

Vibrant Virginia and Beyond Transcript: 10/30/20

Good morning on behalf of my colleagues at the Virginia State University, The University of Virginia, University of Virginia at Wise and Virginia Tech, especially the offices of economic development and continuing and professional education.

I am Dr. Guru Ghosh. I have the privilege of serving as the vice president of Outreach and International Affairs at Virginia Tech.

And I want to focus on welcoming the illustrious panel members this morning to the second of a three-part series on Vibrant Virginia, which will explore the role of public higher education efforts to catalyze economic development activities in order to create a Vibrant and robust economy within the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Past forums have focused on Virginia and the challenges across the urban and rural continuum in the context of recovery, change, and innovation.

Our two panels today are looking further afield with the focus on best practices in higher education engagement to advance shared prosperity and community and regional development from around the US and bringing those connections back to Virginia.

Without further ado, it is my pleasure to introduce Mallory Noe-Payne.

Those of us avid listeners of NPR know of Mallory's extraordinary work as an award-winning national journalist and producer based in Richmond, Virginia.

She's done work for NPR, Marketplace, and Public Radio International. Without further ado, I wanted to turn things over to Mallory.

Good morning.

Thank you so much for having me.

I'm pleased to be here from my desk here in Richmond.

So. I'm gonna give a quick rundown about how it's gonna unfold and play out here during our first panel. We've got three panelists joining us.

Each of them will give about a ten-minute introduction of themselves and their work as it pertains to the topic of our conversation today.

A reminder what is that conversation today?

We're gonna be discussing concrete examples of programs run out of or in partnership with higher ed institutions.

Programs that help bridge some of the divisions in the communities they serve.

Whether that is an urban/rural division, or whether that's within one urban area.

And we'd love the audience to leave this conversation inspired, more informed, armed with some practical advice about how to take their own research, their own work, put it into action.

And so the hope is that the conversation is less about documenting the divide between or within urban and rural communities.

We know that those divides are there, well-documented and instead our conversation today will be more about the

So what now, what, what can we do about it?

So I'm gonna briefly introduce each of our panelists, get them started on their own longer introduction of the work that they do, about ten minutes each.

And then we're gonna turn to our conversation.

I'll ask questions.

Panelists, if you find you have questions for each other, you know, I'd love to invite that dialogue as well as questions from the audience.

So we'll have a chance for those in the audience to take your questions in the zoom chatbox.

And we'll wrap up by about 11:25 before the next panel takes place.

So to get us started, we're gonna start with Dr. Sheila Martin.

Sheila is currently VP for economic development and community engagement at the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities.

She looks at the way universities across the country work with rural and urban constituencies.

And before that, she was at Portland State University where much of our work focuses on bridging the urban, rural divide in that state.

So she'll, if you want to dive on, you've got about ten minutes to tell more about your work.

Thanks, Mallory.

Thanks for that introduction.

And I can't help as a former Planning planner and demographer, to just take a quick step back and to talk a little bit about how higher education got here in this conversation about the urban/rural divide and what we do about it.

So what differentiates urban from rural?

I'm not gonna spend too much time on this, but just to put it in the higher ed perspective, we all want basically the same things.

We want a good job that provides the resources we need for our families.

We want quality time with our friends and we all want to be healthy and we want our environment to be healthy.

But we pursue these goals in sometimes very different contexts: coastal and inland; metropolitan, rural; and in some cases, wet and dry.

So these are all the different ways that we distinguish different parts of our country.

But the important distinguishing characteristic between urban and rural comes down to density and distance.

So density defines urban; we live and work among lots of other people.

And that density, brings benefits, but it also brings costs.

Distance is the flip side to density.

Distance defines rural.

Those distances provide the benefits of privacy, open space, and landscape.

But it also means people have to drive really far. The distance between people makes connection costly.

But density and distance I think are really fundamental drivers for how rural and urban communities work.

And they affect not only how we experience each other, but they have profound impacts on our economy and what it costs to provide services and how we spend our time and on how higher education has to serve these communities.

I want to just use that a little bit as our organizing principles for why reconnecting higher-education institutions across urban and rural can open opportunities for improving places characterized by density and places characterized by distance.

So most states at one time had a pretty uniform distribution of population, much more than they do now.

But as we grew as a nation, our urban centers grew more quickly than rural areas.

And that was at least in part due to advances that were happening all over the world to reduce the negative effects of density.

For example, ie. The transmission of disease.

That allowed urban people to take better advantage of the benefits of density.

One of those most important benefits is the ability to specialize, to get really good at something.

And sell your skill to someone else.

Because when you have a big specialized labor market, like in a city, you have access to more jobs that allow you to do that.

A second big benefit of density is the easy exchange of information and ideas, which happens more easily when people are close together.

Particularly ideas that are hard to understand from just reading something.

Things that need to be demonstrated or Observed, or result from relationships that are based on trust.

And then of course, a third benefit of density is what Ed Glaeser called the marriage market.

The reason that a lot of people leave their rural communities to move to places with more people is so they can find just the right person to spend the rest of their lives with.

So as we solve some of the problems of cities, we were able to take advantage of some of the benefits of density.

And cities grew.

So did the jobs that lent themselves more readily to density than to distance.

And rural areas were more dependent on industries that require more space and fewer workers: natural resources, mining, timber, fishing, agriculture.

But they also had a strong connection to the companies and the labor and the cities that provide legal, financial, and trade services and added value to those natural resources.

So they were economically connected through those industries.

As the labor requirements for natural resources industries declined over the decades, many states like Oregon began to reinvent their economies and in large part that new economy that we found, the industries that we've had success with are more successful in environments where the exchange of ideas takes place more quickly and where specialized labor markets are important.

And those are cities.

So as employment and wages in the metropolitan area grew, rural areas were largely left behind because the industries that were thriving were industries that did not lend themselves well to places with long distances between people.

So, pardon me for this little history lesson, but this was part of what we did in Oregon to help people understand how we got to where we are.

Higher education of course, was one of the drivers of this transformation.

We helped reinvent our economies because we develop technologies that drove the information and tech-based industries and we trained people in them.

So density and distance became the driving factor, that pulled apart the urban and rural economies and higher education became seen as a driver of that divide.

So when we were working on the Toward One Oregon project, we asked the question, what can higher education do to reduce this divide?

Because after all, we bear some responsibility for this.

So Toward One Oregon project was a collaboration between the University of Oregon, Oregon State University and Portland State University to pull the state together, rural and urban, and talk about how we might again focus on our interdependence and less on our divisions. Toward One Oregon began with a series of presentations and conversations and that turned into a book.

And that turned into more conversations about how the universities could work together to build a stronger understanding of the different contexts in which we live.

To promote stronger connections among rural and urban people, businesses, and industries.

And to grapple with and solve some of our most difficult problems in a way that appreciates and leverages our interdependence and the complementarities between rural and urban areas.

So we developed a proposal called You Are Connected.

And when John asked me to step in and participate in this panel, I had to go back and take a look at what that original proposal included.

We really wanted to model the behavior that we wanted to see among urban and rural communities.

We connected the Urban Studies expertise at Portland State University with the rural studies expertise at Oregon State University.

And we offered students, faculty, and urban and rural community partners a richer more complete understanding of our state.

So we would take issues like housing, transportation, aging, economic development, and we would examine how those solutions to some of those issues differ by the context they're in.

And how they might benefit from an approach that considers linkages between urban and rural areas leading to a better set of policy options.

So this One Oregon center proposal was really pretty well received by the legislature.

They love it when the universities work together.

But it ended up on the cutting room floor in the budget environment of the 2008 recession.

But some of the ideas survived. And we were able to execute some of them.

So for example, Oregon State developed a open Campus Initiative that provided better access to higher education for rural communities.

We developed a rural urban student exchange program through a collaboration between Portland State University and eastern Oregon University and OSU and PSU co-developed indicators of rural and urban community health and well-being.

And we collaborated on analyzing the future of rural communities using population forecasts.

And that got us into issues like aging, economic development, what the potential was for those communities, the need for water and other kinds of infrastructure like hospitals and lots of other issues.

So I want to help us move this conversation along.

But I want to just return a little bit to the responsibilities of higher education in this conversation. We helped to fuel the shift to the knowledge economy and it did leave many rural communities behind.

But this pandemic has given us a huge opportunity to test and apply the technologies that reduce the downsides of distance, giving us more opportunities to connect rural students and their communities and in fact, I think that we could declare this one of higher education's grand challenges to eliminate the downsides of distance and build stronger connections between urban and rural America.

So I'll just leave it there for now and look forward to the conversation.

thanks Sheila.

So we're gonna turn now to Lisa Peyton-Caire; Lisa is the founder and president of the Foundation for Black Women's Wellness, a group that empowers Black women to live their healthiest fullest lives.

Her organization works throughout Wisconsin and recently received a million dollar grant from the Wisconsin partnership programs with the University of Wisconsin.

