



CONNECTING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICTS & HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS:

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AND UPPER CUMBERLAND DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT CASE STUDY



Overview

The University of Tennessee's Center for Industrial Services (UT CIS), housed within the university's Institute for Public Service, delivers technical assistance and training across the state of Tennessee, using real-world experience and expertise to provide tools to businesses and communities so that they can grow, succeed, and create good jobs. Headquartered in Nashville, UT CIS is a U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) University Center (UC), designated by EDA to provide expertise, applied research, and technical assistance to support regional growth.¹ In addition to being an EDA UC, UT CIS also houses programs such as the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Manufacturing Extension Partnership, the APEX Accelerator, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Training Institute.

EDA UCs often collaborate with other EDA partners, such as Economic Development Districts (EDDs) and assist them with regional economic development initiatives.² Tennessee has nine EDDs that cover the entire state and UT CIS has worked with all of them. This brief highlights examples of CIS's partnerships with the Tennessee EDDs, in particular its collaboration for over a decade with the Upper Cumberland Development District (UCDD), which has served its 14-county region for over 50 years.

Regional Progress on Research, Partnerships, and Technical Assistance

UT CIS provides technical assistance to communities and research across Tennessee. The Center has worked closely with EDDs on numerous projects and key initiatives include:

- Tennessee Certified Economic Developer (TCED) Program
- Asset-based Planning Initiative
- Tennessee Workforce Development Academy

Tennessee Certified Economic Developer (TCED) Program

The UT CIS administers the Tennessee Certified Economic Developer (TCED) Program, which provides high-quality training and professional development opportunities to Tennessee's economic and community development practitioners, community leaders, and elected officials. The TCED Program provides participants with a broad-based knowledge of economic opportunities and trends, with a focus on economic development in Tennessee. In addition to the coursework, participants complete a Capstone Project to apply knowledge gained in the program to real-world examples. Upon completion of the TCED Program, participants are awarded the Tennessee Certified Economic Developer (TCEcD) designation.

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>

When Mark Farley became Executive Director of UCDD, completing the TCED Program was valuable in gaining a better understanding of how to lead the EDD. Completing courses in strategic planning and leadership development while also finishing the Capstone Project was vital to learn more about economic development in the state of Tennessee. Farley now encourages his staff to complete the program and has become an advocate for the success of this training program.

Farley is also a member of the UT CIS Advisory Board for the TCED Program, which has established a spot for an EDD representative. Not only is Farley able to benefit by continuing to see the evolution of the coursework, but he is able to inform the center of recent changes he is seeing at the local level. Having the EDDs provide perspectives on what topics are relevant to include in the coursework based on trends they are seeing in their regions is important to ensure the program remains relevant to participants. Executive directors at other EDDs have also taught courses in the program, providing them with the opportunity to share their expertise and experience working in the field.

"I think about the partnerships with other communities that I formed when I went through the program and, still today, it is vital for me to do my job. We think economic development is competitive, but the network is always trying to see what we can do to improve Tennessee and better each other as well."

-Mark Farley, Executive Director, UCDD



Photos provided by the Tennessee Certified Economic Development program.

Asset-Based Planning Initiative

Along with the TCED Program, UT CIS has worked with all nine EDDs in Tennessee through a project focused on asset-based planning. The Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development (TNECD) contacted the Center to develop projects centered around capacity building. UT CIS partnered with UT Extension, part of the UT Institute of Agriculture, and all nine EDDs to assist local communities in distressed and at-risk counties across the state with identifying their assets and developing both short-term and long-term goals focused on workforce and economic development. The EDDs served as the convenors, as they had greater familiarity with stakeholders at the local level and were better positioned to invite partners to the events and workshops to participate in the efforts to identify assets. It was discovered that many of the stakeholders had never been in the same room together prior to these workshops and this generated many new collaborative discussions amongst local leaders from across Tennessee. UT CIS facilitated these

discussions and helped identify assets and goals that would better support the many and varied community assets, such as adding better signage along a local river, creating outdoor recreation programs, and more.

Workforce Development Academy

Autumn Derrick, Workforce Development Consultant at UT CIS, was working at an EDD during this asset-based planning initiative. Attending these meetings from the EDD perspective now helps her at UT CIS better understand and provide insights to EDDs on what may be helpful. She shared that it was beneficial to have someone from outside the community come in with a new point of view to assist the community in recognizing their own assets.

