

UNDER  FORUM

2017

Fractured Arkansas

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In 2005, the University of Arkansas System established the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute with a grant from the Winthrop Rockefeller Charitable Trust. By integrating the resources and expertise of the University of Arkansas System with the legacy and ideas of Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller, this educational institute and conference center creates an atmosphere where collaboration and change can thrive.

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WE ALL DO BETTER WHEN WE WORK TOGETHER. Our differences do matter, but our common humanity matters more.”

- President Bill Clinton

WHAT YOU DO HERE [in Arkansas] shows up in a hurry. You can see the results.”

- Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller

The Under 40 Forum is a partnership between the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute, the Clinton School of Public Service, *Arkansas Business* and the *Northwest Arkansas Business Journal*. It came about as a result of a brainstorming meeting the Institute and the Clinton School jointly held several years ago. As organizations uniquely dedicated to continuing the legacy of their two renowned namesakes, we feel it is important to show common ground. We collaborate on a few programs each year that help move Arkansas forward.

At the aforementioned planning meeting in 2015, Dean Skip Rutherford asked, “What if we held a forum where the 80 Forty Under 40 honorees from the state’s two business publications came together and searched for solutions for the state’s challenges?” And so began the Under 40 Forum.

Building upon the success of our inaugural Forum in 2016, this year’s Under 40 Leaders are dynamic, insightful and full of strong opinions. The 2017 Forum, held March 2-3 at the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute, focused on the issue of “Fractured Arkansas.”

As organizers, we saw the state too often dwell on petty differences. This is not uncommon for family. There can be squabbles and competing for limited resources when we should be working together. These can be regional or city quarrels, rural vs. urban tensions, cultural and economic divides or a variety of other areas where we misallocate our focus. This is how we framed the discussion for this year’s Forum, and this report contains the feedback, insight and recommendations of the Under 40 Leaders.

We encourage you to read on to learn *their* thoughts.

Marta Loyd, Ed.D.
Executive Director
Winthrop Rockefeller Institute

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ARKANSAS IS ABUNDANTLY BLESSED. We have more good things to work with, more good things to achieve, than any of our neighbors. We can, with sound programs...become the envy of the South, and I say to you, the entire nation.”

- Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller

AS POWERFUL AS OUR MEMORIES ARE, our dreams must be even stronger.”

- President Bill Clinton

INTRODUCTION

We believe in the power of collaboration; so did Governor Winthrop Rockefeller. He held more than 200 collaborative retreats at his home and ranch, where the Institute now sits atop Petit Jean Mountain. It is the collaborative power of Arkansas’ rising younger leaders we worked to harness at the second annual Under 40 Forum. Like Governor Rockefeller, the Clinton School believes in the power of collaboration. Each school year the Clinton School hosts over 100 speakers and programs on a wide variety of topics. Ranging from regional to international, these events are free and open to the public, providing unprecedented access for students as well as many collaborative and connectional opportunities for Arkansans.

It is the rare product or policy that is the result of one person. While technology has allowed for an ease of correspondence across the globe, nothing has yet replaced the impact of gathering smart people in a room in an effort to address the problems facing us. It is particularly important to gather younger people, as they are the ones inheriting the difficulties passed down to them by previous generations. Today the United States has [more 26-year olds²](#) than persons of any other age. It is for their future we must plan.

Problem solving is open source. We think you will see Under 40 Leaders approach the problems facing Arkansas in the 21st Century with wiki-like tactics, collaboratively developing a database of answers. But like Governor Rockefeller did with his convenings atop Petit Jean Mountain, it is critical to get people in the same room to solve problems.

Our focus in 2017 is “Fractured Arkansas.”

frac•ture

'frak(t)SHər/

When used as a verb it means: break or cause to break.

One of our partners and panelists at the Forum, Rex Nelson, perhaps said it best: “Arkansas is rapidly becoming two states within a state.” The central and the northwest areas and then everything else. The urban and the rural. The haves and have nots. One of the things missing in our state is a 40 Under Forty listing specifically focusing on a specific region such as northeast Arkansas, southern Arkansas or perhaps southwestern Arkansas. Absent these specific regional honors, we as organizers felt our guest list lacked the full depth of regional representation we would have preferred. More to the point, the absence of such a regional list of honors reinforced the opportunity gaps that exist outside of central and northwest Arkansas.

In his comments to the Under 40 Leaders, Nelson noted the trend of populations in rural areas shrinking and populations in urban centers increasing over the past half-century. This great shift of population is not unique to Arkansas, but in our state it takes on a particular geographic form. People are moving from east and south to north and west, and it is arguably the most important trend in Arkansas’s past 50 years. Arkansas will have more counties lose population than gain population when the 2020 Census is counted, though the state is expected to see overall population gains that will meet or exceed the national average. With major population shifts come resource challenges ranging from infrastructure to human capital. While the fractures Under 40 Leaders addressed during their time on the mountain included actual fractures in bridges, streets and the like, they were more focused on the types of fractures that had little to do with place or geography.

The “division” between northwest and central Arkansas and the concern that the other, more rural areas of the state are being overlooked, was set aside by Under 40 Leaders. Instead, Under 40 Leaders chose to focus on more substantive policy concerns that all citizens will relate to, regardless of geography. From Alma to Arkadelphia, White Hall to West Memphis or Benton to Bentonville, every citizen can act on or advocate for these sensible policies, which can begin to heal the fractures facing too many Arkansas communities. The four major areas of focus for change are:

- Healing cultural divides
- Educational structure and policy shifts
- Access to nontraditional educational opportunities
- Focusing on the industry of the future vs. the industries of the past

Fractures can heal, but they will not heal if left untreated. With proper care and planning, fractures can mend. This will take time, focused effort and leadership. We will be stronger for it.



IF WE HAVE NO SENSE OF COMMUNITY, the American dream will wither.”

– President Bill Clinton

I KNOW IT IS DIFFICULT FOR US not to think of ourselves as superior to people who are as different from us in culture, background, customs and religion....[But] it is up to us to work together to bring about that rapport which will enable us to live together in peace and mutual respect. I am sure that, if we work toward that goal, our feeling of superiority will fade away, and we will come to regard them—as different, yes, in many ways—but as equal in every real sense of human qualities.”

– Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller

HEALING THE CULTURAL DIVIDES

Last year’s Under 40 Forum report focused on “Talent Recruitment and Retention in the 21st Century.” The need to embrace diversity was among the recommendations of last year’s honorees and remains a major area of concern into our second iteration of the Under 40 Forum.

“Culture can divide us instead of bringing us together,” one honoree said. “Too often we are afraid of other cultures and other experiences. The word ‘culture’ can have a negative connotation,” another Under 40 Leader said. Unfamiliarity with other cultures and communities leads to assumptions that are often incorrect and a false idea that differences are problems to be fixed.

Under 40 Leaders acknowledged a lack of concentrated effort to gain a full understanding of other cultures, other ways of life. They recognized that this is a negative for our state. It can and will cause economic and community harm if left unaddressed. According to the [Pew Research Group](#)³, by 2055 America will no longer have a single racial or ethnic majority. A culturally diverse America is inevitable, if not already the norm. It is our reaction to changing demographics that will determine the fate of our communities and our state’s economy for decades to come.

This discussion fits right into the latest research by economist Tyler Cowen. In *The Complacent Class: The Self-Defeating Quest for the American Dream*, Cowen writes about the unseen threat to America, the fact that too often people do not leave their hometowns. This might seem counterintuitive to a discussion on the “fractures” of a state significantly impacted by an economically led geographic shift, but he writes:

“...given that mobility is often down the most for the less skilled workers. In such a setting, poverty and low incomes have flipped from being reasons **to move** to reasons **not to move** (emphasis added), a fundamental change from earlier American attitudes. Most troubling, the numbers also show that those who most need to move are, on average, the least likely to do it.”

Lack of geographic experience reinforces inertia, culturally and otherwise. “We want to



stay close to our culture because of safety,” an Under 40 Leader said, speaking about her community experience. Cowen goes on to say:

“[I]f you cease being challenged and you think your way of life is the only way, ultimately that way will become weak, it will be subject to less improvement, you will enter a kind of bubble and continually be surprised by the challenges the outside world keeps on throwing at you. But you’re not very well equipped intellectually to handle them.”

This sums up our cultural challenge as outlined by Under 40 Leaders: We make cultural assumptions. We do not celebrate our diverse cultures, and because of that, we are not terribly open to learning about other cultures. Coupled with a lack of education on cultural competencies, these assumptions have led Arkansas straight into the trap Cowen warns us to avoid in order to be competitive in the 21st century economy.

RECOMMENDATION

Cultural Competency Leadership

Under 40 Leaders pointed out that there is too little formal guidance and support in the arena of cultural competency. While there are organizations and individuals doing work in this arena, the efforts have yet to trickle down into enough smaller towns or corporate boardrooms. This issue must rise in its importance and visibility. Funding for such an effort is important to its success and this issue deserves a large voice in the elected and private arenas. A conference on cultural, corporate and community competency could call attention to this important subject, as would a larger call-to-action by a high-level, respected leader. Additionally, outreach and education with younger generations will be critical to ensuring acknowledgement and acceptance of the multiplicity of cultures as the norm going forward. Programs such as *The Leader in Me* offered in Fayetteville schools might be adjusted to include a broader cultural curriculum.



NEVER ONCE DID I DOUBT that our top priority had to go to education. Our oldest problems are rooted there, and surely our brightest opportunities for the future are to be found there.”

- Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller

IF WE WANT TO INVEST IN THE PROSPERITY OF OUR NATION, we must invest in the education of our children so that their talents may be fully employed.”

- President Bill Clinton

EDUCATION STRUCTURE AND POLICY

No subject brought up more fire, more passion or more discussion than the status and future of Arkansas education policy and structure. Under 40 Leaders stressed that the fate of our state’s future rests on addressing this constant challenge in an aggressive and uncommon way. Under 40 Leaders acknowledged and recognized the significant progress, particularly since the Lake View decision and reaction of the state in the early 2000s. They noted that shifting demographics, technology and additional focus on education issues by disparate advocacy groups has provided innumerable paths to prosperity. Some regions, often the ones with more resources, seem to flourish.

The vast amount of programs that are in operation across the state coupled with the extraordinary amount of information presented to people daily makes it difficult to keep up with what is working best. Add to that, what works best in Mena may not be what works best in Magnolia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pre-K

Universal Pre-K continues to be a critical concern for Under 40 Leaders, a concern echoed by last year’s Under 40 Forum attendees. Let there be no doubt – younger leaders

place an extraordinarily high value on education opportunities for the youngest of us. If Arkansas does not continue to grow its Pre-K offerings we will lose ground to states that do. Under 40 Leaders were clear that the offerings should not be just available to those with means. Those with means have access to most goods and services anywhere in the world in this modern economy. Rather, they saw creative alternative education offerings as critical to maintaining pace in economic recruitment and community vitality. Simply put, communities without these qualities have less to offer in recruiting business and talent and are at a competitive disadvantage.



Nurture Curiosity and Confidence

One of the biggest fractures facing young Arkansans is in the lack of opportunities for mentorship. This is most pressing in our more underdeveloped communities, Under 40 Leaders noted. Regardless of geography, we have a host of younger, curious citizens who Under 40 Leaders believe are the ones to heal the state's fractures. That requires fostering strong communities that include mentorship programs and opportunities to inspire young people to success by exposing them to a variety of career and educational options.

One Under 40 Leader shared a story of a field trip to Memphis when students from their rural northeast Arkansas hometown left the county for the first time. Bridges were built to possibilities previously unknown, paths fostered to other worlds previously unexplored.

Continue to Embrace Technology

Under 40 Leaders lauded making use of technology that a number of financial institutions have utilized in order to aid literacy education. In that same vein of high praise are the STEM Camps being developed in certain areas. What appears lacking is equitable and widespread distribution of that technology throughout the state. Under 40 Leaders suggest building "on ramps" for success, linking the worlds of work and education with continued early exposure to technical skills and training for jobs of the future.

Staying Informed

Under 40 Leaders recognize the herculean efforts of a variety of education advocates who continue their activism in these changing times. Like technology, the change and efforts in education structure and policy are difficult to keep up with on a statewide scale, much less a national one. Under 40 Leaders in attendance were parents, childless, aunts, uncles, cousins and future parents. They are engaged in their community and often, engaged in their school. Yet despite this general high level of engagement, it is difficult for them to keep up with the numerous plans, efforts and partnerships happening across the state in the field of education.



IN TODAY'S KNOWLEDGE BASED ECONOMY, what you earn depends on what you know."

- President Bill Clinton

...IT IS BOTH A MORAL OBLIGATION and in society's best interest to help those unable to help themselves."

- Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller

ACCESS TO NONTRADITIONAL EDUCATION

Under 40 Leaders believe the one-size-fits-all days of education are behind us. A different approach to education did not mean strictly charters or home school vs. the more traditional public school at the Forum. Rather, for Under 40 Leaders the non-traditional approach to learning, particularly lifelong learning, must come beyond the formal classroom. The U of A System's eVersity program is a good model. Exposure to opportunities, deeper integration with the business community and celebrating the entrepreneurial nature of trades are among the highlights of the discussion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nontraditional Curriculum

In order for students to be successful in an evolving economy and for communities to remain competitive, there must be an offering of nontraditional curriculum for all students. This nontraditional curriculum should range from the state's history of entrepreneurship and advanced robotics to storytelling for additional trade as well as apprenticeship opportunities for credit and beyond. The [CAPS⁴](#) (Center for Advanced Professional Studies) program currently in the [Bentonville School District⁵](#) is an example Under 40 Leaders hold up as a model worth replicating.

Statewide Database of Partners, Programs & Plans

To this end, Under 40 Leaders believe there is a strong need for a repository of demands and services in the K-12 education arena in Arkansas. This should be a statewide listing of partner organizations, plans developed, services offered (by area or region) and any measures of success or challenges.

Expanded Consolidation

Another significant concern discussed at length is the large number of school districts for a state of our size and population. "Some of these kids are in a district led by the 240th best superintendent in the state," one Under 40 honoree said. There was agreement among Under 40 Leaders that the disparate administrative priorities and resources of 240-plus superintendents hold back any unity of approach for cutting-edge policies.

Access to Opportunity for All

Unequal access to opportunities feeds many of our fractures, Under 40 Leaders conveyed. This most damaging for K-12 aged citizens. As we continue to urbanize as both a



state and a nation, (in the [latest Census figures](#)⁶, more counties in Arkansas lost population than gained) we risk only further cultivating fractures and thus enlarging the opportunity gap if we do not address the inequity across our unbalanced geographic regions. Upbringing impacts opportunity and lack of access to opportunity impacts social mobility.

There is no singular solution, no silver bullet to these difficulties. Under 40 Leaders find varying levels of success in programs occurring or that have occurred in their current or home communities.

Target High School Students

In order to address lack of access to opportunity and stimulate upward social mobility, Under 40 Leaders recommend at first undertaking a targeted approach, focusing on high school students. This outreach would provide information regarding the opportunities to aid social mobility via a list or database of opportunities that exist within both the community and the county/region.

Utilize Faith Community as Mentors

Arkansas would do well to tap into the faith-based community as potential mentors, the Under 40 Leaders advised. The gateway to many Southern communities runs through its faith-based institutions. Houses of worship are filled with potential mentors, experienced business people and public servants. This is an under-tapped market for community participation in the arena of mentoring and internship access, Under 40 Leaders noted. If a high profile leader charged the faith-based community with outreach in such a way that was in line with their mission of lifting up others and serving community, this could be a powerful tool in many fractured parts of Arkansas. This approach is not without precedent, as Gov. Hutchinson undertook such an effort in the need for more foster parents.

Address the Intimidation Factor

Large corporate offices can be intimidating for younger students. The same is true for formal workplaces or other structured environments for students whose life experience and social networks rarely, if ever, are exposed to certain organized atmospheres. A continued and focused effort to coach students who lack the more formal, professional social networks is critical, our Under 40 Leaders said. Acting at an early student age is the time before social apprehension is in full force, providing immersion into the professional world is recommended by Under 40 Leaders. A good example of a mentorship program is the half-day eighth grade outreach to at-risk youth by Walmart corporate. This involves travel to the Walmart Home Office in order to spur interest in the business world and provide exposure to a corporate environment.



OLD TRADITIONS WILL BE CHALLENGED... And if they are found, after all, to lack stability, then they will give way...and new definitions and purposes will replace them.”

- Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller

IN THE NEW ECONOMY INNOVATION, education and motivation are everything.”

