

CREC Policy Academy:

*A Learning Cohort Designed to Improve Regional Competitiveness by
Enhancing State and Local Alignment Strategies*

June 2024

Introduction

States and regions are increasingly recognizing the value and importance of fostering strategic alignment among economic development initiatives. The push for such alignment in economic development strategies between state and local government agencies and stakeholders stems from a growing understanding that when long-term strategies across various levels of government and organizations are harmonized, the benefits are multifaceted and substantial.¹ These benefits range from enhanced economic outcomes to a more robust preparedness for future economic disruptions.

The U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) provided funding to the Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness (CREC) to improve alignment between state economic development agencies and local partners, especially EDA-designated Economic Development Districts (EDDs). The three-year project began in 2021 and included research initiatives, educational activities, and technical assistance – all designed to assist states and EDDs to understand the value of strategic alignment and drive improved collaboration and cooperation amongst partners.²

Key Academy Takeaways

- It is necessary to be intentional about relationship building.
- Cultural change is needed for sustainability.
- The work is “simple” – but “simple” is not “easy.”
- High-level buy-in is vital but staff buy-in is essential for long-term success.

One major technical assistance element of the EDA project was a Policy Academy which established a nine-month cohort learning process with participants from Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Participants embarked on a process to better align strategies and actions between state leaders, EDDs, and other state and local stakeholders. Teams implemented practices and developed strategies that ensured the long-term sustainability of their new alignment foundation long past the Academy’s conclusion. By working together, sharing objectives, and leveraging combined resources, states and regions learned that they could achieve better programmatic and economic outcomes. The goal of the learning cohort was a united, efficient approach to economic development activities by encouraging teams to collaborate and develop their own unique approaches to strategic alignment. This short report reviews team activities, highlights lessons learned, offers final thoughts on the Academy process, and applying the Academy to other environments.

Team Activities

Given the varying operating and cultural conditions in each state, all teams began at different starting points with varying levels of resources and partnerships, which led to diverse approaches to alignment throughout the Policy Academy process. When teams initially set out on this process after the CREC Kick-Off Meeting in April 2023, each began discussing their unique visions:

¹ Alignment can be demonstrated through similar strategies, policies and initiatives. Coordination, communication, and collaboration are important actions that drive alignment.

²See the [State-Local Alignment](#) page on the State Economic Development Executives website (stateeconomicdevelopment.org) for more information about this project and the products available for review.

Colorado	Establish and promote a framework between EDDs, governmental and non-governmental agencies, and other key workforce and economic development stakeholders to guide enhanced communication, collaboration, and alignment of economic development strategies and actions within Colorado.
Idaho	<i>(What)</i> To formalize and institutionalize collaborative regional and state planning processes... <i>(Why)</i> ... to create an inclusive economic development community within the state.
Kansas	Create dynamic, inclusive, and actionable economic development strategies that align each region's assets to grow vibrant communities, enhance our competitive edge, and accelerate economic prosperity throughout the state.
Louisiana	To develop an inclusive state economic development strategic plan and formalize and institutionalize our collaborative regional and state planning processes.
Michigan	To create a sustainable long-term commitment to unifying shared economic development priorities among the three regional economic development districts in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and the Michigan Economic Development Corporation in order to achieve greater shared success in economic development across the entire region.
Wisconsin	There is a commitment to efficiently collaborate between the state, regions, Tribes, and universities toward economic well-being.


Each team developed their own approach to develop their vision statements, with notable differences across the six teams which highlighted the varying team goals. Wisconsin and Colorado prioritized partner development and collaboration, while teams like Idaho, Kansas, and Louisiana wished to focus on inclusive economic development strategies. Michigan differed from the other teams in that the Policy Academy was initially focused within the Upper Peninsula, and in the future will be spread across the state.

Following the vision creation, each team created an Action Plan with priority goals to guide the efforts and achieve the vision. These goals included both short- and long-term plans to progress activities:




Colorado

1. Develop an internal and external communication strategy including network mapping to leverage existing relationships.
2. Develop an MOU between economic development stakeholders to identify and leverage strengths, create efficiencies, and increase collaboration.
3. Identify resources needed to amplify and sustain these efforts for now and well into the future.
4. Identify next steps for after the Policy Academy




Idaho

1. Create an organization and program asset map for Idaho
2. Develop common language with the Home Team
3. Create a calendar of major planning document deadlines/approvals
4. Identify long-term statewide organizations to convene players
5. Develop a marketing strategy and materials for a consistent story




Kansas

1. Re-building relationships with EDDs
2. Creating Stronger Communication Channels for EDDs
3. Building Internal capacity within KDC




Louisiana

1. Increase coordination and alignment among all economic development planning efforts
2. Increase collaboration across community and economic development planning efforts
3. Enhance state planning efforts to support new quality of life-related initiatives.
4. Create a new and expanded statewide resilience program



Michigan

1. Official documentation that defines the shared commitment for collaboration and ensures engagement and understanding by boards and stakeholders and sustainability over the long term
2. Creation of a shared strategic planning document titled Superior Economic Development Strategy
3. Alignment of planning processes, terms, planning cycles where possible and when it serves to deliver shared success



Wisconsin

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. Ensuring environmental sustainability and push innovation and entrepreneurship in sustainable business.

