



# Campus and Community Trust-Building in Rural Settings



The Council of  
Independent Colleges

**ENGAGING  
COMMUNITIES**

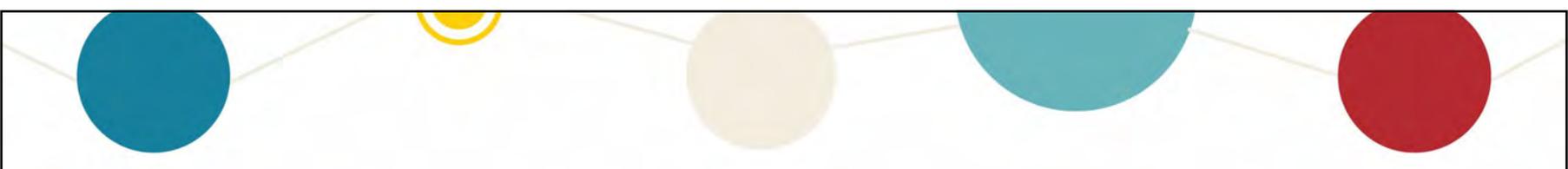
**2025 Presidents Institute**

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## Presenters

**Douglas Palmer**, President, Siena Heights University (MI)

**Glynis Fitzgerald**, President, Alvernia University (PA)

**Lauren Schellenberger**, President, Culver-Stockton College (MO)

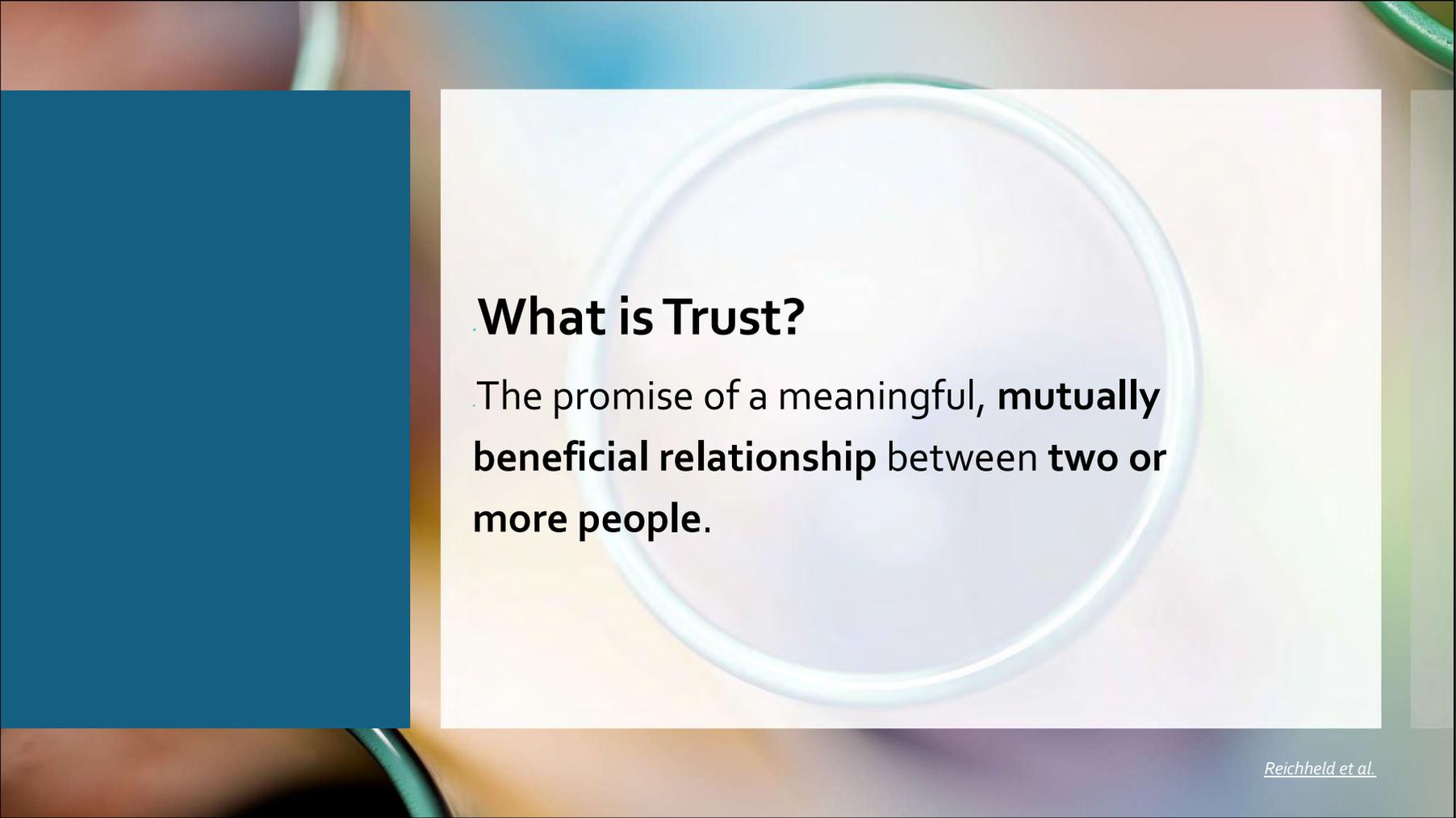
## Chair

**Emma Jones**, Executive Vice President, Credo

## **Why talk about Trust?**

Trust-building was identified as the most important presidential competency in post-pandemic leadership.

*Burmicky et al.*



## What is Trust?

The promise of a meaningful, **mutually beneficial relationship** between **two or more people**.

*Reichheld et al.*

# What's the state of rural higher education?

## In the Rural Context...

1/3 of K-12 schools are **designated as rural** nationally, but in rural areas:

- 29% of 18-24-year-old students enroll in college, compared to 48% from urban areas

**Rural counties** with the lowest levels of educational achievement have:

- Highest levels of poverty
- Highest levels of unemployment
