# Regional Economic Development with EDA University Centers

EDA University Center Program

UEDA
University Economic Development Association

Center for Economic and Community Engagement
Virginia Tech

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## Executive Summary: Key Findings and Takeaways

The U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) University Center (UC) program seeks to help strengthen regional economies by leveraging higher education assets to promote innovation, entrepreneurship, technology commercialization, and skilled talent.

For more than 18 months, the University Economic Development Administration (UEDA) and the Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement (CECE) studied how EDA-designated UCs organize, operate, and implement their economic development programs. With EDA support, UEDA sought both to expand its reach to the UCs and support EDA's goals by facilitating the transfer of knowledge and sharing best practices among the EDA UCs. From this work, UEDA identified common elements across the EDA UCs and offered new ideas to increase the impact EDA UCs have on the communities they serve.

Key findings and takeaways include:

**Key Takeaways:**

- UCs are closing gaps in economic development planning and implementation in their regions.
- UCs desire greater connectivity to others in the network for knowledge sharing and collaboration.
- EDA could help UCs become more valued local partners by better aligning EDA investment priorities with UC focus areas and including UCs in EDA's outreach.
- Funding levels fell and then remained relatively stagnant for many years and are now a major concern for the UCs.
- EDA could help UCs increase their visibility and value to their respective host institutions.
- Reimagining the UC program vision could benefit EDA and the UCs, making the UC program a guiding force behind how IHEs contribute to the state or local economy.

### *Key Program Goals*

University Centers are closing a variety of gaps in their regions. Some of these gaps include:

- Providing economic development planning and implementation to under-resourced rural community organizations.
- Assisting in product marketing for very small farmers.
- Producing market intelligence about emerging industries, such as the electric and autonomous vehicle industry.
- Facilitating business planning and capital access for underrepresented rural entrepreneurs, very early startups, and indigenous founders.
- Training and providing guidance to postsecondary students exploring careers in computer science, entrepreneurship, and other STEM related fields.
- Providing support to underrepresented contractors seeking construction contracts.
- Filling a gap in supply chain partnerships in emerging manufacturing industries.

## *What UCs Need from the UC Cohort*

Current UCs are mostly focused on undertaking their scope of work for their EDA grant. With many UCs having relatively limited funding, they have very little contact with other UCs for support or networking, but they crave interaction with others who may be experiencing similar challenges. We gathered ideas from current UCs about the potential benefits of greater connectivity among the UCs. These include:

- Many newer UCs need help thinking about strategic issues such as how to better leverage their EDA UC funding to achieve greater scale, funding sustainability, and developing impact metrics.
- UCs would like to share ideas with others about programmatic issues such as working with underrepresented business owners (e.g., tribal, minority, or women-owned enterprises) or providing programs to support innovation parks.
- Some UCs expressed interest in working with other UCs about how to address common challenges. They would like more opportunities for in-person convenings that are designed to encourage collaboration for greater impact.
- Some UCs felt they could benefit from mentoring relationships, especially if they could learn from other UCs that have operated successfully over time.

## *What UCs and Potential UCs Need From EDA*

We heard and observed a variety of needs regarding how EDA might address confusion and improve the quality of proposals and reports it receives from UCs and potential UCs.

- EDA's investment priorities and UC focus areas don't seem to be very well understood among grantees and potential applicants. The scopes we reviewed suggest that UCs interpret EDA focus areas and investment priorities very differently. This impression was reinforced by our interviews. EDA will need to consider ways to continue to communicate its priorities clearly and on an ongoing basis.
- The University Center program name discourages other higher educational institutions (e.g., community and technical colleges) from applying to the program.
- EDA could raise the profile of UCs within their respective regions by offering warm introductions and invitations to events designed for other ecosystem partners in the state or region.
- EDA might also include UCs in more of their national outreach efforts. For example, UC leaders could be offered opportunities to test national tools that EDA is developing for the economic development community.
- EDA can help raise the profile of UCs by calling on their leaders more often as presenters to demonstrate their accomplishments in front of regional and national economic development audiences. This greater attention to UC accomplishment might provide opportunities for additional funding to support UC program sustainability. This will become more possible as UEDA assembles the toolkit utilizing tools, reports, and other accomplishments of UCs. EDA will benefit from a deeper understanding of the core capabilities of the UCs.

## *Key Opportunities for EDA to Leverage the UC Program for Stronger Relationships with IHEs*

EDA might consider steps to increase the visibility of UCs at their respective host institutions. Raising the UC profile *within the institution* could have the effect of ensuring that UCs have a greater impact on institutional strategic priorities and enhance the UCs' ability to better align higher educational engagement efforts with regional economic development priorities. These steps might include:

- Requiring a letter of support from the institution's President or Chancellor during the application process.
- Asking proposers to describe how other university assets will be leveraged toward the goals articulated in their proposal.
- Incorporating reports about aligned institution-wide achievements in their annual reporting.
- Requiring the UC to engage with their university's Communications Department to report UC results to a broad set of university and state or local economic development stakeholders (and incorporating these efforts in the UC's annual reporting).

The purpose of this report is to summarize findings generated from a customer discovery process with existing UC grantees and other stakeholders at higher education institutions to learn key takeaways to improve the UC program in future rounds of funding. A strength of the UC program is the variety in activities and work being done across the country; therefore, it is difficult to generalize across all UCs based on interviews and conversations with a subset of them. UCs are conducting great work that can be strengthened and supported through further elevation of the program.

Key focus areas included:

- The key challenges facing UCs in meeting their goals for the program.
- The opportunities for EDA to further leverage the UC program.
- Strategies for increasing EDA engagement with UCs and potential future UCs.
- Implications for what support services (including the kinds of events, convenings, and resources) might be most helpful for the UC cohort.

# Background

## What Is the UC Program and Why Is EDA Investing in It?

The U.S. Economic Development Administration's (EDA) University Center (UC) program is designed to enable institutions of higher education (IHEs) to leverage university assets to build regional economic ecosystems that support innovation and high-growth entrepreneurship, resiliency, and inclusiveness.

According to a report prepared in 2013 by SRI International,[1] EDA's UC program initially focused on technical support for economic development institutions and programs. More recently, many centers have more narrowly targeted their efforts to support innovation, entrepreneurship, and technology transfer activities, while other UCs provide planning and data analysis support to economic development organizations. UCs often operate within the context of larger economic development programs situated within universities, mostly with multiple sources of funding. In the most recent (2023) Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO), EDA articulated the following focus areas for UCs:

- Regional commercialization efforts
- Advancing high-growth entrepreneurship
- Cultivating innovation
- Encouraging business expansion in a region's innovation cluster(s)
- Developing a high-skilled regional workforce
- Increasing the resiliency of a region.

The same NOFO noted the following EDA Investment Priorities, which are also described and defined on EDA's website:

1. **Equity:** Economic development planning or implementation projects that advance equity across America through investments that directly benefit one or more traditionally underserved populations or communities.
2. **Recovery & Resilience:** Economic development planning or implementation projects that build economic resilience to and long-term recovery from economic shocks.
3. **Workforce Development:** Economic development planning or implementation projects that support workforce education and skills training activities directly connected to the hiring and skills needs of the business community and that result in well-paying, quality jobs.
4. **Manufacturing:** Economic development planning or implementation projects that encourage job creation, business expansion, technology and capital upgrades, and productivity growth in manufacturing.

[1] SRI International, 2013. Making Connections: Evaluation Project to Assess Best practices in EDA's University Center Program. https://www.eda.gov/sites/default/files/filebase/archives/2016/tools/files/university-centers/Evaluation-of-UC-Best-Practices.pdf.

5. **Technology-Based Economic Development:** Economic development planning or implementation projects that foster regional knowledge ecosystems that support entrepreneurs and startups, including the commercialization of new technologies.
6. **Environmentally Sustainable Development:** Economic development planning or implementation projects that help address the climate crisis including through the development and implementation of green products, green processes, including green infrastructure, green buildings, and green places.
7. **Exports & FDI:** Economic development planning or implementation projects that enhance or build community assets to support growth in U.S. exports or increased foreign direct investment.

