

Program Evaluation
Year Three Annual Report

September 2026

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Summary

This report is the third 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 73 ARISE projects[1] are represented in Year Three data sources, which include grantee-generated progress reports, interim and closeout performance metrics, Grantee and Partner Reflection ("Reflection") responses, evaluation interviews with grantees and partners, and beneficiary surveys.

Year 3 Key Findings

ARISE grantees are demonstrating measurable progress toward initiative goals.

As of August 2026, projects collectively served nearly 31,000 people, more than 3,600 businesses and organizations, and 835 communities, and grantees reported improving a sizeable portion of those served. Grantees reported more than 570 jobs created and more than 1,440 retained, more than 150 plans or reports produced, and 135 new programs implemented. Collectively, the 23 closed projects met or exceeded targets in nearly every reported category. In the one category below 100%, the grantee has additional time post-close to see results.

Year Three findings show the various ways multi-state designs can have an impact.

Three broad models are emerging. Some projects address a shared region, system, corridor, or asset that crosses state boundaries. Others extend or adapt an existing model into new locations. A third group coordinates across organizations or places to increase reach or scale. Across these models, grantees and partners frequently described

ARISE Project Results to Date

People	**30,973** served
	19,883 Improved
Businesses and Organizations	**3,677** served
	1,660 improved
Communities	**835** served
	745 improved
Jobs	**576** jobs created
	1,448 jobs retained
Tourism	**26,888** new visitors
	102,056 linear feat of trail
Project Products	**154** plans
	135 new programs

[1] Some ARISE awards include more than one separately administered project record, such as distinct construction projects in different states under the same award. For purposes of the evaluation, data are collected and analyzed at this record level when it is logical and practical to do so. Project counts reflect these separate records and therefore exceed the 69 ARISE awards made.

shared learning, broader access to expertise and resources, and stronger regional relationships. The importance of the multi-state structure appears to depend in part on what a project is trying to accomplish and how work is organized across states.

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

Across Reflection results, all implementation factors were rated as strengths overall. The factors of Adaptability, Common Vision, and Partner Commitment and Engagement were among the strongest. Factors related to the practical organization of collaboration, including Use of Time, Effectiveness of Communication, Governance and Decision-making, and Structure for Convening and Collaboration, were comparatively lower, although still rated positively overall. Grantees and partners frequently describe these factors as closely linked and mutually reinforcing.

Programmatic sustainability remains an important focus as projects mature. Grantees and partners generally rated Programmatic Sustainability as a strength, although it was relatively lower than the other progress-related Reflection elements. Some grantees are working to incorporate programs, curricula, tools, relationships, and other project elements into existing organizations and systems. For planning projects, sustainability may mean that the resulting plan continues to guide future action even if the original project structure does not continue. Funding was the most common uncertainty, particularly for continued staffing, programming, participant supports, collaboration, or expansion.

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

Overall, Year Three findings suggest that ARISE is producing tangible project-level results while also supporting forms of regional collaboration that may have value beyond individual awards. As more implementation projects progress and additional projects close, the evaluation will continue to assess project- and initiative-level results and their contributions to the ARISE goals of economic transformation.

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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 $188.6 million in 69 ARISE awards.[2] 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.

[2] https://www.arc.gov/grants-and-opportunities/arise/.

Evaluation Topics and Data Sources

In Year Three, the initiative-level evaluation examined three broad topics:

- 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 data sources.
- Early impacts of the initiative, with a particular focus on transformation.

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

- Grantee-generated progress or new closeout reports from 69 projects.
- Cumulative progress data (outputs and outcomes) from 58 projects.
- Grantee and Partner Reflection responses from 502 individuals representing 53 projects, fielded 70 times.
- Interviews with 155 grantee and partner personnel representing 45 projects.
- Beneficiary survey data from eight projects.

A total of 73 projects[3] are represented in the Year Three evaluation. Projects included in this evaluation report are listed in Appendix A. Evaluation limitations are listed in Appendix C.

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*[4], 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.

Importantly, the Reflection is not a performance assessment; rather, it captures perceptions of strengths, challenges, or neutral elements in a project's collaboration and helps identify practices and barriers that guide deeper inquiry through interviews and progress report analysis. 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 set of responses represents 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.

[3] Some ARISE awards include more than one separately administered project record, such as distinct construction projects in different states under the same award. For purposes of the evaluation, data are collected and analyzed at this record level when it is logical and practical to do so. Project counts reflect these separate records and therefore exceed the 69 ARISE awards made.

[4] https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Case-Studies-Toolkit_Final_081522r1.pdf

ARISE Progress and Evidence of Impact

Outputs and Outcomes to Date

Interim Metrics

As of August 31, 2026, 58 grantees had provided performance data to ARC. Collectively, they reported serving nearly 31,000 people (students, workers, and participants), with nearly 20,000 improved; serving more than 3,600 businesses and organizations, with more than 1,650 improved; and serving more than 830 communities, with nearly 750 improved. Grantees reported three businesses created, along with more than 570 jobs created and more than 1,440 retained. Projects have resulted in nearly 27,000 new recreational visitors and over 100,000 linear feet of trail. They have produced 154 plans or reports and implemented 135 new programs. See details in Table 1.

Table 1: Interim Outputs and Outcomes from ARISE Projects

People		
Students	**23,356**	served (n=8 projects)
	13,492	improved (n=6 projects)
Participants	**4,785**	served (n=9 projects)
	4,462	improved (n=9 projects)
Workers	**2,832**	served (n=8 projects)
	1,929	improved (n=5 projects)
Businesses and Organizations		
Businesses	**3,303**	served (n=12 projects)
	1,633	improved (n=10 projects)
Organizations	**374**	served (n=4 projects)
	27	improved (n=3 projects)
Investment	**$104.1M**	leveraged private investment (n=1 project)
Costs	**$29.4M**	costs reduced (n=1 project)
Communities		
Communities	**835**	served (n=17 projects)
	745	improved (n=16 projects)
Economy	**1,448**	jobs retained (n=2 projects)
	576	jobs created (n=5 projects)
	3	businesses created (n=2 projects)
Tourism & Infrastructure	**26,888**	new visitors (n=1 project)
	102,056	linear feet (n=2 projects)
Project Products		
Plans/Reports	**154**	produced (n=36 projects)
Programs	**135**	implemented (n=6 projects)

Grantee progress reports provided examples of project-level contributions to this collective ARISE progress:

People are gaining skills, credentials, employment, and access to new pathways.

One workforce project alone reported serving nearly 1,500 students through workshops, mock interviews, internships, and training. In another project, graduation rates across workforce-training cohorts ranged from 82% to 96%, employment increased by 68% following graduation, 44% of participants obtained additional certifications, and 25% pursued further education. A cybersecurity initiative engaged 1,785 students across 26 colleges while two major employer partners reported 623 employees gaining cybersecurity skills through professional development.

Businesses and organizations are gaining support, resources, and new opportunities.

One technical-assistance project reported that its support had contributed to approximately $87.6 million in federal electric-infrastructure grant awards across Appalachia. Another project reported stronger tools for utilities evaluating distributed energy resources, battery storage, and data-center loads, while startups received increasingly actionable modeling insights intended to improve product readiness and grid integration. One regional investment initiative has raised over $1 million in committed capital and considered 32 companies for investment, with 18 investment transactions completed.

Communities are moving from planning toward implementation and investment.

A broadband accelerator engaged 71 communities across 12 states and completed 48 plans. Participating communities had applied for approximately $124 million in outside funding and secured nearly $47 million, while several used project-supported knowledge and planning to pursue additional broadband investments. Another regional resilience initiative reported communities moving from identifying priorities to evaluating specific projects and implementation strategies, while delivering digital literacy programming to 134 people.

Plans, reports, and other project products are creating a foundation for future action.

A quantum-network planning project completed a feasibility and cost assessment that was followed by notification of an award of approximately $2.1 million to deploy a quantum network between two Appalachian cities; the team also advanced a proposed National Science Foundation center and completed a workforce framework. A tri-state outdoor-recreation project completed its regional plan and investment pitchbook and identified two initiatives for additional development. Elsewhere, planning and asset-mapping work led grantees to revise proposed program models, identify investment opportunities, or establish structures intended to carry the work into implementation.

Closed Projects

To date, 23 ARISE projects have closed and reported closeout metrics. Of these, 22 were planning projects and one was an implementation project. All 23 projects had targets for the metric "plans/reports produced," while the other metrics were present in one to five projects.

Cumulatively, grantees met or exceeded 100% of planned targets for every metric except one outcome. That outcome, workers improved, was selected by only one of the closed projects, and cumulative results to date represent 85% of the planned target. However, because grantees may continue to achieve and report workers improved outcomes for up to three years after project close, the 85% figure represents progress as of closeout rather than a final measure of performance. See Table 2.

Table 2: Closeout Planned Versus Actual Results

Metric (n=23 projects)	Planned	Closeout	Pct. Of Planned
Businesses served (n=3 projects)	677	1,404	207%
Businesses improved (n=3 projects)	662	666	101%
Workers served (n=1 project)	1,000	1,155	116%
Workers improved (n=1 project)	1,000	852	85%
Communities served (n=5 projects)	419	489	117%
Communities improved (n=5 projects)	419	476	114%
Participants served (n=2 projects)	130	171	132%
Participants improved (n=2 projects)	80	116	145%
Plans/Reports produced (n=23 projects)	124	126	102%
Organizations served (n=1 project)	20	51	255%
Organizations improved (n=1 project)	10	14	140%

Self-assessed Progress

Four Reflection elements related to progress and results: Multi-state Impact, Shared Benefits from Collaboration, Progress Toward Objectives, and Programmatic Sustainability.

Table 3 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 3: Grantee and Partner Reflection Average Scores for Progress and Results Elements

REFLECTION ITEM (N=53 Projects)	PREVALENCE SCORE	STRENGTH/ CHALLENGE SCORE
Multi-state Impact	4.11	4.22
Shared Benefits from Collaboration	4.15	4.19
Progress Toward Objectives	4.18	4.14
Programmatic Sustainability	4.19	3.97

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 53 individual projects with Reflection results in Year Three, these four items were rated as strengths or significant strengths in all but six projects.

Multi-State Impact

Three Emerging Models

For Year Three projects, Multi-state Impact took a variety of forms. In part, the nature of that impact reflected why the project was designed as a multi-state effort. Three broad models of the purpose of multi-state design are emerging from project documentation and evaluation data:

1. Shared region or asset
2. Replication or transfer
3. Coordinating for scale

Shared region or asset.

