

AlabamaCreates Masterplan

North Star

By 2040, Alabama is a production-ready talent engine for the national and global creative economy. Creative work is made here, by people who chose to stay, came back, or chose Alabama as the place to build.

AlabamaCreates is one of multiple organizations working toward that future. The Alabama Office of Entertainment leads on creative-economy policy. Universities train the next generation through their own programs. Regional arts councils, civic creative initiatives, festivals, independent studios, and peer organizations are doing essential work across the state. AlabamaCreates positions itself within that ecosystem as an accelerant and connective tissue, not as the sole driver. Its specific contribution is cohort-based talent development across Brand, Motion, and Interactive, paired with the convening work that helps otherwise segmented organizations compound rather than compete.

The plan runs in three phases. Each phase stands independently. Each commits to specific outcomes, a specific funding architecture, and a specific theory of where AlabamaCreates sits in Alabama's broader creative and industrial economy. The goal is not to predict 2040 accurately. It is to commit the org to outcomes, mechanics, and institutional behaviors that compound across more than a decade and a half.

Phase 1: Foundation (2024-2030)

Mission of phase. Build the talent pipeline. Establish credibility. Reach all 67 counties through a disciplined access strategy. Convene the broader ecosystem without duplicating peer work.

Phase 1 focuses on commercial creative disciplines (Brand, Motion, Interactive) for two reasons. Commercial work has clearer measures of value: portfolios, paid projects, business formation, talent placement. And commercial work creates the financial infrastructure that has to exist before sustainable cultural work can grow.

Why this phase can scale. Film Exchange is not a speculative concept. The model launched in one Southeast Alabama county in 2024, expanded to four in 2025, and to six in 2026, with strong outcomes at each stage. The 2026-2030 expansion is a staged replication of a tested regional model in iterative development since 2023.

Film Exchange expansion sequence. 2026: Dothan and Birmingham. 2027: add Mobile. 2028: add Huntsville. 2029: add Montgomery. 2030: five metro programs plus the first traveling rural program, beginning in Selma to reach the Black Belt. Birmingham is treated as the first urban-market adaptation of the model rather than another county expansion, requiring its own local partnerships, mentor bench, and operating logic. Each subsequent metro launches only after operating conditions are met (local lead, training site, mentor bench, client pipeline, funding base).

Studio Cohort. Multi-disciplinary adult accelerator launching summer 2026. Quarterly cohorts of 12 creatives each by end of phase, training 48 creatives and supporting 32 local organizations annually. Cohorts form small multidisciplinary studios producing client-facing work for Alabama organizations. The program builds creative judgment, AI-native production fluency, business discipline, and collaborative production habits.

Statewide community infrastructure. The Creative Portal, festival and opportunity maps, monthly featured creatives, alumni storytelling, and resources for schools, employers, and families.

Creative Council. A statewide convening body of leaders from peer creative-economy organizations, Alabama's primary creative figures, educators, working professionals, alumni, and industry partners. Assembled by 2030. Convenes quarterly. Advisory rather than governing: the board retains fiduciary authority while the Council provides ecosystem intelligence, critique, partnership pathways, and a check against duplication or mission drift.

Statewide presence, defined in tiers. Awareness (the county is in the org's database, portal, festival map, or outreach footprint). Participation (someone from the county engages with a program, event, workshop, or opportunity). Activation (the org runs programming, places a Fellow, or supports a client project in the county). By 2030, the target is Awareness in all 67 counties, Participation in a majority, and Activation in regions where the org can operate at quality.

Alumni economic ladder. Alumni outcomes track across four tiers rather than a single metric. Creative Operator (paid creative income through freelance, employment, contract, or entrepreneurial work). Freelance Practice (recurring client work, basic business systems, repeat demand). Micro-Studio (two to five collaborators with shared production standards and documented revenue). Production Company (formal creative business with multiple clients, recurring revenue, and operational systems). Phase 1 prioritizes the first two tiers. Micro-studios and production companies emerge from the strongest alumni clusters over time.

2026 as proof year. Before scaling, 2026 is the proof year. Priorities: launch the first Studio Cohort, expand Film Exchange to Dothan and Birmingham, treat Birmingham as the first urban-market adaptation, ship a small number of portfolio-worthy client projects, build the Creative Portal, secure three to five anchor partners across industry, philanthropy, education, and civic leadership, and publish the first AlabamaCreates annual memo on creative talent and AI in Alabama.

Funding architecture. A blend of foundation grants, individual donors, corporate partnerships with Alabama's legacy industries, public-sector support, program fees, and earned revenue. The founder serves as full-time Executive Director, with salary set at a level appropriate to the org's operating scale and governed by board oversight, benchmarked annually against comparable creative-sector nonprofits. Phase 1 ends with a target operating budget of \$1.5M to \$2.5M, with no single source representing more than 25% to 30% of the annual budget. The funding architecture is a structural response to the 2024 funding shock: the org cannot allow one funder, agency, or personality to determine whether the mission survives.

