Institute for Rural Partnerships Consortium
FY24 Consortium Report

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Submitted by: The Institutes for Rural Partnerships at Auburn University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the University of Vermont

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Introduction

Since 2022, the three Institutes for Rural Partnerships located at Auburn University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and University of Vermont, have leveraged the expertise of faculty and staff at these land grant institutions to develop novel and high-value programs that are addressing critical needs in rural communities and economies. Through the inclusive engagement of stakeholders, the three universities are identifying, piloting, and managing collaborative solutions to rural challenges across the three regions. Institute grants are funding innovative partnerships to advance technology, increase knowledge, and provide services to support vibrant and resilient rural communities.

In this second iteration of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships annual report, we build upon our mission to utilize the USDA-NIFA funding support to strengthen collaborations between land grant universities and their communities. This report outlines ongoing collaborations and partnerships between the three institutes and the programming and projects that are currently being implemented and their respective impact. We anticipate that these three-institute collaborations and partnerships will expand in future years.

Consortium Collaboration

Between October 2023 and September 2024, the consortium interacted and shared ideas on several occasions. The consortium, which includes representatives from Auburn University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the University of Vermont met monthly to share updates, troubleshoot challenges, and offer seeds for collaborative opportunities. Through this process of intentional engagement, we were able to identify the unique and shared focus areas of the three institutes, as depicted in Fig. 1. The figure further demonstrates our common commitment to community-engaged research and partnership, and the amplification of the land grant mission.

Figure 1: Visual representation of collaborative interactions between the three Rural Partnership Institutes.

Additionally, the consortium convened twice in the past year: once in Vermont at the RISE summit, which included a day-long retreat for consortium members and selected guests of

relevance, and again through participation in the Rural Sociological Summit in Madison, Wisconsin.

Vermont Visit

Administrators, faculty, and students from Auburn University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the University of Vermont, and representatives from USDA-NIFA and the Brookings Institution gathered at Shelburne Farms on June 23rd, 2024, to discuss the shared and unique challenges faced by communities in Alabama, Wisconsin, and Vermont. The group also had the opportunity to see collaborative research in action at Shelburne Farms, which hosts a variety of research in partnership with UVM that addresses agriculture, education, and sustainability.

These representatives from the three universities also attended the RISE summit on June 24th and 25th, which included a panel that featured the three leaders of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships and a poster session where current projects from the Institutes for Rural Partnerships were shared with summit attendees.

There were also informal opportunities during this three-day event to consider collaborative research opportunities across the three institutions, including reflective work on the role of Institutes for Rural Partnerships in the context of rural development, flooding, and on-farm research.

Wisconsin Visit

In July of 2024, representatives from Auburn University and the University of Vermont traveled to Madison, Wisconsin to participate in the Rural Sociological Society annual conference. The leaders of the University of Vermont and University of Wisconsin-Madison leaders, and a co-PI of the Auburn University Rural Partnership Institute discussed their respective work on a panel at the conference. The institute representatives also toured the University of Wisconsin-Madison's dairy and agricultural research facilities.

Stakeholder Engagement and Communication

A cornerstone of the work of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships is the ongoing engagement of stakeholders working to identify and solve challenges unique to their region. The following section outlines the stakeholder engagement and communications strategies employed by each Institute, and how this outreach contributes to strategic planning and program design.

Auburn University

In the past year, Auburn University Rural Partnership Institute (AURPI) engaged with the following stakeholders

1. City of Pine Hill, AL (Water Department): The AURPI cybersecurity team conducted an on-site interview regarding cybersecurity controls and policy for the water department main office and treatment plan. As a result of interview and follow-up discussions, AURPI will assist the City of Pine Hill water department in updating their Emergency Response Plan which is required under the Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002. The goal is that the plan developed by the AURPI cybersecurity team will serve as a template for water departments of municipalities in the state of Alabama especially those located in the rural part of the state.

2. State of Alabama through the Alabama Focused Cybersecurity Intelligence Center: The AURPI cybersecurity is in discussion with the state of Alabama to develop an Alabama Focused Cybersecurity Intelligence Center that has the following tentative goals: (a) depository for cybersecurity information, (b) public-private partnerships especially for workforce development, (c) platform for sharing information about cyber-physical threats in the state, and (d) coordinate cybersecurity in the state.

