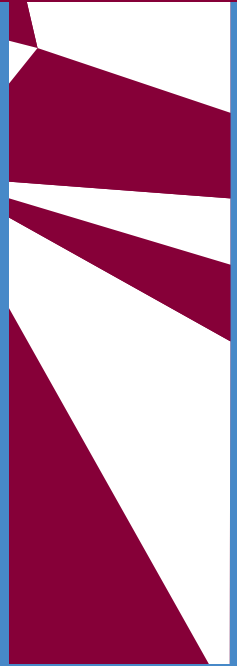




FIRST2 NETWORK

WV CAREER COLLABORATIVE AND FIRST2 NETWORK SPRING CO-CONFERENCE

Building Connections to Make Appalachia a Great Place to Learn, Work, and Call Home



MAY 11-13, 2026

May 11th at the Fairmont State University Falcon Center
May 12-13th at the Holiday Inn Morgantown - University Area

EVENT PROGRAM



The First2 Network is supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation under Award Number: HRD-1834595, High Rocks Educational Corporation.



Appalachian Regional Commission

The WV Career Collaborative is supported by the Appalachian Regional Commission under Award Number: PW-21904-IM



FIRST2 NETWORK

Our vision is to bring together educators, students, industry partners, workforce professionals, and community organizations across Appalachia to build meaningful, lasting connections. By working side by side on real-world initiatives—like internships and curriculum development—we elevate diverse perspectives and turn ideas into action. We believe true connection is created through collaboration, not just conversation. Together, we will strengthen STEM education and workforce pathways, helping make Appalachia a great place to learn, work, and call home.

Questions?

Contact Tracey Kennedy at tracey.kennedy@fairmontstate.edu or Margaret Falletta at first2networkmarketing@gmail.com

LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR NETWORKS HERE:



www.wvcareercollab.org



www.first2network.org



The WV Career Collaborative project is a result of the funding of an Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER) grant called: “Building Connections to Grow Capacity: Breaking Down Regional Barriers in the STEM Workforce Pipeline”. Our mission is to develop the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) workforce in the service region of Fairmont State University (FSU) and Glenville State University (GSU) by connecting industry, academics, educators, students, and other job-seekers, and workforce entities through a Regional Career Services and Workforce Development Collaborative.



The First2 Network is an expanding group of people and organizations working to increase the number of college graduates in STEM to strengthen our communities and drive an innovation economy in West Virginia, Kentucky, and beyond. First2 focuses on rural, first-generation, and low-income STEM students, making sure all our students can succeed. First2 works in true partnership with student leaders and tests and learns with stakeholders to share and scale high-impact practices. At the core of our shared vision to improve student STEM success is the assumption that the students themselves should be co-creators of the solutions and that our efforts will drive systemic change as well as inform resource allocation and policy on a large scale.

AGENDA - MONDAY MAY 11TH

FAIRMONT STATE UNIVERSITY FALCON CENTER

11:00am - 12:00pm		Registration Open	Falcon Center Hallway
12:00pm - 1:00pm	Lunch	(1) Welcome Remarks (2) WV Career Collaborative/First2 Network Introductions	Falcon Center Conference Room
Break: 1:00pm - 1:15pm			
1:15pm - 2:15pm	Concurrent Session A	Stronger Together: Building Collaborative Industrial Advisory Boards	Falcon Center Rooms 301 & 302
		Reframing Student Employment as Workforce Development	Falcon Center Room 303
		Resume/Cover Letter One-on-One Meetings, WVCC Virtual Reality Video Demonstrations, and Professional Headshots	Falcon Center Boardroom
Break: 2:15pm - 2:30pm			
2:30pm - 3:30pm	Concurrent Session B	Developing Competencies in AI for the STEM Workforce	Falcon Center Rooms 301 & 302
		Resume/Cover Letter One-on-One Meetings, WVCC Virtual Reality Video Demonstrations, and Professional Headshots	Falcon Center Boardroom
Break: 3:30pm - 3:45pm			
3:45pm - 4:45pm	Concurrent Session C	Applied Learning for Regional Impact: Student-Driven Solutions in Central West Virginia	Falcon Center Rooms 301 & 302
		(1) Making the WV Career Collaborative Virtual Reality Videos (2) The Cognitive Scaffolding Through Microlearning Spiral	Falcon Center Room 303
Networking Reception: 4:45pm - 5:15pm - Falcon Center Hallway			
Dinner and Table Topics: 5:15pm - 6:15pm - Falcon Center Conference Room			
6:15pm - 7:15pm	Keynote Presentation	Workforce Futures: Youth Programming and Labor Market Trends in West Virginia	Falcon Center Conference Room

AGENDA - TUESDAY MAY 12TH

HOLIDAY INN MORGANTOWN - UNIVERSITY AREA

Breakfast: 8:30am - 9:30am - Mountaineer Ballroom, Montani Semper

Welcome Remarks: 9:30am - 9:45am - Mountaineer Ballroom, Montani Semper

9:45am
-
10:45am

Plenary
Panel

Building Connections to Make Appalachia a Great
Place to Learn, Work, and Call Home

Mountaineer
Ballroom -
Montani Semper

Break: 10:45am - 11:00am

11:00am
-
12:00pm

Concurrent
Session D

Resume/Brand Building and Job Searches
in the Era of AI

Mountaineer
Ballroom - Liberi

Bridging Pathways: Building a Culture of Leadership for
Career Readiness Across Educational Contexts

Mountaineer
Ballroom -
Montani Semper

Networking Lunch: 12:00pm - 1:00pm - Mountaineer Ballroom, Montani Semper

Announcements and Door Prizes: 1:00pm - 1:15pm - Mountaineer Ballroom, Montani Semper

1:15pm
-
2:15pm

Concurrent
Session E

Designing for Impact: Lessons Learned from a Near-Peer
Mentoring Model for First-Generation Students

Mountaineer
Ballroom - Liberi

From "Me" to "We": Building a High-Performing,
High-Retention Team

Mountaineer
Ballroom -
Montani Semper

Break: 2:15pm - 2:30pm

2:30pm
-
3:30pm

Concurrent
Session F

Co-Mentoring for Change: Empowering Undergraduates
Through Improvement Science

Mountaineer
Ballroom -
Montani Semper

(1) ILLUME: Building a Brighter Future
(2) Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills for
Students with Disabilities