- Highest levels of population loss

## In the Rural Context...

**69% of college students** attend college within 50 miles of their home:

- As community colleges and regional public institutions close or are consolidated, “education deserts” are impacting rural communities disproportionately.

**National programs** to recruit and support rural students are growing:

- STARS (Small Town and Rural Students) Network
- 32 national public and private universities and \$150 million in philanthropic dollars

## In the Rural Context...

Since 2020, **more than a dozen** rural independent colleges have closed.

**But others have thrived**, reaching deeply into their communities to build trust, strengthen relationships, and articulate value...

– even in a **low-trust higher education environment**.

**What's the state  
of trust in higher  
education?**

Higher Ed is losing ground in the national narrative

## Is College Worth It?

*As economic outcomes for young adults with and without degrees have improved, Americans hold mixed views on the value of higher education.*

**Poll finds only 36% of Americans have confidence in higher education**

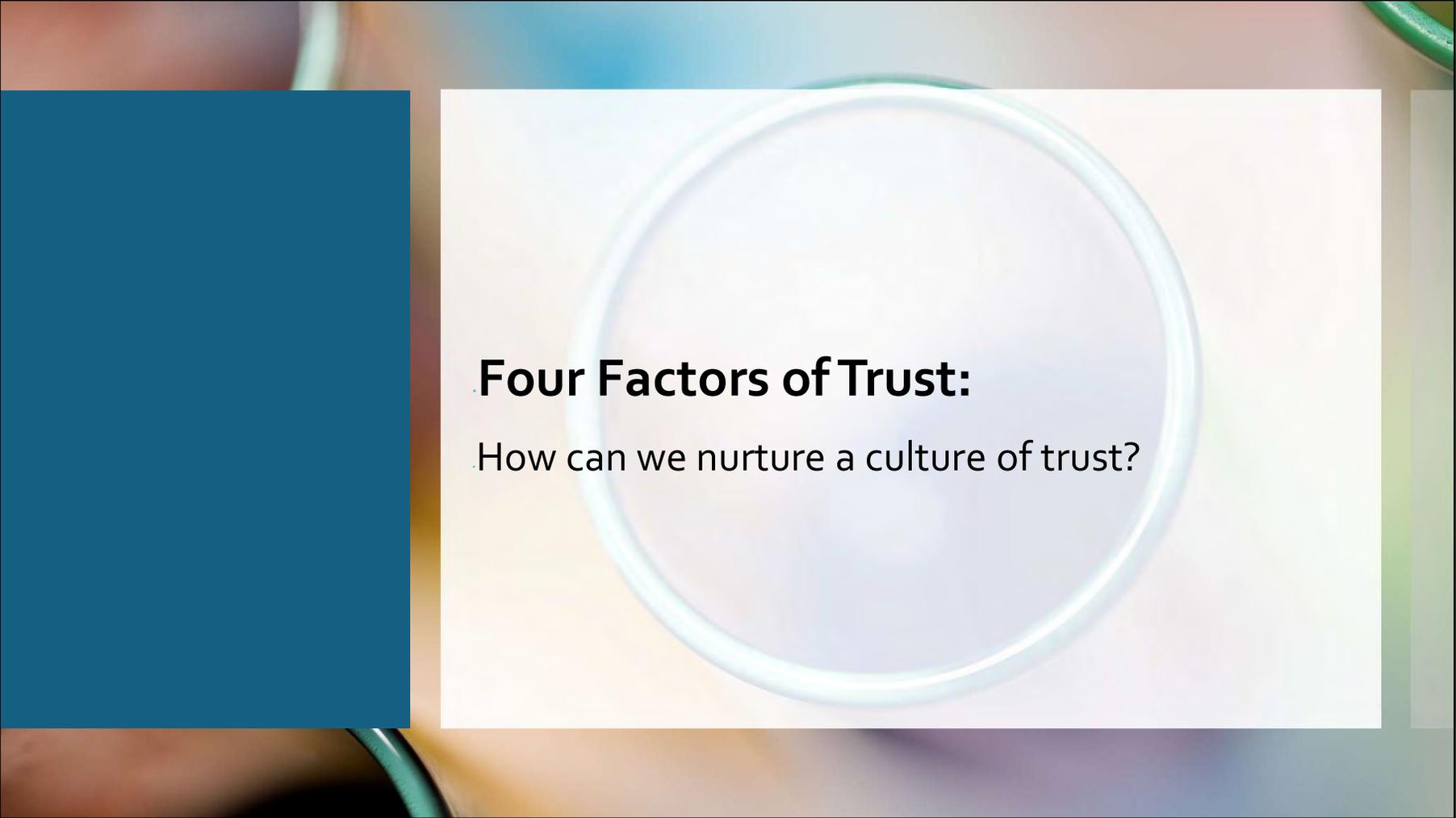
## Public Opinion on Value of Higher Ed Remains Mixed

