



ASSOCIATION OF
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UNIVERSITIES



UNIVERSITY OF
GEORGIA



CECE

INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AWARDS PROGRAM

IEP CATEGORY - PLACE

2025
CASE
STUDY

The University of Georgia

Branding Home: Empowering Communities Through Storytelling and Strategic Identity

THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA'S COMMUNITY BRANDING PROGRAM

The Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia (UGA) delivers non-partisan support to governments across Georgia through technical assistance, training, applied research, and technology solutions, leveraging the expertise of university faculty, staff, and students. The Institute of Government launched its Community Branding Program in 2019 to help local governments tell their stories, promote assets, and boost economic development. As the first public-sector branding initiative in Georgia and one of only a few nationwide, it offers accessible, high-quality branding tailored to cities, counties, and public organizations. To date, the program has partnered with 16 communities across Georgia and Tennessee.

TELLING THE COMMUNITY'S STORY TOGETHER

The Institute's branding process follows a strategic three-step approach grounded in research, public input, brand design, and implementation. It begins by gathering stories, values, and aspirations through listening sessions and surveys that invite community members to share what makes their place distinct. These insights are translated into a visual and narrative identity that reflects the community's character. The final step brings the brand to life across signage, digital platforms, events, and public spaces, creating a cohesive identity that resonates with residents and visitors.

Public engagement is central to this process. When communities help co-create their brand, the result is more than a logo or slogan; it becomes a story rooted in authenticity and shared ownership. This input surfaces what people love about where they live, what they hope to see in the future, and how they want their community to be perceived. The outcome is a brand that supports economic growth, fosters opportunity, and strengthens connections by celebrating qualities such as a vibrant downtown, outdoor recreation, cultural heritage, or a welcoming atmosphere for families.

Communities across Georgia have felt the impact of this approach. In Washington County, business owner Debbie May said, "It reinforces what makes this a special place and helps tell that story to newcomers. It captures our heartbeat." Pulaski County's sole commissioner, Jenna Mashburn, said, "I just can't put into words my excitement for Hawkinsville and Pulaski County's new brand and the potential impact it will have on the ongoing progress of our community." These reflections show how community-led branding can build identity, momentum, and pride.



IMPACTING GEORGIA COMMUNITIES

Impact in Holly Springs, GA

In Holly Springs, branding completed in 2024 created a unified identity that now spans all city departments and the newly constructed Holly Springs Town Center. The center includes a 16,000-square-foot City Hall, retail, restaurants, and an outdoor amphitheater designed to encourage the city's 19,000+ residents to spend locally. For a city that previously lacked a formal downtown, the brand has become a foundation for place identity and economic positioning. Since implementation, the city's Facebook reach increased by 80%, and interactions grew 269% in one year, strengthening community engagement and promotional efforts.

Impact in Hawkinsville, GA

In Hawkinsville, the Community Branding Program and a follow-up Experience Masterplan transformed a \$33,000 investment into more than \$6 million in public and private funding, including a \$4.5 million Georgia Department of Transportation streetscape grant, \$500,000 park renovation grant, and seven private building renovations downtown. The brand and visuals developed through the process were directly used in grant applications, leading to one of the program's highest returns on investment—over 7,000%.

Impact in Vidalia, GA

Vidalia adopted a cohesive brand for seven entities, including the city government, welcome center, and the Vidalia Onion Festival. Since implementation in 2022, the city has seen a 26% increase in museum and welcome center visitation, a 34.5% increase in accommodations tax revenue, and increased brand visibility at large-scale events. The branding was prominently featured at the Onion Festival alongside headliners Lee Brice and Lauren Alaina and the U.S. Navy Blue Angels, exposing the city's identity to 40,000+ festivalgoers annually.

