



Program Evaluation
Year Two Annual Report

September 2025



Summary

This report is the second annual evaluation report for the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) program. ARISE is ARC's multi-state initiative that aims to drive large-scale, regional economic transformation through collaborative projects. ARC launched ARISE to strengthen Appalachian business and industry, and to grow and support the development of new opportunities across multiple states. ARISE encourages initiatives that go beyond borders and help the 13 Appalachian states advance ARC's strategic investment priorities as one, united Appalachia.

A total of 57 ARISE projects are represented in Year Two data sources. Data for this report were collected from September 2024 through August 2025 and include:

- Project applications and approval memos from all projects.
- Grantee-generated reports from 53 projects.
- Grantee and Partner Reflection responses from 414 individuals representing 47 projects and 57 administrations of the Reflection tool.
- Cumulative progress data (outputs and outcomes) from 32 projects.
- Interviews with 72 grantee and partner personnel representing 20 projects.

Year Two Key Findings

ARISE grantees are demonstrating measurable progress toward initiative goals. By August 2025, ARISE projects had collectively served over 14,500 individuals, 3,300 businesses and organizations, and more than 600 communities, with many reporting improvements in capacity, skills, and outcomes. Early workforce outcomes include nearly 1,400 jobs retained and more than 300 jobs created. Planning and implementation efforts have also yielded tangible products, such as 89 reports/plans and 10 new programs. Of the four planning projects that have closed, all met their output and outcome targets.

These outcomes reflect ARISE's unique multi-state design. Grantees reported that cross-state collaboration facilitated knowledge transfer, increased efficiency, and built strategies with broader reach than would have been possible within a single state. They are confident these collaborative networks are creating lasting infrastructure, from shared workforce databases to region-spanning apprenticeship models, that can amplify impact beyond individual grants.

As in Year One, grantees and partners continue to report more strengths than challenges in project implementation. Across 47 projects that completed the Grantee and Partner Reflection in Year Two, nearly all rated adaptability, partner commitment, collaboration, and common vision as significant strengths. The ability to adjust to changing circumstances, coupled with deep partner engagement, is enabling projects to move forward even when facing complex logistical or contextual barriers.

Multi-state, multi-partner work requires careful coordination, strong administrative systems, and thoughtful use of time and resources. Nearly all grantees emphasized the importance of communication structures and project management, and these elements

emerged as challenges for some projects. Some projects also experienced challenges stemming from turnover, administrative hurdles, or differing state policies. Others noted the difficulty of establishing streamlined mechanisms for tracking and sharing data across organizational and state boundaries. These challenges illustrate the ongoing effort required to sustain cross-state partnerships and underscore the importance of investing in collaborative capacity, both to support current implementation and to strengthen the long-term programmatic sustainability of ARISE-funded work.

For future applicants and grantees, ARISE grantees and partners provided several recommendations. They recommended that applicants manage the application process proactively; consider pre-booking critical convenings, which can always be adjusted as timelines change; take advantage of peer-learning opportunities; budget for the administrative time and staff needed for strong project management and reporting; and plan for more startup time than may be expected initially.

They recommended that future grantees establish strong systems, including project management, grant administration, and performance tracking, as early as possible, and ensure they have adequate investment. They also advise that grantees err on the side of overcommunication with partners; spend time building collaborative relationships across project partners; budget and spend with a long-term view; and leverage available ARC relationships and resources.

Grantees continue to value ARC's flexibility and partnership-oriented approach. Many cite it as a critical factor in their own ability to adapt to new information and changing circumstances, and it was not uncommon for grantees to name their ARC project coordinator and/or state personnel as factors in their success. Grantees and partners offered the following recommendations for ARC's consideration:

- Providing earlier access to application materials and multimodal technical assistance during the application phase.
- Continuing to require meaningful partnerships while exploring ways to reduce application complexity.
- Considering opportunities to convene an ARISE-wide community of practice to strengthen cross-project learning and collaboration.

Year Two findings suggest ARISE is building momentum toward its goal of fostering regional economic transformation through multi-state collaboration. While projects are still in the early or middle phases of implementation, the combination of tangible outputs, emerging outcomes, and strong partner engagement signals that ARISE is laying a foundation for long-term impact. The initiative's requirement of multi-state collaboration appears to produce distinct benefits while recognizing the challenges associated with moving multiple partners, across multiple states, toward a shared set of goals leading to economic transformation. Sustaining these collaborative gains will require ongoing investment in systems, relationships, and strategies into subsequent years of ARISE.

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Introduction

About ARISE

Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) is ARC's multi-state initiative that aims to drive large-scale, regional economic transformation through collaborative projects. ARC launched ARISE to strengthen Appalachian business and industry, and to grow and support the development of new opportunities across multiple states. ARISE encourages initiatives that go beyond borders and help the 13 Appalachian states advance ARC's strategic investment priorities as one, united Appalachia.

Since January 2023, ARC has invested \$179.5 million in 68 ARISE projects.¹ In line with the intent of ARISE, these projects support ARC's broader strategic plan goals:

- **Building Appalachian Businesses** by strengthening the region's economy through expanding economic development strategies and investments in entrepreneurship and business development.
- **Building Appalachia's Workforce Ecosystem** by expanding and strengthening community systems that help Appalachians obtain a job, stay on the job, and advance along a financially sustaining career pathway.
- **Building Appalachia's Infrastructure** by ensuring that the residents and businesses of Appalachia have access to reliable, affordable and resilient utilities and infrastructure in order to successfully live and work in the region.
- **Building Regional Culture and Tourism** by strengthening Appalachia's community and economic development potential by preserving and investing in the region's local, cultural heritage, and natural assets.
- **Building Community Leaders and Capacity** by investing in the capacity of local leaders, organizations, and communities to address local challenges by providing technical assistance and support to access resources, engage partners, identify strategies and tactics, and conduct effective planning and project execution.

ARISE is focused on multi-state partnerships and multi-state impacts, and all 13 states are represented in ARISE projects.

About the Evaluation

The ARISE evaluation is designed to follow each ARISE-funded project throughout its period of performance, to maximize the usefulness of evaluation data for ARISE stakeholders as projects are occurring. The evaluation combines this project-level inquiry with initiative-level analysis to summarize progress; identify emerging themes related to grantee and partner successes, challenges, and experiences implementing multi-state projects; and record early impacts of ARISE-funded projects.

¹ <https://www.arc.gov/grants-and-opportunities/arise/>

Evaluation Questions and Methodology

The initiative-level evaluation examines:

- Grantee feedback about the ARISE application process (e.g., how grantees found out about ARISE, their level of preparation to apply, the usefulness of the resources and technical assistance provided by ARC, etc.).
- Successes and challenges grantees experienced as they carried out their work, including those related to implementing multi-state projects.
- Early impacts of individual grants, eventually with state-level sums.
- Early impacts of the initiative, with a particular focus on transformation.

Following a project's announcement, the ARISE evaluator holds an orientation and planning call with the grantee (and its partners, if desired). At ARC's direction, the evaluation adapts to each project's timeline and context; therefore, the default evaluation activities may be adjusted to maximize logic and usefulness of the evaluation, and minimize burden, for the grantee and ARC. By default, however, a standard set of evaluation activities is occurring for each project, along that project's individual timeline. See Table 1.

Table 1: Evaluation Activities by Project Type

EVALUATION ACTIVITY	IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT SCHEDULE	PLANNING PROJECT SCHEDULE
Grantee & Partner Reflection	Semi-annually on project's schedule	Semi-annually on project's schedule
Grantee Interview	Annually on project's schedule	Annually on project's schedule
Grantee Progress Report Review	Quarterly as applicable	Quarterly as applicable
Partner Interviews	Annually on project's schedule	N/A
Beneficiary Feedback Collection	April and/or October, as feasible ²	N/A

In addition to project applications and approval memos from all projects, data sources for this Year Two Report include:

- Grantee-generated progress or closeout reports from 53 projects.
- Grantee and Partner Reflection responses from 414 individuals representing 47 projects and 57 administrations of the Reflection tool.
- Cumulative progress data (outputs and outcomes) from 32 projects.
- Interviews with 72 grantee and partner personnel representing 20 projects.