Mountaineer
Ballroom - Liberi

Break: 3:30pm - 3:45pm

3:45pm
-
4:45pm

Concurrent
Session G

Building Career Pathways Early: Connecting Elementary
Career Exploration to High School CTE Success

Mountaineer
Ballroom -
Montani Semper

Using Generative AI to Improve STEM Course Relevance

Mountaineer
Ballroom - Liberi

Break: 4:45pm - 5:15pm

Dinner and Table Topics: 5:15pm - 6:15pm - Mountaineer Ballroom, Montani Semper

6:15pm - 7:15pm

Scholarly Poster Presentations - Mountaineer Ballroom - Montani Semper

AGENDA - WEDNESDAY MAY 13TH

HOLIDAY INN MORGANTOWN - UNIVERSITY AREA

Breakfast and First2 Network Awards: 8:30am - 9:30am - Mountaineer Ballroom, Montani Semper

Welcome Remarks: 9:30am - 9:45am - Mountaineer Ballroom, Montani Semper

9:45am - 10:45am	Concurrent Session H	First2 Network Institutional Team Presentations - Part 1	Mountaineer Ballroom - Montani Semper
		A Path to Success Uncovered: Charleston Job Corps Center	Mountaineer Ballroom - Liberi

Break: 10:45am - 11:00am

11:00am - 12:00pm	Concurrent Session I	First2 Network Institutional Team Presentations - Part 2	Mountaineer Ballroom - Montani Semper
		Transformational Internships for Next-Generation Leaders: Voices from the Field	Mountaineer Ballroom - Liberi

12:00pm - 1:00pm	Lunch	First2 Network Steering Committee Meeting	Mountaineer Ballroom - Montani Semper
		WV Career Collaborative Workforce Advisory Board and Program Management Board Meeting	Mountaineer Ballroom - Liberi

(optional) Break/Travel Time to WVU Innovation Corporation: 1:00pm - 1:30pm

(optional) 1:30pm - 2:30pm	Site Visit	Tour of the WVU Innovation Corporation	WVU Innovation Corporation 1550 University Ave. Morgantown, WV 26506.
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ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

TABLE TOPICS DURING DINNER

Both Monday and Tuesday evening during dinner (5:15–6:15pm), attendees are invited to participate in optional “Table Topic” discussions centered around selected topics and themes. Each evening will feature a few different discussion topics, offering an informal opportunity to connect with others, exchange ideas, and ask questions. After picking up your dinner, simply look for the tables marked with “Table Topic” signs and join the conversation that interests you most!

Mondays’s Table Topics will be:

- Learn About Becoming an AmeriCorps Partner Site with High Rocks
- Discuss Industry Advisory Boards

Tuesday’s Table Topics will be:

- Discuss First2 Network NSF IUSE Proposal Ideas
- Discuss Internships and Work-Based Learning
- Workshop the First2 Network Value Proposition

SCHOLARLY POSTER PRESENTATIONS

Join us for an interactive Scholarly Poster Presentation session featuring student, faculty, and partner-led research and project work. Presented in a gallery walk format, presenters will be stationed alongside their posters to share their work, discuss findings and experiences, and engage attendees in conversation.

Posters will showcase a variety of topics, including First2 Network student-led change ideas from the 2025–2026 program year; First2 Network and WV Career Collaborative program initiatives; innovative practices in STEM education and workforce development; and broader scientific research.

Attendees are encouraged to explore the posters at their own pace, ask questions, exchange ideas, and connect directly with presenters throughout the session.

REFLECTIONS AND CONNECTIONS CORNER

Asynchronous engagement activities will be available throughout the conference in the venue hallway...look for the tall tri-folds that bring back memories of your 5th grade Science Fair. Stop by at any time to share your ideas, reflect on key themes, and make connections with others. Enjoy the colorful post-its and markers. Feeling creative? You are welcome to channel your artistic side!

SESSION DESCRIPTIONS - MONDAY MAY 11TH

12:00pm - 1:00pm Lunch	<p>Introduction to the First2 Network</p> <p>Presenter: Sarah Riley</p>	<p>This session offers an introduction to the First2 Network and its approach to improving STEM student success. Attendees will learn how First2 partners with institutional teams—including student leaders—to test, refine, and scale change ideas through continuous learning. The session will also highlight the network’s outreach and policy efforts aimed at expanding impact and driving meaningful systems change.</p>
	<p>Introduction to the WV Career Collaborative</p> <p>Presenters: Dr. Robert Niichel and Dr. Erica Harvey</p>	<p>This session provides an introduction to the WV Career Collaborative and its work to strengthen connections between education and industry across the region. Attendees will learn how the collaborative builds partnerships with employers, K-12, and higher education to expand work-based learning opportunities—such as job shadowing, internships, co-ops, and micro-internships—and better align curriculum with evolving workforce needs.</p>
1:15pm - 2:15pm Concurrent Session A	<p>Stronger Together: Building Collaborative Industrial Advisory Boards</p> <p>Presenter: Abby Chapman</p>	<p>This one-hour seminar highlights the essentials of creating and sustaining an effective Industrial Advisory Board (IAB), including structure, recruitment, and engagement strategies. Participants will also explore how to build strong, collaborative relationships with industry partners, leveraging their insight and support while maintaining the program’s unique identity and direction.</p>
	<p>Reframing Student Employment as Workforce Development</p> <p>Presenters: Sadie Murphy, Logan Harrison, and Marcus Spinks</p>	<p>Student employment is often treated as transactional labor rather than transformational professional development. Across higher education, student workers may graduate with two to four years of employment experience yet lack structured professional formation or the ability to articulate transferable skills gained during their tenure. This session reframes student employment as intentional professional development. GSU’s Pioneer Support Center will explore how structured professional development embedded within student employment can strengthen accountability, professional identity, career transition readiness, and reflective practice. By treating student workers as emerging professionals, institutions cultivate peer leaders who contribute meaningfully to campus culture while strengthening the region’s long-term workforce capacity.</p>
	<p>Resume/Cover Letter One-on-One Meetings, WVCC Virtual Reality Video Demonstrations, & Professional Headshots</p>	<p>Step into a hands-on, choose-your-own-adventure session designed to help you prepare for your future career. Participants can engage in any or all of the interactive activities: receive personalized feedback on your resume and/or cover letter through in a one-on-one meeting with an industry professional, get a polished professional headshot, or explore a ‘day in the life of a STEM career’ virtual reality demonstration through the WV Career Collaborative’s immersive virtual reality job shadow experiences.</p>

