

# Regional Ports as Business Clusters

**November 7, 2025**

**2025 Illinois Waterway Ports  
Annual Meeting**



**Western Illinois  
University**

**COLLEGE OF BUSINESS  
& TECHNOLOGY**

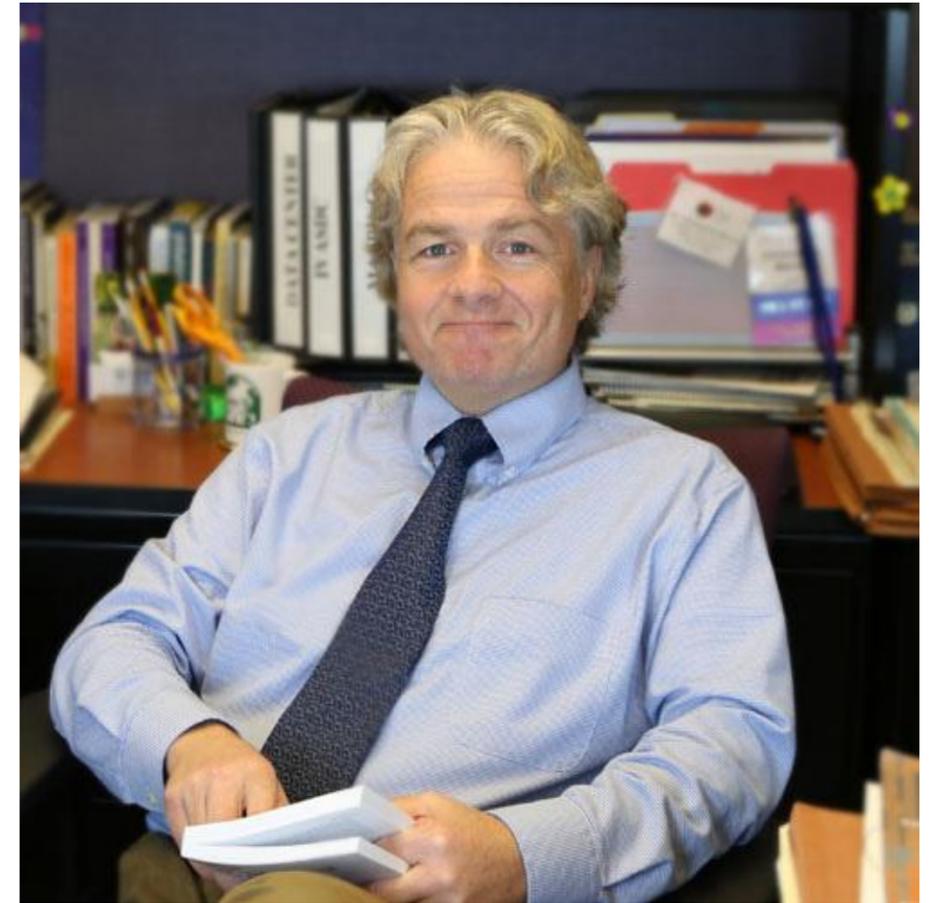
# Meet the WIU Research Team



**Dr. Honey Zimmerman**



**Dr. Sarah Shike**



**Dr. Chris Merrett**



# Agenda

- 1 **Purpose**
- 2 **Process**
- 3 **Results**
- 4 **So What?**

# Research PURPOSE

1

**Coordination:**  
Does it exist?

2

**Cooperation:**  
Is there  
collective action?

3

**Opportunities:**  
As a business  
cluster, where  
should we focus  
next?

*Does coordination predict collective action?*

# Research PROCESS

## Coordination Mechanisms

Inward-looking  
quality measures  
Examine the extent to which **COORDINATED** action is likely



Leader Firms



Voice of Firms



Community Engagement



Overarching Organizational Structure



Public Organizations

## Collective Actions

Outward-facing  
performance measures  
Five strategic areas for collective action through **COOPERATION**



Hinterland Access



Innovation



Internationalization



Training & Education



Marketing & Promotion

If coordination exists, then collective action is more likely.



