions, but by filling meaningful gaps and offering flexible, innovative, and inclusive spaces for learning, living, and gathering.

⁴ Keating, 2024.

Methodology

The plan-to-plan or preliminary visioning process for the transformation of the former campuses was grounded in a structured, multi-method approach designed to ensure that outcomes were data-informed, community-centered, and aligned with regional priorities. The methodology included a blend of primary research, secondary data analysis, and collaborative synthesis to develop a well-rounded understanding of the site's potential and the community's aspirations.

A robust primary research effort was conducted to gather qualitative insights directly from those who live, work, learn, and invest in Venango County (see Appendix A). This included:

- **Individual Interviews:** More than two dozen confidential, in-depth interviews with community leaders, employers, educators, service providers, and elected officials to explore needs, challenges, and opportunities.
- **Focus Groups:** Targeted sessions with stakeholder cohorts, including business and industry representatives, school personnel, human service organizations, municipal officials, and arts and culture leaders.
- **Public Meetings and Site Tours:** Facilitated forums and interactive walk-throughs of the campus allowed residents and other stakeholders to provide open feedback and envision future uses.

These engagement efforts were designed to ensure broad representation and to capture perspectives across geographic, demographic, and sectoral lines. Notes from each session were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and recurring ideas.

To complement stakeholder input, the team conducted a thorough review of existing quantitative data and regional planning documents. This included demographic and socioeconomic trends, labor market demand and workforce indicators, educational attainment and program availability, regional economic development plans and strategic priorities, and historical and architectural data related to the campus facilities. Sources included U.S. Census Bureau datasets, Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry reports, ORA and regional planning documents, and media coverage of the campus closure and transition.

Findings from both primary and secondary research were synthesized using a structured comparative framework. The team identified the overlapping priorities among three core domains:

1. Community Needs and Aspirations
2. ORA's Mission and Strategic Priorities
3. Campus Capabilities and Assets

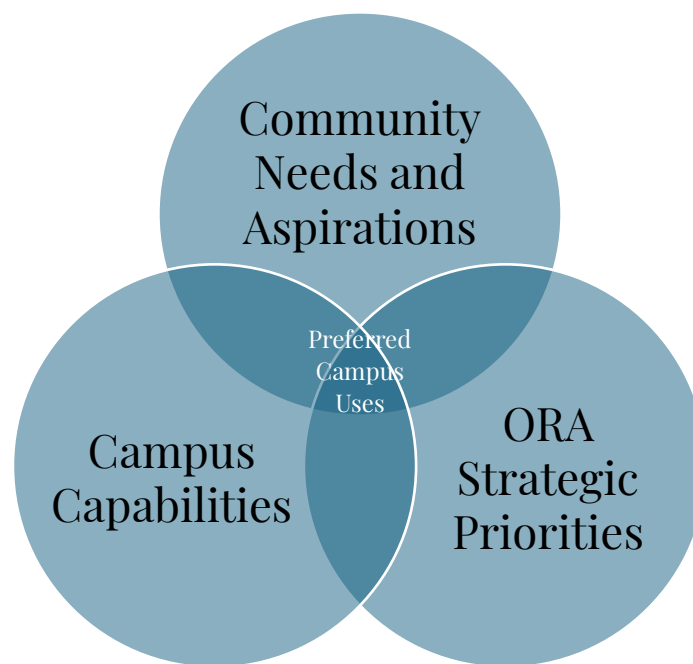
This Venn diagram-based approach enabled a disciplined process for filtering and elevating ideas that were most feasible, widely supported, and aligned with organizational goals. The resulting themes and recommendations reflect this convergence and form the foundation for future planning and implementation. Throughout the process, the guiding principle was to balance ambition with realism, developing a bold yet achievable path forward rooted in the voices of the community and informed by evidence.

Findings

For more than sixty years, the campuses served as prominent educational and civic anchors in Oil City. Their closures in 2024 marked not only the conclusion of their academic operations but also a critical inflection point for the broader community. Recognizing the strategic potential of the combined campus and its significance to the region, local leaders and stakeholders mobilized to preserve the asset and explore new opportunities for its reuse, initiating a process aimed at transforming the site into a dynamic hub for education, workforce development, outdoor recreation, culture, and community life.

Framing the Opportunity

The former Venango campuses offer an exceptional foundation for future reuse, with a compact and well-maintained physical footprint, diverse building inventory, and a scenic location that enhances its value. This section provides an overview of the campus's layout, core facilities, and infrastructure, highlighting both its historical role and its ongoing potential as a flexible, multi-use community asset. Together, these physical elements form the basis for transformational reuse strategies that respond to regional needs and opportunities, leverage the existing campus infrastructures, and align with ORA's strategic priorities.



Campus profile and asset overview

Venango Campus (see photos in Appendix B) is a compact and cohesive campus set within approximately 65 acres of wooded hillsides, open spaces, and well-planned facilities. Originally developed in the early 1960s, the campus was designed to support commuter and residential students in a setting that balances educational function with natural beauty and accessibility.

Over the years, it has served as a critical hub for workforce education, particularly in healthcare, and held a distinct identity within the broader state university system.

The campus is organized around a central spine with key academic and student life buildings arranged along gently sloping terrain. The natural topography and mature woodlands provide a scenic backdrop that buffers the campus from surrounding residential neighborhoods, while also offering opportunities for outdoor education, recreation, and trail connectivity. Access to the nearby Allegheny River and the Justus Trail enhances the site's recreational and environmental potential, making it unique among regional educational facilities.

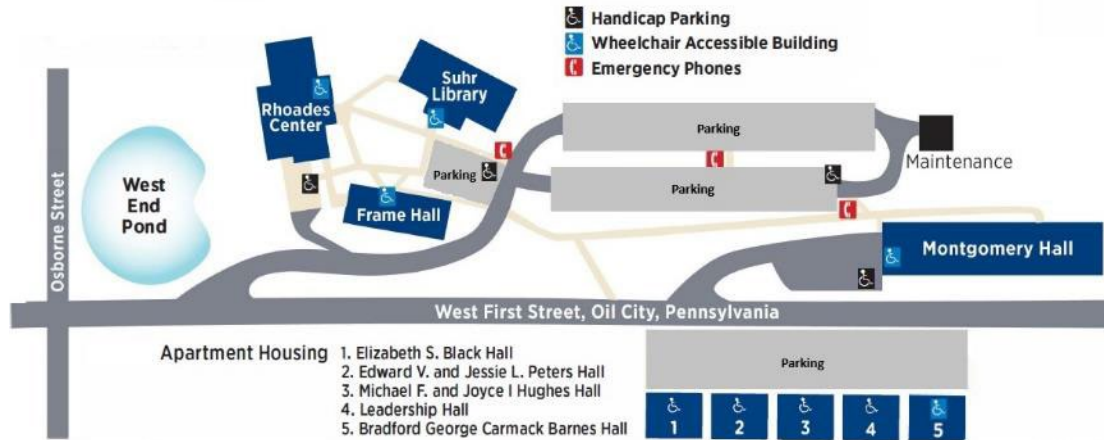
Core Facilities

Despite its modest size, the campus includes a well-rounded suite of facilities that reflect its former role as a full-service educational institution. The key buildings and spaces include:⁵

- **Richard C. Frame Hall**
Frame Hall is the campus's primary academic building. It is a two-story structure totaling 16,380 gross square feet (GSF). The building contains general-purpose classrooms, wet science labs, faculty offices, conference rooms, and support spaces. It was historically used for liberal arts and general education programming and is structurally suited for continued use as instructional or office space.
- **Montgomery Hall**
Designed for health sciences education, Montgomery Hall is a four-story facility with 31,351 GSF. It houses nursing simulation labs, classrooms, and faculty offices. The building's configuration and mechanical systems are conducive to technical training and could be readily upgraded for modern allied health or STEM-related programming.
- **Charles L. Suhr Library**
The Suhr Library is a one-story building totaling 10,140 GSF. It features a flexible floorplan including book stacks, reading areas, computer labs, and group study rooms. Its open layout makes it a strong candidate for reuse as a community learning center, innovation lab, or student success hub.
- **Robert W. Rhoades Center**
The Rhoades Center is a large multi-use facility with 18,380 GSF across two levels. It includes a café space, commercial kitchen, gymnasium, locker rooms, exercise spaces, an auditorium with stage, meeting rooms, and informal gathering spaces. It historically served both campus and community functions and is one of the campus's most flexible and high-capacity assets. Rhoades overlooks the popular West End Pond and gazebo.
- **Residence Hall Complex**
The residential facilities consist of five interconnected buildings configured into apartment-style units. Together, they contain 27,325 GSF and offer 24 suites with nearly 100 private bedrooms and shared living rooms, kitchenettes, and bathrooms. These two-to-three-story buildings remain in good condition and could be adapted for student housing, short-term workforce lodging, or transitional housing models.

⁵ Perkins Eastman, 2013.

Figure 1. ORA Venango Campus Map



The campus infrastructure (roads, walkways, parking lots, and utility systems) was last updated significantly in the early 2000s and remains in functional condition. The compact layout and limited vehicular circulation make it pedestrian-friendly. Except Suhr Library, the buildings are all ADA-accessible, and fiber and IT infrastructure is in place to support digital instruction and connectivity.