<p>2:30pm - 3:30pm</p> <p>Concurrent Session B</p>	<p>Developing Competencies in AI for the STEM Workforce</p> <p>Panelists: Kim Graves, Dr. Adam Smith, Jeffrey Tucker, and Dr. Sydney Credle</p>	<p>Moderated by Samantha Mitchell, this panel will explore what skills students, educators, and employers need to thrive in AI-enabled STEM workforce environments. Panelists from education and industry will discuss emerging expectations for AI competency, including technical skills, ethical decision-making, critical thinking, communication, and responsible AI use in academic and workplace settings. Participants will gain insight into how institutions and organizations are adapting to technological change, preparing faculty and students to use AI effectively, and identifying the competencies that will become essential for the STEM workforce in the years ahead.</p>
	<p>Resume/Cover Letter One-on-One Meetings, WVCC Virtual Reality Video Demonstrations, & Professional Headshots</p>	<p>Step into a hands-on, choose-your-own-adventure session designed to help you prepare for your future career. Participants can engage in any or all of the interactive activities: receive personalized feedback on your resume and/or cover letter through in a one-on-one meeting with an industry professional, get a polished professional headshot, or explore a 'day in the life of a STEM career' virtual reality demonstration through the WV Career Collaborative's immersive virtual reality job shadow experiences.</p>
<p>3:45pm - 4:45pm</p> <p>Concurrent Session C</p>	<p>Applied Learning for Regional Impact: Student-Driven Solutions in Central West Virginia</p> <p>Presenters: Dr. M. E. Yancosek Gamble, Dr. Susan Aloï, and Dr. Tracie Dodson</p>	<p>This panel highlights a collaborative, place-based learning initiative led by three professors at central West Virginia institutions. Across their respective courses, faculty designed and implemented hands-on projects that moved beyond traditional classroom instruction. Students engaged directly with community partners, including Economic Development Authorities, Chambers of Commerce, and local organizations, to address real economic development challenges. Faculty panelists will share how the courses were structured, how partnerships were developed, and how students translated theory and research into actionable recommendations at a regional Appalachian Entrepreneurial Challenge. The panel will also highlight specific solutions proposed by students and discuss their relevance and feasibility for rural economic development.</p>
<p>3:45pm - 4:15pm</p> <p>Concurrent Session C</p>	<p>(1) Making the WV Career Collaborative Virtual Reality Videos</p> <p>Presenters: Ben Berry and Stefano Ceccarelli</p>	<p>Go behind the camera with the MTN Craft team as they share the creative process behind the WV Career Collaborative's Virtual Shadow Series. This session will explore how immersive video storytelling can help students connect with career pathways across West Virginia and the role of virtual reality in expanding access to career exploration for students who may not otherwise have opportunities for in-person job shadowing or site visits.</p>
	<p>(2) The Cognitive Scaffolding Through Microlearning Spiral</p> <p>Presenter: Jason Frazer</p>	<p>Today's student is inundated with media of varying levels of quality and subject matter. "Doomscrolling" has replaced reading, leaving students constantly bombarded with opinions brought to them by social media algorithms and largely unprepared for life after schooling. This presentation combines their habits and preferred methods of information ingestion into a medium that teachers can create and students can consume. The presentation demonstrates how brief, concept-focused videos can enhance engagement, reinforce quantitative and applied learning, and foster real-world problem-solving competencies.</p>

6:15pm
-
7:15pm

Keynote
Presentation

**Workforce Futures:
Youth Programming
and Labor Market
Trends in West
Virginia**

**Presenters:
Jonathon Compton
and Jeffrey Green**

The WV Career Collaborative and First2 Network Spring 2026 Co-Conference is pleased to welcome Jonathon Compton and Jeff Green from WorkForce WV as our keynote presenters. This session will provide an overview of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) youth programming in West Virginia, including what successful youth programs look like, how educators, community organizations, and employers can effectively partner with these initiatives, and emerging plans for future youth workforce efforts. The presentation will also examine state-wide workforce and labor market trends shaping West Virginia, including labor force participation, workforce demographics, economic growth, and long-term employment outlooks. Attendees will gain a clearer understanding of the state's workforce landscape while learning how stronger alignment between youth programming, education, workforce development, and industry can support student success and economic vitality across the region.

SESSION DESCRIPTIONS - TUESDAY MAY 12TH

9:45am
-
10:45am

Plenary
Panel

**Building
Connections to
Make Appalachia a
Great Place to Learn,
Work, and Call
Home**

**Panelists:
Laura Seybold, Alena
Gray, Tracey
Kennedy, and Dr.
Ethan Backus**

Moderated by Susan Rodriguez, this plenary panel will bring together perspectives from education, industry, workforce development, and the student community to explore how stronger connections can help make Appalachia a place where people want to learn, work, and build their futures. Panelists will discuss the partnerships, opportunities, and challenges shaping the region, including workforce readiness, talent retention, and the alignment between education and industry needs. Through shared experiences and practical examples, participants will gain insight into what is working across Appalachia, where gaps still exist, and how communities can collaborate to create stronger pathways for students and job seekers to succeed and stay in the region.

11:00am
-
12:00pm

Concurrent
Session D

**Bridging Pathways:
Building a Culture of
Leadership for
Career Readiness
Across Educational
Contexts**

**Presenters:
Dr. Justin Bowers
and Rebecca
Bowers-Call**

What does it look like to intentionally cultivate leadership in students—regardless of whether they are pursuing technical careers, liberal arts degrees, or professional pathways? This presentation will explore how leadership development can serve as a unifying framework for student success across contexts. Participants will engage in a practical exploration of how to embed leadership principles into their own programs, courses, and student interactions. The session will introduce adaptable frameworks for cultivating leadership identity, aligning values with career pathways, and creating environments where students practice leadership in tangible ways.

**Resume/Brand
Building and Job
Searches in the Era
of AI**

**Panelists:
Travis Miller, Joshua
Staley, and
Mackenzie Sayers**

This presentation and panel discussion will explore job searching trends and "better" practices in the era of AI and modern Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS). This session will also identify advantages and limitations of popular job search tools while also providing guidance on effective job searching strategies and developing strong application materials.

