UNIVERSITIES AS REGIONAL ANCHORS: HOW ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICTS ARE PRIORITIZING HIGHER EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS IN THE CEDS

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Introduction

Economic Development Districts (EDDs) sit at an important position in the regional economic planning infrastructure. Among other responsibilities, they develop and maintain the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), a regional economic development plan which defines the priorities, partnerships, and investments that shape growth in communities across the country.

Higher education institutions play a key role in developing a skilled workforce, fostering innovation, and supporting regional economic growth. While colleges and universities are key strategic partners, their role is often not clearly defined in regional strategic plans. Drawing on data from the State and Local Economic Development Strategies (SLEDS) database, this brief examines how EDDs can better incorporate higher education institutions into their CEDS process and plan.

Why Universities Matter to EDD Strategy

Colleges and universities are important regional assets. They train and educate workers, generate research, anchor neighborhoods, attract talent, and convene stakeholders across sectors. In many communities, especially rural and economically distressed ones, a university or college may be one of the only institutions with both the scale and capacity to sustain long-term economic engagement.

The Talent, Innovation, and Place framework developed by the University Economic Development Association (UEDA) and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) offers a useful organizing lens for how universities contribute to regional competitiveness:

1. **Talent:** Preparing workers across education levels, working with employers, building career pathways.
2. **Innovation:** Conducting applied research, supporting technology transfer and commercialization, managing incubators and accelerators.
3. **Place**: Anchoring neighborhoods, contributing data and analytical capacity to planning, serving as convenors of regional dialogue.

For EDDs, universities can serve as a convenor and partner by bringing together workforce development, applied research, entrepreneurship support, and community-facing programming under one institutional roof. However, universities have historically engaged in regional economic development in fragmented, project-by-project ways, driven more by individual faculty interests or grant opportunities than by deliberate alignment through a shared strategy with regional partners. Initiating these partnerships between EDDs and universities can be a challenge, as knowing who to contact and sustaining these relationships through staff turnover, limited capacity, and shifts in priorities can be difficult.

When an EDD builds a strategically grounded relationship with one or more higher education institutions and documents that partnership in its CEDS, it creates the foundation for sustained, coordinated engagement that can survive leadership turnover and funding cycles. A CEDS that treats universities as a collaborator in plan development and as a core implementation partner signals to institution leadership, to employers, to state and local officials, and to federal funders that the region has considered how higher education connects to its economic future.

Higher Education in the CEDS

Overview of the Dataset

The State and Local Economic Development Strategies (SLEDS) database, managed by the Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness (CREC), inventories and categorizes strategies from state- and EDD-level strategic and CEDS plans across the country. The database includes the specific strategy or goal in the plan, coded by economic development categories, approaches, target populations, and more. The EDD-specific level dataset contains over 18,600 strategies across 398 unique EDDs spanning states that have designated districts and Puerto Rico. *(Note: Since the collection of SLEDS data, more EDDs have been designated – those CEDS are not included in this data. See NADO's EDD map for more information: https://www.nado.org/eddmap/)*

CEDS plans cover a five-year period, and the SLEDS database captures plans predominantly from the 2017–2022 period, with plans ending in 2022-2027. Due to this timeframe, the database predates several significant developments: the passage of the 2024 EDA reauthorization, the de-funding of the EDA University Center program in 2025, and the widespread post-pandemic reorientation of both universities and regional economies. This means the data represents a baseline rather than a picture of current practice. Against this backdrop, the data still provides insight into the level of collaboration between EDDs and universities and the roles they are expected to play.

How Often do CEDS Reference Universities?

EDD CEDS plans mention higher education in different ways:

- 66% of EDDs (263 of 398) include at least one strategy that references universities, colleges, or higher education institutions, including community colleges.
- 42% of EDDs (168 of 398) specifically mention four-year universities.
- Only 29% of EDDs (114 of 398) include a strategy formally coded under the “Higher Education” approach category in the SLEDS database, suggesting that university-related strategies may be embedded in workforce, cluster development, or community support categories rather than elevated as a distinct priority area.

How do EDDs Engage Universities?

