

THE OKLAHOMA ACADEMY 2022 TOWN HALL

Findings Report & Key Recommendations



OKLAHOMA'S HUMAN POTENTIAL

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy

Take Action

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy
2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall



Tips on How to Successfully Talk with Your Legislator and Help the Oklahoma Academy Move Ideas Into Action

The stronger your relationship is with a legislator, the more the legislator will respect and listen to you. Advocating is all about building relationships. As a citizen, you hold a powerful position; you are a voting constituent who is aware and informed of the issues facing this great state.

- Remember that legislators are human beings. Share your story.
- Be positive. Always make your case without being critical of others' personalities or motives.
- Be respectful. Allow the legislator a chance to respond, listen carefully to their advice and don't interrupt.
- Be prepared to listen and speak. Give them an opportunity to voice their concerns and ask questions.
- Don't be intimidated.
- Be honest. If you don't know the answer to something, admit it and try to get the information later. Be credible, honest and trustworthy.
- Avoid party politics.
- Maintain a positive relationship.
- Find common ground. Build a bond, not a gap.
- Don't apologize. Never apologize for your position.
- Thank you notes.

Be sure to check The Oklahoma Academy website for the complete Library for information on all Town Hall Resource Documents, Issues Briefs and Full Reports. The link to the Library is <https://okacademy.org/online-library/>

Building Awareness, Developing Policies, Inspiring Oklahomans to Move Ideas Into Action!

The Oklahoma Academy, P.O. Box 968, Norman, OK 73070
Phone: (405) 307-0986 Email: lynn@okacademy.org
www.okacademy.org

History of The Oklahoma Academy

Founded by Governor Henry Bellmon

Founded 1967 • Revitalization 1985 • Town Hall Process 2001



The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals was founded in 1967 by one of Oklahoma's greatest statesmen, Henry Louis Bellmon. As the first Republican Governor of Oklahoma, top officials, who were Democrats, surrounded Bellmon. In order to achieve a mark of success in office, Bellmon relied on factual information and rational decision making to work with both the state's lawmakers and the citizenry.

As a politician, Bellmon believed in doing what was in the best interest of the public even if it cost him the next election. Still, he knew the people were an important part of the equation for a successful state. Not only did he seek to engage them in the development of public policy, he understood the connection between a sound quality of life for the citizens and the promise of a prosperous state. Dedicated to fiscal responsibility, Bellmon increased government efficiency and invested in critical government services.



Henry Bellmon

Bellmon's humble upbringing in a farming family and his service in WWII cultivated an honest, thoughtful, nonconformist who valued education, collaboration, and integrity. His vision of The Oklahoma Academy was not unlike a farmer planting seeds in the spring in anticipation of a bountiful crop in the summer. To cultivate an informed, engaged citizenry, the people must first have an opportunity to study the issues and participate in the policy development process.

After his first term as governor, Bellmon knew there was a need for open, nonpartisan dialogue in the young state. He sought to create a public policy organization that was independent, nonpartisan, and inclusive. The purpose of which was to provide citizens the opportunity to participate in a truly democratic process designed to shape the future of Oklahoma. To this day, The Oklahoma Academy upholds Bellmon's vision and the organization's long-standing reputation as the state's premier citizen-based organization for nonpartisan public policy development.

From its inception in 1967, to its revitalization in 1985, to its adoption of the Town Hall process in 2001, The Oklahoma Academy has maintained its relevance in raising awareness and shaping public policy in Oklahoma. Despite its small staff and limited resources, The Oklahoma Academy generates and manages an impressive amount of public policy information, engages the citizens of Oklahoma in discussing and developing policy recommendations, and works ardently with the community leaders and policymakers to implement the resulting ideas through community and legislative action. To date, more than 87 pieces of legislation passed since the adoption of the Town Hall process in 2001.

In a time when politicians often hear only the keyboard warriors and dissenters, the work of The Oklahoma Academy is more important than ever. In this divisive political era, The Oklahoma Academy is dedicated to providing a safe, supportive forum where the art of listening, debating, and collaborating are not only valued but also protected. We've covered a wide range of topics, including education, small business development, government structure, crime, technology and the future, and the state's constitution. We've achieved many milestones and accomplishments, and thanks to citizens like you, we continue to grow in numbers, reach and influence.

It is our sincere hope that you will continue to support us in this endeavor to unite the public in working toward creating solutions for a stronger Oklahoma and its people.

Introductions

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy 2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall



The most important element of economic competitiveness in an innovative economy is a properly skilled workforce. In a changing economy, the skill requirements of employers along with the workplace culture of today's labor force are evolving at a rapid pace. To develop Oklahoma's human potential for the future we must create a climate that puts all the elements in place for Oklahoma to become an outstanding global performer.

During 2022, the Oklahoma Academy Town Hall took on a challenge that is affecting our health, education, economy, and most importantly, our people: Oklahoma's Human Potential – Enhancing Our Workforce in an Increasingly Innovative Economy. In October, 2022, Oklahomans met at the Choctaw Casino & Resort–Durant to spend three days discussing this important and timely topic.

The participants represented a diverse group from professionals in the field of education and economic development, business to legislators to interested citizens. Having reviewed a 215 page resource document, the participants engaged in lively debate and made many findings about the workforce of Oklahomans and how we are doing in promoting our state. From these findings came various recommendations for improving how we educate, attract and retain a workforce for an increasingly innovative economy.

This Town Hall Report describes the process these participants went through, much of the richness of their discussions and, finally, the specific findings and recommendations. This is offered for all policymakers in Oklahoma to consider where legislative or regulatory responses can appropriately address some of the concerns. Additionally, this is offered to all Oklahomans to both learn about what our economy is facing in our state and to suggest to you some things that can be done to educate, attract and retain a skilled workforce.

In a rapidly changing economy, the time is now for the right approach to a system that balances the needs of individuals and businesses to ensure Oklahoma has a well-educated and skilled workforce to effectively compete in the global economy. There is a tremendous opportunity at hand, and Oklahoma must seize it, and with your knowledge and help, this can be achieved!

We hope that you will read this Report carefully and that you will choose to help The Academy to take action where needed. The Academy's tagline is "Moving ideas into action" and we will be working in the coming years to see the necessary actions taken as outlined in this Report.

Mike Neal,
Oklahoma Academy Board Chair
President & CEO, Tulsa Regional Chamber

About the Town Hall

The Oklahoma Academy defines leadership as the ability to get people moving in a single direction. One of the most effective ways of achieving that goal is utilizing a process like the Town Hall. The Town Hall incorporates all the elements of a successful consensus-driven process by emphasizing collaboration, cooperation, egalitarianism, inclusivity, and participation. Each must be in place to arrive at the destination improving the overall business climate and quality of life for Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Academy's Town Hall process is successful in implementing recommendations unlike any other because strong group relationships have been developed through the process that results in greater trust amongst the attendees. By "leading" a diverse group of Oklahomans through the Town Hall process, the Oklahoma Academy provides a value-added service unlike any other.

Priority Recommendations

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy 2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Priority Recommendations**



The Oklahoma Academy chose to focus on enhancing our workforce for an increasingly innovative economy in the 2022 Town Hall. A thorough research document was compiled by the Academy and distributed to the Town Hall participants in advance to allow them to read and help give them a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

The Town Hall identified four specific areas dealing with Oklahoma's workforce: new workplace culture, current workplace climate, education/training/skills, and the rural & urban nature of Oklahoma. In addition, experts in the field of human potential, business/economic development, special populations, and education were invited to provide information and insight during the plenary sessions.

The full report, drafted from the single consensus of all the Town Hall participants in the panel groups, gives insight into the attitudes and thoughts of the participants. From the full report (located on pages 16 through 35 of this document) the key recommendations and Town Hall findings report were constructed. The Town Hall participants advanced 24 recommendations for enhancing our workforce for an increasingly innovative economy. Following the Town Hall, the participants were provided the list of the recommendations they developed and were asked to prioritize the recommendations indicating the top five recommendations they want The Oklahoma Academy to emphasize first in the 2022 year and to indicate what their first priority, second priority and so on would include. All of the consensus recommendations are published, but the primary emphasis during 2022 is placed on the priority recommendations selected by the Town Hall participants. The priority and key consensus recommendations on how Oklahoma should enhance our workforce for an increasingly innovative economy are as follows:



Consensus Town Hall Key Recommendations

Recommendation= Proposal as to the best course of action

(The recommendations are in bold print in each of the following areas. Page numbers refer to where the recommendation is found within the full report.)

Top Priority Recommendation

- The workplace is moving in a more technological direction. The response to the pandemic and its impact on all forms of commerce has accelerated this trend. **The Town Hall believes Oklahoma's infrastructure does not support this new workplace model. The Town Hall therefore recommends the development of an accessible and affordable WIFI/broadband infrastructure for remote workers. This is an essential tool for Oklahoma's workforce whether those workers are employed for in-state or out-of-state companies. The Town Hall also recommends dollars not simply be "thrown at the problem," but are very "smart, targeted investments."** It is important to remember these infrastructure deficiencies are not just a rural issue, but that urban areas also are affected by the lack of high-speed broadband. [Page 18](#)

Priority Recommendations

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy 2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Priority Recommendations



Second Priority Recommendation

- To lessen the skills gaps in Oklahoma, **the Town Hall recommends postsecondary institutions first identify what skills are in demand and establish a consistent statewide skills-based assessment. Data must be collected and reviewed, and educational programming to fill skills gaps should be data driven to guide growth and direction. It is necessary that data sources include district reports of the workforce needs. Postsecondary institutions must be flexible in utilizing data to ensure policies meet workforce demands. Postsecondary institutions should endeavor to communicate with employers to assist with identifying what skills need to be integrated into curriculum.** [Page 23](#)

Third Priority Recommendation

- In terms of whether Oklahoma needs a new workforce model, **the Town Hall recommends a greater coordination with more support would be helpful in strengthening Oklahoma's workforce. Those leading existing efforts must form collaboration to achieve this goal.** Overall, we have so many great programs in little niches of Oklahoma – but there is not statewide connection, collaboration, nor communication. Addressing these issues through coordination and support would allow the state to provide more comprehensive and consistent information to potential businesses. [Page 28](#)

Fourth Priority Recommendation

- **The Town Hall recommends that, because of the importance of tribal activity, in urban and rural Oklahoma, the relationship between Oklahoma elected officials and tribal governments must be strengthened. In light of the antagonism of the past several years, the State of Oklahoma must acknowledge that the past rhetoric and posture is unsustainable and pursue a reset in intergovernmental relations with Native American tribes. It is imperative that an attitude of respect be shown to the sovereign tribal nations. Oklahoma must acknowledge the great impact Native American tribes have had on our history and culture, and affirm a willingness to both strengthen and expand the collaborations and partnerships we have with ALL tribes, not just the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole Tribes. The Town Hall recommends that Oklahoma's state and local governments intentionally develop relationships with the tribes, prospectively and not merely for self-interest. The fruit of this investment may not immediately be defined, but the parameters of these "government-to-government" relationships can be formed to build the bedrock of future mutually beneficial agreements on economic development and job growth.** [Page 30-31](#)

Fifth Priority Recommendation

- As of 2021 in Oklahoma, the average ratio for student-to-school counselors is 411-to-1, far higher than the American School Counselor Association's recommendation of 250-to-1. The impact school counselors have on students – or lack thereof – is easiest to understand in the high school context, where students face an increasingly dizzying array of choices about "what comes next" after high school. Without knowing their options, students inadvertently may bypass the best path forward, or simply make no choice at all. **The Town Hall recommends the student-to-school counselor ratio in Oklahoma be reduced to increase the educational outcomes of our students.** [Page 20](#)

Key Recommendations

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy 2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Consensus Recommendations



