



RESEARCH, PARTNERSHIPS, AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

UTAH POST-SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL PARTNERS AND
FUTUREREADY UTAH CASE STUDY



THE VALUE OF ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE AND ONGOING COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN EDDS AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL PROVIDERS IS ON DISPLAY IN SOUTHERN UTAH.

Overview

Utah Tech and Southern Utah University (SUU) are a joint U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) University Center Program called the Southern Utah Entrepreneurship Hub. EDA-designated University Centers collaborate with other EDA partners, such as Economic Development Districts (EDDs), by providing expertise, applied research, and technical assistance to support regional economic growth.¹

The Southern Utah Entrepreneurship Hub began a long-term collaborative project in partnership with Snow College and two local EDDs called the FutureReady Utah Worksite (FRUW) Ecosystem Project.² This collaboration is designed to help disadvantaged populations and rural regions thrive through targeted workforce development opportunities.

The joint service area of the two involved EDDs, the Five County Association of Governments (AOG) and Six County AOG,³ is a rural region comprising roughly 40% of Utah's total area, but only 11% of the total population.⁴ The region has been experiencing rapid population growth in recent years; out of the 11 counties in the combined service area, only one experienced more population loss than gain. This in-migration of new residents to Utah is driven primarily by younger populations that have a higher level of educational attainment. However, Travis Kyhl, Executive Director at Six County Association of Governments,² stated that rural populations in Utah still “face a shortage of

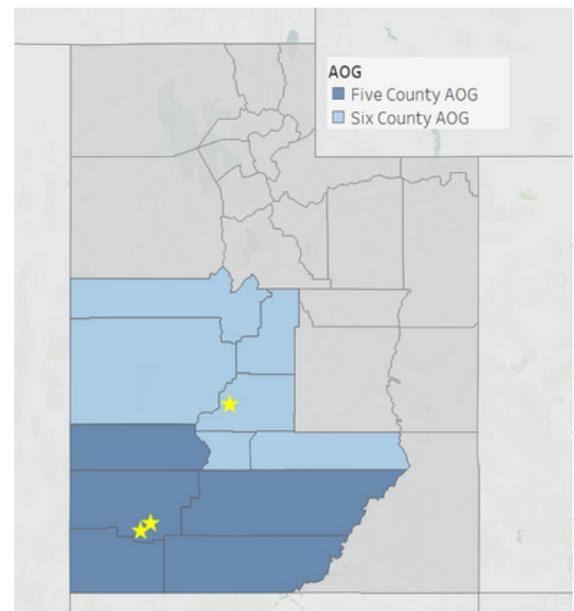


Figure 1: Southern Utah Entrepreneurship Hub Region

¹ Currently, there are 72 EDA University Centers covering 47 states and territories.

<https://www.eda.gov/funding/programs/university-centers>

² Economic Development Districts (EDDs) are multi-jurisdictional entities, commonly composed of multiple counties and which meet EDA's regional distress criteria, that help lead the locally based, regionally driven economic development planning process.

<https://www.eda.gov/about/economic-development-glossary/edd>. In Utah these are referred to as Associations of Governments (AOGs).

³ In July 2024, Six County AOG will be changing its name to R6 Regional Council.

⁴ Population numbers based on 2020 US Census data.

high-wage job opportunities, are experiencing housing shortages, and lack equal access to workforce development opportunities.” The University Center partnership with the EDDs in this region will offer meaningful training opportunities and develop the regional workforce in ways that have not been done in the past to assist with these challenges.

Regional Progress on Research, Partnerships, and Technical Assistance

The University Center began partnering with Five County AOG in 2021 after the in-migration of workers with higher education levels, which was largely fueled by the pandemic, an attraction to rural lifestyles, and an increase in gig and remote work opportunities. These workers had taken many of the higher paying jobs in the area, while many current residents were pushed into lower paying jobs. Due to this dilemma, SUU and Utah Tech began to collaborate on developing micro credentialing programs to help candidates get higher paying jobs. Micro-credentialing is a process for securing skill-based qualifications. Candidates take part in short, self-paced online programs that teach or confirm mastery of a particular skill. After completing the program, candidates receive a digital credential recognizing their acquisition of the skill.

“Some local residents are finding it difficult to afford to continue to live in the communities they love,” said Melynda Thorpe, SUU Executive Director of Community and Workforce Development and the FutureReady Worksite project. “As partners, we’d like to help remedy that with special attention offered to our underrepresented communities.”⁵ However, at times, it can be difficult to have universities cooperate on initiatives involving attracting candidates for programs where the universities do not compete with one another. By framing these collaborative efforts with a focus on the higher purpose of assisting individuals with obtaining jobs, not just focusing on attracting students, the collaboration was able to succeed. Also, recognizing the common interest both universities had for regional economic prosperity was a driver for the universities to collaborate.