When universities are mentioned in CEDS, the engagement largely fell within five broad areas:

1. **Workforce and Talent Development** is by far the most common framing, with more than 330 university-related strategies in workforce or education categories. Language here tends to be aspirational but vague: "Partner with local universities to develop workforce pipelines" or “Align higher education programs with regional industry needs."
2. **Innovation and Applied Research** accounts for roughly 106 strategies involving research, technology adoption, commercialization, or R&D. These tend to be more specific and more geographically anchored, often naming a particular

institution or initiative, such as incubators or technology parks.

3. **Entrepreneurship and Business Development** are in approximately 96 university-related strategies, often linking universities to incubators, startup support, and Small Business Development Centers.
4. **Community and Place-Based Engagement** appears in roughly 220 strategies, ranging from explicit "anchor institution" language to acknowledgement of universities as community stakeholders without defining a substantive role.
5. **Data, Analysis, and Planning Capacity** are mentioned in approximately 46 strategies, a small share that likely understates universities' contributions in regional data, labor market analysis, or planning support.

Several EDDs illustrate what specific university partnership language looks like in practice:

- The **Greater Portland Council of Governments (Maine)** CEDS explicitly names the University of Southern Maine and Southern Maine Community College as foundational partners in a multi-year workforce expansion strategy, tying institutional involvement to measurable credential attainment goals aligned with regional industry needs. The plan also references the university's role in cluster development and professional development programs, treating it as a multi-function partner rather than a single-purpose training provider.
- **Prince William Sound EDD (Alaska)** has the specific priority in its CEDS to strengthen Prince William Sound College, the region’s community college affiliated with the University of Alaska Anchorage. This includes advocating for an enhanced presence with the University of Alaska leadership to bring more resources to the region, leveraging the college’s ties to the university anchor to support regional growth.
- **Flint Hills Regional Council (Kansas)** mentions Kansas State University as one of the economic development partners involved in CEDS planning and offered an applied learning opportunity where graduate students gathered data and developed recommendations for the plan update. Action items included continuing university/college/community partnerships, expanding research, development, and commercialization opportunities, and supporting entrepreneurial-focused programs at Emporia State University.

The Gap Between Mention and Integration

The central finding of this analysis is not that EDDs overlook universities; rather, while two-thirds of CEDS mention higher education in some form, most treat universities as contextual stakeholders rather than strategic, collaborative, and integrated implementation partners. Only 10% of university-related strategies name a specific institution, only 33% mention universities with innovation, cluster development, or technology-based economic development, and only 18% of workforce development strategies mention universities at all, despite universities being among the most significant workforce preparation assets for most regions.

For example, there is a meaningful difference between:
“Support partnerships with local colleges and universities to build workforce pipelines.”
and:
“Partner with [University] to co-design a program in advanced manufacturing, with local employer validation to place 200 credentialed workers by 2030, tied to the region’s priority industry cluster in precision manufacturing.”

Vague partnership language makes it harder to have intentional and deliberate actions and does not provide EDDs a basis for assessing whether the partnership delivered at the end of the planning cycle. Several structural factors may contribute to this gap:

1. **Universities may not be at the CEDS planning table:** Many EDDs do involve higher education institutions in the planning process, but not consistently and perhaps not at a strategic level.
2. **University engagement is often siloed by function:** Workforce development offices, research commercialization units, business extension programs, economic development programs, and community engagement offices all operate largely independently within universities, making it difficult for EDDs to always engage strategically.
3. **CEDS planning cycles and university planning cycles don't always align:** Universities operate on academic and budget cycles that may not match the five-year CEDS cycle. Without deliberate coordination, universities may mistakenly not capitalize on opportunities to contribute meaningfully to regional strategy formation.

4. **There has not been a clear framework for what a university-EDD partnership should look like:** Unlike the relatively well-defined relationship between EDDs and Workforce Development Boards or between EDDs and their state economic development agencies, the EDD-university relationship has lacked a shared template for roles, responsibilities, and mutual accountability.

