



Wisconsin's Policy Academy Process

Fostering Regional Collaboration Toward Rural Prosperity

Executive Summary

On February 17th, 2023, The Wisconsin Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) applied to join the Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness (CREC) Policy Academy. Wisconsin's policy academy process is titled *Aligning Strategies Toward Rural Prosperity in Wisconsin*, in which the state lays out a compelling vision for rural development as the centerpiece of state-EDD collaboration.

How Did the Academy Drive Improvement in Alignment?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that Wisconsin's economic development ecosystem was fractured and misaligned. Basic components of economic wellbeing like childcare, education, and internet access were either absent or faulty in rural areas- further exacerbating the already dire impacts of the virus. In reaction to this, Wisconsin developed a report, *Wisconsin Tomorrow: Building an Economy for All*, which outlined a strategy to recover from the pandemic. This report, combined with perspectives from rural and tribal communities, made it clear that the first step on the road to recovery was increased alignment of all economic development organizations, state, regional, and local.

Wisconsin's entrance into the policy academy came at a critical time. The application process and consequent meetings brought the ORP, EDDs, tribal nations, and the University Economic Development Center into one room to discuss how best to nurture cooperation. Through meetings and activities, the disparate groups in the Core and Home teams communicated their shared challenges and discussed how they might address them via improved collaboration and strategic alignment. The result of Wisconsin's Policy Academy process can be summarized in four broad outcomes:

- 1) **The state and EDDs are set to meet quarterly to discuss strategic and operational alignment around rural development efforts.**
- 2) **EDDs and REDOs are beginning to map out improved partnerships and consistent channels of communication.**
- 3) **Both the Home and Core teams plan to participate in ongoing communities of practice.**
- 4) **The state is considering program modifications that incentivize greater alignment with its EDDs**

What was Key to Wisconsin's Success?

Wisconsin's success depended on developing relationships among a diverse array of strategic partners to coordinate collective economic development action. The home team included WEDC's Office of Rural Prosperity, University of Wisconsin Extension, nine EDDs, nine REDOs, a representative for the state's twelve tribal nations, and other rural stakeholders such as the Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative. The first step was simply to establish these relationships by bringing all partners to the same table. The next step involved building a formal system through which partners could identify common economic development challenges, collaborate on them by pooling capacity, and apply for external funding opportunities. Long-term success depends on maintaining this system to strengthen stakeholders' relationships to achieve sustained rural economic development.

Before the Academy

State – EDD Misalignment

Before submitting their application to the Policy Academy, the Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) was aware of several areas of misalignment between the state and local economic development organizations. In general, state and regional agencies were siloed- moving in parallel, but not in unison. Interactions between the state and Economic Development Districts (EDDs) were informal, which led to duplication of efforts and reinforced misalignment.

Moreover, interlocal relationships were disorganized, in part, because of the structure of the local economic development network. Wisconsin's regional economic development agencies are split into two groups: Regional Economic Development Organizations (REDOs) and Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs). A portion of local misalignment could be attributed to these two sets of organizations which have vaguely analogous competencies but are operationally and legally distinct.

Policy Academy Proposal

In this context, the Office of Rural Prosperity at the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) put together an application for the CREC Policy Academy to better align their state, local, and interlocal economic development programs. The state recognized that local organizations like RPCs, REDOs, and tribal nations, while being poorly aligned, also lacked capacity and that economic challenges would have an outsized impact on their programs. The pandemic further exacerbated this lack of collaboration- exposing weaknesses across several sectors including childcare, broadband, and small business economic resilience.

Thus, Wisconsin's application focused on a series of key tenets that aim to advance the economic well-being of all Wisconsinites:

- 1) Creating a foundation of financial stability to reinforce financial literacy and resiliency,
- 2) Increasing education to prepare citizens for careers and adapt to economic changes,
- 3) Reducing disparities in access to healthcare,
- 4) Reinforcing community and economic infrastructure like schools and libraries,
- 5) And ensuring environmental sustainability and push innovation and entrepreneurship in sustainable business.

