

Applied Learning for Regional Impact

Student-Driven Solutions in Central West Virginia



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Who we are

Highlight multi-institution collaboration and stakeholder involvement

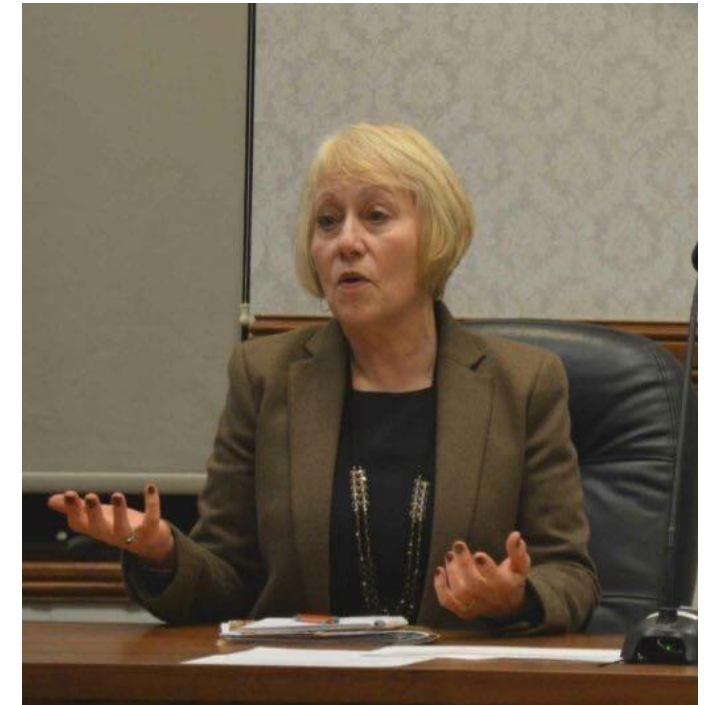
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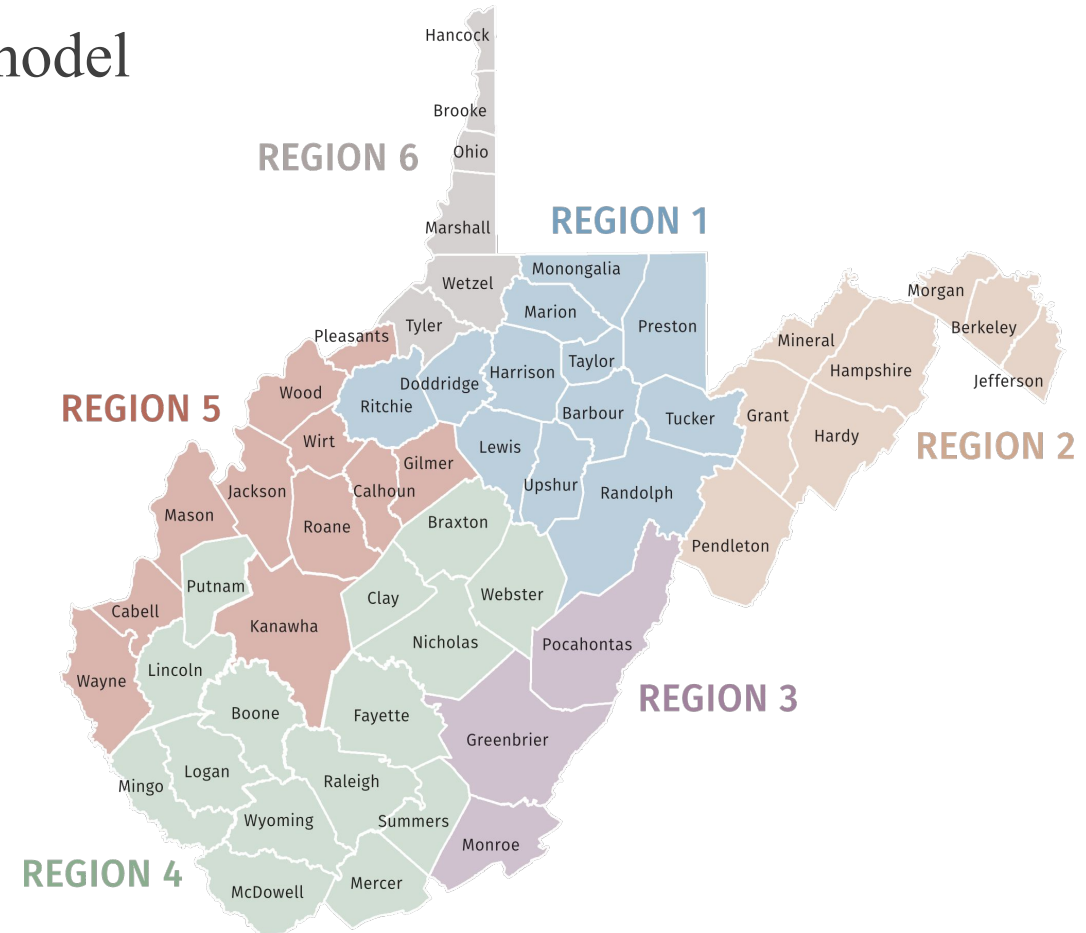
The Classroom as a Consulting Lab