3. Modern sawmill in Abbeville, AL and an older sawmill in Alex City, AL: Visits of project personnel to these mills has significantly improved our understanding of the challenges faced by forestry industry regarding challenges to adopting of modern technology, cybersecurity and data storage, recruiting/retaining employees, and interaction with surrounding businesses and municipalities.

4. Processing plant Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE): A PhD student has been collecting processing production data at a poultry processing plant with the goal of identifying the most logical location/equipment to place sensors in processing plants. The goal of adding sensors is to be able to recommend to poultry processing plants predictive maintenance schedules that have the most impact on Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE). By providing an effective predictive maintenance plan, the amount of emergency shutdowns due to machine/parts failures can be reduced thereby improving the reliability of work for workers in rural Alabama. We are at the early stages of conducting similar studies on OEE for sawmills.

5. Interviews with Forestry Stakeholders: The AURPI social science team conducted in-person interviews of 16 forestry stakeholders such as mill managers, timber buyers, mill owners and Human Resource personnel. We aim to complete the forestry interview by end of 2024. In the meanwhile, common themes are beginning to emerge from the preliminary analysis of the interviews conducted so far.

6. Economic Development Partnership of Alabama (EDPA): At the request of this agency, the AURPI social science team conducted focus group interviews (11 focus groups and 115 participants) on behalf of the EDPA regarding economic development opportunities for Alabama ag sector. The focus groups consisted of the individuals from the major ag commodity groups in the state and also processing and business leaders in the state. The data and report from the interviews are currently being collated and will be part of the strategic plan for workforce development in the state.

7. Advisory Board: The first AURPI Advisory Board meeting was held on May 8, 2024. The next board meeting is scheduled for October 18, 2024. board is comprised of stakeholders from the following rural-related agencies and industries in the state of Alabama: forestry, poultry, cybersecurity, economic development, Department of Commerce, and commodity boards (ALFA, Alabama Poultry and Egg Association, and Alabama Forestry Association).

University of Wisconsin-Madison

UW-Madison's work consists of a group of research projects designed to improve the lives of rural Wisconsonites. These projects center on measuring, communicating about, and preparing for weather, including extreme weather events, the economics of rural livability, K-12 mental health, community health, food resilience in indigenous communities, and water quality in the central sands portion of the state.

We work closely with many stakeholders to give invited presentations across Wisconsin. Our *State Climatology Office (SCO)*, has engaged with weekly Wisconsin Agriculture-Climate Outlooks, a biweekly University of Wisconsin (UW) Extension Badger Crop Connect webinar series, Master Naturalists and Gardeners trainings, and numerous types of media interviews to provide these organizations with weather and climate data and interpretation. Furthermore, the *SCO* receives inquiries nearly every day from the general public, businesses, insurance agencies, law offices, and other organizations seeking weather and climate information. We have also built and networked over 50 new weather stations during this project, named the Wisconet. Wisconet has interacted with numerous stakeholders on a regular basis, including: the National Weather Service through bi-annual webinars and office visits, broadcast media through annual webinars, growers within agriculture during site visits and ad-hoc meetings, and local and national partners during ad-hoc meetings and scheduled workshops.

For our focus on *Preparing for Extreme Weather* we have initially focused on identifying statewide or regional groups of stakeholder groups across our three priority sectors, including 1) Agriculture, 2) Emergency Managers and Hazard Planners, and 3) Schools and Rural Youth. We have distributed a one-page information sheet of the project background and goals to entities representing these groups in the state and conducted follow-up conversations with many of them to explore more formal partnerships. Those groups include the Wisconsin Emergency Management Regions, Regional Planning Commissions, and Producer-led Watershed Groups. To better understand the needs of the Emergency Management/Hazard Planning sectors, we developed and distributed a survey to identify their familiarity with, and use of, existing climate data and tools. We presented 90-minute interactive sessions at the Wisconsin Emergency Management Association (WEMA) conference in September 2024 to gather information from emergency managers on topics related to this project.