² Evaluators piloted a beneficiary feedback survey process in Year Two that included the development of a series of surveys focused on various types of beneficiaries (i.e., people, businesses, communities). In April 2025, when the first set of surveys were scheduled to deploy, just one grantee felt it was feasible at that time to administer the survey to its beneficiaries. All others requested a shift to Year 3 or later to align with their scheduled implementation activities.

A total of 57 ARISE projects are represented across these Year Two data sources. Projects included in this evaluation report are listed in [Appendix A](#). Evaluation limitations are listed in [Appendix C](#).

ARISE Grantee and Partner Reflection and Interviews

Previous ARC-commissioned research completed by American Institutes for Research (AIR), identified multiple factors that may be important to the success of multi-state projects. Together with ARC, the ARISE evaluators expanded on AIR's *ARISE: A Regional Multistate Collaboration Toolkit*, to reframe these factors into 15 items that populate the ARISE Grantee and Partner Reflection ("Reflection"). The Reflection asks project implementers to rate the prevalence of various elements in their project and the extent to which each item represents a strength or a challenge (or neither) for their project. See [Appendix B](#) for the full Reflection and definitions of each item.

Importantly, the Reflection is not a performance assessment; rather, it captures perceptions of strengths, challenges, or neutral elements in a project's collaboration. Further, the Reflection is designed to recognize the following:

- Projects start at different levels of partnership maturity, from long-established collaborations to newly forming networks, and maturity progresses at different rates.
- No uniform timeline applies across projects; variations in strategy, pace, and context shape expected and actual progress.
- Each administration of the Reflection is a point-in-time snapshot; results are not intended for longitudinal comparison.
- "Partner" is defined contextually in each project; cross-project comparisons are not central to analysis or interpretation.
- The tool is designed to surface practices and barriers that guide deeper inquiry through interviews and progress report analysis.

Grantee (for all projects) and partner (for implementation projects) interviews provide an opportunity to explore these items in greater depth; evaluators can ask interviewees to elaborate on factors and practices that support strengths and to provide additional context for items identified as challenges or that stakeholders rated relatively lower. Where applicable, interviews also provide a forum for stakeholders to explain their disagreement with project-level averages and share divergent perspectives.

Early Progress and Evidence of Impact

Outputs and Outcomes to Date

As of August 31, 2025, 32 grantees had provided performance data to ARC. Collectively, they reported serving more than 14,500 people (students, workers, and participants), with about 5,600 improved; serving 3,300 businesses and organizations, with more than 900 improved; and serving more than 600 communities, with nearly 500 improved. Grantees reported more than 300 jobs created and nearly 1,400 retained. They have produced 89 plans or reports and implemented 10 new programs. See details in Table 2.

Table 2: Interim Outputs and Outcomes from ARISE Projects

People		
Students	11,429	served (n=6 projects)
	3,188	improved (n=4 projects)
Participants	1,590	served (n=5 projects)
	1,456	improved (n=4 projects)
Workers	1,538	served (n=5 projects)
	982	improved (n=3 projects)
Businesses and Organizations		
Businesses	3,052	served (n=7 projects)
	905	improved (n=7 projects)
Organizations	255	served (n=3 projects)
	8	improved (n=3 projects)
Communities		
Communities	603	served (n=10 projects)
	460	improved (n=7 projects)
Jobs	1,367	retained (n=2 projects)
	327	created (n=4 projects)
Project Products		
Plans/Reports	89	produced (n=16 projects)
Programs	10	implemented (n=2 projects)

To date, four ARISE projects have closed and have reported closeout metrics; all were planning projects. Collectively, grantees with closeout metrics reported meeting 100% or more of all planned outputs and outcomes. See Table 3. At a project level, all four projects met or exceeded their individual metrics as well.

Table 3: Closeout Planned Versus Actual Results

METRIC	PLANNED	ACTUAL	PCT. OF PLANNED
Businesses served (n=1 project)	12	12	100%
Businesses improved (n=1 project)	17	17	100%
Plans/Reports Produced (n=4 projects)	22	25	114%

Self-assessed Progress

Four Reflection elements are related to progress and results: Multi-state Impact, Shared Benefits from Collaboration, Progress Toward Objectives, and Programmatic Sustainability. Table 4 shows initiative-wide average ratings for each item's **prevalence** on a scale of 1 (not at all present) to 5 (completely present) and degree of **strength**, on a scale of 1 (significant challenge) to 5 (significant strength). Both scales offered the option for Unsure, which was excluded from calculated averages.

Table 4: Grantee and Partner Reflection Average Scores for Progress and Results Elements

REFLECTION ITEM (n=47 projects)	PREVALENCE SCORE	STRENGTH/ CHALLENGE SCORE
Multi-state Impact	4.28	4.36
Shared Benefits from Collaboration	4.15	4.23
Progress Toward Objectives	4.18	4.19
Programmatic Sustainability	4.26	4.10

Completely present/Significant strength

Very much present/Strength

Overall, each item received an average score of at least "very much" present and "strength" on a scale of 1 to 5. See [Appendix B](#) for definitions for each item.

Within the 47 individual projects with Reflection results in Year Two, these four items were rated as a strength or significant strength in all but three projects. Programmatic Sustainability was rated neither a strength nor challenge (NSNC) in one project; Multi-state Impact was rated NSNC in another project; and Shared Benefits from Collaboration was rated NSNC in a third project. In each of those three cases, the other three items were rated as strengths or significant strengths.

For Year Two projects, **Multi-state Impact** took a variety of forms:

- **Building habits of collaboration through shared regional identity**, especially where projects that shared geographic borders.
 - "The ability for two north Georgia and one southeast Tennessee community to see each other and see that their commonalities are far more prevalent than their differences, their ability to see that with communities in West Virginia and communities in Kentucky and beyond, also helps them see and know that they're not alone in some of these challenges."
 - "Now [cross-state partners] call each other before they do an event...or an email like, hey, I'm having this event, I'll send it over to the group [in the partner state]. That's a game changer..."
 - "The database of employers that we've gotten [through our work under ARISE] is just incredible... We're right on the border, so a lot of our students are going into [our partner state] to work, and a lot of [partner-state] students can come into

four state] very easily. So that database just provides us, all the partners, with more resources."

- **Cross-state knowledge transfer and idea sharing.** Multi-state structures accelerated idea-sharing, helped partners borrow working models, and translated successes from one state into action in another.
 - *"You get to hear about what other programs are doing, and even when I started as a digital navigator, hearing about other navigators is what helped frame my program. We would hear about Tennessee and be like, we have a similar problem to you, and maybe we can connect... It fostered good conversations... It's good to find common ground across multiple states and see that we all have these small communities, we're all struggling, and we're all moving forward..."*
 - *"Working with another state that has a similar rural region...that's where...we feel like the real value is, because you get to see things have to be so tailored to actually work in a rural place...it really helps you see like, how are you guys approaching this and what has worked?"*
 - *"We really saw the need for a network in the region where people were connected with each other, hyping each other up, helping each other, and sharing strategies... People were really hungry for shared problem-solving and... just having space to do that with [others] doing similar work in similar regions..."*
- **Building sector and workforce strategies that span borders.**
 - *"I think for apprenticeships, specifically, the way that we're able to really submit the national model and then have it approved in each state will be a benefit, because a nationally approved apprenticeship, folks can not only move throughout these 3 states, they can go into any state and it would be recognized."*
 - *"The problem we're trying to solve is not only going to benefit our co-ops and utility problems here, but this is a universal problem. We know that these kinds of tools...are going to be increasing in terms of adoption... [W]hat we're developing here will be so much more impactful and useful for other grid operators."*
 - *"[I]n the early stages of development of the proposal, we were looking for a partner university in Ohio. But the specific expertise needed, we could not find it... After the project got approved, Virginia is in the area of battery storage technologies, and they're reaching out to a battery company in Ohio. We are together in this. So, what impacts this area will impact the other area as well."*
- **Efficiency and scale advantages.** Grantees and partners spoke about the ways ARISE has allowed them to share costs and expand impact by working across partners and state lines.
 - *"I think there were probably some efficiencies [as a result of multi-state work]. The plans were very different, but we had to do monthly reports for every community, and it was certainly more efficient... You could say our team had to become experts...So becoming experts for the sake of our project in Pennsylvania meant that we could use our knowledge with our project in Maryland..."*

