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Leveraging Higher Education Institutions for Regional Economic Innovation: The Michigan State University Center for Community and Economic Development Approach

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Abstract

Inequities continue to weaken Michigan's capacity to respond quickly and effectively to crises, both natural and human-made. Minority and low-income populations, already disadvantaged, suffer the burden of the inequitable social, environmental, and economic injustices that have culminated in previously unacknowledged levels. Since 2011, the Michigan State University U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) University Center for Regional Economic Innovation (REI) has been leveraging higher education assets in collaboration with distressed regions to support the co-creation, co-implementation, and dissemination of new economic development strategies to build equitable, resilient, and inclusive economies.

To date, REI has generated over $68 million in economic impact across Michigan through its collaborative and community-engaged strategies. The Michigan State University Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) and its REI initiative's unique approach embraces collaboration to create innovative economic development tools, models, policies, and programs to improve the lives of underserved and historically excluded citizens. The CCED

addresses these challenges through community engagement, strategic partnerships, and collaborative learning.
Through technical assistance, Student-Led Faculty-Guided (SLFGs) projects, Co-Learning Plans (CLPs), and Innovation Fellowships (IFs), REI and partners co-create innovative and equitable initiatives leading to long-term economic recovery across Michigan. Addressing these issues requires an innovative, community-centered approach that leverages higher education assets. Engaging Michigan's underserved communities through a collaborative model can drive high-growth entrepreneurship, job creation, and equitable economic development, fostering resilience and long-term prosperity.

REI's approach also emphasizes justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (JEDI+B), and draws on the unique strengths of higher education to empower local communities. These efforts have resulted in measurable outcomes, including increased community investment, stronger regional ecosystems, and demonstrated capacity to retain homegrown talent, positioning REI as a replicable model for regional economic innovation.

Keywords: economic development, higher education, community engagement, innovation, michigan, resilience, entrepreneurship, land grant, technical assistance

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Introduction

Economic development in Michigan's distressed regions faces considerable obstacles, requiring approaches that move beyond conventional top-down methods. The Michigan State University Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) and its U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA)-supported Regional Economic Innovation (REI) initiative seeks to address these challenges through a community-focused, collaborative model. Based on the *Principals of Good Practice* (Community Development Society, 2024), the CCED has a commitment not only to co-learning and collaboration, but also co-creation of community-driven practices, community empowerment, dignity within diversity, economic autonomy, social justice and regenerative, circular practices. Umbrellaed within, the REI EDA University Center is one mode of knowledge dissemination and a co-creative means of improving well-being within marginalized and distressed communities.

REI's mission is to stimulate innovative economic development by leveraging higher education resources to support high-growth entrepreneurship, job creation, and sustainable infrastructure improvements. Since its inception in 2011, REI has partnered with over 180 community-driven projects across Michigan, generating over $68 million in public and private investments. The CCED also assumes a non-traditional approach to development and centers low-income populations' quality of life within the broader, interwoven context of public health, climate, and social justice.

This article explores CCED and REI's model, integrating university resources with community needs, fostering the co-creation and dissemination of economic strategies that address local challenges. Through its extensive network, comprised of over 3,500 public and private sector organizations, REI can crowdsource key topics, respond to emerging issues, and support the creation of tailored solutions for Michigan's economically disadvantaged communities. The emergent nature of this work requires a strong foundation in historical practice in both grassroots and traditional practices alongside modern innovations laid against the dynamic political backdrop of the present day, supporting an ecosystem of engagement that fosters public access to university expertise and resources for transformation anchored in scholarship.

A Description of the Center for Community and Economic Development

Higher education institutions have increasingly recognized their role in fostering regional economic development through community engagement and the application of knowledge to address real-world challenges (Ierapetritis, 2019). The concept of anchor institutions positions universities as central stakeholders in local economies, emphasizing the potential for higher education to drive positive social and economic outcomes (Birch et al., 2013). For instance, the *Principals of Practice for Higher Education's Engagement in Inclusive Economic Engagement*

Strategies (2023) outlines principles for university economic development and engagement, highlighting the importance of aligning institutional strategies with regional economic goals. This is evident in various initiatives and frameworks that emphasize the integration of academic resources with community needs. Michigan State University's CCED, through many of its initiatives, builds on this model by directly involving community members and local organizations in the co-creation of economic development strategies.