In our *Rural Livability* project, we have participated in an advisory capacity for this year's Small Community Forums which included recruiting the participating communities, developing the agenda, and advertising events. This year the forums feature Rewriting the Rural Narrative from Ben Winchester (U-MN) and Melissa Kono (UW-Extension), a body of work that complements the Rural Livability Project. Our team supported the inaugural Rural Entrepreneurial Ventures in partnership with Compeer Financial and UW-Extension. We also supported the Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference in spring 2024, with more than 200 rural economic developers, community leaders, and entrepreneurs participating. Known as a conference "about small towns, for small towns," the CEC conference offers programming, discussion, and networking for stakeholders in Wisconsin's rural business development to support rural livability. We also supported the Community Economic Analysis for Rural Wisconsin Communities (CEA-RWC) pilot program, which equips small communities with tools to plan for a prosperous future, focusing on strengthening local economic development efforts to enhance rural livability. Throughout the program, community leaders collaborate with members and stakeholders to understand the environment, identify priorities and draft a plan. The pilot communities for this project include Pittsville School District, Gilman School District, Mellen-Morse, Brodhead, and Lac du Flambeau. All communities have finished their series of workshops with our Rural Livability team members and most have received their completed Strategic Plans. Results are then used by the community to guide policy and actions. Another engagement, Cornucopia Design Charrette**,** assists participating communities in articulating a common vision for their community, often focused on a specific challenge, that enhances livability. The Cornucopia design charrette focused on senior housing and the work will be used to inform a request for proposals to build independent living housing for seniors ages 62 or older. The Rural Livability Project team supported this charette in partnership with the Economic Development Administration, University of Wisconsin-Extension, the City of Washburn, and the Bayfield County Housing Authority.

In our *K-12 mental health* project we are training school mental health professionals in a family-centered intervention to promote family wellness, youth mental health, and family-school connections. Schools are eager for the training and appear ready to implement once trained. In our Community Health project we are developing communication materials to share project overview and progress with various stakeholders including webpage development, 1-page

overviews, presentation templates, outreach materials, etc. We have completed consultations in two communities and discussed program opportunities.

Our *Food Resilience in Indigenous Communities* team has engaged in over 20 community and stakeholder events from the start of this project, including Members an Indigenous Research Forum at UW-Madison featuring 15 Tribal speakers addressing Indigenous research and data sovereignty. This event reached 150 attendees from Tribal communities and the UW-Madison community. Our Manoomin (Wild Rice) Team focused their engagement and outreach work this summer on gaining input from Tribal community members on how to address questions about contaminants in the St. Louis River Estuary affecting the health of wild rice and people who eat it. Their outreach efforts reached Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa elders and community members, the 1854 Treaty Authority Board, Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission, Wisconsin and Minnesota Departments of Natural Resources, and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. This team partnered with the UW-Superior Indigenous Cultures Resources Center to host a rice camp in September for students to learn how to harvest and finish manoomin. We also engaged with Tribal producers while supporting an Indigenous Food Producer Academy in July organized by the Great Lakes Intertribal Food Coalition and Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council. We hosted a Maple Season Debrief in May featuring five Tribal panelists that reached 23 Tribal producer participants. We are continuing to expand the Tribal Maple Syrup Network facilitated by Extension to reach more Tribal producers and serve their needs. Our project website, linked to our main Wisconsin Rural Partnerships Institute web page (https://ruralpartners.wisc.edu) is now active. Our partnership with the Ho-Chunk Department of Agriculture was featured on Milwaukee NPR in September (listen here).

Our recently initiated *Water Quality project* has engaged stakeholders with an article on the Central Sands water quality project in the Badger Common'tater trade magazine that is distributed internationally. In late spring 2024, the project was featured in a Wisconsin Public Radio show that stimulated much grower and partner engagement, including farmer-led watershed groups. Our work was featured at the UW-Madison Potato and vegetable growers field day with an estimated attendance of 125 stakeholders. Additionally, vegetable food processors have become engaged via raw product committee meeting updates and field days at several times during the season, and the project will be featured in a presentation at the upcoming Midwest Food Products Association Processing Crops Conference. A presentation on the project was also delivered at the Potato Association of America meeting in July.

University of Vermont

The Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships and its sister organization, the UVM Office of Engagement, have established a comprehensive outreach approach to engaging communities across Vermont's fourteen counties. This approach is grounded in engagement with the regional organizations that oversee community and economic development, and planning, for the state.

Our model for effective community engagement is grounded in two key objectives: 1) developing and sustaining partnerships between UVM faculty, staff, students, and program offices; and 2) supporting the development of partnership-based collaborations that build

solutions to Vermont-based rural challenges. We will discuss partnership development further in the next section.

