

West Virginia University, in partnership with Brad & Alys Smith, invest in education and entrepreneurship to bring economic innovation to the communities of West Virginia

## THE STORY

**West Virginia University** is working to make West Virginia a Startup State. Pushing for economic development and innovation across 55 counties, the University is focusing on programs that build the skills, workforce and infrastructure to support this initiative. In addition to leading programming across the University that contribute to the state's innovation economy, the University is working collaboratively with the leaders of **West Virginia Forward**, the state Department of Commerce, the National Guard and the Governor's Office to grow and diversify West Virginia's economy.

One of the initiatives leading the way is the **Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative at WVU**. The Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative (OEDC) was created to leverage West Virginia's outdoor recreation assets to stimulate and improve economic opportunities throughout the state. The OEDC engages youth in the state through programs linking outdoor education, recreation, with STEM education. The 6th grade **Science Adventure School** uses our **Science Behind the Sport** program to deliver a life enriching 4 day outdoor experience for the youth of WV. By building alliances between West Virginia University, educators, state and local governments, the outdoor industry and outdoor enthusiasts, the University will redefine the state and enhance the quality of life for the citizens of West Virginia.

Brad Smith is a native West Virginian who left the state to pursue his path. One of the top CEOs in Silicon Valley, Brad is the chairman of Intuit's executive board, a title he has held since stepping down as CEO in 2019. He, along with his wife, Alys, always felt the tug of his West Virginia roots. The Smiths have been generous supporters of Marshall and Ohio State Universities, establishing named scholarship programs at both institutions. In 2018, the Smiths made a \$25 million commitment to Marshall's business college. They founded the **Wing 2 Wing Foundation**, whose mission is to advance education, entrepreneurship, and equal justice in regions that have been overlooked and underserved.

Wanting to invest in the future of West Virginia and provide hope in communities that are often overlooked, the Smiths learned more about the initiatives happening at WVU and were captivated by the work and the potential of the OEDC to leverage the state's outdoor assets to enhance economic development in WV. They were so convinced this program could change the trajectory of West Virginia and create opportunities for its citizens, the Smiths invested a transformational gift of \$25 million. This gift will advance the state's efforts to become the Start-Up State, a model for the rest of the nation and the world to follow.

Both Brad and Alys share a deep commitment to education, entrepreneurship and economic revitalization in Appalachia. Brad has noted that education and entrepreneurship are the great equalizers in a society where opportunities are not always equitably distributed. The "Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative" will enhance current programs including an outdoor experiential educational curriculum for middle school students to teach STEAM skills and a new remote worker program to retain and attract critical talent to live and create in the state.

## **WHY A REMOTE WORKER PROGRAM?**

The remote worker recruitment initiative is designed to grow the West Virginia family by attracting and retaining individuals to the state who have a shared sense of purpose, who appreciate the beauty of the state and its outdoor assets and who want to make a positive impact on the state.

With technological advances in the modern workplace and remote work trends accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is estimated that between 40%-50% of all U.S. workers are or will have the ability to work remotely in the future. A remote worker program will build on this shift in society where an individual's job does not dictate where they live. West Virginia can greatly benefit from a remote worker program by growing its family with talented professionals who will relocate to West Virginia and add to the business and cultural landscape of the state.

## **WHY THE OUTDOOR FOCUS?**

Asset mapping has shown West Virginia's outdoor recreation assets provide a significant competitive advantage as they are valuable, rare and cannot be imitated. West Virginia's assets are on par with other thriving states such as North Carolina, Colorado and Utah.

West Virginia has the greatest density of whitewater in the country with over 2,032 miles of whitewater. Whitewater is good not only for kayaking and rafting, but also for fishing, swimming, tubing, canoeing and more. It is a water-rich state where enthusiasts can paddle many runs year around.

The state also has some of the best climbing in the Eastern United States. There are more than 3,500 roped climbs and 500 bouldering routes in the New River Gorge area, along with multi-pitch climbing at Seneca Rocks and climbing in 25 other areas throughout the state.

With four seasons, West Virginia allows for great skiing and snowboarding at six ski resorts. There is even a little ice climbing in the winter. As the seasons change, so can outdoor pursuits.

West Virginia is blessed with thousands of miles of trails for all different types of activities including hiking, trail running, backpacking, nature watching or mountain biking.

Further, the program strives to capitalize on the experience-driven economy desired by many professionals and their families. By focusing on the outdoor lifestyle economy, West Virginia offers talent additional locations where they have broad access to outdoor recreation opportunities.

## **PROGRAM ELEMENTS**

In partnership with the state, the initiative will create a sense of belonging and connection to West Virginia as a way to attract long-term residents. Elements and experiences participants in the program may gain access to include community-building initiatives, free access to coworking space, financial incentives, free remote worker & manager certificates through the John Chambers College of Business and Economics and entrepreneurial support through West Virginia University.

## **OUTDOOR RECREATION ASSET ENHANCEMENTS**

West Virginia has tremendous outdoor recreation assets that will continue to develop. Through strategic investments, these enhancements will provide greater value and access to West Virginia residents, while leveraging our outdoor recreation assets to remain competitive in national markets leading to further advancing West Virginia as a desirable place to live, work and play. Through investment in high-quality destination-driven trails, enhanced access to rock climbing sites and rivers, we will create more user-friendly assets, reduce barriers to access and increase participation.

Additionally, this investment will entice the recruitment of remote workers who want to live an outdoor-driven lifestyle, provide additional local economic return through tourism and talent attraction beyond the remote worker program, and provide additional opportunities to improve the health, wellness and quality of life in the state.

---

## **RESOURCES**

[www.wvu.edu](http://www.wvu.edu)

[Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative at WVU](#)

[West Virginia Forward](#)

[Wing 2 Wing Foundation](#)

---

## **CONTACT**

April Kaull, Executive Director of Communications

University Relations

304-293-3990; [akaull@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:akaull@mail.wvu.edu)