- *"Being able to take things...across five states, 156 counties [with] 10,000+ manufacturers. Sometimes that feels a little overwhelming...but sometimes the scale works in your favor too.... our messaging gets out there, and it works well."*

While **Programmatic Sustainability** was rated as a strength overall, at least one grantee or partner in nearly half (47%) of projects said it was a challenge. Challenges and concerns were not isolated to one type of project; responses did not differ substantially between planning and implementation projects. In interviews and open-ended responses in the Reflection, grantees and partners shared the following insights into concerns about programmatic sustainability:

- Regarding **funding uncertainty** and programmatic sustainability:
 - *"[We think about] when the money is done, how does it sustain itself? When that [other federal] grant falls out, how is this going to make money?"*
 - *"[Program] sustainability is a challenge for any project within our region."*
- Regarding **planning** for programmatic sustainability:
 - *"I think spending more time [during our planning grant] with the group on working on diversified fundraising, that's what I would have done [differently]. Everyone felt like it was a sure deal...just spending more time on making sure that there's money coming in."*
 - *"I don't feel like, at least from organizational perspectives of partners at the table, there [is] yet a path forward to sustain this project [beyond this phase] without grant funding to get it going...and I'm sure the partners feel like, 'Great, we did this planning, are we going to get an implementation grant, are we going to keep engaging?'... It doesn't feel good to be beholden to grants and grant timelines and those things to make it sustainable."*
- Regarding **sustained attention** to the issue and need:
 - *"The mission of this effort is critical, and it should be sustained for the long-term. The challenge when it comes to the [programmatic] sustainability of long-term disaster recovery efforts is always maintaining a sense of urgency along with the sense of importance, such that the new things that will inevitably come up with their own senses of urgency do not crowd out the ongoing important work that may not feel as urgent as they once did by comparison."*
- Regarding **partnership** continuity:
 - *"One of my fears is, will [the cross-state collaboration] continue? With new individuals that come and go...once the grant's gone, how do we keep incentivizing?... Because I worry, 10 years down the line, what does this look like? Because I think it'll last 5 years after the grant's over, easily. 10 years, if all the staff turns over...if they're not incentivized to keep working over that state line...The reason all of these organizations operate in the way they do is because they're incentivized to do that. And we aren't going to be able to change a state structure...It's hard to tell where it's gonna end up and land."*

- *"I score [programmatic sustainability] a little lower due to the need for our industry and local stakeholders to get involved, which can be fickle. That said, those who were involved in our workshops seem committed and very willing to work to make change in the industry. This also hinges on the economy."*

Other Evidence of Progress

Many implementation projects are still in the early to middle years of their periods of performance; therefore, progress updates tend to focus on practical and procedural aspects of moving their work forward. Still, grantees have reported a range of other early achievements. In interviews and progress reports, grantees emphasized that these interim achievements are foundational to longer-term economic transformation in the region. Examples include the following:

The development of an alumni network with a strong peer-referral rate: "A significant and unanticipated success has been the emergence of a strong alumni engagement network. Graduates not only refer future participants (a 35% peer-referral rate in some cohorts) but also serve as outreach leaders and mentors, extending the program's reach and reinforcing a cycle of peer-driven community health leadership."

A graduating student who found a future with a grantee employer-partner: The employer partner shared that a key strength of the ARISE-funded program is that it "can help boost up somebody who might think that they're in a situation that's untenable..." and this was borne out in the example of a student from West Virginia. When the student started, "he had a very poor outlook on life; didn't like to show up [at work], but over time, he started seeing the possibilities, and once any student...can see a future, they start realizing and setting goals...[His] goal is to be a team leader...And he's turned from one of our lowest performing [students] into quite the...team member. Everybody loves him, he's got a great attitude...He turned out wonderful."

Power grid modernization: ARISE-funded technical assistance accelerated grid modernization efforts across more than a dozen nonprofit utilities and municipalities in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Mississippi. These efforts included fortifying 6,500 miles of distribution lines, deploying smart grid technologies, and upgrading or replacing aging substations, transformers, and poles. With ARISE support, partner communities have implemented advanced monitoring systems, supervisory control and data acquisition platforms, and wireless metering, among other improvements. Projects like the microgrid installation for an emergency shelter in Hooversville, Pennsylvania; the construction of new electric feeders in Georgetown, Ohio; and the smart grid enhancements by rural cooperatives in New York are all expected to improve reliability, reduce downtime, and lower costs for communities.

Newly generated strategy, tools, and momentum to expand digital access for Appalachian residents: "The...program has absolutely helped build local capacity. Without this work, I wouldn't have been able to accomplish what I did—even if, in the broader scope of the multi-state project, it may not seem like much. The program provided critical resources, expert guidance, and a structured approach that allowed us to develop a solid Connectivity Plan, strengthen partnerships, and lay the groundwork for future digital inclusion efforts. While state-level restrictions limited some aspects of implementation, this

work positioned us to move forward with a clear strategy and the momentum needed to take actionable next steps."

Additional resources for communities: "One of our metrics is how [many] funds have been catalyzed for communities who have gone through this program who have leveraged not just the plan, but the skills building and relationships, and all of that leading to the plan that has catalyzed additional funds. So far, \$102M in grant funds have been applied for, and \$3M has been won as a result of participating in this program..."

New, collaborative wraparound services to overcome barriers to participation. One project explained how they developed a "clearer understanding of the barriers to leadership development, including the need for more intentional support systems." Organizations in the community desired "deeper partnerships with community colleges, training providers, and trade programs,...[but] logistical barriers like transportation, childcare, and sustained funding continue to limit participation. [Our convening], which served as the first place-based training, helped validate these findings. The session offered both inspiration and practical strategies, particularly around models that integrate holistic supports into workforce programming. As a result, several members are beginning to explore partnerships or pilot efforts that include wraparound services."

Factors of Successful Implementation

As noted above, the Grantee and Partner Reflection asked project implementers to rate four elements related to progress and results, as well as 10 elements related to implementation and one element on the overall effectiveness of their partnership. In Year Two, the Grantee and Partner Reflection was administered a total of 57 times, covering 47 projects, with 414 unique responses.

Grantees (for all projects) and partners (for implementation projects only) were also asked to participate in an evaluation interview annually. In Year Two interviews, grantees and partners were asked about their general perceptions of project strengths and challenges and, specifically, to elaborate on the elements that ranked highest and lowest for their project. In Year Two, evaluators completed interviews with 72 grantees and partners from 20 projects.

Grantee & Partner Reflection

Table 5 shows the average scores from the Reflection for the extent to which the element is present in a project and the extent to which it is a strength or a challenge (or neither) for the 10 implementation elements and the one element of overall effectiveness.

Table 5: Reflection Average Scores for Project Implementation Elements

REFLECTION ITEM (n=47 projects)	PREVALENCE SCORE	STRENGTH/ CHALLENGE SCORE
Adaptability	4.23	4.28
Partner Commitment and Engagement	4.14	4.23
Effectiveness of Partner Collaboration	4.05	4.20
Common Vision	4.12	4.19
Resource Allocation	4.26	4.16
Effectiveness of Communication	4.10	4.10
Use of Data	4.06	4.10
Structure for Convening and Collaboration	4.04	4.06
Use of Time	4.18	4.02
Governance and Decision-making Framework	4.00	3.94
Overall Effectiveness	4.44	4.44

Completely present/Significant strength

Very much present/Strength

See [Appendix B](#) for the full Grantee and Partner Reflection.