Some projects are multi-state because the relevant economy, infrastructure, market, workforce system, corridor, or physical asset crosses state boundaries. For these projects, multi-state impact often means improving the functioning of a regional system that cannot be addressed effectively within one state alone. For example, one project that covers a bistate region shares employers, job seekers, and even some education providers who experience the region as a single labor shed. Another grantee, working to develop a tourism corridor, explained "…there's nothing about the [asset] that honors boundaries…Wildlife, water, air, nothing really respects those boundaries, so we have to think regionally." A trail project

reflected similar circumstances: visitors likely experience the trail as a single regional asset, while ownership, maintenance, marketing, and investment decisions are distributed across multiple states, counties, and organizations.

Replication or transfer.

Other projects use ARISE to extend an existing program, model, or approach into additional states or locations. For these projects, multi-state impact can mean expanding access to something that has already demonstrated value, while also learning how the model performs under different local conditions.

Grantees and partners described using experience in one state to inform work in another, including sharing lessons about what has worked, what has not, and what needs to be adapted. One grantee described telling partners, "What you're about to do, they did that in [another state], it did or did not work, let me explain why..."

A partner in another project described the multi-state work as an opportunity to apply a proven approach across different Appalachian contexts and, where it did not work, identify the need for a more customized solution. In this sense, multi-state impact can include both broader reach and stronger understanding of what is transferable.

Coordinating for scale.

These use a common strategy across multiple places to achieve greater reach, efficiency, or regional impact than individual organizations or states could achieve separately. For these projects, multi-state impact often appears through the combined scale of participating organizations, communities, employers, or investments.

One partner described the potential reach of a multi-institution workforce project simply: "Between these institutions, there's a lot of students. So I think that the impact, there's a lot of breadth, and the potential reach of this..." Other grantees and partners described multi-state collaboration as allowing them to expand programming, reach new populations, pool expertise, or connect investments across a wider geography. In some cases, organizations could build on one another's existing capacity instead of developing parallel resources independently.

Importantly, these models are not mutually exclusive. A project may address a shared regional asset while also transferring an approach across locations or using coordinated implementation to increase scale. Additionally, frameworks for governance and decision-making vary within these models. See the Governance and Decision-making subsection for more details.

Cross-cutting Impacts

Across these different models, grantees and partners also described several benefits that appeared across different multi-state models.

Shared learning was one of the most common forms of multi-state impact.

Grantees and partners regularly described the benefits of comparing approaches across states, learning from earlier implementation, sharing tools and materials, and identifying practices that could be adapted elsewhere. One Reflection comment captured the value of exposure to different contexts: "There is always a nugget to be gained from what other states are doing…when it's just one state it tends to be homogeneous." In some cases, lessons from one location helped another move more quickly or avoid repeating earlier mistakes. In others, differences among states themselves generated useful information by showing how policies, institutional structures, or local conditions affected implementation.

Multi-state projects sometimes expanded access to relationships, expertise, and resources.

Grantees and partners described connecting to mentors, investors, employers, technical specialists, peer institutions, and other networks that were not equally available in every location. One partner described receiving investment opportunities through the multi-state relationship that their organization otherwise would not have seen, stating, "We wouldn't have had access to that otherwise." Other projects shared specialized knowledge, instructional resources, equipment, or organizational capacity across state lines. These benefits were especially valuable when one partner already had expertise or infrastructure that another partner would otherwise have had to build independently.

The multi-state structure also strengthened regional relationships and awareness.

Grantees and partners described organizations that had previously worked largely within their own geographies beginning to share ideas, coordinate activities, and see related work in neighboring states as relevant to their own goals. In some cases, the relationship itself became an important outcome, creating new connections that could continue beyond the immediate project.

Not every grantee or partner, however, had the same visibility into multi-state impact.

Some partners noted they were intentionally responsible for a specific activity, institution, or state and therefore had limited exposure to work occurring elsewhere in the project. That does not necessarily indicate weak multi-state design. In some projects, distributed implementation is part of the intended structure, and there may be little reason for every partner to interact directly with every other partner.

Some grantees and partners said implementation was still developing or that cross-state benefits had not yet had enough time to emerge. These responses suggest that the nature and visibility of multi-state impact depend on both the project's design and where the project is in its period of performance.

Shared Benefits from Collaboration

While Multi-state Impact reflects the broader results ARISE projects are trying to achieve across the region, collaboration can also generate benefits for the organizations doing the work together. In interviews and the Reflection, grantees and partners described organizational benefits from collaboration, including expanded capabilities, relationships, and opportunities. One partner connected these shared benefits from collaboration to long-term engagement, stating, "…[E]very entity needs to feel like, *we love doing this, plus here's the ROI for our organization*."

Partners described gaining access to expertise, infrastructure, and support through collaboration.

One Reflection respondent said collaboration was mutually beneficial because faculty received structured support and technical assistance while technical partners contributed expertise and infrastructure and gained engagement with academic programs and student talent. Another described a partnership as "greater than the sum of its parts, where contributions build on each other for outsized impact."

Some partners described advancing their own organizational work through shared resources and complementary roles.

In several projects, collaboration allowed organizations to stretch limited staff, funding, or other resources by dividing responsibilities according to each partner's strengths. One grantee described this as a "swap and share type process" in which organizations identify what each does well and use those strengths together. In one project, a partner described transferring families to another organization when that organization was better positioned to support them, freeing the partner's own volunteers to work with additional households. In others, shared instructional models, curriculum, laboratory equipment, and instructors allowed participating institutions to extend the benefits of the project into their own programs and support broader scaling.

Progress Toward Objectives

Grantees and partners generally described projects as making expected progress toward their objectives, although what progress looked like depended on project type and stage. For planning projects, progress often meant completing research, assessments, plans, or partnership structures that positioned the work for later implementation. Implementation projects more often pointed to programs launched, participants reached, infrastructure or systems put in place, and early outcomes beginning to emerge.

For planning projects, progress was often evident in having moved from an initial idea toward a clearer and more actionable path forward.

Grantees described completing required deliverables while also developing stronger understanding of regional needs, identifying priorities, and establishing partnerships or implementation strategies. One grantee summarized the accomplishment simply: "It was a planning grant, and we have a plan. We have a plan for how it would move forward and how it would benefit everyone involved…"

In some cases, planning work was already generating momentum beyond the formal deliverables. One project used its planning process to develop a larger research and workforce-development concept that grew from three institutions to a broader group of universities, national laboratories, and companies and advanced to a competitive federal funding opportunity. Other grantees described moving from environmental scans or needs assessments into concrete work plans, pitchbooks, or implementation strategies.

Implementation projects described progress through both increasing reach and putting the systems needed for longer-term results into place.

Grantees and partners reported launching or expanding programs, enrolling participants, developing facilities or hubs, building employer and community partnerships, and reaching populations that previous programs had not served. Several projects also reported demand or participation that met or exceeded expectations. Grantees and partners described waitlists, stronger-than-expected enrollment, expanded reach to new populations, or activities beginning sooner than originally planned. At the same time, some emphasized that progress should not be judged only by whether a project reaches a numerical target. One partner described encouraging organizations to focus on the quality and value of programming rather than treating performance measures as the sole objective: "Everybody wants to hit those performance measures…[but] your focus is to provide a good quality program."

Progress was not always linear, particularly for projects still early in implementation.

Reflection comments included projects that were "too early to determine," still building processes before producing major outputs, or progressing unevenly across participating institutions. Contracting, staffing and partner changes, and other administrative or external delays also affected timelines. One partner wrote that the project had "some catching up to do" after receiving funds several months later than expected, while remaining confident it could meet its objectives. Another described having "more process than product so far" but expected progress to accelerate as the project matured.

Programmatic Sustainability

Programmatic Sustainability was rated as a strength overall, but it tended to be rated lower than other progress-related Reflection elements. Grantees and partners often were confident that important parts of their work could continue beyond the ARISE award while also identifying challenges to sustaining programs or carrying out ARISE-funded plans without additional funding.

Some grantees were working to embed grant-funded work into existing organizations, systems, or practices.

One grantee described a school-based model in which participating schools develop and own their curriculum, since that "doesn't cost money for the school system." Another Reflection respondent described sustainability as being "intentionally…built into the structure of the program" by incorporating datasets and workforce skills directly into course curricula, which will continue to be used after the grant ends. Grantees and partners also described building processes, tools, relationships, and local capacity that could continue after the

grant. In one planning project, the grantee described working to ensure that community partners were "fluent and confident" enough to move forward with work independently.

Sustainability sometimes looked like continued partnerships and local ownership of grant-funded plans.

Several grantees and partners expected relationships developed through ARISE to continue after the period of performance. Reflection comments described partners already implementing pieces of planning work, advisory committee members incorporating project goals into their daily responsibilities, and organizations with natural alignment continuing to collaborate. In one project, a partner described volunteers, tourism leaders, economic-development organizations, and other community stakeholders becoming directly involved in implementation and taking ownership of the larger vision.

For planning projects, sustainability sometimes meant ensuring that the results of the planning work would be used, rather than sustaining the planning project itself.

One Reflection respondent noted that the project would achieve its primary purpose once tools and methods were made broadly available and could then be carried forward by another organization. Others described planning grants as creating implementation roadmaps, recommendations, or partnerships that could inform future work even if the original project team did not remain intact.

Funding was the most common uncertainty.

Grantees and partners noted that continuation of staff positions, special programming, ongoing collaboration, participant supports, or expansion often depends on identifying new sources of funding. One Reflection respondent summarized the issue, saying, "Sustainable funding is the main question mark on whether or not we can sustain the goals after the grant cycle." Many cited changing federal priorities and a competitive, uncertain funding environment as challenges to programmatic sustainability. Some projects were already pursuing more diversified approaches, including philanthropy, corporate sponsorship, fee-for-service models, institutional funding, or other grants. Others intentionally focused grant dollars on investments or systems that would reduce recurring costs after ARISE.

Beneficiary Perspectives on Impact

To complement grantee-reported performance measures, the evaluation collected direct feedback from people, businesses, organizations, and communities expected to benefit from ARISE-funded implementation projects. Collectively referred to here as *beneficiaries*, these respondents provide a perspective on impact that is distinct from grantee and partner assessments and progress reports.