Impact in Monroe, GA

In Monroe, branding completed in 2022 sparked a 100% increase in vendor applications for downtown events, arise in foot traffic and attendance, and the application of the brand across 10 local events, wayfinding, murals, and the city's welcome center. The brand was featured in television commercials aired during Atlanta Braves games, reaching up to 100,000 viewers per game. One



mural, designed by the Institute and painted by a local artist, became the city's top photo op on social media, with national exposure from Broadway actress Laura Osnes tagging it to her 189,000 followers.

Impact in Colquitt County, GA

Colquitt County adopted its brand across multiple organizations, including the Chamber of Commerce and Leadership Colquitt County. The brand is displayed at the Sunbelt Agricultural Exposition, a nationally attended event drawing 50,000 to 80,000 visitors annually, further promoting the county on a large stage.

Regional impact: The Copper Basin, GA/TN

The regional branding completed for the Copper Basin (which includes McCaysville, GA; Copperhill and Ducktown, TN) led to the opening of a new business, Copper Basin Mercantile Co., which sells regionally branded merchandise. The city of

Ducktown officially adopted the brand, and Discover Copper Basin Instagram was created, helping reinforce regional identity and tourism potential in an area that sees 100,000 visitors annually.



The Copper Basin brand displayed on a promotional item

INNOVATION AND REPLICABILITY

The program's innovation lies in how it connects design thinking, public service, and economic development in a way few others do. It provides templates and marketing libraries for each community, enabling small towns without design staff to manage and apply their brands consistently. Each engagement produces a brand book, logo system, messaging guide, custom artwork, and templates for signage, merchandise, and print collateral.



CONCLUSION

The Community Branding Program provides measurable economic, tourism, and engagement impacts. Its direct ties to university faculty and students also reflect a strong commitment to developing talent. The program is replicable and scalable and has become a model for how design and storytelling can create economic opportunity and civic pride.

Across Georgia and the region, the Community Branding Program continues to help communities shape their futures through strategic, authentic, and engaging place branding, giving them the tools they need to compete and thrive.



LINKS TO FURTHER INFORMATION

Community Branding Program Applied in Georgia:

- Holly Springs:
 - [Holly Springs Brand Lookbook](#)
- Hawkinsville:
 - [Hawkinsville Brand Lookbook](#)
- Vidalia
 - [Vidalia Brand Lookbook](#)
 - [Tapping into the sweet life](#)
- Monroe
 - [Monroe Brand Lookbook](#)
- Colquitt County
 - [Colquitt County Brand Lookbook](#)
- Copper Basin
 - [Copper Basin Brand Lookbook](#)
 - [Copper Basin branding and downtown planning project](#)
- Washington County
 - [Washington County's It All Happens Here branding](#)

Supporting Information:

- [University of Georgia, Carl Vinson Institute of Government](#)
- [Carl Vinson Institute of Government's Community Branding Services](#)



ABOUT APLU

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) is North America's oldest higher education association. APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The association's membership consists of public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations.

APLU's mission is to expand access and improve student success to deliver the innovative workforce of tomorrow; advance and promote research and discovery to improve society, foster economic growth, and address global challenges; and build healthy, prosperous, equitable, and vibrant communities locally and globally.

Based in Washington, DC, the association's work is furthered by an active and effective advocacy arm that works with Congress and the administration as well as the media to advance federal policies that strengthen public universities and benefit the students they serve.

ABOUT THE IEP PROGRAM

APLU and its [Commission on Economic and Community Engagement \(CECE\)](#) established the Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) Program to help higher education institutions codify, elevate, and advance their campus enterprise supporting economic and community development.

The **IEP Program** recognizes institutions that have demonstrated a meaningful, ongoing and substantial commitment to economic and community development, growth, and economic opportunity.

The **IEP Awards Program** recognize exemplary and innovative projects in university-based economic and community engagement:

- Talent and workforce development
- Innovation, entrepreneurship, and tech-based economic development
- Place development through public service, outreach, and community engagement

Learn more at: www.APLU.org/IEP