So I'm gonna hand it over to Lisa. You've got about ten minutes to tell us more about your work.

Awesome.

Thank you so much, Mallory, forgive me, everyone that I have a raspy voice this morning with changing seasons. I am gonna share my screen.

Let me know if you can see it once it's up.

Oops, I thought I was going to be doing the slide show.

Here we go.

Can you see that okay everyone?

What I didn't realize this I should have preplanned to have you advance my slides.

Virginia Tech, so I'll be advancing my slides and reading my notes.

So we'll see how that goes.

First let me say how excited I am to be here today as a Richmond, Virginia native who happens to have lived in Wisconsin for at least 20 years now, by way of marriage.

But my heart is true to my home state.

All my family is still there. The roots of this work really began in Virginia and I'll tell that story in a second.

I probably am the wildcard on this panel today in that I am speaking from the perspective of a community based organization who is well partnered with our university systems.

So we'll hear about it in the context of our story.

And then maybe more will come out in our panel questions.

But again, I am the CEO and founder of the Foundation for Black Women's Wellness.

We are a small but growing non-profit based in Dane County Wisconsin, which is a combination of urban and rural communities, but we're in Madison, the seat of the capital city, which is an urban area.

And our work is pretty simple.

We exist to empower a generation of well Black women.

We were established in 2012 as a 501c3 non-profit after starting really as a grassroots movement that from the beginning, we really was able to garner community support.

And one of the pieces of our community that really reached out to support us was the University of Wisconsin system, hospital system.

And we are a grantee of a very unique program that our university of Wisconsin system established in 2004

And we'll talk about that.

Our mission is pretty powerful, to energize, mobilize and support Black women, to transform their lives through education, advocacy, and Powerful Partnerships and I emphasize powerful partnerships.

Because it is the partnerships that have allowed us to grow, to become a real credible and commanding voice on the issue of Black women's health equity and health equity in general in our community.

And it has been through partnerships that we've been able to extend our reach and our impact in touching and serving Black women throughout our county and now increasingly across our state.

One of our key focuses is to eliminate health disparities and other barriers impacting the lives of Black women, girls, and our families, and our communities.

For those of you who may not know and some don't know this, Wisconsin, unfortunately, carries the designation as first in the nation for racial health disparities, racial inequality across many measures. I've laid out just some of them here on the slide. We know that Black women in Wisconsin live and die at higher rates and younger ages than our white peers from largely preventable illnesses.

There's a growing life expectancy gap for Black women in Wisconsin, which is unlike any other state. We are the only state in the country where the life expectancy gap between Black women and white women is widening, not closing, which is very concerning and indicative also of measures we know in our County, where we work very closely with our public health system, that the average age of death of a Black woman in our County where I reside is 60 years old.

And that is a measure that's taken every year based on on the deaths of women from birth to old age.

And we're averaging as sixty years old in part because it's being driven by a first in the nation level of Black infant mortality.

Wisconsin is first in the nation for Black infant mortality; that's reflected here in Dane County. And that's exacerbated by a number one ranking for a wealth gap that is also not closing in our state.

So we are the epicenter, unfortunately, in many ways for racial inequality.

And we centered that discussion in our work in talking with our cross-sector partners, including our university, to think of solutions that are broader. And that really are rooted in identifying root causes, systemic causes. So that we are doing broad work and not patchwork as I like to call it.

Here's another picture.

You may have also read in the news that Wisconsin has become the epicenter of the COVID-19 virus and community spread.

We're seeing alarming rates OF hospitalizations, of cases and deaths, which again are disproportionately impacting African American communities and families here in Dane County, Milwaukee has been an incredible hotspot.

We are seeing the growth in rural communities, also, which is pushing our public health systems, our state agencies, our universities to co-create solutions quickly on how we control spread and begin to create solutions that place us in a different position than the epicenter of the COVID-19 spread.

And again, thinking about how we approach and resolve public health crises, like those that I've laid out, from a broader social determinance and structural determinance of health lens. That has been a collective body of work between our organization, our university systems, our cross-sector partners to come together to take a broader view of root causes.

And I'll talk a bit later about a specific project that we're working on around Black maternal and child health to address that. It's also imperative here in the Midwest that we're having this conversation about innovative partnerships that spur change in the health equity space.

Because the Midwest is really the epicenter of racial inequality.

If you were to zero in on a region in our country, as you see from the image at the bottom left of the screen, Wisconsin ranks number one in the country.

But we're ranking pretty high nationally here in the mid-west as the epicenter for inequality.

All of these states happen to have major university systems.

We have 23 campuses within our UW System.

And there are unique efforts being undertaken amongst those campuses to create solutions for our state that we know can also be replicated in other regions.

And that is a specific focus we know of our university partners who we work closely with.

In fact, the diagram that you see on the screen that is mapping out the major causes and drivers of health outcomes was created by our UW School of Medicine and Public Health as part of our county health rankings work; there's a national project that's based here at the UW Population Health Institute.

Another partner, they're actually co-investigators on the million dollar grant you mentioned Mallory that we've just received to create a state wide health equity training ground for Black women.

And this is really the framework that drives how we approach systems change around Black women health outcomes is realizing the social, environmental and economic drivers, as well as the individual

health behaviors, the health promotion, the clinical care, which is actually a smaller piece than the broader socioeconomic ecosystem drivers of health.

And we've all gotten on one page collectively to use our models, our approaches and our solutions with this fundamental understanding of all of the levers that have to be moved in order for Black women's health to improve in Wisconsin.

Just wanted to add that the work of the foundation started from a very personal place, in Virginia where I grew up.

The photo to the left is of my mother, Roberta Peyton. And she's flanked by my paternal aunts, my mother-in-law, neighbors and friends.

All of these women are deceased.

My mother died May 22nd, 2006 at the age of 64 of congestive heart failure.

And each of the women who were instrumental in our lives and in our community, they were mothers, grandmothers, breadwinners, business owners.

Many, many stories are embedded in this photo.

The oldest on this photo is 67 years old.

None of them reached old age.

And this was a pattern that I observed and that really came to light for me with my mother's death, that spurred my attention to turn to what is happening with Black Women's Health.

Why are there no alarm bells going off across our country about Black women dying in the prime of our lives.

I began to look around for initiatives that were addressed this issue head on.

And there were a few, but not many, and certainly none in proximity to me.

So we created a solution which has been built over time and I just wanted to give deference to these Virginia women.

My mother had a hair salon in Richmond, Virginia on West Broad Street, just blocks away from Virginia Commonwealth University where I walked and spent time as a little girl.

And just as an aside, it excites me to hear that Virginia through Bibrant Virginia is taking on this issue in my home state.

Which I know in many ways mirrors the issues that we are addressing here in my second home state of Wisconsin.

This movement started really small, pulling Black women together in a room to discuss and address this issue of the health disparities we face, the early deaths, the lack of access to quality care, different factors that we experience differently in our lives and that ecosystem of opportunity and access that we know is racialized in our country.

And we began to talk about ways that we could begin personally to improve to our health and then to work outside of ourselves to build a movement among women and our families, our neighborhoods, our communities.

And that is how we've grown over time from 40 women in a library talking about what we could do to an organization now that is reaching women across our state and increasingly beyond our state.

Because our model is proving that community has the power and the intel to create its own solutions, particularly when it is supported by our systems as partners and allies, not systems driving or creating change, but systems supporting community informed change.

And we are fortunate to have many university and cross-sector partners who have fueled this work and are working beside us to fuel real traction in making some different outcomes.

I'll skip that a bit.

So one of our big focuses is to move Wisconsin from worst to best for Black women's health, and to position Wisconsin as the leader in health equity.

And we know that that is an urgent imperative for us based on some of the data and statistics and information points that I shared earlier about our first in the nation rankings for health disparities, birth disparities, and otherwise. Our work is really rooted in three pillars.

Education, advocacy, powerful partnerships.

Through those partnerships, which have grown over time, we were able to reach over 5 thousand women annually directly. One-to-one assistance, education, outreach, health prevention and promotion, and leadership training, preparation as wellness ambassadors and a whole gamut of things that we're able to do to shift the culture and build a culture of wellness, and prepare women to be mouthpieces and advocates for health on a local level in their neighborhoods and beyond.

And perhaps I'll end on this slide for now, even though I have many more slides, to give an example of the very diverse funding pool that enables us to do this work.

And you'll note to the top right, the Wisconsin partnership program is a unique endowment fund that was established in 2004 specifically to fund community based or campus based collaborative projects that create solutions that can be tested. And grown to create new traction, new learnings, replicable learnings, and models that drive health equity change in our communities.

We have been funded now twice by that project. It's a competitive process.

It requires collaboration and we're fortunate that over the many years that we existed now since 2012, we have deep relationships already within our university system with many many schools, Department of OBGYN, our Carbone cancer center, our population Health Institute.

They help us in all realms of our work, whether it's providing experts to review our programs and structure our programs.