Beyond its physical assets, the Venango campus holds symbolic and emotional significance for the Oil Region. Nestled into a wooded hillside and integrated into the urban fabric of Oil City, the campus was historically seen as a place of upward mobility, healthcare training, and community learning. Its walkable scale, cohesive architecture, and scenic setting give it a unique sense of place that distinguishes it from other regional institutions.

The campus of Venango Catholic High School, acquired by ORA while transitioning Venango campus, nearly doubles the land size into a 120-acre combined campus (including buildings) and provides access to a commercial kitchen, classrooms, a large multipurpose room and auditorium/gymnasium, and outdoor space that includes a baseball field.

Potential future uses

The closure of the campuses created a moment of disruption but also a moment of possibility. As traditional uses came to an end, a rare opportunity emerged: to reclaim legacy institutions and reimagine them as cornerstones of community resilience and regional renewal. With its strategic location, intact infrastructure, and deep emotional resonance across generations, the combined campus is not simply a dormant property, it is a platform for progress.

The campus offers far more than classrooms. Its assets include purpose-built academic spaces, high-quality residential facilities, a regional-scale auditorium and recreation center, green space, digital infrastructure, and direct access to Oil City's urban core and the Allegheny River trail system. This unique combination positions it as a multipurpose site capable of advancing economic development, workforce readiness, education innovation, social services, arts and culture, and community health.

From healthcare training to childcare services, from housing pilots to business incubation, and from recreation programming to nonprofit collaboration, the campus can be a catalyst for new growth. It is especially well-suited to serve as a central node in the region's effort to attract and retain talent, support employers, uplift families, and create accessible pathways to opportunity for residents across all life stages.

Reimagining the combined campus is not merely an exercise in facility reuse, it is a declaration of local will. It reflects the belief that rural communities can lead, adapt, and build institutions that match their aspirations. The work ahead is ambitious, but the foundation is strong. With the alignment of vision, assets, and leadership, the campus stands ready to become a vibrant engine of impact for the next generation.

Assessing the Regional Landscape and Ecosystem

Understanding the broader regional context is essential for planning the future of the combined campus. The county and surrounding region are at a critical inflection point, facing significant demographic, economic, and social changes that both challenge and create opportunities for growth. Population loss, an aging workforce, and declining school enrollments are reshaping the community's needs, even as committed local leaders work to revitalize the economy and reimagine public infrastructure. These shifts underscore the importance of strategically repurposing assets like the combined campus to serve evolving workforce, education, and community priorities. By aligning redevelopment efforts with local demographic realities and economic imperatives, the campus can become a catalyst for regional resilience and renewal.

Demographic and population trends

Population Decline

Venango County's population has been in steady decline for over two decades. In 2000 the county had about 57,405 residents, which fell to 50,454 by the 2020 census – a drop of roughly 6,951 people (–12%). Recent estimates show the decline has continued, with the population around 49,431 in 2023. Looking ahead, projections indicate the county could lose approximately another 5,000 residents by the year 2050.

This trend far outpaces Pennsylvania's overall modest population change and is also more severe than most neighboring counties. For example, from 2000 to 2020 Crawford and Mercer Counties saw population decreases of about 7%, whereas Venango declined by over 12% in the same period. Even within the region, only Warren County experienced a similar rate of decline (–11.7% by 2020), while Butler County grew by 11% over two decades. Venango's total population is now one of the smallest in the region (about 49k, only higher than Warren's ~37k), highlighting the county's unique demographic challenges.⁶

This population loss is also evident at the community level. Oil City – one of the county's largest municipalities – saw its population drop from 10,557 in 2010 to 9,613 in 2020 (an 8.9% decline). Current estimates put Oil City around 9,368 residents, with further decline to ~9,173 projected by 2029. Similar downward trends affect smaller boroughs and townships across Venango. The

⁶ Venango County Regional Planning Commission, 2024.

ongoing population decline is more than just a numbers issue; it reflects broader economic and social shifts and poses planning challenges for the county.⁷

Aging Population and Age Distribution

An important aspect of Venango County's demographic change is the aging population. The median age in the county is now about 47.6 years – significantly higher than Pennsylvania's median of 40.8.⁸ The proportion of older adults has been rising steadily. Residents aged 65 and over comprised 18.0% of the population in 2010, but grew to 23.7% by 2020. Conversely, the youth population is shrinking: those under 18 made up 21.5% of the county in 2010, dropping to just 18.9% in 2020. This means that today nearly one in four Venango County residents is a senior citizen, a share well above the statewide figure (~18.7% 65+ across Pennsylvania) and the national figure (~16.5% 65+ across the U.S.).⁹ At the same time, the county has a smaller proportion of children and teens than state or national averages. These trends mirror the broader pattern in many rural northwestern Pennsylvania counties,¹⁰ but their implications in Venango are pronounced – an aging community with fewer young people to replenish the workforce and support local institutions.

Racial and Ethnic Composition

Venango County's population remains overwhelmingly white. Approximately 95% of residents are White (alone, non-Hispanic). This is a much higher share than Pennsylvania as a whole (about 77% white) or the United States (~66% white). Racial minorities make up only a small fraction of the community. About 1% of the county's population is Black or African American, and around 0.4% is Asian, with the remainder identifying as multi-racial or another race. The county's Hispanic/Latino population is also very small – only around 1.1% as of 2018–2022 estimates. For context, Hispanics account for roughly 8% of Pennsylvania's population and 19% of the U.S. population. In short, Venango County is far less diverse in racial and ethnic terms than state or national benchmarks. This homogeneity has persisted over time, as there has been little immigration of diverse groups. Notably, Oil City has a slightly more diverse profile than the county overall, but still over 91% of its residents are White. The lack of diversity may influence the cultural and service needs of the community, as well as efforts to attract new residents or workforce from different backgrounds.¹¹

Gender Composition

The population of Venango County is almost evenly split between females and males, reflecting a typical gender balance. According to recent estimates, about 49.9% of residents are male and 50.1% female. This 50/50 gender breakdown is in line with Pennsylvania (approximately 49.3% male, 50.7% female) and the national population (49.6% male, 50.4% female). There is no significant gender skew in the county's demographics, so any population changes or needs tend to affect men and women roughly equally. However, the aging trend does imply a growing number of elderly women, since women on average have longer life expectancies – a common

⁷ Claritas, 2024.

⁸ Venango County Regional Planning Commission, 2024.

⁹ SparkMaps, 2024.

¹⁰ Venango County Regional Planning Commission, 2024.

¹¹ SparkMaps, 2024.

pattern visible in many communities (for instance, about 51% of Venango's over-65 population is female). Overall, gender dynamics in the county remain balanced and do not pose unusual challenges compared to state or national norms.¹²

Implications for Labor Force, Housing, and Community Services

The above demographic trends carry significant implications for Venango County's economy, housing market, and public services. A few key impacts are:

- **Labor Force:** A shrinking and aging population translates into a smaller labor pool. With the prime working-age cohort (18–64) contracting, local employers may struggle to find enough qualified workers, hindering economic growth. The workforce is not only smaller but older on average, which could lead to shortages in certain industries and a loss of institutional knowledge as experienced workers retire. Fewer young adults also mean fewer entrepreneurs and new skilled trades entering the market, posing challenges for business retention and expansion. The county's economic potential is constrained by these workforce demographics.¹³
- **Housing:** Population decline and smaller household sizes have left many housing units vacant – roughly 19% of homes in Venango County are unoccupied. This surplus of housing, combined with an aging populace, affects the housing market. There may be less demand for new housing construction, while existing housing stock grows older. Indeed, a large share of homes in the county were built before 1960. An aging population may prefer downsizing or senior-friendly housing options, yet much of the current stock consists of older single-family homes. High vacancy rates can also lead to blight or declining property values in some neighborhoods. On the other hand, relatively affordable housing (median value ~\$108k) could be an asset if the region can attract new residents or remote workers, but that hinges on reversing the population decline.¹⁴
- **Community Services:** Demographic shifts strain how community services are planned and delivered. Aging residents drive increased need for healthcare services, senior care, and accessible infrastructure (e.g. medical facilities, in-home care, transit for seniors). At the same time, declining youth enrollment forces school districts to consolidate or downsize, which can lead to school closures or reduced programming. With fewer residents overall, municipalities may collect less tax revenue, making it harder to fund services and maintain infrastructure. Volunteer-based services (fire companies, civic organizations) may have trouble recruiting members as the population base contracts. Indeed, local groups are finding fewer residents available to fill leadership roles and support community programs. In short, the county must adapt its services – from workforce training and healthcare to housing assistance and education – to meet the needs of an older, smaller population while trying to stabilize or grow its human capital for the future.¹⁵

¹² SparkMaps, 2024.

¹³ Venango County Regional Planning Commission, 2024.

¹⁴ Venango County Regional Planning Commission, 2024.

¹⁵ Venango County Regional Planning Commission, 2024.

