

# THE CASE FOR RURAL: PLATTEVILLE, WISCONSIN

A CASE STUDY BY THE CENTER ON RURAL INNOVATION  
AND RURAL INNOVATION STRATEGIES, INC.



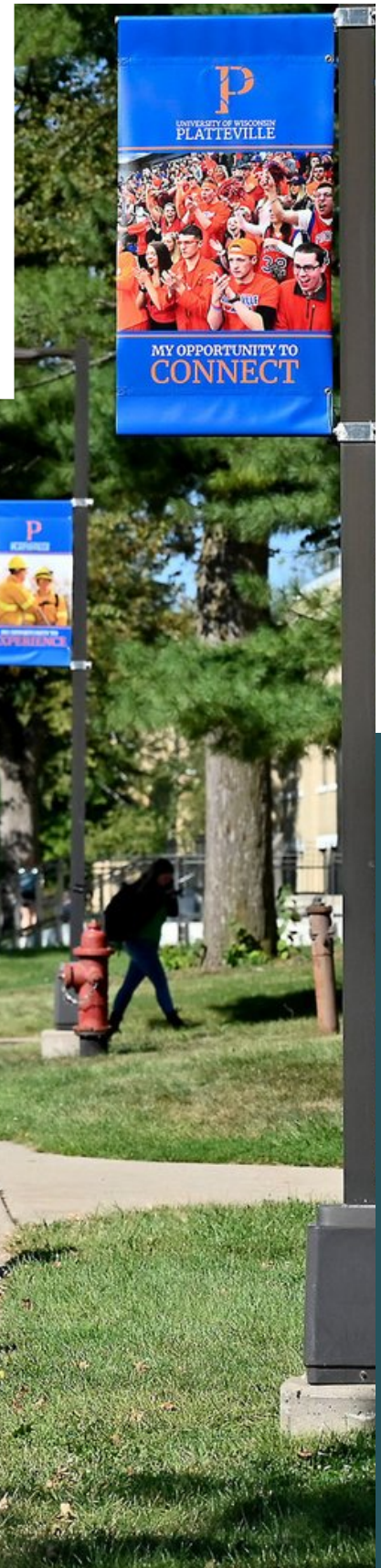
BUILDING INNOVATION IN RURAL AMERICA  
FROM THE GROUND UP

JANUARY 2022





This case study examines how engaging with partners across sectors is an essential aspect of building out a digital economy ecosystem in a rural place. Through the lens of Platteville, Wisconsin, we seek to inform local economic development leaders about the realities of how small, rural communities can foster open, honest, and collaborative communication. Their collaboration speaks to how the commonality of being deeply committed to the well-being of community members can bring people together across social, economic, and educational divides in pursuit of tech-based economic development.



*(The University of Wisconsin-Platteville; Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)*





# UNDERSTANDING THE RURAL-URBAN OPPORTUNITY GAP

The Great Recession exacerbated a growing opportunity gap between urban and rural economies. This was largely driven by gains in the digital economy, which enabled major urban areas to recover from the economic shock. Between 1997 to 2017, the digital economy grew more than four times faster than the overall American economy. In 2017, the digital economy represented 6.9% of GDP; in 2018, it accounted for 10.6% of real value-added ([BEA, 2019](#)). Following the recession, rural economies were not as resilient, and as the growing tech sector concentrated in urban areas, small towns were left without a path to sustainable 21st-century employment. Five major metropolitan areas accounted for 90% of innovation sector job growth between 2005 and 2017 ([Atkins, Muro & Whiton, 2019](#)). Although rural regions represent at least 15% of the workforce (using the CBSA rural definition), only 5% of computer and math occupation employment is located in rural counties. The goal is to bridge that gap and increase the number of tech jobs in rural areas to be 15% of the total rural workforce.

This growing geographic inequality has significant consequences for rural areas, as tax bases shrink and young people move to urban areas searching for aspirational jobs. But with the right tools and assets, small towns can participate in the innovation economy, owning and driving the means of production in today's digital marketplace. This case study, the third in a series of five, seeks to show the strategic work being done across rural America in grassroots efforts to foster the creation of digital economy ecosystems and tech-based economic development.



## Understanding Tech-Based Economic Development and Digital Economy Ecosystems

In telling the story of Platteville, it is important to have a grasp on a few terms relevant to the context. First is the difference between the **tech-based economy** and the **digital economy**. While those in the tech-based economy use specialized technologies as part of their day-to-day work — like those in high-tech assembly lines or in research and development — the work of those in the digital economy is centered on the development of computer-based automation technologies to make processes and markets more efficient. Professions in the digital economy can include computer programmers, cybersecurity analysts, IT specialists, data scientists, network engineers, and other tech-powered roles that are resilient in the face of automation.