Whether it's to do direct education and health promotion efforts that are expert informed or through our grant programs. They are evaluators and co-developers of our models. And their funders. And supporters of our work throughout the year.

We like to use the term braided funding.

We are very fortunate also to have a relationship with a group called the Dane County Health council, which is a partnership of all five of our major health systems in our county. All five hospital systems and our federally qualified Public Health Center.

In addition to our public health department, which have come together collectively, over the last twenty years to really identify community efforts that they can collectively support through funding, through targeted investments. We have been recipients of such targeted investments. And our system is embedded in this Health Council through UW Health, which is our university Hospital and Clinics system.

They're a major funder of our work and many other organizations like ours who are addressing health equity on the ground and the trenches every day.

But what has been unique in this relationship is we're now beginning to partner in deeper ways and committing to multi-year strategic initiatives that we co-create together with community voice that's supported by braided funding, where each institution commits in its institutional budget to invest in these demonstration efforts with community, to really create something new that's not been able to be accomplished in our community yet.

And that's where we are now in and I'll stop there..

And we will have time to get back around to it.

Thank you so much for the sobering information and important life or death vital work your organization is doing.

Thank you also for sharing your beautiful mother with us.

I'm a Richmond native myself.

We actually have a question already from someone in the audience asking where and how and if they can purchase a well Black woman shirt.

So if you want to look onto the chat and answer that question for someone I bet they'd appreciate it.

Thank you.

We're going to turn now to Leslie Boney. Leslie is the director of the Institute for Emerging Issues at Carolina State University, who will be telling us today about Reconnect NC. That's a three-year effort there to bridge a series of divides across the state in North Carolina.

So Leslie, if you could give us about a ten minute intro of your work.

Sure. I can't just plow on from what Lisa was saying though. There's just a rich array of things.

I hope we'll get to in the formal Q&A, but just a few thing she mentioned, I think are really important to lift up.

First the importance of partnerships.

Universities, typically like to have partnerships on their own terms.

I disagree with the way we've been doing them.

I'd like to get into that a little bit more.

Second, just her reminder that this is about people and their lives and just a reminder that the work that universities do has the potential to make a real difference.

And we have this obligation, this three-part obligation for teaching, research, and service, and sometimes services is put in 4-point type in our mission statements, but it's a really critical, important part of what we are and it's why I got into university work.

I'm not credentialed like an academic.

I'm not otherwise qualified to be with a bunch of letters after my name, but I realize a few years ago is that universities in my mind are the greatest underutilized resource in North Carolina.

And I would argue in the country as whole.

Universities have an incredible potential and incredible obligation.

I want to talk a little bit about that.

Let me just say though at the start, really excited about what you're doing with Vibrant Virginia and the partnership with universities you put together.

I think it's really promising and groundbreaking, and North Carolina just south of Virginia, is facing a lot of the same challenges that Virginia has. We're really rapidly growing six metro areas. And flat to declining population in the rural areas of our state.

And so part of what we were trying to get at as we began reconnect NC was addressing that. There were some other things.

But let me start with just a reminder of what I think universities are about and what we should care about.

And I just wanted to show a slide or two that's related to that.

This is a super simple kind of obvious mapping of assets.

Sheila does this every day and can talk about the formal version, but universities happened to be really good at pulling together data.

We have a variety of subject matter experts who can talk about pretty much anything.

We're generally charged with a broad geographic focus, all that helpful for Vibrant Virginia.

We're asked to be non-partisan.

We're really pretty good at taking a longer-term focus. Where that challenges us when it comes to work like Vibrant Virginia, I think is that sometimes we like to have community engagement on our own terms.

We like to parachute in and work on the problems we want to work on. And then we depart the community and the community doesn't quite know what had happened, what happened to them, but we got what we wanted out of it and we come in with a solution rather than a series of questions.

And we tend to talk more than we listen.

That's a challenge.

There's a perception in general that even if universities are nonpartisan, there's some sort of agenda that we have and we're going to inflict that upon whoever it is and sometimes it takes too long for us to do anything that a community would consider useful.

So I think those are both assets and challenges that are important.

And they've really informed a lot of the way that the Institute for Emerging Issues has tried to do its work.

We've been around for thirty-five years trying to bring people together across lines of race and geography and sector and politics to try to come up with common sense solutions for big public policy issues that are either stuck.

Nobody can seem to make much progress on them, or they're lurking and they haven't been fully identified necessarily.

And it's time to talk about them.

We tried to do that through a variety of formats.

And we try to always work on both a state level with state policy makers, but also on a community level to really get energy behind the ideas on a local level, what we call a middle out approach.

We don't have quite enough people to be a true bottom organization, but we do try to work with local organizations that are really working on the ground with real people.

And our belief is that a lot of the solutions that we need to have our going to come from communities themselves.

So we may as well be in relationship with them if we want the best ideas. For the past three years as Mallory mentioned, we've been working on something we call Reconnect NC.

And I just wanted to share this idea of how we went about doing it and how it operationalizes the addresses some of the challenges that we talked about.

We decided, and this was during March when NC State, as it turned out, wasn't participating in a bracket, unfortunately.

And so we decided we would have a public policy bracket.

And we asked people for ideas from all across the state.

We have 25 thousand people on our mailing list.

We asked for ideas.

And as they came in -- the questions was what's the most important issue that North Carolina needs to be working on over the next three years, and it turns out there are 158 best ideas.

So we started narrowing it down.

We got down to 32 ideas and then we had people vote on those a week at a time, and as we got closer and closer to the final three that we're going to pull together, what we realized was that there was this common theme that people felt like we were not connected to each other in the way that in some people's opinion, we used to be, and in other people's opinion, we never were but regardless, there was not a sense of connection like we'd had.

And so we ended up sort of blowing up the bracket and just saying, look, there are five big things that people seem to be telling us.

They seem to be telling us that we are not active in the community like we used to be, the civic connections of falling apart.

That rural and urban are getting further apart rather than closer together, that we are divided when it comes to economic opportunity in our state.

There's a big digital divide and we're divided by health outcomes, across lines of race, across lines of income, across lines of geography.

So that's what we ended up working on and I guess the obvious thing to point out is that we didn't set this agenda.

We were doing it in response to what people were telling us.

And so that's what we've been working on over the past three years is really trying to address those disconnections in a meaningful way by bringing people together, but also by identifying communities.

So gosh, if we had a Black Women's Wellness Foundation that would be one of the 26 places that we would have identified for each of these issues.

So for each of these issues, who's really doing creative work on it at a community level that has to do with increasing civic participation.

Where are the non-profits, both rural and urban that are working to make bridges, not divides between rural and urban parts of our state?

Where are the places that are really doing pioneering work on increasing economic opportunities for those that are struggling?

Where are the places that are focusing on mental health specifically or building those bridges related to mental health?

Who's being really creative about closing the digital divide?

So in each of those cases, we had kind of that approach I talked about.

We were working on a state level to come up with big policy ideas, but also on a community level to identify the heroes, the people who are already working on those things.

And our job was to network those people with each other, to have them get connected to great ideas from other parts of the country.

But also to champion them and share those ideas and say look if you're in a rural place.

Here's a rural place that looks like you that is working on the same problem that you should care about.

Here's an urban place that sounds and looks a little bit like you that maybe you should think about reaching out to and coming up with some ideas about.

So that's how Reconnect NC took its shape.

Everything's sort of blew up as it did for everybody in March.

And we went totally virtual and had this completely new emerging issue.

But it turned out that a lot of the issues that we have been working on were implicated by COVID.

And we went to weekly Zoomcasts.

And you know at a normal meeting that we have, we might have four or five hundred people.

These topics that we were able to take up just went viral in a way that we really hadn't expected.

And we reached over the course of 22 weeks, maybe five or ten times as many people as we normally do.

And you can see things really got attention.

Nearly 1500 viewers on digital divide.

As we were talking about racial equity, more than 1000 people were there for that conversation.

We talked about mental health.

Nearly seven hundred people were involved in that.

A lot changed once Covid came but we tried to keep the same principles in place.

We've tried to work really actively during this time with the faith community.

In a lot of rural places that is one of the strongest institutions, one of the real anchor institutions that still available in every rural community.

We tried to apply limbs of equity and inclusion to each of these topics.

So highlighting some of the disparities that Lisa highlighted earlier, the wealth gap, the health gap, the digital divide, the unemployment gap, the achievement gap, and really trying to talk about those things. We've launched a digital program that is designed to get small grants out, five thousand dollars at a time, to places that are trying to address specific parts of the digital divide.

So getting devices into the hands of people who need them, getting connections or hot spots into the hands of people who need them and trying to get people to think seriously about long-term solutions for digital inclusion issues.

So we're coming up on February. This gets into Mallory's So what and Now what. In February we're gonna lift up one recommendation, just one on a public policy level for each of these topics that we've taken up.

We're gonna celebrate these 26 places that we found.