Labor market and workforce needs

Venango County's labor market reflects the broader trends of Pennsylvania's Northwest Workforce Development Area (WDA), characterized by an aging population, population decline, and lower labor force participation. The county has seen a 12% population decrease since 2000, and its median age is now 47.6 (well above the state median of 40.8). Nearly 24% of residents are over 65, up from 18% in 2010, while the share of youth under 18 has fallen. This demographic shift shrinks the local labor pool and accelerates retirements, challenging employers to replace an older workforce. In 2024, Venango's workforce (population 16+ either working or seeking work) numbered roughly 27,453. A majority of these workers both live and work in the county; about 74% of working residents are employed locally, while 26% commute to jobs outside the county. Conversely, about one-quarter of those working in Venango are in-commuters from neighboring areas. Labor force participation and unemployment in the region have improved post-pandemic, with the Northwest WDA unemployment rate at 4.4% in late 2024 (near historic lows). However, employers report that filling open positions remains difficult due to labor shortages and a mismatch of skills, rather than high unemployment.^{16 17}

Venango County's economy is relatively diverse for a rural area, but it is anchored by a few key sectors. Educational, health care, and social assistance employers account for about 24% of resident employment, reflecting the prominence of hospitals, schools, and human services. Manufacturing is the next largest sector (about 16.5% of jobs), followed by retail trade (~12%). Other notable sectors include professional and administrative services (~8%), transportation and utilities (~6%), public administration (~6%), hospitality (~5-6%), and construction (~5%). This mix suggests a measure of economic stability with no single industry dominating employment. Nonetheless, educational attainment in the region trails state averages, which affects workforce readiness: only about 23.6% of Northwest WDA adults have a bachelor's or higher (vs ~32% statewide). The bulk of the labor force has a high school diploma or less (nearly 50% in the NW WDA), contributing to skill gaps in high-skill occupations.^{18 19}

Key Industries and Top Employers

Health care, education, manufacturing, and government are among the top employers in Venango County. According to the 2023 Q1 Top 50 Employers list, the single largest employer is the State Government (which includes state-run institutions such as correctional facilities or PennDOT). The county's major hospital, UPMC Northwest, is the second-largest employer, underscoring health care's central role. Several manufacturers rank highly as well: Joy Global (Komatsu), a mining equipment manufacturer, is #3, and other important industrial employers include Liberty Electronics (#5), Matric Group (#8, electronics manufacturing), Webco Industries (#10, steel tubing), Franklin Industries (#15, steel/rail products), and Franklin Bronze (#23). Educational institutions are critical employers: three public school districts (Franklin, Oil City, Cranberry) appear in the top 11, along with Child Development Centers Inc. (#14, childcare/early education). County and municipal governments also contribute (Venango County #6, City of Oil City #29, City of Franklin #31). Retail and services have a presence with Walmart (#4), Giant Eagle grocery (#19), and Sheetz convenience store (#37) among the largest employers. The list also features

¹⁶ Venango County Regional Planning Commission, 2024.

¹⁷ Center for Workforce Information & Analysis, 2024.

¹⁸ Venango County Regional Planning Commission, 2024.

¹⁹ Center for Workforce Information & Analysis, 2024.

logistics and transportation companies such as Klapec Trucking (#34) and parcel delivery firms like FedEx Ground (#41) and UPS (#49). Social and health services beyond the hospital are represented by organizations like Presbyterian Senior Care (#17, elder care), Sugar Creek Station nursing home (#20), Pathways Adolescent Center (#25, youth services), and Family Services & Children's Aid Society (#42).²⁰

This employer mix highlights Venango's key industries: health care (hospital, nursing homes, clinics), manufacturing (metals, machinery, electronics), education (schools), government, retail, and transportation. It aligns with the top industries by employment in the county, led by schools and hospitals, followed by manufacturing and retail. Notably, the presence of multiple staffing agencies in the top employer list (e.g., All Seasons Temporaries #32, Career Concepts #33) suggests that many local companies rely on temp or staffing services, possibly indicating seasonal work or difficulty in directly hiring for certain roles. Overall, Venango's economic base is a blend of legacy industries (manufacturing and energy) and service sectors. For instance, manufacturing includes both traditional heavy industry (steel, metal fabrication) and advanced manufacturing niches like electronic components. The county's historical ties to the oil industry are less pronounced in employment today, though a refinery-related company (United Refining) and some petrochemical support services appear in the mix.²¹

High-Priority Occupations and Skill Needs

State and regional labor data identify numerous High-Priority Occupations (HPOs) in the Northwest WDA that are in demand and relevant to Venango County. These include a range of healthcare roles: for example, Registered Nurses (RNs), Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs), and allied health professionals like Respiratory Therapists, Medical Assistants, Radiologic Technicians, and Clinical Lab Technologists are all designated high-priority jobs. The local hospital and elder care facilities especially drive demand for nursing and technician roles, and stakeholders note ongoing needs for positions like primary care physicians and medical assistants in the area. In fact, healthcare employers report relatively low vacancy rates in general – UPMC Northwest has one of the lowest turnover rates in the UPMC system and “not a lot of open positions”²² at present – but they caution that this could change as many workers near retirement, especially in specialized roles like respiratory therapy. Training pipelines have also weakened (e.g. the closure of a local respiratory therapy training program), prompting concerns about future talent supply in healthcare fields.

Another major category of high-priority occupations is skilled trades and manufacturing/technical jobs. Employers consistently highlight shortages of engineers, technicians, and specialist tradespeople, as well as difficulty recruiting “middle-skill” workers with more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree. For instance, industrial maintenance mechanics, machinists and CNC operators, welders, and electricians are all on the HPO list for the region and are sought by local manufacturers. Production supervisors, tool-and-die makers, and quality inspectors are also in demand. Employers like Matric and Webco note that while they can find entry-level assemblers and general labor, they struggle to fill roles requiring technical expertise or engineering degrees.²³ Many of these companies are attempting to upskill existing workers or

²⁰ Center for Workforce Information & Analysis, 2023.

²¹ Center for Workforce Information & Analysis, 2023.

²² Bailey, 2025.

²³ Focus group with regional employers, 2025.

partner with technical schools to build a talent pipeline. For example, stakeholders discussed designing high school programs and pre-apprenticeships (such as an evening course to train students on specific manufacturing equipment, leading directly to jobs). The need for broad-based technical training (e.g. blueprint reading, basic machining, welding certifications) was emphasized to ensure graduates are “workforce ready” for local industry. County leadership also mentioned the need to assess demand and preparation for careers in cosmetology, a program formerly offered by Venango Tech.

In the transportation and logistics field, CDL-licensed truck drivers are a high-priority occupation and a known shortage area. Venango’s location near Interstate 80 and its mix of manufacturing and resource industries drive demand for truck drivers and other logistics workers. Employers cited truck driver training and recruitment as a significant challenge, noting a regional shortage of drivers despite high demand. Other transportation roles like bus drivers and heavy equipment operators also make the HPO list, reflecting needs in both public transit/school transportation and industry. Additionally, the construction trades (carpenters, plumbers, HVAC technicians, etc.) face workforce gaps; tradespeople are aging-out and fewer young workers are replacing them. Occupations such as electricians and plumbers/pipefitters are projected to have steady openings, and stakeholders pointed out the importance of vocational training to supply these roles.

Across these occupations, a common thread is the need for enhanced training and education opportunities in Venango County. The Northwest WDA workforce plan and local employers call for expanding vocational programs, apprenticeships, and credentials in fields like advanced manufacturing, healthcare tech, and CDL driving to address the skills gap. Soft skills and basic work readiness are also key – initiatives like the “Venango Ready” program aim to prepare high school students with workplace fundamentals (attendance, communication, basic computer skills). Stakeholders applaud the strong local career and technical education (CTE) centers (vo-tech high schools) and urge continued partnerships with them. They stress being nimble in developing new programs; if employers signal a need for a certain skill (whether it’s CNC programming or a renewable energy technician), the training providers and proposed campus programs should respond quickly. An employer advisory board could help keep curriculum aligned with industry needs.

Workforce Challenges and Stakeholder Insights²⁴

Through focus groups and stakeholder interviews, several key challenges have emerged that impact Venango County’s workforce:

- **Occupational Shortages and Retention:** Employers report chronic difficulty in finding qualified candidates for certain positions. Manufacturing firms noted that specialized engineers and skilled technicians are very tough to recruit or retain in the area. Even when hires are made, keeping talent in Venango is hard – young professionals often leave for larger markets, and the pool of experienced mid-career workers is limited. One manufacturing stakeholder frankly stated that achieving “20–40% more workforce” locally feels “impossible to do” without attracting people from outside the county.²⁵ Healthcare providers similarly worry about future retirements creating shortages in nursing and technical roles. Overall turnover varies by industry: the hospital has unusually low

²⁴ Derived from various stakeholder interviews and focus groups.

²⁵ Focus group with regional employers, 2025.

turnover (attributed to a regional culture of loyalty and “grit” among staff), whereas sectors like hospitality and entry-level services face constant churn. For example, support departments in health care (environmental services, food service, maintenance) experience high turnover and “constant churn” of workers. Competition for labor can be intense even within the county – several employers mentioned wage competition and poaching, where companies lose staff to a rival firm or even to easier jobs in retail. A common refrain is that convenience stores or national retail chains (like Sheetz or Walmart) can attract entry-level workers with relatively higher hourly pay and less pressure, making it harder for manufacturers paying similar wages to hire newcomers. This dynamic forces local employers to emphasize career advancement and total benefit packages to entice workers, though some noted that many recruits “don’t seem to care as much about benefits (versus salary).”