Collectively, each of these items received an average score of at least "very much present" and "strength" on a scale of 1 to 5. At the project level, in 450 of 470 cases, (11 elements x 47 projects), individual items also received average scores of at least "strength". In the other 20 cases, the average equated to "neither a strength nor a challenge." Grantees and partners in the 47 projects, collectively, felt their overall effectiveness was "completely present" and a "significant strength" for their projects.

Based on average ratings, the top-rated strengths in Year Two were **Adaptability** and **Partner Commitment and Engagement**, and **Effectiveness of Partner Collaboration** which had average ratings of significant strength, plus **Common Vision**, which fell short of significant strength by less than 0.01.

None of the items were rated a challenge or significant challenge overall. Throughout the two years of evaluation, evaluators have defined other "items to watch" as those that received a rating of challenge or significant challenge by at least 10% of responding stakeholders and/or at least one stakeholder in half or more of the assessed projects. None of the items met these criteria this quarter based on reflection data. Other challenges identified through interviews are detailed in the Challenges and Opportunities for Growth section of this report.

Strengths and Accelerators

Adaptability

The flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and challenges.

80% rated significant strength (38%) or strength (42%)³

Average = significant strength (n=29) or strength (n=18) in 47 of 47 projects⁴

Several factors support the ability of grantees and partners to adapt to changing circumstances and challenges in order to continue working toward big goals.

Grantees and partners discussed how **project design** enabled them to shift course, adapting plans, activities, budgets, and structures to meet emerging and evolving needs.

- *"The training can easily be adapted on a variety of factors... [It is] designed to be adaptable to multiple tourism leadership contexts."*
- *"I think the flexibility or adaptability is the key. Any time you take an initiative on...you're going to have obstacles, and changes come up."*
- *"We basically didn't write a plan and then be like, we're going to execute this plan no matter if it's a stupid thing to do... It was very opportunistic."*
- *"I think the innovative strength of our planning project lies in its built-in flexibility... to respond to evolving societal, environmental, and other emerging needs."*

Adaptability can be a **personal mindset supported by organizational values**, demonstrated through a willingness to stay flexible and responsive.

- *"I would just say that's part of our company culture...It's very organic [work] and you have to be adaptable, and we do a lot of test-fail-correct, and so it's almost like...an entrepreneurial way of approaching everything... Everything is iterations."*

³ Of all responses, including Unsure.

⁴ Of those who rated the item; excludes Unsure.

- *"I think all of our partners have been good with being adaptable and pivoting when necessary... the strength of our partners is that they have an innovative mindset and they're ready to pivot when necessary."*
- *"We were all like, oh great, we tried something...that did not go as planned, and what did we learn from that? They did talk about that openly...without judgment."*
- *"[T]he strength of our partners is that they have an innovative mindset and they're ready to pivot when necessary. And I think that kind of mindset's really necessary for this program model to work..."*

Adaptability has also been reinforced through **collaborative practice** that involves monitoring the need for changes through communication, joint problem-solving, and co-creation of solutions. Sometimes this involved learning through change: embracing experimentation, piloting, and reframing plans as conditions shift.

- *"As data is presented and discussed, the plan of action is modified so as to make the most efficient use of time and resources."*
- *"Having conversations...we've been able to adapt some of the prior decisions, to modify based off of the conversations that we're having."*
- *"We know each other's strengths, we know each other's weaknesses, and we're willing to be able to have clear communication and support each other in those areas."*
- *"I think you can go into a grant opportunity with a plan...[you have to] embrace when things don't go the way as planned...those unplanned situations give insight into where the need is."*
- *"I think variable positioning around self-selection [of partners enables adaptability]. We looked across the strengths of organizations and also known and expressed weaknesses [to determine who would do what]... So, we just allowed for some of that natural self-selection and population around different tasks."*

Some partners discussed the difference that it makes for adaptability to be **modeled by the lead** organization.

- *"[The lead grantee] doesn't shy away from, if something doesn't work, taking it down... [T]hat gives you the confidence of trying, and then fail fast, and try new things and see which one works."*
- *"[The lead grantee] supported each of our [communities] according to their individual needs and circumstances."*
- *"Originally...[the process for mini-grant approval] was very regimented and structured...you had to have your applications in by a certain time, they were going to meet once a month to approve them. ...and that wasn't working, so...they adapted..."*
- *"[The lead project manager], from day one, reiterated this is a five-year project. Things are going to change... It's freeing...it is ever changing and flowing, and everybody has been flexible in changing ideas...to work together and work toward the end goals."*

Partner Commitment and Engagement

All partners in all states are actively committed and engaged at necessary levels.

78% rated significant strength (39%) or strength (39%)

*Average = significant strength (n=25) or strength (n=20) in 45 of 47 projects
(neither a strength nor challenge in the other two projects)*

Grantees and partners emphasized that **trust, familiarity, and the quality of relationships** are major drivers of partner commitment and engagement. Many noted that longstanding collaborations foster confidence in each other's decision-making, while newer partnerships benefited from intentional efforts to build people-centered relationships. In several cases, partners demonstrated their commitment through significant personal investment of time and effort, such as traveling long distances to convene or consistently showing up for meetings. These dynamics not only deepened collaboration but also reinforced a sense of shared purpose across state lines.

- *"We've all just been working together for so long that I feel like [the key business partner] has a lot of trust in [the local education partner], that we're making the best decisions for kids... I just feel like there's kind of a built trust both ways."*
- *"There were very strong people relationships... There was just a big effort to make sure we were meeting people where they were, and it was very people-focused and human-focused."*
- *"Partners from seven institutions routinely drive from as far as five hours away to participate. We work well with each other and enjoy each other's company."*

Having the **right mix of partners** was another factor in successful partner engagement. Grantees and partners emphasized that projects worked best when they drew on a broad and complementary set of skills, experiences, and networks. This included technical experts, convening organizations with strong local reach, and diverse stakeholders who could extend the project's impact across communities and states. Participants noted that no single organization could have accomplished the work alone; instead, projects benefitted from a collective approach where partners contributed distinct strengths and shared responsibility.

- *"...[T]his project couldn't have really happened without the spread of project partners that were on board."*
- *"[W]e brought in people from different fields...that could advise us, help us review some of the proposals, help select consultants, help review some of the research... And so we had this awesome team..."*
- *"...We chose the right convening partners overall... We were able to provide some folks ourselves that we already knew, but [our partners] were really able to bring in a large swath of different kinds of stakeholders... so we were able to get some spread there statewide and get some good participation."*
- *"I think something else is, we really do have the expertise in our region of service for this... The strength is, this is not a one person show, it's a group of people collectively banding together to make this happen."*

Project management structures, including regular convenings and clear communication, provided the practical mechanisms to keep partners engaged. These structures provided accountability and connection, ensuring that partners stayed informed and felt invested in collective progress. Through these structures, project management practices translated high-level collaboration into the day-to-day work needed to move funded work forward.

- *"We do an annual [in-person] meeting...[and] a semi-annual virtual meeting. The in-person meetings are a lot more engaging, because we have everyone coming to a new place and meeting each other and talking, but the virtual ones can be just as important too, because it re-frames it as all of us being part of the same program...We're working on the same model, and that really shines through when we meet twice a year to talk about it."*
- *"I think the creation of teams and sub-teams [has made a difference to commitment], because with any project, there are a lot of moving pieces, and it can seem overwhelming ... [With] the sub-teams, those meetings are [about] getting to bond with that smaller group but still having access to the people that we need to ask the questions to about the bigger things. That model has been very effective in the way it works for us, because the communication has been so strong in the partnership."*
- *"I think through those monthly meetings, it's kind of revisited every time...it's always, what's best for our kids, what's best for the hospitals and trying to just manage that and work through that. I think keeping focused is important, because you can get bogged down in all the minute details of planning. But they just kept making sure we were brought back to that vision through those meetings."*

In several projects, **demonstrations of commitment**, including attending calls, contributing openly, and responding reliably, reinforced partnerships and signaled that each partner's time and effort mattered to the collective. These patterns of mutual reinforcement helped sustain momentum and built confidence in the partnership's long-term success.