Note that these investment priorities have changed somewhat over the years. As the SRI report cited earlier noted, the 2013 investment priorities focused on innovation, public/private partnerships, national strategic priorities, global competitiveness, environmentally sustainable development, and economic distressed and underserved communities.[2] While there is some overlap in the areas of global competitiveness and sustainability, investment priorities such as equity, workforce development, recovery and resilience, and manufacturing are significant new focus areas for EDA.

## UC History and Origins

Created in 1965 as part of the Public Works and Economic Development Act, University Centers were charged with providing technical assistance, conducting applied research, assessing program performance, and disseminating results of center activities.[3] Initially, UCs were reviewed routinely for funding, but unless a center obviously failed in its purpose, centers were continuously refunded. In 2004, EDA changed the program from an annual funding cycle to a competitive grant program, in which IHEs compete for funding for a three-year period, even if they had been centers in the past. Between 2004 and 2012, competitions were based on a three-year funding cycle, with two EDA regions up for competition each cycle. Beginning in 2012, the competition cycles were changed to a five-year cycle, with an annual review of each center done by the program manager to secure approval for funding for the next year.

Funding for the UC program has fluctuated since the program's inception. In 1996, the total annual funding was $9.1 million with an average annual grant of $100,000 for each center.[4] By 2006, the total annual funding was $6.8 million with grants ranging from $80,000 to $200,000. For 2023, EDA allocated approximately $8.4 million, equating to $2.4 million for the first year of awards under the competition.[5]

Any accredited institution of higher education is eligible to apply for and to receive funding under the UC program. These include community colleges, junior colleges, tribal colleges, Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), or other Minority

[2] SRI International, 2013.
[3] Public Works and Economic Development Act, 42 U.S.C. Ch. 38 § 3196 (1965)
[4] SRI International, 2013.
[5] EDA Notice of Funding Opportunity, 2023. https://www.eda.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/FY2023-UC-NOFO.pdf

Serving Institutions (MSIs). Consortia of accredited institutions of higher education may also compete for designation.

The number of UCs changes with each funding cycle, with both new UCs joining the program and some long-time UCs continuing in the program. Some UCs exit the program as well. For example, in 2013 there were 58 funded centers, located across 45 states and Puerto Rico. Now, there are 72 UCs across 47 states and Puerto Rico. Many states have multiple UCs, and some are joint centers with multiple institutions partnering.

## UC Cohort Project Overview

The University Economic Development Administration (UEDA) studied how EDA-designated UCs organize, operate, and implement their economic development programs. With EDA support, UEDA sought both to expand its reach to the UCs and support EDA's goals by facilitating the transfer of knowledge and sharing best practices among the EDA UCs. From this work, UEDA identified common elements across the UCs and offered new ideas to increase the impact UCs have on the communities they serve.

The purpose of this report is to document the results of this investigation initiated for the purpose of designing the activities and focus of the UC Cohort project. Key focus areas included:

- The key challenges that UCs face in meeting their program goals.
- The opportunities for EDA to further leverage the UC program.
- Strategies for increasing EDA engagement with current and potential UCs.
- Implications for the kinds of support (including events, convenings, and resources) that would be most helpful to the UC cohort.

## UC Cohort Project Team

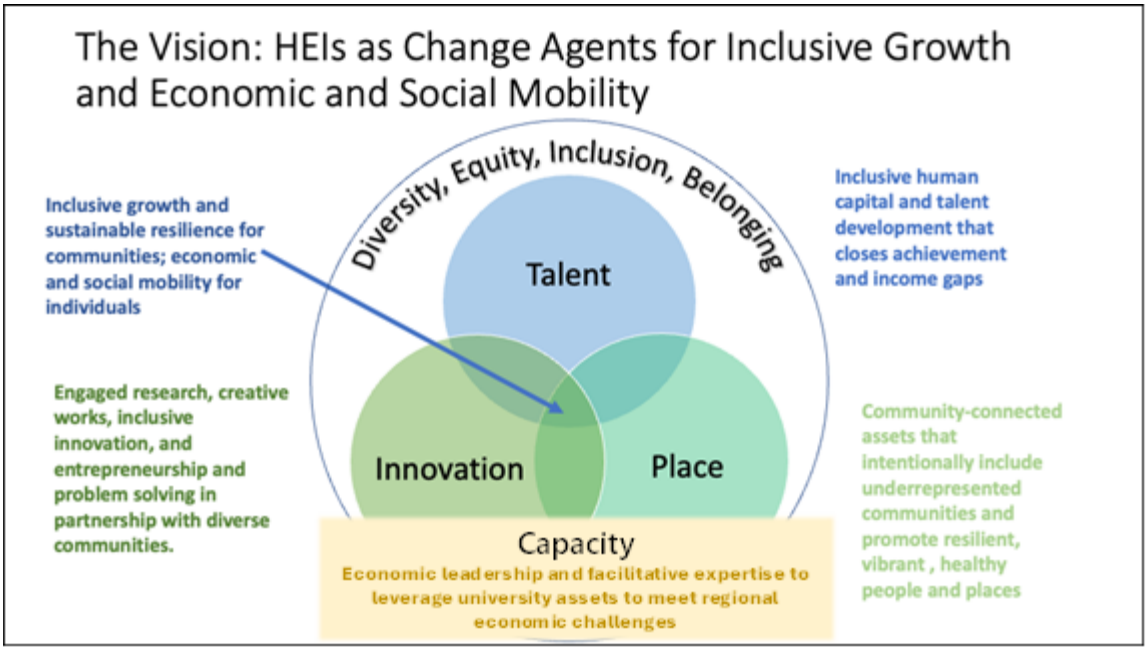
Established in 1976, the University Economic Development Association (UEDA) brings together higher education institutions, private sector businesses, nonprofits, government organizations, and community economic development stakeholders to create local and regional opportunity. UEDA promotes university engagement in economic development and communicates the impact of universities on inclusive community economic ecosystems. About one-third of the UCs are members of the UEDA network, and UCs account for about 20 percent of UEDA's membership. UEDA has an interest in engaging more with UCs as a core constituency of the association.

In facilitating engagement with the UCs, UEDA draws lessons from other models of university economic engagement. For instance, UEDA currently provides access for smaller IHEs to the Association of Public Land Grant Universities (APLU) Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) program. IEP is a framework for community and economic engagement adopted and carefully curated by 85 credentialed higher education institutions. The IEP framework guides university leaders in analyzing how well their institutions are doing in embracing strategies and implementing economic and community development practices that benefit the regions they serve. The IEP framework ties university-led community engagement activities to efforts that improve local Talent,

Innovation, and Place-related (TIP) assets. This framework is also a useful tool in examining how UCs operate, providing a foundational taxonomy for categorizing varied UC activities.

By itself, however, the IEP framework does not sufficiently highlight the role of IHEs in capacity building—an important EDA priority, so UEDA adapted the IEP model framework (see Figure 1) to more closely align with EDA priorities to begin the process of organizing UC activities into structured groupings. This adapted community economic engagement framework serves as a useful way for EDA to benchmark UC engagement with their local economic development ecosystems in comparison with other university-related community economic engagement efforts.

***Figure 1: Talent, Innovation, and Place as a Framework for Inclusive Economic Engagement*** [6]




UEDA used this framework as a lens for organizing the EDA UC data collection efforts detailed in this report. The institutions engaged with the EDA UC program represent a natural constituency for UEDA, and UEDA has supported the EDA UC Cohort to achieve the following goals:

- Connect UCs to each other, EDA, and to a broader economic development ecosystem.
- Identify and address key challenges and opportunities facing UCs.
- Promote innovative UC solutions and successful approaches.