Since its establishment in downtown Lansing, Michigan, in 1969, the CCED, in partnership with public and private organizations, has developed and conducted numerous innovative programs that address local concerns while building the capacity of students, scholars, and communities to address future challenges. Student, faculty, and community involvement are crucial elements of the CCED's mission. The CCED focuses its resources on the unique challenges of distressed communities throughout the state of Michigan. Four generative and co-creative pillars broadly support and help focus the CCED's work, surrounding the areas of:

1) Resiliency, or the ability to recover from shock, whether man-made or natural;
2) Community finance, or focus on community interests and well-being through initiatives and projects rather than profit maximization for shareholders;
3) Circular economics, or a paradigm shift from the traditional "take, make and waste" linear model to a regeneratively sustainable one, and;
4) 21st century communications, or skill development and technological development supporting innovation, critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving.

Such an approach enriches the knowledge base of community and economic development scholarly and practitioner work as well as assists to connect university resources to community while enhancing well-being and quality of life. Examples of project areas spanning this breadth are summarized below including initiatives, an institute, fellowship opportunity and health zone.

Community Benefits Initiatives

Community benefits are a tool for promoting more equitable development practices by explicitly considering the needs of the community where a proposed development is to occur. They are also a direct example of the CCED's work within the community finance pillar. Community benefits, whether they be a plan, agreement or ordinance, are important for community stakeholders to understand particularly given recent increases in their use by local communities and policy initiatives undertaken by the Biden administration to incorporate benefit planning in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Inflation Reduction Act, and Executive Order 14008 or "Justice40" (Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, 2021; Inflation Reduction Act, 2022; Exec. Order No. 14008, 2021; Rosen, 2023, p. 2). The implementation of community benefits has potential to lead to positive changes such as job creation, affordable housing, worker protections, and local amenities (Powerswitch Action & Community Benefits Law Center, 2016). The Center is

working to clarify and provide additional insights as to those qualities contributing to making this a more effective tool to ensure equitable economic development.

Development of a Circular Economic Institute

The current economic paradigm, the "linear economy", is built on a take-make-waste model of thinking. This strategy is reliant on the continual extraction of resources and short product lifecycles, normalizing intense waste generation. The linear economy critically lacks coordination between industry sectors, manufacturers, and end-users, and is increasingly susceptible to economic, environmental, and social disruptions. A "circular economy" is a transformative framework for addressing the current disconnect between economic and environmental health and sustainability. Circular practices represent a systemic shift towards long-term environmental, social, and economic resilience at the local and global levels by embracing ecological truths, working to keep materials in use longer, providing end-of-useful-life solutions, and enhancing collaboration throughout a product's life cycle (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2025).

This transformational paradigm shift has the potential to combat economic instability and social inequalities and is fundamental in confronting environmental and health concerns, including climate change. An MSU Circular Economy Institute charged with advancing research, instruction, technical assistance and corporate social responsibility in addressing solid waste reduction, greenhouse gas emissions, reuse, recycling and recovery has positive impacts on job creation, growing local businesses, and developing the networking and stakeholder capacity to build new economic opportunities while reducing waste and ensuring that Michigan communities divert reliable, high quality and sustainable materials from reaching the landfill stream. As the name implies, this work is a direct example of activity within the circular economics pillar.