- *"It has been a joy to participate in this collaborative. It seems as if we have been on the same page since day one and are all committed to helping each other."*
- *"...[U]sually we get at least representation from 90% of our partners each month... that works out really well."*
- *"Any member of the leadership team or partner organizations...they're doing it because they're committed. It's not even their job, they just know it needs to happen to make things more impactful."*
- *"Throughout the planning and implementation phases, partners have demonstrated consistent communication and responsiveness. This strong partner engagement enhances project credibility, ensures coordinated implementation, and significantly increases the likelihood of long-term success."*

Effectiveness of Partner Collaboration

Collaboration among partners is highly effective and meeting its full potential.

80% rated significant strength (38%) or strength (42%)

*Average = significant strength (n=23) or strength (n=20) in 43 of 47 projects
(neither a strength nor challenge in the other four projects)*

There is overlap between partner commitment and effectiveness of collaboration; one seems to reinforce the other. In addition to the themes above, grantees and partners shared the following insights about the ways they foster effective collaboration in ARISE projects.

ARISE projects benefitted from assembling partners with **complementary roles and cross-sector expertise**, which expanded the lenses through which problems can be solved. In practice, this meant pooling resources, drawing from community experience, relying on subject matter expertise, testing assumptions, sharing proven strategies, and/or refining tools through critical feedback. Partners shared examples of generating better solutions together than any single partner might have developed in isolation.

- *"The team represents an effective combination of resources and strengths. Intentional integration of Extension, faculty, staff, students, consultants, and practitioners makes for a diverse set of talents and experience to draw from."*
- *"It's become really helpful when others suggest something. Like in Northwest PA, our partner there...is working with a third party that does furnace audits...[They] can go in and do an assessment...and reduce the energy consumption, and then it's more efficient and less costly for the manufacturer. And so, they saw that success and they shared it with the group, and then we were able to pull that company in and do some webinars, and we even offered some free intro-level assessments for companies..."*
- *"We thought we did an amazing job [with a tool we created for the project], and we did, but when we took it out to some of our colleagues in other regions, they challenged us and questioned us, and [the tool] got so much better as a result. So, I think that having different vantage points, for people that have similar expertise yet different viewpoints made what we did much richer as a result..."*

Beyond trust and goodwill discussed above, grantees and partners have worked on **structure, role clarity, and strong project management** to move work forward across multiple partners and multiple states.

- *"You can't collaborate on 'good vibes' or values alignment alone. You need a really top notch project manager... If you don't do that [organization-related] stuff, it doesn't matter that people are enjoying the time together."*
- *"The reporting and the constant meetings that we do... I think that makes you stay engaged... I think for me it helps me stay on top of keeping my information ready."*
- *"...[W]e put a lot of time on the front end..., with dozens and dozens of one-on-one meetings with partners across the region... We had a...power analysis of groups that we thought would be supportive, groups that might feel territorial about it that we needed to bring on... And then we thought about, who's... able to be really effective messengers to bring in people that we didn't know that needed to be there?"*

Common Vision

The project vision is understood and shared by all partners.

80% rated significant strength (39%) or strength (42%)

*Average = significant strength (n=26) or strength (n=20) in 46 of 47 projects
(neither a strength nor challenge in the 47th project)*

In interviews and open-ended responses to the Reflection, grantees and partners provided insight into the various dimensions of Common Vision and the factors that contribute to it.

Grantees and partners worked to create and sustain **alignment around purpose and goals** for the project, and they capitalized on shared elements of mission across partners.

- *"We knew workforce was a number one priority of all of our economic development partners and all of our counties."*
- *"I think the true strength of our ecosystem is that we are very much united by a common mission... deeply committed to our community."*
- *"The students we get into the program more aligns with the view of everybody... the common vision is, we know what type of students we want in there... I don't think there's any challenges with the vision whatsoever."*
- *"Our work is about...being united around a common mission, being deeply rooted in the place we're in."*

The presence of **shared motivation and passion** strengthens collaboration and maintains alignment among partners.

- *"Passion was a bigger motivator for [the communities'] time than money, I think."*
- *"I think people recognize it's a need. Then... passion matches need, and that leads to strong relationship development and communication."*
- *"The summit was great, it demonstrated there is a high level of energy and interest in the idea. People felt this was something unique that would really build the capacity of the region."*
- *"Those of us who are 'all in' collaborate as if we have been working together for years! The values, beliefs, and vision are strong."*

Efforts to build and reinforce a shared vision often involve intentional **buy-in processes**, consensus-building, and recurring structures for active engagement with partners.

- *"Right now, our strategy has been connecting and building collaborative partnerships with those larger organizations... getting buy-in so that as we start to distribute this information... those community members really buy into it."*
- *"There was significant consensus building throughout the entire project."*
- *"Because this is a planning process, much effort has gone into ensuring that we all are envisioning the same processes for the implementation."*
- *"I think through those monthly meetings, it's kind of revisited every time... they just kept making sure we were brought back to that vision through those meetings."*

Barriers and Opportunities for Growth

In Year Two, none of the items from the Grantee and Partner Reflection met the criteria to be labeled a challenge or flagged as an item to watch: **no item was rated as a challenge or significant challenge overall, by at least 10% of responding stakeholders, or by at least one stakeholder in half or more of the assessed projects.**

While all factors were rated strengths or significant strengths overall and by a majority of stakeholders in a majority of projects, in about one-third of projects, at least one stakeholder gave a rating of challenge or significant challenge to items related to **communication and coordination mechanisms**.⁵ Indeed, in interviews, grantees and partners discussed the effort that is required to set up and operate workable structures that give stakeholders enough information (but not too much), allow them to interact in productive ways (without asking too much), and recognize the varying environments of different types of partners. This delicate balance requires planning, feedback loops, adaptation, and time, especially in the early phases of a large, multi-partner project.

- *...The hardest thing to get this off the ground was just us understanding each other...just understanding each other, it took a lot of open communication.*
- *"Sometimes we can say something, and we can say something again, and we can say it again, and no one really hears what you're saying until it impacts them."*
- *"...It was difficult in the beginning... if we had done a little more of that upfront with all the partners and the players, that would have been beneficial."*

Projects experience **turnover at partner agencies**, sometimes multiple instances in the same year, which affects the continuity of communication and coordination systems.

- *"If we talk about [partnerships among states], both states are completely committed, and it is a significant strength. When we talk about individual partners, with turnover and new leadership, it takes time to get everyone on board again."*
- *"We have had quite a lot of turnover since the grant application was submitted, so I'm not sure if our experience is reflective of everyone else's, but it's taken a bit for us to grasp the 'Common Vision.'"*
- *"Collaborative coordination is outstanding... This is hard. All the structures are in place. But to fully collaborate, you have to intentionally do it. Changing directors, staff and agencies default to JUST worry about themselves is the biggest challenge."*

Even with consistency, **organizational capacity** can be a challenge, especially when grantees and partners feel that more time and effort is needed than was budgeted in the grant, when there are competing priorities, or when tight timelines limit the amount of flexibility that can occur.

- *"We underestimated the people time and commitment to move it forward. I know even [here] we booked way more time than we [initially] allocated."*

⁵ Effectiveness of Partner Communication, Effectiveness of Partner Collaboration, Structure for Convening and Collaboration, and/or Common Vision.

- *"People are so busy and maxed out and the capacity it takes to manage a federal grant...especially for the working group co-chairs that already have full time jobs..."*
- *"I think our team is very willing to be adaptable, but the nature of this planning grant is that limited time makes it hard to adapt to changes and remain on schedule."*

Sometimes, **administrative and compliance hurdles** can lengthen start-up timelines, often outside of any single person's control.

- *"Tasks are clearly defined and focused. Project has slightly been delayed due to obtaining IRB approval for research protocols. Which in turn, delayed issuance of subawards."*
- *"Our institution has not [yet] experienced any meaningful collaboration (or associated benefits) to date due to significant delays in the subaward contracting process (extended legal reviews)."*

Similarly, **data tracking and reporting** can be a challenge, both for project performance and for gathering and using data applicable to programmatic decisions. This is especially the case when partners are working across different organization types, with different data systems, and different levels of sophistication.