WORKPLACE CULTURE

- Without question, labor workforce participation has been low post pandemic. The cause for this low participation rate often derives from lack of affordable childcare access for Oklahoma's workforce. **The Town Hall recommends Oklahoma amend its current subsidy of childcare centers from attendance based to enrollment based. Childcare centers have fixed costs, and under the current reimbursement system, any day that a subsidized child is not in attendance, the childcare center loses money. Conversely, for students that are not subsidized, parents usually pay based on enrollment which means the parents pay whether the child attends or not. Changing the state's reimbursement to one based more equitably on enrollment would levelize state and parental participation.** [Page 19](#)
- **The Town Hall recommends the state expand the income thresholds to make more Oklahomans eligible for childcare subsidies.** An added benefit would be that increased income thresholds would help families avoid interruption of eligibility due to fluctuating income. Some parents experience a benefits cliff effect of wage increases because an increase could destroy their subsidy eligibility. This places both employers and employees in tough positions. [Page 19](#)
- Paid parental leave is an investment Oklahoma could make to provide flexibility to the labor force. Parents need to manage the needs of their children during the workday. The federal solution of FMLA does not adequately provide for flexibility in Oklahoma because FMLA mandates apply to private sector employers who employ 50 or more employees. In Oklahoma, the majority of businesses have fewer than 50 employees. Women in particular, would benefit from the flexibility that paid parental leave could provide because women are often the primary care providers for children, and also for the elderly and the disabled. Therefore, **the Town Hall recommends the state implement a paid parental leave policy.** [Page 19](#)
- The Town Hall believes Oklahoma's expungement process is too difficult and fails to include all associated records, such as arrest records for prior offenders to adequately navigate the process. Currently seeking an expungement for a conviction requires the hiring of an attorney for which funds are not always available. **The Town Hall recommends the expungement processes be streamlined in the state. Tied to the concerns regarding the difficulty of receiving an expungement, the Town Hall believes Oklahoma incarcerates too many people for too many crimes. Oklahoma must reduce the number of nonviolent crimes considered a felony for which people are convicted. Instead, we must focus convictions on "serious" crimes, that could positively impact the number of people available in our workforce. Additionally, The Town Hall recommends Oklahoma expand diversion programs that redirect offenders to programs or treatment that positively channel their talents rather than simply incarcerating them which increases our budgetary costs and reduces our potential workforce.** [Page 21](#)
- When addressing skills building, education, and career planning with regards to justice-involved persons, attention should be given to each person's mental health both while incarcerated, and upon re-entry into the workplace to reduce recidivism and to encourage resilience. **The Town Hall recommends Oklahoma invest in strategies to sustain Individual Placement Support (IPS) services. IPS supported employment helps people living with behavioral health conditions work at regular jobs of their choosing.** With IPS, case management is assigned for persons experiencing barriers and that person checks in frequently. [Page 22](#)
- **The Town Hall recommends the importance of "corporate culture," modeling ethics," and creating a climate where "workers are valued" are imperative to attracting employees from outside the state to work in Oklahoma. To achieve this environment, the Town Hall suggests having work/life and lifestyle benefits; treating workers with respect and dignity; offering scholarship and tuition reimbursement; 529 plans; enhanced benefit packages; and strengthening the onboarding process for improved retention. The Town Hall also believes the development of an industry mentorship program modeled after successful small businesses; recommending that Higher Education and CareerTech waive all fees for small businesses to participate in career fairs; take advantage of the many SBA lending and non-lending programs; and the use of the employee retention tax credit are key for a strong workforce.** [Page 25](#)

Key Recommendations

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy 2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Consensus Recommendations



CURRENT WORKFORCE

- Groups and businesses working in collaboration is the solution to improving the lack of affordable childcare centers in communities across the state. It is recognized that many businesses are not large enough to provide their own childcare centers, and at some businesses, the nature of the work to be done is not conducive to creating more flexibility in employee scheduling. **The Town Hall recommends that businesses and communities work together to create solutions such as community childcare centers with investment by the community, business partners and the state. These community centers, which could be organized as non-profits, could tap into available grants and private income streams to support their efforts. Centers should also explore their eligibility for federal grants. Matching 21st Century Community Learning Center funding to expand out-of-school and after-school time programs to all public school districts.** [Page 19](#)
- **The Town Hall recommends we must focus on the diversity of the workplace. To meaningfully reduce institutional barriers to marginalized groups, the Town Hall recommends the creation/strengthening of partnerships between employers, schools/education, and advocates for these populations.** The creation of an asset mapping system for all resources being delivered and the receiving populations is an example of how these partnerships would be beneficial. Another example is to identify, promote and utilize an integrated platform for shared closed loop referral and case management for better coordination among Providers, Government, Health Plans, and Nonprofits. [Page 22](#)
- To attract employees to Oklahoma, **the Town Hall recommends a “PR campaign” be utilized to better market the state and to “promote the positive” as an effective attraction strategy. We should emphasize our low cost of living (which helps offset the lower wage rates), housing, and energy prices.** Other strategies that could be used to attract employees include incentive programs to bring in out-of-state talent, support for the Tulsa Remote program, registered apprenticeship programs, and a series of macro-level issues like fixing the housing crisis, women’s health issues, tax credits for key industries, and reviewing/amending immigration policies. Additionally, **the Town Hall recommends implementing a statewide paid family leave policy that goes beyond the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 in order to attract and retain employees.** [Page 25](#)
- **The Town Hall recommends the need for coordination strategies to address the shortage of clinical training opportunities for nurses in Oklahoma. First, finding qualified nursing instructors is problematic because of the pay differential between teaching nurses and practicing nurses. Nursing instructors are not paid at the same level as those practicing. This serves as a barrier. While there are too few clinical training opportunities to accommodate program expansion in a significant way, one possible solution is to increase efforts to stagger clinical rotations in a way that permits more students to cycle through existing clinical training sites. Work should be done on developing more efficient ways to secure licensure in nursing.** [Page 25](#)
- **The Town Hall recommends soft skills ideally be taught at home. However, schools can effectively supplement instruction on these skills with appropriate investment and partnerships. Increasing youth soft skills is critical to many developmental outcomes. The training needs to begin earlier than K-12, with early childhood interventions first being implemented. Investing in early childhood development is critical to build important soft skills. One example of how this can be accomplished is the “Parents as Teachers” program - designed with home visits and educating parents on how to support the development of soft and pre-K-12 skills such as hand strength for writing. This program is currently offered through the Oklahoma State Department of Health. The Town Hall recommends collaboration between the three arms of education (K-12, career technology, and higher education) is essential for planning skills development for our future workforce.** [Page 28](#)

Key Recommendations

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy 2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Consensus Recommendations



EDUCATION / TRAINING / SKILLS

- Childcare positions are in high demand, but with low wages it is very difficult to attract new workers. **The Town Hall recommends utilizing education institutions to elevate the promotion of pathways to increase the childcare workforce. This should be accomplished by utilizing the methods used to promote STEM careers.** Tying childcare to educational outcomes could have a beneficial effect of raising wages while enticing workers into professional development. Focusing on education even at very early ages rather than just “babysitting” helps prepare children for entry into the K-12 system. [Page 19](#)
- More must be done for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) support and student outcomes. **The Town Hall recommends to decrease the drop-rate, especially among students of color and women, and a greater emphasis must be placed earlier in the STEM pipeline. Programs such as Individual Career Academic Plans (ICAP) and OKcollegestart.org have positive outcomes. It is important to continue to support and add funding for the ICAP program in all school districts across the state including funding a marketing strategy for the ICAP process.** Knowing the course requirements PRIOR to post-secondary degree or certification pursuits better prepares the student for success. [Page 20](#)
- Skills building while in jail, assistance with resume development, educational opportunities, and public/private partnerships developed to offer assistance on obtaining tools to assist workers are great ways to help reintroduce justice-involved persons back into the workforce. **The Town Hall recommends Oklahoma offer opportunities in the last six months of incarceration for training in technical trades and skills that equip future workers to seamlessly go back into the workforce. The state must expand access to job training programs like those offered through the CareerTech Skills Centers to assist in the transition into the workforce.** [Page 21](#)
- To eliminate worker shortages in key industries, **the Town Hall recommends employers and educators work together to implement the curriculum needed to help prepare students to enter the workforce and fill shortages. There must be an emphasis on educating students on the opportunities in key industries.** For example, STEM degree production is increasing in Oklahoma, but still is not enough. Only around 6% of graduating high school students are academically prepared for the STEM fields. This pipeline from the common-ed system is the key problem in producing candidates for these jobs. Until this issue is remedied, attracting graduating high schoolers from other states to attend Oklahoma universities in STEM programs is an important strategy. There must also be an emphasis placed on relationships and collaborations between applicable educators and industry specific professionals. Low paying careers requiring an economic investment in education for entry are struggling to find candidates. There needs to be some type of vehicle to lessen the burden on potential workers in these industries. [Page 25](#)
- Because teaching and nursing are typically female dominated careers, **the Town Hall recommends supports be adopted to assist these women in re-entering the nursing and education workforce when they have temporarily exited for family related issues. To better prevent future shortages in education from arising, the Town Hall recommends the continuous re-evaluation of teacher certification requirements and educational standards. Other strategies needed to better prevent future shortages from arising include creating a five-year moratorium on legislative action that would change educational standards in K-12, addressing added costs to restart certifications that have not been completed, and ensuring that K-12 works cohesively with higher-ed and career technology centers.** [Page 26](#)



One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say.” — **Bryant H. McGill**

Key Recommendations

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy 2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Consensus Recommendations



RURAL & URBAN WORKFORCE

- To proactively improve the quality of life in rural Oklahoma in order to fully unlock their workforce, **the Town Hall recommends rural communities fully assess their strengths and areas of services that will enhance the lives of residents, with the added benefit of attracting business.** For rural areas to attract new business, however, the Town Hall recommends communities be cognizant of the appearance of the surrounding area, and should examine their code enforcement status. New businesses can lose interest in small towns when there are a lot of unmaintained properties. New businesses look for communities with housing opportunities, and small towns may consider working with contractors to build starter homes as an attractant. Availability of dependent care is a prime attractant, and municipalities should encourage partnership from all interested parties in creating more dependent care availability, including expansion of family childcare homes. Communities absolutely must invest in childcare, education, and key services such as quality health care. [Page 32](#)
- **The Town Hall recommends that Oklahoma permanently maintain a position of Secretary of Tribal Relations, a dedicated position to be occupied by an individual who is a citizen of a federally recognized tribe; one who can build the relationship between the state government and tribal governments. One vision for the future is an “embassy row” model, where tribal governments have a place at the State Capitol or nearby to facilitate intergovernmental dialogue. Many of the tribes have full time government relations professional, but Oklahoma must facilitate this relationship in a better and more organized manner with the right leadership. To the extent that any legislation is needed to make this happen, it is recommended that the originating legislation come from the Native American Legislative Caucus.** [Page 32](#)
- To replicate the success of MidAmerica Industrial Park (MAIP) and others in the state such as those located at the Ports of Catoosa and Muskogee, you must have visionary, capable, energetic local leadership. Communities should aggressively pursue opportunities in industries such as hospitality, technology, aeronautics, and film. Some keys to success include investment into infrastructure, tribal partnerships, housing, and workforce development. The availability of water and inexpensive energy resources is a key component to attracting industry. **The Town Hall recommends Oklahoma undertake a study exploring what under-used or abandoned facilities that have similar re-utilization to the military facility that became MAIP. It is imperative that a statewide collaborative partnership be developed to guide investments into Mega-X sites and other major job-producing operations. The Town Hall also recommends Oklahoma develop a long-term strategic plan/vision starting with developing a comprehensive and inclusive asset map to better understand what asset avenues are available, such as skilled laborers, energy, and aviation with the intent to develop other major industrial parks.** [Page 35](#)



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Research and Planning Committee

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy
2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Team



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OKLAHOMA ACADEMY BOARD CHAIR & TOWN HALL CHAIR

Lee Denney, Interim State Director, Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education

REPORT CO-CHAIRS

Craig Knutson, President and Chief Executive Officer of Potts Family Foundation, Oklahoma City

Anita Poole-Endsley, J.D., Director of Student Union and Event Services, Rose State College, Oklahoma City

PANEL LEADERS

Teresa Meinders Burkett, Partner, Conner & Winters, Tulsa

Cara Jane Evans, MBA, Deal Flow & Venture Advisory, Encompass Financial Services, Inc., Stillwater

Steve Kreidler, Chief Business Officer, Colorado School of Mines Foundation, Golden, CO

Michael Gordon, Community Affairs Manager Northeastern Oklahoma, Public Service Company of Oklahoma, Tulsa

Amy Walton, Deputy Director Business Development, Oklahoma Department of Commerce, Shawnee

PANEL RECORDERS

Michael Davis, J.D., Ph.D., Special Assistant to the President for Compliance, Southeastern Oklahoma State University, Durant

Amanda Finch, J.D., Crowe & Dunlevy, Oklahoma City

Dylan Hartsook, J.D., Crowe & Dunlevy, Oklahoma City

Lucas Meacham, J.D., Crowe & Dunlevy, Oklahoma City

Anna Sanger, J.D., Conner & Winters, Tulsa

TOWN HALL PARLIAMENTARIANS

Darryl Schmidt, President and Chief Executive Officer of BancFirst, Oklahoma City

Kris Steele, Executive Director of TEEM (The Education and Employment Ministry), Oklahoma City

The Oklahoma Academy wishes to also acknowledge the members of the Town Hall Research and Planning Committee for their assistance in developing the resource document. The committee was also responsible for identifying speakers and sponsors invested in the 2022 Town Hall.