We're suppose to find five for each topic, and the last time we just couldn't make a final decision, so we have six. But we're bringing these 26 communities together to share with community groups across the state what they have learned.

So we're trying to continue with this idea of top-down policy work but also middle out work, really sharing from a community level.

So that's kind of where we're going with this effort.

Things I would suggest that I think are really important as Vibrant Virginia continues its work.

Be aware of the strengths of universities. But also our historic blind spots or tendency to proclaim and fix things rather than listen and react to things.

Finding that balance I think is really important and it's really important to understand we're a unique and fragile time when it comes to conversations about race and equity.

When it comes to conversations about rural and urban. When it comes to conversations about how we participate in democracy.

This is a fraught time and we've got to be careful, particularly as nonpartisan organizations, we have to find that sweet spot between active advocacy for particular outcomes and advocacy for conversations that bring people together.

So going back to Mallory's initial introduction, I would say we are not in a position where anything that we do to respond to bringing rural and urban areas together is going to be no pain. I think there will be pain and I think it's an effort that we as university should and must embrace if we're going to live out our mission.

Thank you Leslie, that was a good pun on my name there.

Okay.

So let's dive into some questions because, you know, I had something laid out and just listening to you guys talk, my mind has gone somewhere else.

So before we start, I wanna say two quick things.

First of all, if you're in the audience, you can type in your question to our Q&A chat box on Zoom.

So someone's gonna be keeping an eye on that, please feel free to.

And then to, my panelists. I'm a radio reporter.

I'm gonna tell you what I told every academic and expert before an interview.

Which is obviously we want depth and nuance to our conversation, but just we also want it to be accessible to everyone in the audience.

So just keep that in mind as you answer these questions.

And of course, the more succinct you're able to be the more ground we can cover.

So I'm actually going to start with you Leslie, what you were just talking about in terms of a lot of times, a lot of times academics or universities want to parachute in and do community engagement on, you said, our own terms.

I'd love it if you can give us an example of community engagement, done well.

One or two specific examples, and Lisa, I'd love for you to keep an ear out to this answer because from your perspective as the non-profit partner, what makes for a good, productive relationship ship with the university or with a funding partner?

So Leslie, why don't you start with that question for me.

So if you really want to be to boil it down, I would say, listen. There are two groups we've been involved with that are both about listening.

One is called Listen First.

That's a national conversation project that is being launched all across the country, that's about being in meaningful dialogue with people that you disagree with. People that you are just meeting for the first time.

Second, we're doing a movie screening next week of a film called Listen, that is about young people who are left behind and ignored and no one is paying attention to them. And so listening, I think is the most important thing that universities could do.

And it is absolutely counter to every element - we're used to standing up in front of people and lecturing for 50 minutes or a 100 or 80 minutes.

And that's really not what works.

So my other side hustle as a university person is I'm Vice Provost for Outreach and Engagement at NC State.

And we've put up a series of principles that we think are important for any university that is going to be doing engagement with community groups.

I'll paste that into the chat in just a second, but that really all boils down to...

Here's what my mom told me when I was growing up.

God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason.

So let me stop there.

I'll paste in these principles of engaging with community in case people wanna look at it.

Thanks.

I mean, so Lisa from your perspective.

On the other end of that relationship, I'd love it if you could talk through some specific examples, you know, I don't need you to name names or anything, but some good experiences and some bad experiences.

I'm gonna work really hard to be succinct because I have a lot to say about this, but I was so refreshed in what Leslie said, he laid it all on the table.

Oftentimes and too often, our universities don't approach our communities as partners.

They impose solutions, they impose theoretical assumptions about what will work in a way that's not community informed.

We've also talked a great deal -- if you're going to include a community organization's name in a grant application that community organization should know about it.

And should benefit from it.

So just some of the issues that we've had to work through, ourselves. Community engagement done well, is being done right now in our community.

One of the projects that we've worked on here to address our worst in the nation Black birth outcomes is with our Dane County Health Council.

That consortium of the five health systems, along with our local United Way, our school district, our public health system and our county Human Services department collectively came together.

The precursor, they collectively came together. And after 20 years of working on this issue and realizing the work was not community rooted or community informed, they decided to start over and to fund an engagement process that engaged an organization which happens to be our organization, to do a very deep community engagement process, where we did focus groups over a nine month period to ask Black women, Black men, and childbearing age youth what they saw as the major impediments to their health quality. What they identified as key stressors and root causes of poor Black birth outcomes.

That process revealed such rich information, spoken from the mouths of community that we crystallized in a report called the Saving Our babies report, which I'll drop in the chat.

And that report commissioned by our health systems, which includes university partners, has become the impetus for a blueprint and a strategy that is more robust than any thing that systems can come up with on their own.

And we've now established the five-year strategic plan across systems that everyone has collectively bought into.

And five years of concrete steps that we're co-building together to address this issue.

And over the three years that we've been partnered up in this way, with this strategic plan that we co-created from this report that was commissioned by systems.

We are making more progress now than has been made in 20 years of effort.

So the answer is community informed is a must.

It accelerates our capacity to have impact.

It addresses what community knows it needs.

And when you combine system support and dollars in one direction, you begin to triple the ability to bring real change and promising outcomes.

And that's what we're learning here in Dane County.

I want to chime in real quickly.

I mean, it's sobering as the numbers and statistics are in Wisconsin. I mean, this is a nationwide disparity. Here in Virginia, Black women are three times, three times more likely to die during or after childbirth than white women.

I once interviewed a State delegate, accomplished lawyer, a graduate of one of the Nation's top Military institutes, and a Black woman.

Those disparities exist across those economic spectrums.

She almost died giving birth to her two twins because she says her pain was taken seriously. Across the country, here in Virginia.

Sheila, I wanted to turn to you and something that you mentioned.

Well, first of all, I'm gonna give you a chance. Do you have anything to add to this conversation we're having right now? A about how to work with communities well and examples of times where it hasn't been done well? Do you have anything to chime in on that front?

Well, absolutely.

I mean, one of the things I'll say is that what Leslie expressed was why NC State is really a leader in these issues.

And why APLU my organization, the association of Public and Land Grant Universities has recognized NC State for its engagement efforts.

And so a couple of things to say about that, first of all, you're both right on with respect to the need for universities to start with taking the questions directly from the community and involving them in the development of the research questions.

While this is something that many universities have resisted, it is actually becoming more and more socialized into the universities with public health in the lead.

Because community engaged research is something that public health researchers have really led on and it is becoming more frequent in other aspects of research.

And this is where our engagement, the engagement folks in our universe, and the research folks in our universities need to be working together more closely in order to ensure that good engagement

practices like Leslie talked about are shared with the research community and in fact, the engagement people became part of the research process.

So that they are helping to make sure that we have these long-term relationships with community organizations that ensure that we are identifying where our goals are aligned and how we're going to over the long term address those goals. And there are definitely examples of that from when I was working in Oregon that I could offer, but why don't we move on to your other questions.

Sure. I mean, you mentioned in your introduction that proposal that you guys were able to pull together the One Oregon center.

And unfortunately, what happened with that? State budgeting?

State budgets are tight and that was the case in 2008 and it is the case again.

Now, I'm wondering if you can go back to that time when things were left on the cutting room floor and you guys had to regroup.

Funding was tight and you had to look at all these ideas you had spent time coming up with and figure out how to dedicate limited resources.

I think there's a couple of things to say about that.

So first of all, we realized that we could address some of these issues in the process of some of the other work we were doing.

So for example, my center was doing population forecasting under a contract with the state to do the population forecasts for every county in Oregon.

While we were doing that, we were able to work with Oregon State University to make sure that we had in every community people on the ground who were informing us about what they're hearing about economic development potential, where the challenges were to infrastructure that might limit what happens in rural communities.

So understanding what was going on on the ground in those rural communities improved our forecast, but it also helped us to connect those communities with resources that they needed to address issues that came up as we were listening to those communities about what was happening.

But I think more importantly, it's important for universities to understand that engagement doesn't only serve the service mission. That engagement also improves student success.

And it also improves the quality of our research.

So this is a way that I have been able to convince some university leaders that this actually is something that is not an extra.

Community engagement is something that serves these other goals that are stakeholders really care about.

Our students care about it, our legislators care a it.

And our communities care about making sure that students are successful and engaged and they get committed to their communities and they learn how to listen in the way that Leslie has expressed so well.

So that means that researchers and those who are teaching courses understand that engagement is a core part of their work.

Let me just, Mallory, let me just mention two things that sort of amplify what Sheila was saying.

First there are some good studies that suggest that students that are engaged in service learning earn higher GPAs.

So they come back from internships or courses where they're applied.

They're more energetic about it because they can see the the real-world application of what they're doing.

And on a national level, I think over the next five years, we're going to see a greater tendency for national funding organizations, those places that really are important to a lot of universities' research efforts. The national agencies joined the National Science Foundation, which already requires statements about what's the broader impact of this research that you're doing.