Beneficiary surveys are administered when an implementation project has an identifiable group of beneficiaries who can reasonably be reached for feedback. Surveys ask beneficiaries to rate two statements on a scale of 0 (not at all true) to 10 (absolutely true), with an option of Unsure:

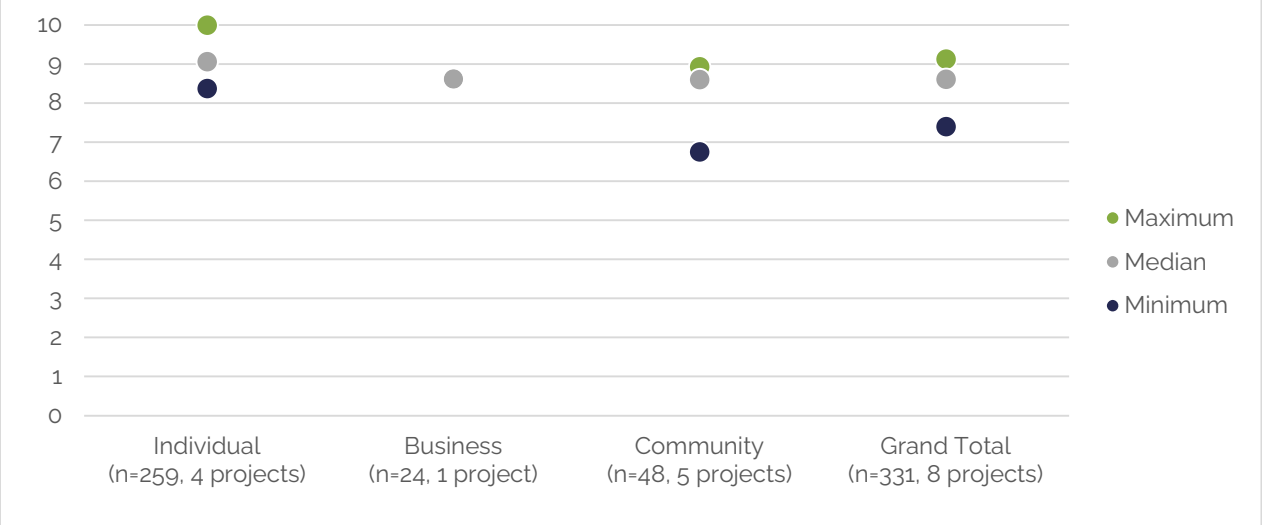
1. [I am/My business is/My organization is/My community is] better off because of [program].
2. I would recommend [program] to a [friend or family member/other businesses like mine/other organizations like mine/other communities like mine].

Beneficiaries were also asked open-ended questions about how the program affected them and how it could be improved.

By the end of Year Three, beneficiary survey data were available from eight ARISE implementation projects.[5]

Beneficiary perceptions were positive across most participating projects. Project-level average ratings for whether beneficiaries were better off ranged from 7.4 to 9.1 on the 10-point scale, with a median project rating of 8.6. Seven of the eight projects had average Better Off ratings of at least 8.4.

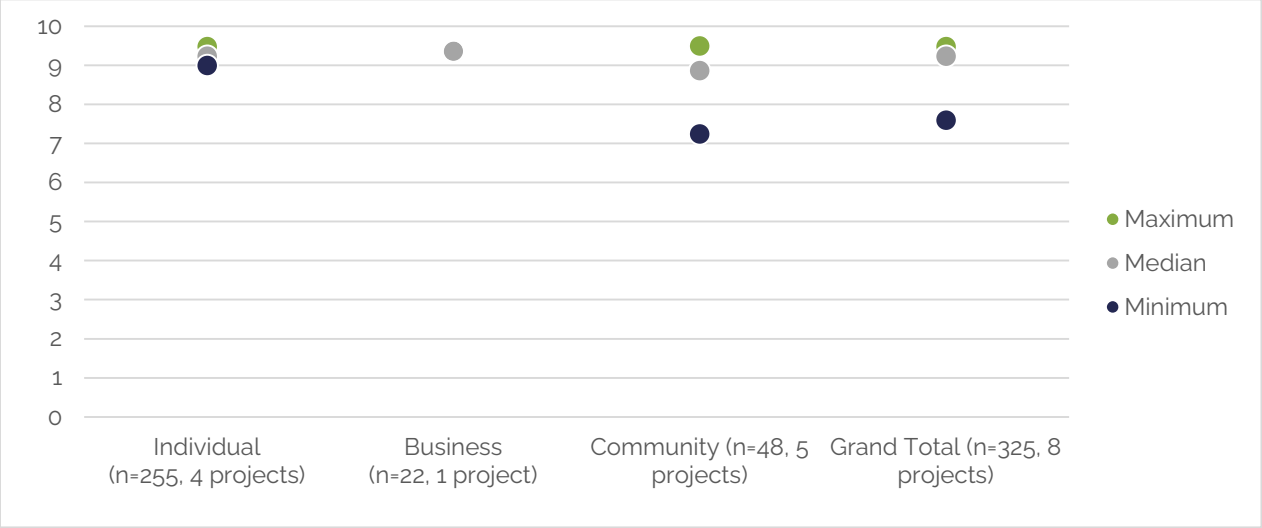
Figure 1. Range of Project-level "Better Off" Scores by Beneficiary Type (Scale of 0-10)



[5] Project-level response counts ranged from 5 to 211 beneficiaries; one project accounted for nearly 2/3 of total responses. Because averages across all beneficiaries would therefore be driven by this one project, the evaluation examined results using project-level averages.

Results were similarly positive for whether beneficiaries would recommend the ARISE-funded program to others. Project-level averages ranged from 7.6 to 9.5, with a median of 9.25. Again, seven of eight projects had average ratings of at least 8.4.

Figure 2. Range of Project-level "Would Recommend" Scores by Beneficiary Type (Scale of 0-10)



Open-ended survey responses provide additional context for the ratings. Because current beneficiary data represent a limited number of projects, these comments should be understood as examples of impact rather than representative findings by beneficiary type.

Individuals participating in workforce and educational programs frequently described greater career awareness, hands-on experience, confidence, and readiness for future employment or education.

Students described opportunities to experience workplaces and career fields, develop communication and leadership skills, and make more informed decisions about their futures.

> - "I went into [the program] not sure if I 100% wanted a job in healthcare but now I know I do because the clinical experience made me realize that."
> - "It's been super fun and I've learned such a wide field of things. I think I am much more prepared for a job because this is work in an actual workplace."

Community representatives described stronger connections, regional coordination, access to resources, and momentum toward community priorities.

Several comments emphasized opportunities to learn from peer communities, build networks, and approach challenges collectively rather than independently.

> - "[The program] has created meaningful momentum in our community by helping move recovery conversations into action-oriented collaboration."
> - "It provides opportunity to learn about successes and failures of other similar communities. It improves networks…and helps to connect with our peers to inspire growth and project development in our hometowns."

ARISE Multi-State Implementation Factors

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 Three, the Grantee and Partner Reflection was administered a total of 70 times, covering 53 projects, with 502 unique responses.

Grantees (for all projects) and partners (for implementation projects only) were also asked to participate in an evaluation interview annually. In Year Three interviews, grantees and partners were asked about their perceptions of project strengths and challenges and, specifically, to elaborate on the elements that ranked highest and lowest for their project. In Year Three, interviews were conducted with 155 grantees and partners from 45 projects.

Grantee & Partner Reflection

Table 4 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 4: Reflection Average Scores for Project Implementation Elements

REFLECTION ITEM (n=53 projects)	PREVALENCE SCORE	STRENGTH/ CHALLENGE SCORE
Adaptability	4.19	4.23
Common Vision	4.13	4.22
Partner Commitment and Engagement	4.07	4.13
Use of Data	3.94	4.13
Resource Allocation	4.19	4.13
Effective Partner Collaboration	3.93	4.07
Use of Time	4.12	4.00
Effective Communication	4.06	4.00
Structure for Convening and Collaboration	3.97	3.94
Governance and Decision-making Framework	3.95	3.93
Overall Effectiveness	4.40	4.41

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. Year Three findings continue to support the relevance of these factors to multi-state implementation and the fact that grantees and partners generally report them as strengths.

Although Reflection administrations are not used to assess longitudinal change, the relative rankings of the factors were similar across quarters in Year Three:

> **Adaptability**, **Common Vision**, and **Partner Commitment and Engagement** ranked second or third on average, suggesting that shared direction and the commitment of the people involved remain among the strongest features of ARISE projects.
>
> **Use of Data**, **Effectiveness of Partner Collaboration**, and **Resource Allocation** generally fell in the middle, ranking fourth to fifth on average.
>
> The comparatively lower-ranked factors, while rated as strengths overall, ranked seventh or lower on average. They related to the processes used to organize and manage collaboration: **Use of Time**, **Effectiveness of Communication**, **Governance and Decision-making Framework**, and **Structure for Convening and Collaboration**.

These groupings suggest that while projects tend to have a strong relational foundation, the practical structures and processes that support multi-state collaboration may require more ongoing attention and effort.

Key Findings for Multi-State Implementation Qualitative data from Reflection responses and interviews reinforce that the 10 implementation factors are closely connected. Effective communication can support partner engagement, a shared vision can make adaptation easier, and strong convening or governance structures can help collaboration function more effectively. The findings also show that even when a factor is rated as a strength overall, maintaining that strength can require deliberate and sustained effort.

There is no single "correct" model for multi-state collaboration.

Across factors, grantees and partners described the importance of roles, resources, meeting structures, and implementation approaches matching the needs of the work and the partners involved. Their experiences suggest that multi-state projects may benefit from enough common structure to maintain alignment while retaining flexibility across organizations, locations, and responsibilities.

Several implementation strengths seem to develop over time.

Respondents described collaboration, communication, and project structures solidifying as partners gained experience with one another and with the project. Changes in staffing or partner organizations could hinder that progress and require time to rebuild relationships and shared understanding.

The factors appear to be interconnected and to reinforce one another.

Common vision can provide a clear direction while adaptability allows for adjustments in the path to get there. Data can inform decisions about resources and implementation, while communication, convening, and governance help partners coordinate their work.

The following sections examine each of these 10 factors, how they appear as strengths, how they overlap, and any challenges or difficulties in implementation.

Adaptability

There is flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and challenges.

Across Year Three, Adaptability was consistently among the highest-rated implementation factors. Grantees and partners described adaptability as an important feature of multi-state work, where projects are operating across different organizations, communities, systems, and state contexts, often over several years. Adaptation took several forms, including refining an approach based on experience and data; adjusting established models to fit new locations or partners; responding to changes in policy, markets, staffing, or other external conditions; and tailoring activities to the needs of communities and participants.

Adaptability typically meant maintaining the goal while adjusting the approach.

For ARISE projects, adaptability did not mean changing what the project was trying to accomplish; instead, grantees and partners described flexibility in their path toward that fixed goal. This distinction was particularly important when projects were expanding or replicating models across organizations and states, since different partners brought different facilities, staffing, assets, and community contexts to the work.

