

## ATE GRANTS CAN HELP COMMUNITY COLLEGES EXPAND THEIR MISSIONS TO ASSIST WITH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Pete Tesch shared the stellar results of the collaboration between the [Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County \(EDC\)](#) and [Indian River State College \(IRSC\)](#) in Florida during the virtual meeting of the [CCPI-STEM Southeast Regional Network](#) on Building Institutional Capacity through Economic Development Partnerships.

Tesch, who is president of EDC, traces a burst of economic development to the company visits that he and Dr. Edwin R. Massey, IRSC president from 1988 to 2020, began visiting companies together after the 2008 recession. At that time Florida was rocked by high home foreclosure rates and community leaders realized Saint Lucie County was too dependent on tourism and only a few other industries.

“Economic development is a contact sport. You’ve got to contact everyone,” Tesch said. The initial visits were just information exchanges. Business owners talked about their companies, where they anticipated growth, and their challenges. Tesch and Massey explained what the college and economic development agency had to offer to help. Over time, as relationships and then collaborations developed, growth followed. Massey is now chair of CCPI-STEM’s Southeast Regional Network.

IRSC used ATE grants to develop technician education programs to meet regional high-tech workforce needs. Thanks to Massey’s expansion of the college’s infrastructure for grants, IRSC secured about \$170 million in grant funding between 1990 and 2020. The college has been awarded 12 [Advanced Technological Education](#) grants from the National Science Foundation.

Tesch said, “There’s a war for talent. And just because of the demographic makeup of your community, your state, and the nation in general, there is going to be a skills gap. And there’s also going to be a severe demand for talent.

“So part of the formula that we’re seeing for success now is being able to combine the ability to identify actual people that would have basic skill sets and the motivation to go to work, and then also to couple, in this case with your state or community college to help supplement basic training and provide a career pathway for individuals in those industry sectors so they could see that clear pathway.”

Since 2017 more than 30 companies have expanded and 44 companies have added facilities in IRSC’s Southeast Florida service area.

“It took us 10 years to be an overnight sensation when it comes to economic development and growth,” Tesch said. Biotechnology, manufacturing, distribution and logistics companies are among the newcomers while aviation and aeronautics have grown.

The college’s response to this growth includes constructing the Eastman Advanced Workforce Training Complex with \$26 million from state and federal government funds and support from local businesses, foundations, families, and individuals.

When the building opened in November 2023, a college press release called it Florida’s “most technologically advanced workforce training facility.” The 60,000 square foot building has labs for teaching mechatronics; robotics and smart automation; welding; automotive technology; refrigeration; and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning.

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