To effectively accomplish these goals, UEDA partnered with the Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement (CECE) to evaluate the UC program and measure engagement efforts. In partnership with Virginia State University, CECE has led a UC program since 1980 to advance regional economic resilience in Virginia. The UC's work includes building support networks for companies and entrepreneurs, conducting applied research and analysis projects, and designing and implementing collaborative programs and initiatives. CECE developed an

[6] Adapted from *Principals of Practice for Higher Education's Engagement in Inclusive Economic Engagement Strategies.* APLU and UEDA, 2023

evaluation program to collect activity and outcome metrics to assess the shared values between EDA and the economic development community; this will assist EDA in developing its policy learning agenda and provide UEDA insights for assessing the sustainability and success of the program.

## Overview of Existing Center Activities

EDA currently funds 72 University Centers, with between 10 and 16 in each EDA region. The annual awards range from $96,000 to $200,000. The average annual award across all regions in fiscal year 2023 was $133,878, which is slightly greater than the 2012 average of $132,000.[7] Awards carry a five-year period of performance, with an initial funding period of one year. Funding beyond the initial year is dependent upon the availability of funds and satisfactory performance and progress in achieving the program goals.

### Data Sources

The data sources for the investigation included project narratives and progress reports provided by EDA. Staff from CREC and Virginia Tech reviewed these project narratives and progress reports to identify the UC focus areas and investment priorities as described in the EDA NOFO. In some cases, focus areas or investment priorities were not explicitly stated in the narratives, but the team made inferences about the focus area for these centers. For example, some scopes of work identified the workforce as a focus area but not as an investment priority. We addressed these inconsistencies by assuming that workforce was also a covered investment priority.

For this initial research, the project team supplemented scopes of work reviews with one-on-one interviews. We conducted 28 interviews, which used a protocol that roughly covered the research question areas and dug into details about the activities, convenings, and resources that UCs believe will provide the greatest support for reaching their program goals. In most instances, University Centers provide value to their communities, but they offer a wide variety of services and products, making generalized assessments very challenging. In the spirit of continuous improvement, the research team identified areas in which UCs could enhance their impact. Even so, these observations may not apply to every UC.

### Research Questions and Methods

The analysis focused on the following research questions:

1. What are the focus areas and investment priorities covered by current University Centers?
2. How do UC activities (performed with EDA funding) relate to or leverage other activities that are performed by other university faculty and staff?
3. What are the key challenges that UCs face in meeting their goals for the program?
4. How well do UCs collaborate with other parts of their institutions and with their community's economic development stakeholders and what might they gain from increased collaboration?

[7] SRI International, 2013.

5. What kinds of events, convenings, programming and resources might be of most interest and assistance to UC faculty and staff?

## Observations Regarding UC Focus Areas

The UC project narratives were reviewed prior to the most recent competition in 2023; therefore, the updated UCs in the Denver and Austin regions are not reflected in the below analysis. From our review of UC project narratives and progress reports, we created a synopsis of activities, relying on definitions in the EDA 2022 UC Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) guidelines. Table 1 summarizes how we interpreted these documents in terms of the Focus Areas covered by each University Center. Note that each UC can address more than one Focus Area.

***Table 1. UC Focus Areas by Region***

| | ***Regional Office*** | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Focus Areas*** | **Atlanta FY22** | **Austin FY18** | **Chicago FY21** | **Denver FY18** | **Philadelphia FY21** | **Seattle FY22** | **Total** | **%** |
| *Regional Commercialization* | 5 | 4 | 1 | 7 | 6 | 8 | 31 | 45% |
| *Advancing High-Growth Entrepreneurship* | 11 | 9 | 6 | 5 | 9 | 9 | 49 | 71% |
| *Cultivating Innovation* | 10 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 8 | 9 | 42 | 61% |
| *Encouraging Business Expansion in a Region's Innovation Clusters* | 8 | 3 | 3 | 8 | 5 | 7 | 34 | 49% |
| *Developing a Highly Skilled Workforce* | 9 | 5 | 8 | 6 | 9 | 7 | 44 | 64% |
| *Increasing Resiliency* | 14 | 5 | 9 | 2 | 8 | 7 | 45 | 65% |
| *Total Number of Centers in Region* | 16 | 10 | 11 | 10 | 12 | 10 | 69 | |

Regional differences in focus areas reflect the unique way the UC program is implemented. Each EDA Region reviews UC applications, makes selections subject to national approval, and manages those awards. In many ways, the variation in interpretation of the program's purpose by the six Regional offices greatly influences the types of awards made to UC programs. Overall, **Advancing High-Growth Entrepreneurship** is the most frequently listed focus area met by UCs. This is especially true in the Austin and Seattle EDA regions, where nine out of the 10 Centers listed this as a focus area. **Increasing Resiliency** was a frequently cited focus area, especially in the Atlanta region, where 14 of the 16 UCs identified it. **Developing a Highly Skilled Workforce** is a focus area in about 64 percent of the UCs. The least often cited focus area across all UCs was **Regional Commercialization**, with only 31 Centers naming this as an area of focus, and only one in the Chicago region. UCs in the Seattle region were most likely to call this out as a focus.

The following is a review of definitions used to describe each UC Focus Area:

***Regional Commercialization***: This may refer to the commercialization of university-developed technologies by providing support for applicants to SBIR and STTR programs, licensing, and patenting. It may also refer to assistance to non-university entrepreneurs with market feasibility studies for new-to-market products, design, prototyping, and early market testing. For example, Georgia Southern University created a Tech Transfer Specialist position, tasked with providing technical assistance to faculty and disseminating information that will lead to increasing disclosure rates and commercialization efforts on campus.

***Advancing High-Growth Entrepreneurship:*** The activities within this focus area vary from targeting university students with workshops and internships that develop their entrepreneurship skills (e.g., Kansas State University Technology Entrepreneurship Internship Program) to focusing on startup entrepreneurs in a specific neighborhood or town (e.g., the Accelerate program at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette). Some entrepreneurship programs focus on specific industries. For example, the San Juan College Harvest Food Hub supports small, early-stage food entrepreneurs with a shared commercial kitchen and marketing opportunities. Meanwhile, Cornell University is working specifically in the agricultural technology space. Others are industry sector agnostic. The University of Illinois University Center is supporting a network of incubators across the state with technical assistance, helping them to create sustainable incubators with a positive impact on their local economies. Many are focused on supporting entrepreneurs in underrepresented groups.

***Cultivating Innovation:*** Many UCs created new programs focusing on research initiatives, training opportunities, and providing technical assistance to initiate knowledge transfer and build capacity around new ideas. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign hosts peer webinars and events to actively encourage sharing of resources, best practices, and programing among members of the statewide incubator ecosystem. Cornell University is focusing on innovative ideas for novel crop protection, biomaterials, supporting local supply chains, and robotics and automation. The focus is on innovation activities in whatever target area the university deems economically important.

***Encouraging Business Expansion in a Region's Innovation Clusters:*** UCs develop strategies to support regional industry clusters and expand small businesses. Pennsylvania State University built a statewide network linking regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS), university assets, and small businesses located in distressed communities, which promotes business expansion, innovation, entrepreneurial development, and supporting business needs in the regional industrial clusters. Focusing on target clusters and how to support businesses within them is a common focus area across the UCs.

***Developing a Highly Skilled Workforce:*** The mechanisms through which the UCs address workforce issues vary greatly. Many identify entrepreneurship training as a type of workforce development. Others research the workforce needs of the region and/or analyze the effectiveness of workforce programs. Some offer non-credit, industry-recognized credentials through coding camps or other workforce training initiatives. Some are designing their own training programs for beneficiaries from the community, such as the University of Louisville's Smart Manufacturing Certification program. Others are focused on internships and engaged learning opportunities for their academic students within companies in regionally targeted industry clusters.

