

2020

**RWD**

**Rural Workforce Development**

*Southern Region Summit*

REPORT:

**Innovation in  
Times of Change**



In collaboration with partners United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development Innovation Center Partnership Division and the University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton (UACCM), the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute (Institute) facilitated a scaled-down version of the 2020 Rural Workforce Development Southern Region Summit on November 5, 2020, at UACCM's Workforce Training Center.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, planning partners cut programming from two-and-a-half days down to a half-day hybrid event, with 54 total attendees (42 virtual and 12 in person).

Through breakout sessions in the virtual space and small, physically distanced groups in UACCM's Tyson Training Hall, participants discussed developments in the rural workforce during the past year and examined future opportunities for collaboration and innovation. They identified their personal strengths and ways in which they can take action to support rural workforce development through their work in their communities.

# Participants

Although there was a drop in participation this year (95 people participated in the inaugural Summit in the fall of 2019,) there was an increase in racial and ethnic diversity among participants, greater representation from other states in the southern region, and many first-time Summit attendees.

Participant Race/Ethnicity   2020		
Black/African American	21%	n=7
White	70%	n=23
Other Race/Ethnicity	9%	n=3

Participant Race/Ethnicity   2019		
Black/African American	8%	n=6
White	89%	n=66
Other Race/Ethnicity	3%	n=2

A considerable proportion of participants this year did not identify their race/ethnicity, likely due at least in part to a hasty re-registration process for a scaled-down half-day program that resulted from complications associated with the pandemic. Of the 62% who self-identified, 21% identified as black or African American, 70% identified as white, and 9% identified as Hispanic/Latino/of Spanish Origin, Asian, or a mix of multiple races. This means that, even with a higher response rate of 78% in 2019, the representation of people of color among this year's participants increased a full 19 percentage points, to 30% (see tables to right).

This is important because the United States Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey data show that people of color make up nearly 28% of the population in the rural South, and data trends show that this percentage continues to rise.

Of the 43 participants who responded to the question of whether they attended last year's summit, 70% (n=30) indicated that they were first-time Summit attendees. Moving forward, it will be important to maintain engagement with these participants as we seek to grow the network of regional citizens working in rural workforce development.

Originally envisioned as a regional Summit, just 9% of participants the first year hailed from states other than Arkansas. Efforts this year to invite stakeholders outside of Arkansas resulted in an 8% increase in regional participation, to 17%, with residents of Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia in attendance. Regional cooperation is critical to developing, sharing, and perhaps most importantly, scaling improvements in the areas of rural workforce, e-connectivity, technological innovation, economic development, and quality of life, which make up the five key-indicators of rural prosperity as identified by the USDA Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity (2017). All of this year's regional attendees joined the Summit virtually.

# Meeting Structure & Insights

Participants began the day by listening to a conversation between UACCM Chancellor Lisa Willenberg and Dr. Marta Loyd, Executive Director/CEO of the Institute, about the importance of developing the rural workforce, both historically and today. The two leaders then shared their institutional and collaborative work to address rural needs, with a focus on improving access to training, removing barriers to work, navigating the changing demands brought on by the pandemic, and collaborating to share knowledge and innovate.

Next, participants worked in small groups to identify challenges and opportunities within the rural workforce. Their insights are listed in the table to the right.

As these data points show, even during a global pandemic participants saw more opportunities in developing the rural workforce than challenges.

Throughout the morning, participants shared **resources** for grants, loans, and programs via the chat feature in the virtual space and through pre-recorded and live Pechakucha presentations, which are engaging ways to tell an organization's story through 20 images shared for 20 seconds each. From there, participants wrote about their personal strengths and shared how they might use those strengths to support development of the rural workforce in their work and in their communities.

## Opportunities

- ✓ Maintain COVID-19 adaptations such as remote work and training as cost-saving measures and reallocate those budgeted funds to programs to maximize positive impact on the rural workforce
- ✓ Utilize new technical skills/systems to reach more people through virtual technology
- ✓ Adapt some parts of traditional workforce training curricula to online learning to increase accessibility
- ✓ Develop virtual internship opportunities
- ✓ Increase workforce training programs with robotics
- ✓ Employ virtual and augmented reality strategies to simulate in person workforce training
- ✓ Maintain virtual marketplaces established as a result of the pandemic
- ✓ Dismantle large central offices in favor of smaller satellite locations
- ✓ Capitalize on improved health and safety practices
- ✓ Further develop organizational emergency response plans
- ✓ Recruit talent through remote work opportunities
- ✓ Rethink onboarding procedures
- ✓ Grow apprenticeship programs
- ✓ Expand use of school buses as wifi hubs
- ✓ Create new ways of interacting socially
- ✓ Influx of new employees due to rise in early retirement can lead to culture shift
- ✓ Live local; work global