Economic Resiliency Tribal Fellowship Pilot

The MSU Economic Resiliency Tribal Fellowship pilot aims to build economic development, sustainable investment, and participatory decision-making within five tribes located in the state of Michigan, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic's distress as well as historical marginalization. In partnership with the MSU CCED, the MSU Native American Institute, and MSU Extension, this professional development opportunity and 12-month work experience also supports leadership development and skill-building capacity amongst competitively selected tribal members. Priority will be given to members residing within and demonstrating a commitment to their sovereign nations and work to build more equitable and just communities as part of rural readiness collective impact efforts. Fellows will provide dedicated technical assistance, planning, and capacity-building support to help meet tribally-identified needs as field

catalysts, strengthening and accelerating economic resiliency projects. This will be accomplished through fostering collaboration, connectivity, knowledge sharing, and more from June 2025 through 2026, and is an example of activity within the resiliency pillar.

Health Zones Collaboration

The CCED is also utilizing National Service programming through Campus Compact and AmeriCorps*Volunteers in Service to America (also known as "VISTA" support) to assess factors affecting vulnerable senior populations and longevity for improved quality of life. With inspiration from the documentary, "Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones" and through related work (2023) the lifestyle habits of "natural movement, purpose, stress reduction, portion control and inclusion of antioxidants, as well as sense of community, care-giver support and socialization as supported by healthy behaviors", it has been found that the average length of life can be extended 10-12 years according to demographic work conducted by Gianni Pes and Michel Poulain in the Journal of Experimental Gerontology (2013).

To understand how vulnerable populations in a capital region can be better supported, the CCED is examining senior activity, natural and built environmental factors such as healthy housing stock and accessibility, as well as access to parks and green spaces for those socially disadvantaged. This work, affectionately termed "Health Zones," has begun by working with area leaders such as the Tri-County Healthy Cities Assessment cohort, Ingham County Land Bank, and Office of the Treasurer in partnership with area non-profits to develop an ecosystem map of resources and supports for at-risk census tracts and their senior populations located within the Capital Region. It is a clear example of 21st-century communications utilizing innovation, the ability to adapt media and technology for vulnerable population needs, as well as applying critical and creative thinking skills for problem-solving.
These examples highlight the evolving role of higher education institutions as active participants in fostering regional economic development through community engagement and the application of academic expertise to address real-world challenges. The CCED is both a generator and a catalyst, as well as an organizational umbrella housing the REI University Center at MSU. At times described as a "center within a center," the CCED is home to the designated "University Center" program for Regional Economic Innovation.

The U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration University Center Model

The U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) developed the University Center (UC) model to leverage the research, technical expertise, and outreach capacity of higher education institutions in service of regional economic development. These centers are intended to foster innovation and build local capacity in economically distressed regions by aligning academic

resources with community and economic development goals across the United States. MSU's CCED has been a longstanding partner of the EDA since 1987. Over the decades, CCED has demonstrated expertise in applied research, technical assistance, and public engagement. These are key attributes that laid the foundation for the EDA's selection of MSU as a University Center site. In 2011, CCED formally launched the MSU EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation (REI) with EDA funding, establishing a statewide platform for co-creating and disseminating innovative economic development strategies.
Following, an in-depth discussion of the REI methods and model offer practical examples of university outreach and engagement through implementation.

Methods and Model Description

The REI University Center's model for economic innovation is grounded in the "Principles of Good Practice" established by the Community Development Society (CDS), which guide ethical, inclusive, and community-centered approaches to development (Community Development Society, n.d.). These principles, such as co-learning, collaboration, community power, and social justice, reinforce REI's commitment to building equitable, resilient, and sustainable local economies. REI operationalizes these values through an integrated cycle of activities that connects university knowledge and resources with the real-world needs of Michigan's communities. This section outlines the primary components of REI's approach, including co-learning, technical assistance, and innovation.

Co-Learning Plans

One of the foundational approaches used by REI is the Co-Learning Plan (CLP), which promotes collaborative knowledge development between academic and community partners. Co-learning builds upon participatory action research, encouraging stakeholders to contribute their expertise, discuss diverse perspectives, and co-generate solutions. This approach not only enriches the knowledge base but also enhances the practical relevance of academic insights, making them immediately actionable within local contexts. Since 2011, 74 CLPs have been completed.