***Increasing Resiliency:*** The way that UCs talk about addressing resiliency varies a great deal. Some are working with EDA-designated Economic Development Districts (EDDs) and other public officials on resiliency planning and identifying opportunities for economic diversification. Others consider their work with small businesses as contributing to regional resilience, particularly where important legacy industries, like fossil fuels, have uncertain futures. In these regions, workforce training is also considered a contribution to regional resilience. Addressing food desserts, working on COVID-19 recovery, and addressing recovery from natural disasters, such as hurricanes and fires, are also listed as activities that contribute to increasing resilience.

## Observations Regarding UC Investment Priorities

Table 2 shows how each of the UC activities align with EDA's current investment priorities. Once again, the investment priorities were sometimes identified specifically in the narratives and sometimes had to be inferred from what the UCs wrote in their proposals or progress reports.

***Table 2: UC Fit with Investment Priorities by Region***

| | ***Regional Office*** | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Investment Priorities*** | **Atlanta FY22** | **Austin FY18** | **Chicago FY21** | **Denver FY18** | **Philadelphia FY21** | **Seattle FY22** | **Total** | **%** |
| *Equity* | 15 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 9 | 42 | 61% |
| *Recovery and Resilience* | 12 | 6 | 9 | 2 | 7 | 6 | 42 | 61% |
| *Workforce Development* | 10 | 5 | 10 | 7 | 11 | 7 | 50 | 72% |
| *Manufacturing* | 7 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 9 | 6 | 35 | 51% |
| *Tech-Based ED* | 10 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 33 | 48% |
| *Environmentally Sustainable Development* | 2 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 13 | 19% |
| *Exports and FDI* | - | 3 | 2 | 1 | - | 2 | 8 | 12% |
| *Critical Infrastructure* | - | - | 3 | 5 | 2 | - | 10 | 14% |
| *Total number of Centers in Region* | 16 | 10 | 11 | 10 | 12 | 10 | 69 | |

The investment priority identified by the greatest number of UCs is **Workforce Development.** As mentioned above, the workforce development activities vary from analysis and planning to development of specific courses or entrepreneurship training.

**Recovery and Resilience** was identified as an EDA investment priority for 61 percent of centers. This seems low given that almost all are engaging in activities that are likely to improve regional economic resilience and yet they do not identify it as such. It may reflect the EDA's shifting articulation of investment priorities over time or in the uncertainty among centers about what exactly constitutes recovery and resilience.

**Equity** was also noted as an investment priority in 61 percent of the applications. Many UCs are working to advance equity objectives including entrepreneurship for underrepresented founders. The most recent competition analyzed (FY22 with the Atlanta and Seattle regions) had the highest amount of equity focus, likely due to equity being a top priority for EDA as of recent. It is likely that as competitions continue, this focus will increase in applications.

The least often cited EDA investment priorities were **Exports and FDI**, as well as **Critical Infrastructure**. The latter is no surprise since it was not listed as a priority in the 2022 NOFO, and therefore shows up only in project narrative submitted before EDA's shift away from this priority. **Exports and FDI** don't seem to be areas in which UCs have felt able to make a difference for their regional economies. If EDA is interested in expanding this investment area, it might be helpful to highlight examples of what UCs are accomplishing in this area and how they are doing it. For example, Bowling Green State University's UC is conducting applied research that focuses on understanding the impact of foreign firms in the region and will highlight the role of FDI in the region and integrate consideration of FDI expansion into regional planning efforts. Similarly, TechHelp Idaho at Boise State University is working with small and medium sized manufacturers to identify export opportunities in collaboration with the ExporTech program and other federal and state export assistance programs. These might be good examples to put forward if EDA wants to encourage more UCs to enter this space.

Less than 20 percent of Centers tried to align with **Environmentally Sustainable Development** as an investment priority. This is another area in which EDA could highlight some existing efforts that are taking place, such as that at the University of Alaska UC's work with renewable energy and the University of North Carolina UC's efforts to determine the benefits of waste-to-energy systems. These examples could inspire other UCs to support entrepreneurs and conduct applied research in this space.

## Observations from Interviews of UCs

UEDA and CECE conducted 28 interviews. Twenty-three were current UCs, one was a former UC, and three were prospective UCs (including one that had applied unsuccessfully for UC designation). The interview protocol used for the interviews is found in the Appendix. The 28 responses may not be fully generalizable due to the variety of work, but the results were helpful in helping to identify issues and concerns. These conclusions are made from the UCs interviewed.

***Table 3: Interviews Completed***

| | Atlanta | Austin | Chicago | Denver | Philadelphia | Seattle | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Centers | 5 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 23 |
| Non-Centers | 1 | 2 | 1 | - | - | 1 | 5 |

**Data is as of September 2023*

## Program Summaries

The interviewed UCs engage in a variety of programming. Several are engaging in entrepreneurship development, as many UCs work with entrepreneurs operating in isolated rural areas, including tribal communities. The interviewed UCs are also providing technical assistance to local governments and EDDs, and some are analyzing workforce needs and offering workforce training. One UC is focused on the future of a key targeted industry in transition, working to ready the state for expected changes in the industry. Two are partnered with other IHEs.

## Key Program Goals

These UCs seek to close a variety of gaps identified in their regions by:

- Working with rural under resourced community organizations that need help with economic development planning and implementation.
- Helping very small farmers to better market their products.
- Filling information gaps about the future of the electric and autonomous vehicle industry.
- Serving underrepresented entrepreneurs in rural communities.
- Working with very early startups and indigenous founders.
- Training underrepresented students for careers in Computer Science, entrepreneurship, and other STEM related fields.
- Helping underrepresented contractors win construction contracts.
- Filling a gap in supply chain partnerships in emerging manufacturing industries.

However, the UCs also perceive significant gaps that they wish they could fill with additional programming. For example, they mentioned:

- Expanding services towards more underrepresented entrepreneurs including small farmers, indigenous, and minority entrepreneurs in early stages of development, as they face obstacles in finding startup capital for some of these entrepreneurs.
- Expanding their geographic reach to more rural and remote areas or enhancing their work with low-resource local governments and businesses.
- Building stronger regional partnerships in support of key state or regionally targeted industries.

## How UCs Leverage Their EDA Funding

Funding from EDA is a small part of the budget for some of the UCs, which is then leveraged substantially, especially for more established centers who have been operating under the EDA grant for many years. They obtain additional funding from other federal agencies for similar work, including grants from other EDA programs that meet similar goals but cover different stages or requirements of the work (for example, a building or equipment). Most UCs also have state support for economic development programming, and some also receive foundation funding. In addition, many are subsidized by their universities, who pay the salaries of staff and students. Some also receive fees from clients for project work.

### *Key Challenges*

Many interviewees mentioned that the small grant amount limits their ability to scale effectively. Models for scaling to increase the impact of their small grants would be appreciated. Newer centers also mentioned challenges to working with the federal bureaucracy on reporting.

### *Interactions with Other University Centers*

Very few of the UC representatives we spoke with interacted with other UCs. This may be, in part, because many of the UCs we interviewed are relatively new. A few of the more established programs were previously engaged with the Education Association of University Centers (EAUC) but note that it has been inactive. A couple of interviewees noted that they have enjoyed EDA-sponsored efforts to encourage centers and regions to interact, but that these efforts seem limited. One UC has conferred with others on common initiatives, but they have not formally partnered in a project or collaborative effort.

Many would welcome greater interaction with other UCs. They see an opportunity to collaborate with other UCs with the goal of scaling successful approaches and joint applications for additional grant funding, they are also hungry for in-person interaction and would like to see regional collaboration among the UCs within a state or region.

In our interviews, UCs expressed interest in learning about how other UCs operate. Some questions posed include:

- How do other UCs offer access to capital to underserved entrepreneurs?
- What are other UCs working on in relation to Tech Hubs legislation?
- How do UCs work with industry on the future of work and adaptation to changes in markets?
- How do UCs address the challenges of program management and reporting?
- How do UCs approach programming for an innovation park?
- How might UCs attract funding partners?
- How can UCs scale their services effectively?
- How might UCs collaborate on potential funding/project opportunities?
- How do UCs measure their Impact?
- What are best practices for working in Indian Country?
- What kinds of projects might be a model for regional collaboration among UCs?