Over the last 12 months, our staff has held over 90 meetings with UVM faculty, and over 150 meetings with community partners across the state. The Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships continues to engage its statewide network through our in-person presence at gatherings, participation in state-level convenings of economic development, community development, and community leaders, and our annual RISE summit, which drew 900 attendees both in-person and online in June of 2024. We have also engaged over 160 employers through our Green Mountain Job and Retention Program, which administers $5,000 in student loan forgiveness to recent graduates of Vermont colleges and universities who remain in Vermont to work and live. In 2023, 169 loans were administered to these recent graduates.

We also engage with Vermonters through our monthly newsletter, which is sent monthly to over 5,000 recipients, and our social media pages on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Here we are able to amplify our grant programs, advertise convenings and events, and amplify the work of our partners both on- and off-campus.

Our work is guided by a diverse advisory board, which has representation from higher education, workforce development, philanthropy, business and industries, local and state government, and community and economic development. They amplify our capacity to engage and communicate with stakeholders through their own networks.

Partnership Development

Each consortium institute is building partnerships to connect University resources with organizations addressing rural needs in their states.

Auburn University

AURPI partnership has grown significantly in the last one year. These partnerships we believe will extend our reach to develop and implement new technologies that will enhance the economic prosperity of rural Alabama especially the technologies that are applicable to the production and processing sectors of the poultry and forestry industries.

1. Southern Rural Development Center: The AURPI social science team is collaborating with SRDC to launch a rural poll for Alabama and the rest of the Southeast with the goal of this poll being conducted every other year. The rural poll will be launched in late Fall of 2024. Survey instrument for a farm poll is being developed. The farm poll will be launched in Spring of 2025 and will also be conducted every other year. These polls will provide biannually important feedback farm workers, farm owners and rural residents about these two important industries in Alabama. AURPI is serving as a catalyst to starting these polls

in Alabama and the goal is for these polls to be a legacy that extends beyond the tenure of AURPI.

2. Forestry partners: Through the interviews conducted by the AURPI social science team, we are developing partnerships with key players and entrepreneurs in the forestry industry. Apart from results that will be gathered from the on-going interviews about the challenges by this industry, our goal is to involve these entities managed by these individuals in the adoption of technologies that this project will identify as being effective for the forestry industry.

3. Processing plants: Two PhD students are collecting data from a poultry processing plant and a sawmill. This is because of the partnership that we have nurtured since AURPI project started. The data being collected by these students are often proprietary in nature that are not often released to entities beyond these companies. However, the data will offer us the opportunity to develop technologies, sensors and systems that will ultimately benefit these two industries and other similar industries in the state, and will reduce the workforce retention challenges faced by these customers. The data will also provide insight about the how their operational effectiveness can potentially impact the rural part of the sate (e.g. downtime often results in hourly employees not being paid).

4. Alabama Community College System Innovation Center (ACCS-IC), Southern Union Community College (SUCC), Alabama Green Industry Training Center (AGITC) and National Poultry Technology Center (NPTC): The AURPI Ag Technology team is partnering with these entities to develop the Ag Technology Certificate program. The overall goal of the program is to produce a workforce that is prepared for the current and future challenges facing the agricultural sector. In addition, the program will empower residents of Alabama with the skills needed to secure high-quality, well-paying jobs in the agricultural sector. It will also ensure that agricultural businesses and owners will have access to skilled professionals needed to adopt new technologies and improve productivity. We believe that these goals will foster a more resilient agricultural sector in Alabama thereby boosting the local economies of rural Alabama. The program is being developed for current workers in the agricultural sector (and other sectors) interested in upskilling and reskilling, and anyone who is interested in living in rural Alabama and having the technological skills desired in modern agricultural industries that are often located in rural Alabama.

5. Workforce Development Partners: The Ag Technology certificate program will consist of five modules – forestry technology, UAV technology, precision ag technology, poultry technology (NPTC), green industry (AGITC), and PLC/hydraulic trainer (SUCC and ACCS-IC). NPTC and AGITC are centers with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES). Planning for the launch of the certificate program has reached advanced stages and offering of the certificate program is scheduled to start in summer of 2025. Publicity for the program will be launched in conjunction with our commodity organization partners/stakeholders (ALFA, APEA and AFA). Because of the Ag Technology program, we are also participating in the workforce development aspect of "Greening the Southeast"

NSF Engine proposal ($160 million) that is focused on development on biobased products for the automotive, construction and packing industries.