"This is a five-year [grant], here are our end goal metrics but how we get to them can vary as we go along."For other projects, adaptation was driven by changes or challenges that emerged during implementation. Projects adjusted to Hurricane Helene and other disasters, changes in federal policy and funding priorities, staffing turnover, market conditions, construction realities, and delays outside the project's control. Describing a project's response to Hurricane Helene, one partner said, "It's good old Appalachian ability to pivot and deal with what's at hand…everyone [here] said, *hey, let's pivot*, and nobody balks at it."

"It's a framework that we give to whoever wants to be part [of] it, and the framework, it can't change…Now what you do inside that framework, you adapt for your school."

"I think in the spirit of transferability, you need to let an organization take the ball of clay you hand them and sculpt it into what fits their place, their location, [and] their population…"

Related Themes from Interviews and Reflection Responses

Common Vision

Several respondents described being able to make significant adjustments because partners remained aligned around the larger project purpose or expected results. For example, one grantee described a "vision architecture that at its highest level remains constant, but at a lower sub-regional and local level has allowed for great flexibility and adaptability for communities to attach themselves to it in a way that is meaningful for them."

Use of Data

One grantee described their approach as "almost like trial and error, scientific method." They explained that the team revised its partner-engagement process as it learned what worked: "It's not that they're bad [approaches], it's just that we're refining our process." In another planning project, survey and focus group findings led the team to move away from the initial idea of a single workforce training center toward a network model that better reflected travel distances and regional needs. Reflection respondents likewise described teams that "see

areas for improvement and adapt to make the program stronger" and returning participants applying lessons from previous cohorts "to streamline onboarding and reduce friction for new participants."

Partner Commitment and Engagement, Effective Communication

Changes in roles, activities, budgets, or timelines often require partners to understand why a change is needed and be willing to adjust their own work. One grantee described a partner whose scope had to change substantially in response to shifting federal priorities: "They were open to [adapting]…They were willing to accommodate this slight change in scope of work, so it went smoothly." A Reflection respondent made the connection among these factors in their project: "This collaborative model is adaptive by design…we're able to adapt to partner needs quickly, with built-in mechanisms to communicate those needs in a timely manner; further, there is a commitment from partners to face challenges together."

Resource Allocation

Projects described adjusting staff effort, revising scopes, changing partners, modifying budgets, or shifting emphasis among activities when circumstances changed. In one project, a grantee credited fiscal staff with being willing to work with partners on changes as they identified approaches that were not working. In another, a Reflection respondent noted that when a partner could no longer fully participate, "Different partners were secured…and the additional partnership was a fantastic fit."

Challenges

Adaptability also had limits and tradeoffs.

One grantee described how customizing work to various places simply requires doing "the hard work…and that's messy sometimes." Another partner testing changes to a program model noted that moving away from an overnight format could make the program easier to scale but would mean losing some of the intangible value created by the original model.

Other grantees and partners described circumstances in which adapting was difficult for reasons that are sometimes outside of anyone's control. One Reflection respondent described losing a faculty member and being unable to make progress on a needed budget modification. Respondents in another project said that staff changes could be accommodated, but the remaining period of performance left little time to recover from resulting delays. As one wrote: "The institutions have worked hard to adapt to the changes, but the period of performance remains a tight schedule."

Common Vision

The project vision is understood and shared by all partners.

Along with Adaptability, Common Vision was consistently among the highest-rated implementation factors in Year Three. A common vision means grantees and partners understood what they were trying to accomplish together, could see how their own role contributed to that larger goal, and were willing to make decisions in service of shared work.

Common vision helped partners move beyond individual priorities.

ARISE projects, by design, include partners with different missions, constituencies, and/or geographic responsibilities. Several respondents described common vision as the uniting feature that allowed them to cooperate and complement one another.

"We talked early in that first in-person meeting about, if competition is an issue, then this is not going to be successful…I just felt really, really good about how we were all on the same page, and that was a non-issue."**Some projects built on preexisting alignment.** In those cases, ARISE gave partners a structure and resources for acting on a shared vision that already existed. One Reflection respondent noted that a project "would not exist without the existing vision of trail connectivity across the state line." Another described partners as having "a pretty amazing alignment," which had led to additional collaborations beyond the project itself.

"All partners recognize that [the objectives of this project] are essential to regional competitiveness and cannot be achieved by individual jurisdictions acting alone. As a result, the project reflects shared priorities rather than isolated or competing objectives."

"And then when we talked to the community partners and reinforced some of the things we already knew and then got some ideas about things we hadn't thought about, it… kind of coalesced into this mutual understanding of what our students need and what our region needs. And it was [being] able to do that without any competition…we're all working for the same goal."

Related Themes from Interviews and Reflection Responses

Structure for Collaboration

One grantee described a formal visioning exercise in which participants first developed a common understanding of the project's guiding principles, then worked in small groups to build consensus around current conditions, needs, strengths, and a longer-term vision. Another described beginning "every conversation" with the larger project vision and intentionally connecting partners' immediate work back to it. Another emphasized the value of skilled facilitation in helping partners "see past their own individual work," particularly when organizations had limited capacity and were understandably focused on their own immediate responsibilities.

Partner Commitment and Engagement

Several respondents described buy-in as easier when partners could see themselves in the vision and believed in the underlying work. One partner said the foundation for the partnership was "an agreement of the philosophy, what are we trying to do here," coupled with a "mutual passion" that existed before the grant. Another Reflection respondent connected early buy-in to success: "Collectively, we bought-into the mission and vision of the Program. Having that early buy-in was a big reason why [the program] achieved higher-than-expected success."

Challenges

Common Vision could be limited by turnover, competing priorities, and disagreement about which elements of a project are fundamental to the vision versus changeable to achieve a vision.

One grantee described a disconnect between the people who developed a proposal and the people later responsible for carrying it out: "At the onset there was a lot of leadership-level conversations and so there was a lot of leadership-level things that went into the proposal and a lot of leadership-level collaboration, but then when the project got to full execution, the people that were in the initial conversations are not the same people that are doing the work. There was a big gap in vision and strategy moving into that..."

For partners who may have a less central role, the project may be among several things they are working on. One partner shared, "There are numerous programs that I interact with, and unless I am frequently reminded of vision and mission, it's easy to forget the specifics."

Finally, agreement on a broad vision does not necessarily mean agreement on which aspects of implementation are non-negotiable. In one project in particular, the grantee and a key partner learned throughout the first year that they had different interpretations of what "replication" means; the partner expected to change some aspects of the model to adapt it to their location, while the other saw certain changes as being at odds with the vision itself. Similarly, in other projects, competing priorities and a wide variety of partners can mean that common vision bumps up against the reality of routine demands. As one partner said, "...we all have our own agendas, and we all have our own things we have to do, and they don't always fit well together."

Partner Commitment and Engagement

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

Partner Commitment and Engagement was also among the more highly rated implementation factors in Year Three. Across projects, commitment and engagement appeared through partners' willingness to devote time and attention to the work, follow through on responsibilities, contribute their expertise and resources, and remain involved over time. In many cases, respondents described highly engaged partners as essential to keeping complex, multi-state projects moving.

Commitment was demonstrated through active participation and follow-through.

Grantees and partners described commitment in concrete terms: partners attended meetings, completed work, responded when needed, contributed resources, and stepped in to solve problems. In some projects, this required partners to take on work beyond their routine responsibilities.

"[They are] so committed to this…It is their focus. I mean, they come prepared, they're doing their due diligence…to understand and be the experts in the CFR200s, the procurements, all of those things…I think that's been very good. They're waking up thinking about this."**Strong engagement did not always require everyone to participate in the same way or with the same degree of intensity.**

"There was one story…where [students] were actually going to sell some of their products. And…you have to get a state license, and their superintendent drove to the state capital to get that license in one day, so that these kids could carry on their projects. So that just shows the dedication."

"That's really been the best part…regular engagement has been key to keeping [ten] different groups all moving in the same direction."

Several examples suggest that what matters is having the right partners engaged at the level necessary for their role. One partner working with schools said successful implementation for their specific project requires "a small, committed core," perhaps two or three people, who are dedicated to the project and outcomes and have a good working relationship. That core is then reinforced by broader institutional and community support.

In another project, a grantee emphasized the importance of involving people closer to implementation: "I think you need people who are not just in leadership positions, who are really dedicated." They described the value of individuals who understood the work, had influence within their own systems, and could deepen connections at the operational level. Reflection comments likewise acknowledged that "some were more actively engaged in their participation" even when partner commitment overall was considered a significant strength.

Related Themes from Interviews and Reflection Responses

Common Vision

One partner observed that "it's easy to embrace a model and help work at it and put the hours in when you're pretty sure it's going to continue to have a positive effect." Others described partners who had "bought into the vision" or whose own organizational missions made the project a natural fit.

Effective Collaboration

One grantee described partners staying beyond the scheduled end of an in-person meeting to continue talking and exchanging ideas, noting that the relationships had strengthened enough that partners could now discuss both promising practices and things that were not working well. Another grantee described a partner saying, "I'm gonna get it done because I don't want [the grantee point of contact] to be disappointed in me," and attributed that level of follow-through to the relationship they had built.

Effective Communication

One partner highlighted the lead grantee's "commitment to seeing it through and having it be beneficial and impactful in each of the communities," which was reinforced by "the communication that they did with everyone."

Structure for Collaboration

A Reflection respondent described monthly team meetings, agendas and meeting notes, additional meetings when issues arose, and site visits with every partner as ways the project kept partners connected to one another and to the work.

Challenges

As with Common Vision, turnover could create substantial challenges for partner engagement, especially if commitments are connected to a specific person at the partner organization.

Often described as unavoidable and outside a grantee's (or even partner's) control, many interviewees highlighted the challenges of losing key project champions, having to rebuild relationships with replacements, and temporarily losing momentum or institutional knowledge. As one grantee said, in an otherwise successful project, "The biggest problem we've had is turnover. You work with somebody for 2-3 years, they understand your value proposition…and they know who and what opportunities and clients to put into our ecosystem." Several grantees said the rebuilding time after key partner personnel leave is typically measured in months, sometimes three to six months or more before a busy new hire can be meaningfully re-engaged.

Use of Data

High-quality data are regularly collected, reviewed, and used for decision making.

Data served many different purposes in ARISE projects: helping to understand regional needs and opportunities, informing planning and implementation decisions, tracking changing conditions, and demonstrating progress and impact. The types of data were both qualitative and quantitative and varied substantially based on the work. Examples included labor market and industry data, surveys and interviews, asset and infrastructure mapping, participant-level data, financial and investment information, and project performance measures.

Project teams used data to better understand needs and identify where to focus.