## Challenges

- ✔ Expand broadband access
- ✔ Data security
- ✔ Ensure high levels of virtual engagement
- ✔ Loss of soft skills
- ✔ Depression and anxiety brought on by job loss, isolation, etc.
- ✔ Rise in early retirement can lead to loss of institutional knowledge and inability to fill open positions
- ✔ Potential for decreased employee accountability and productivity
- ✔ Work/life balance

The morning program closed with keynote speaker Caitlin Cain, who serves as Vice President and Rural Director of Rural LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation) and is based in New Orleans. Cain shared impacts of Rural LISC's work, which focuses on equity and capacity-building in five key areas: access to capital; broadband and infrastructure investment; workforce development; disaster recovery and resilience planning; and place making. Note that these areas are closely aligned with the USDA's key indicators of rural prosperity outlined above.

## USDA Key Indicators of Rural Prosperity

- ✔ e-Connectivity
- ✔ Quality of Life
- ✔ Rural Workforce
- ✔ Technological Innovation
- ✔ Economic Development

# Evaluation

Rooted in the life and work of Winthrop Rockefeller, the Rockefeller Ethic is a formula that combines diverse opinions and respectful dialogue with collaborative problem solving to effect transformational change, and it continually drives all of the Institute's work.

The Institute measures its programmatic work through four primary indicators: Mutual Respect and Understanding; Collaborative Problem Solving; Knowledge and Skills Development; and Process Evaluation.

## 4 Primary Indicators

- ✓ Mutual Respect and Understanding
- ✓ Collaborative Problem Solving
- ✓ Knowledge and Skills Development
- ✓ Process Evaluation

The 12 in person attendees for this program participated in a brief survey. Results for each indicator are as follows:

## Mutual Respect & Understanding

### Chart 1

100% of participants reported feeling very or incredibly comfortable voicing their thoughts and opinions. 83% of participants reported that they were confident that other participants understood their position.

## Collaborative Problem Solving

64% of in person participants reported that a collaborative environment was created to find joint solutions and/or recommendations. This percentage is lower than typical program participant responses, and may be due to limitations of physical distancing requirements due to the COVID-19 pandemic on facilitation methods.