## Observations from Interviews with Non-UCs

Five university administrators who are not currently associated with an EDA-funded University Center were interviewed to gain their perspectives. One interviewee works for an IHE that previously held a UC grant; two have applied and been denied a UC grant, and two have never applied for a grant. We gleaned several insights from these interviews that may be of interest to EDA as they consider how best to market the program to attract grantees that will fulfill the program objectives:

- The UC grant provided an opportunity to introduce the university's economic development function to the regional economic development community. A past University Center director as well as a prospective director mentioned that the UC grant provided an entre for the university to the other economic development entities within the region. Prior to the grant, the university had not played a highly visible role within the economic development community, and their role was not well understood.
- Two interviewees suggested that the program could emphasize alignment between the university's programs, including research and degree programs, with the needs of the region. Emphasizing that alignment could strengthen the university's support for, and integration into, the economic development ecosystem within the community.
- UCs can play an important convening role for economic development entities within the region. According to one interviewee, UC funding provides additional cache to efforts aimed at convening local leaders.
- Lack of capacity explains why some universities are not engaged. The capacity gap includes not only a limited grant writing capability, but also a limited understanding of the grant requirements and goals. Two potential UCs interviewed had never applied for UC funding. In one case, the interviewee, who works at a HBCU, suggested that a small capacity grant would be helpful, for example, to fund a project manager to scope a UC grant with input community stakeholders.
- EDA has limited the potential number of grantees because of the program name. One community college interviewee noted that the program is misnamed if it wants to attract community college interest; expanding that focus could increase interest from community colleges in the program.
- The distress definition is also very restrictive in how it applies to potential University Center applicants. As one interviewee noted, there are a lot of types of economic distress that don't show up in the county-level income and employment numbers. In addition, as Phil Singerman noted in his 2008 paper referenced above,[8] communities that are not considered distressed can easily suffer from disruptive forces that quickly change their economic trajectory. Encouraging connectivity between IHEs and other ecosystem partners in all regions can help to build resilience and limit the economic impact of these kinds of disruptions.

[8] Singerman, 2008.

# Engagement Summary for UC Cohort Activities

## How are University Centers Engaging?

University Centers collaborate in many ways, but the most common engagement methods employed this project to encourage engagement include:

- One-on-one customer discovery interviews
- Topical webinars
- Attendance at the UEDA summit, and specific UC Cohort focused sessions and panels
- Joining the LinkedIn Group and then Civic Roundtable's UC Hub
- Responding to initial, midline, and endline feedback surveys
- Joining UEDA and participating in various UEDA activities related to talent, innovation, place, and diversity, equity and inclusion.

Each of the six EDA regional offices have also engaged in UC activities, with regional officers encouraging attendance of UCs as well as their direct participation and engagement. The most engaged regions in order of most engaged to least engaged (as measured by attendance at webinars, UEDA conference, or participation in surveys and asynchronous engagement on the UC Hub) are the UCs located in:

1. Austin
2. Denver
3. Seattle
4. Atlanta
5. Chicago
6. Philadelphia

Also, of note during this grant, there was a competition in two of the regions, hence some UCs joined the program, and some left the program. In total, 83 University Centers were invited to engage in activities related to this project over the entire grant period, and of those, 78 engaged at least once with project activities, a very high participation rate.

At different points in this UC cohort engagement project, the team reached out to gain feedback on the impact of UC cohort activities on their work. The following tables summarize the results of two different surveys, illustrating how engagement between university centers and one another has impacted them over the course of the project. They compare sentiments in November 2023, with sentiments in September 2024:

**Question 1: How has the UC cohort impacted you personally?**

November 2023 (n=15)

| November 2023 (n=15) | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Expanded your collaborative network? | 46.67% | 40.00% | 13.33% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Produced new knowledge to help you complete your work? | 13.33% | 60.00% | 26.67% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Changed the way you conduct your work? | 6.67% | 26.67% | 60.00% | 6.67% | 0.00% |
| Increased your capacity to conduct your work? | 6.67% | 33.33% | 40.00% | 20.00% | 0.00% |
| Helped you learn new ways of doing your job? | 13.33% | 66.67% | 20.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Increased your capacity to meet EDA requirements? | 6.67% | 60.00% | 33.33% | 0.00% | 0.00% |

September 2024 (n=18)

| September 2024 (n=18) | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Expanded your collaborative network? | 16.67% | 61.11% | 22.22% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| Produced new knowledge to help you complete your work? | 11.11% | 33.33% | 44.44% | 11.11% | 0.00% |
| Changed the way you conduct your work? | 5.56% | 22.22% | 61.11% | 11.11% | 0.00% |
| Increased your capacity to conduct your work? | 16.67% | 22.22% | 55.56% | 5.56% | 0.00% |
| Helped you learn new ways of doing your job? | 16.67% | 50.00% | 27.78% | 5.56% | 0.00% |
| Increased your capacity to meet EDA requirements? | 16.67% | 50.00% | 27.78% | 5.56% | 0.00% |

In general, through the program, UC Cohort members have expanded their collaborative networks, produced new knowledge, increased capacity, learned new ways of doing their jobs, and increased capacity to meet EDA requirements. The cohort's impacts have not yet translated to many changes in how UCs are operating, but that may be due to the timeline associated with their current grants. Those types of work activity changes may not be fully realized until a UC comes up for re-competition and we see how their respective statements of work change. Overall, UCs report a high level of agreement that the program is helping them expand networks and build capacity.

**Question 2: How has the UC Cohort impacted the way that you do your work?**

| November 2023 (n=15) | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| My knowledge of EDA and the University Center program has increased | 35.71% | 57.14% | 7.14% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| My knowledge of promising practices from other UCs has increased | 28.57% | 64.29% | 7.14% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| My learning expectations have been met | 14.29% | 28.57% | 57.14% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| My networking expectations have been met | 21.43% | 57.14% | 21.43% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| I took action on ideas that were generated as a result of my work with the UC Cohort | 14.29% | 64.29% | 14.29% | 7.14% | 0.00% |
| I engaged with one or more people that I met in this UC Cohort | 35.71% | 57.14% | 7.14% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| The UC Cohort was successful in developing better practices for university based economic development work | 21.43% | 50.00% | 28.57% | 0.00% | 0.00% |

| September 2024 (n=18) | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| My knowledge of EDA and the University Center program has increased | 27.78% | 61.11% | 0.00% | 11.11% | 0.00% |
| My knowledge of promising practices from other UCs has increased | 22.22% | 61.11% | 5.56% | 11.11% | 0.00% |
| My learning expectations have been met | 11.11% | 55.56% | 33.33% | 0.00% | 0.00% |
| My networking expectations have been met | 17.65% | 47.06% | 29.41% | 5.88% | 0.00% |
| I took action on ideas that were generated as a result of my work with the UC Cohort | 11.11% | 33.33% | 33.33% | 22.22% | 0.00% |
| I engaged with one or more people that I met in this UC Cohort | 16.67% | 38.89% | 16.67% | 27.78% | 0.00% |
| The UC Cohort was successful in developing better practices for university based economic development work | 16.67% | 38.89% | 38.89% | 5.56% | 0.00% |

The UCs respond positively when asked about their access to new knowledge about effective ways to run their programs. UCs note that they are learning more about the program and about promising practices. While their learning expectations have been met, in general, we see less action and less engagement outside of formal cohort activities in the second survey. This indicates that in the project's final months, highlighting collaborative UC efforts could lead to increased engagement. Looking at the results from both surveys, the UC Cohort has been effective in engaging a high number of University Centers across a variety of different programs. In general, UCs find value in interactive learning sessions. There is a desire to engage outside of formal cohort activities, but some uncertainty in how to do so, especially when two UCs belong to different regions.