(Missy Emler; Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)



# Tech-Based Economies in Rural America

In 2010, federal spending in rural counties was an average of \$683 less per person than in urban counties, and between 1994 and 2001, rural areas received half as much investment per capita from the federal government as compared to urban areas ([Bishop, 2012](#); [WK Kellogg Foundation, 2004](#)). The same goes for philanthropic foundations: Between 2005 and 2010, the average real value of grants given to rural areas was half as much as that given to urban areas ([Pender, 2015](#)). The U.S. Economic Development Administration's (EDA) Build to Scale program supports organizations and initiatives that unlock equity capital to further inclusive investment, operate programs to accelerate sector growth, and/or enable technology commercialization to spur the next generation of industry leading companies. Within that program, EDA aspires to award at least 40% of funds to rural areas ([RISI, 2021](#)). Build to Scale is one of several grant opportunities that rural communities can access to pursue regional innovation, but the 1:1 match requirement to apply can prove to be a barrier. Rural organizations have to navigate the ins and outs of local funders, regional agencies, and private donors as well, often having far more limited staff capacity and access to resources than their urban peers based on sheer numbers.

It is also essential to recognize the difference between tech-based economic development and developing digital economy ecosystems.

## Tech-Based Economic Development

When we talk about tech-based economic development, we are referring to how a community's economy evolves to center on technology and innovation. Tech-based economic development incorporates a broad range of enterprises, from converting traditional manufacturing to highly automated manufacturing of the same product, to research initiatives on new materials, to the assembly of technology equipment, to app development by entrepreneurs. Tech-based economic development can involve strategies like recruiting large tech companies to locate a data center in a community, and can require preparation like building a perimeter road at an industrial park, gaining access to water for cleaning manufactured parts, and obtaining available land for construction.

## Developing Digital Economy Ecosystems

When we talk about developing digital economy ecosystems, we are referring to how organizations in a community work to align around the common goal of increasing tech employment, and as a byproduct, promote greater economic inclusion in rural communities. An ecosystem involves more open collaboration between many different startups, companies, and entrepreneurs, as opposed to having companies operating in silos. This can be supported by building coworking spaces, creating a coalition of tech-focused investors and support organizations, or holding an accelerator program for local entrepreneurs. The ecosystem, when functioning properly, creates a cycle of regenerative benefits for investment, training, collaboration, mentorship, and growth.



Not all tech-based economic development involves developing digital economy ecosystems. But developing digital economy ecosystems is one approach to tech-based economic development — one that involves a more inclusive form of capitalism and is part of what it takes to establish a collaborative culture that supports technological innovation. Workers on an assembly line at a computer chip manufacturer may be contributing to the tech-based economy; yet assembly-line workers who use coding skills learned from a local boot camp to develop a new robotic system to do their repetitive work are a part of the digital economy.

These workers may go on to turn their innovation into a growing startup that trains and employs more line workers, launch a hackathon to identify weaknesses in its software, and subsequently spur new innovations and activity in the community. In short, these workers are part of creating that cycle of local ownership of production, learning, and growth in an age of automation.

Platteville is just one community of many across the United States that tell the story of how bringing together partners across sectors and social divides can lead to the positive growth of a digital economy ecosystem and a tech-based economy in rural America.

### **The Rural Innovation Initiative**

The Rural Innovation Initiative (RII) is a digital economy ecosystem development program that supports rural communities that are seeking to implement strategies for creating digital jobs and fostering more home-grown tech startups. Powered by [Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.](#) (RISI) and its sister organization, the [Center on Rural Innovation](#) (CORI), RII was launched in 2018 through a cooperative agreement between RISI and the EDA. It stemmed from the understanding that while many rural communities had the assets and potential needed to grow tech-based economies, they often struggled to access — or even be aware of — the funding that could help make that a reality.