TOWN HALL PLANNING COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS

John Feaver, Ph.D., President, University of Science & Arts of Oklahoma, Chickasha

Rachel Hutchings, Principal, Chart Consulting, Skiatook

PLANNING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Craig Knutson- Town Hall Research Chair, **Howard Barnett, Jr.**, **Teresa Meinders Burkett**, **Scott Dewald**, **Joe Dorman**, **Cara Jane Evans**, **Mike Fina**, **Scott Fry**, **John D. Harper**, **Tony Hutchison**, **Martie Oyler**, **Sara Jane Smallwood-Cocke**, **Valerie Thompson**, Ph.D., **Richard Wansley**, Ph.D., and **Bailey Perkins Wright**, MPA

Town Hall Participants

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Marianne Akins

Career Counselor
Choctaw Nation Career Development
Hartshorne, OK

Melanie Anthony

Senior Director of Development
REI Oklahoma
Oklahoma City, OK

Cassidy Beck

Student
Rogers State University
Pawnee, OK

Jenny Bentley

Vice President of HR
Northeastern Health System
Locust Grove, OK

Jeff Boatman

Representative, District 67
Oklahoma House of Representatives
Tulsa, OK

Larry Briggs

Banking Consultant
Self Employed
Shawnee, OK

Lauren Brockman

Advocacy Specialist
Oklahoma Food Banks
Oklahoma City, OK

Candee Brossman

Owner
OC Digital Strategies and Leap DM-NWOK
Woodward, OK

Tambi Brown

Strate Center Manager
Autry Technology Center
Enid, OK

Mary Jane Calvey

President
Real World Management Solutions
Oklahoma City, OK

Glory Cing

Corporate Citizenship Coordinator
AAON
Tulsa, OK 74107

Joyce Coleman

Executive Assistant
OCAST
Oklahoma City, OK

H. Gayle Combs

Cyberspace Engineer
Department of the Air Force
Edmond, OK

Lauren Corbut

Vice President of External Affairs
Oklahoma Center for Nonprofit
Tulsa, OK 74137

Tony Cordray

Training Coordinator
Northeast Tech
Afton, OK

Cara Cowan Watts

CEO & Managing Member
Tulsa Pier Drilling
Claremore, OK

Kendi Cox

Manager of Human Resources
Canadian Valley Electric Cooperative
Seminole, OK

Ginger Crawford

Senior Manager
Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma
Employment Training Services
Durant, OK

Dilene Crockett

Associate Dean
Northeastern State University
Broken Arrow, OK

Kristin Davis

Director
Accenture
Edmond, OK

Lee Denney

Interim State Director
Oklahoma Dept of Career Tech Ed
Cushing, OK

Michelle Dennison

Director Policy Management
Oklahoma City Indian Clinic
Choctaw, OK

Jovette Dew

Director, K-12 STEM Programs
OSU College of Engineering
Architecture & Technology
Stillwater, OK

Joseph Dorman

Chief Executive Officer
Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy
Oklahoma City, OK

Laura Dumin

Professor
University of Central Oklahoma
Edmond, OK

Keith Endsley II

Supervisor
Tinker Air Force Base
Oklahoma City, OK

Mike Eubank

Superintendent
Mid-America Technology Center
Wayne, OK

Jim Evers

State Governmental Affairs Manager
Public Service Company of Oklahoma
Oklahoma City, OK

Sherry Fair

Executive Director
Parent Promise/ Prevent Child Abuse Oklahoma
Oklahoma City, OK

John Feaver

President
University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma
Chickasha, OK

Kay Floyd

Senator, District 46
Oklahoma State Senate
Oklahoma City, OK

Shelley Free

Superintendent/CEO
Kiamichi Technology Centers
Wilburton, OK

Andy Fugate

Representative, District 94
Oklahoma House of Representatives
Del City, OK

Town Hall Participants

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy

2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall

**Joseph Fuller**

HR Manager
Dal-Tile
Muskogee, OK

Matt Gard

Owner Manager
Flying G Farms LLC
Fairview, OK

Allison Garrett

Chancellor
State Regents for Higher Education
Oklahoma City, OK

Alaura Gilmore

Student
Southeastern Oklahoma State University
Durant, OK

Jennifer Haile-Egbert

Advising Team Leader
Francis Tuttle Technology Center
Edmond, OK

James Helm

Community Engagement Supervisor
Dale Rogers Training Center
Oklahoma City, OK

Brian Hill

Representative, District 47
Oklahoma House of Representatives
Mustang, OK

Kim Holland

SVP, Government Affairs
Signify Health
Tulsa, OK

Barclay Holt

Superintendent
High Plains Technology Center
Woodward, OK

Ashley Howard

VP, Marketing and Communications
NewView Oklahoma
Oklahoma City, OK

Dwight Hughes

Superintendent/CEO
Autry Technology Center
Enid, OK

Rachel Hutchings

Consultant
Chart Consulting
Skiatook, OK

JaHannah Jamelarin

Psychiatrist
Private Practice
Ardmore, OK

Jarrett Jobe

Vice Chancellor
State Regents for Higher Education
Oklahoma City, OK

Josh Jones

Director of Human Resources
KKT Architects
Tulsa, OK

Kari Jones

Director of Human Resources
City of Durant
Durant, OK

Liz Leaming

Ponca Works Director
Ponca City Development Authority
Ponca City, OK

Shawn Lepard

Owner
Lepard Consulting, LLC
Oklahoma City, OK

Jodi Lewis

Lobbyist
Motorola Solutions, Inc.
Edmond, OK

Marissa Lightsey

Executive Director of College and
Career Readiness
State Department of Education
Oklahoma City, OK

Kirsten Lindsay

Assistant Director, Workforce and
Economic Development
Francis Tuttle Technology Center
Oklahoma City, OK

Ed Long

Chief Impact Officer
MetaFund
Piedmont, OK

Douglas Major

Superintendent/CEO
Meridian Technology Center
Stillwater, OK

Linda Manaugh

Director of Communications &
Program Support
Potts Family Foundation
Oklahoma City, OK

Jena Marr

Executive VP/Chief of Staff
Redlands Community College
El Reno, OK

Mandy Mayberry

Chief Communications &
Engagement Officer
Autry Technology Center
Enid, OK

Jennifer McGrail

Executive Director &
Dept. Sec. of Science & Innovation
OCAST
Oklahoma City, OK

Elizabeth McKinney

Principal/Consultant
Norman Economic Development Coalition
Norman, OK

Jessica Miles

Director Talent Management
ONE Gas
Tulsa, OK

Danny Morgan

Director
Seminole State College-Rural Business &
Resource Center
Seminole, OK

Don Morris

Division Director-Oklahoma Office of
Workforce Development
Department of Commerce
Edmond, OK

Thomas Newsom

President
Southeastern Oklahoma State University
Durant, OK

Homer Nicholson

Mayor
City of Ponca City
Ponca City, OK

Town Hall Participants

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy

2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall



David Nimmo

President/ CEO
Chickasaw Nation Industries Inc.
Norman, OK

Adrienne Nobles

Vice President for Communications and
Public Affairs
University of Central Oklahoma
Edmond, OK

Stacie Nutt

Chief HR Officer
Indian Health Care Resource Center of Tulsa
Tulsa, OK

Jose Andres Olivo

Community Resource Coordinator
Cameron University
Lawton, OK

Daniel Pae

Representative, District 62
Oklahoma House of Representative
Oklahoma City, OK

Laura Patterson

HR Director
Neighborhood Services Org.
Oklahoma City, OK

Jessica Pfau

Chief Executive Officer
Lighthouse Behavioral Wellness Center
Ardmore, OK

Shane Phillips

Sr. Manager of Employment & Workforce
Development
Public Strategies
Oklahoma City, OK

Tony Pivec

Superintendent
Indian Capital Technology Center
Muskogee, OK

Amy Presley

Assistant Principal
Broken Arrow Public Schools
Broken Arrow, OK

Jim Priest

CEO
Goodwill Industries of Central Oklahoma
Oklahoma City, OK

Pam Richardson

President and CEO
Volunteers of America Oklahoma
Tulsa, OK

Ellen Roberts

Director of Ardmore Behavioral Health
Collaborative
Lighthouse Behavioral Wellness Centers
P.O. Box 189
Ardmore, OK

Janet Schwabe

Innovation/Incubator Manager
Pioneer Technology Center
Ponca City, OK

Sheila Shook

Director of Workforce & Education
Tulsa Ports (Tulsa Port of Catoosa)
Catoosa, OK

Jan Slater

Clinical Faculty
Oklahoma University School of
Community Medicine
Tulsa, OK

Mary Statton

Vice President
MST Manufacturing LLC
Claremore, OK

Clayton Taylor

President/CEO
C. Taylor Group
Oklahoma City, OK

Quincy Taylor

Human Resources Manager
WatersEdge
Oklahoma City, OK

Janie Thompson

Regent El Reno Community College/
Executive Director
Oklahoma Health Care Workforce
Training Commission
Yukon, OK

David Tillotson

City Manager
City of Glenpool
Glenpool, OK

Steve Valencia

Vice President for Development
Rogers State University
Claremore, OK

Michael Van Sickle

SVP, Chief Experience Officer
First National Bank & Trust
Chickasha, OK

Chris Wadsworth

Chief of Staff
Oklahoma Aeronautics Commission
Oklahoma City, OK

Dara Wanzer

EVP, Director of HR
BancFirst
Oklahoma City, OK

Brent White

Student
Seminole State College
Shawnee, OK

Kimberly Williams

Dean/Chair of Workforce Development
Northeastern State University
Muskogee, OK

Bailey Perkins Wright

State Advocacy & Public Policy Director
Oklahoma Food Banks
Oklahoma City, OK

Roderick Wright

Training System Manager
Public Strategies-Work Ready Oklahoma
Oklahoma City, OK

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Leader

Ardmore Chamber of Commerce • OCAST • REI Oklahoma • NBC Oklahoma • Tulsa Community College • Cliff Hudson • JaHannah Jamelarin, M.D.
Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education • The Avedis Foundation • Red River Tech-Center • Southeastern Oklahoma State University
Dave Lopez • Meridian Technology Center • HL Investments • Norman Public Schools • Moran Oil Enterprises • Gordon Cooper Technology Center
Pioneer Telephone Cooperative, Inc. • Pat Potts • Volunteers of America Oklahoma • MidAmerica Industrial Park • Pioneer Technology Center
Waldo Zerger • Jerry McPeak • Oklahoma Municipal League • Ross Swimmer • Parent Promise • Kim Holland • Donald Morris • Michael Van Sickle

Lifetime

Phil Albert • Scott Asbjorson • John Budd • Teresa Meinders Burkett • Carol Bush • Ford Drummond • Rachel Hutchings • Tom McKeon, Ed.D
Michael Lapolla • Bill McKamey • David Nimmo • Hon. Daniel Pae • Joseph Parker, Jr. • Richard Wansley, Ph.D. • Terri L. White • George Young, Sr.

TOWN HALL FINAL REPORT



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Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy 2022 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



INTRODUCTION

The most important element of economic competitiveness in an innovative economy is a properly skilled workforce. In a changing economy, the skill requirements of employers along with the workplace culture of today's labor force are evolving at a rapid pace. To develop Oklahoma's human potential for the future we must create a climate that puts all the elements in place for Oklahoma to become an outstanding global performer.

The 2022 Town Hall focused on Oklahoma's Human Potential — Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy. This group of participants immersed themselves in better understanding the new workplace culture, the key industries now in Oklahoma, the educational approaches, and how to optimize our resources, technologies, and behaviors to guide our path for a strong future.