Student-Led Faculty-Guided Technical Assistance

Complementing the Co-Learning Plans are Student-Led Faculty-Guided (SLFG) projects, which engage students in practical economic development initiatives under the mentorship of experienced faculty. These projects serve dual purposes: providing students with valuable, hands-on experience while delivering meaningful, locally tailored solutions to community challenges. SLFG projects have successfully addressed issues such as workforce development, business growth, and infrastructure improvements, demonstrating the mutual benefits of

academic-community partnerships. Over the course of almost a decade and a half, 103 SLFGs have been completed.

Innovation Fellows

Another critical component of REI's model is the Innovation Fellows (IF) program. Seventeen fellows, often drawn from REI's network of partners and previous project leaders, bring specialized expertise to translate research findings into actionable outcomes. However, any community champion, faculty, or other stakeholder representative may apply. Innovation Fellows work closely with community stakeholders to advance on-the-ground initiatives, offering technical assistance, fostering collaboration, and ensuring that project goals align with community priorities. Their efforts help bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical implementation, amplifying the impact of REI's initiatives.

Together, the CLP, SLFG projects, and IF program exemplify REI's holistic approach to more equitable economic development. By integrating academic insights, student contributions, and community expertise, REI fosters sustainable solutions that address the unique needs of Michigan's communities while building long-term capacity for innovation and growth. Simultaneously, these types of programming create and support innovative learning environments, provide training and direct assistance designed to increase community capacities, support research that assists in the development and implementation of effective problem-solving, while providing multidisciplinary responsiveness to complex and interrelated issues of distressed communities.

Co-Learning Plan Case Study: The Global Flint Initiative

In 2024, the Global Flint Initiative followed REI's standard Co-Learning Plan framework, emphasizing community-driven research and inclusive planning, to craft a strategic vision and pathway to implementation for the International Center of Greater Flint. This project kicked off with a stakeholder planning event that gathered input and generated interest in the project. A research team from the University of Michigan-Flint then developed and finalized a survey instrument informed by community dialogue, which was reviewed under IRB oversight to help assess immigrant needs regarding talent attraction and retention. Surveys and follow-up focus groups were conducted in multiple languages across diverse community, faith-based, and educational organizations. Additionally, the native Flint population was also surveyed and participated in a focus group geared to assessing what would help foster a welcoming environment for international talent, engaging immigrant groups alongside native residents to build a cohesive and more economically resilient community.
Simultaneously, a Kettering University research team conducted baseline research on international populations to help inform local strategies. This CLP project also included

workshops for employers on immigration regulations and participation in the national Welcoming Interactive Conference to integrate national best practices. The CLP authors leveraged additional opportunities to provide a Global Flint strategic plan tailored to the region's unique context for implementation, positioning Greater Flint to effectively welcome and support immigrant populations. Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (JEDI+B) principles guided these stages, from inclusive survey design to shared decision-making with results supporting diverse populations for more equitable community development.

REI Community Engagement Strategies

The Regional Economic Innovation (REI) model, employed by Michigan State University's Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED), represents a unique approach to economic development while also promoting and expanding MSU's capacity to provide needed training, direct assistance, and research on community-driven priorities. This model addresses key challenges faced by economically distressed communities in Michigan, including limited job opportunities, lack of entrepreneurial support, and insufficient infrastructure.

Incorporating the Principals of Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging

REI's approach to community engagement is also guided by principles of Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (JEDI+B), ensuring that all economic development initiatives are inclusive, equitable, and community-centered. These efforts are grounded in key principles of community development, prioritizing collaboration, mutual respect, sustainability, and community-driven practices. At the center of this approach is the concept of co-learning, which emphasizes mutual learning and capacity building between professionals and community members. This involves reflective practice, experiential knowledge, professional development, and scholarship, ensuring that knowledge is co-created and applied effectively to meet community needs.