Platteville was a part of the RII 2020 Build to Scale Technical Assistance (TA) cohort, and came to the program in a unique way. Typically, from the time that RII started, CORI and RISI encouraged communities to apply directly to the program and relied on traditional networking, advertising, and word-of-mouth recruitment in its application process. However, in 2018, the organizations decided to pilot using data analysis as a way to identify potential rural communities who may be ready for tech-based economic development. RISI leveraged its Mapping and Data Analytics team to create a tool to analyze communities based on a variety of metrics, including rurality, broadband availability and speed, proximity to higher education institutions, proxies for poverty, location in an Opportunity Zone, and population. Platteville was a rural city that met all the criteria the data team was looking for, and RISI Executive Director Matt Dunne made the decision to reach out to Rose Smyrski, the Vice Chancellor for University Relations at University of Wisconsin-Platteville (UW-Platteville). This kicked off a series of meetings that led to Platteville's participation in RISI's 2020 TA cohort. Through hard work, Platteville was successful in its EDA Build to Scale application, and was awarded a grant in September 2020 to launch the Innovation Driving Entrepreneurship Accelerator Hub, or the [IDEA Hub Accelerator](#).

This case study is part of a larger series intended to illustrate the array of possible ways that digital economy ecosystems can be constructed in rural America. Although the focus of this is on just one small, rural city, the lessons learned in Platteville through the relationships built and collaboration fostered, are applicable to rural communities across the country.



# COMMUNITY CONTEXT



(Downtown Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)

Platteville is a city of nearly 12,000 in southwest Wisconsin, located between the larger metropolitan cities of Madison, Wisconsin, and Dubuque, Iowa. Historically speaking, Platteville, located in Grant County, has been a community of mining and agriculture. Starting in the 1820s, Platteville was known for its lead mining, which became predominantly zinc mining between the 1850s and the mid-1900s after the lead stocks were exhausted. It was home to Wisconsin's first teaching college as well as the Wisconsin Mining Trade School — two institutions that merged in the late 1950s to form what would become University of Wisconsin-Platteville (UW-Platteville) ([Wisconsin Historical Society, 2009](#)). Platteville was described as a place that shifted from a "rural service center" during its mining days, to more of a "residential suburb," where about one-third of residents commuted out for work in larger cities ([Oppenheim, 1956](#)). Today, retail, manufacturing, government, and agriculture-related businesses comprise the majority of the economy of the region. It is known around the region for its strong entrepreneurial culture, in which UW-Platteville plays a central role ([SWWRPC, 2021](#)).

## **Demographics**

Platteville is more than 93% white, 3% Black, 2.7% Asian, 2.3% Latinx, 0.7% two or more races, and 0.4% Indigenous ([ACS, 2019](#)). The city has a median household income of \$46,690 as compared to a median of \$61,747 across Wisconsin as a whole, and its population has a poverty rate of about 31% ([ACS, 2019](#)). Platteville has one designated Opportunity Zone within the city limits — a designation created in 2017 that refers to "economically-distressed communities where new investments, under certain conditions, may be eligible for preferential tax treatment" ([IRS, 2020](#); [WHEDA, 2021](#)). While Grant County's population grew just slightly between 2010 and 2018, the counties adjacent to Grant all experienced significant population loss ([Forward Analytics, 2020](#)). Furthermore, over the past few years, Platteville has only had enough jobs for 77% of its workforce. Although 50% of UW-Platteville students report they would like to stay in the area after graduation, the lack of jobs is one factor that has led to many young people leaving the area to pursue work elsewhere ([UW-Platteville, 2019](#)). Enrollment at UW-Platteville declined by over 17% in the last three years, which university officials attribute to factors related to demographic shifts in the area, curricula currently in demand, and partially the way that the university is able to tailor to more nontraditional students ([Kremer, 2021](#)).





# THE LOCAL DIGITAL ECONOMY ECOSYSTEM



(Professor Arghya Das at UW-Platteville; Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)

This small Wisconsin city is home to half a dozen institutions that make up the central network of organizations focused on education, digital skilling, and employment to promote digital jobs and tech-based economic development. While in many rural communities there are often one or two major institutions leading tech-based economic development, Platteville is unique in that there are many organizations playing an important role in the process. Alongside the accelerator itself, these actors can be sorted into two groups: university-affiliated partners, and economic development and business partners.

## Who are the tech-based economic development players in Platteville?

Before digging into the details of how Platteville built out a group of core partners around tech-based economic development, it is helpful to identify the key players featured in this case study, as well as the organizations they represent:

### Innovation Driving Entrepreneurship Accelerator (IDEA Hub):

- Maia Patrick Donohue, Director

### University of Wisconsin-Platteville:

- Craig Beytien, Executive Director of Corporate Relations
- Marcia Harr Bailey, Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship at UW-Platteville's School of Business
- Jodi Prorise, the Department Chair of Mechanical Engineering, Assistant Dean of College of Engineering, Math, and Science, and Head of the Innovation Center.
- Amy Seebooth-Wilson, Sustainability Coordinator