6. Ag and Forestry equipment manufacturers: As part of the Ag Technology certificate program, we are securing technology simulators that will be used to expose program attendees to the technologies used in ag and forestry production. We are in discussion with major manufacturers of equipment in these industries (e.g. John Deere, Caterpillar, Kubota, Vantage South, Yellowhammer Drones, and Chandler Equipment.) to develop workshops that have cutting edge technologies currently used in ag and allied industries. Our goal is that most of the workshop attendees will be those from rural Alabama those that are seeking to upskill or reskill.

7. Consortia Partners: AURPI partnered with the two other rural partnership institutes at the University of Vermont and the University of Wisconsin-Madison to present their projects to attendees of the RISE summit (June 24-25) and the Rural Sociological Conference (July 24-28). In each instance, there were close to 75 attendees that listened to the panel discussion about the impacts of these three institutes on the rural sectors of their states.

8. Technology Providers: AURPI is partnering with a technology provider that manufactures sensors to monitor process equipment efficient, reduce maintenance and prevent failure. An outcome of the visits to poultry processing plants and forestry mills is that when failures of equipment occur, there is significant impact on the temporary and hourly employees, and therefore the population of the rural communities that these establishments are often located. Testing of sensors from a technology provider will commence at various locations in Auburn University in November with the goal of identifying sensors that are appropriate for the poultry and forest industries.

9. Academia and Industry Partnerships: AURPI is in the process of develop two RFP (request for proposal) programs. One program is for those in academia (faculty and students) while the second program will focus on technology providers. For both programs, a proposal submission will be required by those interested in being funded but for both program, the main goal is to propose a novel solution to one or more technological challenges faced in the forestry and/or poultry industry. An AURPI panel will evaluate which projects to fund and monitor the progress. The tentative plan is for the academia RFP program be launched before the end of 2024. The industry RFP program will be launched in 2025.

University of Wisconsin-Madison

The various subdomains of the WRPI have been very successful in growing our partnerships during this past year. The *SCO* has strengthened connections with the American Association of State Climatologists, Midwestern Regional Climate Center, USDA's Midwest Climate Hub, National Drought Mitigation Center, Wisconsin Emergency Management, and the grassroots Tribal Maple Syrup Producers network. Within Wisconsin, the *SCO* is working closely with UW

Division of Extension, and agricultural representatives from the Wisconsin Drought Task Force. The *SCO* is also developing a new partnership with the National Weather Service's Wisconsin offices to increase collaboration and support their stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, collaborations with businesses includes Madison Gas & Electric utility and Potter Lawson Architects.

We have also developed several partnerships that will support our weather stations, *Wisconet* and our stakeholders, including: CBS58 in Milwaukee to test broadcast products and engage in outreach, like Weather Day with the Milwaukee Brewers; USDA NRCS to support field days and identify new site hosts (at least 6 weather station locations have come from working with NRCS); Vaisala to pilot a new precipitation sensor at our Hancock Ag Research Station, supporting our precipitation performance evaluation and possible new product development (precipitation type); Ocean Spray to identify how Wisconet data can support cranberry growers and what new tools and products can come from Wisconet (4 stations are connected to Ocean Spray, with 3 Co-op growers and the Wisconsin Cranberry Research Station).

Our *Extreme Weather* group of experts have been directly contacted by six county emergency managers across rural counties to formally partner on the project. We will be holding additional exploratory calls to identify the timing and format of future workshops and listening sessions with these partners. We are also engaged with one school district to train educators on participating in the GLOBE program, where students at the school will be gathering climate data and conducting associated research projects. We have engaged with a school district in Vilas County where students will assist with the microclimate monitoring and youth health component of this project. The district plans to subsequently participate in the GLOBE program.

