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## Evaluating the "What's Up Down South" Economic Summit: Transforming Feedback into Value and Relevance

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## Evaluating the "What's Up Down South" Economic Summit: Transforming Feedback into Value and Relevance

### Cover Page Footnote

I extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Lendel K. Narine and Dr. Amanda D. Ali for their invaluable review, insightful feedback, and support through the development of this article. Their expertise and guidance significantly contributed to the refinement and depth of this work.

## **Evaluating the "What's Up Down South" Economic Summit: Transforming Feedback into Value and Relevance**

*Paul A. Hill*

### **Abstract**

*This article explores the impact of the "What's Up Down South" economic summit. Reviewing post-2023 summit changes reveals how adjustments address southern Utah's diverse business needs. Findings show greater attendee satisfaction, increased capacity, and demographic diversity, confirming the summit's role in economic development.*

### **Introduction**

A Utah State University (USU) Extension faculty served on the planning committee for the *What's Up Down South* economic summit and utilized evaluation results to improve the event for participants. Now in its 28th year, it is southern Utah's premier business event, empowering Washington County's business and community leaders with economic insights to assist them in making informed decisions.

The primary objective of the *What's Up Down South* economic summit is to empower business and community leaders in southern Utah with the knowledge and tools they need to plan for success in the year ahead. Structured as a comprehensive seven-hour event, it combines keynote speeches by distinguished economists and innovators, breakout session workshops led by experts, and video presentations laden with up-to-date economic analyses.

### **Response & Target Audience**

In response to the evaluation results from the previous year, a USU Extension faculty member was on the organizing committee for the 2024 summit and assisted in implementing several improvements based on attendee feedback (Hill & Ali, 2023). The committee enhanced the summit by integrating more comprehensive evaluation methods, improving logistical arrangements, diversifying session content, and increasing networking opportunities. These changes aimed to meet the diverse needs of the attendees better, foster community engagement, and ensure the summit's relevance and effectiveness as a platform for economic and professional development in Southern Utah.

The target audience was organizational leaders and stakeholders (i.e., summit attendees). The summit was hosted at the Dixie Convention Center in St. George, Utah, on January 11, 2024, with 807 total attendees ( $N = 807$ ) from seven counties in Utah, with most (88%) residing in Washington County. Slightly more attendees were female (51%), with 12% reporting minority backgrounds. In addition, 54% of attendees were between 45 to 64 years of age, and 66% had a bachelor's degree or higher educational attainment. Only 37% were business owners, but 76% reported having managerial-level positions. Most attendees represented the private sector (59%), and 61% indicated their household income was \$100,000 or more. Overall, 21% of attendees reported having never attended the summit before, with only 12% reporting they attended once

and 28% indicating they attended only a few times in the past. Over one-third (39%) reported that they attend every year.

An online exit survey was distributed to all summit attendees. The survey achieved an 18% response rate, resulting in a final sample of 145 attendees ( $n = 145$ ). Evaluation questions included sections for learning and satisfaction metrics related to the keynotes and breakout sessions, open-ended questions for general feedback on the summit experience, and demographic information.

### Outcomes & Impact

Results in Table 1 showed attendees had positive perceptions of the quality of informational content ( $M = 4.49$ ,  $SD = .71$ ), presenter effectiveness ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = .69$ ), and relevance of information ( $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = .79$ ) provided by keynote speakers at the summit. Mean scores for the keynote speakers indicated that, on average, attendees rated the presenter's content quality, effectiveness, and relevance as high.

**Table 1**

*Attendees' Perceptions Toward the Quality of Keynote Speakers ( $n = 102$ )*

Keynote	Quality of content	Presenter effectiveness	Relevance of information	Overall presentation
Keynote 1: Keeping Utah weird	4.38	4.50	4.27	4.35
Keynote 2: Seeing beyond the economic bubble	4.44	4.20	4.52	4.30
Keynote 3: Culmination Bio: A novel data and technology company	4.79	4.79	4.67	4.75
Keynote 4: Don't limit your challenges...Challenge your limits	4.62	4.79	4.45	4.66
Keynote 5: Beyond authority: How authentic care and empowerment shape exceptional leaders	4.23	4.26	4.25	4.36
[Mean (SD)]	4.49 (.71)	4.51 (.69)	4.43 (.79)	4.49 (.72)

*Note.* Response categories for each item were: 1 = *Very poor*, 2 = *Poor*, 3 = *Fair*, 4 = *Good*, and 5 = *Very good*.

Results in Table 2 showed attendees had positive perceptions of the quality of informational content ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = .84$ ), presenter effectiveness ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = .86$ ), and relevance of information ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = .81$ ) provided by breakout session presenters at the summit. Mean scores for breakout session presenters indicated that, on average, attendees rated the presenter's content quality, effectiveness, and relevance as high. Results for Breakouts 9 and 10 indicate that the presenters have room for improvement concerning delivery, and Breakout 10 was not as relevant to the target audience.

