



Duke  
NORTH CAROLINA  
LEADERSHIP FORUM

2020 Report



Conversations on the  
North Carolina  
Response to Covid-19

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Thank you to Noah Pickus for his support of the 2020 program, and to the NCLF Steering Committee for their continued leadership and steady facilitation of the NCLF program, particularly for their flexibility and creativity during a challenging year. A special thank you to Amber Rogers for her support of NCLF throughout the pandemic, and thank you to the many additional staff from the Duke Provost's office who stepped in to assist throughout the year. Research support was provided by undergraduate students of Duke University and supervised by Professor Deondra Rose of the Sanford School of Public Policy.

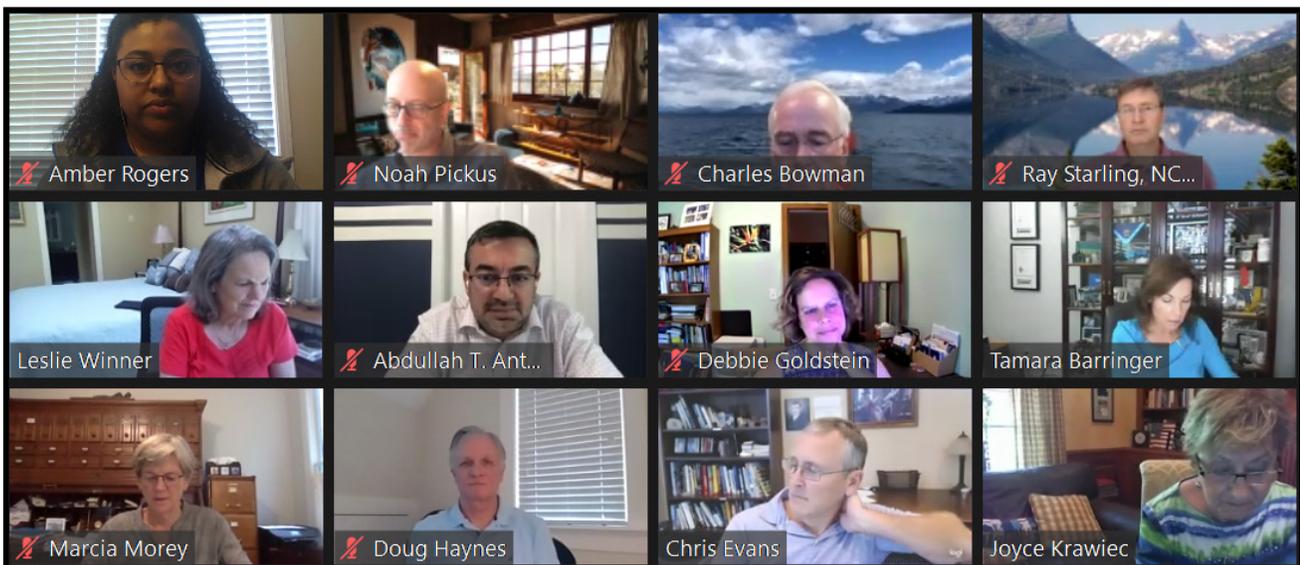
# Conversations on the North Carolina Response to Covid-19

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## Introduction

March-November 2020 was a tumultuous period in American history, witnessing a once-in-a-hundred years pandemic, a national reckoning with racial justice and violence, and one of the most polarizing elections in recent decades. Against this backdrop, at a time when people could not travel or gather in person easily for conversation, the NC Leadership Forum (NCLF) understood that it was critical to continue working with a diverse group of NC leaders to foster relationships and cross-partisan conversations about the issues facing our state.

We moved our regular program online with some doubt that we could achieve our goals. We learned, however, that even amid a pandemic, the NCLF program could provide state leaders with a transformative experience. They emerged more confident and committed to using their will, skills, and relationships to collaborate with others with different ideologies, professional and regional perspectives, and demographic characteristics, to improve the lives of North Carolinians. While the 2020 NCLF Cohort experience was not without challenges or losses, the resulting relationships and policy engagement had a significant impact on the participants and their leadership in their communities.



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# Overview

The overarching goal of NCLF is to develop a critical mass of civic and political leaders who have the will, the skills, and the relationships to work constructively with others of different political parties or ideologies.

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## The Challenge

Although North Carolinians have always had significant political differences, they have historically exhibited a practical, problem-solving mindset about politics. Today, however, the tenor of the times is highly partisan, and North Carolina, like many other states, finds itself sharply divided. Progressive and conservative leaders often depend on different media and social media outlets, operate with different facts and beliefs, seldom engage substantively with people with whom they disagree, and all too often assume the worst about the motives of others. For these reasons, our leaders are less willing and able to work together to create widely-embraced solutions and opportunities for our state and its people. NCLF aims to help bridge this divide.

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## Our Approach

The North Carolina Leadership Forum (NCLF) seeks to create constructive engagement among North Carolina policy, business, and non-profit leaders across party lines, ideologies, professional experiences, and regional perspectives. A program of Duke University, NCLF has been bringing together cohorts of NC leaders since 2015.

NCLF focuses on leaders, both those engaged in state-level policymaking as well as leaders in business, nonprofits, and local communities. For each cohort, we provide an opportunity for these diverse leaders to:

- Build authentic relationships based on trust and understanding through frank, civil, and constructive discourse, and
- Significantly deepen understanding of a specific issue and the underlying values and concerns of others without diminishing one's own or another person's point of view.

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## Our Method

Over the course of several months, normally in a series of face to face multi-day meetings, we work to:

1. Increase participant understanding of their own and others' concerns and values that underly their varying views about the issue;
2. Establish a shared understanding of the nature of important problems and the relevant facts;
3. More clearly articulate the benefits and inherent downsides of proposed ways to address concerns;
4. Identify points of agreement about proposed actions to address concerns;

5. Examine and seek to understand the values, perceptions and experiences that underlie the most polarized disagreements about the proposed solutions;
6. Build authentic relationships among leaders of different political parties and ideological views, as well as across sectors, geography, and demographics; and
7. Create a foundation for future collaboration among their fellow participants.

## Adaptation to Online Dialogue During COVID-19

When COVID19 stay-at-home orders took effect, NCLF had just convened its fourth and newest cohort for the group's first two-day, in-person introductory session. Realizing we could not hold subsequent meetings in person, NCLF pivoted to convene the 2020 Cohort online.

While NCLF leadership initially questioned whether it would be possible to hold meaningful dialogue online, particularly with very busy state leaders during a crisis, we thought it was critical to continue to build connections and foster conversation during this period. We found that many participants were eager to stay involved and engaged with each other, and that we were able to foster meaningful relationship-building and respectful dialogue across serious differences of opinion through an online format. At the same time, facilitating constructive dialogue online amid a crisis was not without challenges.

While NCLF facilitators were able to identify some resources about successful online functional meetings, we found very limited resources to inform leading constructive dialogue across difference in an online context. Ultimately, we adapted the NCLF in-person program to an online format with three main adjustments: 1) increasing pace and interactivity, 2) adding small group meetings apart from the main meeting as a transition to full-group meetings and incorporating optional social time and prioritizing small group conversation in the full sessions to further build connection and trust online, and 3) using simple, accessible technology with specific staff assigned to support technology needs, separating facilitation tasks from technology oversight and support.

We learned that participants did not have the same experience as those who have been through in-person cohorts. They did, however, report learning a great deal from the program, improved their skills and knowledge, and built relationships. Because the program was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and a very tense political election, the experience of the online dialogue was unique and unusual. At the same time, the sessions provided key lessons about how an online format can be used to enhance or enable dialogue across difference on highly polarized issues. For further discussion of online dialogue, see Section "What we Learned".

We found that many participants were eager to stay involved and engaged with each other, and that we were able to foster meaningful relationship-building and respectful dialogue across serious differences of opinion through an online format.

## The Question Addressed

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The 2020 North Carolina Leadership Forum initially planned to address the topic of immigration, asking:

*How should North Carolina and North Carolinians respond to the opportunities and challenges of immigration?*

NCLF convened its first meeting with the 2020 Cohort to focus on the topic of immigration in early March. Participants introduced themselves to each other, shared a wide range of concerns related to immigrants and immigration, and delved into basic data about the issue.

Less than two weeks later, North Carolina's first cases of COVID emerged and stay-at-home orders took effect. Three issues quickly became clear: 1) As leaders in the state, many NCLF 2020 Cohort participants were at the forefront of leading local and statewide efforts to respond to COVID; 2) It would be impossible to convene the cohort in person; and 3) NC was experiencing deep polarization around the state and nation's response to COVID.

Based on feedback that many participants were focusing as much time as possible on the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on their constituents and communities, we shifted the group's topic to be

*"How Should North Carolina respond to COVID-19?"*

Many of our original cohort participants work closely with immigrants and had joined this year's group because of the original topic. For this reason, we aimed to bridge and integrate the two topics wherever possible. The cohort held a specific conversation focused on the impact of COVID-19 on immigrants and immigration policy in small groups in June 2020, and then continued to include concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on immigrants in subsequent broader conversations about the pandemic throughout the rest of the program.

## The Leadership

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The NCLF Steering Committee is made up of diverse state leaders and Duke faculty. This group devoted significant time to designing the format, focus, and pacing of the 2020 program. Members of the Steering Committee also facilitated program sessions during each participant gathering.

The 2020 NCLF Steering Committee members were:

**John Hood**, Co-chair: President, John William Pope Foundation

**Leslie Winner**, Co-chair: Former Executive Director, Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation; Former Member, NC Senate

**Tamara Barringer**, Associate Justice, NC Supreme Court; Clinical Professor of Law and Ethics, UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School; Former Member, NC Senate

**Anita Brown-Graham**, Professor and Director of NC Impact, UNC School of Government

**Maurice “Mo” Green**, Executive Director, Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation

**Charles B. Neely**, Retired Partner, Williams Mullen; Former Member, NC House of Representatives

**Noah Pickus**, Associate Provost and Senior Advisor, Duke University

**Debbie Goldstein**, Executive Director, NC Leadership Forum

## The Participants

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The 2020 NCLF Cohort began with 34 participants, seven of whom served on the NCLF steering committee. Participants included members of the General Assembly, state and local officials, leaders of nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, and business leaders from across the political spectrum and from across North Carolina. Some of the participants are deeply engaged in working with immigrants in NC, and some are more generally engaged in the development of public policy in North Carolina. All of them played a significant leadership role in their local community and many at the state level with regard to addressing COVID-19. Once we shifted to the online format and in part due to demands as a result of COVID-19, seven participants left the program completely and another two who were primarily focused on immigration left after one session.

For a complete list of the 2020 NCLF participants, see Appendix A.

## The Process

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### Overview

#### *Session 1: Identifying Areas of Concern, Things Held Valuable, and Basic Facts related to Immigration*

Prior to COVID, at the initial meeting, facilitators opened the program by establishing ground rules for constructive engagement and beginning to build relationships and trust among members of the cohort.

All NCLF meetings operate under the Chatham House Rule:

When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

Our conversation regarding immigrants and immigration policy in NC began with identifying the range of concerns related to the topic and a conversation about things held valuable with regard to immigration policy. This session was an opportunity for participants to present as many perspectives as possible. NCLF also shared a presentation of basic data on immigration

in NC and an overview of federal immigration law and the role of state and local policy. Also, at a dinner event, U.S. Rep. Virginia Foxx (R), U.S. Rep. GK Butterfield (D), and Duke President Vincent Price addressed the group and shared their own perspective on engagements with people of different views and collaboration in policymaking.

After this initial two-day, in-person meeting in March, the 2020 Cohort continued its discussions through an online format. Because many state leaders were already familiar with Zoom, we elected to use that format for all of NCLF's conversations. Rather than schedule four two-day sessions, NCLF invited participants to attend two small group discussions, scheduled in April/May and in June. Then, we followed up in July, September and November with three full-group sessions—each full-group session was about four hours on each of two sequential days (i.e. Thursday afternoon and Friday morning or Wednesday and Thursday mornings for a total of eight hours).

After shifting to Zoom, the program progressed as follows:

- Identify the broad array of concerns related to COVID-19 in North Carolina, and the core things that participants value related to the state's response to COVID-19.
- Establish the overarching concerns related to the topic. Identify and discuss potential options to address each of these concerns, including benefits and drawbacks of each option.
- Determine the extent of agreement and disagreement about the proposed options and the levels of tolerance for their downsides.
- Identify the actions about which there is a consensus. For those actions that have substantial but not complete support, determine how they could be modified to broaden support.
- Dig deeper into the options that generated the greatest amount of disagreement to allow participants to articulate deeply held views, further understand others' view points, and to practice skills in constructive engagement.

While a typical NCLF forum would also seek to develop a shared knowledge base through consideration of basic data and developing a further understanding of where data complexities lie, discussing a response to COVID-19 while the pandemic was ongoing presented unique challenges—information about the virus changed while our conversations were taking place and perceptions of relevant data were also evolving. Thus, we did not incorporate experts or specific baseline data about the virus for the purposes of our conversations.

### *Relationship and Trust-Building as a Primary and Ongoing Goal*

Fortunately, the cohort had had the experience of one in-person meeting, which focused on learning about the people in the room, before we moved to the online format. During the first meeting, the first afternoon was devoted to a relationship-building and trust-building exercise during which members of the cohort were asked to talk about a person or event that had been significant in their becoming the persons they are. Participants approached

the exercise with vulnerability and open-mindedness and remained engaged with each other for the whole afternoon. It was a remarkable experience that created a foundation for conversations to come.

Opportunities for participants to build relationships with people of different perspectives continued to be woven into the program. Examples include pairing “buddies” of differing ideologies to meet outside of sessions, creating diverse “home room” groups which were used at some point in each meeting, and assigning intentional groupings for small-group discussions (both diverse groups and affinity groups were used). Each of these tools encouraged and enabled connections among individuals who may not otherwise have interacted in a meaningful way. One loss as a result of COVID-19 was that buddies could not meet in person. While some buddies still connected by phone or online, fewer than normal met outside of the program time. People were, however, still able to form connections through small group online conversations.

### *Small-group sessions: Bridging Transition to Online and a New Topic*

The COVID-19 public health crisis and stay-at-home orders came less than two weeks after the 2020 Cohort had convened in person, and NCLF’s steering committee initially questioned whether it would be possible to hold meaningful conversations online, particularly with very busy state leaders who were at the forefront of the response. We invited cohort members to participate in small-group discussions organized by “homerooms,” meaning that participants were assigned to a regular small group that met consistently throughout the program, led by a member of the steering committee. The first session offered an opportunity to connect with and support each other. We found that many, though not all, participants were eager to stay involved and talk to each other. Business leaders shared ideas about how they were supporting employees, elected leaders talked about what concerns they were hearing from constituents, and all of the participants connected over how their families, personal lives, and work had been impacted. Participants did note, however, that responding to COVID had become their top priority, and that it was difficult to give time to discussions of other policy issues during this time.

When it was clear that at least two-thirds of participants wanted to continue their participation through an online format, we facilitated a second series of small group sessions in June that bridged our original and new topic, asking participants to talk about their concerns and ideas about how COVID-19 would impact immigrants and immigration policy.

### *Session 2: Identifying Areas of Concern, Prioritizing Values, and Initial Solutions related to COVID-19*

We began the discussion of how NC should respond to COVID-19 by identifying the range of participants’ concerns related to the public health crisis. This session provided an opportunity for participants to present as all of the concerns they had.

After considering the full list of concerns, the group identified their values relevant to how the crisis should be addressed. Once the primary values were identified, the participants voted on three statements to determine the relative priority of values amongst the group on three issues: reopening schools, mandated versus voluntary business closures, and a moratorium on the detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants seeking healthcare. Participants also brainstormed potential solutions to concerns about the impact of COVID-19.

### ***Session 3: Solutions, Benefits and Tradeoffs***

The third meeting focused on specific policy options to address the identified concerns. Participants discussed the benefits and inherent downsides of each policy option and then answered a survey about their degree of support and extent of their ability to tolerate the downsides for each one. The resulting “polarity charts” show the degree of agreement and disagreement among the group and are included in Section 3 of this report.

Session 3 also included a discussion of leadership, such as how participants would make an effort to hear differing voices and, as issues were resolved, how they would acknowledge what different parties were giving up. In the context of COVID, we also talked about how, as leaders, they would give voice to their own or their community’s sense of loss.

### ***Session 4: Understanding our Agreements and Disagreements***

At the final program, participants considered a presentation on democratic decision-making and executive authority in public health emergencies, prepared by MPP candidates at the Sanford School of Public Policy as part of Professor Deondra Rose’s PolicyLab in response to a concern that had been raised throughout the program about the tension between the Governor’s decisions around COVID and other decision-making bodies in the state.

Because the impact and knowledge about COVID-19 evolved during the program, at the final meeting, participants discussed how their views had changed from April through November. The program also took place about a week after the November 2020 Presidential Election and included an opportunity for participants to reflect on the election results and the process, first in affinity groups (arranged by “Lean Blue” or “Lean Red” politically) and then as a full group.

At the end of this meeting, time was reserved for participants to reflect on their takeaways from the experience, including how the program and COVID-19 had impacted their own leadership and their feedback on the NCLF program.

# Immigration Discussion

North Carolina is home to approximately 800,000 foreign-born residents, approximately 8% or 1 in 13 North Carolinians. 20% of these immigrants entered the state after 2010. Of the immigrant population, about 325,000 are unauthorized immigrants, 305,000 have become naturalized citizens, and the remainder have a visa that permits them to live and/or work in the US. (Sources: US Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey). Over the last decade, as immigration has increased locally (and nationally), North Carolinians have debated numerous policies and responses to the changing demographics of the state, with polarization across many lines.

NCLF originally selected the following topic for its 2020 Cohort:

*How should North Carolina and North Carolinians respond to the opportunities and challenges of immigration?*

The group met in early March to begin discussions on this topic, and then when we shifted to consider NC's response to COVID-19, incorporated specific conversations about the impact of COVID-19 on immigrants. For a summary of general concerns raised related to immigration prior to our shift in topic, see Appendix C. The following summarizes concerns that individual participants raised during the cohort's discussions.

*Concerns raised about COVID's impact on immigrants:*

- COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting Latinos and the severity of COVID is worse within the Latino population. This is even more exacerbated in specific industries: construction, nursing homes, meatpacking plants, and agriculture, and even worse where immigrants live in clustered housing near work;
- COVID-19 has illustrated the fear immigrants have around seeking testing or healthcare due to fears both about cost and detention/deportation, really shows what it means to "live in the shadows";
- With COVID, we are likely to tighten our supply chains and will need immigrants even more to serve as workers in manufacturing, on farms, and as frontline workers;
- With regard to travel, immigrants are fearful about coming to the US because of how we have handled COVID-19, and countries are now preventing US citizens from coming in;
- It is particularly challenging to reach students and families with language issues, and students may also typically be a resource for getting public health information to parents;
- Colleges are losing international students in large numbers as a result of COVID-19, this could be a long-term loss that affects colleges' financial stability;
- COVID-19 could contribute to long-term changes in attitude about immigration policy, and in the short-term, is being used as an excuse to reduce legal immigration.

Participants brainstormed a range of solutions that could address immigrant needs during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Make it safe and affordable for immigrants to seek health care, or at a minimum, provide specific access to COVID-related care, such as free testing, free vaccinations, etc.
- Offer targeted testing and outreach in the Latino community, using trusted sources such as employers, the education system, people that speak the same language, churches, public health departments, etc;
- Restrict travel from countries where COVID-19 is a concern;
- Use technology to reach immigrant populations (one-stop phone numbers, virtual school district outreach)
- Put in place a moratorium on detention or deportation of immigrants who seek health care during the pandemic;
- Expand the path to naturalization and citizenship in response to growing awareness of the contributions of immigrant workers and their needs;
- Connect immigrant workers directly with employers through third-parties such as Chamber of Commerce;
- Increase manufacturing in NC and hire immigrants to fill jobs, but also increase automation and technology;
- Learn from best practices in other countries to improve COVID-19 response;
- Adopt temporary immigration policy changes and reassess at public and private level after COVID crisis.

In September, we polled the group on the following question:

*Based on what you know now about the impacts of the coronavirus on certain communities, do you favor placing a moratorium on detention/deportation of undocumented immigrants seeking health care?*

64% of the group favored a moratorium, while 36% opposed it.

Finally, the group had a more extensive discussion of how North Carolina might address the impact of COVID-19 on agriculture and meatpacking workers, who are predominately immigrants. That discussion can be found below in the Section "Agricultural and Food Workers."

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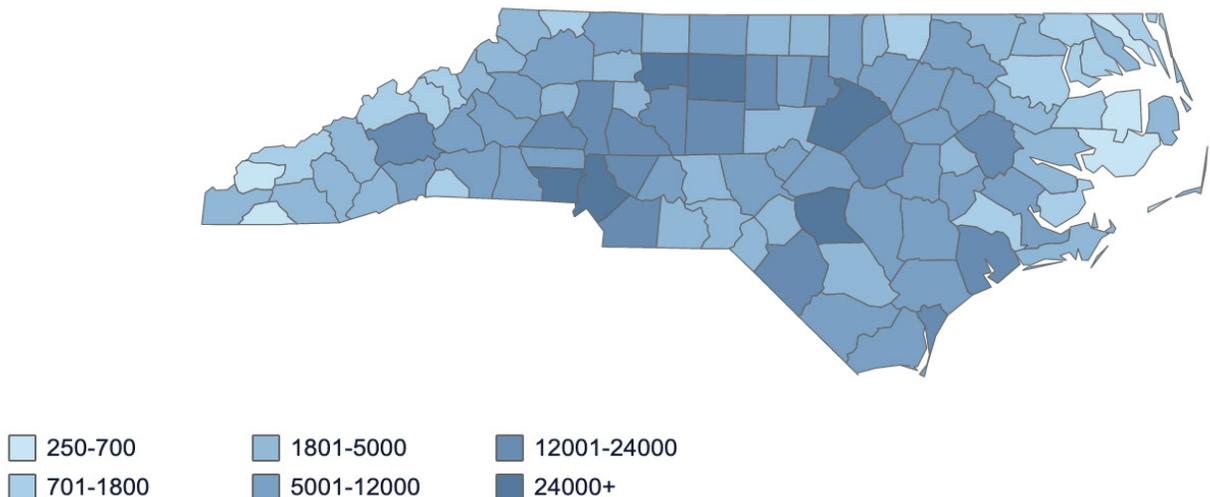
# CONTEXT: COVID-19

Between January 2020 and March 31, 2021, NC reported a total of 914,132 COVID-19 cases and 12,112 deaths (NCLF's cohort met between April and November 2020). The number of total cases put NC at #10 nationally, however, at 89,285 cases per 1 million people, this proportion put NC at #37 nationally.<sup>i</sup>

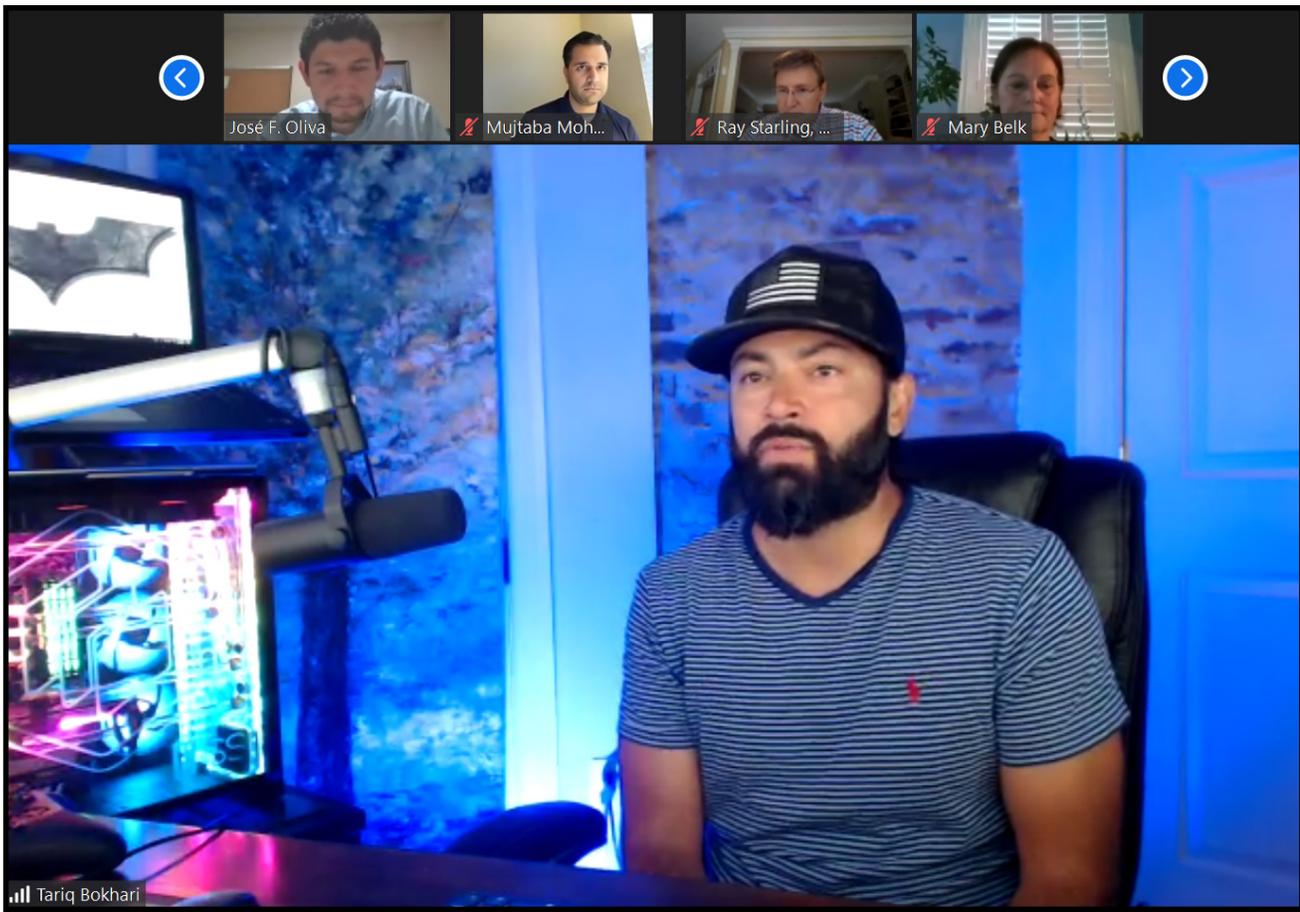
North Carolina reported its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on March 3, 2020, making it the 15<sup>th</sup> state to do so.<sup>ii</sup> On March 10, Governor Cooper issued an executive order, declaring a State of Emergency. Within the following week, schools were closed, mass gatherings were prohibited, bars and restaurants had restricted service, and by the end of the month, all non-essential businesses were closed. Governor Cooper then implemented a 3-phase reopening for the state which occurred between the early Summer and Fall of 2020.<sup>iii</sup>

On March 10, 2021, after our cohort had completed its discussions, Governor Cooper and legislative leaders announced bipartisan legislation that would allow public K-12 schools to reopen for daily in-person instruction. Superintendent of Public Instruction Catherine Truitt said that the decision was about "restoring choice to parents and students" while seeing how "state leaders come together and transcend party lines for the sake of our students."<sup>iv</sup>

*COVID-19 Cases by County as of April 14, 2021, Map from NCDHHS<sup>v</sup>*



While COVID-19 cases increased throughout North Carolina during this period, rural counties reported cases at almost twice the rate of urban and suburban counties as of November 2020. The majority of those cases were younger, white, non-Hispanic people affected through community spread rather than congregate living facilities.<sup>vi</sup>



As of April 2021, Black North Carolinians make up 22% of the state's population but 25% of COVID-related deaths. Hispanic North Carolinians make up 10% of the population but 21% of the cases.<sup>vii</sup> Beyond that, other minority populations like Native Americans worried that there was an overall lack of testing during the pandemic.<sup>viii</sup>

Congregate living facilities, namely prisons, dorms, shelters, and nursing homes, were also hotspots. One in five people and one in four staff members in NC's prisons tested positive, consistent with national averages.<sup>ix</sup> Beyond that, one in four COVID-related deaths in 2020 were connected to assisted living.<sup>x</sup>

During the pandemic, the national unemployment rate hit a 75-year high with people of color, younger workers, and those with lower educational attainment most affected.<sup>xi</sup> NC Department of Employment Security paid out more than \$10 billion in state and federal benefits, but many workers waited months for claims to be filed.<sup>xii</sup> Federal data showed NC ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> for timeliness of first-time unemployment payments.<sup>xiii</sup>

In mid-December, after the NCLF program had concluded, vaccines began to be distributed to frontline workers and vulnerable populations throughout the state.<sup>xiv</sup> Governor Cooper established five groups of adults that would be eligible during the rollout period.<sup>xv</sup> On March 25, 2021, all adults in NC were eligible for the vaccine.

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# Discussion: Concerns, Key Issues, and Responses

During the COVID-19 pandemic, political polarization increased in the state. A Duke survey found the share of people who believed North Carolinians were overreacting and underreacting rose as people held different beliefs on the correct health procedures for social distancing.<sup>xvi</sup> There were also increasing differences on whether or not people should wear a mask every time they left their house and the extent to which social distancing reduced the spread of coronavirus.<sup>xvii</sup> In Spring 2021, there was still a large divide on the restrictions in place—Nearly 60% of Republicans wanted to eliminate the policies while 71% of Democrats favored retaining them.<sup>xviii</sup> Against this backdrop, the NCLF Cohort engaged in extended conversations about how the state should respond to COVID-19 and its impact on North Carolinians.

It should be noted that discussions were held while the COVID-19 pandemic was still unfolding, which led some participants to adjust their perspective and position over the course of the program due to their own experiences or as more information became available. Also of note, throughout the NCLF program, participants generally expressed support for wearing masks and mandating masks in public, with support growing over time.

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## Concerns Overview

As COVID-19 unfolded in April-July of 2020, members of the group shared a broad list of concerns related to the pandemic and North Carolina's response. See Appendix B for the complete list of concerns, which touched on many aspects of daily life, including health care, housing, wages, small businesses, children, supply chains, food supply, race relations, the disparate impact of COVID on some populations, the role of government and particularly executive authority, and leadership in general.

Facilitators focused further discussion on a selection of issues. These issues were chosen for a variety of reasons, such as areas where there was strong disagreement, as well as topics where information for discussion was readily available:

- The impact of business closures on unemployment, erosion of wages, and other economic impacts on businesses and individuals, balanced against the need to protect public health for everyone, with particular attention to workers and customers;
- The impact of school closures and remote learning on exacerbating learning gaps in NC schools and the impact of COVID-19 on families and particularly children more generally balanced against public health concerns and the specific risks to teachers, school staff, and students and their families;
- The impact of potential economic losses resulting from COVID-19 on the North Carolina budget;

- The health and safety of workers in a variety of industries, where we ultimately focused on workers in agriculture and meat-packing facilities;
- Access to health care and the disparate impact of COVID-19 on some populations in NC, including immigrants;
- The tension between individual voluntary responses and statewide mandated requirements and the specific role of the Governor, the Council of State, the state legislature, and local governments in responding to COVID-19; and
- The need for information, through transparency and data as well as the sharing of best practices.

## Things Held Valuable

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Forum participants explored the values they held that were relevant to responding to COVID-19 in North Carolina, both explicitly and as an ongoing part of their discussion of concerns and solutions. In some cases, participants strongly disagreed about the weight placed on some values, and in other areas, there was consensus. Examples also arose where a value meant different things to different participants.

In an early session, NCLF asked members to share what things they held as valuable as it related to COVID-19. Topics that participants raised during the discussions included the following:

- Individuals and businesses should be permitted to make their own choices about safety. Government should share information and best practices, but should not issue mandates.
- We have a community responsibility to watch out for and act to protect the safety and health of others, taking care of society as a whole, taking care of your immediate neighbor or community, or both;
- We should treat each other with trust and respect, act in good faith, and have faith in each other;
- Responses to COVID should be equitable. This was expressed in terms of ensuring rules were fair and not arbitrary, spreading the cost of harms, providing for others, and how to address the disproportionate impact of COVID on various specific populations.
- There should be transparency in data to inform decision making (employers, hospitals, government);
- Leaders should act with integrity;
- We should listen to experts and have a respect for science and facts;
- We should allow for innovation and creativity;
- There should be checks and balances on power during a crisis;
- We should accept that different people are willing to tolerate different levels of risk and that some may prefer to risk health over economic loss or vice versa; and
- We need to be patient and understanding and empathetic during a crisis and recognize everyone has legitimate concerns.

## Potential Responses

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Participants were asked to brainstorm potential responses to concerns about the impact of COVID in the following categories: economic effects, housing, education, healthcare, and government and transparency. Examples of suggested actions included:

- Economic effects:
  - Use state reserves to address economic needs and reverse high-end tax cuts of last 8 years to increase state funds;
  - Consider laying off 10% of state employees;
  - Defer property taxes;
  - Aggressively enforce worker safety rules in the agriculture industry;
  - Reform unemployment insurance to cover self-employed and gig workers;
  - Provide emergency funds to address needs (via nonprofits/churches or via state);
- Housing:
  - Implement a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures, encourage landlord flexibility, provide financial support for landlords;
  - Increase internet access and access to devices for students/families;
- Education:
  - Offer mentorship programs and other initiatives to get disconnected youth back to school;
  - Increase teacher pay;
- Healthcare:
  - Expand Medicaid;
  - Expand COVID-19 testing availability in impacted communities;
  - Deploy private industry expertise to support COVID testing and other needs;
- Government and Transparency:
  - Increase COVID reporting transparency in public and private sectors;
  - Deploy public education campaigns, encourage community members to seek advice from trusted community members;
  - Add time limit on unilateral executive action such as the Governor's emergency orders related to COVID-19.

Given the breadth of needs related to COVID-19 and possible short- and long-term responses, the cohort focused discussion on the benefits and downsides of 4 policy proposals.

- North Carolina should allow businesses to reopen and make their own decisions about how to deal with the impacts of the pandemic, and NC should provide best practices guidance to companies and individuals to support this effort.

- North Carolina should take every reasonable precaution to protect students, teachers, staff and their families and reopen a) K-12 schools and/or b) colleges, prioritizing the educational and social needs of students.
- NC decision making during a public health emergency should be addressed in one of the following two ways:
  - After the first 30 days of an emergency the Council of State or NC General Assembly shall be required to ratify the NC Governor's orders; or
  - The Governor shall have emergency powers to act in response to an emergency until the crisis is fully over.
- To protect farmworkers, meatpacking workers, and food processors, NC should aggressively enforce worker safety regulations in the agriculture industries to protect against outbreaks and give priority to get on-site testing to these workers.

In addition to the four major discussions, cohort participants also had shorter discussions of the following topics:

- NC should enact a moratorium on evictions until the unemployment rate significantly improves and provide a financial incentive to support landlords during this period.
- NC should expand Medicaid immediately and assure that any COVID vaccine will be universally available with no financial barrier and without regard to immigration status.
- To address any possible budget shortfall, North Carolina should (a) use available reserves; (b) reverse high-end tax cuts of the last 8 years; and/or (c) lay off 10% of employees (or contractors) in all departments.<sup>xix</sup>

## Business Reopening

Throughout discussions of COVID-19, a prominent concern of some members of the cohort was the economic impact of the pandemic on businesses and the economy. Topics within this concern included the safety of workers, job losses, the closure of businesses (particularly small businesses and minority-owned businesses), inequitable impacts on different industries, secondary effects of business losses (such as lost rents and lost government revenue), and the fairness or appropriateness of closing businesses. Throughout this conversation, some participants also emphasized support for maintaining public health requirements that prioritized protecting the general population from COVID-19, such as mandated closures or other requirements.

Many participants also highlighted bright spots, stories of businesses that had adapted with creative approaches, or were taking extra steps to protect their workers. Members of the cohort were also managers at specific companies and shared their own lessons from adapting and making efforts to support their employees.

In July, in the context of discussing what participants valued in the context of COVID, NCLF asked the participants to vote on their preferred path forward.

*Knowing what you know now, would you favor government deciding whether to mandate shelter in place, where masks are required and which businesses may remain open, or should government give best practices guidance to individuals and companies so that they can make their own decisions as to how they should deal with the impacts of the pandemic?*

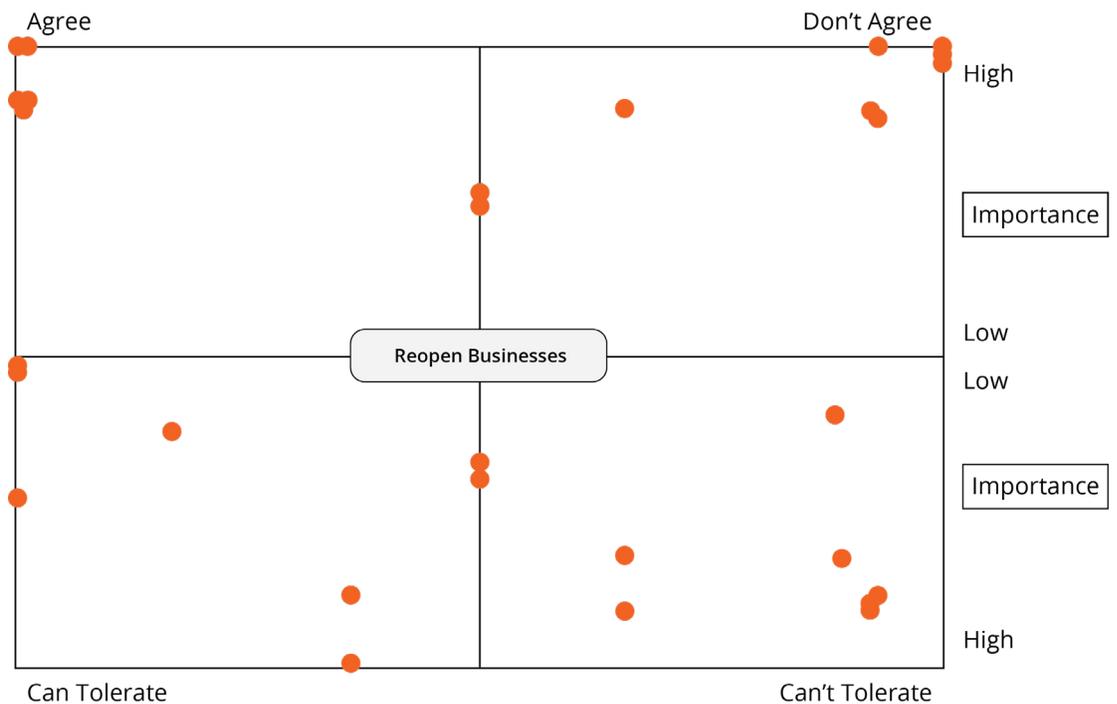
55% of participants favored a government mandate, while 45% favored offering best practices and letting individual business owners make their own decisions.

At a follow up session two months later (September), we used an online survey to ask the group to weigh in on a modified version of the same statement. Participants were asked to rate a) how strongly they disagreed or agreed with a proposed action and b) the level to which they could or could not tolerate the downsides of the proposal.

*North Carolina should allow businesses to reopen and make their own decisions about how to deal with the impacts of the pandemic, and should provide best practices guidance to companies and individuals to support this effort.*

Survey results were presented to the group as a “polarity chart,” which shows the participants reaction to the proposal in two ways: 1) the degree of agreement with the proposal among the group (top axis) and how important they rank their position on a high to low scale; and 2) the degree to which the downsides of the proposal are tolerable (lower axis), and the importance of their position on a high to low scale.

With regard to reopening businesses, the polarity chart showed many strong views on either end, but also many participants in the middle with regard to how to proceed:



Several people noted that they had a strong desire to parse the proposal—allow the government to impose some requirements, but limit which requirements.

Those that favored a government mandate expressed the following views:

- When public health is at stake, it is not infringing on liberty to take special action to mandate business closures. It is the government's role, not that of business, to guard public health;
- In the absence of a government mandate, employers have decision-making power and workers do not have the freedom to make choices, therefore allowing businesses to open would put workers' health at risk;
- Businesses will not have customers if people are concerned about health or if there is widespread sickness;
- While some people would like to think people will do the right thing, not everyone is as responsible as they should be and so government needs to mandate uniform rules;
- Everyone in NC is in this together and the community should not pit responsible businesses against competitors more willing to take risks;
- Clear rules from the government provides clarity and trust for the public; and
- North Carolinians need to consider the government mandate in the context of evolving knowledge about the virus and the impact on the economy and be patient until we can draw stronger conclusions.

Those favoring allowing business owners to make their own decisions shared differing perspectives:

- Widespread closures of businesses are causing severe long-term harm to the economy and government is failing to understand or underestimate the cost of closing a small business and then reopening;
- Business owners are capable of implementing best practices without a mandate and have a stronger interest in protecting their employees, particularly where business leaders know better how their specific company can run efficiently and safely in light of needed protocols;
- Customers are capable of making decisions about whether to patronize businesses that fail to follow best practices, and are better able to hold individual businesses accountable for failures than the government for all businesses;
- North Carolina/government mandates to date have been inconsistent and unfair with regard to allowing some businesses to reopen and not others. Different people view different businesses as "essential";
- Closures to date have had a disproportionate impact on minority-owned businesses, smaller businesses with fewer resources to withstand the closures, and low-wage workers who lose jobs when businesses close;
- It is difficult to trust government or the full citizenry, but trusting citizens to make decisions is the lesser of two evils; and
- The government power used to close businesses has been too broad and has no conclusion, is too sweeping in this context.

A concern noted by some participants that opposed a government mandate was that the government should not have absolute authority and should be the authority of last resort. Another theme that was frequently raised was that different requirements should apply for different circumstances—differences were noted between requiring masks indoors and in outdoor spaces, or requiring the same standards in the Western mountain region compared to denser cities like Charlotte.

Participants also offered three possible ideas to modify the original proposal, although these did not lead to meaningful swings in support:

- They would be more likely to favor reopening if full personal protective equipment (PPE) were provided and more funds were expended to protect workers and customers, and there was widespread compliance with best practices;
- The government could set best practices and provide a safe harbor from liability to businesses that comply, with no safe harbor for those businesses that did not comply;
- The government should implement some restrictions, but there should be a meaningful review, with checks and balances beyond the Governor's decision.

Participants also talked about what could be done to address the impact of COVID-19 on small and/or local businesses who suffered financially as a result of the pandemic. Ideas included offering rent forbearance and loans to struggling businesses. In the case of rent, participants suggested using state tax incentives to encourage forbearance. Similarly, participants also suggested state incentives to create demand to shop at local small businesses and/or to support particular industries. As government stimulus programs emerged, participants also expressed concern about how minority owned businesses were unable to access SBA Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) funds.<sup>xx</sup> Finally, in the context of workers, participants explored reforms to unemployment insurance that would cover more workers (i.e. self-employed and gig workers). They also suggested offering extra pay to workers in hazardous employment conditions and raised the idea that businesses should not be allowed to lower wages or cut health benefits during the pandemic. Members also suggested that employers could be deployed to better educate their employees about the risks of COVID-19 and how to address them.

## School Reopening

Throughout the course of discussions, some participants raised concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on children and families. Examples of concerns raised included how younger children were struggling with remote learning, the likelihood of gaps in learning as a result of closed schools or unsuccessful remote learning, youth leaving the school system altogether, children who were unsupervised at home while both parents worked, and the impact of COVID and educational disruption for particular populations of school-children. One specific example was a concern that more children would enter the foster system because of strains on adults, homelessness, and child abuse, particularly where the lack of in-person school meant that

educators did not have insight to intervene sooner. Some participants also expressed concern about how students were impacted by issues of race relations during the same year as the pandemic—normally a school system would provide a place to address social and emotional needs, and remote schooling had reduced such supports for students.

Other participants emphasized health and safety concerns for students, teachers and other school personnel, and their families if schools reopened too quickly or without proper health precautions.

While the 2020 Cohort discussed reopening schools in some depth, NCLF also held a second separate set of discussions with alumni from its 2019 NCLF Cohort, which focused on the topic of K-12 Education. A copy of a report on the proceedings of the alumni discussions, “COVID-19 and NC K-12 Education: Challenges, Changes, and Charting a Course for the Future,” can be found [on the NCLF Website](#).

In mid-July 2020, after talking through the concerns and values at stake with regard to school closures during COVID-19 and the impact on children and families, participants were asked to vote on a values statement:

*Should the safety of students, families and teachers be paramount, for example, with schools being 100% remote, or should meeting the educational and social needs of students be paramount, for example having school in-person?*

45% of the cohort voted for remote learning, while 55% voted for in-person schools.

During this initial July discussion, participants noted three main concerns in connection with opening schools. Of note, the discussion of schools was unique because of its timing—all NC schools had closed and been remote between March and June 2020, and in July, it was still unclear whether schools would be in-person, online, or take a hybrid approach when the new school year began in September.

- Some participants believed reopening schools should be based on specific criteria, such as whether COVID-19 cases were below a threshold of the percentage of positive tests in the community, and whether sufficient personal protective equipment was available to school personnel and students;
- Participants also suggested increasing funding to help schools provide sufficient protective equipment and take other mitigation measures, such as improved ventilation.
- Others expressed concern about the harms of schools that were only planning to offer remote-learning. First, people noted that there are many parts of NC without access to internet, which would contribute to serious inequities in learning across the state. Second, concerns were raised about children who have difficult home situations, where attending school is an outlet and support for their needs. In both cases, some favored offering an in-person school option and others favored addressing the related need in a new way (i.e. provide computers and internet hot-spots to every child).

Finally, some argued against a one-size-fits-all approach for the state: rather than the state mandating whether schools open in-person or remain online, they believed that each school district was best situated to formulate its own plan for school in the Fall. On the other hand, others were concerned that school districts did not have the expertise or resources to address COVID-19 and thought statewide direction and guidance was needed.

By September 2020, the state of NC had mandated that school districts could choose between a hybrid model with limited face-to-face instruction and fully virtual instruction for the 2020-2021 school year for middle and high school students, and allowed all in-person instruction for elementary schools to begin by early October. Within that context, participants were asked to consider a modified version of the proposal around reopening K-12 schools:

*North Carolina should take every reasonable precaution to protect students, teachers, staff and their families and reopen a) K-12 schools and/or b) colleges, prioritizing the educational and social needs of students.*

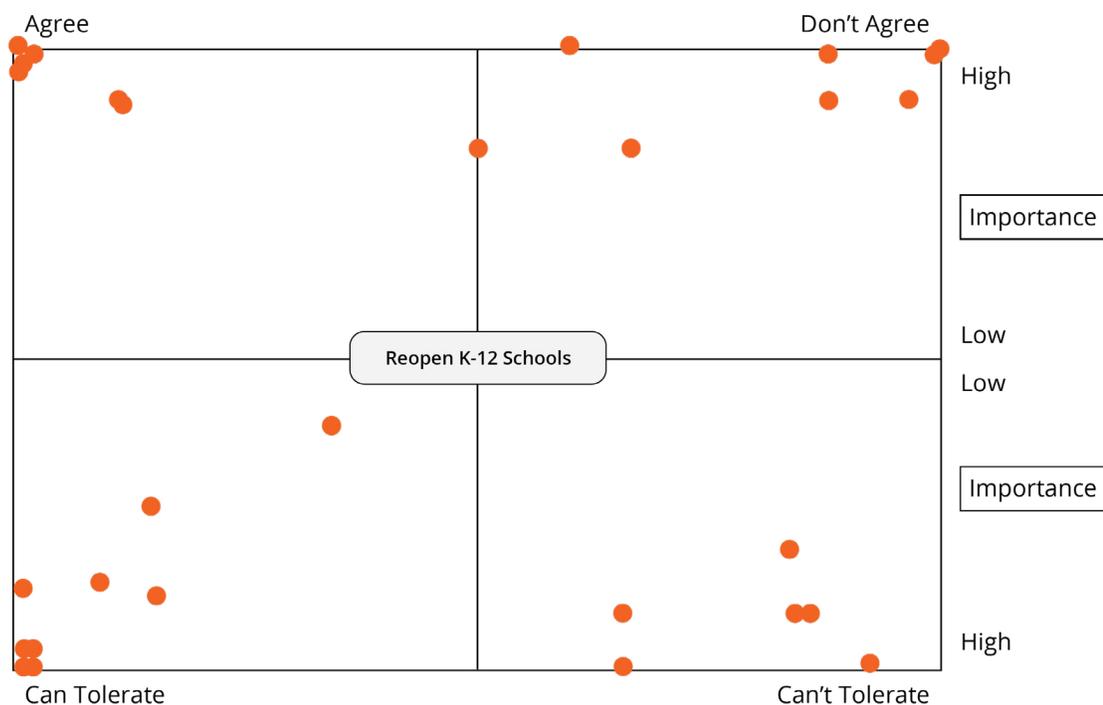
Groups were asked to discuss the benefits and downsides of this proposal, and identified the following:

- Benefits
  - In-person learning is superior
  - Local economies will benefit
  - Working parents can continue working
  - Allows the cultivation of relationships outside the home
  - A potential decrease in cases of abuse at home
  - Takes care of students with exceptional learning needs
  - Mental health harms and learning gaps are mounting and making up for these harms will be impossible
  - Enrollment in public schools is declining in favor of private schools and home schooling, and this will be a permanent effect if public schools do not reopen
  - Children are harmed by teaching them to be afraid and not to take risk
  - In some counties, most families prefer in-person school
  - Schools can reopen in-person and still offer an option for those that prefer to opt-out
- Downsides
  - COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths would likely increase
  - ‘Every reasonable precaution’ is likely to be expensive
  - The funding sources aren’t evident; other investments will need to be sacrificed
  - A student or teacher’s lost life is a larger loss than students being behind a year in learning;
  - Reopening schools will lead to community spread of COVID-19, including within families (i.e. a child could infect a grandparent);
  - We do not know enough to safely reopen schools: there is a lack of transparency and data is inconsistent, so we cannot confidently reopen safely.

After participants took an overnight survey, NCLF shared the polarity chart below, which showed that a heavy cluster of participants strongly agreed that schools should reopen and were willing to tolerate the downsides that had been raised. In contrast, participants that did not agree with reopening were more variable with whether they disagreed with reopening and how much they could tolerate the downsides of reopening.

Once participants looked at the survey results, the conversation focused less on whether schools should reopen to offer in-person learning and more on how that goal could best be achieved. One participant stated,

*“Fundamentally, we have to decide what it is we need in order for schools to open. We know kids do better in the classroom, and that some children, for example those with special needs, that will lose ground if we are only remote. But we also know we have to take protective steps to make it safe. If we don’t, we will create a petri dish and see spread of COVID-19.”*



Participants raised several points in this context:

- Cities and rural counties can and should approach in-person or remote school differently. While Mecklenburg may need to remain remote, a rural county can manage a hybrid A/B in-person schedule, learn from best practices, and return children to school earlier;
- The issue of wearing masks is foundational, and taking every reasonable precaution possible can make in-person school safer. Various options for masks were discussed, including providing masks to school personnel, providing masks to students who were on free or reduced-lunch, and requiring masks, analogous to the application of a dress code for students; and
- Reopening schools could be done prudently in phases, such as reopening in-person school two days a week, rather than reopening all at once.

Some participants noted that the core underlying question became whether the State and school districts would provide the funding for safety measures that some community members viewed as necessary to reopen schools, for example providing PPE to school personnel and offering ongoing testing. They noted that while some solutions were affordable, issues like addressing HVAC systems in schools raised significant costs. In this context, participants also noted the resource-intensive approaches of private educational institutions and whether those could be applied in the public school context (i.e. heavy amount of testing, electronic apps for symptom checks, hybrid in-person/remote options for families that opt-out of in-person). One participant suggested creative solutions in rural areas, such as repurposing other government buildings to serve more students. Another noted that her real concern was that instead of taking on the issue of cost, NC was trying to reopen “on the cheap” and as quickly as possible, which put not just school personnel and students at risk, but the whole community.

The discussion of school re-opening was markedly different in tone from the business reopening discussion, because the group identified that they shared a similar goal of reopening schools and offering children in-person education, but disagreed on how and when to get there. At the conclusion of the conversation, one participant said that his stance had changed over the course of the program as a result of hearing other points of view. The participant noted that at first, he had been against reopening schools because he did not believe the state was capable of doing so in a safe way using public funds (where in contrast, he had seen that businesses could use their own funds to figure out how to reopen safely). After the discussion, after hearing from others, the participant said he now believed it was possible to reopen schools safely, and would approach taking a stance on issues differently going forward.

## Decision-Making During a Public Health Emergency

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In November 2020, participants explored a question that arose repeatedly over the course of discussions of North Carolina’s response to COVID-19—the Governor’s emergency powers, actions to date, and whether there should be future constraints on such power. A group of students working with Duke Sanford School’s PolicyLab prepared a background report that outlined the NC Emergency Management Act, how it had been deployed during the 2020 health crisis, and compared the NC approach to those in other states and some other countries. The cohort reviewed the students’ findings and then discussed two proposed options:

1. After the first 30 days of an emergency, the NC Council of State<sup>xxi</sup> or the NC General Assembly shall be required to ratify the NC Governor’s orders; OR
2. The NC Governor shall have emergency powers to act in response to an emergency until the crisis is fully over.

The NC Emergency Management Act (EMA) grants the NC governor broad powers during a state of emergency, and allows either the Governor or the Legislature to declare and extend a state of emergency. However, only the issuing authority may rescind a state of emergency declaration. When COVID-19 occurred, there was no precedent for a state of emergency during a public health crisis—Governor Cooper’s prior 11 emergency orders had been related to natural disasters and a non-weather-related power outage. At the time of our discussion, Governor Cooper had issued 10 executive orders related to COVID—first closing public schools and prohibiting mass gatherings, then restricting bars and restaurants, then addressing stay-at-home requirements. Emergency orders

were then used from May through November to gradually ease restrictions, reopening certain essential businesses and allowing different levels of gathering for indoor and outdoor spaces.

The students outlined three models of emergency powers seen in NC and other states and countries.<sup>xxii</sup>

1. Centralization of decision-making power with the governor or other chief executive.
2. Deconcentration of decision-making power among various actors at the state level.
3. Devolution of decision-making power to lower levels of government.

In small groups, tensions between several values emerged, with an emphasis on a desire for an executive to be able to be proactive and act quickly as needed, but also gain as much buy-in and advice as possible.

Participants noted the following needs and concerns:

In favor of strong executive power	In favor of limiting executive power
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to act quickly in an emergency and some tension between the ability of an executive to act quickly and the ability of a group such as the Council of State or the Legislature to act in a short time frame</li> <li>• Accountability so that it is clear who is responsible in a time of crisis</li> <li>• Concern that aiming for consensus from a Council of State or the Legislature could cause delay or inhibit needed action during an emergency—what if the legislature cannot convene or fails to ratify a critical action?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerns around the abuse of power in an emergency and the concept of unlimited power or arbitrary decisions by an executive.</li> <li>• Need for transparency in decision-making</li> </ul>

During the discussion, participants noted some procedural safeguards and different options for addressing concerns that could mitigate the risks of each perspective. For example, one participant noted that the Legislature can reject a Governor’s action, but the Governor can veto the legislature’s action and then the legislature can try to override the veto. Other participants noted the difference between ratifying emergency action and overriding such action and suggested that the threshold for voting around each could be calibrated to be responsive to the level of risk in an emergency and timing (i.e. the length of the emergency). Throughout, participants noted the unusual challenge of an extended emergency and expressed a preference for ratification or consensus around emergency action after a period of time, for example, 60 to 90 days.

As a result of the conversation, the participants moved towards some ideas as ways of resolving the tension between a need for immediate action and a desire for buy-in. One idea was put forward to allow the Governor to act, but that the Council of State could act to override if it had an overwhelming majority. Perhaps it would need a unanimous vote to override immediately, a three-fourths vote to override 30 days later, and a simple majority six months from the start of the emergency.



Another idea put forward was to time-limit Executive Action to 30 days and to require automatic termination, with the ability to announce a new action at that time if needed.

One participant noted good arguments for focusing on the General Assembly as the appropriate entity to ratify or override Executive Action, rather than the Council of State. He believed that this would make more sense to the average voter and would be more transparent for public accountability.

Some participants argued that the current status quo around emergency actions during COVID-19 had worked well and favored keeping authority with the Governor as is. They noted that the Governor issued emergency orders, and in some cases, lawsuits were filed and resolved in the courts. The General Assembly did weigh in on some issues and voted on legislation, with checks and balances working such that in some cases the Governor's veto was sustained, and in others it was not.

## Agricultural and Food Workers

Particularly in light of our early focus on immigration, the group took extra time to consider the particular impact of COVID-19 on workers in the agricultural industry. They considered the proposal:

*To protect farmworkers, meatpacking workers, and food processing workers, NC should aggressively enforce worker safety regulations in the agriculture industries to protect against outbreaks and give priority to get on-site testing to these workers.*

Many of the same values and concerns were raised here as were in the general discussion of reopening businesses, but new themes also emerged, including:

Regulators at the local, state, and federal level need to work together and be aggressive to ensure consistent guidance is provided and enforced.	Efforts towards safety should be cooperative and voluntary, not regulatory or combative.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety regulations are particularly important in the agricultural industry to protect workers from being exposed to COVID because workers are vulnerable and due to the nature of the worksites.</li> <li>• Failures of voluntary compliance are proof that stronger government requirements and enforcement were needed</li> <li>• Special attention should be paid given the unique circumstances in agriculture in which the employer controls both the living and working situation of migrant farmworkers.</li> <li>• Workers in this industry lack available information—public data does not always show if an outbreak occurred in migrant housing or a particular occupation, and workers are fearful of getting tested or don't have access to testing.</li> <li>• Given the risks and harms present in this workspace, on-site COVID testing should be provided to workers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In order to reassure customers and retain good workers, businesses in the agricultural sector have every incentive to protect their workers.</li> <li>• Aggressive government action during COVID-19 could introduce new risks: it could harm small processors, it could cause public fear about the food supply, and it could backfire by upending successes with voluntary compliance.</li> <li>• Public officials to date have praised good practices in this industry (related to COVID-19).</li> </ul>

While the discussion highlighted strong disagreement amongst some participants about how to best protect agricultural workers, others in the group were less familiar with the impacted population and how COVID-19 was manifesting in this particular industry.

The discussion illustrated both how to engage in meaningful dialogue about the concerns at issue and a range of solutions to address the challenge. It also deepened participants' understanding of how COVID created unique industry- and location-specific challenges in some parts of the state, particularly with regard to a largely immigrant workforce.

# Evictions, the NC Budget and Healthcare

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## Evictions

The cohort discussed whether the state should enact and/or continue a moratorium on evictions and provide a financial incentive to support landlords during COVID-19. There was minimal disagreement about this topic, with most participants expressing support for the proposal. Participants did acknowledge the benefits and downsides of a moratorium, including the need for relief for renters and landlords, the risk of spread of COVID if families were evicted and had to move, and the high cost of rent relief, and some participants expressed a concern about people not paying their rent if they knew a moratorium was in place. Participants noted that concern about evictions was not only a concern for individuals and families, but also had impacted many business owners in the commercial context.

During the program, the CDC implemented a nationwide eviction moratorium, as did the NC Governor, and the US Congress provided funds to each state to be used for rent relief, so many participants viewed the issue as already addressed.<sup>xxiii</sup>

## NC Budget

While concerns about the status of North Carolina revenues and its subsequent budget capacity were serious at the time of the cohort's discussions, it was also too early to know the scope of key details to have a deep discussion of budget options. Notably, when COVID-19 first impacted the state's economy, the NC legislature acted quickly and in a bi-partisan fashion to address emergency financial needs. During the program, participants expected a state budget shortfall, and considered whether the state should a) use available reserves, b) reverse tax cuts enacted over the last decade; and/or c) lay off state employees. As noted earlier, ultimately, NC did not experience a shortfall in revenue as a result of COVID-19. However, notable points made during this discussion included:

- The value of the state's rainy day fund for moments like the pandemic and significant support for using at least some state reserves during the crisis;
- An expectation that corporate entities should pay their fair share and therefore tax cuts should be reversed, particularly as some businesses benefit from state support during the pandemic;
- A view that taxes should be raised to invest in the state's future;
- Concern about whether further cuts (i.e. reducing state personnel) would be fair, contrasted with others seeing this period as a good time to reevaluate whether the state government is properly staffed;
- Concerns about depleting the state's reserves and the absence of a plan to replenish the reserves;
- The role of federal government financial support versus limited state resources;

- How business and philanthropy might address the economic emergency better, rather than public resources; and
- Concern about reinstating taxes on small businesses during a period when they are already struggling, and
- Concern about increasing unemployment during a period where many private sector employees have been laid off.

## Healthcare

Access to healthcare was a repeated theme throughout the Cohort's discussion of COVID-19, but time did not permit an in-depth discussion of health care policy. Several participants did raise the need to provide affordable health care to various populations, including undocumented immigrants and also other populations in need, specifically around COVID testing, care, and vaccination. Some participants also argued that COVID illustrated the need to expand Medicaid in the state. Others pointed out the need to serve people that were already on the waiting list for access to health care first, and noted that the expansion of Medicaid would not occur in time to address needs raised by COVID-19. Participants also noted how COVID illustrated the need for better access to healthcare in rural areas and the need for more providers in some parts of the state.



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# What We Learned

## What Participants Gained from and Valued about the Process

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The NCLF program begins with participants sharing a personal story of a person or experience that has impacted who they are. At first, a few attendees were skeptical of the value of sharing so many stories and some were reluctant to talk. At the end of the program, many participants, including some early skeptics, noted that the storytelling was one of their favorite parts of the program and that months later, they still reflected on some of the personal details their fellow cohort members had shared. One participant noted that the stories “created an atmosphere of us being able to connect.” This suggests an increased appreciation of the value of getting to know people who are different from oneself beyond a surface level, and a potential for relationship-building grounded first in personal stories, then in exploring differences in opinion.

Several participants also noted that the program had changed their approach to participating in conversation—one attendee said that he “worked on putting himself in other folks’ seats. We all think we’re right, but have to keep talking to meet in the middle.” Another talked about learning the importance of taking a step back, slowing down, and talking and thinking to gain perspective beyond his immediate context or the most urgent battle.

Immediately following each cohort program, NCLF surveys participants about their experience. In 2020, survey results were:

- “I formed relationships with one or more people of differing views that I likely would not have otherwise formed”: 89.23% Strongly or somewhat agreed, and 11.76% were neutral, no one disagreed.
- “I better understand my own values, opinions or priorities concerning NC’s response to COVID-19”: 88% Agreed or strongly agreed, and 12% were neutral, no one disagreed.
- “I better understand the values, opinions, or priorities about COVID-19 held by people with different perspectives than mine”: 94% agreed and 6% (one person) was neutral, no one disagreed.
- “I view some issues about NC’s response to COVID-19 differently than I did before participating in NCLF.” 76% of participant somewhat or strongly agreed, while 24% were neutral and no one disagreed.
- “I gained skills that will help me engage constructively with people of different views”: 76.47% strongly or somewhat agreed, 17.65% were neutral, and 6% (1 person) somewhat disagreed.
- 65% of participants also reported that they have made or are making efforts to encourage or facilitate conversations between people of different parties or ideologies in their communities or elsewhere.

At the conclusion of the program, we asked participants to name one way that their views were modified as a result of their participation in the program. Some representative comments were

*I have listened to other members of NCLF, making passionate, factual, intelligent comments that I had never considered. These comments were not emotional, which is what I generally hear. As a result, my views on some issues were modified.*

*My understanding of [XX] Party and its base has significantly improved. I am more familiar with the nuances and the diversity of this political and ideological camp that I am not a part of.*

*Issues are not black and white. Discussions with people of varying views has helped to moderate my opinions on COVID responses and immigration.*

## Role of Leadership

As part of the discussions around COVID-19, NCLF also incorporated an explicit discussion of how conversations affected participants' thinking about their own leadership, particularly in a time of crisis. Members of the cohort focused on how they could both listen better to other perspectives and express their own point of view in conversation. Here are a few examples of the ideas raised:

*Discussions are very important. It's important to understand that when we express ourselves, not everyone will agree.*

*It is interesting to hear about change in a person, and good to express a willingness to listen to others, that you are open to others' ideas.*

*We need to cultivate curiosity about people with whom you disagree. A political disagreement doesn't need to be a moral disagreement, and we can do a better job showing genuine interest and a sincere commitment to understand each other.*

*I had a mentor who gave time to others to speak to their opposing views, would try to find a nugget he agreed with, and weave that into his ultimate decision. It led to longer meetings and a slowness at making decisions, but it also led to decisions that were closer to unanimous.*

*It's important to communicate that a person is rarely 100% in one political place. It's problematic that ideological purity is treated as moral good.*

Participants also acknowledged the difficulties they experience or hear from friends about participating in public conversations and sharing their views. They talked about how friends watch conversations on social media, but avoid engaging because they don't want to be labelled, but that these same friends appreciate when a leader like themselves does share a strong opinion and engage. Participants talked about the real negative consequences of taking a public position, how individuals or groups weaponize positions, and how media amplifies disputes.