In the pages that follow, the dedicated Town Hall participants studied the issues and engaged in the policy creating process on how to better develop our resources for the future. Moreover, the education that was obtained on this topic from this Town Hall and the discussions were beneficial to not only the participants but will be beneficial to our general conversation as a state.

Operating through five Panels, each led by a Panel facilitator with discussions captured by a Panel reporter, all five Panels followed the same discussion question outline. This report includes the deliberative discussion of the Town Hall participants in answer to the discussion question outline all five Panels followed.

This Town Hall Report is written to convey the essential discourse of those who participated in two days of panel deliberations and their recommendations from the final plenary session. We believe the Report reflects accurately on the scope, tenor, thoughts, and conclusions of those participants.

REPORT

OKLAHOMA'S HUMAN POTENTIAL

Enhancing Our Workforce for an Increasingly Innovative Economy

The Oklahoma Academy's 2022 Town Hall kicked off Sunday evening with a keynote speaker and two panel discussions. Our keynote speaker was Labor Commissioner Leslie Osborn, Oklahoma's 20th labor commissioner. Her comments focused on the current Oklahoma workforce and strategies to improve workforce accessibility and quality. She mentioned four distinct policy areas that the state should consider: raising the minimum wage, addressing childcare deserts, especially in rural Oklahoma, investments in ourselves (quality of life, education, healthcare access, infrastructure), and eliminating bombastic social issue bills that drive people away or deter them from relocating here.

The first panel (Conversation with Leaders in the workforce and economic development arenas) included Chad Warmington of the Oklahoma State Chamber, Jeff Seymour of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber, Rue Ramsey of the Tulsa Regional Chamber, and Dave Stewart with Mid America Industrial Park. This session was moderated by Representative Brian Hill. All four panelists acknowledge the "pockets of excellence across the state," but bemoaned that our workforce development system lacked the alignment and coordination at the highest levels. Throughout their comments, concepts like "improved communication," "execution," and the lack of "soft skills" were mentioned. Two of the panelists referred to the creation of a state-level, non-governmental entity (private public partnership), to better address the alignment and coordination problems previously discussed. All panelists expressed optimism that these challenges can be addressed in the near term.

The second panel (Conversation with Leaders Committed to Assisting Marginalized Populations) included Jim Priest with Goodwill Industries, Ashley Howard with NewView, James Helm from Dale Rogers Training Center, Roderick Wright with Work Ready Oklahoma, and Kris Steele of TEEM (The Education and Employment Ministry). This session was moderated by Bailey Perkins Wright with the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma. Each provided a summary of the services offered and the demographic served. The speakers suggested solutions on how to foster more inclusive and accessible work environments and better increase the number of "background friendly employers" in the state. It was mentioned that one in nine Oklahomans have a felony conviction, which decreases their odds of securing employment, housing, etc. Several supported the "ban the box" movement, which would greatly enhance justice-involved citizens. All mentioned being in the "people building" business, considered themselves "connectors," and ensuring that ALL of their clients have opportunities for economic mobility and success.

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Day 1, Question 1

Urban and rural Oklahoma have seen an increase of population since the pandemic, and many are working remotely. Since the pandemic, remote work is now allowing job seekers to take a job in another state but stay in Oklahoma to work remotely. Does Oklahoma's infrastructure support this new workplace? If yes, how? If not, what is needed to allow Oklahomans the opportunity to be successful working remotely?

Even before the pandemic, the workplace was moving in a more technological direction. The response to the pandemic and its impact on all forms of commerce caused an acceleration of that trend. Four of the five panels specifically stated that Oklahoma's infrastructure does not support this new workplace. All panels agreed that an accessible and affordable WIFI/broadband infrastructure was essential to remote workers, whether those workers worked for in-state or out-of-state employers. But several panels suggested that dollars not simply be "thrown at the problem," and that what is needed are very "smart, targeted investments." Several panels mentioned that infrastructure deficiencies were not just a rural issue, that urban areas also are affected by the lack of high-speed broadband.

The concept of infrastructure was expanded to include a number of related policy issues. Most panels mentioned child care barriers or deserts as being especially problematic, a barrier mentioned by the Labor Commissioner Sunday night. Another infrastructure deficiency cited by nearly all panels was the lack of affordable, accessible housing. Other infrastructure issues making remote work more problematic included our aging water and wastewater treatment facilities, our rural transportation network, the need for more cultural amenities and parks, and training for logistics, benefits, and management skills to accommodate remote work.

As to solutions, there was no consensus among all groups, but several suggested the concept of "co-working spaces," because not all people want to work from home. Digital literacy courses should also be widely available and supported by businesses and local governments. The Tulsa Remote program, funded by the George Kaiser Family Foundation, was mentioned in several panels as a possible model for other communities to consider as far as attracting talent. With over 2,000 people attracted to Tulsa, the pros/cons/ROI of the program are still being compiled. One panel highlighted the investments made in Ponca City, providing free WIFI as a replicable solution for communities to consider. Several panels mentioned the importance of engaging the tribal nations as "viable resources," in all facets of infrastructure. Finally, several panels mentioned the needed access to mental health services for remote workers and the K-12 system.

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Day 1, Question 2

As the data section of the Background Resource Document shows, Oklahoma struggles with a low labor force participation rate, especially among women, post-pandemic. One of the more effective ways to increase that rate is to increase access to childcare. There are a number of strategies/policies that states have implemented to improve child care access, including: raise the subsidy rate for eligible families; lower the income threshold for qualifying for the subsidy; incentivizing companies to adopt or maintain flexible scheduling and/or providing on-site childcare; moving the state reimbursement of the childcare subsidy from attendance to enrollment; implementing a state paid parental and medical leave program; and expanding state educational and certification efforts to increase the child care workforce. Of these strategies, which two to three should the state prioritize/fund and why? Are there other strategies not listed that should be considered and how would they improve access to childcare and increase our labor force participation rate?

Post pandemic, conversations regarding low labor workforce participation have often included concerns regarding challenges derived from lack of affordable childcare access for Oklahoma's workforce. During deliberations each panel discussed priorities the state should consider. There was consensus among the panels that Oklahoma should amend its current subsidy of childcare centers from attendance based to enrollment based. Childcare centers have fixed costs, and under the current reimbursement system, any day that a subsidized child is not in attendance, the childcare center loses money. Conversely, for students that are not subsidized, parents usually pay based on enrollment which means the parents pay whether the child attends or not. Changing the state's reimbursement to one based more equitably on enrollment would levelize state and parental participation.

Panels further found consensus that the state should expand the income thresholds to make more Oklahomans eligible for childcare subsidies. An added benefit would be that increased income thresholds would help families avoid interruption of eligibility due to fluctuating income. Some parents experience a benefits cliff effect of wage increases because an increase could destroy their subsidy eligibility. This places both employers and employees in tough positions.

Wages for childcare workers in Oklahoma are historically low which detrimentally reduces the number of people interested in entering that career field. One way to help increase wages for childcare providers is to raise the subsidy rate for eligible families. Remedying this can help increase childcare offerings statewide. For many workers, the childcare profession is a short-term job, but that paradigm could be changed with an elevation of both training and certification programs helping the profession to rise to a more professional level. Childcare positions are in high demand, but with low wages it is very difficult to attract new employees. Some suggestions to increase the childcare workforce included utilizing education institutions to elevate their promotion of those career pathways like they have done with STEM. Tying childcare to educational outcomes could have a beneficial effect of raising wages while enticing workers into professional development. Focusing on education even at very early ages rather than just "babysitting" helps prepare children for entry into the K-12 system.

Paid parental leave is an investment Oklahoma could make to provide flexibility to the labor force. Parents need to manage the needs of their children during the workday. The federal solution of FMLA does not adequately provide for flexibility in Oklahoma because FMLA mandates apply to private sector employers who employ 50 or more employees. In Oklahoma, the majority of businesses have fewer than 50 employees. Women in particular, would benefit from the flexibility that paid parental leave could provide because women are often the primary care providers for children, and also for the elderly and the disabled. Therefore, the state should implement a paid parental leave policy.

Another way to address childcare needs in the state would be to incentivize companies to provide flexibility in work schedules and/or onsite childcare centers. Allowing employees to work from home, or to arrange their work schedule to accommodate caring for their children may increase employee retention. Onsite childcare centers provide employers with the added benefit of being an attractive recruitment tool. Any solution to expanding childcare access should involve increasing incentives to employers for providing in-house childcare.

One idea parsed by all groups as a solution to lack of affordable childcare centers is the idea of different groups and businesses collaborating to meet the childcare needs in their communities. Panelists recognized that many businesses are not large enough to provide their own childcare centers, and at some businesses, the nature of the work to be done is not conducive to creating more flexibility in employee scheduling. Businesses and communities should work together to create solutions such as community childcare centers with investment by the community, business partners and the State. These community centers, which could be organized as non-profits, could tap into available grants and private income streams to support their efforts. Centers should also explore their eligibility for

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federal grants. Matching 21st Century Community Learning Center funding to expand out-of-school and after-school time programs to all public school districts.

Significant barriers to the creation of more childcare centers include state regulation that should be reviewed and streamlined. Additionally, education focused on training childcare workers like programs present in some of Oklahoma's Career Techs could help potential workers navigate the existing regulatory requirements. A majority of panels also discussed the option of greater utilization of tribal childcare centers.

Day 1, Question 3

The State ranks 50th in STEM and STEM-related degrees or credentials held by working-age adults. The head of the State Chamber's Research Foundation, Ben Lepak, stated: "We can't continue to rank in the bottom 10 and have the workforce we need." With unusually high drop-rates from college STEM programs, particularly among students of color and women, what strategies should be considered to ensure that higher education majors of all backgrounds with interests in STEM degree programs are being supported and fostered to ensure they graduate with a STEM degree at the end of their college journey?

In the area of STEM support and student outcomes, there was general agreement that more could and should be done. To decrease the drop-rate, especially among students of color and women, a much greater emphasis must be placed earlier in the STEM pipeline. A number of panels mentioned programs like ICAP (Individual Career Academic Plans) and OKcollegestart.org that have positive outcomes. It is important to continue to support and add funding for the ICAP program in all school districts across the state including funding a marketing strategy for the ICAP process. Knowing the course requirements PRIOR to post-secondary degree or certification pursuits better prepares the student for success. Several panels also felt that the student to counselor ratios in Oklahoma are too high.

The solutions suggested by the panelists were wider than they were deep. A majority of the panels mentioned the importance of apprenticeships, mentorships, internships in STEM businesses; several mentioned that STEM industry leaders must play a bigger role and their roles must start well before the post-secondary level. One panel mentioned that STEM businesses could expand mentorship opportunities for people who are under-represented in STEM fields. Several mentioned more field trips, games and activities, hands-on experiential learning, and one suggested that private STEM companies fund an endowment for STEM majors. Most panels felt that the introduction to STEM courses and career opportunities need to occur earlier in a student's educational process so students will be prepared.

While not stated in every panel, panels in general felt that Oklahoma needs to be more intentional in our support, focus and investment for minority students and women, due to the underrepresentation of women and students of color in STEM fields. Another theme that surfaced was the lack of preparation from K-12, which could be traced back to insufficient academic and career counseling resources in our K-12 system and the usage of key aforementioned programs.

Day 1, Question 4

People who have been incarcerated, have a criminal record or have otherwise been involved with the criminal justice system, and they face major challenges finding work. Some states have "ban the box" laws that prohibit work applications from asking as a yes/no question about whether the applicant has been convicted of a crime. Some states have also pursued expungement of criminal records for certain ex-offenders who have maintained a clean record. To widen their pool of potential workers and create more economic opportunity for their residents, what steps should Oklahoma take to remove barriers to employment for people who were formerly incarcerated? What needs to be done at all levels to reintroduce laborers into the workforce with expanded expungement for one-time, low-level offenses? How easy is it for these laborers to be reintroduced to new skills and technologies? What do potential employers need to understand so as not to be hesitant in hiring those expunged?

To widen the pool of potential workers and create more economic opportunities for residents, Oklahoma should remove barriers to employment for formerly incarcerated people by changing the content of background checks, taking affirmative steps to reform our expungement process, and reducing the number of crimes that require incarceration. Barriers prohibiting reentry to the workforce for those who have been incarcerated also include the need for training and skills development and lack and access to support services which could be developed to help with job placement upon exiting the penal system.