With respect to *Rural Livability*, the stakeholders are also our partners, and include the following: Wisconsin Rural Partners**,** where two of our team members served in an advisory capacity for this year's Small Community Forums which included recruiting the participating communities, developing the agenda and advertising the events; Rural Entrepreneurial Ventures**,** delivered in partnership with Compeer Financial and UW-Extension. Compeer Financial is deeply interested in rural development and has become a key partner and funder of several initiatives; Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities, where our team members supported the work in partnership with the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation Office of Rural Prosperity, Institute for Business & Entrepreneurship, Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, Prosperity Southwest, Grant County Economic Development Corporation, Platteville Main Street, Iowa County, Incubator Platteville; the Community Economic Analysis for Rural Wisconsin Communities **(**CEA-RWC), a pilot program supported by the Rural Livability Project, UW Division of Extension, and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation. Within each community we engage with team of partners/stakeholders that include school superintendents, economic development professionals, business owners, elected officials and concerned citizens. Lastly, the *Rural Livability* Project team supported the Cornucopia Design Charrette in partnership with the Economic Development Administration, UW-Extension, the City of Washburn, and the Bayfield County Housing Authority.

In our *K-12 mental health project* the training and coaching in the family-centered intervention is

aligned with what rural school professionals and families shared as their key priorities. We have an established relationship with colleagues at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, and are discussing impacts for rural youth mental health statewide.

Our *Food Resilience in Indigenous Communities* team has several partnerships. The Indigenous Crops & Livestock Team is expanding our partnership with the Ho-Chunk Department of Agriculture to assist with harvesting Indigenous corn, supporting the establishment of cover crop demonstration gardens, coordinating learning and capacity opportunities such as a workshop about insects with Insect Ambassadors, and continuing last year's work supporting Ho-Chunk in scaling up Indigenous corn production by advising on equipment. We continue to develop our partnership with the Menominee Department of Agriculture and Food Systems by supporting a cover crop demonstration and working to support equipment needs and purchasing through their subaward. We have a partnership with the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council where we collaborate on knowledge sharing events, along with the Great Lakes Intertribal Food Coalition where we attend quarterly Coordinating Committee meetings in Tribal communities and support the Indigenous Food Producer Academy.

Within our *Water Quality* project, we are partnering with grower stakeholders, key supply chain partners and food retailers with the objective of creating market pull for on-the-ground improved water quality practice adoption for the surrounding rural communities. In our Community Health project, we are partnering with local community organizations providing health care and social services and engaging with community members directly. We are in conversation with United Way and WI Department of Workforce Development regarding support for community health worker participation in an apprenticeship program, facilitating additional access to professional development and a stipend.

University of Vermont

Partnership development is the cornerstone of the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships. In our first report, we outlined three strategies for partnership development: 1) grantmaking; 2) engagement initiatives; and 3) convenings. In this section, we will provide updates on all these strategies.

Grantmaking

Since our launch in November 2023, we facilitated our first round of grants. We offered two types of grants: capacity grants, which provide $10,000 to facilitate partnership development between community partners and UVM entities; and partnership grants, which are grants up to $300,000 that support collaborative projects addressing a rural challenge in Vermont. In our first grant round, we received 150 letters of intent, indicating the large scope of our outreach and partnership development efforts. Ultimately, we funded 13 projects: 5 capacity grants, and 8 partnership grants. A full overview of our funded project can be found here. As of October 2024, we have closed our second round of grant applications. In this round, we have capped partnership grants at $250,000 to facilitate streamlined distribution of funds and have received 130 letters of intent. Three selected funded projects are highlighted below:

The Vermont Local Government Institute

Vermont's municipal governments oversee critical community services, ranging from infrastructure and transportation management, economic development, and housing development. Many leaders in Vermont local government feel they lack the skills required to navigate such dynamic roles.

The Vermont Local Government Institute helps Vermont town managers, supervisors, and other professionals gain the essential skills needed to lead their teams and support their communities.

Leveraging the Vermont Community Schools Research-Practice-Partnerships

A dynamic collaboration, designed to enhance, support, and study the implementation and sustainability of community schools in Vermont. Community schools serve as resource hubs that provide a range of accessible, coordinated services that help students and families with complex needs. The goals are to improve the capacity to provide comprehensive physical and mental health services to rural Vermont youth and families, and provide professional development and research opportunities for UVM students and Vermont professionals.

This learning opportunity is a partnership between UVM's Professional and Continuing Education (PACE) program, and the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, a non-profit with the mission of serving and strengthening Vermont's local government.