So asking people to be thoughtful from the beginning about okay, you're doing this. Where do you think this might go?

And I think you'll increasingly see national funding organizations ask people to be thinking about that.

And so as Sheila said, that increases the interest in teaching and learning, it increases the interest in research.

And it shows that this sort of engagement work can be valuable to a university, not just to fulfill its service mission.

Could each of you maybe touch on once again looking towards specific examples of some ways that service learning or student engagement in this process has been really well?

Sheila, you just got through reviewing the applications from across the country of places that are doing this amazingly well.

Yeah.

So let's see, I don't want to make any announcements because that will happen next week.

But I would say, there are definitely examples where students grow through their engagement work. So for example, there's one program in particular, I'm thinking of where they are working with youth.

And they grow in their leadership abilities while they're working with youth.

And so they're engaging these -

The students are working with youth in the community?

Right, they're working with youth in the community. And as they begin to do this, they start at a lower level, but some of these students who I have heard from grew their own leadership potential through their engagement work in the community.

And that made them committed to to a career of service, which is how a lot of people get committed to service in the long run. Lisa has a really interesting personal story about that.

But I think a lot of university students get exposed to the benefits of service while they're doing service learning that is required at many universities.

But I think that there's good service learning and there's not so good service learning if students are just trying to check off a box for their resume, that's gonna look good on a grad school application or a job application. We need to be making sure that their engagement is much richer than that.

And I'll just say there's one program in Oregon called Oregon solutions where they're building long-term relationships and signing cooperative agreements.

So there's an important problem that needs to be solved.

We need to dredge the river and all of our communities need to help pay for this.

And they need to decide what to do with the dredge spoils or a complex problem like that, that requires an agreement among rural and urban communities that are connected by this river.

The university has not a dog in this fight.

So we're able to, we were able to bring information to the table, have student researchers helping with that effort and understand the complexity of that effort.

But it is the neutrality of the university that allows that engagement to happen.

So that is another thing that Leslie mentioned. Our neutrality, our ability to bring data to the table.

And then the student piece allows the students to really understand the complexity of these issues.

I want to say one quick thing here, Leslie you were asking Sheila and touching on an award program for organizations.

You're saying you can't announce because you're making announcements next week, would you maybe drop a link that provides examples to previous award winners though?

I'll certainly do that.

I should have thought -- I'll think of more as the conversation goes on, I'll definitely do that.

Lisa, you raised your hand a little while ago and I don't know if we've moved too far past what you wanted to say.

No, I just wanted to piggyback on what Sheila and Leslie both said that the benefits to universities through students into students directly are so real. We've had a cycle of over 20 interns over the last eight years who are placed either directly by university departments with the foundation or through a

larger statewide program called the Wisconsin area health education centers program, which recruits students from within the UW system but also from around the country.

So we've had interms from UW campuses throughout the state as well as from Spelman College in Atlanta, where there's a direct relationship between the UW and with HBCUs to recruit and retain health equity and medical student talent between those two universities.

And these students really get meaty projects.

They get really deep, broad opportunities to contribute in very big ways to major initiatives or projects that we're doing to deepen community engagement which we've now taken virtually.

And it really has bridged the University and our organization in a more powerful way because students are sharing and pushing departments to kind of break traditional ways of engaging them and they're demanding more.

Because they're getting lit on fire by these community-based experiences that are really adding color and character to what it means to be a public health advocate, to be a future health professional or physician.

They're getting their hands dirty in the real work that is often a missing link in practice.

So their practice is going to be more informed by this community-based work in and it creates a different type of Dr., a different type of advocate, who then enters a system that has biases and blind spots.

And it begins to change systems through those experiences of individual practitioners.

So it's a really crucial part of our work and of universities.

Let me build on that with two rural examples that might be useful.

So we have kind of a rural version of what Lisa was just talking about.

It's called Rural Works. And the intention is that we get 40 to 50 students who otherwise might be captured by the metropolis that is Raleigh and just see that that's the only place where they could possibly find jobs.

We find them jobs in rural areas while they're undergraduates, so that they can overcome the myth, just the word of mouth, which suggests that if you want to real job, you have to work in a city.

We try to get them real experiences in rural areas and they come back more excited.

We don't have data that I would take to the bank right now, but we see their GPAs going up.

We know anecdotally they come back as Lisa said, on fire.

So that's one thing.

The other thing we've done on a data side is just to put up a snapshot that has information that counties can look at. The ones who've been using it disproportionately have been rural.

And the most popular feature of it has been commuting patterns.

So we tend to think that commuting patterns into cities are one-way only.

And what we find is that for most areas, a large percentage of people who are commuting into urban areas are from rural areas.

But also there are a lot of people commuting into rural areas from cities every day.

And so we have this notion that it's a one-way sort of vacuum effect that's going on.

But just putting that data out there has informed some really rich decisions.

Then we just, we just did it for every county -- North Carolina has a ridiculous number of counties.

But we just did it for every county.

And so those folks can look at -- okay, every day, how many people live in this county and commute out, and how many people who don't live in this county commute in for work?

And there are huge numbers of counties where both those numbers are 40 %.

So a bunch of people commuting out, but a bunch people commuting in and just putting that data out there, I think has been really helpful for people to have meaningful conversations and maybe change the way they think about economic development.

So if I can kind of summarize a couple of really big main points, I'm hearing from all three of you is the importance of listening to communities, seeking deep, rich, meaningful community engagement maybe before deciding which direction to head into, right?

That's the fundamental first step.

And then also seeking, sorry, looking to students as opportunities, as ways to really enrich your programs with their buyer energy and curiosity.

I don't want to gloss over the times that we're currently living in. The COVID-19 pandemic is changing everything.

I'm curious what impact you're seeing on the work and the programs that we've been talking about.

And how you've had to adjust.

Leslie, in one of your intro slides, you specifically talked about how, maybe I misunderstood, but I heard you say that you've seen a lot more engagement in some of these questions because you've had to switch up how you're doing it.

Maybe you can start by talking about that as an example.

So we've long had this inviolable belief that the only way you can really get people talking is if you bring them physically together in the same room at the same time, and magic happens, there are sidebar conversations, everybody's there. They share the same information at the same time.

And I think we still believe that, but it's a little b, it's not like a capital B belief; it's not a religion anymore, because we've seen what can happen in the chat box over there.

We've seen that we can reach dramatically more people.

If we don't ask them to travel to one place.

So I think that's been a real discovery for us, is that there is a certain power and it's not inexhaustible, that can happen when people come together virtually.

So that's been helpful.

I think the other learning probably that we had is that we've tended to think because we want to get 500 people together in the room at the same time that an emerging issue is one that emerges over many years.

And in this case, we've been asked and forced to think much more quickly about what's the emerging issue of this week with the pandemic?

And so the name of our organization has become, I think a little more accurate in the time of pandemic.

Anyone else want to chime in on that question of how the pandemic has changed the work you're doing and you've had to adjust on the fly?

Yeah.

I'll add to what Leslie said.

We've had to take everything virtual.

We actually spent last year raising money to open the first Black Women's Wellness Center in our community, which you see in an image behind me, that's a photo of what the lobby looks like and that was a well supported community effort.

The center exists because our community is showed up, which includes our university community and all those cross-sector partners we mentioned.

We opened in January and we had to close the doors in March.

Just three months into being brand new. But the work has picked up. We moved it to the virtual space.

Our partners have responded to the work that we've already started, this collective partnership around Black maternal and child health. We found ways to carry that work on.

And we've seen that folks commitment to really centering the issues of racial equity and economic security are more pronounced.

And just listening to everything that all of us have shared.

I think we can't leave this call saying that today, universities cross-sector partners, city, county, government, everyone if you're not centering racial equity and economic security as the locus of how you're having conversations around urban or rural, urban and rural advancement, you're having the wrong conversations.

Just gonna say it plain and simple, you're having a wrong conversations and your solutions will continue to miss the mark or miss critical opportunities to really advance systems change. It's great to invest in

targeted ways, it's great to do health promotion; it's great to do a bit here and a bit there. But if we don't take a broad view of how we shift the eco system. And those conversations have really become the center of every conversation we're having locally in our university through that Wisconsin partnership program that I mentioned, the endowment that funds so much of our innovation work around health equity advancement. They have really centered that question.

And you can see it in the way they formulate their RFPs. And the way that they've shaped unique opportunities for relief dollars that they created very quickly to meet immediate, demanding, emergent needs within the last several months.

That has been heartening and I don't think that shift is going to change as we move hopefully beyond this most dire part of the COVID era, I guess you can call it, I think that's gonna stick or at least I hope it is going to stick.

yeah. For all the tragedy of the past several months, hopefully, convincing partners to centralize these questions of racial equity it's easier and more apparent to folks now, than I ever was.