### Southwest Wisconsin Regional Development Commission:

- Troy Maggied, Executive Director

### WiSys:

- Adhira Sunkara, Manager of Innovative Ventures

### Platteville Area Industrial Development Corporation & Platteville Business Incubator:

- Ela Kakde, Executive Director



## **The Innovation Driving Entrepreneurship Accelerator (IDEA Hub)**

The IDEA Hub, which officially opened in October 2021, is the product of the work that local development leaders in Platteville put into its Build to Scale Venture Challenge Grant, which it was awarded in September 2020 (EDA, 2020). While the IDEA Hub is the product itself of an EDA grant, it is also playing a major part in future tech-based economic development: Its purpose is to serve as a central point for both community members and students who are seeking resources and support to scale a tech-centric business endeavor.

The Hub is part of a three-phased tech-based economic development plan. First is to develop the IDEA Hub itself, which includes hiring a director, establishing a physical space in downtown Platteville where it will be located, and developing its accelerator and incubator programming. In spring 2021, Maia Patrick Donohue was hired as the IDEA Hub Director, and he has since led a summer accelerator program with 12 entrepreneurs. There is currently an ongoing search for the physical downtown space, which hopes to serve as an intermediary space between the campus and broader Platteville. The second phase is to expand the services of the IDEA Hub across the six-county region of Southwest Wisconsin through close collaboration with Prosperity Southwest Wisconsin, a regional economic development network that works with Crawford County, Grant County, Green County, Iowa County, Lafayette County, and Richland County. The third and final phase of the work is to build out the social infrastructure to support digital entrepreneurs, including building a network with seed funders, venture capitalists, angel investors, and successful entrepreneurs to support those with new and scaling ideas. Donohue, the IDEA Hub Director, meets with founders every week as a way to begin this process: "We want the people in the accelerator to become community leaders," he said.



### **Accelerators and incubators – what are they, and what's the difference?**

An **accelerator** is an entity that provides education, resources, and mentorship to entrepreneurs who already have a promising idea or product, and are looking to quickly scale their growth. An **incubator**, on the other hand, is designed to help entrepreneurs refine business ideas and build their endeavor from the ground up ([MassChallenge, 2021](#)). In time, Platteville's IDEA Hub hopes to fill both roles, although at the moment it is currently focused on its accelerator programming.

*(The new public library in downtown Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)*





### **University-Affiliated Partners: UW-Platteville and WiSys**

UW-Platteville is a public university that is part of the broader University of Wisconsin (UW) network of 13 universities across 26 campuses. With roughly 7,100 students, UW-Platteville prides itself on its strong engineering program, which is a main draw for many students to the university ([UW-Platteville, 2020](#)). The university is constructing a prototyping center to be completed in 2022, and received a [University Center grant](#) from the EDA in September 2021 to broaden its on-campus tech entrepreneurship efforts with an Innovation Center and Makerspace. Another important asset of the university is its connection to WiSys. WiSys is an independent nonprofit that serves the role as the technology transfer organization of the UW system – meaning it supports students, faculty, and entrepreneurs at UW schools with the patenting and licensing processes of their technologies and inventions. WiSys has a close relationship with UW-Platteville, and is proud of the work that comes out of the area: Aside from UW-Madison, the state’s flagship institution, Platteville produces more invention disclosures than any other school in the WiSys network. “Platteville’s engineering program is one of its strongest differentiators,” said Adhira Sunkara, the Manager of Innovative Ventures at WiSys.



*(UW-Platteville; Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)*

### **Economic Development and Business-Centered Partners**

A third grouping of partners involved in Platteville’s tech-based economy are those centered on economic development and business, notably the [Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission](#) (SWWRPC) and the [Platteville Business Incubator](#) (overseen by the [Platteville Area Industrial Development Corporation](#) (PAIDC)). The SWWRPC, the Economic Development District (EDD) for Platteville, was a co-applicant with UW-Platteville on the Build to Scale grant, meaning that the two institutions are equally responsible for executing the grant.

“We realized that there are just inherently barriers when we work with faculty or others on campus, so conversations grew into [SWWRPC] being a sort of vehicle to help them get off campus, mentally and physically getting out into the community,” said Troy Maggied, Executive Director of SWWRPC.

Another business-centric partner is the [Platteville Business Incubator](#), which was founded in 2000 as part of an EDA grant and is located in an office park about two miles across town from UW-Platteville. Today, the Business Incubator is temporarily housing the IDEA Hub before its downtown location is secured. “The IDEA Hub helped leverage a facelift for the Incubator, and the Incubator helped leverage the IDEA Hub in terms of bringing entrepreneurship – especially digital entrepreneurship – out of the university and into the community,” said Ela Kakde, Executive Director of the Platteville Area Industrial Development Corporation (PAIDC), which oversees the Incubator.