New public opinion survey shows Democrats and Republicans alike are pessimistic of the long-term benefits of a college degree. Partisan divides still exist in solutions to address the rising cost of education and the role race plays in limiting access to college.

**Is College Worth It? Consider These Factors Before Enrolling**

## Active Devaluation of Educational Achievement

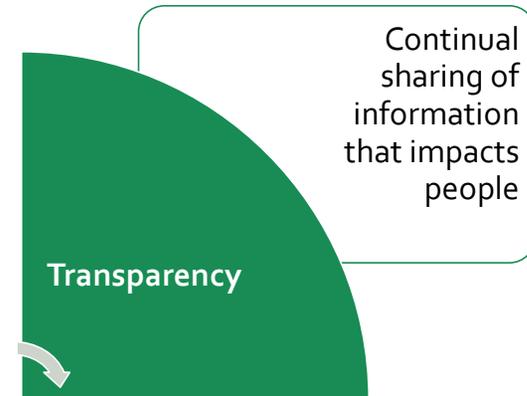
- Preparing children for college as an expectation the general public has of K-12 education has plummeted from the **10th-highest priority to the 47<sup>th</sup>**.
- Having a four-year degree is no longer perceived as a marker for a successful life, with ALL educational degrees ranking in the lowest quartile of.



## **Four Factors of Trust:**

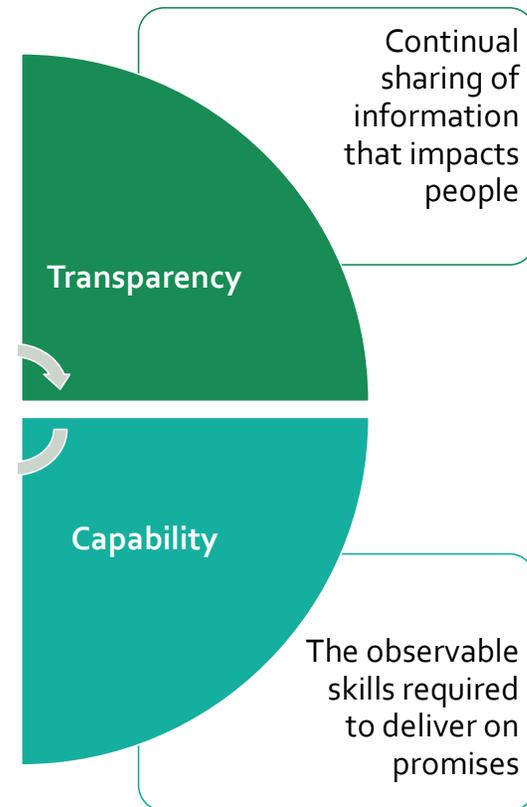
How can we nurture a culture of trust?