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While there was consensus that Oklahoma should consider “banning the box” to remove a significant barrier to workforce reentry for people who were formerly incarcerated, this measure alone may be unsatisfactory. Some panels did recognize that “banning the box” on applications could have other ramifications, particularly in fields that require heightened security or access to children. Conversely some employers are hesitant to hire formerly incarcerated persons because of concerns about retention rates and liabilities. Criminal history checks by employers and applications that query candidates about their criminal history reduce the number of individuals hireable to fill many jobs throughout the state, and may lead to recidivism for former offenders who, while seeking a second chance, find themselves unemployed.

A majority of panels felt that Oklahoma’s expungement process was too difficult and failed to include all associated records, such as arrest records for prior offenders to adequately navigate and that currently seeking an expungement for a conviction requires the hiring of an attorney for which funds may not be available. The panels recommend that expungement processes be streamlined in the state. Tied to the concerns regarding the difficulty of receiving an expungement, there was consensus among the panels that Oklahoma incarcerates too many people for too many crimes. The panels agreed that if Oklahoma reduces the number of nonviolent crimes considered a felony for which people are convicted, and instead focuses convictions on “serious” crimes, that it could positively impact the number of people available in our workforce. Additionally, Oklahoma must expand diversion programs that redirect offenders to programs or treatment that positively channel their talents rather than simply incarcerating them which increases our budgetary costs and reduces our potential workforce.

A barrier to formerly incarcerated persons entering the workforce is also the removal of certain credentials or certifications upon conviction. For example, after leaving prison, many people no longer have an Oklahoma driver’s licenses or Oklahoma state identification card. This creates barriers to transportation and to completing identification verification for employment. Recent legislation has been passed to help incarcerated persons to get a state ID upon leaving the jail and re-entering the workforce. (*House Bill 1679 directs the DOC to gather documents necessary for post-release. These include vocational training records, state-issued ID, birth certificate, Social Security card, work records and a resume.*)

Some panels discussed that Oklahoma should develop a master list of employers willing to hire the formerly incarcerated which would be used to assist potential employees with re-entry, but there was not consensus on this subject. Additionally, it was suggested that employers open to hiring someone with a criminal history could be encouraged to state that in their open job positions. For employers concerned about potential liability in hiring the formerly incarcerated, mention was made that the legislature could adopt legislation to protect employers from liability. It is important for employers to hear anecdotal stories about successes in hiring the formerly incarcerated and lives changed for the better.

Great discussion ensued regarding potential ways to help reintroduce persons back into the workforce including skills building while in jail, assistance with resume development, educational opportunities, and public/private partnerships developed to offer assistance on obtaining tools to assist workers. Panelists suggested that in the last six months of incarceration, Oklahoma should offer opportunities for training in technical trades and skills that equip future workers seamlessly go back into the workforce. Expand access to job training programs like those offered through the Career Tech Skills Centers to assist individual’s transition into the workforce. Programs such as “Restore the Workforce” initiative advocated by the Governor is a step in the right direction to perform job training during incarceration. This initiative may warrant expansion. Other opportunities available while persons are still incarcerated are educational opportunities for those seeking college degrees. The Second Chance Pell Grant has been a valuable program but is highly dependent on the relationship between the prison warden and the local college or university. Oklahoma should consider encouraging appropriate correctional facilities to participate in in-prison education programs and classes.

Intensive focus on skills deficiency for the formerly incarcerated is important. Technology centers may consider expanding programming targeted to the offender population.

Programs like ReMerge and TEEM provide valuable career counseling services that prepare the formerly incarcerated to enter into workplaces. We also need to focus on preparing persons before they are released.

Employers need to be better educated about the benefits of hiring formerly incarcerated persons. There may be opportunity for employers to partner with prisons to employ the currently incarcerated to do remote work which could then lead to further employment once the person is released from jail. Additionally, Oklahoma could consider incentivizing businesses to hire justice-involved

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persons. In the alternative, incarcerated individuals should be offered training on entrepreneurial skills that would allow them to start their own businesses once they are released from the criminal system (which would by-pass the barrier of “the box” on job applications).

While addressing skills building, education and career planning, attention should be given to each person’s mental health both while incarcerated, and upon re-entry into the workplace to reduce recidivism and to encourage resilience. The Individual Placement Support (IPS) is a model with a lot of evidence behind it. IPS serves individuals experiencing barriers to employment. With IPS, case management is assigned for persons experiencing barriers and that person checks in frequently. Oklahoma should invest and scale this model.

Day 1, Luncheon Plenary Session

The Town Hall attendees heard from a cross-section of industry leaders over their lunch hour Monday. Lt. Governor Matt Pinnell moderated the discussion, which included Tom Kupiec, CEO, ARL Bio Pharma, Katy Boren, President/CEO of the OKC Innovation District, Sharon Harrison, OK Manufacturing Alliance, and Don Morris, Oklahoma Office of Workforce Development. Mr. Pinnell challenged the group to answer the question: Where does a state of 3.9 million people want to be in 10 years, knowing that there are over 8 million people in the Dallas Ft. Worth complex just to our south. How can we be more competitive and attract some of those businesses and people to Oklahoma?

Asked about the challenges each face within their industries, it ranged from the lack of qualified workers and the need for improved compensation and culture (Kupiec) and the need to integrate advance technology in the manufacturing process (Harrison), to creating an ecosystem around advanced technology focused on collaboration (Boren) and outreach and the need for mobile broadband units for workforce services delivery (Morris).

Other comments by the panel included greater investment in engineering workforce training, “human (soft) skills” and customer service training, greater investment in digital skills and data analytics, data driven decision-making, being more collaborative to become more competitive, and the need for a “unified skills plan.” One panelist noted that we, as a state, should be supplementing the federal workforce dollars we receive with state appropriated dollars, as nearly all states do.

There was much made of the over \$70 million in Build Back Better grants Oklahoma (Tulsa and OKC) recently received, the only state to receive two such technology grants.

Day 1, Question 5

One of the priorities of the Town Hall Research and Planning Committee was to ensure that ALL Oklahomans were encouraged to be active participants in our economy. That would include any marginalized groups that have traditionally had lower participation rates due to institutional and/or individual barriers. The Background Resource Document has a number of articles (pages 98 – 105) from many of these groups. What specific actions can the Town Hall recommend that would meaningfully reduce institutional barriers to these groups? How can we better assist state agencies, nonprofits, and for-profit organizations, whose missions focus on marginalized populations, to reach more Oklahomans? Should we consider the formation of a statewide body that incorporates the groups and focuses on best practices of integrating marginalized groups in and outside Oklahoma?

Our Sunday evening panel discussion on this topic provided a solid segue into the panel discussions held on Monday. The panel that evening acknowledged the solutions to removing barriers for marginalized populations can be challenging and fleeting, and the results of today’s panel discussions confirm that. The panels suggested a long list of various approaches to meaningfully reduce institutional barriers to marginalized populations. Several panels independently suggested having strong HR policies in place so that outdated job descriptions are improved, that best practices in hiring are available to businesses and that incentives to promote diversity might improve the landscape for these populations. Updated training programs are essential but very expensive for small businesses to implement.

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In lieu of creating a new statewide body to address the many issues, one panel suggested “creating synergy in the already existing system,” but no specific strategies or ownership was assigned. Others suggested empowering a number of agencies/organizations that currently exist, like the Department of Rehabilitative Services, Vocational Rehabilitation, Developmental Disabilities Council, Workforce Oklahoma, and Oklahoma Works, but with no specific changes recommended to their oversight or budgets.

In regard to inclusion of the disabled community, employers would benefit from professional training on making the workplace accessible and accommodating for disabled individuals. Accommodations can be low cost and increase retention for a diverse workforce.

Several panels mentioned the need to create/strengthen partnerships between employers, schools/education, and advocates for marginalized populations. One of the more intriguing recommendations was the creation of an asset mapping system for all resources being delivered and the receiving populations. A recommendation was made to identify, promote and utilize an integrated platform for shared closed loop referral and case management for better coordination among Providers, Government, Health Plans, and Nonprofits. Finally, several panels suggested focusing on the diversity of the workplace.

Day 1, Question 6

It seems that Oklahoma faces widespread skills gaps that are threatening the talent pool and limiting options for entry-level workers. How should postsecondary institutions adapt to help lessen the gap? Specifically, should postsecondary institutions connect students with work-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships to equip them with the real-world work experience, knowledge, and skills to meet employers’ needs? Should students receive college credits for the hours of training they successfully complete at Career Technology Centers? Whether “yes” or “no,” give explanation for your answer.

To lessen the skills gaps in Oklahoma, postsecondary institutions must first identify what skills are in demand, and establish a consistent statewide skills-based assessment. Data needs to be collected and reviewed, and educational programming to fill skills gaps should be data driven to guide growth and direction. Data sources include district reports of workforce needs. Postsecondary institutions need to be flexible in utilizing data to ensure policies meet workforce demands.

Postsecondary institutions should endeavor to communicate with employers to assist with identifying what skills need to be integrated into curriculum. Oklahoma has an enviable network of career technology centers across the state which exceeds all other states. We

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also have a lot of higher education institutions that are working with employers to teach curriculum to meet industry needs. However, there is still room for growth.

An important aspect of meeting the skills-gap are internship opportunities, however, there was consensus that a deficiency that exists with respect to internships is that they are often unpaid. Internship matching programs managed by universities, colleges, employers, and alumni associations are vital in providing entry-level workers on-the-job experience, but when internships cannot be fully paid, some type of accompanying scholarship is important. There are also workforce agencies that can supplement unpaid internships with stipends. Internships should provide opportunities to gain valuable experience. Some tribes also receive federal funding to pay internships.

To find internship opportunities, “Handshake Software” and other software can be helpful in connecting students with internships.

Apprenticeships are one way of filling the skills gap through a structured learning environment. Some panels discussed bureaucratic barriers that complicate creating apprenticeships in some industries. There are many good examples of apprenticeships within the healthcare industry that can be used as models in other sectors. Healthcare is a good model for intern and internal education to give student/workers practical experience. Another good model is the TAP or Technical Applications Program which teaches basic knowledge and practical skills such as identifying tools. In Woodward, for example, shop class was reinstated in 6-12th grade and new students are equipped to enter CareerTech programs.

Micro-credentialling is a method of verifying specific skills and enhanced use of these credentials may assist new entrants to the workforce in persuading employers that they possess certain specific workplace skills. Cooperation with chambers of commerce and other economic development organizations in defining sought-after skills for credentialling will be critical.

When asked whether students should receive college credits for the hours of training they successfully complete at career technology centers, four out of the five panels answered, “Yes!”, but some had qualifications. Panelists pointed out that in some settings doing so is already routine, especially when courses are transcribed. Articulation agreements already exist for credit transferability, and can be expanded so long as the courses in these settings are reviewed by higher education faculty and determined to be equivalent to college credit and applicable toward a college technical certificate, and associate in applied science degree, or a technology baccalaureate degree. In other instances, Prior Learning Assessments, are utilized to give college credit when college learning outcomes are demonstrated to have been met.

Some panels discussed how K-12, career technology and higher education must work together to create solutions. For example, there are some inconsistencies in the way credits are transferred and applied between Career Technology and Higher Education, and we as a state should seek to continually improve our processes. An area to address is creating more uniformity in accreditation at both the state and regional levels.

As far as filling skills gaps and ensuring our workforce is ready to meet industry needs, we can look to successful programs like ICAP (Individual Career Academic Planning). This tool helps students identify career pathways much earlier so they can focus developing their skill sets whether they decide to navigate college, career, or military plans after high school. This program is seeing success and must be supported and encouraged.

Other examples such as the Bell program in Minnesota which allows students to attend school for two years and then partner with a company, helps the student gain skills and experience as well as credit towards a bachelor’s degree.

Day 1, Question 7

A recent article in the WSJ covered the struggles that small businesses are having in attracting/retaining employees. Just over 60% report that worker shortages are affecting their ability to operate at full capacity, despite almost 80% of owners increasing wages and compensation. Aside from salary/benefit increases, what do small businesses need to do or need to have to be more effective at retaining talent? Attracting in-state talent? What should the state be doing to attract a qualified workforce to Oklahoma? Should Oklahoma develop an incentive program to bring workers from other states to Oklahoma? And what is needed to make Oklahoma more attractive to new workers? Please give specific reasons for your answer.

