



CONNECTING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICTS & HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS:

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON AND NORTHEAST OREGON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT CASE STUDY



Overview

The University of Oregon's Institute for Policy Research and Engagement (IPRE) in the School of Planning, Public Policy, and Management is focused on linking resources at the University of Oregon with local communities to promote sustainable economic development. Located in Eugene, Oregon, IPRE is a U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) University Center (UC). EDA UCs are designated by EDA to provide expertise, applied research, and technical assistance to support regional growth.¹ EDA UCs often collaborate with other EDA partners, such as Economic Development Districts (EDDs), to assist with regional economic development initiatives.² IPRE's operational model leverages EDA UC grant dollars within a larger portfolio of applied, capacity-building activities. This allows IPRE to better support the needs of rural and frontier communities in Oregon. The additional funding provided by EDA assists in elevating the existing capacity of the UC and allows the institute to have a greater reach in the community.

IPRE is focused on providing technical assistance to distressed communities and engages with EDDs, Tribes, local jurisdictions, and state agency partners across Oregon. The Northeast Oregon Economic Development District (NEOEDD), one of the state's 12 EDDs that IPRE works closely with, covers three counties in the most northeastern part of the state. NEOEDD delivers economic development programming and technical assistance, such as grant writing and strategic planning support, to cities, nonprofits, and small businesses. The relationship between IPRE and NEOEDD is ongoing and began even before the University of Oregon received the EDA University Center designation in 2009.

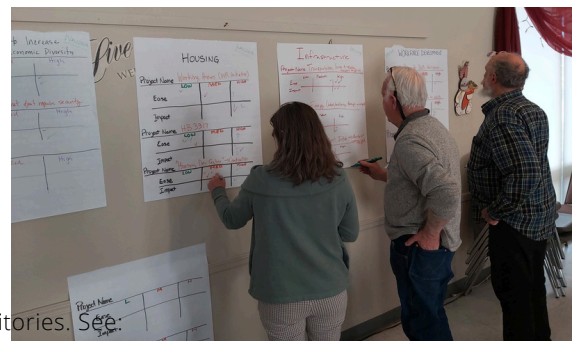
Regional Collaboration and Progress

IPRE has recently collaborated with NEOEDD and other Oregon EDDs on three key initiatives:

- Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)
- Resource Assistance for Rural Environments (RARE) AmeriCorps Program
- Oregon Partnership for Disaster Resilience (OPDR) Program

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)

One of the primary ways IPRE engages with EDDs is by assisting with Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) updates. In 2022-23, IPRE facilitated the update of NEOEDD's 2023-2028 CEDS by conducting the regional analysis for the CEDS and bringing partner



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

agencies into the planning process. IRPE also helped develop metrics for reporting and created a resiliency score framework to evaluate economic resilience at the county level. The framework asks eight questions to evaluate economic resilience and help communities identify where vulnerabilities lie and how to take steps to address impediments to resilience. Including the framework in the CEDS helps the EDD better understand the region's ability to respond to and recover from future shocks or economic setbacks. IPRE developed and piloted this model in the Cascades West Economic Development District using grant funds from FEMA. The goal has been to help regions across the state identify ways to strengthen their economic resiliency.

RARE AmeriCorps Program

Another way IPRE connects to EDDs is through the Resource Assistance for Rural Environments (RARE) AmeriCorps Program. RARE places AmeriCorps members in rural communities for a year of service to work on projects addressing community and economic development, food systems, and environmental and sustainability planning at the local and regional level. Organizations must apply to the program and have a clear set of objectives for a project to take place. RARE is designed to meet communities where they are and be flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of local organizations.

NEOEDD had a RARE position filled by Chantal Ivenso during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following her placement, NEOEDD hired her into a full-time Economic Development Specialist position with the district.

Speaking with Ivenso, she communicated the value of the program in the region stating that she has been able to tap into not only resources at IPRE but the broader university community as well. While in RARE, she provided capacity to help build connections between entrepreneurs and critical



resources. Her responsibilities included coordinating, connecting, and engaging community members to determine COVID-19 impacts and to identify priority projects for recovery efforts and planning. In addition, she assisted with developing and delivering rural economic recovery and resiliency training to small businesses and with improving the region's business ecosystem.

This connection between IPRE and EDDs through the RARE program not only helps provide staff to communities for the program year but also creates long lasting relationships between students and the regions.

“The capacity building piece is important to us and to the district. We are tired of making plans where nothing happens. We don’t need to study the issues; we need to study the actions and how to move projects forward.”

-Aniko Drlik-Muehleck, Project Coordinator, IPRE

As noted on the previous page, many of these RARE placements end up leading to full-time employment, a secondary benefit to the region. In this case, the RARE position was primarily focused on recovery and resiliency, important initiatives to both IPRE and NEOEDD.