And demonstrates that there not tone deaf; on top of that, we call it the triple pandemic, of pre-existing racial inequalities, police violence, and COVID-19. If you're not centering that conversation, then you're not facing facts about what our critical community and national issues really are.

Sheila, you have anything you want to add or chime in on on this conversation about how work has changed right now?.

Yeah, there's been a group of universities that have been sharing ideas about how their engagement has changed with -- we're calling it scaling engagement online.

And there's been, definitely there's evidence that you can engage more people through an online environment and one of the things it does is it erases some equity concerns around how long it might take to get somewhere or the funds that are needed to travel somewhere, but it introduces new equity concerns about access to broadband and devices that allow that to happen.

And a lot of our universities including North Carolina State, have just done an amazing job of trying to patch holes in the network, in the broadband network by providing short-term fixes.

And we definitely need to be addressing the long-term broadband situation.

But I think there's also a shift to helping students to do engagement work remotely and understand what that means.

As far as their ability to pick up on cues.

How do you read the room when the room is a bunch of squares?

One of the things that we need to teach students when they are doing community engagement work is to understand the power dynamics in a room.

How did you do that when the room is a bunch of squares, it's a little bit more difficult, I think, but Leslie's point of just the amount of engagement that people are really wanting -- people have found this to be very true.

People wanna share what's going on.

And I think that we're in the middle of a huge experiment about how we can use technology to reduce some of the inequities address some of the inequities that it introduces.

So it's a continuing, it's a continuing story of how we're going to shift our engagement over time.

I want to point out to folks in the audience in that chat box Leslie has been dropping I think to all attendees as well, Sheila as well, some fantastic resources.

So if you want more details or want to dig into anything that they're saying I think there's a lot there to dig into.

I want to make sure that no one's missing that.

We've got just a few moments left, and I want to kind of wrap up and give you each a chance to respond to this last really fundamental question.

It's kind of like a last elevator pitch for why this work is important.

It may seem so obvious, but I think up here in Virginia, for example, I'm in Richmond. The far southwest corner of the state is six hours away from the state capital.

Communities there in western rural Virginia are geographically closer to the political leaders in West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee. Why is it important that we seek to bring these communities together, that are so disparate, that live such different lives?

What's the value in that?

I want to open it up to all of you, to kind of wrap that up for us.

Do you have any volunteers to start or should I choose someone?

I'll start with sort of a lame answer.

I think that'll make the answers that Sheila and others come up with much better as they do it.

But I think you can make the argument on a number of levels. I think you can talk about the importance of recognizing economies of scale.

And I think there's an economy of scale argument that can come from encouraging rural areas to work together, not to abandon their identity, but to realize that part of what Sheila said at the beginning, this aggregation advantage that metropolitan areas have is real and so everybody has, for example, their own water system; everybody everybody has their own sanitation system; everybody has some cases, three or four different schools systems within an area.

This may be a time where, not where we're blowing up county lines, but where we're thinking about some economies of scale for things that can reasonably be made more positive by collaboration and working together.

So things that can benefit from economies of scale I think are really important.

We tried to do it 15 years ago in our university system.

We tried to make the point that it would be better to all buy books together because the price of everybody's books would go down.

And that was countercultural.

Everybody hated it.

But in the end, the university saved huge amounts of money by doing that.

I think there is an economy of scale argument that universities are qualified to make if they come in, not with all the answers, but at least being part of that. I think there's a mutual benefit effort that we can articulate, that communities can learn from.

I talked about us doing it with commuting patterns showing that there is activity going in both directions.

There is a quite simple self-interest thing.

If somebody's polluting the stream upstream from you, because that's the only way they can figure out to make their economy work.

That's going to affect the downstream water that you get.

So that interdependence argument I think is really important. In terms of the arguments for universities to do this I think it's our mission.

And I think we are better if we fulfill our mission, to the extent that we are state-supported or land grant universities, I think we have even more motivation than others do, but we're members of our communities, we're members of our state, we're part of this country. We're part of the world. And a key part of our responsibility as to help people to be stronger everywhere.

I'll jump in here.

I think Leslie, the interdependence is an important one and it's one that not everyone can see.

We still get our food, our energy, our fresh air, carbon sequestration. We get a lot of benefits from rural communities.

And those of us who live in cities don't always recognize that.

And we are also, we have this shared fate because we share a state government that provides funding.

The decline of rural community is going to affect everyone in a state and it's just I think that we have a responsibility to do more to make sure that the benefits of higher education are shared more widely.

And that includes people who have been left out of our universities for lots of different reasons, whether that's systemic racism, whether it's because our tuition is not as affordable as it once was. Or if it's because it's just too far for someone in a rural community to travel.

So I think we have to continue to work towards reducing those inequalities while we recognize that that interdependence as a real thing.

There's lots of ways that universities can contribute to recognizing and addressing that interdependence by looking at supply chains, shortening supply chains, making sure that things that are made in rural communities have markets in urban communities.

Just a variety of things that we can do to address that.

So I'm sure that Lisa has other things to say about this.

Lisa, we have just a couple of minutes left and I'll let you have the last word on this to wrap things up.

I would just say Leslie and Sheila are the experts from the University system perspective, but here at the University of Wisconsin, that too is an imperative.

There's a concept, the Wisconsin idea, which is a pledge built into the culture of the university that is intent in its reason for existing is to improve the lives of every person in the state of Wisconsin.

And I truly believe universities in their neutrality have the power to be forerunners of creating solutions that no other sector can create. I think there's a unique positioning that universities can take and must take and we've been looking at this here as the next decade, as we enter this next decade, we have an imperative and an opportunity to really drive something different and something new.

And we've been shaping the conversation around COVID, not only as a dire occurrence in our community, but as an opportunity to shift and to shape the new, to define the new normal.

Universities are in a position to define what the new normal, root it in an equity lens an economic security commitment, where they can drive the change and set the narrative and convene the partners.

We have powerful convening power as universities.

And I think now is the time to exercise that and service all of the citizens of our state and to create solutions that impact urban and rural and bring us together because we know, as Sheila said, we've got a shared fate and we really all need and want the same things.

So Universities, step up, be courageous. Be leaders in this new terrain where we're all counting on each other right to come out of this period stronger than before. And I think universities play a huge role in that.

Well, thank you, guys.

Thank you so much Leslie, Sheila, Lisa, our great panelists, for your expertise and your time.

That wraps up this segment of the event.

I'm gonna hand it back over to Caroline now, who's going to introduce and get things rolling on what happens next.

Thank you guys.

Thank you Mallory. We really appreciate having all of you here today.

Great discussion.

So next we're going to have Guru Ghosh, moderator of our next panel.

And we're gonna to put up a slide and you can kind of get an overview of who's going to be in that.

And we will begin shortly.

Well, that was a fabulous discussion.

We are waiting still for Peter Blake, I believe, to join us.

But Mallory, let me commend you and the panel members for just having such a fabulous discussion around the role of universities.

And the best practices on economic development, community engagement nationwide.

So hats off to Sheila, Lisa, and Leslie.

It's so remarkably informative.

We go from the range of pursuit of finding the perfect life partners, to systemic change, and taking a systemic approach and a systems approach to looking at the complexities of the urban and rural spectrum.

And also a reminder that really the engagement mission of public land-grant universities are deeply interdependent on both students. As well as the quality of research that is coming out of our faculty labs and research agenda in order to certainly make lasting societal impact for decades and generations to come.

So I have the privilege to really catalyze continuous discussions with two members of our panel this morning.

Carrie Chenery is one of the members of the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors at Virginia Tech.

And founder of the Valley Pike partnership, which is a firm focusing on economic development, coalition building, and government relations.

And Peter Blake is the executive director of the State Council for higher education for the Commonwealth of Virginia.

And without further ado, I'm going to turn things over to both Peter, as well as to Carrie to opine about what they heard earlier this morning from our panelists.

And also to connect the dots and from what they heard from our national speakers and to bring it back in terms of the opportunities and challenges that we see across the Commonwealth of Virginia in the urban and rural spectrum.

Carrie, shall we start with you?

Happy to.

Thank you so much.

And I think I see Peter's phone, so we might not have his video, but I think maybe we'll have his audio.

Peter, is that right?

Maybe not.

That's OK.

We'll kick it off.

I just want to thank our presenters; that panel was so great and I have three pages of notes, and I feel like Mallory said at the beginning. I had a whole idea of how I was going to connect the dots and wrap this up and I've gone in a completely different direction now.

I think, let me defer to Peter quickly.

I think I see him now.

Great.

Well, I think there are a couple of big things that stand out to me from this discussion, but if we are talking about bringing this back to Virginia and connecting the dots with the opportunities and challenges that we see that our going on, maybe in my case, from an economic development, higher ed standpoint, certainly the same for Peter, I think one of the big things that kept coming up in my mind was this idea of incentives.

So that's my economic development lens coming out a little bit but if you think about it from a business perspective, what are people, institutions, and organizations incentivized to do?