After the success of this initial partnership, the Southern Utah Entrepreneurship Hub expanded to include Snow College and Six County AOG to further address these challenges in 2021. Building on the universities’ previous work with micro credentials, partnering with the EDDs led to the universities having greater awareness of the needs of local businesses to better match the training to employment opportunities. This local knowledge and having connections with industries and small businesses within the EDDs assists the universities with creating programming to match demand. The programs and specific credentials now being offered include Advanced 3D Printing, Cloud Computing, Grant Writing, Technical Writing Editor, and recently, Animal Services courses. The online animal services courses, for example, take seven weeks to complete and includes Contemporary Animal Services, Dog Lifesaving, and Cat Lifesaving. When stacked together, the

5 See: <https://www.suu.edu/news/2023/10/eda-grant-award.html>

training participant earns a Contemporary Animal Services Foundations Certificate, providing the opportunity to enter a rapidly developing profession that is tied to social change and community wellness.⁶ Leveraging local EDDs and the area's post-secondary educational institutions also allows for increased capacity and program reach, which is needed to benefit rural communities in the service area. To succeed, a big push for awareness of these training programs is required, as well as offering credentialing options online for students in remote locations, especially those who may lack the ability or flexibility to travel for in-person coursework.

The FutureReady Utah Worksite (FRUW) Ecosystem Project is the next step that has developed out of this partnership and is a key activity of the University Center. FRUW focuses on disadvantaged and rural regions to encourage collaboration between employers and business resource organizations to prepare for growth; therefore, the project takes a broader look at the economic ecosystem in the region and ways to improve worker shortages and disconnects. SUU led a post-pandemic research effort, which detailed the growing regional workforce challenges. Through this research, major challenges discovered in the region included:

1. The extent of employee shortages in the region (or impact of The Great Resignation).⁷
2. Reasons why existing job openings are not being filled.
3. Current skills gaps.
4. How to respond collaboratively to workforce education and training needs.

These findings assisted the university-EDD collaboration in learning what issues need special attention in the future so that the region can thrive. FRUW will elevate skills in strategic target sectors, as designated by the State of Utah, and to support regional economic development strategies by bringing high-wage jobs and opportunities to Southern Utah. Upskilling the workforce is a key part of this; in addition to developing training to reach rural towns, a regional coordination council will also work with the universities involved to create learn-to-work pathways that are affordable, accessible, and often short-term. Reducing skills gaps by promoting micro credentials and training programs will be a key part of this, and learning what the local needs are will strengthen the programs.

6 See: <https://bestfriends.org/about/media/best-friends-animal-society-and-southern-utah-university-announce-new-0>

7 See: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ywe6-jxYSnbLF-IFt1rNdEUJyrXECCZ/view>

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The relationship between the Southern Utah Entrepreneurship Hub and the Five County AOG and Six County AOG demonstrates to other EDDs seeking to partner and better leverage their post-secondary educational partners that stepping back and thinking about what is best for your region, and not just best for your organization, is key to successfully working together. The two EDDs in the region recognized the workforce challenges they were experiencing and came to the conclusion that partnering with area colleges and universities would benefit the region as a whole and create new opportunities for those living there. The relationship showcases the opportunities that may arise for an EDD by partnering with a University Center by having greater access to expertise and resources. Gaining awareness of what both an EDD and a University Center can offer to a community can lead to greater benefits to everyone involved.

Participants in the project also discussed takeaways that can be applied to many similar partnerships:

- Clearly understanding the needs of the region is necessary when implementing multi-county approaches. In Utah, counties are big and can contain both cities and a lot of rural areas. This case illustrates how a multi-county approach was helpful in bringing together the expertise of several regional partners (3 post-secondary institutions, 2 EDDs, and area businesses) to better understand specific local needs and make progress on shared objectives.
- A convener is needed to bring economic developers, educational institutions, and businesses into the same room, as this builds trust, and having regular meetings keeps small issues and misunderstandings from becoming big issues. The EDD can oftentimes act as this convenor. The insights and actions steps shared at these meetings can also be applied to the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) which assists in keeping all involved on the same path to improve the region.
- A final lesson is that each member of the partnership should celebrate each other's successes loudly, as if they were their own, to make sure policymakers understand the progress that is being made, and the necessity of it.
- Partnerships can be challenging because there are multiple different entities involved, trying to work towards the same goals while also trying to balance the priorities and resources of their own organizations. Five County AOG and Six County AOG saw the need in their community for stronger workforce initiatives to improve the local ecosystem. Turning to a University Center with the resources and capacity to focus on these issues, such as the Southern Utah Entrepreneurship Hub, led to a successful collaboration to create new and accessible programming to meet the workforce needs of the region.

The tip sheet was written by the University Economic Development Association.

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