# We asked...

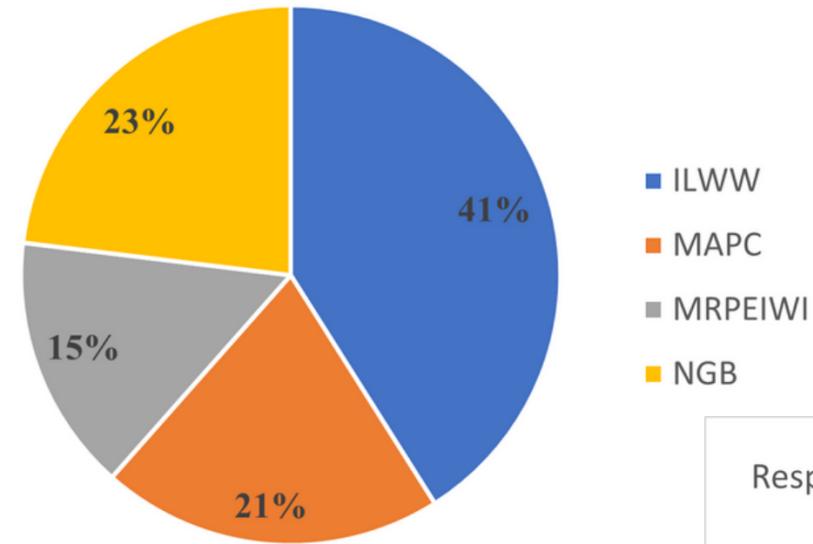
(a) Are these variables *important* for competitiveness?

(1 = not important at all, 5 = absolutely essential)

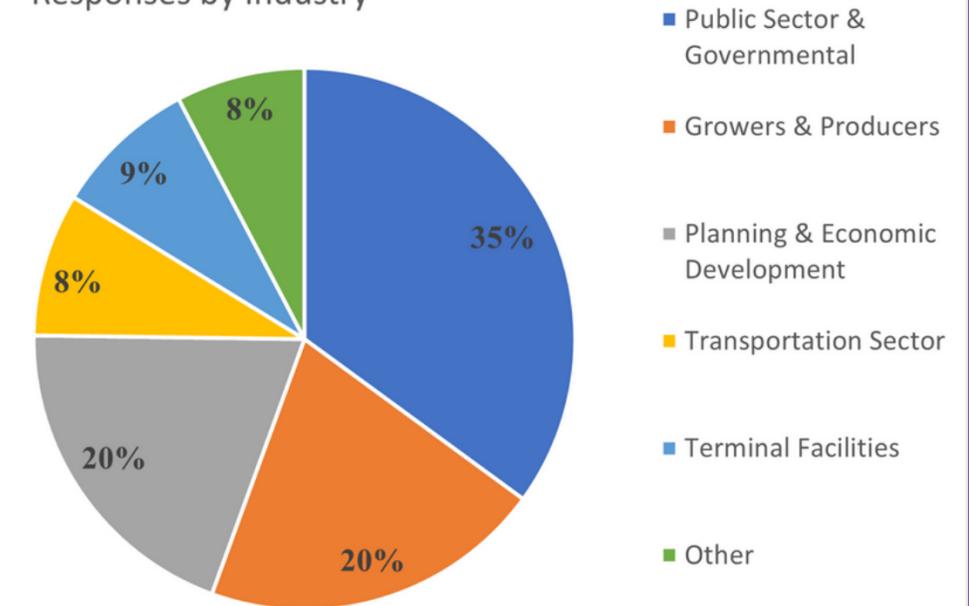
(b) To what extent are these variables *present* in the cluster?

(1 = very poor, 5 = very good).