And I think in Virginia, one of the things that we're really working on, and I think doing well, is incentivizing universities to work together because in the past, we've been incentivized to come compete against one another and some of that is policy-driven, and some of that is budget-driven.

And so, Sheila was telling her story about funding getting scrapped at the last minute in the state budget; that just seems all too familiar for me and I think that one of the things that we can focus on through multiple initiatives across Virginia is -- and we're doing this through the Catalyst with Life Sciences through GO Virginia, through a number of organizations that are interested in bringing together existing assets with universities.

But I think rooted in that policy idea, we have to incentivize our institutions to work together rather than compete for state dollars or compete for certain programs or recognition.

And along those lines, I was also thinking a lot about mutually beneficial programs.

So I think Leslie's comment was really telling about how universities tend to by nature, maybe drop into communities and say, here's how I'm going to fix your problem rather than listening and I think that's great advice, but we also have to think about why what matters for the university.

How does it make them better?

And Dr. Ghosh, I think this is something you said at our last board meeting, when Virginia Tech is focused on their global land-grant mission, the work that they're doing makes them better.

The work that Virginia institutions are doing can't be seen as a favor.

It can't be seen as swooping in and saving a community or addressing an economic development issue and I'm going to mention one more thing and then flip to Peter for a minute, but along those lines, as a specific example, oftentimes I found from state economic development work that universities would think, Well, my role in economic development is that I'm the largest employer in this locality or I'm the largest employer in this region.

And that just doesn't go far enough.

That's not really pulling in the full benefits for either party, the surrounding community, the state, the entire constituency of that university.

So I think that's another thing that again I think is being done well in Virginia is trying to help universities understand that by being really engaged with the community around them, it in turn makes their programs and their initiatives and their mission to Leslie's point, their mission that much easier to fulfill.

So with those kinds of top-line comments, I'm gonna flip to Peter for a little bit.

Thank you.

And good morning.

It's a pleasure to be with all of you.

I'm sorry. The technology is not as robust as I'd hoped.

I thought those panelists were just outstanding.

I don't know I could add anything to what they said as far as how to work better. Good definitions of a partnership. And so on.

But I guess just a couple of takeaways.

They talked about a number of different gaps. So noted, economic prosperity gaps. We've characterized it for this conversation as being urban/rural, but we also know there are many other dimensions to economic prosperity. Educational attainment gaps, that's where we, at SCHEV, that's where we spend a lot of time thinking about how to close educational attainment gaps that we see in many different ways.

And then Health and wellness that Lisa brought up was just sort of staggering, the gaps that they experience in Wisconsin.

And of course, Mallory brought it home to Virginia as well.

And then Lisa also put an exclamation point on equity being a gap, which is persistent and pernicious and one that we need to continue to try to overcome.

And then Leslie, so articulately, along with Sheila, putting it in the context of what are colleges and universities' obligations and opportunities to help.

And so those were the kinds of reflections that I had.

When you think about, well, what is it that you do? And Carrie already introduced a number of ways in which colleges and universities can perhaps work a little bit more in partnership with one another. And

be more intentional and have more productive partnerships with the communities. I really liked what Dr. Boney said about listening and being community informed.

So I think we do well in fulfilling our obligation and seeking better opportunities to help, but also know that we have a ways to go.

So a couple of ways to go.

This is a Virginia Tech, Virginia state event. So the land grant mentality can mean so much and be so transformative in our communities.

And I know for Virginia Tech and Virginia state, because they are land grant institutions, have that baked into their missions.

And I think other colleges, universities, could benefit from a little bit of that thinking as well.

So that's one.

And then I spent five years in the community college system and I tell people that I thought I knew something about higher education until I started to work for the community colleges.

And their involvement in what goes on, on the ground in their community, where they do excellent listening, is unparalleled. The word community in community college is something that those colleges really take to heart.

So we haven't talked a lot about the role of the community college in helping to address some of these gaps, but I just want to add that they're critical. So a land grant mentality is valuable, doing all we can for opening up access to improve educational attainment. And there are a number of strategies that can go with that.

And I think colleges and universities also can bring some some creativity of thought and intentionality around some of the problems that is valuable and that we perhaps don't utilize as fully.

And then I'll just conclude with some of the things Carrie said too about partnerships, among institutions and then certainly in the communities in ways that respect those communities. And I think as Leslie said, realize that communities come up with solutions, not someone coming from outside.

So I'll pause there.

And let me hit on a few more things.

Thank you Peter.

I wanna if I didn't say this strongly enough that panel was fantastic, to Peter's point; it was really great.

And I really enjoyed getting outside perspectives and hearing about some other best practices and again, thinking about a statewide lens. One of the things that Virginia, particularly the legislature, is always concerned about is what other states are doing and how we benchmark against them.

And one of the things that the Virginia Economic Development Partnership is doing right now is a local, regional competitiveness analysis of local and regional economic development groups all across the state.

And why that matters, I think for higher ed is that some of these organizations are intertwined with higher ed.

Some of them are closely aligned from a research perspective, a marketing perspective, and a workforce perspective.

So I think to Leslie's point earlier about things really changed when you put a set of data in front of people, that's an important process that's happening statewide right now.

And then also want to make sure we talk a little bit about the business perspective of higher ed.

Someone who runs a large non-profit recently said, you can be business-minded without being business-like.

So, you can be a non-profit focused on a core mission.

You can be a university focused on service and focused on community development, but still have a business mentality.

And I think that that's really important for a lot of these discussions because the university landscape is obviously changing.

For all of the reasons that we've just discussed today, including cost and including future workforce needs, so I think that for the businesses that I work with right now, we have a lot of conversations about what's a need to have and what's a nice to have.

And I think one of the luxuries with higher ed is that you get to focus on what's nice to have because you have to, to sustain and continue to be relevant and so Sheila made that point earlier, which was great, is that engagement is not extra. Engagement is critical.

And so I think that there's a shift in Virginia for that thinking.

I think single points of contact at universities and each region is also important.

I think it makes a big difference from the community development landscape and being visible in your community, whether that's visible on Zoom or visible in person. Makes a big difference and it can't be seen as this is a nice thing for us to have on staff.

It really has to be seen as incredibly important to sincere, authentic, relationship building in a number of ways.

So I have a lot of great notes and a lot of great takeaways and I think that Virginia is well positioned to continue to find linkages with economic development, with workforce, with research, with mission based work, and not losing sight of what the student population wants and needs and looks like for generations to come.

So Peter, what am I missing?

Nothing, but let me build on two things.

One was what are other states doing and then the other word that you said that struck a chord with me was relevance.

And I think Virginia has been fortunate for over decades now in broad, nonpartisan support for its colleges, universities, public and private across the Commonwealth.

And you look, and that's not the case in other states.

And so as difficult as we think we have it sometimes from the higher ed side, as far as funding and respect and being harassed by state officials or whatever, we're in a lot better situation than most other states, as far as the support that we get from our governor, from our legislators, the outstanding leadership like Carrie serving on our boards of visitors in a non-political way.

We're very well-positioned.

Part of maybe the main reason that we have that support is because our colleges, universities are relevant, they are relevant to the students for the individual prosperity that comes to graduate, to the communities and the prosperity that having a college and university in those community brings and the outreach and engagement that our colleges undertake across the Commonwealth.

We're relevant.

And I think that really means a lot.

And perhaps now, in the COVID world, in the [inaudible] of some of the social justice issues that we've been encountered in the last 6-7-8 months or longer I should say, we have a need to be even more relevant in order to maintain, sustain the progress and the broad support that higher ed has had in Virginia because of the thing I just mentioned, we need to step up in new, bolder and more creative ways in order to maintain that relevance.

And I think all of that goes back to business again.

I think increasing opportunities for Virginia's laser focus on being the best for business has an additional positive effect that, that really is going to ultimately mean that it is the best for community.

It's the best for workers and students, and citizens and minorities in underserved areas.

And I sit in, what is apparently rural metro Virginia.

I'm in the Shenandoah valley and that so one of the things that really hit me earlier was Mallory's comment of how can you care when you're six hours away?

I'm paraphrasing, that's not what she said, but I think the point is, how do you make meaningful linkages when you're that far away and I think that goes back to making sure that you have strong communities that have some sense of connection and are incentivized to work with other regions and work with other universities that are also doing similar community and economic development work.

So I totally agree with Peter that it's good to to be a Virginian and we have it better than most.

So Peter and Carrie, let me nudge you both a little bit to talk about the issue of access and student debt.

As we look at what is happening across the nation now, students are carrying, alumni from most of our universities are carrying about 1.6 trillion dollars worth of student debt.

Homes are getting more and more expensive to purchase.

And as we look at this socioeconomic milieu in our society now, the pursuit of the American Dream for the next generation of our youngsters coming into an active societal role is going to be a lot harder than it was for us 20-30 years ago.