2030 outcomes. 150 or more Film Exchange Fellows graduated. 1,000 or more aspiring filmmakers engaged through Film Exchange competitions, festivals, or programs. 500 or more videos promoting

Alabama organizations produced by Fellows during the Fellowship. 170 or more Studio Cohort alumni across the three orientations. Five operating metro-based Film Exchange programs and the first traveling rural program launched in Selma. Documented presence in all 67 counties. Creative Council assembled and operational. A measurable alumni base distributed across the economic ladder. Operating budget at the upper end of the target range. Board, staff, and advisory structures prepared for Phase 2.

Phase 2: Expansion (2030-2035)

Mission of phase. Expand into cultural creative disciplines. Establish Alabama as a peer in the South's cultural economy. Deepen regional partnerships.

Alabama has uncommonly deep cultural roots in music, literature, photography, film, visual art, design, and storytelling that warrant their own infrastructure. If AI displacement of commercial creative work accelerates, the cultural-disciplines infrastructure absorbs talent transitioning between commercial and cultural work. The phase is built to compound across either trajectory.

Expansion principle. AlabamaCreates enters a new cultural discipline only when five conditions are met: a demonstrated statewide gap, a credible partner or coalition, a mentor bench capable of supporting real development, a funding path that does not weaken existing programs, and a clear reason the cohort model adds value without duplicating the work of peer organizations. This protects the org from becoming a catch-all creative institution before it has earned that role.

Core programs. Cohort expansion into selected cultural disciplines (film, music, literature, photography, visual art), each with its own curriculum, mentor network, showcase pathway, and quality standards. Reciprocal regional partnerships with leading institutions in Atlanta, Nashville, New Orleans, Orlando, and Miami, structured so Alabama becomes a place creatives from peer cities come to work, not a feeder for outbound talent. A flagship Alabama cultural event co-developed with peer organizations across the state, anchoring the cultural calendar and creating national visibility. The Creative Council expands to reflect the broader disciplines now in scope.

Funding architecture. Phase 2 shifts toward institutional capital partnerships and earned revenue. Earned revenue from contracted creative work, program fees, curriculum and content licensing, training partnerships, and consulting scales to 30% to 40% of the operating budget. Capital campaigns begin toward a permanent operating headquarters and the early stages of an endowment. Phase 2 ends with an annual operating budget in the \$4M to \$6M range and a capital base under construction.

2035 outcomes. Three to five new cultural-discipline programs operating at scale. Five formal regional partnerships in active reciprocal exchange. A flagship Alabama cultural event in its third or fourth year. An alumni base of 1,000 or more concentrated in working creative roles based in Alabama. Formalized partnerships across Alabama's legacy industries (aerospace, automotive, healthcare, agriculture). Operating budget at the upper end of the range. Capital campaign launched and partially funded. National press coverage that treats Alabama as a peer rather than an underdog story.

Phase 3: Permanence (2035-2040)

Mission of phase. Build the production infrastructure. Reverse the migration pattern. Become the institution that outlasts its founder.

Phase 3 runs five years and operates as a horizon with three parallel streams. Each pursues a different layer of permanence: physical, narrative, and institutional. By 2035, the foundation should be substantial enough that the closing chapter is about acceleration and durability.

Stream one: Production infrastructure. The talent pipeline is mature. The next layer is the physical and financial infrastructure that lets Alabama be a place creative work is made, not just where creatives come from. AlabamaCreates works alongside state agencies, universities, private capital, and alumni-led companies to catalyze a major film and post-production facility in Birmingham, a music production cooperative grounded in the Muscle Shoals lineage, shared equipment access models, and industrial storytelling and visualization infrastructure connected to Alabama's legacy industries. Where the Alabama Office of Entertainment leads on creative-economy policy, AlabamaCreates supports through ecosystem data, talent representation, and convening.

Stream two: Reverse migration. The metric that proves the masterplan worked. Alabama becomes a place creatives move TO. The 1960s-rooted external story is no longer the dominant frame, replaced by the work and people produced by more than a decade of investment. The org commits to active recruitment of Alabama-born creative expats, alumni retention support, national storytelling around Alabama-based work, and a flagship cultural event that matures into an international draw. Leading indicators tracked before the migration pattern fully turns: alumni retention two years after program completion, expats re-engaged through mentoring or relocation, out-of-state mentors and partners doing paid work with Alabama creatives, and creatives relocating to Alabama for work, community, or opportunity.

Stream three: Institutional permanence and model export. Three pieces matter. First, the endowment. A working endowment is funded and operational by 2040, in the \$25M to \$40M range, underwriting rural access, scholarships, alumni leadership development, and core operating independence. The endowment protects the talent pipeline from political cycles, grant volatility, and founder dependency. Second, succession. Leadership transitions beyond the founder during Phase 3. Alumni from the 2024-2030 Fellows and Studio Cohort classes hold meaningful roles on the board, staff, Creative Council, or as founders of affiliated organizations. The org operates with the founder in an emeritus or advisory role. Third, model export. Partnerships with peer regional initiatives in Mississippi, Appalachia, the Rio Grande Valley, the Pacific Northwest, and the rural Midwest.