- *"[A] challenge for us has been personally identifiable information and students.... If we had a way to track and share that information, that would be great, amongst all partners [and multiple states]...But we don't... We can have five students with the same name. So that kind of stuff is really hard."*
- *"We're still trying to figure out what's the best way to streamline it so we're not reinventing the wheel and we're able to use data we already track... I think internal tracking mechanisms for us would be something that I would have spent more time on..."*
- *"We strive to utilize up-to-date data, but sometimes the data does not exist for all of the states that are involved, or all of the occupations in the workforce."*

Finally, **varying state environments** and policy differences can complicate project implementation, including divergent regulations, timelines, and political contexts.

- *"It is a challenge in our particular case since having two different state legislature budget timelines, requirements, etc. have complicated our ability to progress through the stages of acquisition."*
- *"Tourism regulations/standards are different in each state, so navigating how to develop tools that support those different needs can be challenging."*
- *"It's a bit of a challenge: distance between schools and difference in minimum wage make it hard to cross borders for various events."*
- *"...[It] became very clear over the course of the project [that] there's a lot of complexity when you're looking at a multi-state approach...because each of the states have different legal requirements for commercial development, different resources, tax credit options... So it got to be quite complicated..."*

Recommendations

Recommendations for Applicants and Grantees

In interviews, grantees and partners shared a range of recommendations and considerations for other grantees who may be doing similar work or who may pursue an ARISE grant.

For **new applicants**:

Manage the application process well:

- *"Set aside a lot of time. And read all you can about [the application] before you do it."*
- *"I think it's great if you can get all the partners engaged as early as possible, and I mean, right at the application process. Somebody has to take the lead, or you'll never get to the end goal... [J]ust get everybody involved as early as you can. Come up with the unified plan...and then allow some time for everyone to have some input."*

Consider pre-booking critical convenings:

- *"...I started scheduling [right as we submitted the application]... contacting all of the organizations and saying let's find a date in November that we can meet for our retreat if it's ARC funded... So the only reason I was able to pull off an in-person retreat with all the organizations three weeks after we finally got our last contact negotiated was because I already put it on the books..."*

Learn from peers:

- *"Reach out to other organizations that have done this in the past and lessons learned that they've had, and what to be prepared for..."*
- *"[Be] heavy on the 'go and see,' and learning from other locations, listening to the struggles they had at start up. Really asking questions...just really heavily lean on all the supports you have to get started up."*

Budget for the time and staff needed for project management and reporting:

- *"I've dealt with grants before, but none to the level of [multi-partner] reporting on this... I didn't prepare myself and I didn't know what I didn't know when I started... You're going to have to do some legwork on it [to pull all the data together]."*
- *"[One thing we've learned from the process], we have more people on our grants and financial team now. We have a more senior financial person who has more experience because...these are complex grants...so we brought someone on who's been amazing. And we're going to fill one more spot to continue with grant tracking."*

Plan for more startup time than may be expected initially:

- *"We always underestimate the people aspect and how much time it takes to move something forward...So [don't] underestimate the people resources and just the time it takes to move things forward."*

For **new grantees and partners**:

Establish strong systems, including project management, grant administration, and performance tracking, as early as possible, and ensure they have adequate investment:

- *"The big word of wisdom...these multi-state projects have to have a full time administrator that's going to manage all the partners, help with all the deliverables, and get them to collaborate... It's really a full time job. I feel like it should just be required."*
- *"If [a new grantee has] subrecipients, [I recommend they] establish policies and procedures very early and stick to them... So I would just recommend getting those templates in place, because it's a bit of a struggle trying to create the template while also getting all the information and tracking it."*

Err on the side of overcommunication:

- *"I would say one thing in retrospect to anyone who is coordinating this, build in a lot more time for communication and extra meetings and such like that. I wish I had done more of that ...Making sure you build in that time is important."*
- *"I think [the key] is, overcommunicate. Don't make assumptions... Really get together in the beginning, talk about barriers, talk about support needed and then just really educate yourself [as a partner]... The more you can get together, build those agendas, build [project elements together], it makes it so much easier."*

Spend time building collaborative relationships across project partners:

- *"I feel like having some momentum with your partners in advance is important. ...If you don't have the benefit of 10 years of network building, trust building, I would say in advance of trying to build out something...[grantees should be] thinking in that regard."*

Budget and spend with the future in mind:

- *"Don't view this as a [short-term] grant; view this as an opportunity to grow your [work] well past the time that the grant expires. Educate your staff, don't just get their costs covered...I think a lot of times people have a very short-run vision of the grant world...without understanding how it can [build organizational expertise] well past the expiration of the grant."*

Leverage available ARC relationships and resources:

- *"Take advantage of every resource you have. Don't wait to reach out to your state person or the ARC person in the state. That is critical. You need to get them on board, and they can be your advocate, and that's really important. Get to know folks at ARC."*
- *"...[J]ust be open with your ARC rep, because they're there to help. Unlike other grants I've had, they're trying to adjust it to make it work for you, vs. saying like, oh something isn't going as planned and then they shut things off." As another said, "ARC means it when they say, 'Contact your program officer.' ...[Ours] is always so honest and transparent..."*

Recommendations for ARC

Grantees also shared a range of recommendations for ARC.

Regarding ARC's **grantmaking and investments**:

If possible, provide access to the application guidelines during the pre-application phase so that grantees know what to expect:

- *"...[E]ven just having access to the application form before you get approval to submit would have been huge for us... We couldn't even get into the form until we had access to it after it had gotten approved by the states."*

Continue to require meaningful partnerships:

- *ARISE "probably did force us or encourage us to work together with some of our other [peer organization] partners on this that we maybe wouldn't have done. I think that's been beneficial to have that need to work together...and a lot of sharing that maybe just wouldn't have come out [otherwise]... I think they're really onto something."*
- *"ARC considers partnerships to be very, very, very deep... maybe require letters of support during the pre-application process, and not just the full application process, and make that letter of support be a template that requires commitment...."*

Consider offering technical assistance in a variety of formats, through written support as well as videos, webinars, etc., since there is no universally preferred mode among grantees:

- *"Maybe ARC could provide some online resources, a video or something of what to expect or who ARC is, or why we're doing this... a video to help communicate."*
- *"...All of [ARC's] stuff is [videos]...I would rather have [something like] directions [for forms] as to what they're looking for in what field."*

Consider whether there are ways to reduce the burden of the planning grant application:

- *"I'm not saying [our planning grant amount] is something to sneeze at—that's a substantive amount of money to help support—but...I felt there was no difference [between planning vs. implementation applications]...we're doing the same heavy lifting... That's the only thing I would offer, some scaling relative to what's being offered "*

Regarding its efforts to **build community and share knowledge** among ARISE stakeholders:

Consider supporting an ARISE community of practice and/or convening:

- *"Perhaps ARC could be a convener of all involved parties at some sort of interval...ARC as the convening entity... maybe quarterly or something."*
- *"I feel like ARC has been one of the best connectors of those [peer] learning opportunities... but there needs to be more."*

Regarding its **support of, and interaction with**, ARISE grantees:

Continue to support grantees with flexibility and thought partnership:

- *"I was not prepared for the hands-on aspects of ARC, which I love... [We received] really good feedback, and then [the ARC project coordinator] was the one who [told us] to go for the planning grant. She was just super helpful... I found [the assistance from ARC] really beneficial and personalized, and I appreciated that."*
- *"[ARC] is a community of people that have relationships built [with their constituency]; I feel like the ARC team really tries to get into those communities as much as they can. So that's been a huge difference maker for us, because if we were unclear about what the grant was asking for, the direction it should take, they would actually help us understand what was being asked for so we could give them better information."*

Continue to champion this model of genuine multi-state partnerships:

- *"The connectivity across state lines is what makes this project special."*
- *"I think this multi-state idea, the more federal agencies, government funding, legislators can see the value of incentivizing multi-jurisdictional, multi-state initiatives, the better off we would be not only in Appalachia, but across the whole country."*

Year Two Conclusions

ARISE grantees are demonstrating measurable progress toward initiative goals.