A Path Forward: Universities as Strategic Partners in Regional CEDS

The data points to a gap between how often universities are mentioned and how specifically their role is defined. The following are practical recommendations for EDDs to strengthen these partnerships through the CEDS process:

Before the next CEDS update:

- Convene a conversation with universities in the region to discuss alignment between the institution's economic engagement priorities and the EDD's regional strategy. If there is uncertainty on who to contact, follow-up and determine if the university has an economic development, community engagement, or strategic partnerships office.
- Ask the university to identify specific areas where it could make a contribution to the CEDS and document these commitments as part of the planning process.
- Review existing university programs (research, extension, entrepreneurship, etc.) to identify what is already happening and where CEDS alignment could strengthen or scale these efforts.

During the CEDS process:

- Include higher education representatives in the CEDS steering committee.
- Emphasize the role of higher education in regional competitiveness in the CEDS, not just in the workforce section but integrated across relevant priority areas.
- Define strategies and action items that name institutions, describe commitments, and include expected outcomes.

For ongoing CEDS implementation:

- Establish at least an annual check-in with university partners to assess progress.
- Celebrate and communicate examples of university-EDD collaboration that produce measurable regional outcomes.
- Engage with UEDA and the *NADO EDD Community of Practice* to share and learn from examples of strong EDD-university partnerships.

Conclusion

The SLEDS data shows that most EDDs recognize the value of higher education in regional economic development. The majority of CEDS mention higher education in some form, but the data also demonstrates that recognition and integration are not the same thing: fewer than half specifically engage four-year universities, only one in three connects these institutions to innovation or cluster priorities, and just one in 10 university-related strategies name a specific institution. Closing that gap does not require a new program or a major planning overhaul; it starts with EDDs inviting universities to the CEDS table, defining how institutions can contribute, and documenting those commitments in the process and ultimate CEDS plan.

As EDDs update their CEDS in the coming years, stronger university engagement presents an opportunity to better align talent, innovation, and place-based development strategies in support of long-term regional competitiveness. Moving beyond aspirational partnership language toward clearly defined roles, measurable commitments, and ongoing intentional collaboration can position universities as long-term regional anchors and accountable implementation partners in advancing regional economic prosperity.

Appendix: Data Notes and Methodology

The analysis in this report draws on the EDD-specific tab of the SLEDS (State and Local Economic Development Strategies) database, maintained by the Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness (CREC). The dataset contains 18,600 strategy-level entries from 398 unique EDDs.

Higher education-related strategies were identified through keyword searches across the Strategy Summary, Goal, Economic Development Category, and Approach fields, using terms including: university, universities, higher education, four-year, college, and related variants. Entries coded under the formal "Higher Education" approach category were also included. The analysis distinguishes between broad higher education references (including community colleges) and university-specific references.

Because the SLEDS database reflects plans as they existed at time of coding (predominantly 2017–2022), the data reflects past CEDS and should not be read as descriptions of current EDD-university relationships. EDDs update their CEDS on rolling five-year cycles, and many plans in the dataset have since been revised or replaced and are not yet updated in the data.

Percentages are calculated against the total of 398 unique EDDs in the dataset. Some strategies appear in multiple categories (ex., a university workforce strategy may be coded under both Workforce Development and Education).

A Note on Regional Variation and University Presence

Not every EDD has a four-year university within its boundaries. Some are served by institutions located nearby but outside the district, while others may have limited access to any post-secondary institution beyond a community college or technical school. An EDD that does not reference a university in its CEDS may reflect the absence of a nearby institution as much as a lack of strategic intent. Similarly, the nature of available institutions shapes what partnership looks like. A land-grant university with a statewide extension network offers different assets than a small regional campus, and CEDS strategies should reflect those differences rather than apply a single template.

This analysis does not control for institutional availability, and comparisons across EDDs should be read with that in mind. Future analysis that cross-references EDD geography with the location of higher education institutions would provide a clearer picture of where genuine engagement gaps exist versus where geographic constraints are the primary factor.

Cover image courtesy of UEDA and the University of Tennessee Center for Industrial Services.

This report was written by the University Economic Development Association (UEDA), the national association dedicated to advancing the role of universities as partners in regional economic development. UEDA serves economic development practitioners at colleges and universities across the country and works to strengthen the connections between higher education institutions and the regions they serve.

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