# COALITION-BUILDING FOR TECH-BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS FROM PLATTEVILLE



*(Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)*

It is rare that all institutions in a community will agree upon the best method to promote economic development. Throughout the history of UW-Platteville, there has been social and economic division between the university and the surrounding local communities — a social phenomenon known as the “town-gown divide” (Ferman et. al., 2021). This division stems from the physical separation from the rest of the community, differences in educational and socioeconomic status, and relationships of distrust stemming from being left out of past economic development centered on the university. UW-Platteville brings in wealth and resources to the community, but residents of the city who are not associated with the university do not often have access to these benefits. This is not a feature that is unique to Platteville, but one that is common across rural towns that are home to four-year universities. Bridging and promoting partnerships across this social division became a high-level priority when Platteville committed to developing its digital economy ecosystem. “We would not have been successful in getting this grant if we hadn’t figured out a way to start crossing those communications barriers right away,” said Jodi Prosis, the Department Chair of Mechanical Engineering, Assistant Dean of College of Engineering, Math, and Science, and Head of the Innovation Center at UW-Platteville. This divide also persists between regional economic development leaders and university development. “There is code shifting and languages we’re all navigating,” said Amy Seebooth-Wilson, Sustainability Coordinator at UW-Platteville. “But I believe we need to be working together in rural America if we’re going to move forward.”







*(UW-Platteville; Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)*

While acknowledging existing power dynamics in the community, Platteville’s experience shows the value that can come from bringing together local leaders together from across sectors who have a common goal in mind: prosperity and economic equity for the residents of their community. “I’m not a tech guy, and this project was never led from my office,” said Maggied. “But what I value in this project is that it doesn’t matter why I care about it – there’s lots of people who want to create wealth and to me, this [tech-based economic development] is something that is another shot in the arm to inject life into the community.” Through the lens of the Platteville coalition of tech-focused organizations, the following offers insight into lessons learned about what it takes to build a collaborative team and work across the town-gown divide.

## **CHALLENGE 1: BUILDING TRUST ACROSS THE “TOWN-GOWN” DIVIDE**

Not unlike other rural communities – and urban ones, for that matter – Platteville faces a prominent divide between the university and the broader Platteville community that is geographic, economic, and social ([Carlson & Biemiller, 2019](#)). Geographically, UW-Platteville is based on a campus on the western part of town. Students venture down to Main Street for bars and restaurants, but they tend to stay in relatively close proximity to the campus. Those working at the university and local businesses are often talking on different planes. In the academic realm, there is a good deal of ideation, but the university can be slower to act on these ideas; whereas on the side of the local business incubator, conversations can be more prescriptive around capital, relationships, and mentorship. There can be perceptions of elitism and lack of interest in development into the town itself. “The university could have done [the IDEA Hub] on their own completely, but it really would have lost that regional connection,” Kakde said. “And if the region were going to do it on its own without the university, it’s not going to work.”



## **The Solution: Bringing all the parties to the table**

Before RISI approached UW-Platteville about participating in the RII, there had been really no substantive work on tech-based economic development and entrepreneurship in Platteville. Yet once the decision was made to apply for the RII cohort, it was clear that an open and honest discussion needed to take place amongst leaders at UW-Platteville, the Regional Planning Commission, and the local business community before any sort of progress on a digital economy ecosystem could be made. After Platteville was accepted to RII in fall 2019 but before the official engagement with RISI began in early 2020, Kakde took on the task of bringing together 25 organizations from across Platteville in collaboration with the university as a way to introduce broader discussions about scalable tech entrepreneurship. In essence, Kakde took on the role of being a convener. Before her work with PAIDC, she worked for the university in agricultural extension – meaning that she had a broad array of connections across Platteville and the region, and she was able to leverage her relational capital in getting all the different parties to be a part of initial discussions. This was the first of several collaborative meetings, some of which would be facilitated by RISI staff as a part of their strategy development technical assistance.

“If you don't have a good infrastructure for partnership, you need to build one, because you can't do this alone.”

- Craig Beytien, Executive Director of Corporate Relations at UW-Platteville



At the university – whose representatives were present at these meetings – brainstorming around the IDEA Hub had been ongoing for many months among professors. “UW-Platteville is a taxpayer-funded endeavor, and therefore has a responsibility to survive as an institution of education – but we also need to do outreach to the community,” said Craig Beytien, Executive Director of Corporate Relations at UW-Platteville. “If you don't have a good infrastructure for partnership, you need to build one, because you can't do this alone.”