Specifically, REI integrates JEDI+B principles into its work as a critical requirement for design, implementation, and evaluation across all projects. Project awardees submit four updates throughout the period reflecting their progress with engagement efforts and documenting JEDI+B activities. These updates serve to bridge communication between the project coordinator and awardees while also creating structured opportunities for reflective practice. Through these updates, the project coordinator and CCED team members provide constructive feedback and highlight considerations for the awardees as they continue to build out their projects. Feedback has included guidance on trust building in underrepresented communities, fostering inclusive decision-making processes, and survey and data analysis considerations.

REI prioritizes dignity within diversity by fostering cultural humility and practicing nonjudgmental listening to ensure that all voices are valued and respected throughout the innovation process. Cultural humility is practiced from the very first point of contact, when a potential community partner reaches out to the REI coordinator to discuss an idea. During these early conversations, staff seek to understand the context of the individual, their community, and their proposed project. This relationship-building continues throughout the application process, with REI offering personalized feedback and support, regardless of whether the project is ultimately funded. Even when proposals are not selected, constructive feedback is shared respectfully and encouragingly, reinforcing REI's commitment to helping communities grow, build capacity, and succeed over time.

Additionally, the principle of economic autonomy speaks to further strengthening local ownership and stewardship of community assets while fostering wealth-building opportunities that directly benefit communities. In its outreach and engagement efforts, the REI University Center embeds social justice into its initiatives by supporting the identification, resistance, and dismantling of systems of oppression that impact historically marginalized groups. Finally, sustainability is central to REI's work, with a focus on carefully considering the long-term cultural, social, economic, and environmental impacts of actions and inactions to ensure positive outcomes over time.

Collaboration is another fundamental principle of REI's strategy as it bridges boundaries of place, sector, discipline, identity, and interest. By fostering shared decision-making and co-creation, REI brings together diverse resources and expertise to achieve common goals. This approach centers community-driven practice, placing those most directly impacted by development initiatives at the forefront of planning, implementation, and evaluation. By involving partners/stakeholders in every step, typically through community-stakeholder advisory working groups, policies, programs, and research reflect their lived experiences and address their unique needs. One example of this collaborative framework is the REI Consultative Panel (CP), a group of experts engaged in economic development activities across Michigan.

The REI Consultative Panel, a Stakeholder Advisory Working Group

The REI Consultative Panel comprises representatives from statewide, knowledge-based, and experienced industry experts spanning grassroots, business, nonprofit, academic, philanthropic, and governmental sectors, including economic development organizations (EDOs). The consultative panelists meet approximately four times annually to guide and support the REI University Center's initiatives. For instance, panel members (CPs) provide counsel on regional collaboration and innovation issues, ensuring that Michigan's regional innovation clusters are equipped to compete effectively in the state and global knowledge economy. The panel also helps align REI's efforts with cutting-edge knowledge and practices. Additionally, the CPs play

a key role in organizing and contributing to various activities such as the REI annual *Innovate Michigan!* Summit by crowd-sourcing priority topical areas. Through a competitive selection process, the CPs also inform the decision-making and awarding of annual Co-Learning Plans and Fellowships.

Furthermore, REI respects and amplifies community power, supporting community members in developing and sustaining a strong self-image, creating shared power, and shaping their futures independently. An example of this is REI's collaboration with all U.S. Department of Commerce, EDA-designated Economic Development Districts (EDDs) to identify shared regional priorities. This supports the leveraging of resources, including research and technical assistance, and Student-Led Faculty-Guided projects, that may support EDD-led initiatives. The University Center also collaborates heavily with the Michigan Economic Development Corporation's Economic Development Collaboratives (EDCs) and Redevelopment Ready Communities (RRCs). Leaders from the RRCs also help make up the Consultative Panel and inform the broader discussion. These projects have included planning studies such as economic development corridors, sustainability practices, computational analysis of community capital data, and housing revitalization strategies.