Applied Entrepreneurship, AI, and Economic Development

The course is a consulting-based, applied learning model



- Traditional classroom projects often lack accountability
- Students need real stakeholder Interactions
- Communities need fresh research and communication support
- EDA's face limited resources and personnel



Students work with real Economic Development Authorities (EDAs)

Applied Entrepreneurship, AI, and Economic Development
The course is a consulting-based, applied learning model.

**Projects are based on active regional challenges,
not hypothetical cases**



Featured counties:
Marion
Featured
Lewis
Randolph
Upshur

KEEP YOUNG TALENT. BUILD WEST VIRGINIA'S FUTURE.

A Consulting Challenge for County Economic Development



FOCUS COUNTIES:

- Lewis County
- Marion County
- Randolph County
- Upshur County

BACKGROUND



West Virginia has experienced sustained population decline over the past decade, including continued outmigration among young adults ages 18 to 34.



Many leave for education and do not return, citing limited career opportunities, lower wages, and fewer lifestyle amenities than nearby states.



County economic development organizations often lack the staff time and budget to conduct extended research on this issue or to develop a unified strategy.



Fresh ideas that better connect young people, education, employers, and community opportunities could help more young adults build their futures in West Virginia.

THE PROBLEM

West Virginia is losing young talent faster than it can replace it,

weakening its workforce, tax base, and long-term economic outlook.



YOUR ROLE

Using the partner we have set up, proceed as if you are serving as a consulting group hired by your county's economic development authority.



Your task is to design a targeted, research-based, realistic retention strategy for **ONE** audience within the 18–34 age range.

REQUIRED DELIVERABLES

1 PROBLEM DIAGNOSIS



Identify three primary drivers of outmigration for your assigned audience.

Support your analysis with credible research. (Not just using AI but understanding findings).

2 STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS



Propose three solutions aimed at your identified drivers.

Include description, implementation, and expected outcomes.

★ At least one must address lifestyle, perception, or systems.

3 COMMUNICATION STRATEGY



Develop core messages, channels, and one example marketing tactic.



4 SUCCESS METRICS



Define three measurable indicators, such as retention rate, migration, job placement, or partnerships.



Think like consultants. Be realistic. Be bold. Be rooted in your community.

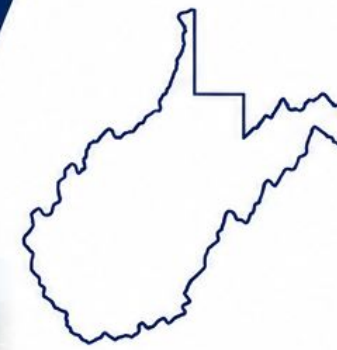


Stronger Communities. Stronger West Virginia.



PROBLEM 2: STRENGTHEN AWARENESS AND VALUE

Develop a targeted marketing strategy that increases awareness, engagement, and perceived value of a local or regional economic development authority.



FOCUS COUNTIES:

- Lewis County
- Marion County
- Randolph County
- Upshur County



ASSIGNMENT OBJECTIVE

You will create a realistic, research-based marketing strategy to help your assigned economic development authority build awareness, engage key audiences, and communicate its value to the community.

REQUIRED DELIVERABLES

1 AUDIENCE DEFINITION



- Identify two priority audiences.
- For each audience, explain key needs or motivations.
- Explain the current perception problem.

2 BRAND POSITIONING



- Define how the Authority should be understood.
- Include current perception.
- Include desired positioning.
- Create a clear value proposition.

3 CORE MESSAGING STRATEGY



- Develop one central message.
- Create three supporting messages tailored to your audiences.
- Messages should be concrete and benefit driven.

4 CHANNEL STRATEGY



- Recommend specific communication channels (social media, partnerships, events, networks).
- Explain why each fits your audience.

5 CAMPAIGN CONCEPT



- Create one campaign.
- Include the name.
- Provide a concept description.
- Include a sample of content (post, slogan, or visual idea).