Although some members of the community – like the university and Kakde – were on board with pushing for tech-based economic development, it was not an obvious path for others. “During that first meeting, you could see people wanting to talk about cheese making and wanting to talk about manufacturing expansion, and we really had to shake people up a little bit,” said Seebooth-Wilson, who came to play a central role in the grant writing process. “The IDEA Hub project for me represents a leap in us figuring out what the relationships between the regional planners and the university look like.” The choice of UW-Platteville to become a co-applicant with SWWRPC [on the Build to Scale grant] was an important piece of determining what that relationship would be, one in which both parties are equal owners of the tech-based economic development work.







(Professor Maria Harr Bailey in her office at UW-Platteville; Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)

## **The Solution:**

### **Dividing the labor and knowledge**

By pooling together the talents and insights of those across the university, local, and regional organizations, the team developing the IDEA Hub created a strong, sustainable set of contributors to turn to at different points in the process. Many of these roles fell into place naturally, along the lines of professional experience, life experiences, and position at their current institution. Here are some of the key skills and responsibilities that were established:

- **Project management:** A central manager who ensures the pieces of the project stay on track is essential when bringing in an array of partners. When the IDEA Hub digital economy work came along, Craig Beytien, the Executive Director of Corporate Relations at UW-Platteville found himself in the role of identifying a team of people at the university and locating external partnerships. “My role was to get all the players on the field, and then make sure everybody stayed on the field,” Beytien said.
- **Community connections:** Without a skilled facilitator and networker, it can be challenging to effectively bring together all the different stakeholders. Ela Kakde at PAIDC took on the role of community connector and convener, following from her experience working as an agricultural extension worker for the University. “I’m the person behind the scenes,” Kakde said. “While the university was trying to figure out how to structure all of these things, we were selling it to the community and getting the funding associated with it.”
- **Technical knowledge and EDA know-how:** Having a leader with deep local knowledge of the broader community brings an important perspective on how to make programming more inclusive — and having someone with experience working on federal projects is an asset as well. Troy Maggied, Executive

## **CHALLENGE 2: COMBINING SKILL SETS ACROSS INSTITUTIONS**

After uniting relevant local organizations around a common goal, it was time to dig into more technical aspects. Many different skill sets existed across organizations in Platteville — from grant writing, to organizing, to teaching — but none of the organizations had all of the necessary skills and knowledge about different facets of Platteville. In the end, there were about half a dozen organizations that played central roles in the development of the IDEA Hub and the Build to Scale grant. Capacity in rural communities can be extremely limited, and it was important to create a strategy that allowed people to maximize their time while pursuing the work they and their organization knew how to do best.



Director at SWWRPC, was able to offer his experience based on years of navigating federal grant processes and his deep insight into the Platteville region. In his role, Maggied visits towns with as few as 68 people, and the majority that he works with are under 5,000. "I'm a stickler for due diligence," Maggied said. "We really help bring that bigger case – we generally know the region better, and we can bring that framework to the university."

- Putting the vision on paper: By bringing in a team member with strong grant writing experience, groups of partners can avoid the barriers of needing to learn the writing technicalities from the ground up. In her role as Sustainability Coordinator, part of Amy Seebooth-Wilson's job is to help students think systematically about long-term solutions to future problems, which fits well with the goal of creating an inclusive digital economy ecosystem. She was key in conceptualizing ideas that came about in group meetings and turning them into a visual format, and took the lead role on writing the grant itself. "My role is really capacity building in helping get these programs launched," she said. She previously worked for the SWWRPC, and brought her experience on federal grant writing to the table.
- Connecting to students and advocating at the university level: There were two key faculty members at UW-Platteville who took leading roles in the digital economy work: Marcia Harr Bailey, Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship at UW-Platteville's School of Business, and Jodi Prosis, the Department Chair of Mechanical Engineering, Assistant Dean of College of Engineering, Math, and Science, and Head of the Innovation Center. While Prosis centers her work on the engineering side – pushing engineers to be entrepreneurial and collaborate with their peers across sectors "to make the coolest things we possibly can" – Harr Bailey's mission is to offer her entrepreneurial students the most connections and resources she can. "Similar to how the SBDC [Small Business Development Center] supports lots of local organizations they can plug into, because of our unique access at the university, we can do that too," Harr Bailey said.
- Connecting to broader networks of talent and mentorship: Not all communities have access to organizations like WiSys, but bringing in leaders who know how entrepreneurs can be connected to a broader network of professionals in tech is a crucial piece of the puzzle. WiSys – the technology transfer organization of the UW system – strives to grow the amount of ingenuity coming from across Wisconsin and Adhira Sunkara, the Manager of Innovative Ventures at WiSys, fills the role of facilitating these connections. She has deep insight into the research, development, and patenting process, she supports the creation of the VentureHome program. VentureHome was piloted in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and is being established within the IDEA Hub. "The goal is to combine statewide resources with community initiatives to provide local entrepreneurs access to a full menu of startup resources in their community," Sunkara said. "The idea is that you won't need to leave Platteville to create a startup."





