



Q&A With Brian Kelsey, Keynote Speaker at 2015 EMSI Conference

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Brian Kelsey, principal and founder of Civic Analytics, is the keynote speaker at the fifth annual National EMSI Conference in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, September 21-23. Below is an interview we conducted with Brian on his work, his inspiration, and his vision for what success looks like in economic development.



Brian Kelsey

1. What drew you to the economic development field 15 years ago, and what led you eventually to start your own planning and consulting firm?

I studied development economics in college and I had planned on working for a year after graduation and then probably returning to do a PhD. I found a one-year fellowship program working for the Sonoma County Economic Development Board in Santa Rosa, California, and thought that would be a great adventure since I grew up across the country in Raleigh, North Carolina. I was immediately drawn to the idea that the private sector and the public sector could work together to improve outcomes for communities, especially in terms of human capital development and socioeconomic mobility. After a few months, I knew I'd found my career.

By 2012, I had worked in economic development in and around the public sector side at the local, regional, state, and federal levels. I'd been doing some consulting on and off since 2007 and really enjoyed working with clients to improve their capacity for leading community and economic development initiatives. When I got back to Austin in 2012 from working in Washington, DC, for a year, I knew the time was right to jump right in on a full-time basis.

2. What does a successful economic development project look like from your experience? How much does it involve having regional partners outside economic development vested in the project?

A successful economic development project should improve living standards in a community. Too many people define economic development in very narrow terms focused on jobs or tax base or some related measure. There's nothing wrong with using things like jobs and tax base as measurements, but measurements are not the same as goals.

You may engage in cluster development efforts or job creation activities as a strategy, but the goal should be defined as your desired outcome—and that should be measurable improvement in the lives of your community members. If you agree that economic development should be defined in those terms, then you need other partners at the table. As an economic development practitioner, you aren't going to get very far these days in attracting jobs or increasing your community's tax base if you can't offer a high-quality workforce and education and training capacity.

"A successful economic development project should improve living standards in a community."

3. Much has been made about the increasing importance of data in economic development. How was data used when you first got into the field, and how is it used now?

I learned a lot from my first boss, Ben Stone, in Sonoma County. He knew that research and information products could add value to both the private sector and the public sector, which kept stakeholders engaged and willing to support and invest in new initiatives.

Market insight available to everybody passes the market failure test for purists in terms of justifying public involvement, and it can help economic developers stand out from the thousands of other economic developers active across the country.

One of my first assignments was to do a "state of high-tech" report on Sonoma County's telecommunications cluster, which included a workforce gap analysis. We just completed a [similar product](#) for the Austin Technology Council here a few months ago, and it was fun looking back over the last 15 years and marveling at how much data availability has improved and changed the way we think about the labor market.

It's really cranked up expectations for economic development organizations, too. Data used to be a differentiator; now it's an expectation. Public and private sector stakeholders expect economic developers to be market experts and to have data readily available for a variety of applications. That's what's different today.

"Data used to be a differentiator; now it's an expectation."

4. Your blog at [civicanalytics.com](#) has gathered a large following in the economic development world and for those interested in the Austin workforce and economy. What was your original goal when you started blogging all those years ago?

I've always admired academics for putting their ideas out there in journals for public scrutiny. It takes courage and thick skin to offer up what you think you know about the world, and let people take shots at it. But, at least for people like me, it's also a very efficient way to sort out your own ideas and learn from people with different experiences, skill sets, and perspectives. The internet has democratized the journal process, lowering the barrier for participation, at least for non-academics.

As far as our focus on Austin goes, we live here and want to contribute to public discourse on issues we feel are important for shaping the future of our city and region. We don't have very many non-partisan, think tank-esque groups publishing original work on community and economic development here, so we want to do our part.

5. What excites you about speaking at the 2015 EMSI conference?

I teach a graduate-level class in the community and regional planning department at UT Austin and I always learn as much if not more from the students as I'm hopefully teaching them. It's an interdisciplinary course, drawing students from business, public policy, education, and social work, in addition to the future planners.

That's what I'm looking forward to in participating in the EMSI conference—a roomful of smart data wonks with a shared skill set that provides a common foundation or language, but each coming from a different perspective and experience. Where else could you find a group that gets equally fired up about the nuances of the so-called "skills gap" and the role of data in improving educational outcomes for kids? It's going to be fun.

"The EMSI conference—a roomful of smart data wonks with a shared skill set..., but each coming from a different perspective."

6. Can you give a sneak peek at what you'll be talking about?

Generally, the process of turning data into information for decision-making, along the various dimensions of education, workforce development, and economic development. I spend a lot of time with clients and in my class emphasizing the role of information in communications to achieve policy objectives. Data is, after all, of limited value if your job is to go beyond knowledge creation, which I think probably describes most of the people attending EMSI conferences.

7. What are you passionate about outside of economic development? Any side ventures or hobbies?

We have a three-year-old at home, so side ventures have been somewhat limited lately, outside of learning how to be a good parent. We work with a lot of planning organizations in small metros and rural communities through the National Association of Development Organizations and I always enjoy traveling to different parts of the country and meeting people who take an active role in civic participation and leadership. We get so fixated on the theatrics of national politics that we sometimes lose focus of the impact local leaders are having on their communities. It's inspiring.



Register [here](#) for the National EMSI Conference. Follow Brian Kelsey on Twitter [@civicanalytics](#). Follow EMSI on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), and Twitter [@DesktopEcon](#).

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Gwen Burrow



Christian Fletcher says

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It's clear why Brian is so highly regarded in the field: he has great reverence for "traditional" economic development, but he is always employing new tools and approaches to help communities achieve their greatest potential.

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