Due to their acute economic precarity, Wisconsin developed these foci with a particular emphasis on smaller and rural communities. To that end, a major component of Wisconsin's application was to

align rural prosperity strategies and to develop a “whole-of government” approach to rural development.

To assist rural communities, the application sets out a handful of rural prosperity objectives:

- Align state and regional strategic plans toward rural prosperity
- Create a feedback loop to share innovative solutions to ongoing challenges and develop partnerships between local organizations
- Identify collaborative projects where alignment of strategic initiatives exists, to advance economic well-being
- Focusing investment on economic well-being
- Creating innovative solutions and removing barriers to participation in the economy

Leaders in Application Development

In 2020, Wisconsin governor Tony Evers created the [Blue-Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity](#) to identify current and future economic challenges facing rural Wisconsin. The panel created the *Rural Voices for Prosperity: A Report of the Governor’s Blue-Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity*. To ensure that the economic needs of rural Wisconsin communities were being met through the policy academy, the Office of Rural Prosperity was charged with managing application development and leading the academy process for Wisconsin.

ORP’s existing relationships with rural and tribal communities also made it an ideal leader to bring these communities together and develop greater alignment between the state and local partners.

The Core and Home Team

Members

Core Team Members:

- **Beth Haskovec**- Director, Office of Rural Prosperity
- **Troy Maggied**- Executive Director, Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission
- **Kristin Runge**- Community Development Specialist – UW-Madison Division of Extension
- **Diane House**; Economic Development Program Director; Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, Inc.

Home Team Members:

- **Sydney Swan**- Economic Development Director- Bay Lake Regional Planning Commission
- **Dennis Lawrence**- Executive Director – North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission
- **Craig Moser**- Deputy Director- East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission
- **Sheldon Johnson**- Director, NWRPC and Visions Northwest
- **Scott Allen**- Executive Director- West Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission
- **Jon Bingol**- Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission
- **Kietra Olson**- Rural Initiatives Manager, Office of Rural Prosperity, State of Wisconsin
- **Marie Barry**, Director, Community and Economic Development, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative
- **Tom Barron**, Economic Development Representative at U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration

Team Member Identification

Wisconsin identified team members which had similar economic priorities focused on key tenets ([discussed above](#)) and which would benefit from greater alignment and cooperation. Wisconsin consulted with their regional partners and reviewed their planning documents to create the Core and Home teams with the long-term goal of building a unified approach to rural prosperity. To that end,

Wisconsin included RPCs (EDDs), REDOs, tribal nations, and other economic development stakeholders on both teams.

Overall, organizations were happy to work with the ORP to apply for the Academy and committed to continued collaboration pending acceptance. Home and Core team meetings were well attended, indicating broad-based support for the effort.

Wisconsin's Policy Academy Strategy

Vision

In April of 2023, CREC hosted the Policy Academy kickoff meeting, to help states begin to build the vision for their projects. To produce their vision, the Wisconsin Core Team first had to frame the challenges in their state and develop a series of solution statements.

Naming the challenges to alignment in Wisconsin proved straightforward as the Policy Academy application had already outlined key roadblocks and fissures in rural programming. The Team was able to immediately name the primary challenge to rural prosperity: multiple regions and agencies working toward similar goals without cross communication or collaboration. This, in turn, led to a local lack of capacity as organizations duplicated efforts without realizing it and spread staff time thinly over several projects which could be better handled by others with a relative advantage.

The problem was especially acute in tribal communities as there was a lack of trust both amongst tribes and between tribes and state level organizations. There was also significant resource disparity between tribes with some tribes marshalling full economic development departments and others administering all programs through one council. The team pointed out that, despite disparate needs, all nine tribes, split into noncontiguous territories, had to develop one CEDS plan. The team

acknowledged that a lack of capacity, inequality, and uncoordinated CEDS development all contributed to misalignment between tribes and with the state in economic development programs.