- President Bill Clinton

INDUSTRY OF THE FUTURE VS. INDUSTRY OF THE PAST

Under 40 Leaders feel strongly that too many officials participating in our state’s efforts in economic development are wed to an ancient approach. This is more the case on the county and local level, they note. In today’s economy, employees must continue to learn and evolve their skills. Under 40 Leaders believe recruiting a business that will soon relocate when offered even greater incentives is a zero-sum game. In order to heal our economic fractures, areas and/or regions of our largely rural state must find ways to satisfy the demands of the modern economy. “You have to get comfortable with uncertainty,” one Under 40 Leader said.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Rightsize Shrinking Cities

Struggling areas must mindfully address their population shrinkage by rightsizing. Size does not necessarily equal wealth, despite the perception to the contrary. This means an enhanced focus on walkable neighborhoods and commercial districts as well as a sharper focus on entrepreneurship. It is by “growing where you’re planted” that areas struggling economically have a far better chance of long-term success than they do recruiting a “savior” corporation from afar. The efforts that go into local entrepreneurial enhancement will only aid additional economic development efforts as quality of place and community development come before traditional economic development. We see the success in this approach in [certain areas](#)⁷ of the state already. Usually there is a strong role played by the nearby college or university.

Grow College and University Partnerships with Cities

These critical ties between higher education and business support are no longer optional. Both corporate citizens and small business need the lifelong learning necessary in an ever-changing economy in order to stay competitive. This is critical to ensuring skills for emerging industry are continually honed to meet the ever-evolving need. It is important to remember that 65% of children in primary school today will have jobs that [don't exist yet](#)⁸.



Support Smaller Agriculture with Technology Advances

Under 40 Leaders feel it is critical to tie our state's largest economic sector, agriculture, to the technological growth all sectors are experiencing. There is a particular need for outreach and education for the smaller farmer, they believe. Mindful of globalization's encroachment, changing market forces and the opportunity for numerous entrepreneurial approaches in smaller market agriculture, Under 40 Leaders expressed reverence for our state's heritage and the backbreaking work of the farmer. This reinforces the need to not ignore this critical sector of our economy for the bright, shiny newness of the tech sector or other rising industry.

It is this holistic approach that Under 40 Leaders recommend localities formally adopt as a significant portion of their economic development efforts. Once adopted, communities must replicate and develop these programs as appropriate and be mindful of regionalism. Siloed approaches are destined to fail. Additionally, programs for mentoring entrepreneurs such as the Delta I-Fund program, efforts by StartUp Junkie and a variety of other entrepreneurial aid efforts will be critical. These initiatives can fill the critical skills gaps that in part prevent expansion efforts by the larger corporations that overlook some areas of our state due to the gap in skills, services or quality of life amenities. The development and success of these organizations that are not the traditional chamber of commerce, or municipal economic development agencies in and of itself is evidence of how the model is changing.

Eliminate Self-Inflicted Wounds

These efforts can only be truly effective if our state can stop self-creating a climate that makes us appear unwelcoming to "others." One of the areas where Under 40 Leaders felt Arkansas is mired in the past comes from purposefully divisive legislative efforts. This does not reflect the majority of Arkansans, the Under 40 Leaders believe. Self-inflicted wounds are difficult to heal. "Reputations [of states] change fast," one Under 40 Leader said. "Just look at North Carolina."

Some of the strategies Under 40 Leaders propose do not easily lend themselves to metrics. They are qualitative, not quantitative. These types of innovation require reinforcement from high-level leaders who understand the long arc of economic and community improvement.



WE CANNOT BUILD OUR OWN FUTURE without helping others to build theirs.”

– President Bill Clinton

EVERY CITIZEN HAS THE DUTY TO BE INFORMED, to be thoughtfully concerned, and to participate in the search for solutions.”

– Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller

CONCLUSION

Under 40 Leaders are bullish on Arkansas’ future. When younger leaders are enthusiastic, we should all have hope. There is a shared awareness that our beloved state has significant fractures, these specifically being

- Healing cultural divides
- Educational structure and policy shifts
- Access to nontraditional educational opportunities
- Focusing on the industry of the future vs. the industries of the past

But these leaders are offering solutions. Not everyone will agree with the solutions they provide, and that’s OK. What’s most important is that we as a state continually consider the thoughts and approaches presented by up-and-coming leaders and work to ensure engagement of rising generations.

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1. <https://www.facebook.com/Rockefeller.Institute/videos/10154708917588107/>
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