Now at UT CIS, Derrick took what she has learned at the EDD and has used it to develop the Tennessee Workforce Development (TNWFD) Academy, launching in early 2025.

Stemming from the success of the Tennessee Certified Economic Development (TNCED) program, and the high demand for workforce-related conversations, the TNWFD Academy will help bridge the gap between workforce and economic development and create coursework specifically catered to workforce development professionals.

Funded through a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), UT CIS is piloting the effort first within the East Tennessee Development District, followed by a second round with the UCDD. The Academy is an 18-credit course over 2.5 days and will include different topics on current workforce development trends and professional development. Participants will receive a certificate after completing the course. This is the only program of its kind in Tennessee where early-stage workforce development professionals can tap into a network to build connections as they start their careers. This program can potentially become a model for workforce professional development courses in the future. Having received input from EDDs across many projects and programs, UT CIS has been able to not only leverage local expertise but also learn what may be useful for community members and stakeholders as they continue developing programs in Tennessee.

“The EDDs are like ‘Switzerland’: they are expert convenors and are neutral, so they can pull people together from all levels in different disciplines for the greater good. The EDDs serving as convenors has helped this initiative be successful.”

-Kim Denton, Economic Development Director, UT CIS



Photos provided by the Tennessee Workforce Development Academy.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

It is important to remember that all universities and EDDs are different - a UC's experience with one EDD may differ significantly from its experience with another, and similarly, an EDD's interactions with various universities in their state can result in distinct experiences. UCDD, for instance, is extremely rural, so strategies, subsequent partnerships, and specific activities with UT CIS must keep that in mind. UCDD also has programs in economic development, housing, grant writing, aging programs, and works with other higher education institutions in the state when warranted, such as Tennessee Tech University and its Small Business Development Center (SBDC). The EDD has wide-ranging knowledge in-house but can lean on UT CIS when needed. Leveraging the expertise and resources from both organizations can offer a mutually beneficial and ongoing reason to maintain the relationship.

Likewise, the consistent leadership at both the EDDs and UT CIS over the years has helped sustain the partnership, even with EDDs located far away from the UT Knoxville campus, where the EDA UC is physically located. While turnover is inevitable, maintaining continuity—whether through staff, processes, or communication—can help preserve and strengthen partnerships over the long term. Also, because EDA has placed EDDs front and center for investments and with continued encouragement to University Centers to make EDDs a primary partner, UT CIS has felt encouraged to continue partnering with EDDs. Continued credibility and awareness from the federal level has reinforced the importance of these partnerships.

It is not always easy to know how to begin collaborations if there is not an existing relationship or history, especially with universities. A higher education institution is not always the easiest to reach out to, being a larger institution with many potential points of contact. Establishing those points of contact and interacting with staff is incredibly important. At the University of Tennessee, the current President was the previous Tennessee Commissioner of Economic and Community Development. The commitment to economic development at the executive level assists the UT University Center with its initiatives. Having staff at the University Center who previously worked for an EDD (like Autumn Derrick) or who previously served as a local economic developer and has built collaborative partnerships across the state (like UT CIS Director Kim Denton), lends greater credibility to the Center's programs, as these staff members have unique experiences and local perspectives that can make programs successful.

Finally, ensuring that EDDs and University Centers include each other in conversations is important. Offering a seat at the table is crucial for fostering meaningful collaboration between EDDs and UCs. This helps build trust, share knowledge, and align goals. For instance, Mark Farley's involvement, from completing the TCED Program to serving on its Advisory Board, while also assisting with search

committees for UT CIS staff and collaborating on projects, exemplifies how mutual engagement can strengthen partnerships and facilitate successful initiatives. Providing opportunities for EDDs to contribute their expertise and perspectives enriches the university's programs, while universities can offer valuable research, resources, and credibility to EDDs. This ongoing, inclusive dialogue ultimately leads to more effective and sustainable partnerships that benefit the entire region.

RESOURCES

- [University of Tennessee Center for Industrial Services](#)
- [Upper Cumberland Development District](#)
- [Tennessee Certified Economic Developer Program](#)
- [Tennessee Workforce Development Academy](#)

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.