- **Skills Gaps and Workforce Readiness:** Despite decent high school graduation rates, many young entrants to the labor force lack essential soft skills and technical basics. Employers emphasized work ethic and reliability as concerns – for instance, younger workers’ “work appetite” or motivation is perceived as lower, and some “don’t want to work” in physically demanding jobs. This generational gap in expectations means companies must invest more in onboarding and coaching new hires. Focus group participants encouraged more soft skills training in schools, covering punctuality, communication, and basic computer skills. Additionally, the decline in local post-secondary options (e.g., campus closures) has reduced opportunities for continuing education in Venango. Stakeholders noted that with Clarion University consolidating, there was community anxiety about the loss of local college programs, and it underscores the need for the new campus initiative to fill that void in training capacity. Technical skill gaps are also problematic: many applicants lack specific competencies like reading blueprints, operating CNC machinery, or welding to certification standards. To address this, employers are increasingly partnering with technical schools or even proposing in-house programs. For example, one idea was a shared regional training center or pre-apprenticeship classroom on the new campus, possibly in cooperation with Pittsburgh-based apprenticeship models. Another idea is to create training tailored to local industry equipment (e.g., Matric offering their old equipment for a student training program) to build a direct pipeline from school to employment. Incumbent worker training is also a need – even current employees require upskilling (for instance, training in MS Office, Excel, and leadership was requested by companies during campus tours). On the whole, there is strong consensus that workforce development efforts must be employer-driven and responsive, constantly updating programs to match evolving skill needs (for example, future needs like fiber-optic installers or AI tool operators were mentioned).
- **Barriers to Participation:** Several structural barriers make it harder for people to join or stay in the workforce in Venango County. Transportation is a significant challenge – with a rural geography and limited public transit, many potential workers (especially lower-income or young people) have trouble getting to jobs or training sites if they don’t have a reliable car. The county’s transit agency (CATA) operates some bus routes, but stakeholders said these services are not widely known or utilized, and they may not align well with work schedules. Childcare is another critical barrier. There is a lack of affordable childcare options, which especially hampers labor force participation for parents of young children. Employers noted that some talented workers (particularly mothers) remain out of the workforce or can only work part-time because they cannot secure daycare. In

response, ideas like shared employer-sponsored daycare or subsidies were floated – for instance, multiple companies could collaborate on a daycare center for their employees or provide childcare stipends. Housing availability – particularly quality rentals – also affects workforce attraction. Both industrial and healthcare employers pointed out that for new hires moving into the area, finding suitable housing is tough. Higher-end rental units or short-term corporate housing are “non-existent” or very limited in Venango. One major employer has resorted to putting new staff in a hotel due to the lack of decent apartments, albeit at high cost. Stakeholders cautioned that the community needs more modern rental housing to accommodate young professionals and trainees. They also noted that if the campus offers student or trainee housing, it should be upgraded to be attractive and done in coordination with – not at the expense of – private development in downtown areas. Finally, beyond these primary barriers, other quality-of-life factors such as the availability of amenities, entertainment, and cultural activities play a role in attracting and retaining talent. Some cited the need to improve local “third places” for youth (e.g., coffee shops, recreation centers, arts venues) to make the area more appealing to young people and new graduates. The Venango Chamber’s “Be Here” initiative, for instance, is working to change the narrative and showcase the region’s lifestyle benefits to prospective residents.

- **Youth Engagement and Retention:** Engaging local youth and students is seen as vital to building the future workforce. Stakeholders encouraged expanding programs that expose high school students to local career opportunities in both existing and emerging industries. Successful examples include manufacturing summer camps (e.g., “Kids in Manufacturing” programs). “Venango Ready” was cited as a positive program instilling work readiness in students. The focus is to “home-grow” talent so that young people develop skills and interests aligned with local jobs, rather than all pursuing opportunities elsewhere. There is also interest in STEAM education and making use of the county’s unique assets (e.g., the outdoors, the Allegheny River) as part of youth programming and team building. Overall, community leaders feel that if the region provides more modern training facilities, internships, and youth programs – and combines them with attractive amenities (trails, recreation, social venues) – it will increase the likelihood that young adults will “be here” and contribute to the local workforce after graduation.

Emerging Workforce Development Needs and Opportunities

Looking ahead, Venango County and the Northwest WDA are identifying emerging industries and workforce opportunities that could shape the region’s economic future. Healthcare and advanced manufacturing remain top-of-mind – these sectors are expected to continue dominating job openings, so ongoing training for nurses, technicians, and skilled trades will be critical. However, stakeholders also urged planning for future growth industries and new skill sets. For example, the rise of renewable and clean energy is seen as an opportunity: local leaders noted interest in “clean energy” jobs and businesses. This could include training workers for solar panel installation, energy efficiency retrofitting, or even emerging fields like battery manufacturing and carbon capture technology if such projects come to the region. Similarly, the logistics and distribution sector was highlighted as a cluster to develop. With Venango’s proximity to major transportation corridors, there may be potential to attract warehouses or freight facilities, which would require forklift operators, supply chain technicians, and truck drivers – again pointing to the need for CDL and logistics training capacity.

Another growth area is information technology and broadband expansion. The pandemic accelerated remote work and digital business, and Northwest Pennsylvania is investing in broadband infrastructure. Regional planners mention future needs like “fiber installers” as an example of a niche occupation that could grow. Equipping workers with IT skills, from basic computer literacy to more advanced networking or software abilities, will increase their employability as the digital economy expands even in rural areas. Some companies (e.g. a local broadband provider) are already part of Venango’s employer mix, and a tech talent pool could attract more. Additionally, business and entrepreneurship skills are being encouraged. With a small but active entrepreneurial community, programs to “stoke entrepreneurship” and support small startups can create new jobs. This includes providing training in business management, accounting, and leveraging technologies like AI for new ventures, some of which could be offered through the planned campus as part of its workforce mission.

Venango’s rich natural and cultural assets also present workforce opportunities in outdoor recreation, tourism, and hospitality. Stakeholders noted interest in expanding hospitality (lodging, events) and outdoor adventure businesses, which ties into workforce needs for chefs, hotel managers, guides, and recreation planners. For instance, if the region succeeds in developing trail networks, riverfront recreation, and heritage tourism, demand for workers in those areas will rise. The county lacks a sufficient hotel/event center currently, so any new development there would require trained hospitality staff. Similarly, enhancing parks and environmental education (e.g. an environmental center on the campus property) could create jobs in environmental science and education, aligning with suggestions to partner with PA DCNR or DEP on programming.

Finally, a consistent theme for all emerging needs is the importance of collaboration and adaptability. ORA’s campus project is envisioned as a hub that can bring together education, industry, and community. Stakeholders see it as a chance to host satellite programs from universities or trade schools (without duplicating what’s already offered in adjacent areas like Meadville or Titusville), to establish testing and certification centers so residents don’t have to travel to Pittsburgh or Erie for credentials, and to serve as a one-stop venue for career fairs, job training, and even public workforce services like PA CareerLink. By co-locating these resources, Venango can more nimbly adjust to workforce trends, whether that means launching a short-term course on mechatronics and CNC when a new manufacturer arrives or offering leadership and management training as local workers advance in their careers. In short, the county’s workforce strategy is to both shore-up the fundamentals in its core industries and prepare for the next wave of opportunities, ensuring that Venango’s labor force has the skills and support to thrive in a changing economy.

Understanding Priorities through Community Engagement

To ensure the campus transformation plan would reflect the true needs, values, and aspirations of Venango County, the project team pursued a robust and inclusive stakeholder engagement strategy. From the outset, the approach prioritized meaningful dialogue with a broad and representative cross-section of the community, including local employers, educators, nonprofit leaders, civic officials, and residents. By hosting a series of one-on-one interviews, public meetings, campus tours, and issue-specific focus groups, the planning process created space for honest input and constructive collaboration. This outreach was designed not simply to collect opinions, but to build a shared vision rooted in lived experience and local priorities. As a result, the ideas and themes that emerged carry the weight of broad community endorsement and form

the foundation for a transformation plan that is practical, aspirational, and uniquely reflective of the Oil Region.

Stakeholder engagement approach

Throughout Venango County, an extensive community engagement process informed the development of a shared vision for the combined campus. Over the course of the planning period, the project team and its partners conducted numerous individual interviews, public meetings, and focus groups designed to reach a broad cross-section of the community. These engagement activities were held in multiple locations across the county and solicited input from residents, employers, educators, service providers, and civic leaders. By proactively inviting diverse voices into the conversation, the planning process ensured that the emerging vision for the campus reflects local needs and aspirations. Stakeholders were encouraged to speak openly about their ideas, concerns, and hopes for the site's future, yielding a rich collection of perspectives to guide the transformation plan.

The outreach efforts engaged a wide range of stakeholder groups, ensuring representation from nearly every sector of the community. Stakeholder groups consulted in the process included:

- **Local Employers and Business Leaders** – owners, managers, and industry representatives from small businesses to major employers
- **Educators and School Representatives** – local school district leaders, teachers, vocational/technical training providers, and higher education partners
- **Community Organizations and Service Providers** – nonprofit agencies, workforce development and healthcare providers, social services, and civic organizations
- **Public Officials and Civic Leaders** – municipal and county officials, economic development and planning representatives, and other government or civic leaders
- **Residents and Community Members** – citizens of Venango County, including residents and other interested community members

Themes and priorities emerging from community input

This broad engagement brought together people of different ages, occupations, and backgrounds. Each group contributed unique insights. For example, business stakeholders emphasized workforce needs, while parents and educators discussed educational opportunities and family services. Community members shared ideas about recreation and cultural activities, and public officials raised points about economic impact and infrastructure. Despite the diversity of viewpoints, participants also found common ground. Across these dialogues, several recurring themes and areas of shared interest consistently emerged, forming the basis of a unifying vision for the campus's future use.