By August 2025, funded projects had collectively served over 14,500 individuals, 3,300 businesses and organizations, and more than 600 communities, with many reporting improvements in capacity, skills, and outcomes. Early workforce outcomes include nearly 1,400 jobs retained and more than 300 jobs created. Planning and implementation efforts have also yielded tangible products, such as 89 reports or plans and 10 new programs.

These outcomes reflect ARISE's unique multi-state design.

Grantees reported that cross-state collaboration facilitated knowledge transfer, increased efficiency, and built strategies with broader reach than would have been possible within a single state. These collaborative networks are creating lasting infrastructure, from shared workforce databases to region-spanning apprenticeship models, which can amplify impact beyond individual grants.

As in Year One, grantees and partners continue to report more strengths than challenges in project implementation.

Across 47 projects that completed the Grantee and Partner Reflection in Year Two, nearly all rated adaptability, partner commitment, collaboration, and common vision as significant strengths. The ability to adjust to changing circumstances, coupled with deep partner engagement, is enabling projects to move forward even when facing complex logistical or contextual barriers.

Multi-state, multi-partner work requires careful coordination, strong administrative systems, and thoughtful use of time and resources.

Nearly all grantees emphasized the importance of communication structures and project management, and these elements emerged as challenges for some projects. Delays stemming from turnover, administrative hurdles, or differing state policies were not uncommon. Others noted the difficulty of establishing streamlined mechanisms for tracking and sharing data across organizational and state boundaries. These challenges illustrate the ongoing effort required to sustain cross-state partnerships and underscore the importance of investing in collaborative capacity, both to support current implementation and to strengthen the long-term programmatic sustainability of ARISE-funded work.

Year Two findings suggest ARISE is building momentum toward its goal of fostering regional economic transformation through multi-state collaboration.

While projects are still in the early or middle phases of implementation, the combination of tangible outputs, emerging outcomes, and strong partner engagement signals that ARISE is laying a foundation for long-term impact. The initiative's requirement of multi-state collaboration appears to produce distinct benefits while recognizing the challenges associated with moving multiple partners, across multiple states, toward a shared set of goals leading to economic transformation. Sustaining these collaborative gains will require ongoing investment in systems, relationships, and strategies into subsequent years of ARISE.

Appendix A. Year Two ARISE Projects

This report includes the following ARISE projects, grouped by investment priority. Dates indicate the most recent collection for each method, as applicable.

Building Appalachia's Infrastructure

Project	Metrics	Progress Report	Reflection	Interview
<i>Planning</i>				
Appalachian Region Community-Owned Grid Resilient Infrastructure Project (ARCO-GRIP)	Sep-24	Sep-24	Sep-24	Oct-24
Pennsylvania Ohio West Virginia Economic Revitalization (POWER) Network	-	Jan-25	Mar-25	May-25
Quantum Appalachia: Forging the Future of Economic Growth and Secure Connectivity	-	Mar-25	Mar-25	-
<i>Implementation</i>				
Appalachian Digital Equity Accelerator (ADEA)	Apr-25	Apr-25	Oct-24	Mar-25
Appalachian Region Community-Owned Grid Resilient Infrastructure Project (ARCO-GRIP)	May-25	May-25	Mar-25	-
Smart Grid Deployment Consortium and HILLTOP Platform Expansion	Mar-25	Mar-25	Jul-25	Sep-24
Building the Battery Belt in Appalachian Tennessee, Georgia, and North Carolina	-	Apr-25	May-25	-
Increased Commerce Through Multistate Multimodal Investments at Inland Ports	-	Mar-25	-	-

Building Community Capacity

Project	Metrics	Progress Report	Reflection	Interview
<i>Planning</i>				
Central Appalachian Network New Era Planning Project	Sep-24	Sep-24	Oct-24	Oct-24
Building GIS Capacity in Energy Communities	Mar-25	Mar-25	Jul-25	Aug-25
Vocational Initiative for Thriving Appalachian Leadership (VITAL)	Apr-25	Apr-25	Mar-25	-
<i>Implementation</i>				
Thrive Regional Resource Hub: Driving Connectivity and Resilience in the Cradle of Southern Appalachia	May-25	May-25	Mar-25	-

Building Appalachia's Workforce Ecosystems

Project	Metrics	Progress Report	Reflection	Interview
<i>Planning</i>				
Setting Appalachia's Workforce on Track to Adapt to the Changing Construction Industry (Industrialized Construction)	Jan-25	Jan-25	Feb-25	Jan-25
Empowerment Collaborative: Increasing Student Empowerment in Appalachian Communities	Jun-24	Jun-24	-	-
2023 Connect Appalachia, A Recovery-Friendly Initiative	Oct-24	Feb-25	Feb-25	-
Appalachian Cybersecurity Training, Innovation & Opportunity Network ("Appalachian ACTION")	-	Dec-24	Oct-24	Feb-25
Appalachian Water Infrastructure Workforce Development and Training Center	Mar-25	Mar-25	Mar-25	-
Regional Public Colleges and Universities (RPCU) Central Appalachia Health Consortium	-	Oct-24	Jun-25	-
Preparing Appalachia for a Sustainable Electric Aviation Future	-	Jun-25	Jul-25	-
Expanding Access to Aviation Education in Central Appalachia	-	Apr-25	Apr-25	-
Data-Driven Approaches to Support Workforce Skills Matching and Resilient Careers in Appalachia	Dec-24	Apr-25	Apr-25	-
Strengthening the Talent Pipeline in Central Appalachia	May-25	May-25	Mar-25	-
Tri-State Apprenticeship Consortium	May-25	May-25	Mar-25	-
Integrated Systems Approach to a Healthier Future in Central Appalachia	-	Apr-25	Jul-25	-
BARMA: Biotechnology and Regenerative Medicine Advancement of Appalachian Economy	Apr-25	Apr-25	Jul-25	-
Expanding the Oral Health Workforce and Access to Care for the Appalachian Region	-	Jan-25	-	-
PA/WV – Rural Broadband Adoption and Workforce Planning Program	Apr-25	Apr-25	Jun-25	-
Multi-state Remote Work Expansion to Increase Labor Participation in Appalachia	-	-	Jul-25	-
<i>Implementation</i>				
Career Acceleration, Readiness, and Employment Experiences for [ARC] Region Students (CAREERS)	Jun-25	Jun-25	Mar-25	May-25
Twin Tiers ARISE Program	Feb-25	Feb-25	Jul-25	Aug-25

Project	Metrics	Progress Report	Reflection	Interview
Help Our People Expand the EcoSystem (HOPEE)	Jun-25	Jun-25	Dec-24	Jan-25
THRIVE - Transforming Homes and Rebuilding in Vulnerable Environments	May-25	May-25	Apr-25	-
Career Pathways to Success in Rural Communities: Apprenticeship and Education Opportunities for Professionals	Jun-25	Jun-25	Jul-25	Aug-25
Cyber ACCESS (Appalachian Community Colleges Eco-System Sustainability)	-	May-25	Jul-25	-
Empowerment Collaborative: Increasing Middle School Student Empowerment in Appalachian Communities	-	Feb-25	Jul-25	-
Building the Aerospace Workforce Pipeline in Appalachia	Sep-24	Jan-25	Mar-25	-
Appalachian Rural Health Technical Assistance Center	-	May-25	Aug-25	-

