

## ReCONNECT to Community

Solving Problems Together for a More Prosperous Future



Community Conversation Summary  
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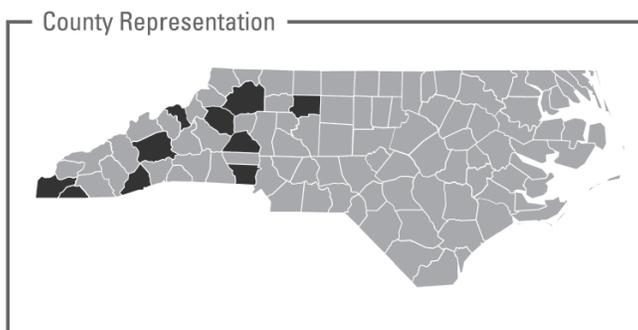
The newest initiative of the Institute of Emerging Issues, [ReCONNECT NC](#), seeks to address a profound challenge: the loss of connection — to work, to civic institutions, to one another — that has serious and measurable consequences for North Carolina’s economy and the individual well-being of us all. Without strong ties to employers, schools, local communities and neighbors, people are far less likely to contribute to economic growth, maintain their health, or participate in the social and civic activities that define our shared quality of life. This topic is so crucial to North Carolina’s future success, that IEI is dedicating three-years to the topic and, for the first time in its history, bringing the Emerging Issues Forum to other regions across the state.

IEI will kick-off the ReCONNECT NC series in **Asheville, NC** on **November 27, 2018** with ReCONNECT to Community, a Forum focused on increasing the number of people working to make their communities stronger through civic engagement. People across our state are stepping away from community life, threatening our ability to solve our biggest challenges and maintain our economic competitiveness. ReCONNECT to Community will explore this rise of disengagement and learn strategies to re-energize our citizens. We will be highlighting community initiatives from across the state and sharing their innovative strategies to engage their citizens and solve local challenges.

## WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA PERSPECTIVE

To ensure that the content presented at the statewide forum reflects the needs, ideas, and interests of the host region, IEI staff convened a series of meetings in Western North Carolina (WNC) in August 2018 to better understand the current state of civic engagement in the region and the barriers and opportunities to working together to solve key challenges. With the support of community partners, IEI held six community conversations with participants from the WNC counties of Buncombe, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Mitchell, Transylvania, and Wilkes. Other participants hailed from Catawba, Gaston, and Forsyth counties. Participants represented the nonprofit, higher education, policy, and business sectors; and included young professionals, retirees, and members of the faith community. Eighty North Carolinians took part in these conversations.

It is important to note that the demographics of those participating in the conversations were disproportionately white and older adults. They also represent the 24% of North Carolinians that volunteer in their community. As such, these themes can be used to generate discussion, but cannot be generalized across the region.





## SUMMARY OF THEMES

The community conversations both validated the need for IEI's work on reconnection, and provided new insight into some of the challenges and bright spots across the region. Below is a brief summary of common themes discussed.

### Defining Civic Engagement

Though some participants think of civic engagement as policy/government engagement, many liked the expanded definition that IEI is using that includes community and social engagement. At IEI, civic engagement means active participation in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future.

*"Even small scale stuff in a community (potlucks, square dances, etc.) lets people plug in where they can."*

*– Buncombe County participant*

*"You have to have love, and passion, and pride in your community before you can be civically engaged."*

*– Wilkes County participant*

While there was general agreement that "community" is defined by geographic boundaries, many expressed their beliefs that community should include also sub-groups within, and/or outside of a community.

## CHALLENGES

### Media

- Some groups shared the belief that people are withdrawing from civil society because today's challenges feel insurmountable. The overwhelming message that many receive from the media is negative, and several participants shared that they no longer watch the news.
- There was a good deal of discussion about how social media is contributing to community divisiveness. Numerous examples were shared of people in their community spreading false information or antagonizing people through social media.

*"People are withdrawing because the challenges...[portrayed in the media]...feel insurmountable."*

*– Buncombe County participant*

*"What I'm noticing in my peers—they are posting to facebook—and think they are civically engaged.  
But then they won't show up to a meeting."*

*– Transylvania County participant*

### Silo Walls are Getting Thicker:

- People increasingly want to take comfort with people who look and think like them.
- Some felt individuals are more concerned about convincing someone else to take their view than getting to know who that person is as an individual and why they have the view they do.
- There was also a sentiment of not knowing how to break down the silo walls, and/or having the confidence to talk with people that represent different demographic and economic groups and ideological beliefs.



“Being very polite, being too polite sometimes. Shyness, being stereotyped as ignorance. Those things can hold people back a lot. Makes it difficult. If you can’t learn what’s bothering them, you can’t learn the situation and help it.”

– Cherokee County participant

“People here are raised to be a certain way--to not be confrontational.”

– Wilkes County participant

### **WNC Born and Raised and Relocated Retirees:**

- As communities grow and people relocate into the community from other areas, communities can struggle with their identity.
- There was a recognition by several participants that the influx of wealthy retirees are contributing to gentrification in communities, but that there was a desire by many of the new residents to be a part of the solution.