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The panels were then asked to address the small business sector in Oklahoma. According to the OESC data, 96% of all Oklahoma firms employ less than 50 people, supporting the small business nature of Oklahoma. The questions focused on small business expansion (from within Oklahoma) and how best to attract employees from outside the state. Nearly all panels stressed the importance of “corporate culture,” modelling ethics,” and creating a climate where “workers are valued.”

To achieve this environment, the panels suggested the importance of having work/life and lifestyle benefits; treating workers with respect and dignity; offering scholarship and tuition reimbursement; 529 plans; enhanced benefit packages; and strengthening the onboarding process for improved retention. Also mentioned were the development of an industry mentorship program modelled after successful small businesses; recommending that Higher Education and CareerTech waive all fees for small businesses to participate in career fairs; take advantage of the many SBA lending and non-lending programs; and the use of the employee retention tax credit.

On the topic of how best to attract employees to Oklahoma, there was consensus from three panels that utilizing some type of “PR campaign” to better market the state and to “promote the positive” would be an effective attraction strategy. We should emphasize our low cost of living (which helps offset the lower wage rates), housing and energy prices. Other strategies include incentive programs to bring in out-of-state talent, support for the Tulsa Remote program, registered apprenticeship programs, and a series of macro-level issues like fixing the housing crisis, women’s health issues, tax credits for key industries, and reviewing/amending immigration policies. Additionally, at least three panels discussed the value of implementing a statewide paid family leave policy that goes beyond FMLA in order to attract and retain employees.

Day 1, Question 8

Our Town Hall Background Resource Document has several articles covering worker shortages in a number of key industries, from Nursing and Pre-K-12 educators to Aviation and Engineering. What specific actions should Employers and Education/Training/Certification providers take to both promote and eliminate the shortages in these (and other) key industries? What new collaboration and coordination strategies are needed to better prevent future shortages from arising?

To eliminate shortages in key industries, employers and educators can work together to implement the curriculum needed to help prepare students to enter the workforce and fill shortages. Some of the panels felt there needed to be an emphasis on educating students on the opportunities in key industries.

For example, STEM degree production is increasing in Oklahoma, but still is not enough. Only around 6% of graduating high school students are academically prepared for the STEM fields. This pipeline from the common-ed system is the key problem in producing candidates for these jobs. Until this issue is remedied, attracting graduating high schoolers from other states to attend Oklahoma universities in STEM programs is an important strategy. Data shows that even out of state students often stay in Oklahoma after graduation from college though some argued that graduates leave the state to find entry level positions.

We must do a better job educating our population about the need and opportunities that are available in our employment sector. There must be an emphasis on relationships and collaborations between applicable educators and industry specific professionals. Low paying careers requiring an economic investment in education for entry are struggling to find candidates. There needs to be some type of vehicle to lessen the burden on potential workers in these industries. Additionally, programs such as RISE-IT assessments and ICAP Reinvestments should be a part of the equation for success.

An idea to decrease shortages in STEM related fields includes Esports as an increasingly popular collegiate activity, and may be a pathway to attract more STEM majors. This could lead to filling more job vacancies in professions such as engineering.

For Nursing, there was consensus among panels that coordination strategies are needed to address the shortage of clinical training opportunities. First, finding qualified nursing instructors is problematic because of the pay differential between teaching nurses and practicing nurses. Nursing instructors are not paid as high which serves as a barrier. While there are too few clinical training opportunities to accommodate program expansion in a significant way, one possible solution is to increase efforts to stagger clinical rotations in a way that permits more students to cycle through at existing clinical training sites. Work should be done on developing more efficient ways to licensure in nursing.

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In the teaching field, we now have thousands of teachers in classrooms that are emergency certified. This leads to high turnover in the profession. An ill-prepared teacher leads to ill-prepared students to replace them in the profession, making the problem cyclical.

Because teaching and nursing are typically female dominated careers, we must focus on supports to assist these women in re-entering the nursing and education workforce when they have temporarily exited for family related issues. We must also constantly re-evaluate teacher certification requirements and educational standards. Other ideas included creating a five-year moratorium on legislative action that would change educational standards in K-12, addressing added costs to restart certifications that had not been completed, and ensuring that K-12 works cohesively with higher-ed and Career Techs.

Day 1, Dinner Plenary Session

Following our Monday afternoon discussions, the attendees heard from representatives from our K-12, Career Technology Education (CTE), and Higher Education (HE) systems. John Feaver, Ph. D., President of USAO, moderated the session and Marissa Lightsey, Lee Denney, and Chancellor Allison Garrett represented the three educational/training systems, respectively. After opening remarks, John asked the panelists questions related to the preparation of students for a 21st Century economy.

Marissa, who is E.D. of College and Career Readiness at the State Department of Education, remarked that, in addition to an overall teacher shortage, Oklahoma also suffers from a school counseling shortage. While the recommended student to counselor ratio is 250:1, Oklahoma's ratio is 433:1, significantly higher than the norm. That high ratio makes it hard from schools to provide the academic and career counseling services students need to be successful. She also talked about the goal of "graduation without remediation" and the efforts to braid both academic and industry experiences together.

Lee, who is the Interim State Director of Oklahoma Career Technology and Education, described her system as being agile and nimble in response to workforce needs. She described the importance of their industry advisory committees and the process they use to keep up to date on the needs of business and industry. She addressed how CTE students are able to earn and stack credits, making it seamless for students to transition from CTE to HE. She also highlighted the efforts of the co-curricular Career Technology Student Organizations to teach students leadership and soft skills, making them more prepared to enter the workforce and meet employers' needs.

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Allison, who is Chancellor of the Oklahoma State Regents of Higher Education, remarked that higher education is more important than ever, with two-thirds of all new jobs being created today requiring a college degree (associates or higher). Sadly, Oklahoma has one of the lowest levels of educational attainment in the US, with just 26% bachelor's degree attainment, compared to the US average of 33%. She also remarked that so many of the low-skill jobs are disappearing, like trucking, fast food, retail, banking etc., placing an even greater demand on a post-secondary education. Finally, the need to better fund K-20 is critical as funding on a per-FTE student basis is among the lowest in the nation.

Day 2, Question 1

Prior to 1991, the Legislature voted on tuition and fee increases at state colleges and universities. That year, the Legislature decided to give power over tuition decisions to the State Board of Regents but under a strict cap through House Bill 1219. In 2003, however, another measure was passed to give the State Regents full reign over decisions concerning tuition hikes. With large increases in tuition and fees since 2003, should the power be restored to the Legislature to vote on tuition and fee increases at state colleges and universities? If so, why; if not why? Is there an alternative approach to keeping college affordable for Oklahomans? If yes, explain fully what that approach is. If not, state why.

There was consensus among all five panels that the power to increase tuition and fees within the higher education system should remain with the Oklahoma State Regents of Higher Education (OSRHE). Panels cited legislative reluctance, in part to re-elections every two years ("political reasons"), not having their "finger on the pulse of education," having "no skin in the game," "too bureaucratic," and their likelihood to vote "no" on tuition/fee increases "to appease their voter base." But on a more positive note, most of the panels also cited the ability of the OSRHE to fairly adjust rates, being "flexible to respond," and its desire to remain competitive with bordering states.

On the issue related to keeping college affordable in Oklahoma, nearly all panels addressed the impacts that inflation has had on costs and more importantly, how the percentage of state appropriated dollars has declined over the decades to fund the higher education system. One panel asked the question: why are we calling our high education institutions "public" when public dollars represent a very small percentage of their total revenue. Each of the panels agreed that in general more state appropriations are needed for higher education. In order to reach the national average funding levels for higher education, approximately 400,000,000 more dollars are necessary.

There is a long list of recommendations on how we might fund/or keep higher education costs down, but very little consensus. Several panels mentioned the importance of tuition support programs – one example being the Oklahoma Promise, but one panel felt the requirements were over burdensome. The requirement to go directly from high school into post-secondary institutions removes access to these programs to those students who join the military or complete a Tech program before continuing their post-secondary education. Another barrier to these programs is the prohibition of any judicial involvement, even low-level misdemeanors. Another panel mentioned the OTAG program (Oklahoma Tuition Aid Grant) and redirection of some of those dollars to areas of career shortages.

Other suggestions, in no priority order, included:

- Employer-based payment plans;
- Any Oklahoma high school graduate who is in the process of becoming a citizen shall be eligible for in-state tuition;
- Legalizing sports betting and utilizing resultant tax revenue for scholarships and grants. The 2018 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall focusing on our tax structure also recommended the legalization of sports betting;
- Utilizing/redirection of \$\$ from cannabis sales to higher education;
- Encouraging K-20 partnerships by allowing K-20 entities to be eligible for sector partnership grants as LEAD applicants;
- Utilizing loan repayment programs based upon income (career impact bonds and Public Student Loan Forgiveness program);
- Use of Rainy Day funds;
- Expanded textbook rental programs; and
- Lowering overhead costs by reducing/eliminating redundancies.

Day 2, Question 2

In the data section of the Background Research Document, we presented the most recent survey of how highly site selection professionals and corporate executives value workforce skills and the availability of skilled labor (page 7). When asked to identify the most pressing issues

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facing the workforce in 2022, most listed labor participation, worker training, and childcare. But more and more are citing the need for greater collaboration with “business and end-users,” due to the constantly evolving needs. Greater emphasis is being placed on “hiring people with the right soft-skills” and then “providing them with company-specific training.” How can our K-20 systems do a more effective job of providing those skills, knowledges and abilities PRIOR to graduation and transition to the workplace? Do current processes/collaboratives need to be strengthened, and if so in what ways? Or does Oklahoma need to do a completely new “workforce model?” If so, what would the critical components of such a model look like?

There was consensus across the panels that soft skills should ideally be taught at home, but that schools can effectively supplement instruction on these skills with appropriate investment and partnerships. Many students are not receiving adequate soft skill training in the home, and some panels said that soft skill development needs to start much earlier than K-12 and that early childhood interventions must first be implemented. Investing in early childhood development is critical to build important soft skills. One example of how this can be accomplished is the “Parents as Teachers” program - designed with home visits and educating parents on how to support the development of soft and pre-K-12 skills such as hand strength for writing. This program is currently offered through the Oklahoma State Department of Health.

Programs in schools such as ICAP can be effective in teaching soft skills. The ICAP program is a method of developing soft skills that was first implemented during COVID-19 and has promise. It needs time to have a more pronounced effect. There is much variation in ICAP among school systems, however, providing consistent implementation is going to be important and the public needs to be made more aware. Another potential program is the GKFF model which surrounds kids with counselors at school and involves parents in their process. Currently, Edmond Schools had success with the Safe and Civil program which trains students on how to interact with one another. Training teachers to train students on soft skills would be helpful to students. Woodward’s Project Aware provides another model to promote youth mental health awareness among schools and communities and improve connections to services for school-age youth. Oklahoma should look to existing programs with proven results such as TAP and its successful implementation. Extracurricular activities in school including after school jobs can help students develop soft skills. One suggestion to better align soft skills development would be to develop Career Exploration Programs as early as possible. Barriers include the lack of a common career curriculum and limited instructional time during the school day, which has been more focused on standardized teaching and testing.

There was consensus among panels that collaboration between the three arms of education (K-12, career technology, and higher education) is essential for planning skills development for our future workforce.

Technology centers fill soft skill gaps including ones that are employer specific which is important because soft skills needed in the workplace are ever changing. In higher education in Oklahoma, University of Central Oklahoma’s Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR) program gives students “transcripts” which track the soft skills students have developed. This template could be expanded to other schools and even K-12.

To properly address what soft skills students need to prepare for the workforce, partnerships with industry are essential. Businesses should be encouraged to work with our education sector to identify needs skills which would allow educational institutions to plan for solutions such as micro-credentialing. The efforts by education and the industry sector should be marketed to students to entice participation in learning the skills needed to enter the workforce. Social media marketing could be a helpful tool for recruitment of student into training programs, but also to connect potential employers with future employees.