Building Appalachian Businesses

Project	Metrics	Progress Report	Reflection	Interview
<i>Planning</i>				
Accelerating Forest Farming in Central Appalachia: Strengthening Market Connections and Collaboration for Long-Term Sector Impact and Sustainability	-	Jun-24	Sep-25	Nov-24
Establishing a Regional Green Building Supply Chain for Upper Appalachia	Jun-24	Jun-24	Sep-24	Oct-24
Appalachian Sustainable Finance Hub	Mar-25	Mar-25	Dec-24	Feb-25
Appalachian Downtown Developers Initiative	Jan-25	Jan-25	Dec-24	Feb-25
Accelerating Startup Success Through Mentoring	-	Apr-25	Mar-25	-
Supporting Prosperity, Advancing Rural Knowledge for Small Businesses (SPARK)	-	May-25	-	-
Project Everberry CAP (Comprehensive Analysis Plan)	May-25	May-25	-	-
Southern Appalachian Forest Products Marketing and Supply Chain Analysis	-	Apr-25	Jul-25	-
<i>Implementation</i>				
Accelerating the Green Textile Economy in Southern Appalachia	-	Dec-24	Jul-25	Nov-24
Manufacturing the New Energy Economy in Appalachia (New Energy Economy Project)	Dec-24	Dec-24	Mar-25	May-25

Building Regional Culture and Tourism

Project	Metrics	Progress Report	Reflection	Interview
<i>Planning</i>				
Mobile Platform Development to Advance Rural Tourism Economies	Apr-25	May-25	Jun-25	Aug-25
The Saluda Grade Trail: A Catalyst for Economic Transformation in Upstate South Carolina and Western North Carolina	May-25	May-25	Jan-25	-
Cumberland-Pine Mountain Outdoor Recreation and Conservation Corridor	-	Jun-25	Jul-25	-
Strengthening Connections: Assessing Multi-Use Trail Connectivity Across Western PA, Southern New York, and the Seneca Nation of Indians	-	Jul-25	Mar-25	-
Great Allegheny Passage Trail Maintenance and Strategic Planning	-	Jun-25	Feb-25	-
The Rural Tourism Institute: Leveraging Land-Grant Universities to Support Sustainable Rural Tourism Development in Appalachia	-	Feb-25	Jul-25	-
New River Water Trail Action Plan	Mar-25	Mar-25	Mar-25	-
Unlocking the Economic Potential of the Parkersburg to Pittsburgh (P2P) Trail Corridor	-	Apr-25	-	-
<i>Implementation</i>				
KY Boone's Ridge; CTC Equipment Purchase and Trail Improvements	Apr-25	Aug-25	-	Jan-25
Growing the Gateway Economies of the Blue Ridge Parkway	-	Apr-25	-	-

Appendix B. Grantee & Partner Reflection

The ARISE Grantee & Partner Reflection is administered via online survey software and hosted by the ARISE evaluators, Chamberlin/Dunn. Grantees facilitate an email introduction to partners to encourage participation, and ARISE evaluators then distribute the link. Multiple partners from the same organization are permitted to respond. Questions 1 through 14 are randomized. Aggregated, anonymized results are shared with grantees.

Grantees and partners are asked to assess 15 elements through two questions, using a 5 – point scale, with the option to enter an open-ended comment for each element.

Question 1 (Prevalence): To what extent is [the element] present within the project?

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1 – Not at all | 4 – Very much |
| 2 – Not very much | 5 – Completely |
| 3 – Somewhat | Unsure (not scored) |

Question 2 (Strength/Challenge): To what extent is [the element] a notable strength or challenge within the project?

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| 1 – Significant challenge | 4 – Strength |
| 2 – Challenge | 5 – Significant strength |
| 3 – Neither a strength nor a challenge | Unsure (not scored) |

Reflection elements and their associated questions

Common Vision

To what extent is the project vision understood and shared by all?

To what extent is Common Vision a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Progress Toward Project Objectives

To what extent is the project on track to meet or exceed all outputs and outcomes?

To what extent is Progress Toward Project Objectives a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Partners' Commitment and Engagement

To what extent are all partners in all states actively committed and engaged at necessary levels?

To what extent is Partner Commitment and Engagement a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Convening/Communication Structure for Collaboration

To what extent is the framework for collaboration clear and functional (e.g., cadence, format(s), opportunities to collaborate, etc.)?

To what extent is Structure for Convening and Collaboration a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Effectiveness of Communication

To what extent is project communication effective (e.g., amount, frequency, content, audience, etc.)?

To what extent is Effective Communication a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Effectiveness of Collaboration Among Partners

To what extent is collaboration among partners highly effective and meeting its full potential?

To what extent is Partner Collaboration a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Governance and Decision-making

To what extent is the project's governance and decision-making framework clear and functional?

To what extent is the Governance and Decision-making Framework a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Use of Time

To what extent is project-related time used efficiently and effectively?

To what extent is the Use of Time a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Resource Allocation

To what extent are project resources allocated optimally and for maximum impact?

To what extent is Resource Allocation a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Use of Data

To what extent is high-quality data regularly collected, reviewed, and used for decision making?

To what extent is Use of Data a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Adaptability

To what extent is there flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and challenges?

To what extent is Adaptability a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Sustainability (Programmatic)

How confident are you that this work can and should be sustained for the long-term?

To what extent is Sustainability a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Multi-state Impact

To what extent has there been added benefit from the project operating with multi-state partners (vs. the impact that would be seen if implemented in one state only)?

To what extent is Multi-State Impact a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Shared Benefits from Collaboration

To what extent are the benefits from collaboration in line with each partner's contributions and expectations?

To what extent is Shared Benefits from Collaboration a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Overall Effectiveness

To what extent is the ARISE partnership effective and likely to have the expected impact by grant end?

To what extent is Overall Effectiveness a notable strength or challenge for this project?

Appendix C. Evaluation Limitations

As with any evaluation, this evaluation has several limitations that should be considered when reading and applying this report. Limitations are as follows:

Partial and biased findings

Qualitative and perceptual research and analysis methods are, by nature, partial and biased. To attempt to address this limitation, the evaluation triangulates data through multiple sources, including grantee reports, the grantee and partner self-assessment, and semi-structured interviews, as well as through post-interview discussions within the evaluation team and with ARC staff. Where grantee partners were interviewed along with grantees themselves, the evaluation team triangulated information collected from these partners and information collected from the grantees. The varying timelines of each project, however, mean that not all data sources are available for all grantees in a given quarter or year.

Selection bias

Selection bias is common in any form of design that does not involve random sampling or random assignment. Grantees are required to participate in the evaluation as a condition of receiving ARISE funds. While this requirement reduces the possibility of non-response, it also introduces the potential for participants to feel pressured to speak favorably about project implementation and the funder (ARC). To try to mitigate this, the evaluation team informed interview participants that their feedback would be confidential in the case of discussing challenges (while challenges may be associated with grant projects, comments would not be associated with individual interview participants) or anonymized in the case of feedback about ARC. Neutral, negative, and sometimes critical feedback from grantees and partners supports the notion that grantees felt comfortable to share their experiences, both positive and negative.

Researcher interview bias

Although a semi-structured interview protocol is used for each interview, it is possible that an individual researcher's methods for asking initial or follow-up questions may inadvertently introduce bias into responses. To attempt to mitigate this issue, the evaluation team reviewed the interview protocol questions collaboratively prior to conducting any interviews. The same protocol was used for all interviews. The same evaluation team member conducted all interviews, and another team member transcribed them. Notes were shared in a common system, and a separate team member completed quality reviews of all notes and conclusions. Where necessary, evaluation team members met to discuss any issues associated with carrying out the interview protocol and adjust interviewing techniques as needed. In addition, evaluation team members reviewed findings and interpretations collaboratively, as discussed in the next section, researcher extrapolation bias.

Researcher extrapolation bias

Analysis conducted within an interpretative analytical framework is threatened by the fact that researcher interpretation is personal and may go beyond what is present in and supported by actual data. To mitigate researcher extrapolation limitations, the evaluation

team individually reviewed and analyzed raw data collected through interviews; identified themes were collaboratively discussed and refined as a team; and evaluators introduced and discussed any contradictory evidence for themes as it arose. However, recommendations and lessons learned that were identified through this evaluation may not be suitable for all ARISE grantees.

Convenience Sampling

The self-reflection questionnaire represents a convenience sample, where a link is sent to the lead grantee and identified partners for each project, and individuals within the grantee and partner organizations can elect to respond. As such, reflection results in this report represent only the perspectives of those responding to the reflection and may not be indicative of all participants' perspectives on all ARISE projects.