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Embracing Innovation at West Virginia University



E. Gordon Gee
West Virginia University

E. Gordon Gee, J.D., Ed.D. is the President of West Virginia University. He is one of America's most prominent leaders in higher education, having helmed universities for more than three decades. Dr. Gee's leadership goals include putting students first, advancing WVU's research agenda and making sure that 1.8 million West Virginians know that WVU is their university.

West Virginia has been facing stormy economic weather for some time, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only darkened the horizon for many people. But, looking beyond the clouds, we also find opportunities – to ignite our economy, develop world-class recreational infrastructure and expand outdoor educational programs.

breath of fresh air. Our research shows that Millennials, in particular, along with our emerging Gen Z, focus heavily on quality of life when deciding where to live. Amid the pandemic, many are seizing the opportunity to work remotely from their jobs in big cities while living in areas that are less costly and

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Of course, it takes an especially acute vision to unveil the innovative solutions that lurk among all our problems. Brad D. Smith, Chairman and former Chief Executive Officer of Intuit, did just that when he turned his gaze on his home state. Brad saw great potential for growth in our post-pandemic “next normal,” which will include many more remote workers than ever before. For those workers, West Virginia offers a

crowded. The cost of living in West Virginia is 16 percent below the national average.

Brad believes in West Virginia's appeal so strongly that he and his wife donated \$25 million to create the Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative at West Virginia University. The resulting remote worker program, Ascend WV, will leverage West Virginia's outdoor assets to bring fresh talent to the Mountain State.



About four million Americans are working remotely, and many states are competing to become their home base. Ascend WV is unique as the only privately funded remote worker program led by a top tech executive looking to give back to his home state.

We are fortunate that Governor Jim Justice shares Brad's vision and has charged his Tourism and Economic Development departments to help lead state efforts in partnership with the University's Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative.

Targeting fully employed individuals from outside the state who can work anywhere, Ascend WV will attract those who want to be part of a contemporary, healthy, outdoor-focused lifestyle. Those who leave concrete and asphalt behind will find a place where their families – and their spirits – will flourish.

West Virginia's unique assets include:

- The greatest density of whitewater in the country, with more than 2,000 miles for kayaking, rafting, tubing and canoeing
- Four ski resorts, including the top three in the Mid-Atlantic region
- For rock climbing enthusiasts, the New River Gorge, which is one of the most popular destinations for sport climbing in the eastern United States, and Seneca Rocks, the highest technical summit east of Wyoming
- America's newest national park, New River Gorge Park and Preserve, as well as the Monongahela National Forest and one of the country's largest and best-regarded state park systems

Ascend WV has much to offer outdoor enthusiasts, young families and others who can help create a more diverse, inclusive and purposeful community. In addition to a \$12,000 financial incentive, workers accepted into the program



Photo Caption Downtown, Morgantown, West Virginia.

will enjoy unparalleled recreational, networking and professional development opportunities.

We have picked three initial venues for the Remote Worker Program: Morgantown, Shepherdstown and Lewisburg, which all have strong economic opportunities and amenities attractive to young people. The first application window opened April 12 for Morgantown and will allocate spots to the top 50 qualified candidates.

As the program continues its success, it will grow into other communities.

In total, it will help West Virginia welcome 1,000 new residents over the next five years. These new West Virginians will generate a significant economic impact in not only their local communities, but across the state.

Ascend West Virginia joins other exciting initiatives – such as Virgin Hyperloop, Vantage Ventures, and FinTech Sandbox – that reflect the entrepreneurial-led approach our University has taken to drive economic development.

We are embracing innovation and engaging with those whose eyes are cast to the future.

Ascend WV will lure people from all corners of the globe to discover our state. And, by embracing our assets instead of our obstacles, we will see afresh the breathtaking vistas that have been before us all along. 