This was especially evident in planning projects, where data collection was often a significant component of the work itself. Grantees described using data to test assumptions, understand differences across states or communities, and identify where needs or opportunities were greatest.

> - "How can we bring in the evidence that we're hearing so much anecdotally...We maneuvered around with both methods [qualitative and quantitative] of feedback to get the most accurate picture possible."
> - "...[W]e wanted the data to see where...else are there places where it's an easy win...that data just showing what jobs we're going to be moving forward in the next 10 to whatever many years just helped us hone in... We used it as a guide of where we would start."
> - The data "did not always reveal what we thought it would say, but we have real data for decision making moving forward."

Data also helped identify meaningful differences across places. One grantee described environmental scans that showed, for example, that some states offered comprehensive adult dental benefits while others did not. Understanding those differences helped the project consider which barriers would require different strategies in each state. Mapping served a similar purpose in trail and community projects by making assets, gaps, or connections more visible than they had been before.

Grantees and partners used data to make decisions about priorities, services, investments, and implementation.

Respondents described bringing data into decisions about priorities, services, investments, and implementation approaches. One partner described collecting information about participant barriers and immediately connecting those findings to services: if the data showed that most participants had poor credit, for example, that pointed toward financial literacy support; transportation data similarly identified who might need transportation services. As the partner put it, "There's always data everywhere."

In other projects, data were used to prioritize among possible activities. One planning grantee developed a scoring approach that considered alignment with ARC and industry

objectives, partner capability, and partner availability to help determine which initiatives to advance. A Reflection respondent from another project described the relationship directly: "High-quality data is regularly collected, reviewed, and used to guide planning and implementation decisions. Shared data among multi-state partners supports informed investment, efficient phasing, and ongoing performance monitoring."

Related Themes from Interviews and Reflection Responses

Effective Collaboration

In one technical project, a partner explained that utilities, manufacturers, and grid operators each hold different pieces of the information needed. Because no single organization has the full picture, collaboration is necessary to bring those pieces together and make the information useful at the project level.

Resource Allocation

In several projects, strong data practices were supported by having the right infrastructure in place. One Reflection respondent described using shared Voice of Customer software across partner institutions so that "all institutions have access to training and use of [the software]" and can be connected through the same system, which "allows for consistency in interviews and data collection." Another respondent described data collection and evaluation as a major strength of the project alongside adequate funding for participant support, curriculum, training, and staffing. In other cases, respondents described dedicated databases, data systems, consultants, or staff capacity that made it possible to collect and organize information in a usable way.

Structure for Collaboration

One Reflection respondent specifically requested "more tips for data collection during group meetings," suggesting that convenings can be used not only to share findings but also to strengthen the underlying methods. In projects with more technical data needs, respondents described the value of working sessions that allow partners to compare methods, troubleshoot problems, and align their approaches when several organizations are contributing pieces of a larger dataset.

Challenges

Challenges with Use of Data often emerged when the resources, systems, or collaboration needed to support it were not fully in place.

In some projects, limited infrastructure made data collection and reporting more time-consuming. One Reflection respondent noted that "the lack of a participant database causes reporting to take much longer than it should." In another project, partner organizations tracked participants differently, and a planned shared database never materialized. As one Reflection respondent explained, "Each partner collecting data in a unique manner creates aggregated challenges." Similarly, in a technical project, one partner described the difficulty of working across organizations that each hold only part of the needed information: "All the stakeholders are focusing on their part, that's what they should be doing, but it makes the whole project a little bit challenging because no one has all the information."

Effective Collaboration

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

Grantees and partners described effective collaboration in the ways partners combined different strengths, shared information, and worked through problems to improve their collective work. In some projects, partners entered ARISE with established working relationships; in others, collaboration strengthened as partners gained experience working together and learned what each organization could contribute.

Effective collaboration allowed partners to contribute different strengths.

Interviewees described the ways that roles, expertise, and networks complemented each other. Rather than duplicating effort, organizations contributed what they were best positioned to provide.

> - "The positives are, you've got a lot of really, really smart people in the room…a lot of very smart, innovative folks…and then you're trying to…solve an actual business problem. So we have actual industry customers and utilities, and so I think that's a strength, is you have the capability and know-how within this program."
> - "We are definitely approaching this as [a] dual team. They're the grantee, and we will always yield to that…They know this very well. So…I mean obviously we're going to bring our expertise, but we also have such a respect for their expertise…"
> - "Everybody, not only do we have our different strengths, everybody understands and celebrates the strengths of [others]…'I'm not a business person.' No problem, we're gonna take care of that. [You] model, and here's exactly the data that I need you to produce."

For some projects, this complementarity was possible because the partners had been selected specifically to bring different kinds of knowledge to the work. One planning grantee, for example, described the value of having both engineers and social scientists on the research team because each approached the work differently and brought expertise the other group did not have. In another project, a third-party organization served as an interface between university researchers and startup companies, allowing technical partners to focus on their work while someone else helped bridge the academic and business environments.

In several projects, collaboration has reportedly strengthened over time.

One grantee described partners becoming comfortable with one another as trust developed, to the point that organizations that had initially been protective of employer contacts were beginning to share information. Another partner described organizations moving beyond simply carrying out parallel activities to inviting one another into events and programming earlier in the planning process. A Reflection respondent captured this progression as well: "Collaboration is active and productive, particularly within established cohorts…At the same time, as new partner institutions launch their first cohorts, the collaboration is still evolving toward its full potential."

Related Themes from Interviews and Reflection Responses

Partner Commitment and Engagement

Effective collaboration requires partners who are willing to participate, respond, share information, and contribute their expertise. One Reflection respondent described partner collaboration as a major strength because most partners were "living up to their potential on the program as it evolves."

Effective Communication, Structure for Collaboration

One Reflection respondent noted that "the regular virtual meetings allow for partner recognition and engagement. We have been supportive of each other and know who to turn to when we have questions." Another described collaboration beginning through scheduled virtual meetings and then extending into one-on-one connections among partners. In this way, convening structures can provide the starting point, while effective collaboration increasingly extends beyond the meeting itself.

Resource Allocation

Several respondents described projects as stronger because no one partner was expected to provide every kind of knowledge or capacity. As one grantee put it, ARISE projects require a team with enough depth to delegate execution across people and organizations with different expertise; without that capacity, "you're gonna end up with some very superficial results."

Challenges

Challenges with collaboration arose when partners had not yet developed ways to work together beyond their individual responsibilities.

Reflection respondents described projects in which partners primarily interacted during scheduled meetings, with "very little cross-communications" outside them, or were "still siloed." One respondent noted that bi-monthly calls were helpful but wanted "collaboration [to] extend beyond those opportunities."

Differences among partner organizations could also make collaboration harder.

One partner described the difficulty of bridging academic and industry perspectives: universities may focus on innovation and research while utilities are concerned with whether something can actually be deployed and maintained. "It's like these two worlds need to meet in the middle somehow." Another described the administrative side of working across a university and community colleges: "Our systems are very different, and our requirements are very different, and so trying to make those two worlds collide to push forward through the project, that was a bit challenging."

Resource Allocation

Project resources are allocated optimally and for maximum impact.

Resource Allocation includes financial resources as well as staff capacity, specialized expertise, equipment, technology, and other assets available to a project. Grantees and partners described strong allocation when those resources were directed toward the activities, organizations, or participants where they could have the greatest effect. Flexibility was also important, since the appropriate allocation was not always fully apparent when the original budget was developed.

Strong resource allocation responded to differences in need and capacity.

Several grantees described distributing resources strategically, based on what partners or participants needed to carry out the work successfully. In some cases, this meant recognizing that smaller or less-resourced organizations needed funding structures that differed from those available to larger institutions.

For example, one implementation project involving community colleges provided each participating college with the same allocation rather than distributing funds based on size. A partner described this as both a fairness and capacity issue, since smaller colleges often have fewer resources even though they may need more assistance to establish a new program.

> - "Most of these…small and rural economic engines…[are] not at the staffing or the capacity to do the work on day one, hour one…They needed that first bucket of funds."
> - "Giving everybody something to start with…allowed me, specifically, to pay for those books at the beginning of the semester…if I have to wait a semester, I lose momentum."

In one project, a state partner concluded that funds budgeted for recruitment duplicated work it was already doing and encouraged the grantee to use those dollars to expand programming instead. The reallocation allowed the project to reach additional students and families in another location. A Reflection respondent from the same project later reported, "We were able to reallocate resources and impact an additional 384 students."

Other grantees and partners described reusing existing equipment, shifting funds among budget categories, or filling gaps left by other funding sources. One partner described ARISE funding as a "bridge" among several related initiatives: "We've really used these funds to patch gaps…being able to look at both organizations, see where that gap was and fill that in…has worked really well." Another grantee emphasized that resources extended beyond money after Hurricane Helene: the organization could deploy vehicles, shower trailers, tools, volunteers, and donated funds to fill gaps for community organizations.

Related Themes from Interviews and Reflection Responses

Use of Data

Some grantees described formal assessments or eligibility criteria that helped direct services and support. In one disaster-recovery project, partners used established case-management and fair-housing criteria to determine which households qualified for

assistance. In another, technical assistance providers used organizational assessments to identify where participating providers had the greatest needs and develop a corresponding assistance plan. These approaches give grantees and partners a rationale for prioritizing limited resources.

Adaptability

Several respondents described reallocating funds when staffing changed, an activity proved unnecessary, costs shifted, or a different approach appeared likely to produce greater impact. One partner described a faculty departure that required "a lot of juggling" and said the budget had to be "organically restructured" so the project could continue drawing funds in a balanced way. Another project partner described discovering that another organization lacked funding for a relevant group of households and could say, "I have grant money, let's make a partnership." In another project, partners recognized that equipment from a discontinued program could be reassigned to other sites rather than purchasing new machines.

Challenges

There was sometimes a mismatch between available resources and the cost or time required to complete the work.

One grantee felt, in retrospect, that the amount of funding they provided to participating communities was insufficient to create new staff capacity. Communities therefore had to rely on existing staff who were already supporting other grants and responsibilities.

Rising or unpredictable costs created similar challenges. Because budgets are developed well before implementation begins, actual costs can be substantially higher than planned. One grantee described the challenge as trying to "right size it for the time and funding we have," while another Reflection respondent observed that projects can stretch resources effectively but "there are never enough resources available to comfortably pursue all opportunities and address challenges."

Administrative requirements could also limit how easily projects use or shift resources.