**Additional comments from UCs about the benefits of their engagement include:**

There have been more opportunities to engage with others in our cohort than I originally anticipated. It has been nice to meet with our UC Cohort at conferences, as well as our monthly meetings, to hear about the work being done at other UCs.

I have expanded my idea of how the program can be operated and have adopted some new projects and approaches to existing ones.

Accountability for presenting our program has helped us learn to talk about it and present it. We are now offering a community presentation tour to share about our project - it is helping us grow the work.

Our UC seems to have a little bit of a different focus, specifically helping with the grant application process. While we are doing what we originally proposed, in addition, we have developed programming to parallel our grant funding assistance which has been inspired by hearing of other UC Cohort activities.

I have received ideas from other University Centers about how to better leverage the resources at our University to assist with projects, in addition to ideas about additional funding sources to pursue."

It has helped us think of new ways to deploy approved budgetary categories to better impact our stakeholders.

## Sustaining an Effective UC Cohort

After engaging with current UCs, action items are recommended to EDA to sustain the UC Cohort and strengthen the work done by centers:

### Achieving Scale for Serving Entrepreneurs

Many UCs are supporting startups and small businesses — some with a focus on entrepreneurs from underrepresented groups. They provide training, direct technical service, and/or insights about potential funding sources. But many are frustrated by the size of the funding they receive and the difference between the need and the resources available. The gap in funding may mean that they can only serve a limited geographic area, or that they cannot work with founders at the level of depth that they feel is needed. Additional resources for expanding access and services were almost always mentioned in interviews. This reflects the retail-service nature of the work that many centers perform. In fact, of all the UCs examined, almost all working on entrepreneurship are providing direct services to entrepreneurs, programs similar services as a small business development center and nonprofits working in this space. The exception to this among UCs is the program at the University of Illinois that provides technical support for community incubators where the UC has developed a "train the trainer model" to help community-based incubators become more effective. This offers the scale necessary to have greater impact.

Given the importance of this focus area, UC cohort programming will focus on information sharing among UCs doing this work. Ideas for programming include:

- Articulating the role of the UCs and distinguishing UCs from the work of other forms of small business and startup assistance, as well as other EDA programs such as the Build to Scale program funded through EDA's Office of Innovation and Entrepreneurship.
- Working with tribal communities on entrepreneurship and others that are interested in identifying partnerships with tribal communities. There are specific issues related to working in tribal communities that the UC cohort could address as a group, such as how to work within the constraints of trust land, and how to partner with tribal enterprises.
- Achieving scale by working with local communities and nonprofits to develop and deliver entrepreneurship programing at a greater scale.
- Developing common metrics for UCs working to achieve common goals and the data collection and analysis tools required to track and report those metrics.

### Developing a Stronger Understanding of EDA's Priorities

Some of EDA's investment priorities seem poorly understood by those applying for and receiving UC grants. EDA might consider working with the UC Cohort to explain these priorities and to offer examples of UCs that are meeting these priorities. For example, we could highlight several examples of commercialization programming and explain how they fit EDA's priority in this area. Similarly, if EDA is interested in more UCs that work specifically on exports and FDI for workforce development, they might want to highlight this work in future programming, explain how it fits in the EDA's priorities, and how it is different from work that is funded by other agencies.

## Achieving Greater Leverage

Some UCs are missing an opportunity to leverage IHE resources for the benefit of their regional economies. EDA might consider changes in the NOFO that encourage UCs to work within their respective IHEs to assess the assets that the institution offers to the regional economy and plan UC activities that address the priorities of the regional economy, perhaps as expressed in the regional CEDS. For example, if the CEDS includes a plan for growing an emerging industry, the UC might consider working with the IHE to focus commercialization and entrepreneurship efforts across the institution to that industry. If a CEDS has identified the need to improve the resilience of local infrastructure, perhaps the UC can identify civil engineering faculty conducting research at the institution (or in partner institutions) that can support these planning efforts. If the CEDS includes a focus on manufacturing, the UC might work with the local MEP and different parts of the IHE to introduce workshops on industry 4.0 technologies. These are examples of how University Centers might achieve greater leverage by aligning university assets around the needs identified by local leaders in the CEDS.

Greater leverage might require the attention and support of senior IHE leadership. Some steps that EDA might take to ensure that this occurs might be to require a letter of support from the institution's President, Chancellor, or another senior university executive. The NOFO might ask proposers to describe how other university assets will be leveraged toward the goals articulated in their proposal. EDA might also ask the IHEs to highlight how they align institution-wide achievements in their annual reporting and discuss how they might employ their university's Communications Department to report UC results to a broad set of university and state or local economic development stakeholders (and incorporating these efforts in the UC's annual reporting).

However, as noted by Phil Singerman in his 2008 article in Economic Development Quarterly,[9] it can be difficult to draw the attention and support of senior IHE leadership for the small amount of funding that EDA provides.

## Connecting UCs to Each Other

We have learned from our interviews that there is a hunger for connection among UCs. The UC Cohort program can fill an important need by getting UCs connected to each other over common objectives, issues, and challenges. At least some of these opportunities should be in person. EDA also might consider starting a mentorship program for newly named UCs. When EDA awards a UC grant to an IHE that has previously not had a grant, they might look at the new UC's focus areas and identify a more experienced UC with similar target area to be a mentor. The mentor can discuss issues such as program design for scale and effectiveness, developing and reporting metrics, and EDA reporting and other logistical issues. This might be most effective if the mentor is within the same EDA region, given the differences across regions with respect to how EDA UCs are managed.

The UC Cohort might also offer programming that provides space for UCs operating within the same state or region to discuss how they might collaborate and leverage their work. This might

[9] Singerman, 2008.

include writing grants to tackle shared challenges, developing broad regional strategies for talent development, and other efforts that could address the needs of a broad statewide or multistate region.

### Developing Common Metrics

As it considers an evaluation plan for the UC program, EDA may wish to develop common metrics for UCs to use. These metrics should further EDA's objectives of leveraging the limited resources available to the Centers as well as identifying common measures of the impact of similar programs.

Currently some of the most frequently used metrics for assessing UC performance include both process and impact metrics, such as the following:

- **Number of businesses assisted:** Some UCs measure the number of businesses that receive technical assistance or other support services in the form of business planning or market research.
- **Jobs created or retained:** Some UCs track the number of jobs created or retained in the region because of their activities, such as through business incubation or workforce development programs.
- **Private investment leveraged:** Some UCs measure the amount of private investment resulting from their activities, such as through technology commercialization or business support services.
- **Research and development expenditures:** Some UCs track the amount of regional research and development resulting from applied research collaborations with local businesses.
- **Innovation and entrepreneurship:** Some UCs track the number of new products or services developed, patents filed, or startups launched in the region because of their activities.

These metrics are not relevant to all current UCs, so it is no surprise that they are not universally used. Developing a new set of common metrics to be reported to EDA could help to shift the focus of the UCs in a direction that is more scalable and help to achieve a broader and more clearly aligned program vision.

## Reimagining the EDA University Center Program

EDA recently outlined a new vision for the University Center Program reflecting, in part, lessons learned from our work. EDA seeks to **leverage more university resources** to strengthen and enhance economic competitiveness and quality of life in U.S. communities. Under this new vision, the University Center program serves as a **primary mechanism for empowering institutions of higher education to meet the full array of regional economic development needs**, especially in traditionally under-resourced urban and rural places. This vision recognizes the **convening power of UCs to bring together diverse stakeholders as a cohesive regional economic development ecosystem**. That ecosystem would entail collaboration among counties, states, regional nonprofits, tribes, EDDs, and other investment entities. In this new vision, **UCs serve as**

**community and regional ecosystem hubs** leveraging technological and human capital assets and breaking down barriers to equitable growth. The UC Program offers a linchpin for EDA in building the strongest possible partnership with higher education institutions and broadening the agency's impact on economic development in targeted distressed communities.