Diverse Perspectives and Shared Interests

Participants in the engagement process expressed a wide variety of perspectives, reflecting the county's diverse needs. Residents from different communities spoke about their personal experiences and hopes – from young adults seeking local career opportunities to older residents concerned about services for seniors. Employers and workforce leaders offered insights into the skills gaps and talent needs in the region, while educators discussed opportunities for innovative

learning and partnerships. Service providers, including those in childcare, healthcare, and senior services, highlighted gaps in community support systems. Arts and cultural representatives shared ideas for creative uses of campus facilities, and outdoor enthusiasts noted the campus's geographical assets for recreation.

These perspectives were sometimes distinct – for instance, an employer might prioritize technical training, whereas a community volunteer might focus on recreation space – yet they were not mutually exclusive. In fact, stakeholders frequently built on each other's ideas during group discussions, recognizing that the campus could serve multiple roles simultaneously. A clear message emerged that the future campus should be a multifaceted community asset, addressing educational, economic, and social needs in tandem. The engagement process revealed an encouraging convergence of aspirations: stakeholders may have arrived with different priorities, but they left with a shared vision centered on improving quality of life and opportunity in Venango County.

Across all engagement activities, stakeholders consistently raised a core set of themes regarding the former campus's future. The following major themes and community priorities emerged repeatedly from interviews, public forums, and focus groups:

- **Workforce and Technical Training:** Nearly all stakeholder groups emphasized the need to expand local workforce development opportunities. Participants see the campus as an ideal site for technical training programs, skilled trades education, and career certification courses that prepare residents for in-demand jobs. There was broad agreement that equipping the local workforce with modern skills is critical for retaining talent and attracting. From advanced manufacturing and healthcare to emerging technologies, stakeholders expressed strong support for programs that would help both young people and adults gain practical, marketable skills without having to leave the region. This focus on workforce and technical training reflects the community's determination to bolster economic opportunity and ensure the campus continues its legacy as a center for learning and professional growth.
- **Responsiveness to Employer Needs:** Alongside calls for more training, employers and educators alike stressed that campus programs should be closely aligned with the needs of local industries. A recurring idea was to develop courses and workshops in direct partnership with area businesses so that curriculum stays up-to-date with current job requirements. Stakeholders suggested creating an employer advisory council or similar mechanism to provide ongoing input into campus offerings, ensuring agility in responding to changing economic trends. By making the former campus a place where companies can find the talent they require – through apprenticeship programs, custom corporate trainings, and incubation of new enterprises – participants believe it will become a driving force for regional economic development. This theme of employer responsiveness underscores a shared interest in forging strong school-to-work pipelines and keeping educational programs relevant and demand-driven.
- **Childcare and Family Services:** Many participants raised the point that accessible childcare is a pressing need for working families in the county. During community meetings, parents and service providers described how the lack of affordable daycare and early childhood education options limits workforce participation and educational advancement for caregivers. As a result, stakeholders floated ideas for the campus to host

a childcare center or partnership program that could serve students, staff, and local families. Such a facility would support parents pursuing training or jobs, directly tying into the workforce development mission. Beyond daycare, stakeholders also mentioned family resource services and after-school programs as potential campus offerings. The inclusion of childcare emerged as a popular idea to make the campus more family-friendly and to remove barriers for those seeking education or employment opportunities.

- **Elder Services and Lifelong Learning:** Given Venango County's aging population (with nearly one in four residents over age 65 as of 2020), stakeholders frequently discussed the importance of services for seniors and older adults. Community members and healthcare providers noted that the former campus could fill gaps by offering programs like adult day services, senior wellness activities, or continuing education classes for retirees. There was enthusiasm for making the campus a hub for lifelong learning, where older adults can engage in classes, technology training, or arts workshops alongside younger students. Additionally, stakeholders saw potential for coordinating with existing senior service agencies to possibly locate offices or programming on-site. By catering to multiple generations – from youth to seniors – the campus can strengthen its role as an inclusive center of community life. Participants consistently emphasized that planning for the campus's future should account for the county's demographic shifts and ensure that elder care resources and intergenerational opportunities are part of the mix.
- **Housing and Lodging Options:** Housing needs in the community emerged as another recurring theme. Stakeholders pointed out shortages of certain types of housing – for example, short-term housing for visiting professionals, students, or new employees, as well as quality rental options for young adults and families. Some participants familiar with the campus noted that it includes several apartment buildings formerly used as student housing. They suggested leveraging these facilities to address housing gaps. Ideas ranged from utilizing the apartments for workforce housing (e.g., interns and temporary workers) to possibly offering student dormitory space for partnering institutions or even short-term transitional housing for those relocating to the area. ORA has, in fact, purchased the on-site apartments and acknowledged they are a “key component” for supporting campus events and attracting. Across the engagement, participants supported creatively repurposing campus housing to benefit the community's broader needs, seeing it as another way the campus can help recruit talent and serve residents.
- **Recreation and Outdoor Amenities:** A common aspiration among residents, youth, and outdoor enthusiasts is to better utilize the campus's recreational assets. The campus boasts a gymnasium, open green spaces, and proximity to the Allegheny River and regional trails. In the public forums, stakeholders envisioned the campus as a community recreation hub – suggesting ideas like reopening the gym and fitness facilities for public use, hosting youth sports or wellness classes, and creating new walking or biking trails on the 110-acre grounds. There is strong interest in connecting the campus to the existing Justus Trail system and leveraging its location as a trailhead for hiking and biking. Some participants even proposed outdoor adventure amenities (e.g. mountain biking paths or kayak rentals) to draw visitors and locals alike. Overall, the recreational theme highlights the shared desire to encourage healthy lifestyles and social activities on the campus, transforming it into a vibrant space for play, exercise, and enjoying Venango County's natural surroundings.

- Educational Innovation:** Educators, students, and parents in particular voiced enthusiasm for making the renewed campus a place of educational innovation. This theme encompasses introducing new learning models, creative curricula, and partnerships that extend beyond traditional college courses. Stakeholders proposed ideas such as establishing a technology and innovation lab, where high school or college students could access equipment (for example, 3D printers or multimedia studios) and work on hands-on projects. Others talked about expanding vocational and STEM programs in collaboration with local high schools or the county's career and technical center, thereby strengthening the school-to-career pipeline. There were also discussions about inviting specialized training providers – for instance, a partnership similar to the one being explored with Pittsburgh's Manchester Bidwell Corporation to offer unique arts and technical training programs on site. Participants consistently encouraged thinking outside the box: rather than merely replicating existing education offerings, the campus could pilot innovative approaches, integrate technology, and serve as a "learning lab" for the community. This innovative spirit is seen as key to keeping young people engaged and attracting new learners of all ages to the region.
- Arts and Culture:** The rich arts and cultural life of the Oil Region was another thread woven through stakeholder input. Arts organizations, local artists, and culture enthusiasts highlighted the campus's auditorium and public spaces as underutilized resources that could host performances, exhibitions, and cultural events. Participants imagined the auditorium in the Rhoades Center alive with theater productions, live music, film screenings, and community theater. Others suggested dedicating space for art galleries, heritage displays, or a community arts center where classes and workshops could be held. This theme also extended to celebrating the unique history and identity of the region – for example, expanding cultural programming that ties into the area's oil heritage and industrial past (building on features like the existing *Barbara Morgan Harvey Center for the Study of Oil Heritage* and the *Venango County Conservation Hall of Fame*). Stakeholders see arts and culture as vital for quality of life and tourism, and they believe the campus can provide an ideal venue for these activities. By opening its doors to creative endeavors, the campus would become a cultural hub that brings people together and showcases local talent and heritage.
- Community Identity and Pride:** Finally, throughout the engagement process stakeholders repeatedly underscored that the campus represents an important part of the community's identity. Participants expressed a strong desire to preserve the campus's legacy and reinforce its role as a community cornerstone. Many noted the deep local history of the campus – its origins, the families and donors who helped establish it, and its decades of service as an educational institution – and urged that any future uses honor that heritage. There was a shared sentiment that the transformed campus should "feel like ours" to the people of Venango County. In practice, this means ensuring the campus remains open and welcoming to the public, and that community members see visible reflections of their input and culture on the grounds (such as retaining original building names, commemorative signage, or historic exhibits). Participants also spoke about the campus as a potential gathering place that fosters social connections and civic pride – whether through community festivals, public forums, or simply as a beautiful space where neighbors can come together. By anchoring the site's new purposes in the community's shared values and stories, the campus can continue to be, as one historical motto put it, "a great place to start, a great place to grow."

In conclusion, community engagement across Venango County revealed both a diversity of perspectives and a clear convergence of vision for the former campus. Stakeholders from all walks of life contributed to a robust dialogue about the site's future, and despite their different viewpoints, a set of common themes emerged. There is broad agreement that the campus should evolve into a dynamic multi-use community asset – one that provides workforce and technical training opportunities, responds to employers' needs, supports families and seniors, offers housing and recreation, nurtures education innovation, celebrates arts and culture, and reinforces the identity of the Oil Region community. This shared vision, born out of extensive public input, will guide the transformation project and ensure the campus remains a source of local pride and opportunity for generations to come. Each theme identified through engagement speaks to a collective aspiration: that the Venango campus will continue to enrich lives and strengthen the region, true to the community's hopes and in line with a unified vision for a brighter future.