1:15pm - 2:15pm Concurrent Session E	<p>From "Me" to "We": Building a High-Performing, High-Retention Team</p> <p>Presenter: Chris Bailey</p>	<p>Most people become managers because they are good at their jobs. Nobody warns them that the skills that made them successful as individual contributors — heads-down focus, personal accountability, getting things done — can actually work against them once they're responsible for a team. This session is for new and recently promoted managers who want to build teams that don't just hit their numbers, but actually want to show up. We'll explore what it means to create a team culture where people feel connected to the work and to each other — and why that turns out to be the most practical thing a manager can do.</p>
	<p>Designing for Impact: Lessons Learned from a Near-Peer Mentoring Model for First-Generation Students</p> <p>Presenters: Dr. Michelle Richards-Babb, Dr. Marjorie Darrah, Dr. Cinthia Pacheco, and Michelle Paden</p>	<p>First-generation college students often encounter systemic barriers that hinder academic persistence, sense of belonging, and effective engagement with institutional resources. To address these challenges, this project implemented two coordinated interventions —First Gen Student Ambassadors and First Gen Faculty Champions —centered on a structured near-peer mentoring model designed to inform both student support and institutional practice. This presentation will describe program design, recruitment, training, and implementation, and will highlight lessons learned in managing a near-peer mentoring program, including mentor preparation, workload balance, communication structures, and alignment of mentors and mentees by discipline. Key take-aways from site visits and qualitative outcomes from ambassador and faculty journaling will also be shared.</p>

2:30pm - 3:00pm Concurrent Session F	<p>(1) ILLUME: Building a Brighter Future</p> <p>Presenter: Jacob Wisenbaker</p>	<p>This session will explore how ILLUME connects rural students to STEM careers and skilled trades. Rural communities in West Virginia do not lack talented students. They lack structured pathways that connect classroom learning to real careers. This session introduces ILLUME (Innovating, Learning, Leading, Uniting, Making, Experimenting), the workforce education program developed by the Civil-Military Innovation Institute (CMI2) to close that gap. Since launching in Clay County in 2023, ILLUME has expanded to Braxton, Calhoun, and Brooke counties in West Virginia as well as additional counties in Mississippi. Attendees will learn how the ILLUME model works, how it adapts to local community context rather than imposing a fixed curriculum, and what it takes for a county to become an ILLUME hub. The session will include information on how educators, economic development professionals, industry partners, and higher education institutions can partner with CMI2 to bring this model to their communities.</p>
	<p>(2) Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills for Students with Disabilities</p> <p>Presenter: Dr. Leann DiAndreth-Elkins</p>	<p>Self-determination is the independent ability to direct one's life by setting goals and making decisions. Self-advocacy is a skill necessary for self-determination that involves communicating one's needs, rights, and desires to achieve one's goals. Students with disabilities should receive support to develop and practice effective self-determination and self-advocacy skills in preparation for their transition to life after high school. Setting goals, making decisions, and understanding their needs, abilities, and interests are essential for being successful in school and the workplace. This presentation will describe self-advocacy skills, how students can work towards self-determination, and how these skills support success in the workplace. A series of transition seminars and transition planning strategies designed for middle and high school students with disabilities to develop self-awareness and self-advocacy skills will be shared.</p>

2:30pm
-
3:30pm

Concurrent
Session F

**Co-Mentoring for
Change:
Empowering
Undergraduates
Through
Improvement
Science**

**Presenters:
Charlisa Daniels and
Autumn Jouett**

In a cohort-based co-mentoring initiative at Northern Kentucky University (NKU), mid-career undergraduate students and faculty collaboratively designed, implemented, and refined change ideas aimed at enhancing student success. Grounded in the principles of improvement science, the program adapted methodologies from the First2 INCLUDES Network to create a structured framework for iterative testing using the PDSA improvement science cycles. Participants identified barriers to student persistence, developed targeted interventions, and assessed their impact using data-driven approaches. This presentation will detail the integration of improvement science into NKU's TRUE ACCESS program, highlighting how student-led experimentation fostered agency, leadership development, and a culture of continuous improvement. Faculty and student co-mentors will discuss the process of adapting the First2 model at NKU, outcomes, and lessons learned.

**Building Career
Pathways Early:
Connecting
Elementary Career
Exploration to High
School CTE Success**

**Presenters:
Lori Stover and Dr.
Donna Burge-Tetrick**

What if career readiness began in elementary school? This session highlights an innovative, vertically aligned model that connects playful, hands-on career exploration in the early grades to high school Career Technical Education pathways, certifications, and workforce skills. Discover how embedding real-world relevance into core instruction is increasing student engagement and strengthening connections that help make Appalachia a great place to learn, work, and call home.

3:45pm
-
4:45pm

Concurrent
Session G

**Using Generative AI
to Improve STEM
Course Relevance**

**Presenters:
Marjorie Darrah and
Russell Dillon**

This presentation describes how Generative AI was used to redesign a theoretical mathematics course for engineering majors, to enhance motivation and persistence in STEM by connecting abstract algebraic theory to meaningful real-world applications. Using Perplexity.ai, the instructor developed a 15-week course schedule aligned with student backgrounds, replacing a traditional textbook with an open-source online text featuring embedded computer scripts. Each chapter now integrates STEM-relevant examples, and students complete a final project linking course topics to their own majors. Evaluation data indicate that students find the redesigned course effective in making mathematics more relevant to their future careers, with statistically significant gains in perceived usefulness, motivation, and interest. Over half of students reported that the applications clearly motivated them, and qualitative feedback highlighted a desire for deeper, discipline-specific examples. The presentation will also discuss how AI tools are increasingly shaping both course design and students' learning practices.

SESSION DESCRIPTIONS - WEDNESDAY MAY 13TH

9:45am
-
10:45am

Concurrent
Session H

**A Path to Success
Uncovered:
Charleston Job
Corps Center**

**Presenters:
Michael Linkenhoker
and Daniel Gates**

This session highlights how the Charleston Job Corps Center helps young adults build a pathway to success through career training, education, and supportive services. Participants will learn how partnerships and workforce connections create opportunities that prepare students for sustainable careers and brighter futures.

