

# Northwest Pennsylvania Innovation Collaborative

*"Our region has been working very hard to improve the economic landscape, but clearly some important pieces were missing. First, we needed to learn why we were falling behind other regions, then we needed a plan to begin developing and celebrate entrepreneurship. We owe it to our children and generations to come."*

- **BETH ZIMMER**  
FOUNDER, NORTHWEST PENNSYLVANIA  
INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE

Northwestern, Pennsylvania

## Background

Communities like Austin, Boston and San Francisco have well-established entrepreneurial ecosystems to build upon. But what about places that have experienced decades of setbacks? How do community leaders in these struggling regions generate vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystems essentially from the ground up?

When JumpStart began its work in Northwest Pennsylvania, Erie County had one of the highest unemployment rates in the state for 10 consecutive years. A downward spiral of job losses led to a population exodus. This created a smaller tax base, which led to a serious deterioration in infrastructure. The resulting loss of appeal to new businesses left most of Northwest Pennsylvania, including Erie, struggling to keep up with the growth of other states.

Erie's Rust Belt location and decades of slow decline made revitalization a real challenge. But Northwest Pennsylvania is full of entrepreneurial people. Ultimately these people—not geography or past circumstances—determine a region's future.

Enter the Northwest Pennsylvania Innovation Collaborative, who engaged JumpStart to help them assess the region's best opportunities for immediate improvement and develop a collaborative implementation plan to make those opportunities a reality.

## Implementation

JumpStart and the Innovation Collaborative needed to work quickly to uncover Erie's most critical needs and then develop a real-world strategy to address them. This process began with a comprehensive "regional assessment" of Northwest Pennsylvania. This proprietary process combines dozens of stakeholder interviews, community surveys, secondary data analyses and strategy meetings to create a truly objective third-party analysis of key opportunities for improvement.

In Northwest Pennsylvania, this assessment discovered a significant number of existing businesses with growth potential, but also uncovered a fragile support system focused more on general business support than the industry-specific expertise modern businesses need to thrive. Collaboration among these traditional resource providers was also very low and no entity had clear mandate to organize the regional support ecosystem into something more cohesive.

The assessment also found that although Northwest Pennsylvania is home to several colleges and universities, academic culture was not encouraging students to consider local entrepreneurship as a viable option. As a result, too much young talent was leaving the region after graduation.

---

Following the assessment phase, JumpStart helped key stakeholders come into rapid alignment on a comprehensive strategy for change. Differences of opinion, conflicting plans, negative perceptions, unhealthy competition and any other baggage that could be potentially divisive to the ecosystem was aired, discussed and resolved so that a path forward could be determined.

As an impartial third party, JumpStart was able to introduce a fresh perspective and objective data gathered during the regional assessment to help stakeholders focus on areas of commonality and the intersections where their collective interests met.

All told, stakeholders emerged from the assessment and alignment process with a list of 77 strategic recommendations to improve the Northwest Pennsylvania ecosystem. These recommendations ranged from growing regional business plan competitions to obtaining more risk capital for startup entrepreneurs.

## Outcomes

1. JumpStart helped the Innovation Collaborative develop a rapid, thorough cataloguing of each entrepreneurial asset in the region, organizing all of the raw materials they need to get aligned and collaborate more strategically.
2. By engaging JumpStart to crunch the numbers, the Innovation Collaborative freed themselves to focus on nurturing alignment and developing a well-organized collaborative ecosystem map full of easily identifiable, non-duplicative resources for local entrepreneurs and small business owners.
3. JumpStart helped several Northwest Pennsylvania colleges and universities begin the process of pooling their resources to increase the number of entrepreneurship-specific degree programs and create better networking opportunities for students and local mentors/resource providers. By collaborating, these institutions can inspire talented graduates to settle in the region and contribute to the growing economy.
4. With help from JumpStart, regional leaders have begun examining new ways to persuade the local philanthropic community to tie more funding to projects that focus on entrepreneurship so early stage startups can have a fighting chance at raising the risk capital they need to get off the ground.
5. The Innovation Collaborative has created a series of work teams to meet and implement JumpStart's 77 recommendations to improve the Northwest Pennsylvania ecosystem. The first work team is currently taking on recommendations dealing with culture building and deal flow generation.

*“Creating a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem is not an overnight job. Our work is just beginning, but today we have a much better understanding of where we need to improve and a plan for making that improvement a reality. Working with the most experienced organization in the country was extremely valuable.”*

**- BETH ZIMMER**  
FOUNDER, NORTHWEST PENNSYLVANIA  
INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE