March 2015

Some Missing Places and Faces

After more than a thousand of you brought your passion, perspectives, and smart ideas to the 30th Annual Emerging Issues Forum, Innovation Reconstructed (full info, recap here), you’ve generously shared important feedback on the terrific innovators and big thinkers on the agenda. You’ve said they were all great. You’ve also said (with overwhelming consistency) that IEI needed to have included much more diversity in the places and faces of innovators highlighted.

We agree. Indeed, in full disclosure, your reaction did not catch us by surprise. While planning the Forum, we tried hard, just as we always do, to ensure the broadest possible mix of sectors, geographies, and perspectives. Yet, we failed.

Our failure wasn’t because we weren’t alert to the issue. Our failure, at least in part, was a troubling reflection on the innovation economy – a network in which women and ethnic minorities, as well as communities beyond our two largest metro areas, have not yet found their places in sufficient numbers.

We at IEI own our failure – and recognize our responsibility to respond. For the next two years, IEI will focus on expanding the innovation circle in North Carolina. Given our statewide underperformance in innovation this isn’t just the right thing to do, it’s an imperative. To move the statewide measures, we need more places and people in the innovation circle.

Our post-Forum work on Innovation Reconstructed will focus very intentionally on reaching out to include places and people underrepresented in our current innovation ecosystem. We are designing our work to help widen networks far beyond the Research Triangle and Charlotte, and to bring in more ethnic minorities, more women, and
Influenced by the implications of Forum keynoter Victor Hwang’s talk on how to build innovation infrastructure across communities, we’re launching new work that includes the following key programmatic elements:

1. Urban Learning Collaborative: IEI is partnering with Forward Communities and a number of other organizations to bring five NC communities beyond the Triangle and Charlotte into active, sustained collaboration focused on enhancing local innovation capacity. We will formally announce that effort next month.

2. Thriving Rural Communities Initiative: IEI is partnering with the Duke Endowment to help forty rural pastors expand the role of their churches as community anchor institutions by fostering social innovation and social entrepreneurship.

3. BB&T Discovery Forums: With generous support from BB&T, IEI will visit six North Carolina communities over the next four months to host fun, upbeat events where diverse young adult innovators and social entrepreneurs share rapid-fire project pitches while forging stronger ties with each other.

4. Summer in the Commons: We’ve set a target of hosting 1,000 youth and young adults this summer in our Emerging Issues Commons for facilitated engagement activities on the innovation issue.

5. North Carolina Civic Health Index: Our new study of civic engagement, which emphasizes that high
levels of civic engagement boost innovative capacity and economic prosperity, also implies the need to reach out to many demographic subgroups and rural communities. We plan to be all over the state over the next six months sharing the findings and the connections to innovation.

I know many of you are also launching your own related efforts. We want to help you, and have you help us. Don’t hesitate to let us know of efforts that you think bolster or could be bolstered by the list above. I invite you to use this quick survey to report on your efforts to boost innovation, widen the innovation circle, and foster civic engagement, and additionally to suggest potential new collaborations with IEI.

Let’s commit ourselves, our institutions, and our resources to making NC the innovation powerhouse we know we can be.

Warmly, Anita

Director, Institute for Emerging Issues

North Carolina State University