

UNDER 40 FORUM

Retention & Recruitment: Ideas for the Future of Arkansas

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“ PERHAPS YOU ALL WILL
COME UP WITH A FOCUSED
MISSION FOR OUR STATE.”

- GOV. ASA HUTCHINSON,
2016 UNDER 40 FORUM KEYNOTE ADDRESS



INTRODUCTION

IDEAS THAT SHAPE OUR FUTURE RARELY COME FROM LONE MINDS. They take shape from the combination of diverse thought and experience.

This guiding principle was embraced 50 years ago by Arkansas Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller, who held more than 200 summits with leaders, experts, policymakers and scholars at his home and ranch atop Petit Jean Mountain.

The inaugural Under 40 Forum was born from a conversation between Dean Skip Rutherford of the Clinton School of Public Service and Winthrop Rockefeller Institute Executive Director Dr. Marta Loyd. “Why not provide an opportunity for our state’s up-and-coming acknowledged leaders to gather and help develop solutions to the problems our state faces?” All 78 of the 2015 40 Under 40 honorees as determined by both *Arkansas Business* and the *Northwest Arkansas Business Journal* were invited to a summit at the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute on Petit Jean Mountain April 1-2, 2016. Their task was to discuss the challenges and opportunities Arkansas faces in attracting and retaining young talent. Under 40 Leaders represented at the forum included entrepreneurs, bankers, attorneys, government officials, nonprofit leaders and small business owners.

Gov. Asa Hutchinson set the tone for the event with a [keynote address](#)¹ at which he discussed his ideas for how Arkansas can better attract and retain the next generation of leaders. He also took time to answer questions from the Under 40 Leaders, addressing such topics as the need for better early childhood education opportunities throughout the state, the need for more workers with programming and coding skills, Arkansas’ reputation among millennials, and how Arkansas can effectively brand itself as a place full of quality of life.

The Under 40 Leaders then engaged in a facilitated discussion moderated by Matt DeCample, former spokesman for Gov. Mike Beebe and well-known communications consultant and comedy improviser, to identify existing strategies that are working and ways to scale them; obstacles that need to be overcome; and new ideas to spur growth and development. Their dialogue was full of insight, energy and healthy discourse. The results of their conversations are detailed in this report.

The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute, Clinton School of Public Service, *Arkansas Business* and the *Northwest Arkansas Business Journal* served only as conveners and observers, not as participants. The Under 40 Forum Report, a compilation of the observations and recommendations of Under 40 Leaders, was prepared by the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute and edited by both Under 40 Forum partners and an editorial review board of forum participants.

“ ACCESS TO TALENTED AND
CREATIVE PEOPLE IS TO
MODERN BUSINESS WHAT
ACCESS TO COAL AND IRON
ORE WAS TO STEEL-MAKING.”

- RICHARD FLORIDA, THE TALENT MANDATE



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AT THE UNDER 40 FORUM, attendees participated in facilitated discussions on the topic of attracting and retaining talent in Arkansas. The charge for Under 40 Leaders was to identify what is working in Arkansas' favor and what serves as a burden when trying to convince young talent to consider moving to or remaining in our state. The group then honed in on specific recommendations for community, business and political leaders to consider in making Arkansas a more attractive place for young people to live and work.

We recognize that this report is not scientific and that this group of honorees is not an exact reflection of the diverse tapestry of our state. However, Under 40 honorees represent leaders in the state's economic, technological, corporate and nonprofit sectors. They have their fingers on the pulse of change of both the economy and the culture. The group's concerns draw attention to areas where improvement will likely aid the state's efforts in talent recruitment and retention. Those areas are:

- Heightened focus on Quality of Living & Place
- Cultivation and Coordination of Economic Genius
- Expansion of Educational Opportunities
- Improved Regionalism Outside of Central and Northwest Arkansas

These areas may sound like some of the traditional focus areas of public and private advocates. Under 40 Leaders look at them differently. Areas Under 40 Leaders suggest stronger focus on include:

<i>Enhanced Quality of Place</i>	<i>Parks & Tourism and AEDC</i>
<i>Universal Pre-K</i>	<i>Sustained Expansion of the ASBDTC</i>
<i>Embracing Diversity</i>	<i>Continued Focus on Workforce Development</i>
<i>Certification for Woman-Owned Businesses</i>	<i>Connecting the Tech Scene</i>
<i>Economic Capture & Retention Campaigns</i>	<i>Branding Arkansas as a Place for Entrepreneurship</i>
<i>Getting Out of Our Own Way</i>	<i>Broadband Expansion</i>
<i>Development of Resource One-Stops</i>	<i>Statewide Internship Coordinator</i>
<i>Encouraging Greater Connection between</i>	<i>4-Year-Old Pre-K & Financial Literacy</i>

Improved interaction with elected officials, with which many Under 40 Leaders had little relationship or awareness of, can only help in implementing these recommendations. Improving the dialogue between public sector officials and our state's future leaders is a target of this Under 40 Forum and surely the Forums to follow. This report is a first attempt at sharing the perspectives of Arkansas' Under 40 Leaders and encouraging business and political leaders to take notice.

Strong opinions and suggestions are shared throughout this report. Ideas are presented to improve Arkansas' economic and community climate. We invite you to read and listen. Under 40 Leaders are the future. They see things differently. Change is recommended. It is the only constant.

The Winthrop Rockefeller Institute, The Clinton School of Public Service, *Arkansas Business* and the *Northwest Arkansas Business Journal* will host the 2016 classes of the 40 Under 40 honorees March 2-3, 2017. We look forward to equally interesting outcomes from that gathering.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING TALENT IN ARKANSAS; THE VIEW FROM UNDER 40 LEADERS

WHAT IS WORKING?

Selling Arkansas' Positives

Attendees noted that once they were able to arrange a prospect visit – be it client or recruit – they were more than halfway to closing the deal. However, convincing and arranging the visit took far more than 50% of the work. Once the prospect arrives, Under 40 Leaders agree, there is a lot to sell. Arkansas boasts a relatively low cost of living and an increasing variety of cultural amenities that allow the state to sell itself. Attendees did note that it often took a second visit to truly “seal the deal.” The consensus among the Under 40 Leaders was that the first visit overcame the negative perceptions. Recruits then reflected and scheduled a second visit, often including the spouse and/or other family members. Attendees agreed with Gov. Hutchinson, who pointed out in his keynote address that once people get to know Arkansas, they are ready to move here.

Culture and Community Involvement

Under 40 Leaders allow that another reason Arkansas is easy to sell is its hospitality. In Arkansas, by and large, people are welcomed. Given Arkansas' size and “small town” feel, attendees acknowledged it is possible to get involved and make a difference in one's community here. This was noted as a particularly important aspect of recruiting talented younger people. The community-focused ethic is strong in the background of the type of people Under 40 Leaders work hard to recruit. According to our group, Arkansas being welcoming, having causes and organizations focused on areas of importance to Millennials and Generation Y, and making a [difference in one's community](#)³ ranked as important factors in talent recruitment.

Given the importance of community impact to individuals, Under 40 Leaders applauded business-driven outreach to nonprofits. In the best-case scenarios discussed, businesses worked across the community to cultivate relationships with locally focused nonprofits and encouraged their outreach to employees. Many organizations and supervisors allow employees to dedicate a few office hours per week to focus on nonprofit, apolitical work. Attendees expressed how this helps staff to encourage placing roots in the community. This only further integrates transplants into the organization and state as well as continuing the cycle of community improvement. Not all Arkansas businesses adopt this approach, and for them, Under 40 Leaders encouraged a shift to good corporate citizenship and community involvement.

Under 40 Leaders encouraged a shift to good corporate citizenship and community involvement.

WHAT ISN'T WORKING

Current Branding & Marketing of the State

Under 40 Leaders noted their strong awareness of our state as a place to vacation, particularly as it relates to Arkansas' scenic beauty and outdoor recreational opportunities. Lacking, however, are efforts to brand the state as a place for younger, talented people to relocate and be entrepreneurial. This is not to say such efforts do not exist, but rather that they are perhaps not being targeted as smartly as Under 40 Leaders would recommend. This is a group that understands that brands are far more than taglines and graphics; they are a decades-long undertaking. They also note it will likely take a significant public-private partnership to begin this rebranding effort.

Under 40 Leaders represent a new generation of Arkansans who agree that the perception of Arkansas stemming from the state's past history of racial discrimination, the challenges of 21st century discrimination as well as the pervasive belief that the South consists largely of uneducated people holding onto outdated ideas, continues to hold Arkansas back when it comes to recruiting talent. To this group of business leaders, any legislative action or news story that serves to perpetuate that belief is problematic.

Opportunity Gaps & Returning Home Recruitment

Under 40 Leaders overwhelmingly agreed that many ambitious entrepreneurs and business people feel forced to leave the state. There are innumerable reasons for this. Up-and-coming tech entrepreneurs and investors may discover the need to make stronger professional and personal networks in places like Silicon Valley or Wall Street. Often out-of-state corporate headquarters host the most senior level positions in a company, providing the only means of upward mobility. While there is only so much to be done about some of those issues, there is an opportunity gap in the arena of recruiting native alumni. Under 40 Leaders agreed that an effective strategy is to develop a network of our best and brightest who have been forced to depart but still have strong lingering feelings for the state and who may be inclined to either return or invest in Arkansas.

Incentives, Under 40 Leaders largely agreed, are like an arms race; many had concerns about incentives (except the group receiving the incentives), but until the other actors universally eliminate them, the state must be competitive with incentive packages. While there was debate over the details of use and policy on incentives, most attendees agreed that Arkansas lacks incentives targeted at small and rising businesses. There was agreement among the group that when considering new or revised incentive packages, government leaders should look at incentives not only aimed at attracting new business, but also at helping small existing businesses scale upward.



RECOMMENDATIONS

QUALITY OF LIVING

In 21st century economic development, people often choose where they want to live first then they choose what they want to do. It is no longer enough to build a spec park in the middle of a bean field and throw enough incentive money at a large manufacturing plant in hopes it will locate there. In the 21st century, it takes much, much more.

While the definition of “quality of living” differs for people of different generations, backgrounds and interests, there are some universal things that must exist to meet minimum quality-of-life needs. However, Under 40 Leaders assert it is meeting the “next level” needs that will inevitably push some communities to the front of the economic pack and unfortunately leave some communities behind. Among these areas are:

Universal Pre-K Opportunities

There was a consensus among Under 40 Leaders that access to high quality, public pre-K education was a must for many recruits to even consider living in or relocating to another community. Absent that offering, a community is quickly cut from the list. Given that the target recruitment audience for Under 40 business leaders consists generally of young professionals, attending to the needs of small children is typically a high priority. Attendees recognized this could contribute to the strain of our “shrinking cities,” but it is nonetheless non-negotiable for those with children or considering parenthood.

The changing demographics of our state are recognized by Under 40 Leaders, who are working to reflect the same diversity within their own organizations.

Embracing Diversity

Honorees spoke eloquently about their lack of interest in homogeneous communities. Often with this group, those are the types of communities they left behind. The changing demographics of our state are recognized by Under 40 Leaders, who are working to reflect the same diversity within their own organizations. The group allowed that the best way to develop and market products was to cultivate a team that best reflected their often national customer base and sometimes global customer base. Not doing so risks confirmation bias developing within the company. However, some firms faced challenges in their diversity recruiting from the segments of the community that are struggling with the relatively rapid cultural transformation they are facing. “It’s hard to recruit out-of-state diverse candidates when they constantly see trucks driving around with rebel flags,” one Under 40 Leader said.

Certification for Woman-Owned Businesses

Despite past efforts, Arkansas lacks an option for a state certification of a “woman-owned business” as a minority business enterprise. Such a certification is necessary for a business to be declared a “minority-owned business” and to enjoy access to a variety of incentives available from state government.



Economic Capture & Retention Campaign

“My hometown didn’t retain me,” one Leader said. They left for opportunity and access to better quality of living. A number of Under 40 Leaders reported that their Arkansas hometown often had one major industry – sometimes agriculture, other times a major manufacturing plant. Mechanization of farming as well as the migration of industry for incentives and/or cheaper labor has left segments of our state decimated and in need of new opportunities for the younger generations.

However, cultivating hometown alumni as mentors, investors and supporters in small communities is an opportunity Arkansas is leaving on the table,

according to Under 40 Leaders. The opportunity to advise students, elected officials and others about cultivating hometown alumni is one this group would welcome. Too often smaller cities are lacking in strong technical expertise in a variety of areas where community alumni have a strong set of skills. Taking advantage of those skills to help their native communities is not something they have been asked to do, attendees noted. The advent of social media and other electronic communication better facilitates both the connection of alumni and access to the expertise of younger generations.

There is an acknowledged fear among Under 40 Leaders that the advice they give might not always be welcomed, particularly by older generations. This advice may or may not involve decisions to purposely contract, combine or otherwise change. Change is hard, and acceptance of community dysfunction is harder, but this opportunity is one that could benefit our struggling communities.

Getting Out of Our Own Way

One topic Under 40 Leaders focused on for discussion was the impact of 2015’s proposed Religious Freedom Restoration Act (HB 1228). While a revised version of the bill was eventually signed into law, the attendees reported a significant negative impact on their talent recruitment efforts because of the negative press the bill received. “We benefited from the fact that Indiana’s bill was much harsher,” one Leader said. “Absent their negative attention, all the attention would have been on Arkansas. Message boards and social media were flooded with discussion, almost all negative. It was a solution in search of a problem, and it hurt our recruiting efforts.”

While our attendees came from various backgrounds and hold diverse political opinions, there was strong

agreement that the publicity surrounding this type of proposed legislation creates significant embarrassment in the business community and harms efforts at talent recruitment and retention. Under 40 Leaders encouraged strong opposition voices, not just on this issue but on all issues that might reinforce negative stereotypes. Quick reaction and public statements by high-level elected leaders would be an appropriate damage control response.

Beyond elected officials, our group recommended a return of an “executive forum” along the lines of the Northwest Arkansas Council but made up of high-level executives at successful, growing companies. This group would be a voice to speak out on issues that harm the state’s reputation and lend a business perspective to issues that might impact Arkansas’ growing status as a place for entrepreneurship.

**“My hometown
didn’t retain
me.”**

Resource One Stop

In terms of resources to aid entrepreneurs and small business owners, Under 40 Leaders acknowledge that programs and information are surely available, but not always well advertised or easily accessible. Many Under 40 Leaders told stories of their lack of awareness of resources until advised of them, often in casual conversation. Examples included business licensing requirements, tax payments and public sector incentives.

While a variety of websites and social media platforms exist to promote resources as well as the work of public bodies and elected officials, Under 40 Leaders advocate for a “one-stop shop” online – a place where the combined business development resources of the public and private sector are highlighted rather than a series of independent and mutually exclusive platforms, which can be easily missed.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Encourage Greater Connection between Parks & Tourism and AEDC

While both the Arkansas Economic Development Commission and Arkansas Parks & Tourism received strong praise from Under 40 Leaders, they felt a stronger connection between the two agencies would better serve Arkansas. Parks & Tourism is charged with relocation package development, for example. That struck the attendees as ineffective. The relocation budget has been frozen, it was reported, and efforts now included less hard copy outreach and more web-focused material. There was a concern about this from one of the attendees with close ties to retirement relocation efforts and a strong agreement that relocation attraction efforts need more support from the public sector.

Expansion of ASBDTC

Arkansas’ Small Business Development and Technology Centers (ASBDTC) are recognized as extraordinary resources. Each have particular strengths. However, Under 40 Leaders felt that an increased focus on startups and access to venture capital would fill an existing gap. The attendees recommended an expansion of these focus areas by our publicly funded small business advocate to aid the state’s overall economic base.