Aligning with ORA Priorities

The ORA views the transition of the campus as a generational opportunity to advance its mission of increasing regional prosperity through preservation, promotion, and development. Rooted in a rich legacy of natural and industrial significance, the campus embodies the exact intersections of education, economic development, recreation, and cultural heritage that animate ORA's work. The organization sees the campus not just as a vacant facility to be repurposed, but as a physical platform for inspiring new community narratives, fostering entrepreneurial ventures, and anchoring long-term revitalization strategies.

Consistent with ORA's management of the Oil Region National Heritage Area, the campus represents an asset where educational innovation, heritage tourism, and creative place-making can converge. Staff noted that the site can support diverse activities: from workforce training and industry-led learning labs to artistic, recreational, and interpretive uses that reinforce the region's identity as "the Valley that Changed the World." This aligns with ORA's heritage strategy, which emphasizes storytelling, experience-based attractions, outdoor recreation infrastructure, and partnerships with nonprofits, governments, and the private sector. The campus has the potential to become a demonstration site for these integrated efforts—where historic preservation, trail connectivity, and programming come together in visible and impactful ways.

As a development agency, ORA recognizes the importance of balancing near-term activation with long-term vision. The organization is especially focused on ensuring that early uses of the campus contribute to a larger ecosystem of economic growth. This may include small business incubation, light manufacturing, hospitality, or education-adjacent services that benefit from a walkable, amenity-rich site with flexible buildings. ORA's broader goals – outlined in its strategic plan – prioritize unlocking the tourism and entrepreneurial potential of the region, improving visitor and resident experiences, and creating attractive reasons for individuals and families to live and work in the area. The campus is uniquely suited to advance these aims.

ORA also sees itself not as the sole actor, but as a steward and convener. To this end, the organization is committed to identifying and cultivating partnerships that reflect the values of the National Heritage Area while ensuring that campus development serves regional and local interests. The Alliance is prepared to contribute its expertise in fundraising, heritage interpretation, project development, and stakeholder engagement to help coordinate a future for the campus that is bold, grounded, and sustainable.

During an internal strategy session, ORA staff articulated a cohesive and aspirational vision for the future of the Venango campus, centered on aligning the site's reuse with regional needs, community revitalization, and ORA's mission. The team identified three overarching priorities: (1) positioning the campus as a multi-use hub for workforce, education, and entrepreneurship; (2) ensuring long-term sustainability through phased, financially responsible development; and (3) preserving the campus's symbolic and historic importance to the community.

There was strong internal alignment around the idea of transforming the site into a regional asset that supports economic and human capital development. Staff emphasized the opportunity to co-locate training programs, business incubation space, and supportive services in a way that fosters both collaboration and community access. The notion of "stacked impact" emerged — creating a physical environment where workforce, arts, wellness, and social services can thrive side by side to meet overlapping community needs.

At the same time, ORA staff acknowledged the financial and operational realities of maintaining a large campus. They advocated for a pragmatic, incremental approach to redevelopment, beginning with the most viable and high-impact uses that can build momentum and demonstrate success. Underpinning this was a desire to avoid "mission creep" and ensure that ORA's role remains one of convener, facilitator, and catalyst, not an operator of every program.

Finally, there was a consistent thread of civic pride and place-based stewardship. Staff viewed the campus as a visible symbol of the Oil Region's resilience and believed its reuse should reflect local identity and heritage. They expressed a commitment to honoring the site's history while reimagining its future, including preserving architectural elements and community access.

In summary, ORA's internal priorities reflect a strategic balance: bold in vision, measured in execution, and grounded in the belief that the Venango campus can be a cornerstone for regional renewal.

Envisioning a Shared Future

The extensive research, stakeholder engagement, and asset analysis undertaken in this initial planning phase point toward a clear and compelling convergence of opportunity at the combined campus. At the center of this convergence lies the shared space between three domains: what the community needs and desires; what the Oil Region Alliance (ORA) is mission-driven and strategically positioned to advance; and what the physical campus can realistically support and enable.

Community Needs and Aspirations emerged from months of outreach to educators, employers, service providers, public officials, and residents. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized the need for workforce and technical training, innovative education models, accessible childcare, elder services, recreational amenities, arts and cultural programming, and spaces that strengthen local identity and pride. These aspirations were not isolated, they represented a holistic vision of how the campus could evolve into a vibrant, multi-use community asset that improves quality of life and retains local talent.

ORA's Strategic Priorities reinforce and align with these community goals. As the regional economic development agency and steward of the Oil Region National Heritage Area, ORA's mission centers on increasing prosperity through the preservation, promotion, development, and

support of historical, educational, recreational, and commercial destinations. Its vision for the campus includes catalyzing tourism, nurturing entrepreneurship, supporting talent development, and elevating the region's unique identity. ORA's expertise in fundraising, storytelling, placemaking, and partnership-building positions it well to lead and sustain an ambitious yet grounded transformation effort.

Campus Capabilities, as revealed through detailed facility and land use analysis, are diverse and adaptable. The 120-acre site (including buildings) contains core facilities suitable for instructional, recreational, cultural, and administrative use. Existing infrastructure, including academic halls, a gymnasium, library, auditorium, and on-site housing, can accommodate a range of activities, from training programs and conferences to performances and wellness services. The site's walkability, green space, and proximity to trails and waterways add to its appeal as a destination for both learning and leisure.

At the intersection of these three spheres lies a strong foundation for a unified vision of the campus's future: a flexible, inclusive hub that strengthens workforce readiness, fosters community well-being, and celebrates the region's identity. This vision supports multiple uses: a training and education center, an intergenerational service and recreation site, an arts and culture venue, and a gathering place for residents and visitors. Importantly, this multi-dimensional potential is not aspirational alone; it is grounded in what the community wants, what ORA is structured to pursue, and what the campus itself can realistically support.

Specific potential uses

Based on the discussion notes and follow-up review meeting with ORA leadership, the organization has developed a refined and actionable vision for the reuse of the Venango Campus. Their priorities focus on activating the site in ways that align with ORA's mission to foster economic development, community vitality, tourism, and heritage preservation while also ensuring that spaces are flexible and responsive to evolving community and workforce needs. The campus is now envisioned as a multi-use hub with distinct identities and functions assigned to key buildings and outdoor areas.

- **Richard C. Frame Hall: Education and Community Administration**
 Frame Hall is envisioned as a dual-purpose facility. Approximately 80% of its space is already under long-term lease to new tenants, and the remaining 20% will be reserved for rotating, short-term educational programs, ideally those that are accessible, low-barrier, and responsive to employer demand. These could include day-long workshops, technical skills training, or micro-credentialing sessions. The hall's accessibility and classroom layout make it ideal for this type of flexible, rapid-turnover programming.
- **Robert W. Rhoades Center: Community and Recreation Hub**
 The Rhoades Center is planned to become a flagship destination for community engagement. Already housing the United Way's new Community Innovations Center, including a nonprofit support office and a regional human services call center, this building will be reimagined as a dynamic, shared-use space. Proposed features include a staffed retail area with visitor and tourism services, a café with grab-and-go food options, and an outfitter-style store with trail and heritage merchandise. Public-facing amenities such as locker rooms and showers for trail users are also under consideration, enhancing

the building's appeal as a recreational anchor. The gymnasium and auditorium will remain available for large events, conferences, or sports programming, with growing interest in hosting community leagues and competitions.

- **Charles L. Suhr Library: Workforce and Business Innovation Center**
 Suhr Library is positioned to become a hub for small business incubation, workforce training, and shared services. ORA proposes eliminating traditional library stacks to make room for modular offices, digital learning environments, and coworking-style spaces. Four existing offices will remain leased, while other areas could host support services in HR, finance, and legal affairs for emerging businesses. With funding, a computer lab open to the public may also be introduced, contributing to digital literacy and employment readiness. The renovated Barbara Morgan Harvey Center and Venango County Conservation Hall of Fame will anchor the site's heritage dimension. Collectively, the library's transformation will support entrepreneurship, remote work, and community learning in an adaptable and collaborative setting.
- **Montgomery Hall: Long-Term Academic Programs**
 Montgomery Hall will be retained primarily for formal academic partnerships. Its internal configuration and infrastructure make it best suited for long-term use by postsecondary institutions. The existing nursing program and planned expansions in allied health fields, such as Medical Assisting and Emergency Medical Services (EMS), are expected to anchor this building's purpose. Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) and other institutions have expressed interest in co-locating programs here. Office space on the second floor supports instructional staff, while first-floor classrooms and labs offer technical training capacity.
- **Residence Hall Complex: Lodging to Support Community Vitality**
 The Residence Hall Complex represents a highly flexible asset with strong potential to support multiple housing and lodging needs. As stakeholder input emphasized, the ability to offer short-term, flexible accommodations is critical to advancing the campus's vision as a regional hub for education, workforce development, recreation, and community engagement. In the short term, the residential facilities could provide immediate value as lodging for visiting instructors, traveling nurses, seasonal workers, or interns placed with local employers. Additionally, the buildings are ideally suited to house participants in workforce bootcamps, summer camps, or youth leadership programs held on campus. Mid- to long-term concepts include developing a trail-friendly hostel or retreat center that caters to hikers and cyclists using the Justus Trail, or creating transitional housing in partnership with human services providers. With kitchenettes, private bedrooms, and shared living spaces already in place, the Residence Hall Complex is move-in ready and adaptable, making it a strategic pillar in efforts to animate the campus year-round and welcome a diverse mix of users.
- **Venango Catholic Site: Multi-Generational Community Node**
 The adjacent Venango Catholic property, also under ORA's purview, is being reimagined as a multi-generational service and learning hub. It already hosts a senior center operated by the Area Agency on Aging and Nutrition Inc., which uses the commercial kitchen to prepare meals for senior meal sites across the county. Future additions may include a cosmetology program that offers services to both seniors and students, a childcare facility targeting employer-supported models, and recreational programming for youth and

families. Outdoor facilities are envisioned for public use, including sports and fitness activities. While the YMCA has expressed interest in co-locating a gymnastics program, careful balance will be needed to ensure that single-use proposals do not displace broader community benefit.

