



# RESILIENT AREAS AND EQUITABLE REGIONS

VIRGINIA TECH AND NEW RIVER VALLEY REGIONAL  
COMMISSION CASE STUDY



## *The value of forging meaningful partnerships between EDDs and universities to promote economic resilience and equitable growth is on display in southwestern Virginia's Blue Ridge and Appalachian Mountains.*

### Overview

Virginia Tech's Center for Economic and Community Engagement (CECE), located in Blacksburg, Virginia, provides research and technical assistance services to both rural and urban communities across the state, focusing on technology, talent development, entrepreneurship, and community development.<sup>1</sup> CECE is also a U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) University Center Program, in partnership with Virginia State University, with a focus on advancing regional economic resilience in Virginia.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

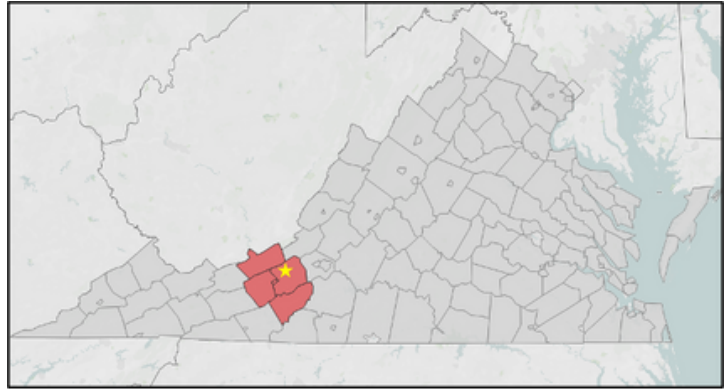


Figure 1: New River Valley (VA) Economic Development District

CECE has had a particularly active and ongoing partnership with the New River Valley Regional Commission (NRVRC), which spans 13 local governments, three higher education institutions, including Virginia Tech, along with Floyd, Giles, Montgomery, and Pulaski County, as well as the City of Radford.<sup>4</sup> NRVRC is one of 13 designated EDDs in Virginia.<sup>5</sup> Over the years, the University Center and EDD have collaborated on several projects together, in particular projects aligned with their work in community health and equitable economic development.

1 CECE is a unit within Virginia Tech (VT), formally the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, a public land-grant research university with its main campus in Blacksburg, Virginia, offering 280 undergraduate and graduate degree programs to its 37,000 students <https://cece.vt.edu/>

2 VSU is a public, comprehensive 1890 Land Grant institution and historically black college/university (HBCU) located 20 minutes south of Richmond in the village of Ettrick. <https://www.vsu.edu/>

3 Currently, there are 72 EDA University Centers covering 47 states and territories. <https://www.eda.gov/funding/programs/university-centers>

4 See: <https://nrvc.org/>

5 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>



Examples of these direct relationships include:

- The Western Virginia Transportation Equipment Manufacturing Initiative, which was awarded a grant by EDA in 2010. This was one of the first projects NRVRC and CECE worked on together, with the goal of increasing the capacity of regional manufacturing and supplier firms through technical assistance.<sup>6</sup>
- Developing components of NRVRC's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). Members of CECE are also on NRVRC's CEDS Committee.
- Collaborated on the EDA Build Back Better Regional Challenge application, which CECE was selected as a finalist for. The proposal focused on transportation and logistics and to strengthen regional collaboration to grow these clusters.<sup>7</sup>
- Received an Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) grant to create a roadmap to address affordable housing in the region.<sup>8</sup>
- Received an EDA Tech Hubs Strategy Development Grant, the Virginia Additive Manufacturing & Applied Materials Strategy Development Consortium.<sup>9</sup>

Resiliency and equity have taken on heightened importance in the region since the COVID-19 pandemic. NRVRC prioritizes disaster preparedness and emergency response planning in its CEDS; despite an overall low risk of being impacted by natural disasters, the region is focused on ensuring that if an unexpected change such as a global pandemic occurs, the region can recover. This includes both resiliency and recovery of industry, as well as recovery of communities impacted by disasters. The region is focused on assisting businesses with sustainability in times of turmoil, as well as prioritizing income inequity, housing instability, and social and physical isolation in its strategies.

## **Regional Progress on Resilience and Equity**

Prioritizing resiliency and community development is a regional focus. This focus is at the forefront of the ARC ARISE initiative. CECE received the grant and partnered with NRVRC to brainstorm on the proposal design. NRVRC played a critical role in convening local partners to align the work. The project will develop a workforce training strategy for industrialized construction that aims to reduce costs, waste, and emissions while addressing housing affordability challenges. Growing Central Appalachia's workforce will promote inclusivity and resiliency in a region that has been faced with economic challenges due to the decline in coal and traditional manufacturing.