These types of collaborations, built on neighborhood-level participation and across the CPs, EDDs, and EDOs, as well as state economic development entities, amplify community power by ensuring the 'eyes and ears' of each region can connect directly with university resources to advance local priorities through REI. One example of this type of collaboration brought about a study to address challenges in local government capacity and collaboration, with a focus on underserved communities, including tribal communities. The 2023 *Collaborative Partnership Models: A Case for Increased Capacity and Efficiency* CLP demonstrated how merging efforts across organizations can create more holistic solutions, improve efficiency, and serve broader community needs. Specifically, it offered a case study focused on workforce economic development services utilized in Northern Lower Michigan by conducting a comprehensive review of the program's small business development services and their impact in statistically underserved communities through descriptive statistical analyses and stakeholder interviews. By respecting and amplifying the role of EDDs and EDCs, REI ensures that its initiatives are deeply informed by local expertise and aligned with community-driven goals.

Methods to Incorporate Essential Elements of Community Development

To further operationalize these principles of community development in economically impactful ways, the REI model identifies community issues, capacities, and needs using both formal and informal methods to ensure a thorough understanding of challenges. Stakeholders, particularly those directly experiencing the issue, are engaged to ensure inclusive participation. Through collaborative discussions and outreach, strategies are identified and researched to address

concerns effectively. For example, the REI *Ideas to Innovation* process, which leverages crowdsourced priority areas, plays a critical role in ensuring that selected initiatives are directly aligned with community needs and emerging opportunities. By capturing diverse perspectives and synthesizing them into actionable strategies/topical ideas, this process ensures that the solutions developed are innovative and grounded in lived experiences. Achieving this level of collaboration underscores the importance of buy-in. As the saying goes, "culture eats strategy for breakfast."

Even the most innovative and well-designed strategies can falter without a culture of shared ownership and alignment among stakeholders. By securing buy-in from the initial stages, this process fosters a culture that actively supports and drives strategy forward, ensuring relevance and long-term impact. Local resources, both in-kind and financial, are also aligned with external resources to support the selected program strategy. Implementation is carried out in cooperation with the community/stakeholders, emphasizing shared leadership and collaboration to ensure collective ownership of outcomes. Finally, formative and summative evaluations are conducted to assess the impacts of the programming and to ensure that stated goals and objectives are met while providing critical feedback for future refinement. By adhering to these principles and essential elements, REI fosters a participatory and inclusive framework for community engagement. This ensures that development initiatives are not only responsive to local needs but also empower communities to lead and sustain their own growth.

Effectiveness of REI's Model

One of the central strengths of the REI model is its emphasis on collaborative and responsive engagement. By crowdsourcing topics from its network, REI ensures that its projects address the actual needs and concerns of Michigan's communities. The Co-Learning Plans and Student-Led Faculty-Guided (SLFG) projects create a feedback-rich environment where community members actively contribute to the design and execution of development strategies, enhancing both the relevance and impact of the projects. Innovation Fellows are yet another key component, as boots on the ground, to mobilize these innovative economic development tools, models, policies, programs, and practices.

This approach has been recognized at the state level, with two SLFG Projects receiving the Michigan Association of Planning's 2024 Planning Excellence Award for Outstanding Student Project. One of these award-winning projects, the Churchill Gardens Ladybug Sustainable Community Initiative in Lansing, represents a forward-thinking model for urban agriculture and sustainability. By incorporating community involvement and regenerative methodologies, the initiative aims to mitigate environmental challenges while fostering local wellness. The project included three components: a detailed planning report analyzing socio-economic and site-specific factors, a comprehensive handbook on cultivating agriculture-based communities, and

community-centric materials such as brochures and site layouts to engage and inform residents. Another SLFG project, Morningside Housing Revitalization Strategy, focuses on addressing housing rehabilitation in Detroit's Morningside neighborhood. By developing a replicable methodology for assessing housing conditions and prioritizing interventions, the project offers a framework for effectively allocating resources to improve housing stock and community well-being.