## Four Factors of Trust



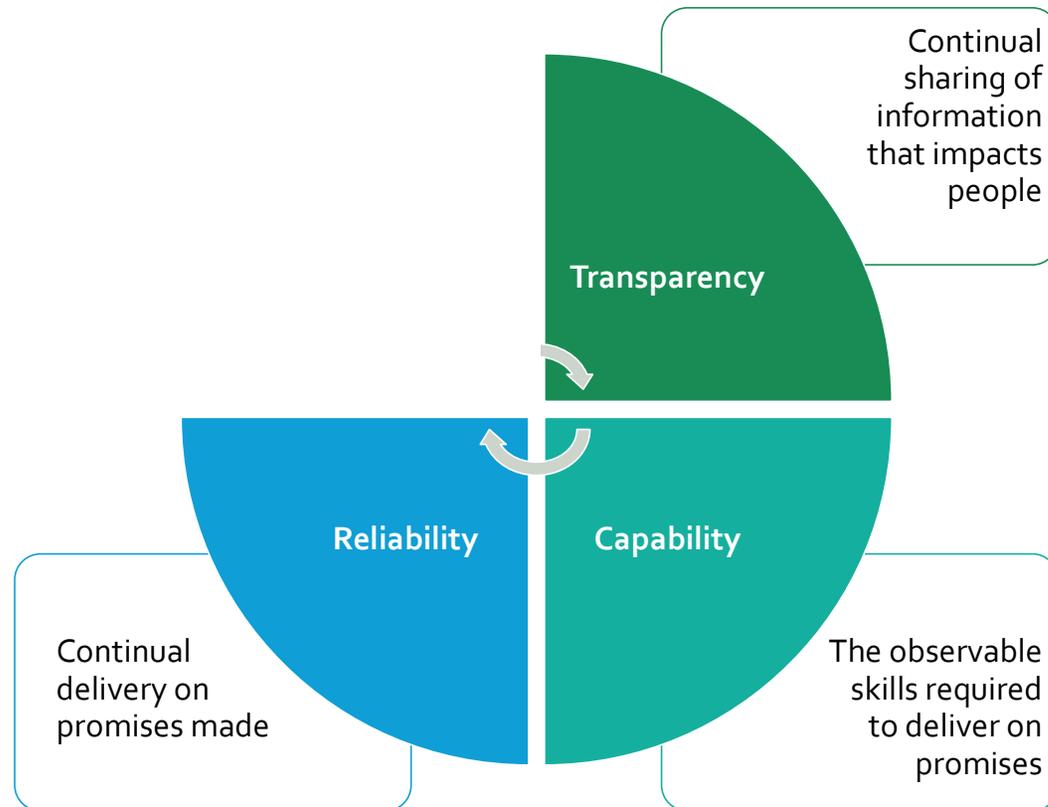
*Reichheld et al.*

## Four Factors of Trust



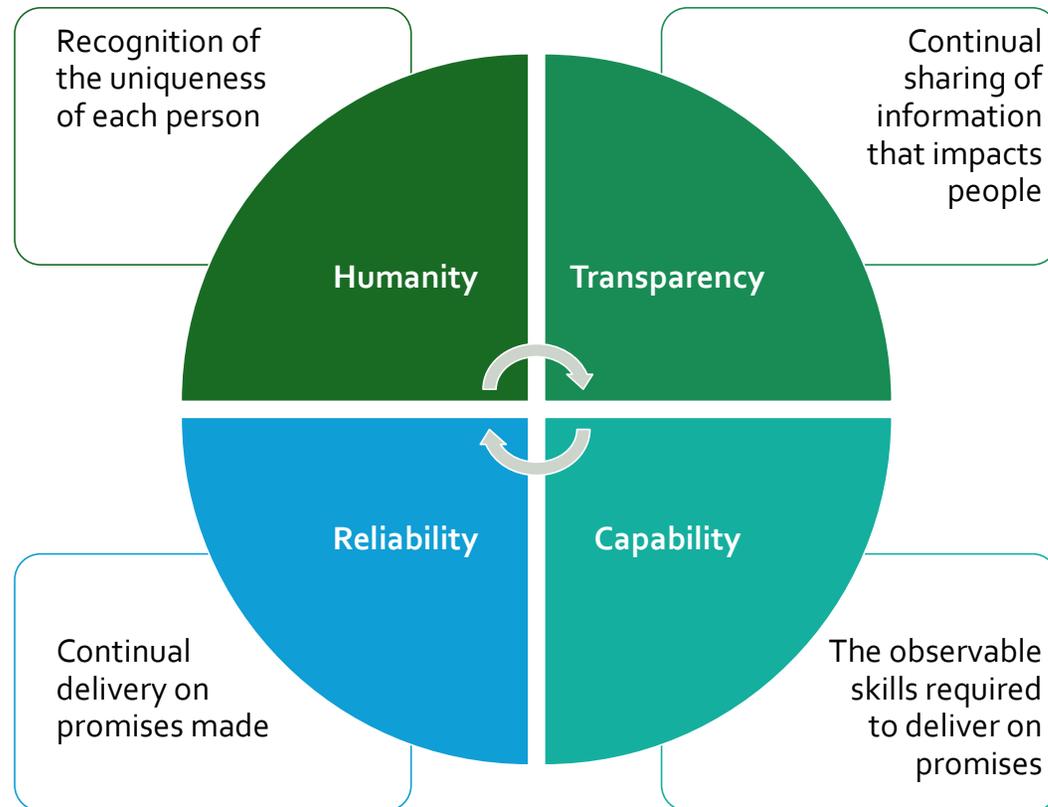
*Reichheld et al.*

## Four Factors of Trust



*Reichheld et al.*

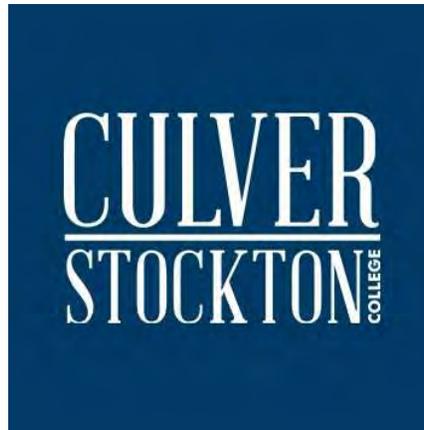
## Four Factors of Trust



*Reichheld et al.*



**Rural Campus & Community  
Trust-Building in Practice**





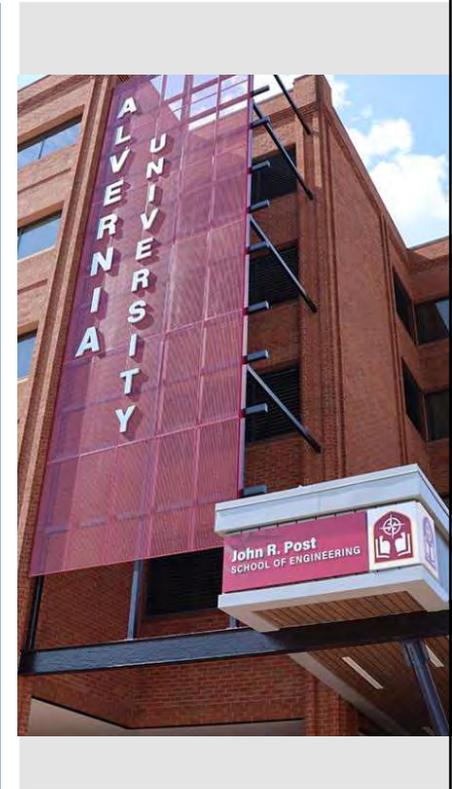
# Get to Know Alvernia University

- Nationally Ranked Doctoral University in Eastern Pennsylvania
- 1 of 23 Franciscan Colleges and Universities
- Academic Structure in Four College Model
- 1,700 Undergraduate Students and 1,000 Graduate and Online Students
- Main Campus & 2 Community-Based Resource Centers
- 1 of 23 universities in the country to receive the Community Engagement Classification by the Carnegie Foundation



# Exploring Downtown: CollegeTowne

- Alvernia's innovative approach to town-gown relationships
- New CollegeTowne Facilities
  - John R. Post Center at Reading CollegeTowne, American House, Pottsville CollegeTowne
- Assisted over 150 small and established businesses and entrepreneurs
- 27 Jobs Created; 2,871 Full-Time Jobs Retained
- Over 1.7 million square feet of transformation projects along the downtown corridor
- Community Engagement through Cultural Coalition
- Over 100 and continually growing economic and academic partnerships with private and nonprofit organizations to enhance the local community and grow experiential learning opportunities