<p>9:45am - 10:45am</p> <p>Concurrent Session H</p>	<p>First2 Network Institutional Team Presentations - Part 1</p>	<p>This round-robin session will feature presentations from the First2 Institutional Teams at Marshall University, West Virginia University Institute of Technology, Glenville State University, and Eastern Kentucky University, highlighting change work and lessons learned from the 2025–2026 academic year. Teams will share the change ideas they implemented, data and outcomes from their initiatives, and how student voice and leadership were incorporated into their work. Presentations will also explore successes, challenges, and sustainability efforts as institutions continue building stronger pathways for student success in STEM education across the region.</p>
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<p>11:00am - 12:00pm</p> <p>Concurrent Session I</p>	<p>Transformational Internships for Next- Generation Leaders: Voices from the Field</p> <p>Presenter: Cree Lahti</p>	<p>Internships hold tremendous potential to strengthen workforce pipelines while providing meaningful, hands-on learning experiences. However, many employers struggle to design programs that are truly impactful, while interns often encounter experiences that fall short of their expectations and potential. This panel brings together supervisors and interns to share perspectives from both sides of the internship experience, exploring what makes internships effective while elevating the voices of those directly involved in these programs. Through facilitated Q&A and audience participation, attendees will examine common challenges, learn practical strategies, and gain fresh perspectives for strengthening internship programs. The session will also introduce the High Rocks 4 Pillars Model for designing and evaluating internship programs, grounded in nearly 30 years of experiential and peer learning, and highlight workforce development initiatives through the WV Jobs Network.</p>
	<p>First2 Network Institutional Team Presentations - Part 2</p>	<p>This round-robin session will feature presentations from the First2 Institutional Teams at Fairmont State University, Blue Ridge Community and Technical College, West Virginia University, and Northern Kentucky University, highlighting change work and lessons learned from the 2025–2026 academic year. Teams will share the change ideas they implemented, data and outcomes from their initiatives, and how student voice and leadership were incorporated into their work. Presentations will also explore successes, challenges, and sustainability efforts as institutions continue building stronger pathways for student success in STEM education across the region.</p>



We gratefully acknowledge the members of the Co-Conference Planning Committee for their collaboration and hard work in organizing this event:

Tracey Kennedy, Fairmont State University
Margaret Falletta, High Rocks Educational Corporation
Lloyd Ford, Fairmont State University
Roberta "Robbie" Baylor, Preston County Economic Development Authority
Dr. Robert "Bob" Niichel, Fairmont State University
Susan Rodriguez, Fairmont State University
Samantha Mitchell, High Rocks Educational Corporation
Dr. Erica Harvey, Fairmont State University

OUR SPEAKERS:

DR. SUSAN ALOI

Dr. Susan Aloï is an Associate Professor of Business at Davis & Elkins College, where she chairs the Division of Business & Entrepreneurship and teaches courses in management and marketing. Dr. Aloï is committed to guiding students to learn by doing, applying course content to real-life community projects. Aloï is active in several community-development-focused nonprofit organizations across West Virginia.

DR. ETHAN BACKUS

Dr. Ethan Backus is a West Virginia native. After graduating from Braxton County High School in 2009, he attended Marshall University, where he earned a Bachelor of Science in Geology with an emphasis in Environmental Geosciences. He later moved to Lubbock, Texas, to pursue graduate studies at Texas Tech University, earning both his M.S. (2015) and Ph.D. (2020) in Geosciences. His research focused on trace element geochemistry, mineralogy, and metamorphic petrology. Following the completion of his doctoral degree, Dr. Backus returned to West Virginia, where he taught at Braxton County High School from 2020 to 2025. During his time there, he instructed AP mathematics and science courses, as well as PLTW pre-engineering classes. He also served as an adjunct faculty member at Glenville State University. Dr. Backus currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Physical Sciences at Glenville State University, where he teaches courses in geology, earth science, chemistry, and mathematics.

CHRIS BAILEY

Chris Bailey is the founder of Bailey Learning Works and a leadership and organizational development practitioner with more than a decade of experience working across the sectors that define Appalachia's workforce landscape — economic development, higher education, manufacturing, healthcare, and community organizations. His work sits at the intersection of how people lead and how teams perform: designing and facilitating programs that produce real shifts in leadership behavior, not just awareness. His cohort-based leadership programs have documented measurable behavior change across multiple cohorts of emerging leaders — participants who returned to their organizations leading differently, not just thinking differently. Chris holds an M.Ed. in Learning, Leadership, and Organization Development from the University of Georgia and currently serves as Co-Chair of the Career and Corporate Training Advisory Council at Pierpont Community and Technical College.

DR. JUSTIN BOWERS

Justin Bowers, PhD, is a leader, teacher, and thinker committed to helping others willingly engage the tensions surrounding leadership and innovative change. He serves as the Director of Career Services and Experiential Learning at West Virginia Wesleyan College and Davis & Elkins College, pastor of New Community in Buckhannon, WV, and leads Intensional Coaching & Consulting - a business formed to help organizations grow in their own willingness to grow. He holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from Regent University's School of Business and Global Leadership.

REBECCA BOWERS-CALL

Rebecca Bowers-Call serves as the Director of Fred W. Eberle Technical Center, a secondary and post-secondary Career Technical Education (CTE) Center where she has dedicated the past 9 years to expanding opportunities for students and strengthening workshop pathways. Over her 22-year career in education, she has focused on the people with whom she works - students, staff, parents, business and industry; relationships come first. She believes that strong school climate and culture leads to success for everyone inside and outside the classroom.

DR. DONNA BURGE-TETRICK

Dr. Donna Burge-Tetrick is the Superintendent of Braxton County Schools, where she leads district-wide initiatives focused on student achievement, innovation, and community partnerships. With a strong commitment to workforce development and rural education advancement, she supports collaborative efforts that align elementary, secondary, and career technical education to create meaningful opportunities for students and strengthen the future of the region.

OUR SPEAKERS:

ABBY CHAPMAN

Abby Chapman, MS, CSP, is the Department Chair, Program Coordinator, and Associate Professor of Occupational Safety at Fairmont State University, where she leads program strategy, accreditation, and curriculum development, and fosters strong industry partnerships to enhance student learning and workforce readiness. She brings over 20 years of experience in safety, health, and environmental (SHE) practice, including more than a decade at Pratt & Whitney, where she managed EHS systems, regulatory compliance, hazard risk assessments, and continuous improvement initiatives aligned with ISO 14001 and ISO 45001. A Certified Safety Professional and ABET Program Evaluator, Chapman is deeply engaged in aligning academic programs with evolving industry needs through advisory boards, accreditation, and applied learning experiences. Her work focuses on bridging academia and industry, making her a recognized leader in developing effective Industrial Advisory Boards that drive program relevance and student success.