At the regional level, the team noted that economic development organizations, REDOs and RPCs, did not align with state priorities, nor did they align with one another. Much of this came from a lack of clear state expectations for both REDOs and RPCs. Moreover, regional EDOs in Wisconsin often share geography- meaning that two organizations without distinct economic development objectives were operating in the same region, offering parallel programs, without significant communication or alignment.

At the state, there were further struggles with coordination. ORP had good communication with regional leadership but at times lacked the visibility to effectively advocate for strategic action. ORP's relatively new status in WEDC (the office was created in 2020) also meant that it was still in the process of defining a clear role in relation to other stakeholders engaged in rural development. Fortunately, the Policy Academy served as an important vehicle through which ORP was able to better define its role as a coordinator and facilitator in the state's fragmented rural development ecosystem.

Solutions

After identifying challenges, the team created a series of solutions which could guide their creation of a vision statement. The proposed solutions were:

- Use existing communication channels to nurture alignment and increase the amount of strategic conversations
- Develop ways to incentivize organizations to coordinate their activities—especially if they cover the same geographic area
- Improve funding capacity by allowing WEDC to make grants to regional partners
- Increase coordination with tribes both at the state and regional levels

- Institutionalize relationships to ensure sustainable cooperation in the long-term

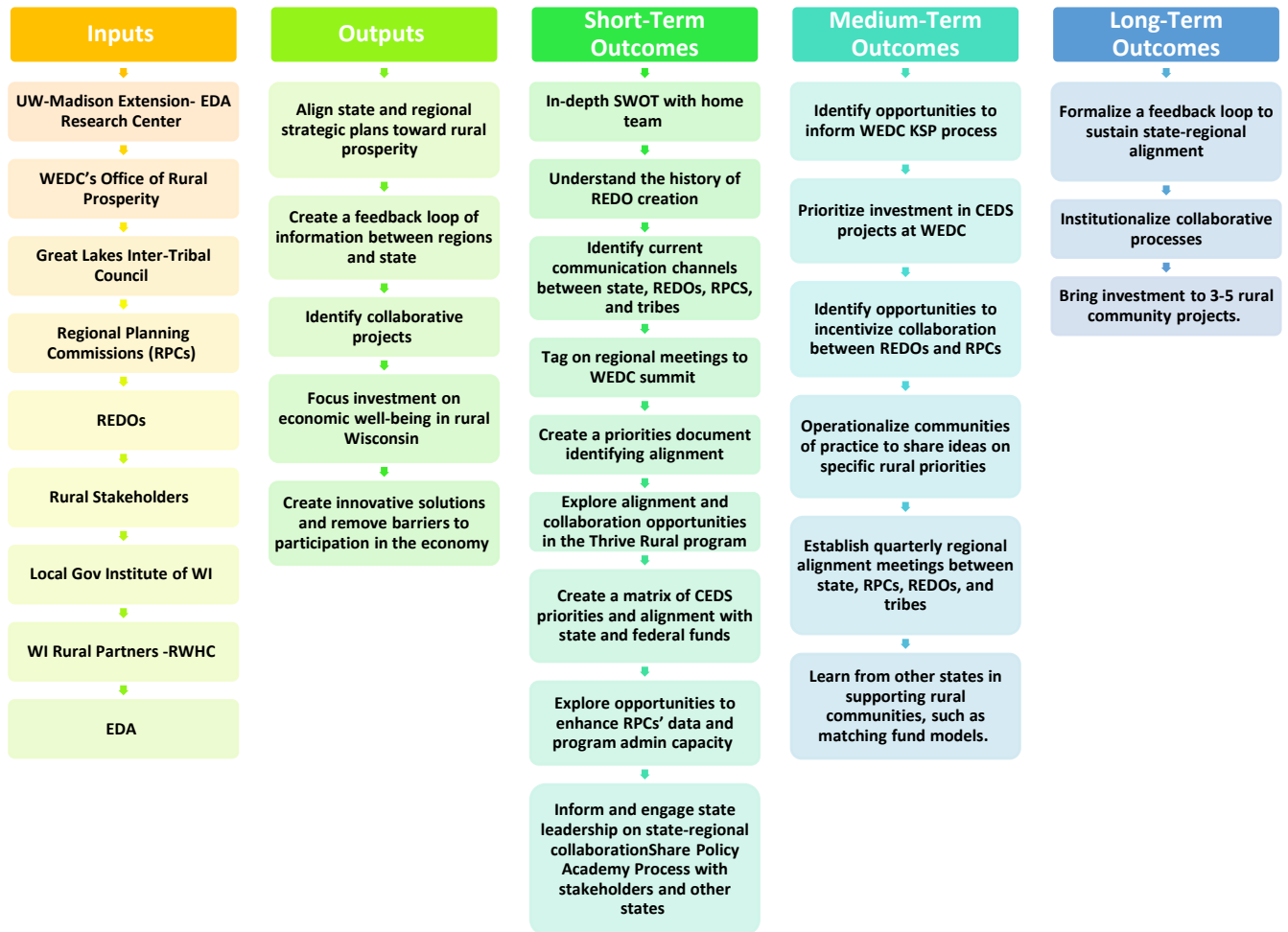
Once the team had proposed solutions, they were able to produce the following vision statement:

Wisconsin Policy Academy Vision:

There is a commitment to efficiently collaborate between the state, regions, tribes, and universities toward economic well-being

Action Plan

As part of the visioning process, the team created a logic model to map out the steps to success by the metrics they had set for themselves and to organize their efforts:



Development

Both the vision statement and logic model were developed through an iterative set of discussions. While brainstorming and trial and error sometimes led to “dead ends”, the Core and Home Teams eventually established a set of priorities that were reasonable to accomplish during the academy.

Wisconsin's Policy Academy Timeline

Over the course of the academy, CREC met with both the Home and Core Teams several times in person. Each meeting was designed with specific goals in mind and culminated in meaningful steps forward in Wisconsin's academy process. Below are the meeting dates and goals.

In-Person Convenings of All Core Teams

Washington D.C., April 27th and 28th: This meeting was used to kick off the academy process by identifying areas of misalignment and roadblocks to further cooperation. The meeting concluded with the development of Wisconsin's vision statement and plans for future work.

Cleveland, OH, November 6th and 7th: The Cleveland meeting was a chance for the Wisconsin team to regroup and demonstrate the accomplishments of the six months since the beginning of the academy.

Wisconsin presented the following accomplishments with the other academy teams:

- Feedback loop design, whereby the CEDS process and annual listening sessions/surveys would lead to collective priorities and strategies to be implemented and analyzed.
- Identification of common priorities like rural housing, childcare, workforce attraction and retention, and small business development in rural communities.
- Plans for a process map and a blueprint to institutionalize relationships and the feedback loop process.

Home Team Meetings / CREC Site Visit

Stevens Point, WI, August 24th: At this in-person meeting facilitated by CREC staff, the Core team and the RPCs discussed results from a county-level survey, an initial strategy toward alignment, relationships between key strategic partners, and next steps. More specifically, discussions focused on the following three themes and accompanying questions:

1. Survey Results and Strategy: Counties economic development agencies consistently cited childcare, housing, and workforce as their major challenges. They reported only moderate success in receiving external funds in the past and significant difficulty securing matching funds when applying. How can the policy academy address these challenges?
2. Relationship Building: Most RPCs and REDOs share similar geographic boundaries. What function does each organization serve and how can policy academy improve collaboration? Tribes have historically been excluded from economic development efforts. How do RPCs engage with them and sustain long-term collaboration?
3. Brainstorming: Rural RPCs cite similar economic development challenges. Can they and WEDC pool capacity to jointly apply for federal, state, and non-profit funding opportunities? RPCs all conduct their CEDS on different cycles. Does it make sense to follow the same five-year cycle and initiate a statewide CEDS to increase alignment? Several members from the Colorado Core Team joined virtually to share their process for aligning the timing of CEDS development.

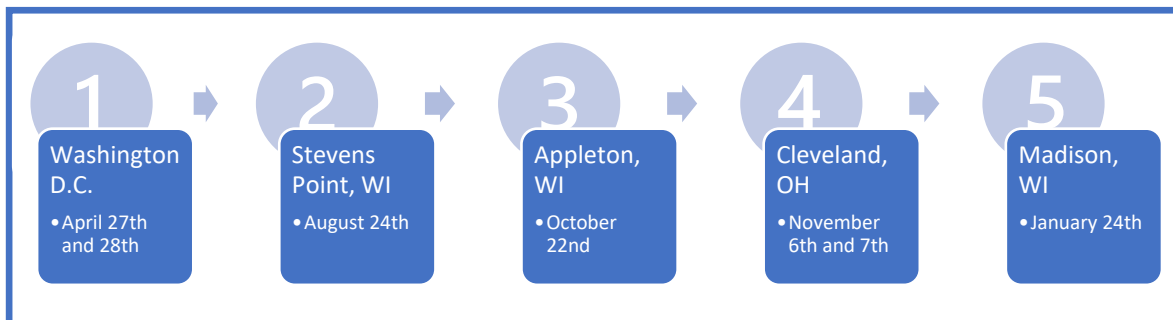
Appleton, WI, October 22nd: The Home Team, RPCs, REDOs, and other regional partners met during the WEDC Summit to learn about each other's organizations. The meeting focused on two themes that prepared stakeholders to propose a new system for regional collaboration.

1. EDD-REDO Collaboration – Those serving similar geographies paired together in an exercise to identify stakeholders, services, and revenue streams.
2. Economic Development Priorities – The state and the EDDs shared the issues they are actively working on ranging from housing to childcare to workforce to broadband.

Madison, WI, January 24th: During this site visit, the Core Team and CREC staff co-presented the updated policy academy progress report to WEDC leadership, including Missy Hughes (WEDC CEO) and Sam Ridders (WEDC COO). The presentation covered the team’s most recent accomplishments and next steps, including three proposed changes to bolster the academy effort:

1. Regional Collaboration: Align state, tribal, and regional strategic plans toward rural prosperity
2. Enhanced Communication Channels: Create a feedback loop of information between regional and statewide partners
3. Targeted Investment: Identify collaborative projects for state and federal funding that provide focused investment toward economic well-being in rural Wisconsin

Timeline Overview



Outcomes and Deliverables

The Wisconsin team achieved many goals through the academy process. While there is much work still to do, four stand out deliverables have been accomplished by the team:

1. The commitment by the state, EDDs, universities, and tribal representatives to meet every quarter to discuss aligning rural development efforts around specific topics (e.g., rural housing, childcare, etc.)
2. Identification of collective priorities of the state, RPCS, REDOs, tribal nations, and university economic development center to guide future strategies and programs
3. Collaboration between RPCs and REDOs to identify commonalities across services, customers, and revenue streams—leading to further alignment on projects and less duplication of effort
4. Development of five communities of practice surrounding key issues which will facilitate resource sharing, connections to technical experts, and opportunities for peer learning and workshopping projects and ideas

Overall, the work completed by the Wisconsin Core and Home Teams is noticeably improving cross-organization communication and collaboration.