Co-Learning Plan topical areas have broadly ranged across: abandonment, revitalization, and development; creativity and innovation; digital entrepreneurship; finance, legal, and exporting; green and food; local technical assistance; and workforce and education. Past examples have included *Opportunity or Betrayal?: The Promise and Perils of Electric Mobility (2024)*, *Engaging Pontiac's Neighborhoods for Downtown Economic Resiliency (2022)* and *Community Land Trusts and Land Banks: Understanding the Opportunities and Barriers to Affordable Housing and Placemaking (2022)*. Authors come from a variety of backgrounds, including community champions, elected officials, volunteers, nonprofit leaders, philanthropic investigators, entrepreneurs, and industry experts, as well as internal MSU faculty and partnering university researchers.

Complementing these initiatives is the work of Innovation Fellows such as Christopher Miller. A former Co-Learning Plan author (ZumBrunnen & Miller, 2019), Miller continues to advance community capital strategies that strengthen local economies. Becoming a Fellow in 2021, he embodies the saying "*once an REI fellow, always an REI fellow!*" Through his leadership, the National Coalition for Community Capital and related projects have demonstrated how investment crowdfunding and local capital recirculation can foster resilience and equity in underserved areas. Beginning in his backyard of Adrian, Michigan, today, Chris has become a nationally recognized leader in community capital practice and expertise. Together, these examples illustrate how REI's holistic model integrates academic insight, community expertise, and innovative financial strategies to address pressing regional challenges.

Annual Impact Measurement

REI employs both quantitative and qualitative metrics to evaluate programmatic impacts across Michigan, ensuring its activities remain aligned with community needs and generate measurable outcomes. Metrics such as investments generated, jobs created, partnerships formed, and the scope of geographic and demographic engagement are compiled into an annual impact report, which is shared with partners and stakeholders. A key component of this evaluation is the annual Program Outputs Questionnaire, designed to collect information on the outcomes directly attributable to program activities funded under an EDA grant. This questionnaire focuses on reporting twice a year, rather than cumulative annual results, enhancing precision and data relevance. The questionnaire collects data on outputs such as events, networking, and referrals;

research, development, and commercialization support; financing support activities; mentoring, coaching, and training; and planning and institutional development activities.

At the state level, each community engaged is part of a larger network of economic development collaboratives, as designated by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, forming 10 regions across Upper and Lower Michigan. Typically, these are voluntary, state-appointed regional councils. Additionally, the U.S. Dept of Commerce's Economic Development Administration has also designated 12 Economic Development Districts (EDDs), with an additional eight informally recognized. Annually, questionnaires are also distributed to these community partners and stakeholders, including questions on private investment, wages, revenue, new firm creation, and job creation and retention. Each region is guided by their Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies, or blueprints for improving their regional economies. The questionnaire delves into categories of outcomes aligned, such as product and production processes, markets and business networks, innovation and technology transfer, financing and investment, human capital and workforce development, and organizational capacity.

Since its inception, the REI University Center has supported over 190 projects across 46 counties in Michigan (or more than half), with U.S. EDA support totaling over $2 million. These projects have generated an economic impact exceeding $68 million, with over 20% of initiatives promoting sustainable and green practices (see Figure 1). Beyond funding, REI has catalyzed economic innovation by fostering local capacity building, increasing access to capital for small businesses, and strengthening underserved communities through initiatives such as the Comprehensive Economic Recovery Initiative**.** This initiative, for example, supported 16 projects across strategic areas, including resiliency planning, financial resilience, circular economies, and 21st-century communications infrastructure in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, of those students participating in the SLFG programming, 96% report gaining new skills and knowledge, and most students also express a desire to remain in the state to pursue careers. Jointly, this also demonstrates REI's growing impact on Michigan's talent retention and workforce development efforts.

FIGURE 1. Impact of the REI network on Michigan communities.
Source: Michigan State University Center for Regional Economic Innovation, retrieved from https://reicenter.org/projects/success-stories

Through its structured approach to impact measurement, REI ensures accountability while refining its strategies and activities for greater effectiveness. After project completion, partners complete a post-engagement outcome survey to document measurable impacts such as jobs created, businesses assisted, and private investment leveraged. These responses, along with ongoing communication and follow-up from REI staff, form the basis for performance reporting and program enhancements. The resulting data not only demonstrate REI's contributions to Michigan's economic development but also support ongoing evaluation of equity measures and inform adjustments to better meet the evolving needs of the communities served.