Continued Focus on Workforce Development

Under 40 Leaders applauded the increased focus on workforce development efforts under Governors Hutchinson and Beebe and Arkansas State Sen. Jane English's leadership. Better partnership with Workforce Development Boards, particularly in the arena of technology, is an area where the group believes progress can be made. Under 40 Leaders demonstrated a willingness to help develop talent and recommended better outreach to the small business sector.

Connecting the Tech Scene

One of the strongest things to come out of the inaugural Under 40 Forum is the connections made among emerging and established younger leaders. Many of the attendees had not formally met before

but it wasn't uncommon that names and roles were familiar to others. The ubiquity of social media makes this unsurprising, but the opportunity to connect was reported as invaluable. This seemed most true of our attendees engaged in the startup and technology professions. While most of the attendees participated in some form of professional development on the national level, there are gaps on the state level. The biggest gap appeared to be the opportunity to network with peers in the same field. The lack of connectivity between the northwest Arkansas tech scene and the central Arkansas tech scene became a significant point of conversation. Under 40 Leaders think this is a gap that can be easily filled, perhaps with a conference or a retreat that rotates geographically.

Branding Arkansas as a Place for Entrepreneurship

Arkansas' brand as The Natural State is well established for travelers and the vacation-set. The gap, according to Under 40 Leaders, exists in our entrepreneurial micro brands. Under 40 Leaders recommend that micro brands highlight Arkansas' quality of living options

when marketing to entrepreneurs and mobile workers. Access to outdoor activities, walkable places, biking options and homegrown retail are an important part of that micro brand. These concerns are not separate from salary and incentives, attendees noted.

The best way to promote these assets – all of which Arkansas has – is by personal testimony, the group noted. Films/video of transplants, entrepreneurs and other talented people tell the story in a compelling way that is of interest to the kinds of talent Under 40 Leaders are recruiting. These messages would ideally be made up of a diverse cast – diverse in all aspects, from business types to those sharing their message. The attendees noted that too often branding messages focus on some of Arkansas' legacy successes, which trend toward the established. A tremendous opportunity for a crowdsourced solution exists, taking advantage of the creative class that exists and has chosen Arkansas as a place to live and work.

Areas without strong broadband service simply do not make the list of locations to which rising generations consider moving.



Broadband Expansion

Areas without strong broadband service simply do not make the list of locations to which rising generations consider moving. One attendee in the technology field told the story of how downtown Little Rock had worked hard to upgrade the level of broadband in the new “Tech Park,” and despite significant upgrades in a narrow area, the coverage simply was not strong enough for the need. In June 2016, the [Tech Park signed a contract](#)⁴ for 1GB connections with an option for 10GB in the future. This is reaching the needs of major tech entrepreneurs but as yet does not have citywide, much less statewide, access for these speeds. Arkansas ranks [48th](#)⁵ in broadband access. Under 40 Leaders expressed concern with the dissolution of Connect Arkansas. There is familiarity with the state [Legislature’s broadband initiative](#)⁶ and [continuing discussions](#)⁷ on broadband, but there is concern that current efforts are not competitive enough and that the market is not as open as is needed to increase.

EDUCATION

Statewide Internship Coordinator

Several Under 40 Leaders had both served as interns and/or engaged interns in their offices. Most attendees work with colleges to recruit the best and the brightest minds for their organization. Nearly all reported a variety of challenges in working at both obtaining the internship and in recruiting interns. The challenges were well understood in that internship placement is often an above-and-beyond service

Arkansas continues to be ranked extraordinarily low in financial literacy.

of teachers or administrators who have innumerable other responsibilities. Internships often went unfilled because of the logistical details that simply become too much trouble.

While internships are often unpaid, improved ease of matching, providing coordination and developing a central clearinghouse would go a long way toward providing students access and opportunities that are currently being left on the table. This person would ideally work across the multiple university systems as there is no limit on where talent matching is enrolled.