## Knowledge & Skills Development

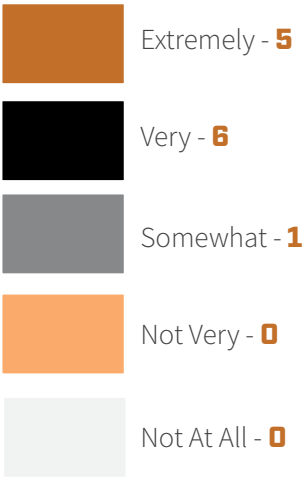
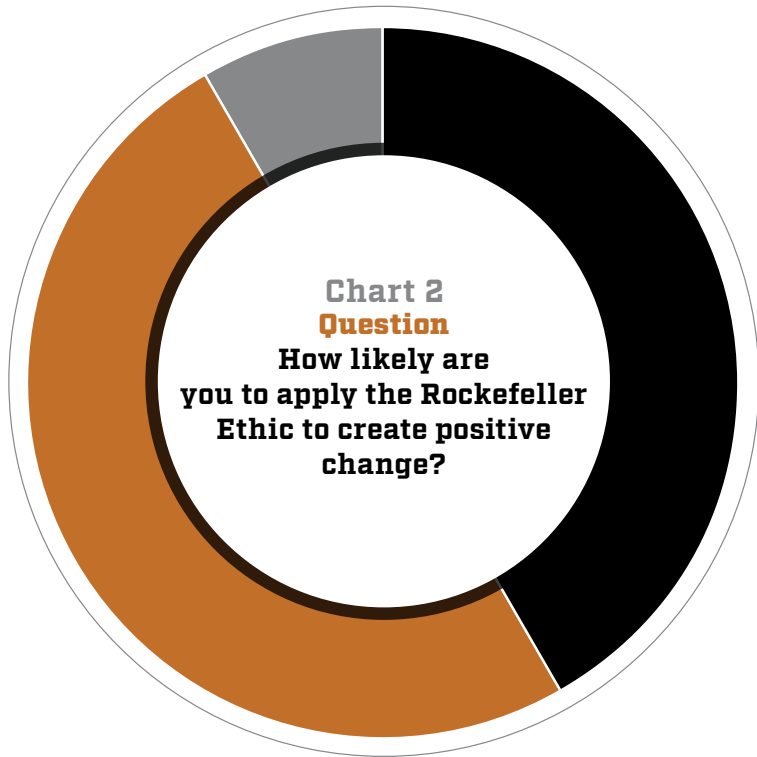
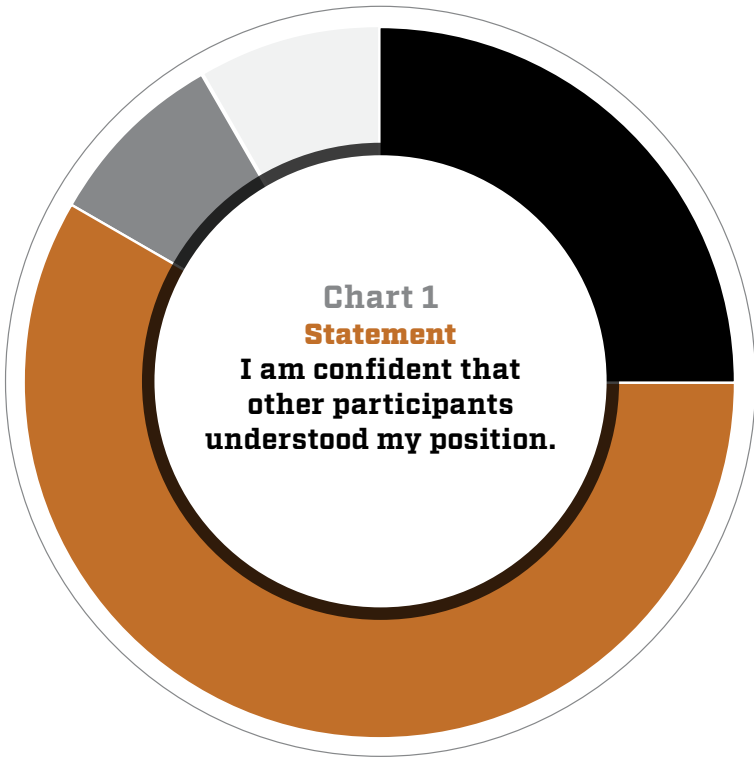
### Chart 2

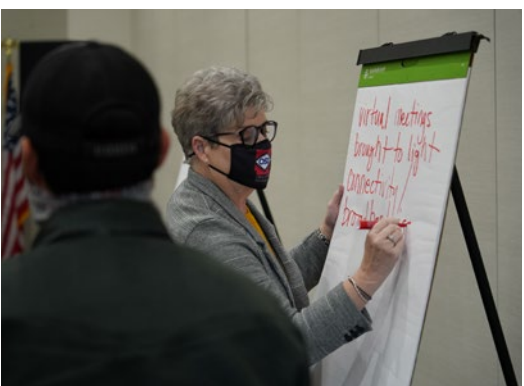
92% of participants indicated that they are likely to apply the Rockefeller Ethic toward the creation of positive change, 58% of participants indicated that they are very or incredibly likely to continue to be engaged in the topic of Rural Workforce Development because of this program, and 18% of program participants indicated that information in the program led to better informed decisions.

## Process Evaluation

67% of in person participants reported that the program was well-facilitated, focused, and productive.









Overall, the Institute's first hybrid online and in person event was successful,

particularly as the team adapted programming less than two weeks prior to the event to accommodate changing patterns in participation due to the pandemic and experienced challenges associated with developing a pricing model for the virtual program given that many organizations are offering virtual programs free of charge during the public health crisis. Although some indicators are below the Institute's typical rate of success, many lessons were learned throughout the process, including those regarding timing variations between in person and virtual environments and technology requirements for seamless program delivery. Just as participants saw more opportunities than challenges in these times of change, the Institute looks forward to future possibilities of integrating the virtual environment into its in person events to increase accessibility and include an even more diverse array of voices in its work.





Want to get involved?  
Contact Institute program officer Amber Jackson at [ajackson@uawri.org](mailto:ajackson@uawri.org).



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