- **Campus-Wide and Outdoor Space Activation**

ORA leadership emphasized that the full 120-acre property (across both the main and adjacent sites) should be included in planning considerations. The outdoor space has significant potential for public recreation, events, and integrated programming with indoor uses. Improved signage, wayfinding, and a centralized visitor reception function are considered essential next steps. The combination of built and natural assets offers the opportunity to develop a truly integrated campus experience that reflects the region's heritage while positioning it for future relevance.

Taken together, these priorities reflect a clear desire to create a vibrant, multi-purpose destination that is rooted in community, responsive to workforce and business needs, and aligned with ORA's broader strategic goals. The approach honors the campus's past as an educational institution while charting a forward-looking course that engages multiple sectors, constituencies, and uses.

The path forward will require careful phasing, creative partnerships, and sustained investment. But the alignment established through this planning process ensures that future decisions can be made with confidence. The campus is not merely a legacy asset to be maintained, it is a generational opportunity to unify purpose and place. With a shared vision now in hand, Venango County and the ORA are well-positioned to transform the campus into a regional engine of opportunity, community pride, and economic vitality.

Conclusions and Considerations

The transformation of the combined campus represents a rare and powerful convergence of factors: a community with pressing needs and bold ideas, a regional development organization with a clear mission and strategic intent, and a physical campus with infrastructure, beauty, and flexibility. At the heart of this opportunity lies the intersection of three key elements: community aspirations, ORA's strategic priorities, and the campus's physical capabilities. Where these domains overlap, a compelling transformation agenda begins to take shape, one that integrates education, workforce readiness, family support, arts and culture, and economic revitalization into a single, adaptable place.

The findings of this first-phase planning process illuminate a shared vision grounded in stakeholder voices and ORA's strategic direction. Residents seek opportunities to grow, learn, and thrive close to home. Employers seek a skilled and reliable workforce. Civic leaders seek destinations that bring vitality to the region. ORA's mission – to entice people to live, work, learn, and play in the Oil Region – aligns closely with this feedback and provides a strong foundation for implementation. The campus's facilities, from healthcare-ready labs to flexible residential units and scenic outdoor areas, provide the essential infrastructure needed to bring these ideas to life.

Importantly, ORA is not starting from scratch. Even as this planning phase unfolded, ORA has been actively cultivating partnerships to bring high-quality programming to the site. One such effort is its ongoing collaboration with the Manchester Bidwell Corporation (MBC) and its National Center for Arts and Technology (NCAT) initiative. This nationally recognized model helps communities develop training centers that blend arts, culture, and job preparation, especially in underserved regions. ORA's early engagement with NCAT reflects its proactive leadership and deep commitment to workforce development. By laying the groundwork for potential MBC-style programs, ORA is helping ensure that the campus can soon host innovative training opportunities that are responsive to both community aspirations and employer needs. This early investment in planning and relationship-building provides a strong signal that the transformation of the Venango campus is already in motion.

To bring this vision to reality, ORA must pursue a phased approach that balances immediacy with intentionality. In the **short term**, the focus should be on achieving baseline financial sustainability by filling available space with semi-aligned tenants. These may include community organizations, educational providers, or health-related tenants whose presence contributes to campus vibrancy, even if not all perfectly align with the long-term vision. However, caution must be taken to avoid long-term leases with entities whose missions may limit future flexibility. A target occupancy threshold, such as 70–80%, may provide a useful benchmark to stabilize operations while maintaining room for strategic expansion.

In the **mid-term**, ORA should invest in high-quality campus photography, wayfinding, and promotional materials that elevate the site's visibility and marketability. Strategic outreach should be guided by the transformation framework, with intentional efforts to attract tenants and programs that align with community priorities and ORA's mission. Each new use should be evaluated not only for its financial contribution but for its synergy with the overall campus vision.

Over the **long term**, the goal is to fully realize the campus as a living embodiment of the community's shared aspirations: a regional hub for training, services, innovation, and connection.

This includes anchoring core tenants and programs that reflect the highest priorities such as workforce development, youth and elder services, and community-based education, while remaining nimble and adaptive to emerging needs. To support this adaptability, ORA should establish a system for ongoing engagement with community members and employers to regularly monitor trends, identify new opportunities, and ensure programming remains relevant and impactful.

Ultimately, the path forward must be both visionary and pragmatic, honoring the campus's legacy, leveraging its assets, and aligning future uses with a coherent, community-rooted strategy. With a structured approach, steady leadership, and collaborative momentum, the Venango campus is well-positioned to become a generational asset and a regional engine for inclusive growth.

Structuring Future Campus Transformation Projects

With a clear understanding of community priorities, organizational goals, and campus potential now in place, the next phase of work must shift from visioning to structuring. This moment represents a critical inflection point, moving from exploration to execution. To realize the full promise of the Venango campus transformation, ORA must translate the findings from this planning effort into a phased, actionable strategy that aligns people, programs, and physical assets around a shared purpose.

This section outlines the core building blocks of that next phase. It begins with the finalization of a campus transformation framework that integrates diverse ideas into a coherent strategic direction. From there, the path forward includes formal strategic planning, deepened stakeholder engagement, pilot initiatives that build early momentum, and the establishment of strong governance structures to support sustained implementation. Each of these components is designed to ensure that the campus becomes not just a symbol of renewal, but an engine for inclusive, community-driven growth.

1. Finalize Transformation Framework

In the coming phase, ORA and its partners must refine and validate the programmatic priorities identified through stakeholder input and research. This will involve synthesizing the full range of ideas, from career and technical training to community enrichment and housing, into a coherent strategic vision. Stakeholder re-engagement sessions should be held to test the alignment of proposed uses with regional needs. Special attention must be paid to balancing workforce development imperatives with community-serving functions such as arts programming, public events, and support services. This framework will serve as the foundation for all subsequent business planning, funding strategies, and space utilization plans.

2. Develop Strategic and Business Plans

Following the establishment of a transformation framework, ORA will initiate a formal strategic planning process. This phase will identify and prioritize use-case scenarios across themes such as workforce credentialing, adult education, youth programming, employer partnerships, and community events. Each use-case will be supported by a business plan detailing required facilities upgrades, operational costs, potential partnerships, and revenue strategies. These plans will

inform a capital improvement roadmap and an implementation schedule. Additional analysis will be conducted to determine which spaces on campus require investment and which uses can be piloted with minimal capital outlay.

3. Engage Additional Stakeholders

Engagement must continue with regional employers, workforce development entities, educators, healthcare institutions, and nonprofit service providers. Particular attention should be paid to engaging industries not yet fully represented in Phase 1, including retail, hospitality, construction, and logistics. Additional public engagement via community surveys, open houses, and listening sessions will ensure broad-based input. Establishing advisory working groups for specific opportunity areas (e.g., housing, transportation, employer training partnerships) can help shape implementation plans and build buy-in.

4. Identify Pilot Initiatives

To generate early momentum, ORA should identify a small set of 'early win' pilot initiatives that demonstrate the viability of campus reuse. Examples include hosting a summer youth leadership camp, offering short-term welding or CNA credentialing bootcamps in partnership with local employers, or repurposing dorms for intern housing tied to hospital or industry placements. These pilots will serve as proofs of concept, provide real-time feedback, and lay the groundwork for scaled programming.

5. Establish Project Governance

To ensure coordinated progress, ORA should formalize a governance structure for the campus transformation initiative. This may include establishing a cross-sector steering committee or working board comprising representatives from industry, education, government, and the community. Clear roles, decision-making protocols, and meeting schedules should be defined. This group will guide strategic decision-making, support stakeholder coordination, and help pursue funding opportunities and partnership development.

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Appendix A – Stakeholder Session Summaries

Northwest Commission Staff (January 21, 2025)

Economic development professionals framed the campus as an asset with regional impact potential. They noted alignment with broadband expansion, talent attraction, remote work infrastructure, and the manufacturing-to-technology workforce pipeline. Suggestions included creating a flexible coworking and training space that could serve regional innovation and entrepreneurship. There was a desire to anchor efforts in data, industry engagement, and measurable return on investment.

ORA Staff and Leadership (January 22, 2025)

Staff shared enthusiasm for a bold vision anchored in education, economic development, and heritage. They underscored the importance of aligning the project with ORA's mission and regional strengths. Reuse ideas included a regional hub for training, incubation, and entrepreneurship, paired with a commitment to long-term financial sustainability. Concerns were raised about operational complexity, but the mood was solution-oriented and proactive.