Grantees and partners described federal spending requirements, reimbursement processes, match requirements, procurement rules, and budget-modification procedures as unavoidable challenges in large grants. Smaller organizations may be particularly affected by reimbursement processes; one Reflection respondent noted that reimbursements "can take some time to approve and distribute which can cause cash flow challenges for smaller organizations doing the work." Sometimes, partners contributed match in different forms and at different rates, making it important to monitor commitments throughout implementation. One grantee said match "can be an easy piece to let slip...[and] can be something that gets out of hand before you realize it." Another project found the level of match burdensome for communities with limited financial capacity.

Use of Time

Project-related time is used efficiently and effectively.

Grantees and partners described strong Use of Time through careful planning, purposeful meetings, realistic expectations for partner participation, and attention to where staff effort would have the greatest value. In many ARISE projects, time is a particularly important resource because project staff and partners are balancing ARISE responsibilities with other organizational demands.

Strong use of time often started with clear planning and project management.

Grantees and partners described timelines, agendas, work plans, and deliberate sequencing as helping projects stay focused and make progress without creating unnecessary demands on partners. One Reflection respondent described a project as "strategically planned and sequenced to ensure efficient use of time," with coordination and preliminary planning allowing activities such as design, permitting, and partner review to proceed in parallel. Another noted that a detailed timeline and statement of work helped ensure team members' time was "targeted to specific activities and outcomes."

> - "We had a Gantt chart and so that helped me keep track of the deliverables and how much time we needed to accomplish each thing. Other than that it was just reminders, reminders, reminders, this is the deadline..."
> - "Whenever our group meets, we set an agenda and stick to timelines."
> - "The established timeline was completely communicated at the onset of the planning grant and was strictly adhered to in order to provide consistency."

Grantees also used time well by being selective about when and how they engaged partners.

Several grantees described limiting meetings, setting clear expectations in advance, and matching the format of engagement to what needed to be accomplished. One grantee said their two in-person meetings had "a very sharp agenda" and participants knew ahead of time what would be discussed and what input was needed: "Sometimes you get in these meetings...and everyone's stumbling for a while, and we just didn't have time for that."

Reflection respondents described similar approaches. One project "scaled back on meetings to ensure we required people's time only when needed or when value was being provided through training or content sharing." Another struck "a great balance between in-person and virtual meetings" and handled issues through email when a meeting was unnecessary. In another project, meetings alternated between in-person and virtual formats "to ensure time was not wasted traveling when goals could be accomplished virtually."

For projects relying heavily on external stakeholders, respecting participants' time could also shape the engagement strategy itself. One grantee described going directly to stakeholders in their own communities rather than asking them to travel: "The idea that we were going to them, on their turf, so to speak, helped create this limited use [of] time." Another project offered free professional development alongside focus groups to make participation more worthwhile for attendees.

Related Themes from Interviews and Reflection Responses

Structure for Collaboration

Standing schedules, focused meetings, and smaller groups could help projects involve the people needed for particular tasks without requiring the full partnership to participate in every interaction. One Reflection respondent said, "I think we just meet enough as a big group while frequently [meeting] in small team[s] for best use of our time."

Effective Communication

Advance communication about meeting goals helped participants come prepared, while regular updates reduced the need to revisit decisions or clarify responsibilities later. One Reflection respondent summarized the result simply: "We have very productive meetings and follow-up to meetings."

Governance and Decision-making

Clear responsibilities and decision processes helped projects avoid delays and duplication, especially since partnerships mean, as one Reflection respondent put it, "you have two organizations that need two decision processes." As another respondent shared, clearer timelines across partners could help make progress more transparent, even when organizations were moving at different speeds

Challenges

Staff capacity could be a challenge across project types.

One Reflection respondent said the project would be "more manageable" with a staff member dedicated solely to it, since the work was currently spread across people responsible for multiple projects and programs. Another observed that several people involved had "too many competing demands on their time," which meant project tasks did not always rank high among their priorities. One grantee described how a one-year planning project also had to incorporate time-intensive administrative processes, subawards, and MOUs. Another project began later than anticipated but maintained its original completion date, requiring an aggressive schedule and multiple meetings each week.

Grantees and partners sometimes wished they had invested more time earlier in planning or preparation.

Examples included reviewing curriculum sooner, conducting more detailed walkthroughs before program launch, clarifying consultant deliverables at the beginning of an engagement, and developing assessment tools earlier so technical assistance could be targeted more efficiently.

Effective Communication

Project communication, including amount, frequency, content, audience, etc., is effective.

Grantees and partners described effective communication as regular contact, responsiveness, clear expectations, and communication practices that helped people get the information they needed to carry out their roles. Because ARISE projects often involve multiple organizations, locations, and types of stakeholders, respondents also emphasized the value of adjusting communication to fit different audiences and circumstances.

Strong communication kept partners informed and work moving forward.

Grantees and partners described regular contact as especially valuable when projects involved many organizations or activities occurring simultaneously. Communication practices included recurring emails and calls, meeting notes, individual check-ins, office hours, and follow-up between formal meetings. In some projects, a designated project manager or communicator was key to coordinating large amounts of information across the partnership.

> - "The follow up is just maniacal, and we all have a good enough relationship, we can just pick up the phone and call these people if it needs to happen…We had one voice that generally communicated to partners…"
> - "There is constant communication. …You are very well aware of when dates are and when stuff's happening, so that's actually kind of nice to deal with."
> - "We have very open communication. We created a space for us to communicate…through chat, and if we need to pick up the phone to call them, we can…We can just ask them questions as we go, which makes it easier."

Reflection respondents similarly highlighted frequent, predictable contact. One described "weekly meetings and project check-ins" as a strength in ensuring communication and completing project goals. Another said communication was "as frequent as needed," with responsive team members and meetings whose content was relevant and helpful. In another project, focused meetings with regular agendas were described as "the anchor of the success of the program."

Effective communication reflected the needs of the audience.

Grantees and partners described adapting the message, format, channel, or participants based on who needed the information and what they needed to do with it. This was especially relevant when projects communicated across technical and nontechnical audiences or worked with stakeholders who had different levels of familiarity with the project. One project had three different communication channels "to ensure we were available and responsive to all workflows and working personalities," along with weekly office hours, monthly meetings, and written notes saved for later reference.

A partner in another project described limiting certain meetings to the people who needed to make technical and business decisions: "There are a lot of parties involved, and I think we've done a good job …we keep the technical meetings where business decisions are made

to those people, and then they relay that to [whoever] is working on these efforts, and I think we do a good job at not overwhelming the customer in these meetings."

Related Themes from Interviews and Reflection Responses

Structure for Collaboration

Respondents described regular meetings, defined meeting cadence, agendas, office hours, workgroups, and shared documentation as creating predictable opportunities to exchange information. One Reflection respondent summarized the structure as "templates, recurring meetings, calendar invitations/reminders." Another described monthly partner meetings, additional meetings as needed, agendas provided in advance, and follow-up documentation from the project manager.

Resource Allocation, Governance and Decision-making

Several interviewees highlighted the value of having a project manager or designated person responsible for communications. In one planning project, a respondent said that without the lead staff member coordinating communications, "this project would have fallen apart." Another grantee intentionally maintained "one voice" for outbound partner communication until responsibility was formally handed off. Clear communication roles often reduced duplication and helped partners know where to go for information.

Partner Commitment and Engagement, Effective Collaboration

Grantees and partners connected strong communication with open working relationships. One partner said the project had a "very friendly dialogue" that made people comfortable asking even small questions. Another described communication as especially effective because partners could work through misunderstandings together: "We can figure out what we're trying to accomplish, or maybe there's some miscommunications along the way, [and] we can ultimately get those resolved."

Challenges

Communication challenges involved getting the right information to the right audience.

In technical projects, respondents described situations in which participants were overwhelmed by information or the project initially engaged people who were not positioned to act on it. One partner reflected that identifying "the right person in an organization as quickly as possible" could prevent repeated conversations and save time. Another Reflection respondent said lengthy emails required substantial time to parse and suggested a centralized project-management or Teams space would have made information easier to collect and respond to.

Governance and Decision-making

The project's governance and decision-making framework is clear and functional.

Although each ARISE project has a lead grantee with ultimate responsibility for the award, Year Three findings suggest three broad approaches to how implementation authority is organized across ARISE partnerships, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive:

1. **Centralized models**, in which a lead organization or project manager retains a strong coordinating role;
2. **Distributed or parallel models**, in which state teams or organizational partners lead distinct portions of the work; and
3. **Jointly integrated models**, in which partners are more interdependent and decisions are made collectively.

In centralized models, a lead organization or designated project manager provided strong coordination and direction.

Responsibility for keeping work aligned, managing key processes, or making final decisions is concentrated with one main organization. One partner described the lead organization as the "natural lead" because of its substantive expertise, while emphasizing the complementary role of other partners: "The Foundation is the natural lead of this. They live this…So they need to be leading this…but then we're coming along…bringing our programmatic expertise…"

In distributed or parallel models, substantial responsibility was delegated to state teams or strategy leads.

One bistate project provides a particularly clear example. The lead grantee is based in one state, while a partner organization in the other state serves as a co-lead and coordinating partner for their state. One partner in that state described meeting biweekly with that co-lead and said, "…[T]hey really keep things on track together with all of the partners. I don't think this project would be anywhere near as successful if we didn't have that role in the grant…" Another project distributed leadership across approximately 20 implementation strategies. The two core organizations identified a lead or co-leads for each strategy, often with representatives from both organizations sharing responsibility. The project then formed action teams around individual strategies to refine details and support implementation.

In jointly integrated models, governance relied more heavily on shared decision-making across all core partners.

Respondents described these projects in terms of consensus, collective management, and broad participation in important decisions.

> - "Relative to decision-making, I don't feel like it's necessarily top-down. I feel like the decisions are sort of collective. Everybody has input…"
> - "The management of the program is collective and involves all constituents. This has been a major strength of the initiative."

Reflection respondents similarly described decisions being approved "with everyone's input and by consensus" and collaborative decision-making creating "shared vision and shared governance."

These patterns suggest that effective governance can take different forms, as long as the distribution of authority is clear and workable for the partners involved.

Related Themes from Interviews and Reflection Responses

Effective Communication, Structure for Collaboration

Grantees and partners connected clear decision-making with regular communication about roles, next steps, and responsibilities. One Reflection respondent described a governance structure as effective because "decision-making processes are straightforward, and communication channels are well-established." A grantee described giving experienced teams enough guidance to stay aligned while avoiding "hovering": "I want to be in the loop, but I'm going to yield to your expertise."

Challenges

Governance and Decision-making, while rated as a strength overall in all prior quarters, has been consistently among the lowest rated Reflection items for two years.

Governance challenges often involved uncertainty about roles, authority, or how decisions were supposed to be made.