In terms of whether Oklahoma needs a new workforce model, several panels agreed that Oklahoma has a lot of disconnected efforts happening and greater coordination and more support would be helpful. Most panels discussed forming collaborations between those leading existing efforts. Overall, we have so many great programs in little niches of Oklahoma – but there is not statewide connection, collaboration, nor communication. Addressing these issues would allow the state to provide more comprehensive and consistent information to potential businesses.

Day 2, Question 3

When new industries consider moving into the state, or when existing industries have emergent market opportunities for rapid expansion, the ability of the State to support rapid and specific workforce preparation can mean the difference between success (economic growth) or failure (stagnation or industry loss). All levels of education within Oklahoma likely possess components of a solution to this need...but likely not the entirety of a solution. How might Oklahoma better integrate across all levels of higher education (community/junior colleges, regional universities, research universities), Career Tech, and K-12 institutions to create a “rapid workforce response team” to serve the needs of specific new, rapidly growing industries, or other high-priority industry sectors?

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The attendees were next asked to address the ability of the state to more “rapidly” respond to both existing and emergent workforce needs, perhaps creating a rapid workforce response team. The overall summary from the five panels was that there was very little consensus. One panel felt the question was unneeded and directed their comments toward efforts at the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, which, in collaboration with local chambers, economic development agencies, and educational institutions is already performing this function. While they suggest that efforts could be more proactive than reactive, and that additional research on “up and coming industries” would be valuable, they felt the teams were already in place.

Three of the panels felt that there needed to be a broad array of representation/collaborators from across the state to lead this effort. Organizations most often mentioned were the three branches of education and OCAST (Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology), but also the need to have Oklahoma Works, municipal governments, economic development organizations, nonprofits, and the philanthropic sector involved in the mix. One of the panels had a stronger emphasis on “technology solutions” to help drive these teams and perhaps the development of a strategic plan. They suggested marrying soft skills training with an emphasis on math and science, thus creating a “modular workforce.” Several mentioned highlighting “roving pockets of excellence” across the state and to encourage replication where possible. Another panel felt that this effort was too much of a burden on the educational system and should be driven by the business community, with specific state support from OCAST and career tech. Two other panels agreed higher ed and career tech should be involved in the expansion and attraction of economic development projects. They also made a specific recommendation to create a single platform of state, regional, and local coordinators to both identify and address specific business needs.

The fifth panel felt that, as a state, we are too reactive; that we need to be proactive and nimble. They suggested that the career tech system should provide the overall leadership, and remain closely aligned with the other two “arms of education.” While leadership needs to be state-driven they would be considering local area assets. They called on a continual review of workforce trends, voiced strong support for the Training for Industry Program (TIP), and also agreed that successful initiatives need to be evaluated for replication. Finally, one panel, after providing their responses to this question, closed with the “panel also recognizes that “rapid” is vague” and that “nobody has the authority to coordinate this.”

Day 2, Question 4

In the workforce development arena, it has been said that there are duplicative services in many state agencies. If there is duplication, should lawmakers create an agency that could identify deficiencies, connect training services for job seekers, and find workers to help lure companies into the state to address the worker shortage? If you think a new agency should be established, how would it be funded, and what are the hurdles it faces to be productive? If you do not think a new agency should be established, state the reasons why.

All panels recognized that Oklahoma has a high level of duplicative services with respect to workforce development. The panels discussed various options to address duplication such as assessment, collaboration, coordination and even consolidation. A majority of panels were not in favor of creating a new agency, but instead felt that a thorough review of existing service providers in workforce development could facilitate better coordination and collaboration to meet our workforce goals. However, the panels were somewhat divided in their identification of who should do the review to address duplicative agency actions. At least two panels favored hiring an outside firm to complete a review and make recommendations, to either the legislature or the governor, but concerns about undue influence and lack of implementation of recommendations were stated. Other suggestions included either a current agency take the lead (such as OMES), or a Task Force or commission be created.

There was consensus that some services should be consolidated. The centralization or consolidation of existing agency functions related to workforce development should be pursued. Because most agencies are created by statute, plans for consolidation must take those statutes into account. But, running an analysis to see where overlap exists and determining the scope of work of each agency could help define agency duties.

A majority of panels discussed the Legislative Office of Fiscal Transparency (LOFT), which is currently looking at ways to make agencies more effective by utilizing critical data. Additionally, the Office of Management and Enterprise Services (OMES) is the agen-

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cy other state agencies use for the finance, property, human resources and technology services they need.

Agencies need to cooperate to avoid duplication of services but also need to strategically plan so as to ensure parts of the workforce development mission are not being neglected. A couple of panels suggested that a Task Force, commission or the Governor's Council on Workforce and Economic Development should consider conducting the study or review to tackle duplication reduction analysis and propose remedies. Service Oklahoma may also address some of these issues by making it easier to find government information and service.

An idea was stated that agencies should collaborate to form a central clearing house or "one-stop-shop" type of website which would assist individuals interested in starting a business with resources. This would require multi-entity cooperation and could develop into a concierge model so service recipients could have a guide through the maze of interconnected service providers. The website would have to be user friendly with attention paid to end-user experience and utility.

Finally, most panels agreed that offices with existing services should communicate more effectively. These offices should meet annually (perhaps mandated to do so) to make sure all parties are at the table to strategically discuss duplication, coordination and even consolidation.

Day 2, Luncheon Plenary Session

Following Tuesday morning's panel discussions, the Academy assembled a panel of workforce experts to discuss the urban/rural complexities of geography. Moderated by Town Hall Chair Lee Denney, the panelists included Kyle Dean, Ph. D, Oklahoma City University economist, Cara Jane Evans, Encompass Financial Services, Scott Dewald, President/CEO REI Oklahoma, and Andrew J Van Leuven, Ph. D., Oklahoma State University, Agricultural Economics.

Lee asked the panelists about the biggest concern in rural areas and most agreed that population decline over the decades was the most troubling occurrence. Kyle mentioned that population decline by definition begets dwindling job opportunities. Scott mentioned that Bryan County (where REI is headquartered) was the only county in their 17 county region to have grown. Cara agreed and added population density and a lower labor force participation rate were of great concern. Andrew shared housing and childcare availability, and poor transportation as other deficits.

As to assets of living/working in rural areas, many lauded the quieter, laid back lifestyle. Andrew challenged rural areas to "take care of your living room," referencing the importance of a first impression. The saying by Will Rogers that "you never get a second chance to make a first impression" was supported by all; your major thoroughfares and downtowns in rural Oklahoma need investment, just like your living room. Kyle's comments on the importance of Native Tribes also resonated; they are tied to their lands and cannot be attracted away like so many businesses. In addition to their investments, which take place in rural and urban areas, their job generation is primarily rural, making them a real asset in statewide community, economic, and workforce development.

Finally, the panelists opined that, despite the stigma of living rural, many of our best tourist attractions are located in rural parts of the state, that there is a "diverse eco-system" of businesses in most regions, rural Oklahoma has a real entrepreneurial spirit, and with the ARPA dollars earmarked for rural broadband deployment, the future is much brighter for population and job growth in rural Oklahoma.

Day 2, Question 5

According to the article on page 199 of the Background Resource Document, Native Americans in Oklahoma had a \$15.6 billion impact on the state in 2019. The article also states the tribes directly employ more than 54,000 people and support a total of 113,442 jobs to tribal citizens and non-citizens accounting for more than \$5.4 billion in wages and benefits to Oklahoma workers in 2019. Given the importance of tribal activity in rural Oklahoma and investments in urban Oklahoma, how can government (state/local) – to – government (tribal) relationships be strengthened, and investment partnerships expanded to enhance long-run economic development and job growth?

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Following the luncheon panel on urban and rural issues, the attendees were asked to address how relationships between all governmental entities in the state – tribal, state and local – can be strengthened. This question generated unanimity on three fronts: the need to reverse the current attitude expressed by the governor with respect to our sovereign tribal nations, to acknowledge the great impact Native American tribes have had on our history and culture, and to affirm a willingness to both strengthen and expand the collaborations and partnerships we have with ALL tribes, not just the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole Tribes.

Each panel had a different way of describing the current environment in state-tribal relationships. One described the governor’s attitude as “not helpful;” a second said there was a “lack of respect” exhibited from state government; a third describes the situation as “notable antagonism.” All panels acknowledged the need for “fence mending,” and provided numerous examples of why “Native Americans are fellow citizens.” First, let’s all acknowledge that tribes are sovereign nations, recognized by the federal government. As a state, we should support and acknowledge that fact.

The panels provided a long list of collaborations, partnerships, and investment made by and in collaboration with the tribes across the state. They include projects in the areas of education, infrastructure, medical clinics, housing, and coronavirus vaccines. One panel shared that of the 2,000 employees a native business employs, only 14% of the workforce was native American. The tribes work closely with workforce, economic, and community development leaders across the state, leveraging state and tribal dollars to improve economic and employment conditions.

Unlike previous questions addressed by the Town Hall attendees, nearly all panels had at least one consensus recommendation to present. They are presented in no particular order.

The Town Hall recommends that in light of the antagonism of the past several years, the State of Oklahoma should acknowledge that the past rhetoric and posture is unsustainable and pursue a reset in intergovernmental relations with Native American tribes.

The Town Hall recommends that Oklahoma’s state and local governments intentionally develop relationships with the tribes, prospectively and not merely for self-interest. The fruit of this investment may not immediately be defined, but the parameters of these “government-to-government” relationships can be formed to build the bedrock of future mutually beneficial agreements on economic development and job growth.

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The Town Hall recommends that Oklahoma permanently maintain a position of Secretary of Tribal Relations, a dedicated position to be occupied by an individual who is a citizen of a federally recognized tribe, who can build the relationship between the state government and tribal governments. One vision for the future is an “embassy row” model, where tribal governments have a place at the State Capitol or nearby to facilitate intergovernmental dialogue. Many of the tribes have full time government relations professional, but we can facilitate this relationship in a better and more organized manner with the right leadership. To the extent that any legislation is needed to make this happen, we recommend that the originating legislation come from the Native American Legislative Caucus.

The Town Hall recommends that, because of the importance of tribal activity, in urban and rural Oklahoma, the relationship between Oklahoma elected officials and tribal governments must be strengthened.

Panels discussed that one of the keys to resolving issues between the state and tribes is to make sure all parties affected are participants in the conversations.

The consensus of one panel is that one of the most important elements here is rebuilding relationships between governments. One change that could be made is to have a tribal representative for all state boards and commissions, with voting rights. The state must make sure that it is not just taking services from the tribes but also proffering benefits to the tribes in return. The state should offer to partner its resources with the tribes’ programs and initiatives. We need to avoid the conflicts between tribal and state programs that offer similar services and instead foster collaboration and resource sharing, primarily in the five main priority areas: Education, Health, Transportation, Housing, and Infrastructure.

It was clear by the aforementioned, that the Town Hall participants appreciate the past and present relationships with and investments by the Tribes, and find it necessary to secure a strong and collaborative future with ALL native American tribes.

Day 2, Question 6

There are countless communities in rural Oklahoma whose economic development and workforce development are limited due to a lack of “quality of life” features. The town might have a daycare, but its capacity is low, and there is a long waitlist, preventing many household caretakers (often female) from joining the workforce. The town might have some available housing, but it is either too expensive (luxury homes) or too cheap (old, run-down houses), preventing middle class households from finding a “starter home” in the community, moving somewhere else instead. Many such communities have the mindset of waiting around for the market to step in and fill these gaps (housing, childcare, etc.), but in many cases, that day never comes. What can (and should) rural communities do to proactively improve quality of life, in order to fully “unlock” their workforce? Describe fully.

To proactively improve quality of life in order to fully unlock their workforce, rural communities should fully assess their strengths and areas of services that will enhance the lives of residents, with the added benefit of attracting business. Several panels recognized that large growth may not be a goal of some rural communities, and those communities may still need significant state support to offer basic services. Rural communities offer benefits to the state as “homes of industries” that urban centers do not want to be near such as agriculture and wind turbines, among others. In addition, rural areas often also provide pastoral settings and recreational areas such as state parks.

For rural areas to attract new business, communities must be cognizant of the appearance of the surrounding area, and should examine their code enforcement status. New businesses can lose interest in small towns when there are a lot of unmaintained properties. New businesses look for communities with housing opportunities, and so small towns may consider working with contractors to build starter homes as an attractant. Availability of dependent care is a prime attractant, and municipalities should encourage partnership from all interested parties in creating more dependent care availability, including expansion of family childcare homes. Communities absolutely must invest in childcare, education, and key services such as quality health care.

