



# STRENGTHENING LOCAL CAPACITY AND CONNECTIONS

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS SYSTEM DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE, COOPERATIVE EXTENSION & WESTERN ARKANSAS PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT



## Overview

Headquartered in Little Rock, the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service (UADA Extension) operates statewide through a community-based model with a presence in every county. Local county agents bring grounded knowledge of community needs while connecting residents to university research, data, and technical support. Guided by its land-grant mission, UADA Extension advances three core pillars of technical assistance, applied research, and the dissemination of knowledge and tools.

UADA Extension collaborates with all eight U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) Economic Development Districts (EDDs) designated in Arkansas. One of its strongest and longest-standing partnerships is with the Western Arkansas Planning and Development District (WAPDD), which has served a six-county region since 1966. Over time, this collaboration has matured into a strategic alliance centered on training, data sharing, community facilitation, and capacity building that serves as a locally-rooted model for university-EDD partnerships.

## Regional Progress on Capacity Building and Collaboration

WAPDD and UADA Extension have collaborated on several impactful projects that exemplify how universities and EDDs can align to support community goals. These include offering professional development training, Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) planning, technical assistance and grant writing support, and data access. All of these resources are free of charge to the districts.

### *Team Development through True Colors Training*

Many EDDs have limited capacity for internal professional development. However, when WAPDD leadership recognized the need to reenergize staff and improve internal communication, it worked with UADA Extension to deliver the True Colors training. This program, facilitated by UADA Extension staff, uses personality assessments to help teams understand how communication styles and motivations impact workforce dynamics.

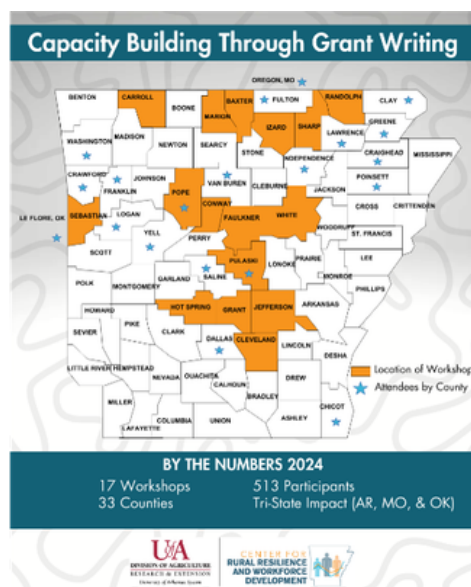


*WAPDD at True Colors Training  
with UADA Extension*

The experience provided collaborative tools and a common language for the team, led to a renewed sense of purpose, and offered a reference to continue to help the team understand how to better support one another. UADA Extension has now provided this training to three Arkansas EDDs, reaching 35 staff members and applying what was learned to improve internal communication to external work. "Our districts told us they needed more professional development internally. True Colors gave them a new way to understand and work with each other," says Brandon Mathews, former UADA Extension Program Associate.

### *CEDS Development and Regional Visioning*

WAPDD also leveraged UADA Extension's facilitation and community engagement skills during the development of the region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDs). Rather than a transactional engagement, UADA Extension staff worked closely with WAPDD's internal team and external partners to deliver a more participatory process, bringing stakeholders together for meaningful dialogue. "It wasn't just creating a checklist. They helped everyone in the room think differently about their own communities," WAPDD Executive Director Sasha Grist noted. The workshops, which included SWOT analyses and community-based conversations, helped participants focus not only on data but on collaborative visioning across jurisdictions.



### *Locations and impact of grant writing workshops*

Post-event surveys from these workshops showed that 97% of participants felt better equipped to find grant funding from state, federal, and private foundations and 100% felt somewhat or very prepared to use SMART Goals in their grant writing approach. Since the workshops, \$723,000 in funding has been awarded to attendees in grant funding. "Yes, it's about writing grants. But more importantly, it's about building partnerships and trust with local organizations. That's the core of our work," said Hunter Goodman, UADA Extension and Director of the Center for Rural Resilience and Workforce Development.

### *Data Access and Visualization*

Access to reliable, relevant data is a recurring challenge for rural and regional organizations. In response, UADA Extension created the Labor Market Observatory with assistance from Heartland Forward to visualize workforce and labor market data at the EDD level. UADA Extension used the local data gathered for WAPDD CEDs development, impact reporting, and strategic planning. This data has been useful not only for internal planning, but for demonstrating regional impact to legislators and funders. These are resources the district would otherwise not have the budget or in-house expertise to create on its own.

### *Technical Assistance and Grant Writing Support*

UADA Extension has also hosted regional training workshops on grant writing, project design, and funding strategies across the state. These free trainings covered everything from SMART Goals to finding and evaluating funding opportunities. For WAPDD, these trainings helped the EDD connect with Arkansas organizations they hadn't previously worked with and gave attendees a better understanding of how to structure successful proposals and identify appropriate funding sources.

## What Makes the Partnership Work

Both WAPDD and UADA Extension cite several reasons for the success of their partnership:

- **Consistent Communication:** Extension staff stay in touch through calls, emails, and regular check-ins. “They reach out frequently and are always looking for ways to help,” said Ashley Garris, WAPDD’s Assistant Executive Director. UADA Extension maintains a Funding, Activity, Community, and Tools (FACTs) Newsletter where success stories are highlighted and new initiatives are announced, which has been helpful to provide quick updates.
- **Deep Community Knowledge:** By working through county agents, UADA Extension can bring local insights into planning efforts and convene relevant stakeholders. The local expertise from EDDs also helps UADA Extension stay better informed about community needs.
- **Mutual Respect for Roles:** UADA Extension offers tools and expertise but acknowledges WAPDD’s leadership role and avoids overstepping. The two entities work alongside each other.
- **Flexibility and Responsiveness:** UADA Extension has been nimble in responding to district needs, from helping facilitate meetings to providing data and staffing support.

Mutual understanding and ongoing communication between UADA Extension and WAPDD has allowed these partners to work through times when there have been capacity challenges. For UADA Extension, shifting perceptions and building trust was an important and necessary challenge to overcome. “Extension hasn’t traditionally been seen as a partner in workforce or economic development. We had to earn trust, but now we’re at the table,” said Brandon Mathews.

## Advice for Other EDDs and Universities

For other EDDs looking to build stronger ties with universities, WAPDD staff emphasize the importance of outreach and relationship building. WAPDD encourages other EDDs to initiate relationships with university partners, even if no formal program is in place. “Go to their office. Tell them what you do. Let them know how you can work together,” said WAPDD’s Grist. Conversely, she encourages universities to be present in the communities they want to serve: “Attend our meetings. Get to know our staff. That’s how real partnerships are built.”

UADA Extension further stressed the role of universities being present in the communities they wish to partner with. Hunter Goodman emphasized, “It’s about showing up. Not just at the university, but in the community. That’s where the relationships start.”



*Sebastian County Capacity Building  
for Grant Writing Training*

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Photos are courtesy of UADA Extension.

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