JONATHON COMPTON

Jonathon Compton is the Assistant Director of Workforce Development at WorkForce WV. Born and raised in West Virginia, and a WVU graduate, Jonathon brings a deep understanding of the unique struggles West Virginians face when seeking employment opportunities and furthering their education. He previously served as State Monitor Advocate overseeing farmworker rights and protections throughout the state, and has a strong relationship with many businesses and state agencies from his time in that position. In his current role as Assistant Director of Workforce Development, Jonathon works closely with the local workforce development boards in conjunction with the Department of Labor to facilitate WIOA funded projects and programs throughout the state. Additionally, Jonathon and his team coordinate WorkForce WV's dislocated worker grants, the state's Work Opportunity Tax Credit program, and various other workforce development projects and initiatives.

DR. SYDNI CREDLE

Sydni Credle, Ph.D., is a Research General Engineer at the U.S. Department of Energy's National Energy Technology Laboratory (NETL). She currently serves as Director of NETL's Laboratory Directed Research and Development (LDRD) Program, which incubates high-risk, disruptive R&D projects within the Lab. Sydni is also a senior advisor to executive management, providing strategic guidance on research computing infrastructure, artificial intelligence strategies, workforce adoption of new technologies, and capability development. Over her 12+ year career, Dr. Credle has contributed to NETL through a variety of different roles, including Acting NETL Deputy Director and Chief Technology Officer, Acting Senior Fellow for Computational Science & Engineering, and Technology Manager for multiple DOE R&D portfolios. She holds a B.S. and M.S. in mechanical engineering from Florida A&M University and a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering from the University of Florida. Dr. Credle is a licensed professional engineer (P.E.) in West Virginia with a specialization in thermal and fluid systems.

CHARLISA DANIELS

Charlisa Daniels is the Director of Recruitment and Retention at NKU's STEM Center (CINSAM) and an Associate Professor of Chemistry. She is a co-PI and faculty co-mentor in the TRUE ACCESS program.

DR. MARJORIE DARRAH

Dr. Marjorie Darrah is a Professor of Mathematics at West Virginia University. She has taught in higher education for over 25 years and leads research at the intersection of artificial intelligence, STEM education, and applied mathematics. She has served as Principal Investigator on multiple National Science Foundation projects that connect students and teachers with cutting-edge technology and support the success of rural and first-generation STEM students. Her work also includes developing biologically inspired algorithms, such as neural networks and genetic algorithms, and applying advanced analytical and computer science techniques in areas including unmanned aerial systems and haptics. In addition, she is an experienced program/project evaluator, directing external evaluation for numerous STEM education initiatives through her work with ProEvaluators, LLC.

OUR SPEAKERS:

DR. LEANN DIANDRETH-ELKINS

Dr. Leann DiAndreth-Elkins is a seasoned special education professor, researcher, and administrator of disability services. She has taught undergraduate and graduate courses in special education for four different universities. Currently, as an Assistant Professor in Special Education at Fairmont State University, she has significant experience working with students with disabilities and supporting their transition from high school to college. Dr. Elkins professional experiences include working with struggling students and students with disabilities from kindergarten through college. As the Executive Director of Disability Resources Services at Muskingum University, she oversaw the PLUS Program, providing comprehensive academic support services for students with learning differences to foster the development of skills for success in college, and ADA Services, ensuring students with disabilities receive equal access to college programs and services. She previously developed Texas Tech University's TECHniques Center, providing students with disabilities transition support, tutoring, and academic coaching. She taught in 4th and 5th grade inclusion classrooms, conducted research with the University of Texas at Austin's early mathematics intervention project by providing training for K-2nd grade teachers, and served a middle school as a Co-teaching Coach to support teachers' development of effective strategies for co-teaching in inclusion classrooms. Dr. Elkins earned an Ed.D. and M.Ed. in Special Education from Texas Tech University, and her M.A. in Student Affairs in Higher Education and B.S. in Elementary Education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

RUSSELL DILLON

Russell Dillon is a senior at West Virginia University, pursuing dual studies in Physics and Mathematics. Over the past year, Russell has been an active Student Director within the First2 Network, helping implement two change ideas that reflect his commitment to increasing student retention in STEM fields. He brings over a year of research experience in quantum computing and is focused on transitioning into an industry career following the completion of his degree. Passionate about inspiring others to pursue higher education, Russell is honored to present his recent work and to engage with fellow professionals.

DR. TRACIE DODSON

Dr. Tracie Dodson is a professor at West Virginia Wesleyan College's Albinson School of Business, where she teaches business and management courses. She is committed to advancing applied business education and supporting the economic development of West Virginia through experiential learning, professional engagement, and community collaboration. Her research and applied interests include organizational behavior and culture, human resources, project management and success, and ethics and justice.

JASON FRAZER

Professor Jason Frazer is an Assistant Professor of Business at Fairmont State University. He holds an MBA from Fairmont State and is leaning into the exploration of enhancing student learning through the application of micro videos. Prof. Frazer is currently working towards the completion of his DBA with a concentration in finance at Liberty University. Beginning with six-second "knowledge bursts" through Vine, then Twitter, before ultimately transitioning to YouTube, he has scripted, recorded, and edited over 500 videos for his classes in finance and economics.

DR. MARY ELIZABETH "M. E." YANCOSEK GAMBLE

Dr. Mary Elizabeth "M. E." Yancosek Gamble is currently a professor at Fairmont State University's College of Business and Aviation, where she teaches, mentors, and explores the evolving intersections of business, communication, and innovation. She is also a Wall Street Journal Opinion Leader, a Wikipedia Education instructor, and a member of the NYT Sources and the New York Times Advertising research panel. Before academia, she built a career in economic development, serving as the state director for West Virginia's Small Business Division and as Small Business Developer for Loudoun County, Virginia. That foundation in entrepreneurship still fuels her work today, whether in the classroom or community.

OUR SPEAKERS:

DANIEL GATES

Daniel Gates is an Admission Counselor at Charleston Job Corps Center, where he helps guide prospective students through the enrollment process and connects them with opportunities for education and career development. He is passionate about supporting youth as they explore career pathways and build a strong foundation for their future. Through clear communication and a student-focused approach, he is committed to creating a positive and informative experience for each applicant, ensuring they feel confident, prepared, and empowered.