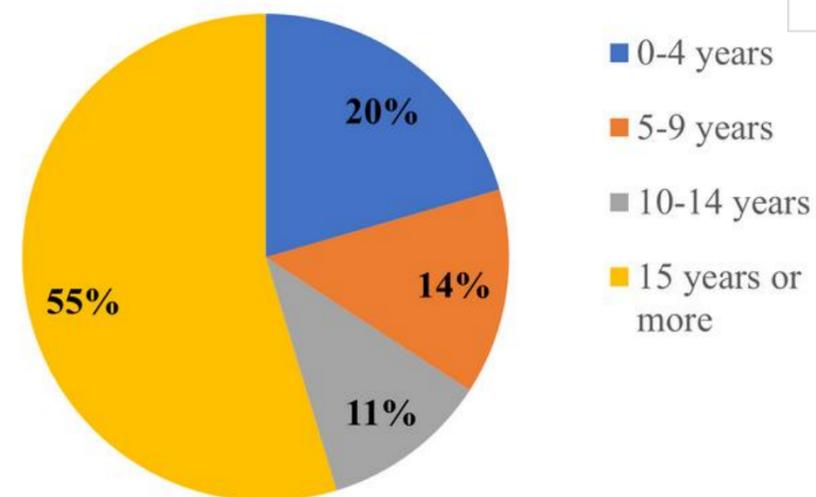
Responses by regional CBP



Responses by Industry



Years in the Profession



# Research RESULTS

## Coordination Mechanisms



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Business Cluster Variables	Importance of Variable	N	SD	Presence of Variable	N	SD	Δ
1. Presence of Leader Firms	3.79	116	0.965	3.45	107	0.903	0.34
2. Presence and Participation of Public Organizations	3.98	117	0.799	3.33	107	0.949	0.65
3. Presence of an Overarching Organizational Structure	3.82	117	0.897	3.3	107	0.871	0.52
4. Community Engagement	3.74	117	0.977	2.86	107	0.895	0.88
5. Voice of Firms	3.93	116	0.766	2.98	107	0.847	0.95
6. Innovation	4.03	117	0.793	2.88	107	0.866	1.15
7. Hinterland Access	4.21	117	0.839	2.82	104	0.798	1.39
8. Marketing and Promotion	3.82	117	0.916	2.63	106	0.809	1.19
9. Internationalization	3.59	117	1.108	2.68	107	0.864	0.91
10. Training and Education / Industry 4.0 Technologies	3.86	117	0.860	2.73	107	0.819	1.13

**Coordination Mechanisms**



Leader Firms



Overarching Organizational Structure



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**Collective Actions**



Hinterland Access



Internationalization



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Training & Education



Marketing & Promotion

Outward-facing performance measures  
Five strategic areas for collective action through **COOPERATION**

Adapted from De Langen & Visser (2005)

# Research RESULTS

		<i>ILWW</i>	<i>MAPC</i>	<i>MRPEIWI</i>	<i>NGB</i>
	<i>Variable</i>	<i>(n = 45)</i>	<i>(n = 22)</i>	<i>(n = 16)</i>	<i>(n = 24)</i>
<b>Quality Traits for Collective Action Regime</b>	<i>Leader Firms</i>	10	10	10	9
	<i>Public Organizations</i>	8	9	7	8
	<i>Overarching Organizational Structure</i>	9	8	9	10
	<i>Community Engagement</i>	5	7	8	7
	<i>Voice of Firms</i>	6	5	6	6
<b>Collective Action Problems</b>	<i>Innovation</i>	4	4	2	4
	<i>Hinterland Access</i>	1	1	1	1
	<i>Marketing &amp; Promotion</i>	3	2	3	2
	<i>Internationalization</i>	7	3	5	3
	<i>Training &amp; Education</i>	2	6	4	5

# Research

# RESULTS



Adapted from De Langen & Visser (2005)

	<i>Variable</i>	<i>ILWW</i> (n = 45)	<i>MAPC</i> (n = 22)	<i>MRPEIWI</i> (n = 16)	<i>NGB</i> (n = 24)
<b>Coordination Mechanisms</b>	<i>Leader Firms</i>	5	5	5	4
	<i>Public Organizations</i>	3	4	2	3
	<i>Overarching Organizational Structure</i>	4	3	4	5
	<i>Community Engagement</i>	1	2	3	2
	<i>Voice of Firms</i>	2	1	1	1

# Research

# RESULTS



Adapted from De Langen & Visser (2005)

Collective Actions	Variable	ILWW	MAPC	MRPEIWI	NGB
		(n = 45)	(n = 22)	(n = 16)	(n = 24)
	<i>Innovation</i>	4	4	2	4
	<i>Hinterland Access</i>	1	1	1	1
	<i>Marketing &amp; Promotion</i>	3	2	3	2
	<i>Internationalization</i>	5	3	5	3
	<i>Training &amp; Education</i>	2	5	4	5

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**YES!**

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# So what? NEXT STEPS

## Coordination

- Leverage the strong presence of leader firms
- Build upon the synergies of the Corn Belt Ports structure
- *Strengthen community engagement and the voice of local businesses beyond the leader firms*

## Collective Actions

- *Seek opportunities to enhance access to the hinterlands*
- Focus on training and education, workforce development
- Continue collective efforts to market and promote the region

# THANK YOU!

**Please feel free to contact me with  
questions, comments, and insights**

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