Several Reflection respondents said they did not know what the governance framework was, could not see how decisions were being made, or were unclear about their own role. Staff turnover, developing structures, and formal agreements sometimes contributed to that uncertainty.

Uncertainty also arose around the role of the lead grantee. One planning grantee reflected that they initially approached the project too assertively: "I jumped on trying to dictate how everything was gonna go and not necessarily taking time to listen to our partners." Another described the opposite concern: narrowing and prioritizing project ideas without making stakeholders feel that the lead organization was "driving the bus."

Distributed governance sometimes created a challenge when coordinating organizations lacked formal authority over participating partners.

In one project involving a shared regional asset, an umbrella organization coordinates and markets the asset while seven separate owners manage individual segments. One Reflection respondent summarized the challenge as, "Too many different owners and maintainers…I'm not sure everybody agrees." Because each owner in this project is accountable to its own decisionmakers, budgets, and processes, agreement depends heavily on partner buy-in and goodwill.

Structure for Collaboration

The framework for collaboration is clear and functional, including its cadence, formats, and opportunities to collaborate.

Structure for Convening and Collaboration is closely related to communication, partner engagement, and collaboration, but focuses on the framework that organizes those interactions: when partners connect, in what groupings, through which formats, and for what purposes. Grantees and partners described strong structures as those that created predictable opportunities to coordinate while also giving smaller groups space to work through specific issues in greater depth.

Projects used different meeting structures for different kinds of work.

Several ARISE projects used a combination of full-partnership meetings, smaller workgroups or committees, state-level meetings, one-on-one check-ins, and technical sessions. This allowed projects to maintain coordination across the partnership without requiring every participant to be involved in every discussion.

> - "We come together and we have different committees; there's a technology committee, a rates and contract committee, a variety of others…and then we'll come back and report to the whole group…"
> - "Each state, we meet collectively once a month, with our team and state leaders, but they also have implementation plan meetings with an implementation specialist…So they're meeting monthly to vision out exactly what that looks like in each state…"

Other projects combine office hours, advisory committees, one-on-one meetings, and workgroups as useful complements to larger convenings. One partner said the combination of regular meetings and knowing the other organizations involved made it easier to reach out directly when questions arose.

The purpose and format of convenings could be as important as their frequency.

Some projects used committees, technical sessions, or intensive planning meetings to create dedicated space for those kinds of interactions. Other structures were effective for keeping partners informed but offered less opportunity for substantive joint work. One partner described monthly meetings as "really just an update" and said there was not enough time for "deep dives." They suggested creating "actual work groups" where partners could brainstorm, work through issues, and share lessons learned.

Some grantees described being strategic about the use of virtual versus in-person formats. Virtual meetings made regular interaction possible across large geographic areas, while in-person convenings were often described as more valuable for relationship-building, intensive planning, and making progress on work that benefited from direct interaction. One grantee explained: "The in-person trainings, I get that things need to be virtual just for budget and time's sake, but it was good to get together to be able to have the interactions needed to actually push the conversations forward…"

At the same time, more convening was not necessarily better. One Reflection respondent described their project as having "the optimal amount of meeting and engagement to move

things forward without burdening internal and external partners." Strong structures therefore appeared to depend on fit: enough regular interaction to maintain momentum, combined with formats and groupings appropriate to the work partners needed to accomplish.

Related Themes from Interviews and Reflection Responses

Use of Time

Regular schedules, focused agendas, smaller workgroups, and deliberate use of virtual meetings can help projects maintain collaboration without placing unnecessary demands on participants. Several respondents described the difficulty of finding common meeting times across organizations and emphasized the value of standing schedules or choosing meeting formats based on what actually required synchronous interaction.

Partner Commitment and Engagement

Meetings and collaborative forums provide opportunities for participation, but their value depends on partners attending, preparing, and contributing. Reflection respondents described strong attendance as evidence that projects could "convene and spark collaboration," while others noted that even an effective framework could be limited when some partners participated less consistently.

Governance and Decision-making

Several projects used smaller committees, strategy leads, or state-level groups to carry out work and then report back to a larger partnership. Clear roles within these structures helped participants understand where particular discussions or decisions should occur.

Challenges

Noted challenges reflected the practical difficulty of coordinating people across organizations, states, and schedules.

When meetings were not scheduled far in advance, some grantees and partners described difficulty finding times that worked for everyone without repeatedly polling for availability. One grantee concluded that, in hindsight, they would have established standing meeting times from the beginning rather than continually trying to accommodate every schedule.

Distance also constrained the types of interaction projects could incorporate. Respondents often valued face-to-face engagement but acknowledged the travel required to bring multi-state partners together. One Reflection respondent summarized the tradeoff: "The distance is a challenge; having face-to-face meetings would be helpful but is not practical." Hybrid meetings provided one solution, although respondents noted that they can be difficult to facilitate in ways that engage virtual and in-person participants equally.

The appropriate level of convening was sometimes hard to gauge.

Some grantees and partners described meeting fatigue when projects scheduled too many engagements, while others felt quarterly or bi-monthly meetings let too much time lapse. The right balance seemed to vary by the needs of the project and the partners involved.

Recommendations

Year Three recommendations focus on implementation of current projects and on ARC's ongoing support for grantees and multi-state collaboration.

Recommendations for Applicants and Grantees

Grantees and partners offered several recommendations for organizations managing complex, multi-state projects.

Invest in dedicated grant administration and project coordination capacity, to manage scheduling, partner logistics, collection of quantitative and qualitative data, reporting, and other back-end tasks. Grantees and partners recommended assigning this responsibility deliberately and not assuming someone can simply absorb it with other duties:

> - "Operationally, having someone who is on staff that their focus is compliance, the coordination of partners. When you talk about eight partners, multiple contractors, all of the everything that comes with that, having someone who is focused on that has been hugely beneficial."
> - "I would really recommend [having someone to track things] as a best practice for any grant. I know it increases the amount of administrative overhead on the grants, but if it's the difference between having a more robust project and getting actual work done and connections made, it's completely worth it."

Build sufficient time into project management and engagement. To the extent possible, grantees and partners recommended planning meetings and activities farther in advance, recognizing that partners often have full calendars and that research, engagement, and coordination can take longer than expected.

> - "Schedule your meetings at least a month in advance. Have it all planned out as far in advance as possible…the earlier the better."
> - "I would say give yourself some more buffer time on qualitative research than maybe you think initially…If I could go back in time and give myself an extra five days here or an extra couple days there, I think I could have used it."

Be deliberate about project team composition and expected roles and contributions. Consider the expertise, capacity, working style, and role of each partner, as well as whether the overall partnership remains manageable within the project timeline:

> - "Spend the time to form the right team. It's not just about the technical talent and skills and such, but I would add the collaborative spirit and being humble, this is a very important trait in the people that you work with."
> - "Do you really need that partner on the grant…? What are you specifically asking that partner to do?"

Build relationships early and include people who understand the target communities. Grantees and partners described trust and local relationships as important to recruitment, understanding differences across communities, and carrying out work across state lines. For projects entering new communities, they emphasized the value of local connectors:

> - "I would just like to say, relationship building, knowing the community, knowing the players, it's a journey when it comes to building those relationships, so make sure you have a healthy relationship with those stakeholders or community members of that state."
> - "I would tell people not to make decisions on what will work without asking their communities that they're targeting first. Everything is different…one size does not fit all when it comes to multi-state programs…Be culturally relevant."

Utilize ARC staff and other available resources when issues are present. As in every quarter, grantees encouraged others to develop strong working relationships with ARC staff and to raise questions rather than trying to resolve issues alone. As one said, "Take advantage of whatever support is available to you…reaching out to a program officer to say 'Hey, this is a challenge that we are dealing with, do you have any suggestions for how we navigate it?' You're probably not the only grantee that's ever dealt with something like that…just don't be afraid to ask the question."

Plan for what happens after the grant period of performance. For both planning and implementation projects, grantees and partners discussed thinking about who will continue convening partners, which activities can be sustained, and what capacity or resources will be needed after the grant period ends. One planning grantee described managing partner expectations, because they said partners were already asking, "OK well, we did the plan, but what next? Are we waiting for somebody to convene us again?" They recommended thinking explicitly about future roles and commitments before the current project concludes.

Recommendations for ARC

Grantees and partners also offered recommendations for ARC's continued support of active ARISE projects and multi-state work.

Continue providing responsive program support and flexibility during implementation. A repeated comment across interviews was appreciation for ARC staff who were accessible, willing to work through problems, and open to reasonable changes when conditions shifted. Many credited their own ability to be flexible and adaptable to the tone ARC sets and the collaborative, problem-solving approach ARC staff take with grantees:

> - "I've felt [ARC] to be a really supportive funder the whole way through, whether that be flexibility as we had to move things…or just all the way through being an excellent partner…It was just this sense of really being helped to succeed all along the way."
> - "ARC…understand[s] that we're doing research, we're doing new things, we're creating something that doesn't exist, and they understand that things change…Having that type of project manager is critical to an ever-evolving and iterating design of what we have."

Continue providing technical assistance, with a focus on administrative and compliance challenges. Grantees generally described ARC's technical assistance positively, while identifying topics where additional guidance could reduce uncertainty. These included match calculation and documentation, procurement, construction-related requirements, and ARC's grant reporting system.

> - "I think more training on how to calculate match, what can be used as match…Training on where to find match, how to track it, how to make sure that if you're saying that you're using some of your time for match, how are you showing that in…timesheets…"
> - "…I think if we could have some really strong procurement training…I think maybe if [ARC] could go back and look at where some of these audit findings are for the past couple of years, and if it's in reporting, if it's in procurement, if it's in remittances, if it's in reimbursements, whatever it is, and lean into that [for training]…"

For construction projects, grantees and partners specifically mentioned environmental reviews, Davis-Bacon requirements, the role of the state basic agency in oversight for construction projects, and uncertainty about how federal construction requirements apply to less traditional projects such as trails.

Grantees also identified a few issues related to ARC's grant management system, Pathways, although experiences varied. Some described the transition to a new grants management system as smooth and praised ARC's responsiveness and support. Others requested additional training or identified specific system issues, including reporting deadlines that did not always align with expected reporting periods, difficulty accessing or downloading reports transferred from the previous system, limited options for uploading supporting materials, and problems with reimbursement or budget information in the new system.

Consider additional opportunities for ARISE grantees and partners to learn from each other. Grantees and partners expressed interest in hearing what other projects are doing, comparing approaches, and building relationships across states and projects. Suggestions ranged from periodic virtual conversations to smaller regional gatherings or use of existing ARC networks.