Obstacles and Challenges

While Wisconsin's Policy Academy process was an overall success, the team faced and overcame a series of challenges:

1. At the time of application, ORP was a relatively new organization, and not all stakeholders understood its mission or role within the state's economic development ecosystem. Since the beginning of the academy, ORP has effectively marketed its work within WEDC, to other state agencies, and throughout the network of local organizations that comprise Wisconsin's rural development ecosystem.
2. RPCs and REDOs often serve common geographies but usually don't communicate or coordinate with each other. Broadly speaking, RPCs focus on planning and REDOs concentrate on business attraction. Increasing collaboration between both organizations would expand local capacity and strengthen regional economic development.
3. From the beginning, members of both the Home and Core teams made it clear that lack of capacity in the economic development ecosystem was a major challenge. In part, this problem was a consequence of funding shortfalls and a lack of knowledge of federal opportunities. To ameliorate this problem, ORP set out to create a federal and state grant program tracker, which will help disseminate knowledge about federal opportunities across EDOs. Moreover, increased alignment between REDOs and RPCs could mean more holistic applications to federal programs- further bolstering the usefulness of the tracker.

Lessons Learned

The following are lessons learned that the Wisconsin Team will leverage to continue nurturing further alignment:

1. Policy and process are both equally important: Much of Wisconsin's Policy Academy process has been dedicated to building relationships, sharing information, and deliberating about collaboration opportunities. While this process has at times been slower and less straightforward than some team members would have liked, it strengthened a network whose core principles revolve around consensus building and open dialogue. Furthermore, this "bottom-up" process served as the first step toward policy change, as concerted action among Core and Home team members raised greater awareness, especially from WEDC leadership, about the need for alignment.
2. High-level buy in is vital for success: Effective alignment between a state and its EDDs require support and commitment from state leadership. In Wisconsin's case, securing buy-in from WEDC leadership is necessary to ensure both that 1) regional organizations are receiving programs and grants which match their competencies and 2) to bolster the state and federal access to (and awareness of) grant funding.
3. Institutionalized relationships are key: Early in the academy process, it was clear that greater alignment between organizations in the past was mediated by strong personalities and personal relationships between leaders. However, once these leaders left, those inter-organization relationships deteriorated. To ensure future success, the Wisconsin team recognized that relationships between organizations must be primarily institutional to prevent future de-alignment.

Sustainability

While the connections and processes established during the academy are vital, it is perhaps more important that states *sustain* these after the academy is concluded. To that end, the Wisconsin team has developed several practices to ensure that this effort will continue to bolster alignment, far after the academy has come to a close.

Quarterly Regional Strategy Sessions

In an effort to keep communication flowing and to maintain an emphasis on alignment between state and local efforts, Wisconsin has developed a schedule of quarterly meetings to keep state and regional leaders informed. These strategy sessions are part of already existing meetings- greatly reducing the administrative load of attendance. The meeting schedule is as follows:

- January/February: WEDA Governor's Conference on Economic Development
- April/May: Wisconsin Rural Partners Annual Summit
- July: State Convened Interagency Meeting
- September/October: WEDC Economic Summit

Rural Communities of Practice

As mentioned previously, the Wisconsin team has also developed five rural communities of practice surrounding key issues in rural economic development as identified in the academy. These communities will share information and create synergies between organizations which may not otherwise communicate. The five topics are:

- Housing
- Small Business
- Sustainable Energy Projects/Infrastructure
- Childcare
- Workforce Development

Recommendations for Improved Regional Alignment

While work on formalizing REDO and RPC relationships is not yet final, the recommendations presented to WEDC leadership represent Wisconsin's future vision for REDO and RPC alignment. These recommendations include:

- Annual REDO and RPC/EDD work summits
- Invite RPC/EDDs to monthly calls
- Require RPC/EDD presence on REDO boards
- Provide "points" for WEDC grants that implement regional CEDS
- Geographic alignment and opportunities identified to use WEDC programs to better support alignment with EDDs
- Fund RPC/EDD services that are needed by, or complementary to, REDO services

It is clear through the preceding examples that the Wisconsin team has made a committed effort to ensure the sustainability of their work during the academy. As the team pursues further alignment, they will leverage the new relationships they have developed to build on their many successes and to accomplish their vision of delivering economic well-being to all rural and tribal communities in Wisconsin.