**Table 2***Attendees' Perceptions Toward the Quality of Breakout Session Presenters (n = 26)*

<b>Breakout Session</b>	Quality of content	Presenter effectiveness	Relevance of information	Overall presentation
Breakout 1: Washington County real estate market update: Where we've been and where we're headed	4.33	4.29	4.37	4.29
Breakout 2: AI-generated content: Striking the balance between innovation and ethics	4.12	4.18	4.29	4.24
Breakout 3: An introduction to the Women's Business Center	4.50	4.60	4.80	4.60
Breakout 4: Trends and outlook for Southern Utah's economy	4.30	4.10	4.30	4.30
Breakout 5: Creating high-wage tech jobs in Southern Utah: What we're doing, and what more we can do	4.11	4.22	4.00	4.11
Breakout 6: What's up with commercial real estate?	4.12	4.12	4.06	4.12
Breakout 7: Pioneering logistics in Utah: Exploring the Utah Inland Port Authority's role in revolutionizing Utah's economic landscape	4.17	4.17	4.00	4.17
Breakout 8: The economic value of water	4.67	4.78	4.83	4.72
Breakout 9: The good news housing report	4.12	3.76	4.00	3.82
Breakout 10: A Bolder Way Forward: When we lift Utah girls and women, we lift all Utahns!	3.43	3.36	3.57	3.50
Breakout 11: Supporting & expanding Utah's five targeted industries in Washington County	4.38	4.25	4.38	4.38
	[Mean (SD)] 4.20 (.84)	4.17 (.86)	4.24 (.81)	4.30 (.85)

*Note.* Response categories for each item were: 1 = *Very poor*, 2 = *Poor*, 3 = *Fair*, 4 = *Good*, and 5 = *Very good*.

Results in Table 3 indicate that summit attendees agreed that they learned from all five keynote speakers. The survey assessed learning outcomes from keynote presentations and revealed strong participant engagement. Using a Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5), responses to five learning objectives showed high levels of agreement: 89% for Utah's

economic and societal contributions, 88% on changing economic growth expectations; 96% for discoveries in population genomics; 94% on the impact of a positive mindset; and 84% for leadership caring in team dynamics.

**Table 3**  
*Learning Outcomes from Keynote Speakers (n = 102)*

Learning Outcome	%				
	SD	D	N	A	SA
Keynote 1: I learned about how Utah's distinctiveness contributes to the national economy and society.	0	3	8	44	45
Keynote 2: I learned about why the expected economic growth of the past is fading away.	0	0	12	32	56
Keynote 3: I learned about a specific example of a novel discovery made through population genomics.	0	0	4	24	72
Keynote 4: I learned about the impact of a positive mindset on problem-solving and effectiveness in various environments.	0	1	5	30	64
Keynote 5: I learned about different ways leaders can show authentic care and concern for their team members.	0	2	14	32	52
	[Mean (SD)]				4.47 (.14)

*Note.* Response categories for each item were: 1 = *Strongly disagree (SD)*, 2 = *Disagree (D)*, 3 = *Neither agree or disagree (N)*, 4 = *Agree (A)*, and 5 = *Strongly agree (SA)*.

Table 4 presents learning outcomes from breakout sessions. Data revealed an overall mean score of 4.18 ( $M = 4.18, SD = .85$ ), indicating a strong agreement among participants regarding the educational value of these sessions. This high mean score suggests that attendees found the breakout sessions informative and relevant to their interests and professional development. These results emphasize the effectiveness of the breakout sessions in engaging attendees and providing valuable insights into various topics pertinent to their fields.

**Table 4**  
*Learning Outcomes from Breakout Sessions (n = 26)*

Learning Outcome	%				
	SD	D	N	A	SA
Breakout 1: I learned about the main challenges that buyers are currently facing in the housing market.	0	0	4	38	58
Breakout 2: I learned about what AI can realistically do in creating content for different types of media.	0	0	13	31	56
Breakout 3: I learned about the primary mission of the Women's Business Center and the range of services it provides to support women entrepreneurs.	0	0	0	10	90
Breakout 4: I learned about the driving forces behind economic trends in the southern Utah economy.	0	0	10	50	40

Breakout 5: I learned about the reasons why creating high- growth, tech jobs in Southern Utah is crucial for the region's economic and social development.	0	0	11	44	45
Breakout 6: I learned about the major challenges impacting the commercial real estate industry, including economic, environmental, and market-related issues.	0	6	25	13	56
Breakout 7: I learned about what the Utah Inland Port Authority accomplished in 2023.	0	0	33	17	50
Breakout 8: I learned about the current status and dynamics of our local water supply, including its availability and sustainability challenges.	0	0	0	18	82
Breakout 9: I learned about the regions within Washington County experiencing the fasteth growth, including insights into what is driving growth in these areas.	0	6	23	24	47
Breakout 10: I learned about the specific goals and objectives of 'A Bolder Way Forward,' including the movement's vision and key areas of focus.	0	10	7	29	54
Breakout 11: I learned about Utah's five targeted industries and their significance in the state's economy.	0	0	0	50	50
			[Mean (SD)]	4.42 (.24)	

*Note.* Response categories for each item were: 1 = *Strongly disagree (SD)*, 2 = *Disagree (D)*, 3 = *Neither agree or disagree (N)*, 4 = *Agree (A)*, and 5 = *Strongly agree (SA)*.