Having a strong, well trained, and well compensated city manager, or other potential community leaders, for rural communities is essential because competent and forward-thinking leadership in these municipal leadership roles can help communities focus on quality-of-life development, the professional pursuit of grants, commercial development, etc. City manager training must be sufficient to equip the leaders, and continuing education at a national level can be beneficial, although expensive. The state must intentionally invest in this need.

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Rural towns have difficulty gaining members of the younger generations because activities in rural areas are not as attractive to the younger generation. A solution to this problem proposed by one panel suggested young people to be appointed on their local economic development boards.

For rural areas to provide services, one solution is to foster relationships with tribal services such as childcare services. Rural towns could band together to provide services such as high-quality healthcare, mental health services, and grocery stores. Rural Economic Action Plan (REAP) Program make tax dollars available to rural communities for important quality of life infrastructure. REAP deserves more funding in order for these communities to exist and thrive.

Potential solutions to unlocking rural workforces includes consolidating services in regional areas to concentrate density and strategically placing these services in accessible areas. Rural towns should highlight their tourist attractions and things that make their community or town unique. For example, Fairview, OK has done a great job of promoting their town, and Fairview has a cool nonprofit movie theater that celebrates their history and shows newer movies as well.

There needs to be a change in narrative about taxation to change mindsets that stigmatize taxes. As a state, we need to highlight and inform the populace of the benefits of taxation. One potential way to solve this is through better transparency from local communities to inform citizens of how their tax dollars are spent. This could include comparing tax allocations between neighboring counties. Educating can help citizens slowly come around to the idea of investing in community.

Rural communities should invest in themselves. Residents could start by donating their time to clean up their town which would slowly lead to greater community buy-in for centralized community services like parks, school and libraries.

Cities and towns have limited revenue opportunities. The Legislature must make additional revenue streams available to cities and towns. (**The 2018 Town Hall, in agreement with the Oklahoma Municipal League's call for "municipally-minded tax reform" for Oklahoma, recommended authorizing a diverse tax base using ad valorem taxes, millages, implementation of Public Safety Districts, and the strategic use of taxes on services in a broad multi-prong approach to fund municipal governmental services. A wholesale tax overhaul should occur. We should not make structural changes on a line-by-line basis. To eliminate the existing system may seem radical, but is necessary to address the system's dysfunction as a whole to actually contribute to sustainable long-term planning for Oklahoma's prosperity. These recommendations are made because Oklahoma is the only state in the nation where cities and towns are solely dependent upon sales tax for general operations. The recommendations enable giving local control to municipalities and counties, especially enabling services in rural areas.*)

Rural Oklahoma has access to small business loans to create new business and to rural development funds to help build and/or repair infrastructure needs, like wastewater treatment, broadband access, fiber, and rural housing. Other potential funding sources for rural needs includes PREP funds, state bonds and investment by businesses buying into the community.

Day 2, Question 7

Rural communities, businesses, and economies face unique challenges that require community stakeholders to work together to overcome. How can the public, nonprofit, and private sectors collaborate to align workforce development, economic development and community development goals to benefit rural communities in Oklahoma?

The attendees next addressed the strengthening of the fabric of rural Oklahoma through collaborative efforts of the public, private and nonprofit sectors. There was very little consensus among the groups but each had concepts or programs that reflected successful collaborations in rural communities across the state.

One panel suggested the development of a statewide model for rural workforce, economic and community development, and collaboration, that would include their related organizations, as well as Native American tribes, rural electric cooperatives, and rural based associations. The model could be replicated in rural areas across the state. This same panel acknowledged the importance of Councils of Governments (COGs) to help facilitate intergovernmental dialogue and cooperative planning (the 11 COGs cover all 77 counties of the state) and publicity campaigns for various small-town festivals and events. Finally, they recommended the funding of a full-time

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grant writer to assist rural areas with funding possibilities, with assistance from COGs to identify achievable grant opportunities.

One panel noted that a missing key is investment by the private sector into rural communities.

One panel said we should support existing initiatives. Another panel shared a long list of existing initiatives, all in rural communities across the state, that have been supported by local non- and for-profit organizations across the state. While not comprehensive, the list includes:

- Imagine Durant;
- Shawnee Forward;
- The Claremore Collective;
- Ponca City Development Authority's regional efforts;
- Tahlequah helping with housing downtown;
- The Regional Food Bank is working to provide job training for rural Oklahomans, and they are teaming with TEEM, to provide job training for formerly incarcerated individuals;
- Woodward Leadership Program; and
- Community Leadership Development program, sponsored by the Oklahoma Municipal League.

Other panels suggested the importance of public-private partnerships, community collaborations; utilizing the Community Reinvestment Act afforded to local banks, collaborations with the faith-based community; Main Street Program (ODOC), and the utilization of local chambers of commerce, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and Nonprofits in communities.

Day 2, Question 8

Senate President Pro Tempore Greg Treat said that Pryor's MidAmerica Industrial Park is a tremendous asset to the State, however, members of the Legislature are starting to get frustrated that they are being asked to put about \$700 million cash on the table that may not directly impact their district. "At some point, we have to start developing assets around the state, so we have more than one option

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to show businesses who want to locate here. “Pryor is a crown jewel, but we need crown jewels all across the state!” How can you achieve the MidAmerica Industrial Park success in other regions of the state? What state and local economic development efforts need to occur to see a replication of this kind of asset across the state? What can other rural regions of the state learn from the MidAmerica Industrial Park experience?

To replicate the success of MidAmerica Industrial Park (MAIP) and others in the state such as those located at the Ports of Catoosa and Muskogee, you must have visionary, capable, energetic local leadership. We must keep in mind that this initiative began as far back as 1960 and that transformational change is not always fast – this alone should not be a disincentive to starting, and building momentum for this type of industrial development.

One lesson learned from MAIP is that simplified assistance is attractive to industry. At MAIP, red-tape is simplified for obtaining water and land-use permits and businesses only need to deal with one person to locate in the park. Having one person in charge is very attractive to businesses.

To replicate the successes of MAIP, communities should aggressively pursue opportunities in industries such as hospitality, technology, aeronautics and film. The Aeronautics Commission plans to use ARPA funds to replicate the MAIP model. Some keys to success include investment into infrastructure, tribal partnerships, housing, and workforce development. The availability of water and inexpensive energy resources is a key component to attracting industry.

Potential funding sources include TIF (Tax Increment Financing), MAPS-style funding, and PREP funding (Progressing Rural Economic Prosperity). TIF funding can be used to attract business through a trust authority. Just because TIFs have historically been used for revitalization does not mean they cannot be used for industrial development. MAPS-style financing programs could similarly be used. PREP is a specific state statute designated five primary industrial parks and 12 secondary sites for industry across the state. PREP seed money from the legislature may be crucial to creating industrial parks within the state.

To be successful, communities must be willing to provide incentives which will definitely pay the community back in additional development in retail, taxation and additional industry.

The Town Hall recommends that Oklahoma undertake a study exploring what under-used or abandoned facilities may have similar re-utilization to the military facility that became MAIP.

The Town Hall recommends that a statewide collaborative partnership be developed to guide investments into Mega-X sites and other major job-producing operations.

The Town Hall recommends Oklahoma develop a long-term strategic plan/vision starting with developing a comprehensive and inclusive asset map to better understand what asset avenues are available, such as skilled laborers, energy, and aviation with the intent to develop other major industrial parks.

CONCLUSION

Again, this year’s Town Hall focused on how we can effectively organize, equip, and utilize to the fullest extent Oklahoma’s diverse human resources particularly in meeting the workforce development and critical occupation needs of our state. The work and time devoted to this Town Hall conference by the Participants has produced a consensus report that will not only guide Oklahoma in the future, but will be used to inform, educate, and begin a discussion of open-minded dialogue and fact-based analysis that leads to action.

We plan to reach the goals listed in this document and address the issues discussed throughout this report in an efficient, collaborative, successful manner. As with previous visioning processes facilitated by The Oklahoma Academy, many of the recommendations included herein will become policy recommendations, some will become law, and many will form from community initiatives. Ultimately, each one of us bears an obligation to implement these changes for a more prosperous, healthy, and secure Oklahoma. Moving these ideas into action will take a continued effort and collaboration, and with your help we will ensure Oklahoma is the best state to work, play and live.

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TOWN HALL CONFERENCES

Topics covered at the Town Hall Conference from 2001 - 2023

2001 – Competing in an Innovative World

Town Hall Chair: Cliff Hudson, SONIC, America's Drive-In

2002 – Oklahoma's Health

Town Hall Chair: Cliff Hudson, SONIC, America's Drive-In

2003 – Oklahoma Resources: Energy and Water

Town Hall Co-Chairs: John Feaver, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma; Howard Barnett, TSF Capital LLC; and Larry Nichols, Devon Energy Corp.

2004 – Oklahoma's Environment: Pursuing A Responsible Balance

Town Hall Chair: William R. McKamey, AEP Public Service Company of Oklahoma

2005 – Drugs: Legal, Illegal... Otherwise

Town Hall Chair: Howard Barnett, TSF Capital LLC

2006 – Strategies for Oklahoma's Future

Town Hall Co-Chairs: John Feaver, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma; and Larry Rice, Tulsa University

2007 – Building Alliances: Tribal Governments, State & Local Governments And Private Sectors

Town Hall Chair: Douglas Branch, Phillips McFall

2008 – Oklahoma's Criminal Justice System: Can We Be Just As Tough But Twice As Smart?

Town Hall Chair: Steve Turnbo, Schnake Turnbo Frank PR

2009 – Getting Ready For Work: Education Systems And Future Workforce

Town Hall Chair: Howard Barnett, OSU- Tulsa

2010 May – Oklahoma Water- A Special Town Hall on Oklahoma's 50 Year Water Plan

Town Hall Chair: John Feaver, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma

2010 November – MUNI.OK.GOV- Addressing Municipal Governance

Town Hall Chair: Tom McKeon, Tulsa Community College

2011 – Developing the Oklahoma Economy

Town Hall Chair: Susan Winchester, The Winchester Group

2012 – It's 2032- Where in the World is Oklahoma?

Town Hall Chair: Steve Kreidler, University of Central Oklahoma

2013 – Moving Oklahoma: Improving Our Transportation Infrastructure

Town Hall Chair: Darryl Schmidt, BancFirst

2014 – We Can Do Better: Improving the Health of the Oklahoma People

Town Hall Co-Chairs: Kay Goebel, PhD, Psychologist; Gerry Clancy, MD, OU-Tulsa; and Steve Prescott, MD, Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation

2015 – Oklahoma Priorities: The Government & Taxes We Want

Town Hall Co-Chairs: Howard Barnett, OSU- Tulsa; and Dan Boren, Chickasaw Nation Department of Commerce

2017 – Oklahoma Votes: Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement

Town Hall Co-Chairs: Dan Boren, Chickasaw Nation Department of Commerce; and John Harper, AEP Public Service Company of Oklahoma

2018 – Aligning Oklahoma's Tax Code to Our 21st Century Economy

Town Hall Co-Chairs: Darryl Schmidt, BancFirst; and Dan Boren, Chickasaw Nation Department of Commerce

2019 – OKLAHOMA ENERGY: Optimizing Our Resources for the Future

Town Hall Co-Chairs: C. Michael Ming, retired VP Baker Hughes, a GE company, and Stuart Solomon, retired President & COO of Public Service Company of Oklahoma

2021 – Addressing Mental Health ~ Improving Mental Wellness

Town Hall Chair: Howard G. Barnett Jr., The Barnett Family Law Firm

2022 – OKLAHOMA'S HUMAN POTENTIAL: Enhancing Our Workforce for an Innovative Economy

Town Hall Chair: Lee Denney, D.V.M., Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education

2023 – Oklahoma's Housing Challenge – to be held October 29- November 1 at River Spirit Hotel, Conference Center & Casino - Tulsa

Town Hall Chair: Mike Neal, President & CEO, Tulsa Regional Chamber

A complete Library of Town Hall Resource Documents, Findings & Recommendation Reports can be found at www.okacademy.org



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The Oklahoma Academy, P.O. Box 968, Norman, OK 73070

Phone: (405) 307-0986

Email: lynn@okacademy.org

www.okacademy.org