InnovateNC

Backed by a diverse group of Partners,¹ InnovateNC is a two-year cross-city learning collaborative supporting five North Carolina communities as they accelerate the growth of their local innovation economies. Selected cities receive tools and technical assistance valued at no less than $250,000 over the course of the two-year project.

**Background**

Innovation is the essential ingredient for continued economic growth and well-being. National researchers, including at the Brookings Institution, have recognized a new urban spatial geography of innovation now emerging and call for its replication. The spatial geography at the heart of this emerging model is defined by *core clusters of leading-edge anchor institutions and cutting-edge innovative firms, surrounded by a wider innovation-sustaining ecosystem* that includes business incubators, spin-off companies, mixed-use housing-office-retail development, and 21st-century urban quality-of-life amenities. According to Brookings, cities striving to develop on this model must do the following: first, **build a collaborative leadership network**; second, **set a vision for growth**; third, **pursue talent and technology**; fourth, **promote inclusive growth**; and finally, **enhance access to capital**.

The Research Triangle Park is North Carolina’s most notable innovation district, and several other cities in the state are also developing versions of an innovation model. However, North Carolina is mired mid-pack among the nation’s states in overall innovation capacity and effectiveness. A recent Institute for Emerging Issues (IEI) study, using SAS Visual Analytics software, found that North Carolina sits well below the top quartile of states and even trails the U.S. average on key innovation indicators, including output and compensation. Current trend lines indicate that North Carolina will fail to reach the top quartile unless we involve many more people in more of our cities in a broad innovation turn-around effort through which we reconstruct our innovation model and expand innovation capacity. North Carolina’s roster of leading innovation cities must expand beyond the Triangle and Charlotte.

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¹ Partners include NC State University’s Institute for Emerging Issues, College of Design, and Industry Expansion Solutions; Forward Impact; the UNC System; Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy, UNC Chapel Hill’s Kenan Institute for Private Enterprise and Department of Public Policy; RTI International; UNC-TV; the Council for Entrepreneurial Development; the Research Triangle Foundation; and the NC Board of Science, Technology & Innovation.
Why InnovateNC
We know that North Carolina cities beyond Raleigh, Durham, and Charlotte are seeking to bolster their innovation capacity by adopting the new innovation district model. However, some struggle to develop the scale and complexity needed to foster positive short-term outcomes and create the conditions required for long-term innovation success.

To assist such efforts, InnovateNC is a robust cross-city innovation learning collaborative that helps five highly-committed North Carolina communities expand their innovation economies using this new innovation district model.

Goals and Benefits of InnovateNC
InnovateNC aims to enhance innovation-related economic development and to advance critical new knowledge related to that goal. As a result, InnovateNC will:

1. Increase innovation capacity, activity, and connectivity;
2. Broaden the demographic and sectoral diversity of those engaged in the innovation economy;
3. Increase collaborative cross-city learning and partnerships; and
4. Increase visibility and financial support for innovation district efforts.

InnovateNC will accomplish these objectives by providing the following benefits (valued at over $250,000) to each InnovateNC city:

a) Information about, and preparation to take advantage of, existing and newly proposed innovation programs at the state and national level;
b) Guided development of a coherent strategic plan to accelerate inclusionary innovation;
c) Valuable new relationships and connections via in-person cross-city convenings and shared web platform;
d) Data-driven asset mapping and gap analysis of the existing local innovation ecosystem, and measurements of progress over time;
e) Extensive technical assistance to advance local projects while building the base for a longer-term talent development pipeline;
f) Access to extensive best practices resources; and
g) Substantial exposure through storytelling programming.

By freely sharing data tools, metrics, and case studies with other interested communities in support of their innovation development efforts, InnovateNC seeks to contribute meaningfully to North Carolina’s broader economic development and policy landscape.
**Structure of InnovateNC**
The learning collaborative includes:

- **Intensive Two-Year Planning Process within Each Selected City**
  Projects will utilize a coordinated asset-mapping protocol developed by RTI International and the North Carolina Board of Science, Technology & Innovation, and they will conform to an accompanying measurement tool that will track progress over time. In each InnovateNC city, the process will begin with Forward Impact coordinating the assignment of a local facilitator/coach who will assist cities in forming a local Innovation Council (IC). Each local IC will include representatives of specific stakeholder groups and reflect the community’s broad sectoral leadership and demographic diversity. Supported by the facilitator/coach, Forward Impact, IEI, UNC Chapel Hill’s Kenan Institute for Private Enterprise (KIPE), and the Council for Entrepreneurial Development (CED), each local IC will meet monthly across the collaborative’s two-year span to develop and begin to implement a cogent innovation strategy leveraging existing assets and activities. KIPE will provide resources to help shape a creative process for developing each local plan in ways that increase inclusiveness for those involved in and benefitting from the plans.

- **Cross-City Convenings to Focus Learning and Build Strong Relationships**
  Representatives of the various local ICs will participate in four cross-city convenings (one every six months) at the RTP Frontier, as part of The Research Triangle Foundation’s continuing statewide service expansion. At each cross-city convening, highly-regarded innovation and other content experts will support efforts by the ICs to catalyze ground-breaking initiatives in their communities; facilitate the sharing of strategies, models, and visions emerging across the participating locales; and document and share the learnings for the benefit of other communities across North Carolina and beyond. IEI’s Emerging Issues Commons, an award-winning in-person/virtual ideation and deliberation hub that supports collaborative engagement, will be used as a platform to extend relationship building and knowledge sharing beyond the convenings.

- **Data-Driven Decision Making**
  InnovateNC cities will engage in unparalleled data-driven decision making. Each local IC will build its work around three critical planning components: a coordinated data mapping protocol to map each local innovation ecosystem, an innovation measurement tool to track progress over time, and an innovation project logic model. RTI International and the North Carolina Board of Science, Technology & Innovation will develop these tools, which will be administered by the cities with support from a local data partner.
• **Innovative Policy-Making at the Municipal and State Level**
  To support and advance local innovation district expansion, InnovateNC cities must operate within a supportive policy environment at both the local and state levels. To inform municipal policymakers and economic and community development policy at the state level, InnovateNC will work with Partners including Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy to identify best policy practices and to bring relevant policymakers together for facilitated conversations. Additionally, InnovateNC will provide opportunities for students from NC State, Duke, UNC-Chapel Hill, and other regional campuses to support the development and implementation of relevant city and county policy recommendations through the local ICs.

• **Knowledge Sharing through Storytelling**
  InnovateNC cities will gain significant exposure. To ensure that other North Carolina communities benefit from the extensive collaborative learning, Partners will develop a specific web presence for the project, engage in an aggressive earned and social media strategy, publish papers and make presentations at relevant meeting and conferences, curate local and national stories related to inclusive innovation and place-based change, profile an innovator from each community each quarter, and otherwise document, promote, and share findings and emerging resources. Notably, **UNC-TV** will capture innovator profiles from participating cities and build innovation-related programming around them.

• **Supportive Supplemental Programming**
  Each local IC will host a one-day site learning tour and networking opportunity for representatives from the other ICs. Additionally, the Partners will ensure that local ICs are regularly notified regarding innovation-related conferences, forums, and other similar opportunities of interest.