A content analysis of responses to the first open-ended survey question, "How could the What's Up Down South Economic Summit be improved in the future?" yielded insights across six primary improvement themes. These themes are outlined in Table 5.

**Table 5**  
*Analysis of Attendee Responses About Summit Improvements (n = 62)*

Theme	Description
Inclusivity and diversity	Emphasizes the importance of representing both genders, industries, and a range of perspectives.
Session structure and content	Advocates for concise presentations and a variety of topics in breakout sessions.
Networking and information accessibility	Calls for more networking time, better event promotion, and improved vendor booth flow.
Event logistics	Suggests changes to start time, more food options, and rethinking seating plans.
Use of technology and resources	Highlights the need for post-event session access and recording sessions.
Engagement and interactive elements	Proposes more Q&A, interactive sessions, and local business tours to enhance engagement.

Table 6 provides thematic results from the second open-ended survey question's content analysis: "Are there any other comments, ideas, or suggestions you would like to share with us?" Findings show strong appreciation for the summit's direction, speaker quality, and organizational efforts, as indicated by the high frequency of positive feedback.

**Table 6**

*Analysis of Attendee Responses About Summit Feedback (n = 57)*

Theme	Description
General appreciation	Respondents expressed overall satisfaction suggested improvements to enhance future summit experiences.
Event organization and logistics	Feedback called for better refreshment access, comfortable seating, and optimized event scheduling.
Networking and interactivity	Calls for extended networking opportunities, improved vendor booth access, and dynamic pre-event promotions.
Economic focus	Recommendations to broaden scope of economic discussions for more comprehensive insights.
Event content and structure	Suggestions for revitalizing breakout sessions with local success stories and experts.
Communication and promotion	Emphasized the importance of better communication strategies to ensure attendees are well-informed and engaged before and during the event.

Overall, 73% of attendees rated their experience at the *What's Up Down South* economic summit as very good, or excellent. Forty-five percent (45%) of attendees felt the summit was worth what they paid (\$120/person). Results indicated that attendees agreed that the summit provided a valuable experience to the business community (94%), had a good reputation in the community (93%), and provided valuable information to them personally (94%). Most attendees (86%) would recommend attending the summit to their friends, family, and colleagues, and 82% indicated they would use what they learned to make decisions for their organization.

### **Public Value & Next Steps**

USU Extension faculty and committee members of the *What's Up Down South* economic summit, have increased public value by making strategic decisions based on systematic evaluation results and thoughtful incorporation of community feedback. By engaging in comprehensive program evaluation and implementing suggested changes, the summit has demonstrated a commitment to serving the needs of southern Utah's business community. The event's expansion, increased diversity, and focus on economic issues emphasize its role in fostering economic prosperity and informed decision-making. These efforts elevate the public's perception of the summit and strengthen its position as a cornerstone event.

The results of the 2024 summit reflect a successful integration of feedback into the planning and execution of the event. Positive shifts in attendee demographics, satisfaction, and impact



highlight the effectiveness of the implemented changes. The approach to enhance inclusivity, diversity, and accessibility has broadened the summit's appeal, contributing to its sustainability and growth. Additionally, improving engagement with the Latino business community has been identified as a critical area for further development. The commitment to evaluation and responsiveness to feedback continues to drive the summit's development, ensuring alignment with the community's needs.

Due to the high demand for the summit, organizers plan to expand capacity from 800 to 1,200 people in 2025. The 12% increase in attendance from 2023 and a notable sponsorship increase, amassing \$197,000 from 41 sponsors, emphasize its sustainability and role in providing an operational budget for the Southern Utah Economic Alliance. This growth reflects the community's valuation, demonstrating how Hill and Ali's (2023) insights have enhanced the summit's relevance and impact, meeting current needs and solidifying its pivotal role in regional economic engagement and planning.

Building on this foundation, several initiatives could refine the event's offerings. The planning committee could broaden keynote speaker and breakout session topics to diversify content, ensuring broader industry representation. This responds to calls for more varied content, enriching the summit experience. Recognizing the need for better networking, innovative formats for interactions among attendees should be explored, including interactive elements and structured sessions. Implementing summit content recording for post-event access caters to a broader audience and provides flexible learning options. Furthermore, conducting annual focus groups and surveys with attendees will allow the summit to adapt to trends, ensuring relevance and impact. Efforts should be made to strengthen partnerships with local businesses, educational institutions, and non-profits, improving the summit's community integration and support. Through these initiatives, the summit will continue to serve as a vital platform for economic insight, professional development, and community engagement, delivering value to southern Utah and beyond.

### References

Hill, P. A., & Ali, A. D. (2023). Evaluating the "What's Up Down South" Economic Summit: A Platform for Business Leaders to Share Ideas. *Outcomes and Impact Quarterly*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.59620/2995-2220.1048>