Engagement Initiatives

We also develop partnerships through engagement initiatives, which seek to institutionalize university support for targeted rural challenges. In 2023, the three engagement initiatives were data services, student engagement for a resilient Vermont, and partnerships for rural capacity. Today, there are five engagement initiatives making an impact across Vermont. They include:

1. Data services: this programming provides community and economic development data tools, support, and reporting to communities, organizations, and local and state governments. While we have continued to provide this resource, we have also taken a critical look at the data needs of Vermont communities, and how we can use the innovative work of UVM faculty, students, and staff to address these needs. One of our funded projects, for example, collects and consolidates all available wastewater infrastructure data for municipalities in Vermont to guide planning and development. As of September 2024, we have created a data services advisory board to better facilitate

requests for similar projects and are considering shared data governance agreements with state and community partners.

2. Student engagement for a resilient Vermont: in 2023 and 2024, Vermont experienced devastating and unprecedented flooding that impacted communities across the state. Capacity challenges require creative solutions from university partners, and we are developing a coordinated professional development program for faculty interested in developing service-learning courses that support flood resilience in Vermont. We are currently in the process of preparing this first cohort, which will provide a replicable model for systematic approaches to rural challenges via service-learning and student engagement.
3. Partnerships for rural capacity: the challenge of rural capacity is stark in Vermont- lack of county government places tremendous responsibility into the hands of often-volunteer led communities. To support rural capacity building in Vermont, we funded a grant that supports professional development for town leadership, in coordination with the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, which provides technical assistance and support to Vermont communities, and UVM's Professional and Continuing Education department. Additionally, we are supporting state-funded research on regional and county governance models.
4. Partners in Place podcast: In 2024, we helped evolve an Extension-based seminar series into a podcast that highlighted community-engaged collaborative research and programming between UVM and Vermont communities. Our hope is the podcast makes the prospect of partnership more accessible to more Vermont communities, organizations, businesses, non-profits, and governments. To date, we have released one episode on agroecology in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom and have multiple episodes in production on issues like sustainability, water resources, and planetary health. You can listen to the podcast at this link.
5. Place-based summer internship program: For the second year in a row, the Leahy Institute facilitated a place-based summer internship program where UVM students were placed with organizations outside the Chittenden County area, where UVM is based. This summer, 10 UVM undergraduate students lived in Vermont's rural Northeast Kingdom, worked for local organizations, and participated in a cohort where they lived and learned together at Sterling College in Craftsbury, Vermont. A full writeup of this story is included here, and we plan to replicate this program in other regions of Vermont during the summer of 2025.

Convenings

Our final partnership development strategy was to sponsor convenings to share knowledge, best practices, and build connections among UVM and community entities. On June 24-25th, 2024, the Leahy Institute held our second annual RISE summit, which highlighted the way research, innovation, sustainability, and entrepreneurship contribute to placemaking in Vermont and other rural communities around the country. The 2024 summit built upon the momentum of the previous year, drawing nearly 900 participants. This year, we featured keynote addresses from Tony Pipa, a rural development expert from the Brookings Institution, and Dr. Chavonda Jacobs-Young, the Under-Secretary of Agriculture for Research, Education, and Economics. Many of the Leahy Institute funded proposals participated in wide-ranging panels that spanned our

thematic areas, including community schools, rural capacity and governance, regenerative agriculture, and rural refugee resettlement.

Additionally, we have hosted convenings of relevance for different interest groups within UVM to facilitate knowledge sharing and partnership development. In 2024, following a second year of devastating flooding, we brought together interdisciplinary researchers and faculty to share about their work and seed opportunities for collaboration. We also brought together food and agriculture researchers to seek greater research alignment and are in the process of developing a workshop where those researchers will hear about direct research needs from Vermont's Agency of Agriculture.

We also sponsor and support numerous rural and community development focused conferences and summits throughout the year, which displays our continued commitment to collaboration and the role of UVM in statewide and local endeavors.

Future Endeavors

In the coming year, the three Rural Partnership Institutes plan to continue to build upon the work they've been doing over the last two years, and continue to support collaborative, partnership-based programming that impacts rural communities across their respective states.

In June 2025, UVM's Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships will host its third annual RISE summit, which will provide an opportunity for the consortium members to gather in Vermont and present their respective work and discuss collaborative opportunities.

Additionally, a consortium visit to Alabama has been tentatively planned for 2025.