JEFFREY GREEN

Jeff Green has been a Deputy Executive Director of WorkForce West Virginia since 2017, overseeing the Agency's Research, Information Technology, and Unemployment Divisions. He began his career with WorkForce West Virginia in 1996 as a Labor Market Analyst and became the Director of Research, Information, and Analysis in 2010. Mr. Green holds a BA in Sociology from West Virginia State University and an MA in Humanities from Marshall University. With over 25 years of experience, he has contributed to numerous workgroups and projects focused on labor market research, statistical software development, and information technology systems. In 2022-2023, he served as Chair of the Workforce and Labor Market Information Committee for the National Association of State Workforce Agencies.

DR. ERICA HARVEY

Dr. Erica Harvey, Abelina Suarez Professor of Chemistry Emerita at Fairmont State University, is one of the founding Principal Investigators (PIs) for the First2 Network and a co-PI for the WV Career Collaborative (WVCC). She helps support First2's sustainability efforts, Improvement Science Team, and data gathering efforts, serves as a bridge between First2 Network and WVCC, and helps the WVCC with grant oversight, management, and reporting. A chemistry professor for 34 years, she championed student-centered learning and led grant-funded projects on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) student persistence, online learning communities, and renewable energy research.

AUTUMN JOUETT

Autumn Jouett is a rising junior Biological Sciences student at NKU, a TRUE ACCESS Fellow co-mentor, and a student researcher at Northern Kentucky University who has been conducting and presenting research since her freshmen year. She has been a speaker and poster presenter at the Kentucky Academy of Science's annual meeting, alongside various on-campus events where she has also represented several STEM organizations. Her extensive experience in benchtop research, project planning, and event hosting has manifested in her collaborative and multifarious approach to research. In addition, Autumn's continued involvement in STEM engagement and biological research has led her to being accepted for the Greaves Scholarship with the purpose of conducting and presenting her own research question. With her passion, she continues to help host and attend various events that encourage and share STEM achievements, on top of further developing her technical skills as a researcher.

TRACEY KENNEDY

Tracey Kennedy is the Director of Economic and Workforce Development at Fairmont State University and a Core Executive Team member for the WV Career Collaborative. She has over 10 years of economic and workforce development experience, specifically serving the North Central West Virginia Region. Tracey's experience spans across multiple sectors, including nonprofits, higher education, and private industry. She has engaged with companies of all sizes, developed non-credit training courses and programs that target workforce demands, and cultivated partnerships across all sectors to ensure workforce pipeline needs are met. She is very committed to bridging gaps, breaking down barriers, and building partnerships that foster sustainable workforce development in our communities.

OUR SPEAKERS:

CREE LAHTI

Cree Lahti serves at the WV Jobs Network Coordinator at High Rocks Educational Corporation. Cree is a native West Virginian that realizes the pathway to a career or degree is often winding and rarely linear. She has a varied education experience with a B.A. in Communication from Antioch College, M.A. in Higher Education Administration from West Virginia University and M.S. in Library and Information Science from the University of North Texas. She has also had a varied work experience, as the director of the public libraries in Pocahontas County, WV, teaching English as a second language in Istanbul, working with elementary children in Los Angeles, leading middle-schoolers on outdoor adventures in the Monongahela National Forest, and working in the student life department at Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, WV.

MICHAEL LINKENHOKER

Michael Linkenhoker is a Career Transition Specialist at the Charleston Job Corps Center. Michael helps the students once they have finished the program to find jobs, apprenticeships, military, college, and even get into a local union hall. He also speaks with organizations to find what options are out there for the students after they finish the program.

TRAVIS MILLER

Travis Miller is an accomplished education, workforce, and grant specialist with over 26 years of experience. He has extensive experience in curriculum development, program evaluation, federal grant management, grant writing, scientific research, staff management, experiential learning, business/community outreach, and project management. He was a higher education STEM teacher for 20 years, served in management roles for nine years, and was involved in workforce and economic development initiatives for over seven years including federal grant management. He has a Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction, with a specialization in Science Education.

SADIE MURPHY

Sadie Murphy serves as a Pioneer Support Counselor and Tutoring Coordinator at Glenville State University and is Co-Advisor for the First2 Network-sponsored Pioneer STEM Club. In her oversight of tutoring services, she co-leads the supervision and development of student workers, emphasizing mentorship practices, communication skills, and support for diverse and exceptional learners. Her work centers on peer leadership development and fostering inclusive, student-facing professional environments.

DR. ROBERT NIICHEL

Dr. Robert Niichel is Associate Professor of Mathematics at Fairmont State University, where he serves as Principal Investigator for the Appalachian Regional Commission POWER implementation grant "Building Connections to Grow Capacity: Breaking Down Regional Barriers in the STEM Workforce Pipeline" and as PI/Co-PI on multiple NSF-funded STEM education and workforce development initiatives. His work focuses on strengthening STEM pathways in Appalachia through regional partnerships among higher education, K-12 schools, industry, and economic development organizations, with particular emphasis on student retention, undergraduate research, workforce preparation, and faculty mentorship. In addition to his research and grant leadership, Dr. Niichel serves as President of the Faculty Senate and chair of the Fairmont State Research Corporation.

DR. CINTHIA PACHECO

Cinthia is the Director of Undergraduate Research at West Virginia University. She holds a B.S. in Dentistry, as well as master's and Ph.D. degrees in Pharmacology, all from the Federal University of Minas Gerais in Brazil. She has also served as a visiting scientist at the University of Pennsylvania (UPENN) and the University of Pittsburgh (PITT). Her passion for research began early in her life as an undergraduate student participating in a research program. During her 16-year tenure as a professor of Dentistry, she sought to create similar research opportunities for undergraduates, recognizing the profound impact research can have on their lives and future careers. Currently, as the Director of UGR, Cinthia is dedicated to continuously increasing the participation of both students and faculty mentors in undergraduate research.

OUR SPEAKERS:

MICHELLE PADEN

Michelle Paden, a TRIO Alum, started her career at Davis & Elkins Upward Bound before moving to WVU as an academic advisor in University College. As luck would have it, Michelle was able to return her focus to supporting first-generation students where she now leads the charge to connect all first-generation students, faculty, and staff together. Michelle briefly worked with First2 Network in 2018, but she has been back as part of the WVU Institutional Team for several years now.