The goal of UEDA's proposed work program moving forward is to help EDA promote and achieve this new ideal for the UC program and to help the UCs become the effective conveners, connectors, and capacity builders envisioned. UEDA benefits from this work program by becoming an invaluable resource to those UCs that may not already be members and by sharing EDA UC best practices with other UEDA members that may not receive EDA funding.

By gaining greater support for this new vision, EDA can better leverage universities as anchor partners for regional economic development. Success will require building consensus among stakeholder institutions about how best they can adapt within different state and regional economic development ecosystems and using EDA's limited resources to engage more universities and communities.

Using the IEP model to analyze how well IHEs are doing in implementing economic and community development practices (Figure 1), UEDA used this framework as a lens for organizing its recent EDA UC data collection efforts. That research revealed that many UCs were successful not only in implementing TIP activities, but also in serving as regional economic engines and building knowledge and capacity among local leaders. UEDA's research indicates that some (but not all) existing UCs are pivotal in leading regional economic discussions, offering expertise to state and local leaders, guiding policy makers through economic shifts, and aiding in strategic decision-making for regional economic prosperity. Moreover, those UCs have a unique standing in their communities that positions them as a likely neutral convener for state and local leaders to promote dialogue about economic priorities and to monitor progress in achieving inclusive economic growth.

These roles are vital to implementing EDA's newly articulated vision for the UC program. When fully operating under the envisioned approach, UC leaders create strong ties with the local economic development community and have a deep understanding of their local economy's resources and needs. When UCs align their efforts with partners in developing human capital and talent to meet these regional needs, UC leaders become invaluable resources for bringing together regional economic development, workforce development, and education system leaders to leverage and strengthen common assets needed for a more robust local innovation economy. Also, UCs can advise the area's higher education system on how university assets and capabilities can strengthen the local innovation ecosystem. In addition, well-positioned UCs seek to use university resources to help meet local needs and achieve desired quality-of-life goals. This is the vision of a fully functioning EDA-sponsored UC.

Under this new vision, the UC guides the strategies and actions included in the IHE's overall plan to have the greatest economic development impact possible, especially in underserved communities. An appropriately supported UC serves as the central nervous system that guides how the university engages with community leaders, supports research and teaching, and connects students and faculty to its service area's stakeholders and economic development needs.

## Value Proposition

While each UC may choose to organize differently and often undertake widely different work programs, under this new vision they serve a common purpose as a regional economic thought leader and strategy partner. The UCs would leverage their university's assets for their region's economic prosperity. In this context, state and regional stakeholders could also help determine UC success by how much they value the UC as a key partner in supporting regional research, strategy, and economic leadership. While today, some UCs currently undertake direct service delivery to individual businesses, entrepreneurs, researchers, or communities, the small scale of their resources means these activities have a limited regional impact. The relatively modest EDA resources targeted to the UC program may best be directed to guiding how the university invests its resources through research, outreach, planning, training, and technical assistance that could help the IHE improve how it directs the entirety of its resources to meet local economic and community challenges. Furthermore, the UC resources should also be focused on leveraging other federal, state, local, and philanthropic resources toward these same challenges.

Beyond the limited funding from EDA, the UC program's greatest value may well be the designation provided by the federal government to the university as a regional economic resource and the standing that designation provides to the UC (both externally to partners and internally to institutional stakeholders) as a recognized resource for economic development. To date, the UC designation has not necessarily offered this standing. Consequently, large land grant institutions came together to create the APLU IEP designation process to recognize institutions that developed and implemented a university engagement strategy. But the APLU designation is all but inaccessible to smaller regional IHEs due to the resources and expertise required to obtain the recognition. Aligning these two ideas–the federal UC recognition and funding resources with the IEP certification's rigor and purpose–could help highlight the role that regional IHEs should play in meeting local economic development needs and demonstrating IHE commitment to local leadership. Offering a more focused designation (using EDA's limited UC program resources) could help EDA achieve its goal of raising the visibility of UCs and increasing the status of the UC as a regional economic development ecosystem partner.

Assuming no additional funds for the Federal UC program, a significant shift in the function of EDA UC grantees could better leverage their potential and increase the program's strategic value for their host universities and regions. To achieve maximum impact, EDA should refocus the UCs to serve as a guiding force behind how their IHE contributes to the state or local economy. Under this vision, the UC would serve as the university's chief economic strategist and regional market facilitator to:

1. **Strengthen local CEDS development and implementation** by bringing IHEs and their leadership fully into the economic development planning and execution process. While university representatives may already serve on a CEDS committee, this action will increase the likelihood that adopted CEDS initiatives serve as priorities for the university to implement.
2. **Ensure greater internal university visibility for the UCs** to confirm their role as a prominent player representing the whole institution–housed in a place that has control (or at least a significant influence) over decisions about the IHE's priorities and resource allocation.

3. **Create a rationale for advocating for a more widely recognized Federal UC designation** (managed through the EDA UC program) to lay the groundwork for UC efforts to access other funding sources. Beyond EDA, many federal (e.g., NSF, DOL, ED, NIST, DoD, DOE, and USDA) and state economic development agencies are seeking to leverage universities as an anchor partner, and universities need a community economic engagement strategy to create effective ways to access these extramural resources. The EDA UCs should be the "go-to" anchor for these efforts.

Ideally, EDA would redirect its existing UC program funding to units of IHE's that seek to:

- Build and nurture a long-term institutional economic engagement plan that aligns closely with their region's local CEDS process and
- Leverage not only EDA resources but also those of other federal, state, and philanthropic funders.

Through the UC grant, the IHE engagement plan would identify priorities that would receive the host institution's full commitment. EDA would make the UC funding available for a limited duration (e.g., a period of 3-5 years) to allow time for the IHE to fully engage within their institution and with their partners. At the same time, the UCs would work closely with local EDDs to ensure that IHE economic engagement strategies align with their state or regional CEDS. This shift in emphasis may be implemented with a pilot group of existing UCs that wish to move their efforts in this direction and then would be implemented in future UC designations as part of future EDA Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) requirements.

## Key Takeaways on the UC Cohort Program

**Key Takeaways:**

- UCs are closing gaps in economic development planning and implementation in their regions.
- UCs desire greater connectivity to others in the network for knowledge sharing and collaboration.
- EDA could help UCs become more valued local partners by better aligning EDA investment priorities with UC focus areas and including UCs in EDA's outreach.
- Funding levels fell and then remained relatively stagnant for many years and are now a major concern for the UCs.
- EDA could help UCs increase their visibility and value to their respective host institutions.
- Reimagining the UC program vision could benefit EDA and the UCs, making the UC program a guiding force behind how IHEs contribute to the state or local economy.

**UCs are Closing Gaps in Economic Development Planning and Implementation**
University Centers are playing a pivotal role in addressing disparities in economic development within their regions. By leveraging local resources and expertise, UCs are identifying specific economic challenges and developing tailored strategies to foster growth. Their involvement ensures that planning is inclusive, catering to the unique needs of communities, which often leads to more effective implementation of economic initiatives.

**Desire for Greater Connectivity and Knowledge Sharing**
UCs recognize the immense potential that comes from networking and collaboration. There is a strong desire for greater connectivity among UCs to facilitate the sharing of best practices, research findings, and innovative solutions. By establishing a more robust communication framework, UCs can enhance their collective impact, fostering partnerships that lead to more significant advancements in regional economic development.

**EDA's Role in Enhancing UC Partnerships**
EDA has an opportunity to strengthen the role of UCs as valued local partners. By aligning EDA investment priorities with the focus areas of UCs, EDA can ensure that funding and resources are directed toward initiatives that resonate with local needs. Additionally, including UCs in EDA's outreach efforts would not only amplify their visibility but also enable them to engage more effectively with community stakeholders, fostering a collaborative environment that drives economic growth.

**Concerns About Funding Levels**
The insufficient financial resources available to UCs hinder their ability to execute impactful projects and limit their capacity to adapt to evolving regional economic challenges. To ensure UCs continue to lead in economic development, addressing these funding issues is essential. Given the current federal fiscal constraints, the likelihood of new funding is low. Therefore, UCs must prioritize sustainable initiatives that effectively leverage alternative funding sources as a key part of their strategy.