Oregon Partnership for Disaster Resilience (OPDR) Program

IPRE also has an established relationship with FEMA through its [Oregon Partnership for Disaster Resilience \(OPDR\) program](#). This program supports communities largely by leveraging [FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Assistance Grants and Cooperating Technical Partners](#) programs. IPRE wrote a proposal to FEMA to better determine how to enhance regional capacity around resiliency. When considering partners for the project, IPRE hoped to work with an organization that had a regional scope, does resiliency work, and has capacity to convene on the ground. NEOEDD's CEDS places an emphasis on economic resiliency by using the resiliency framework, and focuses on efforts like housing, renewable energy, and infrastructure. Since IPRE recently completed the CEDS, the relationship with NEOEDD was already established. This made them a natural partner for this FEMA project.

IPRE then onboarded a RARE member in the community to provide capacity on the ground and to align RARE AmeriCorps project and funding capacity with the OPDR technical expertise and FEMA funding. In short, IPRE wanted to explore ways to develop pathways promoting collaboration that move efforts forward even when organizations and regions may have resource constraints and limited capacity. The project launched in summer 2024, with the intended outcome to have more groups working together on resiliency-related projects, to provide additional capacity to one another, and to codify efforts into planning documents that seek additional funding in the future. This includes FEMA compliant Natural Hazard Mitigation Plans and EDA-funded CEDS. By strengthening coordination on the local level, IPRE is bringing capacity to the region while exploring ways to align these plans more effectively.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Josh Bruce, Associate Director of Applied Research at IPRE and the Director of the UO EDA University Center, shared that it is hard to know when some of these relationships began with EDDs, as they have been so interconnected over time. The RARE program specifically has been a strong line of connection as the EDDs often apply for RARE positions when they have a specific need for a project. That continuous presence and knowing what resources may be available helps maintain the strong partnership between IPRE and EDDs.

NEOEDD has a small staff, which limits the capacity of the organization at times. Having a RARE position in the community can greatly increase the EDD's capacity, while also building stronger connections for students with the community. This professional development component is a major

benefit UCs can provide to the community. Universities have a pool of students ready to enter the workforce, and UCs can play a role to ensure more of those students stay in the state. Taking the time to understand students' professional development goals and having a conversation with partners, such as EDDs, to see where mentorship or employment opportunities are available is a strong role UCs can play in the community to fill workforce and capacity needs.

"I think relationships are key. We have good communication channels, and competence is big for us. They seem to hire people who I feel comfortable reaching out to; there is a good network that they foster well."

-Lisa Dawson, Executive Director, NEOEDD

IPRE emphasized the importance of coming to the conversation with humbleness and a recognition that universities often do not understand the day-to-day, on the ground realities of working in a rural EDD. Often universities may enter conversations thinking they have all the answers. It is important to acknowledge that what works in urban regions may not work in rural regions - all EDDs are not the same. In this case, IPRE is located over 400 miles from NEOEDD. At first this was a worry for the EDD as they were concerned the UO team might not be able to be heavily involved. However, having strong means of communication and setting clear expectations up front was important for the EDD and allowed the relationship to be successful. NEOEDD shared that Oregon is large and diverse, but IPRE does a great job connecting to rural parts of the state. By operating similarly to a university extension program, they ensure that they are not simply oriented to urban areas or the university's surrounding community of Eugene.

One of the challenges is that those working on the ground in EDDs are doing a specific job, and an academic lens is not always particularly useful to meeting those needs. One of the strengths at IPRE is that all the work conducted is applied research, and while IPRE is interested in acknowledging theory and best practices, it offers both university resources and faculty that have experience working on the ground and who understand what it may be like working in a resource-constrained region. Having faculty on staff with this experience helps build trust with the region so they can feel more comfortable using university resources without feeling like there may be a gap in understanding.

Finally, the key for both UCs and EDDs is to listen to one another. Listening to and respecting the community is vital in shaping effective projects and programs. IPRE and the UO EDA UC strive to be involved by showing up and engaging with district colleagues at professional conferences. In addition, IPRE is involved in [Oregon's statewide association of EDDs](#). This helps build connections across the state and provides an opportunity for the UC to hear what EDDs say they need and determine how to offer capacity to fill those gaps, especially in underserved regions of the state. For EDDs, reaching out to a UC and seeing what they can offer is the first step. Since each UC has unique strengths, it is important to explore how their programs align with local priorities and foster collaboration.



RESOURCES

- [University of Oregon Institute for Policy Research and Engagement](#)
- [IPRE's EDA University Center](#)
- [Northeast Oregon Economic Development District Website](#)
- [NEOEDD 2023-2028 CEDS](#)
- [RARE Program](#)

PHOTOS

- **Cover:** RARE 2024-25 cohort (*Photo Credit: RARE AmeriCorps Program*)
- **Page 03:** RARE 2024-25 cohort (*Photo Credit: RARE AmeriCorps Program*)
- **Page 04:** CEDS Workshop – Union County economic development practitioners prioritize projects (*Photo credit: Aniko Drlik-Muehleck*)
- **Page 06:** Downtown Baker City (*Photo credit: Travel Baker County*)

The case study 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. 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.