# Expanding Experiential Learning

- Student experience at forefront of decision making
- O’Pake Fellows Program
- Apprenticeship to Degree Program



# Economic Development

- Using trustees and community connections to focus workforce development efforts
- Attract businesses, entrepreneurs and innovators
- Academic integration into economic development spans from recruitment to graduation



# Maximizing Partnerships

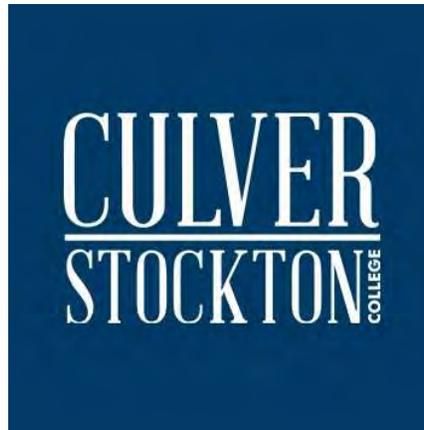
- Multi-layered partnerships connect university talent and capability with various community needs
- Revisiting partnerships often as community needs change and university resources change
- Academic integration into economic development spans from recruitment to graduation



# Lessons Learned

- Align Vision with Faculty and Staff Support
- Secure Public Support (Awareness and Funding)
- Become a Catalyst, not a Savior



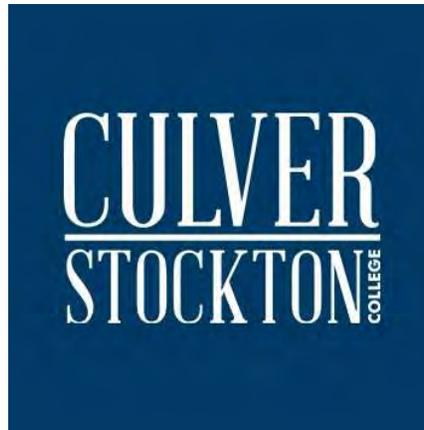


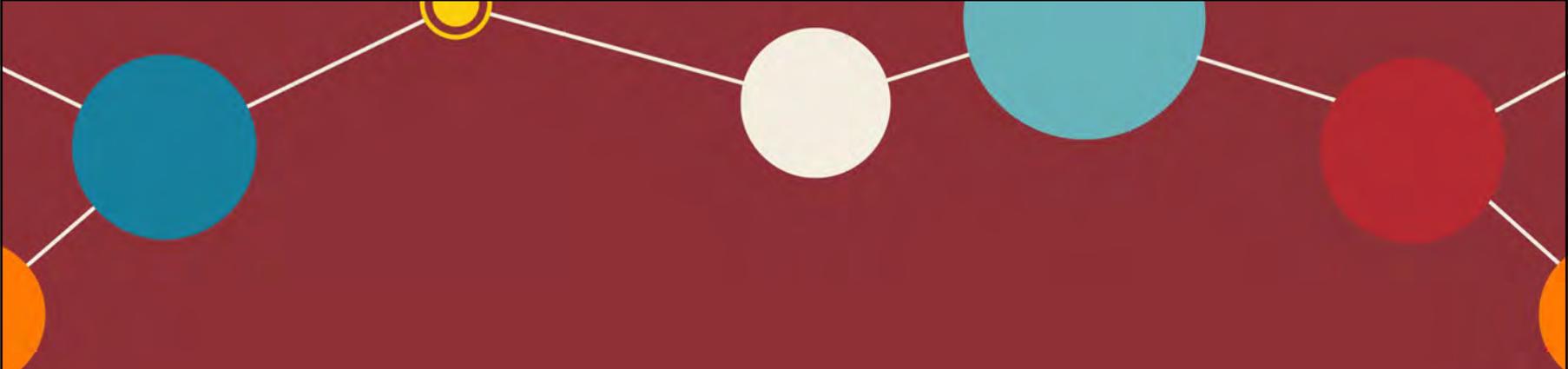
# Tri-State Development at C-SC

- 3 states (Missouri, Illinois, Iowa), 42 counties
- Coordination of taskforces and workshops
- Host site for relevant organizations
  - Corn Belt Ports, Port Commissions
- Annual summit with 200+ attendees
- Research projects
- Grant-writing initiatives
- Community partnership opportunities
- Internships









# Q&A



The Council of  
Independent Colleges



**Thank you for attending  
this session!**