**Increasing Visibility and Value to Host Institutions**
EDA can play a crucial role in enhancing the visibility and perceived value of UCs within their host institutions. By promoting the successes and contributions of UCs to regional economies, EDA can help secure further support and resources for these centers. This increased visibility can lead to stronger institutional backing, enabling UCs to expand their initiatives and engage more effectively with local communities and businesses.

**Reimagining the UC Program Vision**
Reimagining the vision for the UC program could serve as a transformative strategy for both EDA and the UCs themselves. By positioning the UC program as a guiding force in how institutions of higher education contribute to the state or local economy, there is potential for a more strategic alignment of goals. This vision could foster a proactive approach to economic development, encouraging UCs to innovate and adapt in ways that directly benefit their communities while simultaneously meeting EDA's broader objectives.

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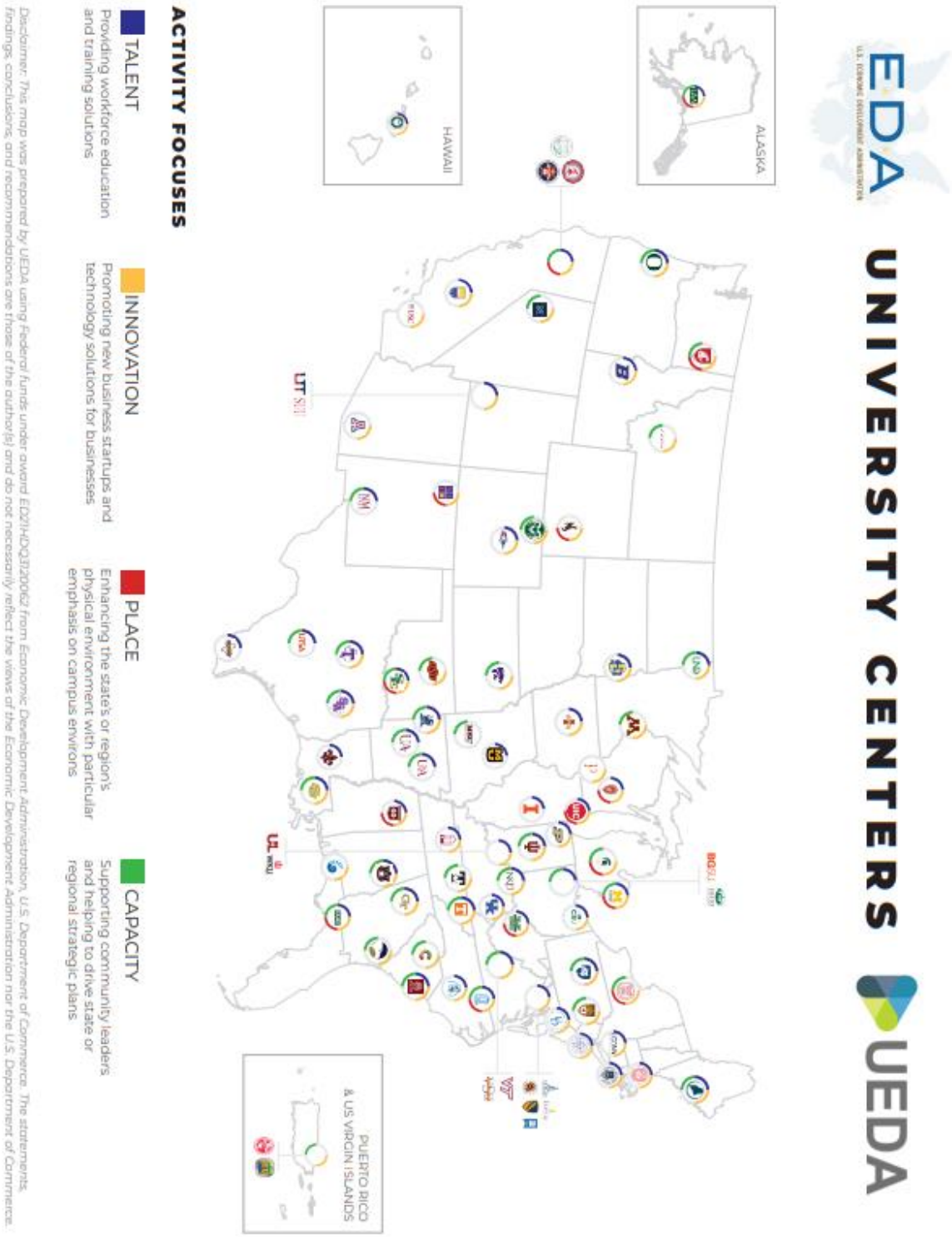
## Appendix 1: EDA UC Cohort Map

A map of all the current UCs was last updated in January 2023. An updated, interactive map can also be found on the UEDA University Center webpage.



## Appendix 2: Customer Discovery Interview Protocol

**Part 1: EDA activities**

1.1 What geographic region does your Center serve?

1.2 Does your Center serve any specific demographic groups? Which?
*In reviewing your project documents, we see that you focus your activities in XYZ areas. Is this accurate? How, if at all, do you engage in the other EDA investment priority areas (read one by one -what are your activities in this area, is it a central focus?)*

**Please rank the importance of these issues in your activities, where 0 = no activity, 1 = some activity, 2 = a primary focus.** Please explain how your activities focus on these areas.

| | Frequency of activity (0, 1, 2) | Relevance to Center's mission? (yes/no) |
|---|---|---|
| Cultivating innovation | | |
| Commercialization of technology to generate new business and advance the region's competitiveness | | |
| Advancing high-growth entrepreneurship and supporting entrepreneurship among underrepresented founders | | |
| Encouraging business expansion in a region's innovation cluster | | |
| Developing a highly skilled regional workforce | | |
| Increasing regional economic resilience | | |
| Other (specify) | | |

1.4 When we reviewed your workplan, we noted that your project appears to respond to the following EDA Investment priorities. (*Refine question according to the scope review).* Please answer yes or no regarding whether your activities respond to these priorities.

- Equity (Yes/No)
- Recovery and Resilience (Yes/No)
- Workforce Development (Yes/No)
- Manufacturing (Yes/No)
- Technology-based Economic Development (Yes/No)
- Environmentally Sustainable Development (Yes/No)
- Exports and FDI (Yes/No)

Please explain how, if at all, your work focuses on equity and resilience.

- *Does your work related to equity focus on a particular demographic group, service area, or definition of equity? What activities fall within this group of activities?*
- *Does your work relate to resilience focus on a particular type of resilience (economic resilience, environmental resilience, social resilience)?*
  - *What activities do you do that fits in this group of activities?*

### Part 2: Non-EDA activities

We would like to understand what your Center does – outside the scope of your EDA-funded activities, particularly those related to community, workforce, and/or economic development.

Answers to these questions will help us better understand synergies between programs, how UCs work with others at their universities, and how EDA funding for UC activities can be more effectively leveraged.

2.1 What other activities does your center engage in that are NOT funded by EDA's University Center program?
*Research, teaching, extension, other buckets more relevant to the non-land grants?*

2.2 How are these activities funded?
*Who is the main funder? Do you rely on match? Do you use the EDA UC funding as match?*

2.3 How do they complement your EDA-funded University Center activities?
*How are those activities like your UC activities? How are they different? Are the stakeholders the same or different?*

2.4 How much influence does the EDA UC funding have on your overall activities?
*Do you use it as leverage? What would you not be able to do without UC funding?*

### Part 3: Impact, Successes, and Communication

Now we would like to discuss how you measure the outcomes and impacts of your program, and the key communication tools you employ. We are most interested in the methods and the "how" of your outcome, impact, and communications activities.

3.1 How do you measure the impact of your work?

3.2 What are some recent successes you can point to because of that work?

3.3 How do you share information about your work with your stakeholders?