> - "It would be interesting to hear what other projects are doing…and perhaps be able to meet and talk…I know another conference is expensive, but a day seminar or a day event or something…"
> - "How could ARC think about cross-pollinating…If there are tools in the toolbox they're already using with other programs…they should think about how they could foster that connectivity within their own existing cohorts and networks."

Consider future opportunities and incentives for multi-state projects. Grantees and partners described value in having a funding mechanism that encourages organizations to work across state boundaries. Many said the multi-state requirement helped projects address regional issues that do not follow state lines, learn from approaches in other states, expand successful models, and build relationships that may not otherwise have developed. Several explicitly encouraged ARC to preserve this feature of ARISE in future initiatives.

"[Of] everything ARC has done over the last 60 some years, I think the ARISE program has done more to get the region acting and thinking as a region than anything else before…"

Year Three Conclusions

ARISE grantees are demonstrating measurable progress toward initiative goals.

As of August 2026, projects collectively had served nearly 31,000 people, more than 3,600 businesses and organizations, and 835 communities and had reported improving a sizeable portion of those served. Grantees reported more than 570 jobs created and more than 1,440 retained, 154 plans or reports produced, and 135 new programs implemented. Collectively, the 23 closed projects met or exceeded targets in nearly every reported category.

Year Three findings show the various ways multi-state designs can have an impact.

Three broad models are emerging. Some projects address a shared region, system, corridor, or asset that crosses state boundaries. Others extend or adapt an existing model into new locations. Still others coordinate across institutions or places to increase reach or scale. Across these models, grantees and partners frequently described shared learning, broader access to expertise and resources, and stronger regional relationships. The importance of the multi-state structure appears to depend in part on what a project is trying to accomplish and how work is organized across states.

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

Across Reflection results, all implementation factors were rated as strengths overall. Implementation factors of Adaptability, Common Vision, and Partner Commitment and Engagement were among the strongest. Factors related to the practical organization of collaboration, including Use of Time, Effectiveness of Communication, Governance and Decision-making, and Structure for Convening and Collaboration, were comparatively lower, although still rated positively overall. Grantees and partners frequently describe these factors as closely linked and mutually reinforcing.

Programmatic sustainability remains an important focus as projects mature. Grantees and partners generally rated Programmatic Sustainability as a strength, although it was relatively lower than the other progress-related Reflection elements. Some grantees are working to incorporate programs, curricula, tools, relationships, and other project elements into existing organizations and systems. For planning projects, sustainability may mean that the resulting plan continues to guide future action even if the original project structure does not continue. Funding was the most common uncertainty, particularly for continued staffing, programming, participant supports, collaboration, or expansion.

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

Overall, Year Three findings suggest that ARISE is producing tangible project-level results while also supporting forms of regional collaboration that may have value beyond individual awards. As more implementation projects progress and additional projects close, the evaluation will continue to assess project- and initiative-level results and their contributions to the ARISE goals of economic transformation.

Appendix A. Year Three ARISE Projects

This report includes the following ARISE projects, grouped by investment priority. Dates indicate the most recent collection for each method with Year Three, as applicable. (-) indicates the data point was not available in Year Three (Sept 2025-Aug/2026).

Methods are as follows:

- M= Metrics
- P = Progress Report
- R = Reflection
- I = Interview
- B = Beneficiary Survey

Building Appalachia's Infrastructure

Project	M	P	R	I	B
Planning					
Appalachian Region Community-Owned Grid Resilient Infrastructure Project (ARCO-GRIP)	x	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	
Pennsylvania Ohio West Virginia Economic Revitalization (POWER) Network	x	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	
Quantum Appalachia: Forging the Future of Economic Growth and Secure Connectivity	-	x	x	x	
Implementation					
Appalachian Digital Equity Accelerator (ADEA)	x	x	x	x	x
Appalachian Region Community-Owned Grid Resilient Infrastructure Project (ARCO-GRIP)	x	x	x	x	x
Smart Grid Deployment Consortium and HILLTOP Platform Expansion	x	x	x	x	
Building the Battery Belt in Appalachian Tennessee (1)	-	x	n/a	x	
Building the Battery Belt in Appalachian Georgia (2)	-	x	n/a	-	
Building the Battery Belt in Appalachian North Carolina (3)	-	x	n/a	x	
Increased Commerce Through Multistate Multimodal Investments at Inland Ports (1)	-	x	x	x	
Increased Commerce Through Multistate Multimodal Investments at Inland Ports (2)	-	x	x	x	

Building Community Capacity

Project	M	P	R	I	B
Planning					
Central Appalachian Network New Era Planning Project	x	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	
Building GIS Capacity in Energy Communities	x	x	x	-	
Vocational Initiative for Thriving Appalachian Leadership (VITAL)	x	x	x	x	
Implementation					
Thrive Regional Resource Hub: Driving Connectivity and Resilience in the Cradle of Southern Appalachia	x	x	x	x	x

Building Appalachia's Workforce Ecosystems

Project	M	P	R	I	B
Planning					
Setting Appalachia's Workforce on Track to Adapt to the Changing Construction Industry (Industrialized Construction)	x	x	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	
Empowerment Collaborative: Increasing Student Empowerment in Appalachian Communities	x	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	
2023 Connect Appalachia, A Recovery-Friendly Initiative	x	x	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	
Appalachian Water Infrastructure Workforce Development and Training Center	x	x	x	x	
Regional Public Colleges and Universities (RPCU) Central Appalachia Health Consortium	x	x	n/a-closed	x	
Preparing Appalachia for a Sustainable Electric Aviation Future	x	x	x	x	
Expanding Access to Aviation Education in Central Appalachia	x	x	x	x	
Data-Driven Approaches to Support Workforce Skills Matching and Resilient Careers in Appalachia	x	x	x	-	
Strengthening the Talent Pipeline in Central Appalachia	x	x	x	x	
Tri-State Apprenticeship Consortium	x	x	x	x	
Integrated Systems Approach to a Healthier Future in Central Appalachia	x	x	x	x	
BARMA: Biotechnology and Regenerative Medicine Advancement of Appalachian Economy	x	x	x	x	

Project	M	P	R	I	B
Expanding the Oral Health Workforce and Access to Care for the Appalachian Region	x	x	x	x	
Multi-state Remote Work Expansion to Increase Labor Participation in Appalachia	-	x	x	x	
PA/WV – Rural Broadband Adoption and Workforce Planning Program	x	x	-	-	
Small Modular and Advanced Reactor Training (SMART) Program	x	x	x	x	
Appalachian Young Peoples Employment and Transformation Planning Initiative – Youth Economic Stability Strategy (YESS Appalachia)	x	x	x	-	
Transforming Appalachia: Expanding the Reach of Advanced Technology Centers	x	x	x	x	
Appalachian Prosperity Fund: A Holistic Approach to Building Sustainable Economic and Social Resiliency	-	x	x	-	
Creating Upward Mobility in Appalachia Through Aviation Education	x	x	x	-	
Implementation					
Career Acceleration, Readiness, and Employment Experiences for [ARC] Region Students (CAREERS)	x	x	x	-	x
Twin Tiers ARISE Program	x	x	x	x	
Help Our People Expand the EcoSystem (HOPEE)	x	x	x	x	
THRIVE - Transforming Homes and Rebuilding in Vulnerable Environments	x	x	x	x	x
Career Pathways to Success in Rural Communities: Apprenticeship and Education Opportunities for Professionals	x	x	x	x	x
Cyber ACCESS (Appalachian Community Colleges Eco-System Sustainability)	x	x	x	x	
Empowerment Collaborative: Increasing Middle School Student Empowerment in Appalachian Communities	x	x	x	x	
Building the Aerospace Workforce Pipeline in Appalachia	x	x	x	x	
Appalachian Rural Health Technical Assistance Center	x	x	x	x	
Expansion of Cloud Data Analytics Fellows Program	x	x	x	-	
Connect Appalachia	x	x	x	-	

Building Appalachian Businesses

Project	M	P	R	I	B
Planning					
Accelerating Forest Farming in Central Appalachia: Strengthening Market Connections and Collaboration for Long-Term Sector Impact and Sustainability	x	x	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	
Establishing a Regional Green Building Supply Chain for Upper Appalachia	x	x	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	
Appalachian Sustainable Finance Hub	x	x	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	
Appalachian Downtown Developers Initiative	x	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	
Accelerating Startup Success Through Mentoring	-	x	x	x	
Supporting Prosperity, Advancing Rural Knowledge for Small Businesses (SPARK)	x	x	x	x	
Project Everberry CAP (Comprehensive Analysis Plan)	-	x	-	-	
Southern Appalachian Forest Products Marketing and Supply Chain Analysis	-	x	x	-	
Implementation					
Accelerating the Green Textile Economy in Southern Appalachia	-	x	x	x	x
Manufacturing the New Energy Economy in Appalachia (New Energy Economy Project)	x	x	x	x	
The Appalachian Venture Foundry & Multi-State Ecosystem Building Initiative	x	x	x	x	

Building Regional Culture and Tourism

Project	M	P	R	I	B
Planning					
Mobile Platform Development to Advance Rural Tourism Economies	x	x	n/a-closed	n/a-closed	
The Saluda Grade Trail: A Catalyst for Economic Transformation in Upstate South Carolina and Western North Carolina	x	x	x	x	
Cumberland-Pine Mountain Outdoor Recreation and Conservation Corridor	x	x	x	x	
Strengthening Connections: Assessing Multi-Use Trail Connectivity Across Western PA, Southern New York, and the Seneca Nation of Indians	x	x	x	x	
Great Allegheny Passage Trail Maintenance and Strategic Planning	x	x	x	x	
The Rural Tourism Institute: Leveraging Land-Grant Universities to Support Sustainable Rural Tourism Development in Appalachia	x	x	x	-	

Project	M	P	R	I	B
New River Water Trail Action Plan	x	x	-	-	
Tennessee RiverTowns: A Strategy for Restorative Recreation	x	x	x	x	
Unlocking the Economic Potential of the Parkersburg to Pittsburgh (P2P) Trail Corridor	-	x	x	-	
Implementation					
KY Boone's Ridge (1)	-	x	n/a	-	
CTC Equipment Purchase and Trail Improvements (2)	x	x	n/a	x	
Growing the Gateway Economies of the Blue Ridge Parkway	x	x	x	x	x
Appalachian Overland Triangle Project (OH) (1)	x	x	x	x	
Backroads of Appalachia (OH) (2)	x	x	x	x	
Appalachian Overland Triangle Project (WV) (3)	-	x	x	x	
Appalachia United Outdoors: Connecting Communities and Outdoor Recreation Economies	x	x	x	-	

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.