6 MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION



- Define three metrics that will measure success.
- Examples: engagement, participation, conversions.

7 CONSTRAINTS



- Work within a limited budget (approx. \$50,000).
- Account for small team capacity.
- Maintain public sector tone and compliance requirements.



FORMAT AND SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

- 4-to-6-page report, double-spaced
- APA style with a references page
- At least five credible sources beyond class materials
- Include at least one visual (chart, mockup, or campaign sample)



EVALUATION CRITERIA

- ★ Clarity of positioning
- ★ Audience insight and relevance
- ★ Practicality of recommendations
- ★ Quality of messaging
- ★ Creativity grounded in reality



SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE...

A strategy that connects the Authority with the right audiences, tells a compelling story, and leads to stronger engagement and long-term community impact.



Think like consultants. Be strategic. Be creative. Be realistic. Your ideas can shape the future of your community.



WHAT MAKES THIS DIFFERENT?



We replace hypothetical assignments with real-world impact.

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

VS.

APPLIED CONSULTING MODEL



HYPOTHETICAL

Assignments are based on made-up scenarios.



REAL STAKEHOLDERS

Students work with real Economic Development Authorities (EDAs) and community partners.



CLASSROOM-ONLY

Learning happens within the classroom.



PUBLIC-FACING

Student work is presented to EDA leaders, community members, and regional stakeholders.



INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK

Feedback comes primarily from the instructor.



EXTERNAL EVALUATION

Projects are evaluated by EDA professionals and real-world stakeholders.



INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENTS

Students work individually on assigned tasks.



COLLABORATIVE CONSULTING

Students collaborate in teams to diagnose real problems and develop actionable solutions.



OUR GOAL:

Prepare students to think like consultants and lead change in their communities.



REAL PROBLEMS

Tackle today's economic development challenges.



REAL PARTNERSHIPS

Build relationships that strengthen our region.



REAL IMPACT

Deliver recommendations that can be implemented.