Funding architecture. Anchored by endowment income, with continued earned revenue and proportionally smaller grant and donor support. Government partnerships, particularly state-level economic development funding, become more viable as Alabama's creative economy matures. The annual operating budget by 2040 is in the \$8M to \$12M range.

2040 outcomes. Major production infrastructure operational or in active development, co-developed with state, university, private, and industry partners. Documented inbound migration of working creatives.

Measurable alumni retention and creative business formation in Alabama. An endowment in the \$25M to \$40M range. Leadership team with significant alumni representation. Founder no longer required for day-to-day institutional credibility. At least three formal partnerships with peer regional initiatives outside Alabama. National press treating Alabama as a creative reference point.

Ecosystem Strategy

Relationship to Alabama's industrial base. AlabamaCreates positions commercial creatives as integral to Alabama's legacy industries, not separate from them. Alabama's economy is anchored by aerospace and defense, automotive and manufacturing, healthcare, agriculture, forestry, and emerging technology. Each of those industries needs modern creative talent (brand systems, technical storytelling, product visualization, training media, simulation, UX, investor and recruiting communications) to compete nationally and globally. Brand, Motion, and Interactive are not peripheral services. They are economic infrastructure. Phase 1 establishes initial corporate partnerships across the legacy sectors. Phase 2 deepens those into multi-year sponsorships and co-developed talent pipelines. Phase 3 includes legacy industries as anchor partners in production infrastructure, particularly for industrial film, simulation, training, and visualization that scales with the state's industrial growth.

Own, operate, catalyze, support. To avoid mission confusion, AlabamaCreates distinguishes between four roles. The org owns programs, intellectual property, standards, and platforms central to the mission (Film Exchange, Studio Cohort, curriculum, alumni systems, quality standards). It operates the programs it is directly responsible for delivering. It catalyzes major ecosystem projects through convening, talent data, partnership design, or de-risking (production infrastructure, regional partnerships, statewide events). It supports partner-led work that aligns with the mission but should not be owned by the org (peer organization programs, university initiatives, state policy work, festivals already led well by others). This distinction allows AlabamaCreates to be ambitious without becoming imperial.

Quality. The thesis depends on quality. If the work is average, the story breaks. The org maintains a documented creative standard across youth programs, adult cohorts, client projects, public showcases, and alumni promotion, with senior creative review for public-facing client work, mentor training against a shared evaluation framework, and portfolio review before alumni work is publicly showcased. Quality is not polish for its own sake. It is how the org earns trust with students, families, clients, employers, funders, and partners. The org scales only when quality can scale with it.

Measurement. Three categories of outcomes are tracked across phases. Program throughput (Fellows, cohort participants, county presence, work produced). Economic impact (alumni placement on the economic ladder, paid creative work, in-state retention, businesses formed, out-of-state revenue earned by Alabama creatives). Institutional health (operating budget, funding diversity, earned revenue percentage, board and Council engagement, succession progress, endowment progress). Targets are directional and refined annually as operating data accumulates, but they exist as commitments rather than vibes.

Decision framework. Five questions govern programs, partnerships, funding decisions, and strategic pivots. Independence over dependence: does this make the org more durable, or more dependent on one

funder, personality, or political condition? Focus over bloat: does this strengthen the core flywheel, or pull the org into adjacent work that should belong to someone else? Durable assets: does this create lasting value through talent, curriculum, alumni, infrastructure, or public trust? Quality bar: can the org execute this at a level that strengthens the brand and the ecosystem? Counterparty integrity: is the partner aligned with the mission, respectful of creative talent, and trustworthy in execution?

Governance. The masterplan is reviewed annually by the board against the named outcomes. The Creative Council convenes quarterly and provides ecosystem feedback. Phase boundaries (2030 and 2035) trigger formal strategic reviews with external input from the Council, advisory cabinet, alumni, funders, industry partners, and peer-institution leaders. Material deviations from the masterplan require board approval and a published rationale.

Risk register. Six risks shape the org's posture. Funding shock, addressed through the diversified funding architecture above. AI trajectory uncertainty, addressed through an annual published memo on the creative-economy AI landscape and through Phase 2's expansion design that holds across multiple AI scenarios. Founder dependency, addressed through staged succession beginning in Phase 1 and active alumni leadership development throughout. Brand and mission dilution, addressed through the decision framework and through Creative Council oversight. Quality dilution during scale, addressed through the documented quality system above. Ecosystem resistance, addressed through behavior: AlabamaCreates acts as accelerant and connective tissue, co-develops where overlap exists, supports where others are better positioned to lead, and avoids competing for work or visibility that belongs to peer organizations.

Closing

AlabamaCreates exists to help Alabama build the creative infrastructure required for the next economy. The work begins with talent. It expands into systems. It matures into infrastructure.

The org's power is not in trying to become the center of everything creative in Alabama, but in building a repeatable talent engine, proving that creative work belongs inside economic development, and helping the broader ecosystem compound.

If Phase 1 proves the model, Phase 2 can expand it. If Phase 2 deepens the ecosystem, Phase 3 can make it permanent.

The masterplan is the contract between AlabamaCreates and the future it intends to help build, alongside the many partners doing parallel work across the state.