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## **Statewide conference to encourage entrepreneurship and economic development in rural communities**

*With more than 300 attendees from 90+ Texas cities, the Texas Rural Challenge is the largest conference of its kind in the state*

**(San Antonio, February 20, 2017)** – [Early registration](#) is now open for the Texas Rural Challenge, an annual conference hosted by the University of Texas at San Antonio’s Institute for Economic Development–Small Business Development Center (SBDC) Rural Business Program.

With a focus on economic development in rural Texas, the SBDC Rural Business Program has partnered with the City of Waco and numerous agencies across Texas to launch its 8<sup>th</sup> annual Texas Rural Challenge (TRC) conference in Waco, TX from June 29-30.

This year’s conference, “Empowering Rural Texas,” will focus on small business growth, community and economic development, and leadership. The two-day conference will feature keynote speakers, workshops and business competitions. It will also promote best practices and offer collaborative opportunities to help Texas’ rural businesses and communities thrive.

>> See the full conference agenda at [texasruralchallenge.org](http://texasruralchallenge.org).

Texas Strong, one of the conference’s featured competitions, will test how effectively entrepreneurs are able to fast-pitch their businesses. Texas SBDC clients who have developed innovative products or services to benefit rural communities can participate if they are nominated by a Texas SBDC advisor. Finalists will also have the chance to win a Governor’s Small Business Award.

“Texas Strong opened my eyes to all the amazing things happening in our rural communities and made me proud to be from a rural community,” said **Robert Likarish**, 2016 Texas Strong first place winner and CEO of Ironroot Republic Distillery.

The conference will also include the Texas Student Challenge, a fast-pitch and business plan competition encouraging entrepreneurship and technological innovation. The competition is open to undergraduate and graduate students attending any Texas college or university. In addition to a monetary prize, winners will receive in-kind services from Texas SBDCs.

“Competing in the Texas Student Challenge was a wonderful experience through which I gained such valuable insight on how college students can become successful in business,” said **Manish Patel**, 2016 Student Challenge third place winner.

The State of Texas is comprised of 254 counties, including 177 that are considered rural and have less than 50,000 in population.

“Rural communities account for more than half the State of Texas. With the immense growth that the Texas Rural Challenge has experienced over the past seven years, we invite interested partners, entrepreneurs, students and the general public to get involved in the only statewide conference that caters specifically to Texas rural communities,” said SBDC Rural Business Program director, **Gil Gonzalez**.

“The Texas Rural Challenge conference is an outstanding event and a real showcase for the economic vitality and strength of rural communities. The innovation and resilience we see in rural small businesses in Texas is a real beacon for SBDC efforts nationwide. Thanks to UTSA and the South-West Texas Border SBDC Region for their leadership in this effort to energize rural entrepreneurship,” said America’s SBDC president, **Tee Rowe**.

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Register for the Texas Rural Challenge at [texasruralchallenge.org](http://texasruralchallenge.org)

Follow us on Facebook at [facebook.com/TexasRuralChallenge](https://facebook.com/TexasRuralChallenge)

Learn more about the [SBDC Rural Business Program](#)

### **About the UTSA Institute for Economic Development**

The UTSA Institute for Economic Development is dedicated to growing businesses, creating jobs and fostering economic development. Focused on building the economy one business at a time, the Institute consists of 10 centers and programs that provide professional business advising, technical training, research and strategic planning for entrepreneurs, business owners and community leaders. These programs serve Greater San Antonio, the Texas-Mexico border area as well as regional, national and international stakeholders. Together with the federal, state and local governments, and private businesses, the UTSA Institute for Economic Development fosters economic and community development in support of UTSA’s community engagement mission. In 2016, the Institute generated direct regional economic impact of 7,517 jobs, started 591 new businesses, \$447 million in new financing, \$78 million in new tax revenue and exceeded \$1.4 billion in new sales, exports and contracts. For more information, visit [www.iedtexas.org](http://www.iedtexas.org).