This structured vision and goal process led to many successes for the participating teams highlighting how the Academy can facilitate the process and change necessary to embrace strategic alignment:

- **Creation of New Initiatives:** **Kansas** created a Sector Development Specialist position during the Academy which will play a central role in working closely with each EDD to identify specific action items that the state can undertake to support their respective organizations and districts. **Wisconsin** also developed five communities of practice surrounding key issues to create synergies between organizations which may not otherwise communicate; this will further facilitate resource sharing, connections to technical experts, and opportunities for peer learning and workshopping projects and ideas.
- **Formalizing Partnerships:** **Colorado**, **Louisiana**, and **Michigan** created a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Resolutions to present to board members in order to sustain the work. Teams found it important to document the relationships built and institutionalize the long-term commitment of this work to withstand future leadership changes.
- **Developing a Brand and Promoting the Initiative:** Teams believed creating their own unique identities to brand their intentional alignment efforts would assist with stakeholder buy-in and better reflect their state's ecosystem and overall economic development operating culture. Rather than continuing to call this initiative a "Policy Academy," the **Idaho** team branded their Team as 44Go! to represent the 44 counties in the state and better representing their statewide efforts. **Colorado** implemented the CO|Align brand, and the team also created templates for participants to announce their participation in the Academy efforts and share this work in newsletters and on social media.
- **Relationship Growth:** After nine months at the Policy Academy, there have already been programmatic successes that can be directly credited to these teams' efforts. In **Louisiana** in August 2023, First Solar, the largest solar energy manufacturer in the Western Hemisphere, announced the site of its fifth American manufacturing facility located in Louisiana's Acadiana Region. This project is believed to be the largest single capital investment in the area's history and to be the first time that higher education, an airport, industrial development foundation, local officials, EDDS, and the State coordinated a project that also involved engaging federal grant dollars. The Louisiana team believed that the coordination was a direct result of the improved alignment created and fueled by the Academy and used by participants in this project.

Lessons Learned

Participation in the Policy Academy led to many lessons for the participants and reflections on what they would have done differently in the process. Overall, teams reported the process to be successful in transforming the economic development landscape in their states. Four key takeaways emerging from the Academy discussions and feedback were:

1. It is Necessary to Be Intentional About Relationship Building

Capitalizing on existing structures and relationships was not enough; teams had to be strategic in inviting participants to the Academy. To ensure future success, teams recognized that relationships between organizations must be primarily institutional, rather than primarily interpersonal, to prevent future de-alignment and to sustain the progress achieved in the Academy when an individual leader departs the organization. When building these relationships, it is vital to create unique strategies in order to engage different stakeholders. With urban and rural divides across states, this inherent diversity and unique asset structure underscores the crucial lesson that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to economic

development in the state. Recognizing this, it becomes imperative to provide individualized support and resources to each EDD, tailoring strategies to meet the specific requirements of their organization and region. The lesson learned is that a nuanced and customized approach is essential to effectively strengthen the capabilities of EDDs and foster sustainable development. Embedding the concept of alignment into the daily work of the teams had led to stronger relationships and a higher likelihood of sustaining the work beyond the Academy.

2. Cultural Change is Needed for Sustainability

Teams learned that culture change across participating economic development partners is critical to incorporate process and policy alignment. The need to “get comfortable” communicating with each other, including expanding the definition of who is “in” the area of impact, is important to make change. The teams intend to make the collaboration efforts needed to further alignment initiatives a regular process since the Policy Academy has helped create a “safe space” for these partners to build trust and shared experiences. Teams have been able to identify “pain” or “conflict” points that prevented effective communication, collaboration, and coordination and developed an alignment strategy to address these bottlenecks. This helped to address previously identified threats and maximize resources to effectively act on new economic opportunities. It takes time and remarkable shared commitment, but it is always worth doing given the improved economic outcomes.