DR. MICHELLE RICHARDS-BABB

Michelle Richards-Babb is a professor and the Associate Chair for Undergraduate Studies for the C. Eugene Bennett Department of Chemistry at West Virginia University. Michelle earned an ACS-certified B.S. in Chemistry from Ursinus College (1986) and a Ph.D. in Chemistry from Lehigh University (1993). She arrived at West Virginia University as a Postdoctoral Fellow (1993-1994) for Dr. Lane Wilson and Dr. Nar Dalal. She transitioned to teaching large enrollment chemistry courses and then into a faculty position with research in chemical education, particularly the freshmen chemistry learning experience, undergraduate research and STEM outreach. She was the recipient of a 2013/2014 Eberly College Outstanding Teacher Award.

SARAH RILEY

Sarah Riley is the Executive Director of High Rocks Educational Corporation. Sarah, a Pocahontas County native and Harvard graduate with honors in history, co-founded High Rocks with her mother Susan Burt in 1996 and has been a driving force behind its growth through teaching, fundraising, and leadership ever since. Her impactful work has earned her numerous accolades, including the Helen Lewis Community Service Award, WV Wonder Woman recognition, the Zenith Award, the WV Red Wagon Award, and the Power of Performance Award. She is a Principal Investigator (PI) for the First2 Network and provides backbone leadership for the WV Jobs Network.

MACKENZIE SAYERS

Mackenzie Sayers is the Marketing and Recruiting lead for the Industrial Solutions Network by CED. In her year and a half at CED, she has supported 40 Profit Centers across four states, from KY to NY, helping them share their story with customers. Throughout her brief time with CED, she has supported and led large-scale customer events, engaging with vendor partners and customers to help them find their next solution. She also shares the CED story with students at different universities. Whether at the University of Kentucky or her alma mater, she enjoys engaging with students to see how they can fit into their team.

LAURA SEYBOLD

Laura Seybold is the Senior Vice President of Culture and Talent Development at Hope Utilities, where she is responsible for supporting company culture, leadership development, and career development, including the newly formed early career umbrella, Hope Academy. Additionally, she owns a coaching and consulting business called Shine Consulting, where she partners with organizations and individuals on organizational culture, team dynamics, and leadership development. A West Virginian by choice, Laura holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Wright State University, an Executive MBA from West Virginia University, and is an associate certified coach through the International Coaching Federation (ICF).

DR. ADAM SMITH

Adam Smith is a Senior Research Chemist at The Chemours Company, conducting research on novel Teflon® products in Washington, West Virginia. After earning B.S. degrees in chemistry and math from Fairmont State University and his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in synthetic polymer chemistry, Adam held a National Research Council Research Associateship at Wright Patterson Air Force Base where he developed flexible solar cells made with electroactive polymers.

OUR SPEAKERS:

MARCUS SPINKS

Marcus Spinks serves as a Pioneer Support Counselor and as the Mentor Coordinator for GSU's Pioneer Mentor Program. In his oversight of student employment operations, he co-leads the supervision and professional development of student workers, strengthening administrative capacity, mentorship skills, and workplace accountability. His work focuses on establishing clear expectations, consistent documentation practices, and sustainable employment structures across student roles.

JOSHUA STALEY

What if the apps you use every day had to work not just for convenience—but for national security? That's the kind of problem Joshua gets to solve every single day. Joshua Staley is a Chief Architect at Microsoft, where he has spent the past five years helping some of the most mission-critical organizations—like the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Special Operations—modernize their systems using cloud technology. Before Microsoft, he served in the U.S. Army and later worked as an IT Specialist with the FBI, giving him a unique perspective on how technology supports both national defense and public safety. Throughout his career, he has led large-scale projects such as designing cloud architectures for Navy initiatives and migrating FBI systems to Azure to meet strict security standards.

LORI STOVER

Lori Stover serves as Principal of Braxton County High School and brings extensive experience across multiple levels of education. Throughout her career, she has served as a preschool and high school teacher, and college professor, in addition to holding leadership roles as School Improvement Coordinator, Deputy Director of Secondary Attendance, and CTE Director. Her work centers on building cohesive, student-focused systems that connect early learning experiences to secondary pathways, certifications, and workforce readiness.

JEFFREY TUCKER

Jeffrey Tucker is an IT/Cloud technology enthusiast with over 25 years of progressive software engineering expertise in areas like information technology assessment, software development, and technology integration across diverse industries including education, healthcare, telecommunications, retail, banking, and government. Mr. Tucker currently serves as Sr. Principal Systems Engineer and Solutions Architect with Leidos. Leidos is a 47,000+ employee led IT Services firm and is one of the largest IT systems integrator within the Federal Government. Mr. Tucker supports the Leidos Civil Enterprise IT and Mission Solutions CTO Office. For the past 20 years, Mr. Tucker has served in a number of different CTO/CIO roles supporting global IT projects and is currently supporting Enterprise IT Modernization efforts including Commercial and Government Cloud Architectures in both the US and UK for Leidos. Mr. Tucker holds a Master's Degree in Software Engineering and is a West Virginia Tech Connect Board Member and serves on several academic advisory boards at Fairmont State University and Marshall University.

JACOB WISENBAKER

Jacob Wisenbaker serves as Program Manager for Grants and Ventures at the Civil-Military Innovation Institute (CMI2), where he leads grant development, strategic planning, and program expansion for the ILLUME program. His portfolio spans grant-funded operations across West Virginia and Mississippi. Before joining CMI2's grants team, Jacob spent five years as a program manager supporting the Department of Defense National Security Innovation Network (NSIN), where he designed and managed rapid prototyping, applied research, and technology scouting programs connecting universities, startups, and military end users. Jacob holds a master's degree in international relations from Syracuse University's Maxwell School and a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Sacred Heart Major Seminary. His earlier career includes operational field experience across Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala, where he managed community development projects, donor relations, and youth education programming in underserved communities. At CMI2, he works at the intersection of community economic development and national security readiness, building scalable models that connect rural and underserved students to STEM careers, skilled trades, and workforce pathways.

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WV Career Collaborative Workforce Advisory Board

WV Career Collaborative Project Management Board

High Rocks Tech Express

First2 Network Industry Advisory Board

First2 Network Backbone Team

First2 Network Leadership Team

First2 Network Improvement Science Team