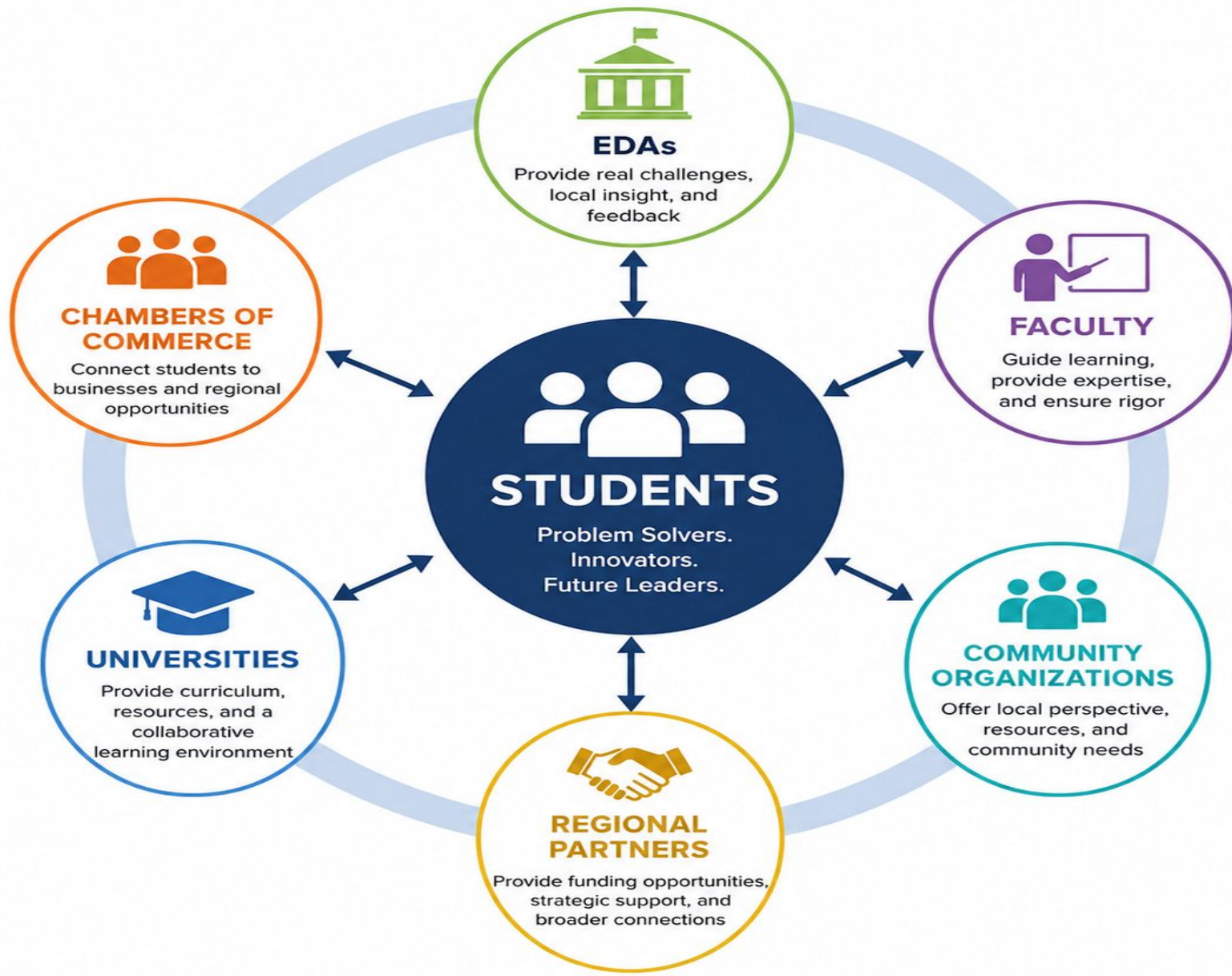


REAL LEADERSHIP

Develop skills that last beyond the classroom.



From classroom to community. From theory to impact. From students to **change makers**.



A COLLABORATIVE ECOSYSTEM FOR REGIONAL IMPACT
Working together to strengthen communities and build a better future.

The Why – Regional Impact and Educational Value

- West Virginia has experienced **sustained population decline** over the past decade or more.
- This is driven, in part, by the **outmigration of young people** ages 18-34, taking their **energy and ideas** with them.
 - limited **career** opportunities
 - lower **wages**
 - fewer **lifestyle** amenities

Economic Development Challenges

- County economic development organizations struggle to develop a **unified approach** to addressing this challenge.
- **Limited staff time and budget** prevents the extended research
 - further **understand** the problem
 - identify **fresh ideas** for engaging young people in WV
 - **connect** education with workforce needs and employers
 - encourage young people to **build their future here**

The Educational Value

- Teams of undergrad students at Davis & Elkins College, Fairmont State University, and WV Wesleyan College **served as consultants.**
- Each team designed a targeted, **research-based**, realistic retention strategy for young adults in WV.
 - Identification of three **primary drivers** of youth outmigration
 - Three specific **solutions**
 - At least one solution addressed **lifestyle, perception, or systems**

The Educational Value – Applied Learning

- Real-world scenario
- EDA “clients”
- Solutions grounded in current data
- Professional presentation experience
- Final written report for professional audience
- Collaboration with faculty and teams from other IHEs



The Why - Potential Strategies

- **Career-Internship Programs** that connect students to employers in key industries with career opportunities
- **Talent-Retention Incentives** to provide student loan assistance or relocation stipends
- **Social-Media Campaigns** that frame WV as the ideal destination to live, prosper, and grow
- **Systems for Connections & Engagement** that highlight outdoor recreation, community events, volunteer opportunities
- **Provide Practical Support** such as housing guides, roommate connections, spaces for remote work

Partnership at a Glance

<i>Colleges</i>	<i>Counties</i>	<i>Problems</i>	<i>SBA Coach</i>	<i>Presentations</i>
<i>Faculty-led, cross-institutional collaboration</i>	<i>EDA Executive Directors</i>	<i>Selected from EDA input for North Central WV</i>	<i>Federal small business perspective included</i>	<i>Student Teams sharing results with partners</i>

Entrepreneurial Leadership Symposium

Student Learning Areas

- Applied research: Moving from theory to real-world problem-solving with actual stakeholders
- Working within constraints: Navigating budget limits, data gaps, and community context
- Professional communication: Presenting to EDA directors and a SBA representative
- Civic engagement: Understanding the economic realities of Central Appalachia firsthand

Reflective Insights

Strengths

Faculty brought complementary expertise: economic analysis, community planning, and business development, creating a rich learning environment for students.

Gaps

Students needed stronger foundational training in regional data sources, demographic analysis, and grant-ready proposal writing earlier in the semester. Each faculty had a basis but then autonomously adjusted their courses.

Improvement

Earlier and more structured EDA feedback loops, shared rubrics across campuses, and coordinated timelines would strengthen consistency and outcomes. Some more consistent final presentations.

What Worked



Stakeholder Engagement

EDA directors and the SBA representative provided authentic, real-world context and students responded with higher motivation and more rigorous work.