City and Municipal Leaders (March 25, 2025)

Municipal officials expressed strong support for reactivating the campus in ways that benefit residents and revitalize the urban core. They emphasized the importance of practical workforce programs, family services, and youth engagement. There was interest in leveraging the site's proximity to downtown Oil City and the Justus Trail, and calls to avoid duplication with existing services. Leaders urged a phased approach focused on incremental wins, citing concerns about sustainability and funding.

Venango County Government Leaders (March 25, 2025)

County officials supported the campus's transition and saw opportunities in using the space for co-located public services, behavioral health programming, and wraparound supports for youth and families. They advocated for integration with existing county-led efforts on housing, workforce reentry, and economic development. Transportation challenges and the need for better regional coordination emerged as common threads.

Keystone Community Education Council (March 25, 2025)

KCEC representatives stressed the importance of industry-responsive training, short-term credentialing, and custom workforce programming. They expressed interest in collaborating on future campus uses and emphasized leveraging their established infrastructure for rapid deployment of training aligned with local employer needs.

Venango Chamber of Commerce (April 23, 2025)

The Chamber voiced support for business-friendly uses, including entrepreneurship support, shared workspace, and professional development. They suggested a “one-stop shop” model for workforce, training, and economic services and saw the campus as a way to enhance the regional image and attract new investment.

Residents and Community Members – Campus Tour and General Public (May 13, 2025)

Residents described the campus as a hidden gem and were excited by its potential. Participants expressed deep emotional ties to the campus and supported programs that would benefit all ages. They proposed arts and recreation programming, intergenerational uses, and accessible public space. Concerns about building upkeep and long-term sustainability were tempered by optimism that a community-led plan could bring the site back to life.

Arts and Culture (May 13, 2025)

Arts stakeholders advocated for creative reuses of the campus that would support local artists, public performances, and cultural events. They recommended preserving existing aesthetic qualities while adapting spaces for studios, galleries, and community art classes. The potential to connect to Oil City’s broader creative economy was noted, especially as a complement to workforce and youth programming.

Employers and Healthcare Sector (Various Employers and Various Dates)

Employer representatives, including those from healthcare and industry, emphasized practical workforce needs: basic employability skills, trades training, safety certifications, and stackable credentials. Specific demand was identified for CDL, welding, nursing, behavioral health, and medical assistant pathways. Childcare and transportation were noted as retention barriers. Employers expressed interest in flexible, short-term training models that align with hiring pipelines, and UPMC emphasized the potential of simulation labs and partnerships to grow local talent.

Community and Human Services (Various Stakeholders and Dates)

Human service professionals described extensive community needs—especially among youth, families, and those experiencing trauma. Stakeholders supported co-location of nonprofits, integrated behavioral health services, wraparound support, and transitional housing. They emphasized making the campus a safe, accessible, and dignified space for service delivery. There was enthusiasm for collaboration and shared infrastructure to reduce duplication and improve client outcomes.

Education Sector, Regional Superintendents and Teachers (Various Stakeholders and Dates)

Education leaders supported expanding dual enrollment, career pathways, and technical education through use of the campus. They saw potential for early college models, short-term training aligned to high school students, and arts or enrichment programming. They emphasized student engagement, culturally relevant content, and integrating creative expression into workforce and academic development. All participants supported alignment with the local Intermediate Unit and school systems.

Appendix B – Campus Photos

Richard C. Frame Hall – Frame Hall is the campus's primary academic building. It is a two-story structure totaling 16,380 gross square feet (GSF). The building contains general-purpose classrooms, wet science labs, faculty offices, conference rooms, and support spaces. It was historically used for liberal arts and general education programming and is structurally suited for continued use as instructional or office space.

Frame Hall front entrance



Upstairs corridor



Upstairs classroom



Individual office space



Montgomery Hall – Designed for health sciences education, Montgomery Hall is a four-story facility with 31,351 GSF. It houses nursing simulation labs, classrooms, and faculty offices. The building's configuration and mechanical systems are conducive to technical training and could be readily upgraded for modern allied health or STEM-related programming.

Montgomery Hall front entrance



Large classroom or conference space



Medium classroom



Healthcare simulation suite



Charles L. Suhr Library – The Suhr Library is a one-story building totaling 10,140 GSF. It features a flexible floorplan including book stacks, reading areas, computer labs, and group study rooms. Its open layout makes it a strong candidate for reuse as a community learning center, innovation lab, or student success hub.

Suhr Library front facade



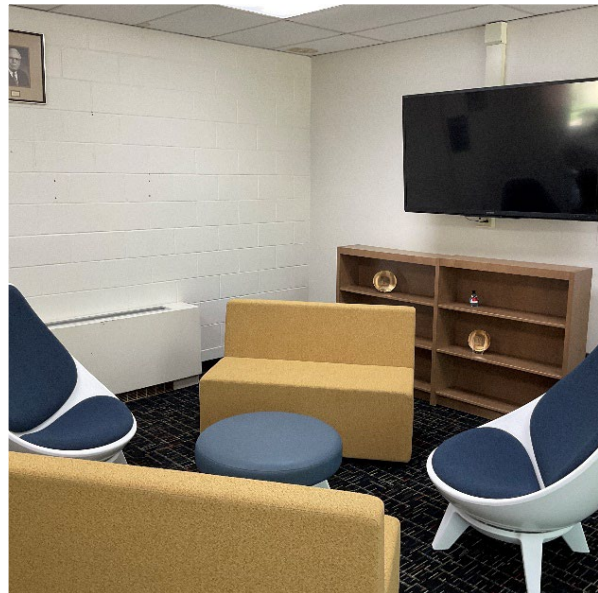
Small modular conference room



Library stacks and workstations



Lounge space



Robert W. Rhoades Center – The Rhoades Center is a large multi-use facility with 18,380 GSF across two levels. It includes a café space, commercial kitchen, gymnasium, locker rooms, exercise spaces, an auditorium with stage, meeting rooms, and informal gathering spaces. It historically served both campus and community functions and is one of the campus's most flexible and high-capacity assets. Rhoades overlooks the popular West End Pond and gazebo.

Rhoades Center front entrance



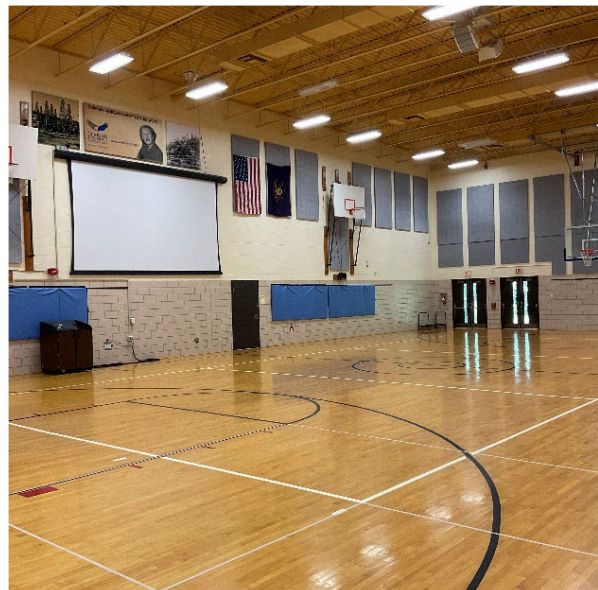
Upstairs cafe and meeting space



Auditorium and theater



Gymnasium



Residence Hall Complex – The residential facilities consist of five interconnected buildings configured into apartment-style units. Together, they contain 27,325 GSF and offer 24 suites with nearly 100 private bedrooms and shared living rooms, kitchenettes, and bathrooms. These two-to-three-story buildings remain in good condition and could be adapted for student housing, short-term workforce lodging, or transitional housing models.

Residence Hall entrances



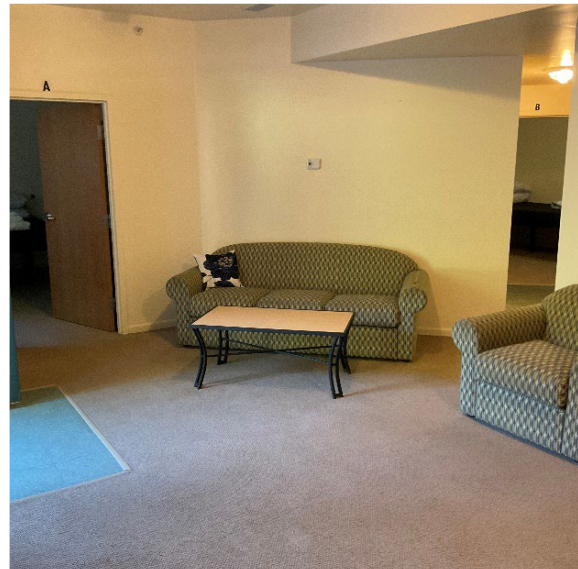
Kitchen



Bedroom



Living and dining room



Venango Catholic – The campus of Venango Catholic High School, acquired by ORA while transitioning Venango campus, nearly double the land size into a 120-acre combined campus (including buildings) and provides access to a commercial kitchen, classrooms, a large multipurpose room and auditorium, and outdoor space that includes a baseball field.

Multipurpose room



Library



Gym/auditorium



Gymnasium