3. The Work is “Simple” – but “Simple is not “Easy”

The adage that “the work is 'simple' – but 'simple' is not 'easy'” encapsulates a truth about the nature of tasks and challenges in economic development initiatives. Breaking down the initiatives to move forward with the Academy such as working together in a sustained manner, finding consensus on the vision and goals, identifying an approach for team members to agree on, and maintaining commitment to the process are simple in concept, but because of the cultural shifts and relationship building involved to kick off and sustain these activities, teams learned that the Academy success would not be easy. At its core, simplicity implies a clarity of purpose. However, this simplicity often contradicts the effort, discipline, and persistence required to achieve success. What appears simple may demand intricate planning, attention to detail, and the willingness to navigate complexities along the way. Moreover, a strong commitment to the process is critical for implementing the necessary change, especially given the time commitment over the nine-month Academy.

4. High-level buy-in is vital for success but staff buy-in is essential for long-term success

Effective alignment between a state and EDDs requires support and commitment from state leadership. Securing buy-in from leadership is necessary so the wider audience understands the value of the process, but as noted in some states, if the initiative is not institutionalized it runs the risk of losing support when key staff depart. Having high level buy-in is important to share the importance of the work, but staff commitment to continue the tasks to move the initiative forward is essential.

Final Thoughts on the Policy Academy

Great work can be done individually, but greater achievements are possible when a team comprised of various jurisdictions and stakeholders unite. Teams that set-aside power dynamics, different constituencies, and varying approaches can use the Academy’s learning cohort model to institutionalize alignment and move beyond individual relationships that can sink an initiative in the short- and long-run.

The Policy Academy overall showed the six teams and the national ecosystem the benefits of coordinating strategies and emphasizing alignment in economic development activities and processes. Economic development is never finished; therefore, the work is an ongoing journey with new and varied challenges always emerging, and requires adaptability, flexibility, and a shared dedication to constant progress.

Although teams worked independently, there were common tactics used across the teams, as many found value in sharing progress updates and lessons learned throughout the process. In-person meetings were shown to lead to effective engagement of broader stakeholders and assisted in picking up momentum during the process. Many teams created subcommittees to divide activities, which assisted in the level of commitment placed on members to achieve the goals set. Sustaining the work was a key priority across all teams, with nurturing long-term alignment an important goal for all.

Methods taken in the Academy were geared towards creating a more cohesive and effective approach to economic development that leverages the strengths and resources of various stakeholders. Here's a closer look at how states can improve alignment, as learned through this initiative:

<p>Establishing Coordination Frameworks to facilitate coordination of economic development strategies. This involves creating structures that enable regular communication and collaboration among different economic stakeholders, ensuring that efforts are harmonized and moving in the same direction.</p>	<p>Commitment to Collaboration by emphasizing the importance of working together towards a common purpose. This includes a willingness to invest time, resources, and effort in joint initiatives that drive towards aligned goals and move the collaboration past the individual to the organization.</p>	<p>High-Level Engagement and Investment is recognized and needed for successful collaborative activities. This means getting buy-in from top officials and dedicating resources to support the processes that lead to alignment.</p>
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To translate these efforts into tangible outcomes, the Academy demonstrated that states may adopt various strategies to support their efforts:

- **Developing Communication Strategies** supports the planning and execution of aligned economic development strategies, ensuring all stakeholders are on the same page.
- **Creating Organizational and Program Asset Maps** helps in identifying and leveraging the strengths of different organizations and programs towards a common goal.
- **Aligning Planning Cycles and Processes** and establishing a common calendar across multiple planning processes help in coordinating efforts more efficiently.
- **Formalizing Collaboration** by using Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) and similar arrangements to document collaboration commitments solidifies the intent to work together.
- **Setting Shared Goals** by establishing commonly agreed-upon goals that can be incorporated across multiple plans fosters unity and direction in economic development efforts.
- **Creating a Common Brand** through a unified website and branding can promote and support ongoing alignment by serving as a central hub for information and resources.

- **Supporting State and Community Capacity** ensures that there is sufficient support for collaborative efforts and ensures that all parties have the necessary resources and capabilities to contribute effectively.
- **Offering Neutral Facilitators** to lead the alignment efforts helps in maintaining focus and achieving objectives without bias.
- **Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities** of all ecosystem partners engaged in strategy alignment and implementation, ensuring clarity and accountability.

The Policy Academy showed the six teams the benefits of coordinating strategies and emphasizing alignment in economic development. Fostering such alignment requires a cultural shift among state and regional partners. Stakeholders must be encouraged to embrace new ways of collaborating, moving beyond traditional silos to embrace a collaborative culture focused on alignment.

This foundational and cultural shift is key to developing a shared vision that can effectively guide collective efforts—a vision that emerges from ongoing dialogue, engagement, and the willingness to invest in building trusting relationships among current and future partners. By working together, sharing objectives, and leveraging combined resources, states and regions can achieve better economic outcomes. The cohort learning process was found to be an effective technique for sharing strategies on alignment across the six states and providing lessons for each team to utilize moving forward to sustain efforts. The process, while challenging, was rewarding and can be applied to different organizations and program applications.