4 Year Old Pre-K & Financial Literacy

Arkansas continues to be [ranked](#)⁸ extraordinarily low in financial literacy. Efforts to include [mandatory financial literacy](#)⁹ training at the public school level were withdrawn by the sponsor in the [2015 legislative session](#)¹⁰. At the same time, existing pre-K funding has remained relatively flat for eight years now.

Under 40 Leaders felt these two education issues are some of the most important areas needing progress. Some of the attendees serve as guest lecturers in both primary and secondary schools, teaching everything from basic business practices to financial literacy. Developing a more formal set of needed skills training curriculum outside of the school setting and in partnership with community groups is an idea that appealed to the group.

REGIONALISM BEYOND NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

Under 40 Leaders heaped praise upon the Northwest Arkansas Council. The Council's work over the past couple of decades to bring together a once disparate series of cities to a place now seen as a coordinated region required vision, leadership, planning and no small amount of resources. This is tremendous progress for a group that started with a stakeholder survey leading to a detailed, three-year plan. Central Arkansas has also enjoyed the benefits of regionalism via partnerships like the merged Central Arkansas Water and the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce. Despite these identified successes in regional partnerships in central Arkansas, most Under 40 Leaders acknowledged that the northwest Arkansas area appears to have reached a higher level of functionality. While the group was aware of the more formal regional planning agencies and regional tourism advocates, they lack the independence and resulting impact demonstrated by the Northwest Arkansas Council.

Under 40 Leaders recommend that each of our state's natural economic regions would be well-served to replicate the largely privately funded work of northwest Arkansas. Admittedly, much of the rest of the state does not have the same economic resources as Arkansas' northwest corner, but all agreed that developing a joint vision and formal cooperation does not necessarily require large amounts of funding. There is no doubt that having those resources – enough to hire highly professional staff being the most important aspect of said funding – are what take regionalism to the next, functional level. Even without high levels of private funding, coordination and cooperation are low-cost levels that lead to success.



Such an undertaking may take public sector support in the early years. It is surely best led by the private sector as well as elected officials and community leaders. No matter exactly how it is established in the various economic regions, formalized, structured regional advocacy groups and their success should be replicated.

Under 40 Leaders observed something surprising in their view during the discussion of regionalized economic and community advocacy. The success of northwest Arkansas, likely spurred by the effectiveness of both the Northwest Arkansas Regional Council and the extraordinary worldwide business leadership, had created a separation between that area and the rest of the state.

Even attendees from what others considered the “northwest Arkansas” region, such as Fort Smith or Van Buren, felt somewhat removed from the world of NWA. Even the initials “NWA” were a problem for some residents. When googled, NWA brings up a search separate from what residents would prefer, particularly with the success of a recent movie focusing on the music group NWA. They have collectively started to use “NWAR” to help with regional/brand clarity.



CONCLUSION

UNDER 40 LEADERS AGREE THAT ARKANSAS HAS A LOT TO OFFER for young entrepreneurs and their families. Potential recruits are impressed by the state's natural and cultural amenities, its people and the opportunities to make a difference in local communities. However, Under 40 Leaders also acknowledge the state's branding and image need to be improved. Lack of adequate financial incentives for small businesses and lack of opportunities for hometown alumni often cause the state to lose its best and brightest.

Despite the challenges, Under 40 Leaders are optimistic about Arkansas' future and agree on broad priorities in talent recruitment and retention. Enhancing quality of living by expanding pre-K, embracing diversity, incentivizing women-owned businesses, broadband deployment and centralizing resources around business licensing and regulation are good first steps. Finding ways to cultivate the talents of hometown alumni as mentors and investors could ignite growth in stagnant communities.

Enhanced focus on public sector initiatives around relocation efforts, small business assistance, workforce development and broadband access is necessary to fuel economic opportunity. Micro branding targeted to the entrepreneurial sector is sorely needed.

In developing future leaders, the state could improve its efforts by emphasizing early childhood education and financial literacy and considering some type of investment in identifying and placing college-level interns with Arkansas companies.

Finally, an approach to regional advocacy groups beyond northwest and central Arkansas could benefit small to mid-size communities in their leadership and economic development efforts.

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FOOTNOTES

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