With formal mechanisms of communications established and roles delegated, the Platteville tech-based economic development team pieced together how all of its different strengths would not only help in building an application, but in sustainably executing the work.

### **CHALLENGE 3: CONNECTING PLATTEVILLE ENTREPRENEURS AND COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH ENTREPRENEURIAL RESOURCES**



*(Professor Antonette Cummings at UW-Platteville; Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)*

There is often a skills gap between young, creative students and more experienced local entrepreneurs. In Platteville, there are a wealth of student ideas coming out through classes, projects, and pitches every year at the university, but at the same time, there are also a limited number of scalable tech entrepreneurs in the Platteville community. This presents an opportunity for the small, rural Wisconsin city: the chance to bring together these groups of people to encourage the creation of more scalable tech businesses.

#### **The Solution: Creating communal spaces and opportunities for collaborative projects**

Addressing such a gap between student ingenuity and entrepreneurial experience is a core tenet of the IDEA Hub. Bringing together innovative students with more practiced entrepreneurs means that all parties have the opportunity to learn from one another. “The idea is to get them into the pipeline, and then we can figure out where to direct them,” said Marcia Harr Bailey. Given that the IDEA Hub is only officially launching in fall 2021, an early example of this logic is the IDEA Hub’s Summer Accelerator.





*(Marcia Harr Bailey at UW-Platteville; Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)*

Led by Maia Patrick Donohue, the summer accelerator included 12 entrepreneurs with a wide range of ideas. One of these entrepreneurs was Harr Bailey, who herself was seeking to scale a business. Her idea, at its core, was to bridge the town-gown divide by building out a virtual community resource center of entrepreneurship skills. The resources would be available to those within and outside of the university.

The Hub is the community piece of the collaboration, where if someone has a business idea, they can workshop with Donohue at the Hub on how to get funding and market ideas. UW-Platteville received another EDA grant in September 2021 to establish a university innovation center, which will serve as a complement to the IDEA Hub. It will be led by Prosis, and open to entrepreneurs throughout Platteville, where they can bring those ideas further through resources to support prototyping and app development. "I push for more and more collaborative projects because that's the way our students will be better prepared, and our constituents will be better served," Prosis said.

In short, digital economy leaders in Platteville hope to show that living in a rural place should by no means be a barrier to scalable tech entrepreneurship opportunities. "If a Stanford kid and a Platteville kid have the same idea, it is about the support they get that determines whether they can succeed or not," Donohue said. "In Platteville, the goal is to remove as many of those barriers as possible."

## COMMUNITY PROGRESS AND BENEFICIARIES

With all the collaborative tech-based economic development work going on behind the scenes, a growing number of talented entrepreneurs coming out of Platteville have been able to thrive. Their stories show how both university faculty and community members are able to benefit from the resources being offered through the newfound digital economy ecosystem. Below are the stories of two of those people.







*(Professor Arghya Das in his office at UW-Platteville; Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)*

## ARGHYA DAS

Arghya Das is an Assistant Professor of Computer Science at UW-Platteville, who moved to the Platteville area in 2018 after being hired for a teaching position. Das' knowledge is steeped in computer science and data analytics: Before becoming a professor, he worked as a software developer in India, and also did data analytics research to create models to predict pollution levels from coal mines. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Das began to recognize that cost served as a crucial barrier to entry to those wanting to pursue data science – from tuition, to infrastructure, to accessing supercomputing technologies. He started thinking about how he could create a startup to address the issue, and he created Onstitute, an online education platform for data science curriculum with the goal of making data science education affordable to everyone regardless of location.

Das was able to leverage the support he got as a faculty member at UW-Platteville to perfect his curriculum development and hone his online teaching skills as he builds Onstitute. He also opted to work with Donohue at the IDEA Hub. "Maia and the other mentors really gave me a great way to expand the business," Das said. "I learned about the customer discovery process, and Maia pushed me to go and interview professors and students just to see where my customer base actually lies."

