I had the opportunity to speak with a group of rural leaders earlier this week about the future job prospects for rural communities. They are rightfully concerned about the lack of growth in many communities, and the reversal of fortunes for many rural areas that once thrived. Suffice to say, there are no easy answers to this problem. And, unfortunately, it looks as if we'll be wrestling with this challenge for some time to come.

But, I firmly believe that what we suffer from is a poverty of imagination. It's high time to imagine the world as we want it to be, and to make that world a reality. In the process, we will have to dispense with our adherence to old practices, policies and customs. Without a doubt, we can create vibrant and thriving rural communities in North Carolina. A North Carolina that is a dotted landscape of smart, connected, and thriving rural communities is not only imaginable, it's possible.

Featured Virtual Engagement Activities

Register for one or more of our upcoming sector-focused virtual engagement activities designed to explore opportunities to expand project-based learning (PBL).

How does your county rate on the Disruption Index?

Is your county more vulnerable to future jobs disruption due to automation and technology? See IEI's FutureWork Disruption Index for North Carolina and access interactive maps of your county.

Keep Your Eyes Peeled...

Stay tuned for more info on the FutureWork Prosperity Tour—coming soon!
There is general agreement that there are two major fronts on which to confront this challenge – talent development and infrastructure investment. There is a lot to be said about our aging physical infrastructure, and we have some definite challenges in this area. Our expanding internet infrastructure and advancements in technology will solve this challenge in the coming years. With the advent of innovations like 5G wireless service, which promises 10 gigabit per second download speeds, our rural broadband challenges won’t be as insurmountable as they currently are.

Assuming we can meet our physical infrastructure challenges, and technology bridges our internet divide, then we are left with the most pressing challenge – talent development. Rural communities are experiencing a brain drain. In addition to the difficulty of recruiting talent and industry, these communities are trying to stem the tide of bright minds leaving for greener pastures. On Day 2 of the recent Emerging Issues Forum, FutureWork, a young student proposed the idea of fusing project-based learning with social entrepreneurship. Essentially, she suggested that we enlist the talent of young people to confront the challenges local government faces. She believed that this could increase the commitment of young people to their communities, inspire them to stay rather than leave, and infuse our communities with much needed talent to begin the transition to smart communities. These would be communities that are web-connected with the human capital, physical infrastructure, communications networks, and data analytics brought together to enable the community to deliver its essential services with greater efficiency and reliability. Connected communities that operate from this integrated framework will boost their sustainability, resiliency and citizen satisfaction, and expand their opportunity for economic development.
I left that meeting inspired by her vision. If we can meet our internet challenges, and our other infrastructure problems, the realization of wired-connected and smart communities can be a reality in every region across North Carolina.

**On April 28th,** IEI will launch an interactive webinar focused on the connection between project-based learning and smart communities. It will feature interviews with three innovators in this space that promises to inform and inspire. I hope that this new feature will inspire you to **connect, think** and begin to **do** the work that our rural communities desperately need from all of us.

Best,

Donnie Charleston

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**Donnie Charleston**

Economy Policy Manager
Institute for Emerging Issues
donnie_charleston@ncsu.edu

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