“There can be a disconnect with people who have been members of the community for generations, and then the new people wanting to change things.”

– Cherokee County participant

### **Inclusive Engagement:**

A challenge that came up in every conversation was how to increase engagement by members of the community from lower economic circumstances and from minority members of the community. The following sub-themes emerged:

“These listening sessions always have the same leaders, not the people in the community that have something to say.”

– Mitchell County participant

“If you want to be inclusive—you need to know the history of the way people and communities have been-- and are currently—being destroyed. Need people who can share in a way that people in power will listen.”

– Buncombe County participant

### **Power**

- Many participants shared that a disproportionate number of civically engaged members of the community either are retired or have jobs that allow them to engage with the community during work hours; white; and generally of higher economic status.
- Some participants questioned whether people who hold power are willing to give up some of that power to have a more inclusive community.
- Many people do not recognize or fully understand their own power, or the perception others have of their power. There is great need to educate people about the historical context of power in their community.

“Civic engagement is power engagement. Power Elite, those with money. Some see civics as the “system” and who is in charge—and who is in charge has power.”

– Buncombe County participant



### Transportation and time

- Some of the rural communities we visited do not have public transportation, which can be a barrier to engagement for people without vehicles or without a driver's license.
- Many families, especially those of lower economic status, may work two jobs or might not have child care to be able to engage in their community.

“Time is a valuable commodity and today's busy world—with most people balancing work and family and other community priorities—often kept people from engaging as much as they would like to.”

– Buncombe County participant

“No public transportation so it can be difficult for people who work, or don't have transportation.”

– Transylvania County participant

### Unclear how to engage

- In some instances, individuals are passionate about helping their community and want to make a difference, but they don't know how. It's not always clear where to start and how to make change happen in their communities.

“There is a lack of information about how to get involved.”

– Mitchell County participant

“Hear “volunteer” a lot. We don't “volunteer”, we help our neighbors. Verbiage may matter.”

– Cherokee County participant

### Overuse

- Several participants mentioned that leaders of color tend to be asked to be on multiple boards and committee.
- There can be an unfair expectation that these leaders are the “spokesperson” for all issues coming out of communities of color.
- When an incident in the community involves a minority resident, there can be an unfair burden of the leader of color to “fix it”; and/or be blamed by their community if they don't.

“Leaders of color often became unfairly ‘overused’ and ‘overburdened, often being treated as tokens.”

– Buncombe County participant

## BRIGHT SPOTS

### Technology as a Tool

- People in power are hearing from voices that they have not heard from (or chose not to) in the past.
- Technology can make government more transparent.
- Technology can connect neighbors and make them aware of opportunities to engage.

“Being informed is civic engagement.”

– Transylvania County participant

“We use the nextdoor app to let people know about community meetings.”

– Buncombe County participant



### **A Desire for Inclusion**

- Many participants shared a desire by organizations in the community to be more inclusive of who and how they engage people in the community. One organization had even recently gone through an equity and inclusion audit, which had immediate impact.
- Even when the desire is there, some organizations struggle with how to effectively achieve this in practice.
- Some participants noted that inclusion on small-scale community boards could serve as a pipeline to get great diversity down the road in larger-scale positions, like elected office.

“Some organizations are offering scholarships for people to participate on boards to get different faces (e.g., museum board.) Covering memberships to get foot in the door.”

– *Buncombe County participant*

“There are places and people that have assets, but we haven't labeled them as assets. We need to look outside our usual places.”

– *Transylvania County participant*

### **“Third places” and Friday Night Football**

- Across several conversations, participants talked about physical places in their community where people come together across their differences to celebrate community, such as the public library.
- Specifically, Friday night football and other sporting events can bring people from different races and economic status together. Sports can be neutralizing.
- Churches can also be a place where people come together across silos to serve their community.
- Gym and recreation - several ‘millennials’ from one community noted that they often socialize with others while working out.

“Even when I'm working out, I pretty much talk the whole time.  
Sometimes I go to the gym for that social interaction.”

– *Wilkes County participant*

“We have a lot of community diversity at the Friday night football game.”

– *Transylvania County participant*

### **Strong Nonprofit and Faith Organizations**

- There is overwhelming credit given to the important work of nonprofit and faith organizations in the community. It's also important to note that in some areas, a faith community can be its own silo, limiting engagement with diverse communities.
- A significant portion of each conversation was spent highlighting the programs in their community that help citizens support one another. There are too many examples to list, but the impact of these programs—both at the individual and community levels, is what is giving participants hope that they will indeed be able to achieve the goal of reconnection.

“We have a very strong nonprofit community and they are including the people to be served as part of the decision making process.”

– *Buncombe County participant*



## Hope and Optimism

- Several participants strongly believed that there is hope for their community's future. That hope is what brings people back to their towns and keeps them there.
- There is a strong belief in many communities that their place is special and holds meaning and value in their lives. They want to reconnect to make it more successful.

*“There is a level of hope and optimism and wanting to be a part of the solution—or people wouldn't be here.”*

*– Buncombe County participant*