While the university resources provided Das with the content knowledge he needed for his business idea, the IDEA Hub's practical business supports helped him bring it to fruition. From a small rural town, Das was able to build the foundation for an international tech business: he has formed collaborations with IBM, as well as universities across in the US, India, and Europe.





*(Stacy Jax; courtesy Susan Endres/Baraboo News Republic)*

## STACY JAX

Stacy Jax is the founder of [Trinity Alarms](#), and is based in Baraboo, Wisconsin – about 90 minutes northeast of Platteville. Prior to becoming a tech entrepreneur, Jax was a teacher. Her oldest daughter was in kindergarten when the Columbine High School shooting happened in 1999, and her youngest daughter was in first grade when the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School took place. She began to ask herself how it was possible that so many people could be caught off guard. “I started thinking about emergency procedures I used as a teacher in my classroom, and the idea of a fire alarm came to mind,” Jax said. She began to ask herself why there wasn’t some sort of detector that could recognize the sound of a gunshot, set off an alarm, and send a notification to law enforcement officers – and the idea for Trinity Alarm Systems was born.

Jax sought out the IDEA Hub in Platteville when she found she wasn’t getting the support she needed to grow her business. When she initially started working on the idea, she received support from the [Sauk County Development Corporation](#) to get connected

with mentors and other startups in the Madison area. But Platteville’s support stood out. “I really felt like being surrounded by other entrepreneurs was exactly what I needed,” “What I liked about Maia was that he exposed you to other entrepreneurs who are in it, and maybe just have had a successful business launch.”

What propelled Jax’s entrepreneurial creativity forward was being surrounded by other entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship can be a lonely endeavor, and the opportunity to build relationships and learn from peers at a rural accelerator like IDEA Hub served as a source of motivation to excel.

## CONCLUSION

Although Platteville is still on the early side of its tech-based economic development, the success it has seen thus far in securing funding, bridging relationships, and forging partnerships offers essential lessons to other rural communities considering pursuing such a development pathway. The organizations and institutions in the city have made significant accomplishments, from being awarded an EDA Build to Scale Grant, to establishing the IDEA Hub, to creating a structure to connect students and entrepreneurs, to putting together a clear roadmap for the future tech-based economic development. Those contributing to digital economy work in Platteville come from a wide array of perspectives. Several have held prior work experience in other different but complementary roles, from working in other economic development offices, to agricultural extension, and are able to transfer their skills. A key point to successful partnership building – and successful tech-based economic development – is that it takes time and ongoing commitment. As Amy Seebooth-Wilson expressed, “These coalitions are built upon years of working together.” The IDEA Hub and the other structures are just beginning in Platteville, but are the result of working together on other economic development issues.





# THE RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TOOLKIT: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS ACROSS SECTORS

Platteville created a tech-based economic development strategy based on working across sectors, across counties, and across social divides. Based on these realities, CORI and RISI created a checklist of suggestions and questions for rural community leaders. This checklist is one in a series of five, and it is recommended to be used alongside the others. It can be used as a tool to support those considering applying for a Build to Scale grant or other funding opportunities, and is ideally used several months before the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) is released:

## 1. Map out stakeholders committed to economic development in your community:

- What are the key sectors working in your community?
  - What are the specific businesses, groups, or institutions in each of these sectors?
  - How do each of these sectors work with technology?
- What types of educational institutions exist in your community?
- What organizations in your community are specifically working on issues related to technology and the digital economy?
- What are the organizations that support underrepresented groups in your community?

## 2. Understand the social context of your community:

- What are the demographics:
  - Economically?
  - Racially?
  - Educationally?
  - Religiously?
- What types of divides have historically persisted in your community?
  - Between sectors?
  - Between demographics?
- What types of strategies, events, or conversations have brought together different groups of people?
- Who are the organizations trusted by the demographics or groups that you are looking to partner with?

## 3. Think about strategies to build relationships:

- What are the economic development coalitions or groups that exist:
  - In your community?
  - In your region?
  - In your state?
    - On each of these levels, how do these coalitions relate to tech-based work?
- Who are the leaders at institutions, businesses, and organizations related to tech in your community?
  - What do you know about the skills of these different leaders?
- Who are the people in your community who excel at bringing people together?
- Who can you reach out to start conversations about collaboration?



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*(Downtown Platteville, Wisconsin; courtesy Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.)*

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*This content was prepared by Rural Innovations Strategies, Inc. using Federal funds under award ED20HDQ3120070 from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce. The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Economic Development Administration or the U.S. Department of Commerce.*

