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West Tennessee Leaders Elected as Founding Fellows in Statewide Economic Leadership Initiative

WEST TENNESSEE — Twelve senior leaders representing a cross-section of West Tennessee's higher education, economic development, industry, government, and nonprofit sectors have been elected Founding Fellows of the Porter Development Initiative Fellows Academy, receiving the Charter Fellowship and Distinguished Achievement recognition on June 26, 2026 – the academy's highest honor for inaugural members of this statewide economic leadership initiative.

The West Tennessee Founding Fellows were elected by the Board of Directors of Global Action Platform, together with the Regional Steering Committees of the Tennessee Leaders Action Platform, in recognition of their distinguished leadership and commitment to advancing regional competitiveness and shared prosperity.

The West Tennessee Founding Fellows are:

- **Dr. Amanda Walker**, Vice President of External Affairs, Dyersburg State Community College
- **Scott Williams**, President and CEO, Discovery Park of America
- **Rob Goad**, Executive Director, Paris/Henry County Economic Development Corporation
- **Lindsay Theobald**, CEO, Obion County Joint Economic Development Corporation
- **Dr. Adnan Rasool**, Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning and Associate Professor of Political Science, the University of Tennessee at Martin
- **Erica Bell**, Executive Director, UT Martin Regional Centers and Online Programs
- **Dr. Jamie Frakes**, Vice President of Academic Affairs, Tennessee College of Applied Technology Northwest
- **Matt Varino**, Director, Southwest Tennessee Economic Partnership, Southwest Tennessee Development District
- **Robin Sealy**, Director of Special Projects, Tipton County Government
- **Stephen Milligan**, President, Tennessee College of Applied Technology Crump
- **Marianne Dunavant**, Community Relations Manager, Ford Motor Company
- **Lori Burdine**, Executive Director, Northwest Tennessee Development District/Human Resource Agency

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The Fellows Academy is part of the Tennessee Leaders Action Platform, a statewide initiative organized and led by Global Action Platform – the initiative's permanent home – in partnership with the Porter Development Initiative. The platform brings together a statewide network of 120 senior leaders organized into eight regional economic steering committees.

To earn the Founding Fellow designation, participants successfully completed an executive course in Microeconomic Competitiveness and Regional Strategy, grounded in the competitiveness frameworks pioneered by Professor Michael E. Porter and developed in collaboration with global case studies, applied competitiveness frameworks, and regional economic analysis developed through the U.S. Cluster Mapping Project.

The Academy's executive convening was held June 23–26, 2026, at Vanderbilt University Owen Graduate School of Management, bringing together senior leaders from across Tennessee to examine regional competitiveness, analyze key economic clusters, and develop coordinated strategies to drive sustainable growth.

West Tennessee was represented through the Jackson-Martin and Memphis cluster zones. The Jackson-Martin zone was chaired by Dr. Yancy Freeman, Chancellor of the University of Tennessee at Martin, and Matt Marshall, President of United Way of West Tennessee.

"This was an important opportunity for West Tennessee leaders to work together in a more focused and intentional way around the assets, industries, and partnerships that can drive long-term prosperity," said Dr. Freeman. "The Porter Development Initiative gave our region a framework to better understand our economic strengths, identify gaps, and develop action plans that reflect the realities and opportunities of our communities."

"West Tennessee has significant assets, including affordable land, strong educational institutions, manufacturing capacity, agricultural heritage, and a growing network of civic and economic development leaders," said Marshall. "The challenge now is to align those assets in a way that creates more opportunity for the people who live here."

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This announcement is issued on behalf of the coalition of West Tennessee organizations represented in the Tennessee Leaders Action Platform. Media inquiries should be directed to Global Action Platform.

For media inquiries or additional information, contact: Dr. Scott T. Massey, CEO, Global Action Platform, stmassey@globalactionplatform.org.

PHOTO ID: Left to right, back row: Rob Goad, Dr. Jamie Frakes, Scott Williams, Matt Varino; middle row: Stephen Milligan, Dr. Adnan Rasool, Lori Burdine, Robin Sealy, Marianne Dunavant; front row: Dr. Amanda Walker, Lindsay Theobald, Erica Bell.