Structured Deliverables

Clear milestones and presentation formats kept teams on track across three campuses and ensured professional-quality outputs for community partners.



Cross-Collaboration

Faculty coordination created a shared learning experience despite institutional differences which we found to be a model worth replicating and scaling.

What We Would Improve



Earlier Stakeholder Feedback
Build in a mid-semester check-in with EDA partners so students can course-correct before final presentations.



Stronger Data Training
Integrate regional data literacy modules (Census, BEA, EDA tools) at the start of the semester.



Campus Alignment
Shared timelines, rubrics, and expectations across institutions from day one.



More Q&A Time
Reserve dedicated time for interactive discussion — stakeholders had valuable follow-up that the format didn't always allow.

Why “Reverse Pitch” Model

- Higher ROI by focusing on specific problems, states get better returns than generic incentives, which often fail to create the promised jobs.
- Strengthening local ecosystems by fostering homegrown innovation and connect students, potential local startups with the public sector.
- Reverse pitches can be targeted at in communities, addressing regional disparities rather than only focusing on high-growth urban centers.
- They encourage regional, cross-sector partnerships, breaking down silos between government agencies, academia, and the private sector.
- Why this works:
 - Low-cost, high-impact: leverages existing courses and faculty
 - Builds student pipelines into regional economic development
 - Creates a replicable framework
 - Aligns with federal EDA and SBA priorities for rural innovation

Exciting Options

The Reverse Pitch & WV Entrepreneurship Office

Traditional Model

Students present solutions to stakeholders at semester's end with limited iteration, no implementation pathway and potential prizes.

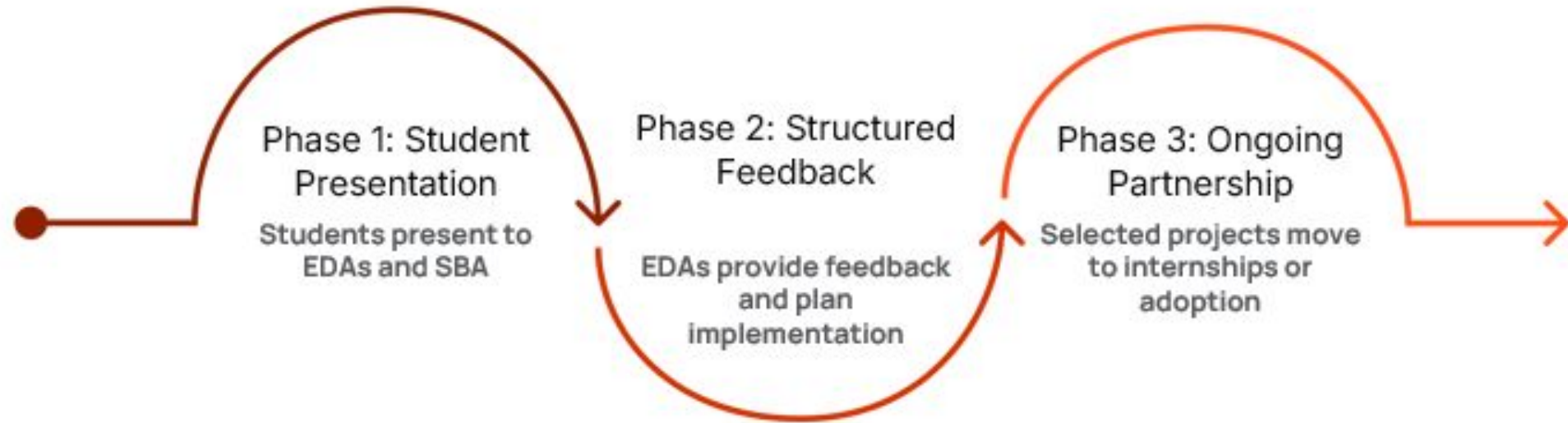
Reverse Pitch Model

EDAs present real challenges *first*. Students respond with research-backed proposals which may include a new business proposal.

WV Entrepreneurship Office

The new state-level office could serve as the connective tissue, coordinating across campuses, EDAs, and the SBA for sustained impact – multi-level education system could be introduced as early as the Governor's summer School of Entrepreneurship.

Multi-Term/Year Projects



How You Can Help

- Share this model with colleagues at other institutions
 - Connect us with EDAs in your network
 - Advocate for faculty time and institutional support
 - Consider your institution/organization as a future partner
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- Ask us questions now?
 - What could we do differently?
 - Would you want to get involved?

Thank you!

Questions?

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Or join us?

Davis & Elkins College

West Virginia Wesleyan College

Fairmont State University