So I wonder what role should public higher education leaders as well as businesses that one day we'll be looking to hire these individuals into their agencies, what type of partnerships should we be promulgating and advocating for as we begin to put our arms around this significant structural challenges that are going to be befalling our young citizens, both within the Commonwealth and of course beyond.

This is Peter, I'll jump in.

That's got a lot of different parts to that question.

And Carrie's vantage from a board will be valuable here, to the boards responsibility, of course, in managing institutions setting tuition, those sorts of things.

Absolutely right about that.

It is large and growing.

I will say it has leveled off some, whether the pandemic is going to drive it even higher again I don't know, but we did see a leveling off of the last several years, in the amount of debt that a graduate from a public university has.

So that's a little bit of good news, but it's still true that over 60% of the graduates are carrying an average debt of something in the range of 26-27 thousand dollars upon graduation.

And at the same time, higher-education, some education beyond high school, a credential of value, is more important today than ever.

So, we have kind of a combination of things going on with demographic changes where some of the fastest growing communities across the nation are those that we historically have served less well. Racial minorities, first-generation students, low-income students, at the time when we need more higher education and at the time when revenues both from tuition side of the equation and state funding are strained.

And so yes, those are those are the forces that are coming together that are going to make our jobs even more difficult over the next couple of years.

But they also lies to one of the obligations and opportunities to help to go into close and address some of these gaps.

So I'd be interested from Carries perspective on how you discuss it when you're making on the ground decisions at a board.

I think one of the things to consider for both perspectives, from the student perspective and from the university perspective right now, is that the value and the relevancy going forward depending on those conversations requires creativity, innovation, and partnerships.

So. And some level of adaptation. I believe higher ed always pays for itself.

I believe that's an investment that is something that transforms individuals, transforms communities, all the things that we started the conversation with earlier this morning.

But what does that look like realistically?

How is that implemented?

And I think that having a conversation is the most important thing because I think, and maybe Peter would agree, I don't know, that maybe for years we've kind of ignored this and thought, well, yes, they're rising costs, but we're gonna plow ahead and I think we're having more of an honest open discussion now about the real impact of that on individuals and families and communities and those types of things. And people have more options.

A traditional college path is very different right now than it used to be.

All of that creates opportunities from the university's side of things.

So I think that goes back to Sheila's, Leslie's, Lisa's, everybody's point about how can universities have to see themselves more holistically, have to see themselves as more, as more than degree generators.

And I don't mean that in any negative way at all.

But the fact that there's a holistic mission and a greater conversation for universities than the cost of tuition and that's my perspective.

As we take the next step in terms of public land grant universities your perspectives about the diffusion of innovation.

I mean, most of our faculty, so many of our faculty are deeply involved in creating new knowledge, commercialization of their research. And certainly one of the legs, one of the pillars that we stand on as large research land-grant institutions are to make sure that our research emanating out of our universities are actually enhancing society, broadly speaking.

But the diffusion of the innovation doesn't happen as rapidly as perhaps we would like to see happen.

And I think part of the challenges were sort of spoken about by the panelists and certainly Carrie, you and Peter alluding to this as well, that our partnerships and our coalitions that exist between our entities aren't as robust.

And we aren't listening as actively with one another to create those types of deep bonds that would be seen as a value proposition for all the parties involved.

I wonder if you could speak about from your vantage point, what you see occurring in the communities and with research coming out of universities in general.

I guess from my perspective, I've seen universities as a more active, more present economic development partner than they used to be and I think that relationship with business has really become much stronger and healthier.

And there are a number of custom workforce grants and custom incentive grants that Virginia has implemented with a number of University partners. The tech talent pipeline's a great example.

All of these things where business is driving the bus a little bit more than universities.

And I think that's a positive. Often the other way around is what results in -- well, now we've spent a lot of time and money on researching something and it has no application or it didn't go where we thought it was going to go.

And when you come in from the other perspective it seems from -- I'm making very general broad statements right now, but it seems to be much more beneficial for both parties.

Peter what do you think?.

Well, I'm struck by you saying this could be more beneficial as it is more business driven.

And I think that is a big part of the answer; when we had the Virginia Research investment committee that the legislature created several years ago, one of the first things we did was do a step back to assess the relationships that we already had, areas of greatest opportunity for research investment. And then which ones had the greatest potential return for commercialization.

They're both content specialists in various research domains.

But then also, they needed to be partnered with someone with a certain kind of business acumen who could go into the lab, work alongside a researcher and make the connection from a business perspective. When you had those two coming together, then you would bring things to market more quickly and to our communities in more robust ways.

So I don't know how that's done. We've talked about things like entrepreneurs and residents which has a little bit of attractiveness in the community these days.

But I'm sure there are other things to do through VRIC and now subsequently VIPA.

There is a fair amount of funding.

And through the combination with the assets from the Center for Innovative Technology, a fair amount of funding to incentivize, back to a word Carrie used earlier on, some of this kind of behavior.

So I think we're set up to do a better job with that in the coming years through all the prep work that we've done for VRIC and now with VIPA.

I think universities have to have to understand that for business, universities are a safe spot to experiment and I don't mean that in any demeaning way, but the university should be the safe partner to take the stress and finances of speed and access to market out of their future decisions and their growth.

And that's the beauty of the partnership when you can intersect in that way. So I think maybe we should be taking some questions, Dr Ghosh, what do you think?

It's a wonderful idea. So Caroline, shall we turn things over to you? If you're hearing anything from the Q&A session?

Yes. Thank you.

So we do have a couple of questions coming in.

One of them is, how do we ensure that our system are less static and more dynamic?

Funding. Making sure again, I don't mean to keep giving the same answer, but just incentivizing and rewarding change and momentum.

I'm sorry.

No go ahead, Peter.

I was going to say money always helps. I think some self-reflection on whether or not -- it's easy for us to talk about how good we are, but we also need to talk about how can we improve.

And so I guess in addition to that, always have the capacity to question where we are, whether or not we can get better.

So a combination with some money, I think that kind of introspection is valuable.

I also think to that question, being more dynamic usually means bringing more partners to the table and changing up the traditional partners. And I think that's something that universities are realizing they have. Again, this goes back to this, it's not a nice to have, it's a need to have.

That's a good point. I like that because it gets back a little bit to what I mentioned earlier about the creativity that is often a part of a university community.

Thank you.

Another question that we had is, are there differential impacts of student debt across/within urban and rural communities?

I'm gonna defer to Peter on that because I don't have any good good data.

My gut would say yes, but I'll...

I don't know if I've looked at it quite like that -- urban, rural communities, as far as amount of debt.

So there may be, but I'm not aware of them.

So I'm sorry.

It's a fabulous question, I think in many ways, and I think we need to be looking at that.

If you're going to make, to Carrie's point, if we're going to create rules, rewards, and incentives for success, we've got to be able to determine that, especially for our marginalized communities as well as our minority communities.

That's a great question I think.

Well, we certainly can point to differences and gaps, that level by some of the characteristics that we described, just not sure that I looked at it by urban and rural. So to your point, thank you.

I think we have time for one more question and that is, how can Virginia universities better engage to address the social and health challenges in our urban and rural communities? Just like our prior panelists were touching on.

I'm just so impressed by Lisa's organization and what she's doing. And Leslie's and everybody's, just going back to how much I loved the panel.

But I think finding broader different nontraditional partners is the key and knowing that will make the university better, not here's a thing that I think I should do or here's a thing that I feel like I have to do, but if I do this, then in turn, every other thing I'm doing, and everything that is driven and tied to my mission will be enhanced.

We're very fortunate to have teaching hospitals across Virginia and other centers of health and academic excellence and engaging them in some of the kinds of partnerships that Carrie just described.

And elevating the data so that we all know what the problems are can go a long ways towards addressing that issue.

Those issues.

And I just think doing those partnerships in earnest, so looking for more, better, deeper partners and doing it for the right reasons.

Deep, wide, and ubiquitous, I think those are the key phrases as we move forward in our engagement with all the entities involved in society.

We're coming upon the noon hour and I wanted to thank both Carrie and Peter for a marvelous discussion as we moved forward with our deliberations after the panel discussion. Thank you both for your time and look forward to seeing you here in Blacksburg before too long and Peter, look forward to seeing you in Richmond.

Caroline, I'm going to turn things over to you.

I believe you have the last word.

Go Hokies! Go Hokies!

Absolutely, always Go Hokies!

So thank you, everyone.

For our panel and our moderators and we really appreciate it.

Please make sure to visit the URL listed.

We're gonna have someone drop that in the chat as the discussion does continue online.

And you can also find upcoming, Vibrant Virginia book there as well; a draft chapter will be posted for discussion early next year.

So look out for that and announcements for our December virtual form, which will be on funded higher education community partners in Virginia.

And lastly, we will send an email containing a link to today's forum once it is available.

So thank you so much for joining us.

thank you all.

Thanks for having me, thanks Peter and everyone, John and Dr. Ghosh, and Caroline. A great team that got this setup. So thank you.

Thank you all.