Limitations

REI's extensive digital network, with over 3,500 subscribers from the public and private sectors, has been instrumental in increasing the visibility and reach of its initiatives. Social media, podcasts, webinars, and the annual *Innovate Michigan!* Summit have also helped broaden REI's influence, sharing successful models and engaging a wider audience in discussion on economic innovation. This digital presence has significantly increased engagement metrics, including posts' reach and shares, demonstrating the value of a multi-platform strategy in modern community development.

However, REI also acknowledges the limitations and factors affecting generalizability to both broad dissemination, model transferability, and implementation. In particular, "co-creation" of community-led solutions by nature poses an innate organic development that does not lend itself to "one-size fits all" activity. The landscape of the nature of civic engagement, leadership, population needs, built and natural environments is also myriad and fluid, including both urban and rural regions.

Additionally, by nature of the overarching mission of the Center for Community and Economic Development, and therefore the REI, serving marginalized populations within distressed communities typically means working through the barriers and challenges of poverty, including lack of resources. This may include connectivity and access to technology. While REI strives to include all stakeholder voices at the table, by nature of the work, it is almost inevitable that some community members are not included and are also unable to access the information, share their ideas, or implement them.

Implications for Practice

The REI model offers valuable practical insights for regions seeking to leverage university resources for community-based economic development. Inherent in the REI model is a commitment to innovation. REI recognizes that many traditional economic development practices have resulted in uneven development as measured by income inequality. REI seeks to discover, pilot, and apply new economic development tools, models, policies, and programs that reduce income inequality and are relevant to the challenges of distressed people and places. Central to this is the adaptation of Co-learning Plans, Student-Led Faculty-Guided projects, and Innovation Fellowships, emphasizing the importance of incorporating community input into project design, ensuring that initiatives are locally responsive and impactful. Another critical component is building collaborative networks that bring together diverse stakeholders, enabling the rapid identification of emerging issues and fostering collective problem-solving, essential elements for creating resilient and inclusive economies.

By embedding Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (JEDI+B) principles into its projects from design, REI also demonstrates how such values can lead to more equitable and sustainable economic outcomes, particularly in marginalized or underserved communities. The initiative's annual impact measurement practices highlight the importance of using comprehensive metrics to assess program outcomes, such as investment, job creation, skill development, and community engagement. This structured evaluation process ensures accountability, facilitates continuous improvement, and provides a replicable model for similar initiatives aiming to achieve meaningful and lasting economic development.

Conclusion

Michigan State University's Center for Community & Economic Development EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation initiatives offer a replicable model for higher education institutions seeking to play an active role in equitable economic development for those populations most in need. By combining community engagement, knowledge-sharing, and applied research, REI has demonstrated the transformative potential of leveraging academic resources to address real-world challenges. Its focus on co-learning, innovation, and collaboration with and within communities ensures that its strategies are not only grounded in evidence but also tailored to the unique needs of Michigan's most distressed regions.

The initiative's emphasis on fostering economic resilience, equity, and sustainability sets it apart as a forward-thinking model for other universities and regions to emulate for real-time problem-solving. Through initiatives like Co-Learning Plans, Student-Led Faculty-Guided Projects, and the Innovation Fellows program, REI effectively translates research into actionable solutions through community voices, economically benefiting those communities, regions, and the broader economy. Its commitment to JEDI+B further ensures that the voices of historically marginalized groups are centered in the development process, fostering inclusive growth.

Looking ahead, REI's structured approach to impact measurement and its ability to adapt to emerging needs position it as a force in advancing regional economic development. As REI continues to refine its strategies and expand its network of partners, it provides a practical and actionable model for higher education institutions and community organizations to work together toward a shared vision of sustainable and equitable prosperity in regional economic development. By combining community engagement, knowledge sharing, and applied research, REI has demonstrated how to enable an innovative program that meets the ever-evolving needs of the communities it serves.

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