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6 See: <https://www.eda.gov/archives/2016/news/press-releases/2010/09/14/517.htm>

7 See: <https://news.vt.edu/articles/2021/12/outreach-cecebbb.html>

8 See: <https://news.vt.edu/articles/2023/10/arcgrant-outreach-cece.html>

9 See: <https://news.vt.edu/articles/2023/10/techhubsgrant-outreach-cece.html>

The partnership between CECE and NRVRC inherently strengthens the resiliency of the Southwest Virginia region by increasing the capacity both organizations have, reducing the duplication of efforts, and advancing towards mutual goals. For instance, CECE focuses much of its capacity on supporting industry and economic diversification activities, recovery-focused planning and technical assistance, and serving historically under-served or under-resourced communities or those with higher concentrations of minority residents, including black and indigenous persons of color. NRVRC conducts work in community and economic development at the local level through workforce programs in target industries, substance use recovery programs, and advancing transportation and affordable housing. By working together, greater capacity is achieved, as the EDD can benefit from the resources and capacity that a university has, but the university can also benefit from the local and regional expertise of the EDD.

**“The shared labor of developing proposals like ARISE or Tech Hubs works out really well. We had adjacent overlapping networks and were able to deliver a big thing by working together.”**

*-John Provo, Executive Director, CECE*

Other benefits and considerations of partnerships between EDDs and universities to promote economic resilience and equitable growth include building trust with not only the local community, but with each other as well. The relationship between CECE and NRVRC has lasted leadership transitions. The current executive director of NRVRC, Kevin Bryd, also worked with the predecessor of the current executive director of

NRVRC, Kevin Bryd, also worked with the predecessor of the current executive director of CECE, John Provo. With CECE’s previous executive director, the relationship was focused more on promoting the university’s overall goals, assisting with traditional economic development studies, and helping with the regional CEDS. As CECE has grown, so has its relationship with NRVRC, evolving into more community-centered projects, as trust was established over time. Strengthening these relationships ensures the partnership can continue even if there are transitions in university or EDD leadership.

To promote economic resilience and equitable growth, the EDD should be a part of university economic development discussions to better understand and include the local perspectives. For this reason, NRVRC advocated for inclusion in the region’s EDA Tech Hub application because the EDD understood the value of their work. The EDD leads the region’s CEDS, so it is also important for an application such as Tech Hubs to include a partner with local knowledge on the region’s economic

**“The ideal model is what we have evolved into. We lean on them for special things and acknowledge they are involved, while we run the meetings. It helps build capacity and confidence that our community has with the EDD and the university.”**

*-Kevin Byrd, Executive Director, NRVRC*

development priorities. NRVRC ultimately led the Tech Hub application, leveraging CECE's experience in the application process. By having effective communication, collaboration, and inclusion in application planning and development, CECE and NRVRC successfully received an EDA Tech Hubs Strategy Development Grant, the Virginia Additive Manufacturing & Applied Materials Strategy Development Consortium. This designation will assist in the resiliency of the region, with a focus on advancing a regional strategy to develop and deploy additive manufacturing system technologies for heavy industry to re-shore manufacturing and strengthen domestic supply chain resilience. Prioritizing this collaboration led to a successful grant application, which overall benefits the region's resiliency.

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

CECE and NRVRC have a strong relationship due to the recognition of what both organizations can bring to the table. CECE states that it is important for universities to see the benefit in the relationship and realize that there is equal benefit to the partnership and that you can accomplish more by working together. Likewise, to build resilient regions, it is necessary to better understand the conditions the region faces; this can be effectively accomplished by collaborating with those working on the ground at an EDD.

For an EDD interested in strengthening a relationship with universities, acknowledging what the university can assist with is important to initially begin that outreach and learn how the relationship can grow. NRVRC believes the ideal model is what they have with CECE, in that it is a mutually beneficial relationship: the EDD is able to rely on the university for special contracts and specific activities where the capacity at the local level may be limited and can leverage the resources the University Center possesses, while the University Center can benefit from the community connections, trust, and local expertise the EDD possesses. In this case as well, with the EDA Tech Hubs, the University Center proved an effective partner to secure funding which the EDD can then help to implement.

Especially in regions that may be disadvantaged or facing challenges related to resiliency and equity, having a trusted entity focused on the community, like NRVRC, that receives expertise from a University Center such as CECE can create an effective model for resource delivery, with overall benefits for both organizations and the region. Developing this relationship, however, is a two-way street where both entities must prioritize communication and trust to effectively work with each other.

## RESOURCES

- [Virginia Tech's Center for Economic and Community Engagement Website](#)
- [New River Valley Regional Commission Website](#)
- [NRVRC CEDS](#)

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**The tip sheet was written by the [University Economic Development Association](#).**

This resource is offered through the Economic Development District Community of Practice (EDD CoP), managed by the NADO Research Foundation to build the capacity of the national network of EDDs. To learn more, visit: [www.nado.org/EDDCoP](http://www.nado.org/EDDCoP). The EDD CoP is made possible through an award from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce (ED22HDQ3070106). The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations in this resource are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Economic Development Administration or the U.S. Department of Commerce.