## Impact of COVID

At the conclusion of the program, the group talked how COVID itself has led to changes in their perspective over time. Some discussed about the specific challenges during COVID that have made conversation more difficult. They noted that it has been harder to hear some voices during COVID because we are each more likely to be staying close to home, in a bubble with other people we agree with. Further, the crisis has lasted for months, meaning that people are both fatigued and evolving constantly in their opinions. Participants talked about how now they know people that have contracted COVID, and have experienced changes to their business, their job, or seen their child go through multiple school changes.

In this context, participants also mentioned how specific lessons from the pandemic had impacted their approach to leadership. Several people mentioned the value of considering data, including polling, to understand the variation in others' perspectives and to better understand the reality of the public health crisis. They also talked about how they had seen people's opinions change over time based on experience and the pain of seeing health care and health needs be politicized. Finally, as leaders, they noted that people have experienced real pain and loss, making disagreements more painful and requiring a real acknowledgment of the other person's loss when you want to disagree.

The group concluded by discussing how leadership combines the head and the heart, and that humility can be a path to leading a community through significant loss.

## The Election and Race

While COVID-19 dominated the forum as the core theme, the discussions also took place during a politically tumultuous time, with the death of George Floyd and subsequent protests taking place in the summer of 2020, and a highly contested national election held the week before our final meeting. In November, we created space for NCLF participants to self-select into Red-Leaning or Blue-Leaning affinity groups to talk about their reactions to the election, and then we reconvened together as a full group.

One clear theme that emerged from the discussion was concern about our ability to talk with each other about race. One participant talked about the importance of courageous conversations and the idea that "race is the biggest social issue this state faces," while another expressed dismay at the viewpoint that "If you voted for a particular person or party, you must be racist." Participants also talked about how social media lifts up extremes and makes it harder to engage, how different generations approach diversity and conversations about race differently, and how participants themselves differed in their use of the term "racist."

## What NCLF learned

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Although previously mentioned, NCLF learned about the importance of continuing to engage leadership during extreme hardships. We saw emotions become a large factor in the public-facing work that these leaders did, warranting even more conversation about the relationships among our leaders on a personal level and highlighting the need for more cross-partisan dialogue, particularly during or in preparation for a crisis.

Prior to 2020, NCLF conducted its programs completely in person, and we were unsure whether the activities would translate to an online format. We learned that some aspects of the program are inherently valuable, regardless of whether they are delivered online or in person. For example, participants valued the diversity and talent of the people in the group. They also appreciated the opportunity to take time to talk through their views over time and the quality of facilitation of each conversation. Even in an online format, many participants noted that the program changed their approach to dialogue and made them more willing to engage in conversation, appreciated the opportunity to participate, and learned something from the program.

Overall, the final discussions reinforced that NCLF made the right decision to proceed in an adjusted format, even during a crisis period. Several participants noted that their participation was a bright spot in a very difficult year, giving them support and connection through a challenging time for leaders.

### Online Dialogue

While NCLF was able to find some resources on how to run an effective group meeting online via Zoom, we found little guidance about facilitating online dialogue among people with deeply different views as we made the transition to an online format. However, with detailed planning, debriefs after each program, and a willingness to be flexible, we were able to facilitate a program that engaged participants, introduced meaningful discussion on a challenging and important topic, and left attendees with increased will, skills and relationships compared to before they attended the program.

In conducting the NCLF program online, we focused on three key areas as priorities:

- In order to keep the attention and focus of participants, we adapted and accelerated the pace of each conversation within the full program. We also made it a priority to encourage high levels of interaction through activities and increased use of small group discussions.

In general, we encouraged participants to digest material in advance or offered only a brief overview, focusing sessions on interactive conversation and limiting the time spent listening to a single speaker to as little as possible;

- Recognizing the loss of in-person interaction, we found that the priority NCLF typically places on opportunities to build trust and personal connections, through pairings, small groups, and social time was even more important on Zoom and increased our use of small groups even further. We also learned that being online also offered new opportunities for participants to share parts of their personality.

As one example, we started each session with optional time to bring your coffee and have conversation before the program started. Most of the group joined for these opportunities and the brief exchanges quickly moved to shared storytelling. In one example, multiple participants told stories of how they got to school in the morning, finding common ground over similar histories in different parts of the state and new connections. In another example, some people shared personal anecdotes based on their “zoom backgrounds”—a favorite family holiday tradition, a cherished trip, or a hobby illustrated by objects in the room behind them; and

- To make the program accessible and support the flow and pace, we kept technological tools simple and separated the role of facilitation from technology and logistical tasks, which were supported by staff that were not simultaneously facilitating.

Separating “tech support” from facilitation proved to be valuable in several ways. Facilitators were able to focus on the conversation and engage participants, while separate support focused on taking notes, handling people coming in and out of the conference call, and noting if someone was trying to participate and had not been invited to speak. While we sometimes asked participants to vote in a Zoom poll, take a survey after the program, or use a Google Doc, we did not incorporate additional technology tools that were confusing or distracting. It was clear that participants had differing levels of capacity—joining by iPad or with a weak internet connection, and we did not want to detract from the conversation by limiting participation.

We learned that online programs had some unanticipated advantages. For example, some participants remarked that the focus and close-up facial views during small group discussion encouraged authenticity and honesty in a way that in-person large groups may not. Second, the reduced time commitment and lack of travel made it easier for some members of the cohort to participate.

On the other hand, we also experienced some challenges. New constraints on resolving tension after difficult conversations emerged. Participants also expressed frustration about the reduced opportunities to network with each other informally. Finally, we were less successful at fostering the “buddy” relationships that have been a hallmark of past annual programs.

At the conclusion of each NCLF cohort, we conduct an immediate post-program survey to assess whether the program had an impact on participants and which parts were most effective. A comparison of the post-program surveys from our most recent in-person cohort in 2019 and the online cohort in 2020 shows that participants in the online cohort did experience similar outcomes as the in-person cohort, but to a weaker degree. For example, 88% of online participants said they built relationships with people of differing views, compared to 95% of in-person participants, but respondents from the online group on the survey split between “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree,” while 86% of the in-person group selected “strongly agree.” A similar pattern holds for improved understanding about the issue, the views of others, and developing strong skills at constructive engagement—responses of the online group are about 10-15% lower than the in-person group overall, but still very positive.

## Post-Program Survey of Participants (2019-2020)

	Online Cohort March-Nov 2020	In-Person Cohort Jan-Aug 2019
<b>Building Relationships</b> <i>I formed relationships with one or more people of differing views that I would not have otherwise formed</i>	Strongly agree: 52.94% Somewhat agree: 35.29% Neither agree/disagree: 11.76% Somewhat disagree: 0 Strongly disagree: 0	Strongly agree: 86.36% Somewhat agree: 9.09% Neither agree/disagree: 0 Somewhat disagree: 0 Strongly disagree: 4.55%
<b>Understanding the issues</b> <i>I learned more about [topic]</i>	Strongly agree: 29.41% Somewhat agree: 52.94% Neither agree/disagree: 17.65% Somewhat disagree: 0 Strongly disagree: 0	Strongly agree: 65.22% Somewhat agree: 30.43% Neither agree/disagree: 4.35% Somewhat disagree: 0 Strongly disagree: 0
<b>Understanding the Views of Others</b> <i>I better understand the values, opinions, or priorities about [topic] held by people with different perspectives than mine.</i>	Strongly agree: 47.06% Somewhat agree: 47.06% Neither agree/disagree: 5.88% Somewhat disagree: 0 Strongly disagree: 0	Strongly agree: 65.22% Somewhat agree: 34.78% Neither agree/disagree: 0 Somewhat disagree: 0 Strongly disagree: 0
<b>The Skill of Seeking to Understand</b> <i>I gained skills that will help me engage constructively with people of different views</i>	Strongly agree: 41.18% Somewhat agree: 35.29% Neither agree/disagree: 17.65% Somewhat disagree: 5.88% Strongly disagree: 0	Strongly agree: 72.73% Somewhat agree: 13.64% Neither agree/disagree: 9.09% Somewhat disagree: 4.55% Strongly disagree: 0

## Conclusion

Now more than ever, the United States faces serious issues of polarization and distrust, illustrated by many events of 2020, including the COVID-19 pandemic. While COVID-19 disrupted NCLF's ability to conduct its planned in-person programs, the choice to move online and continue provided a space for North Carolina leaders to talk with each other during a difficult period for their communities. The conversations they had reached across party, geography, and demographics, and demonstrated that it was possible to have a thoughtful, constructive discussion of differing points of view on hard topics. Ultimately, our participants told us that they left better informed and better prepared to lead during a crisis and after as a result of their conversations. We look forward to bringing our participants back together in-person soon and to their leadership in North Carolina going forward.

## Appendix A | NCLF 2020 Participant List

1. **W. Ted Alexander**, NC Senate
2. **Abdullah Antepi**, Duke University
3. **Kevin Austin**, Yadkin County Board of Commissioners
4. **Rachel Baker**, NC Council of Churches
5. **Tamara Barringer\***, UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School; Former NCGA Member
6. **Johnny Bass**, Bass Business Solutions
7. **Emma Battle**, Higher Ed Works
8. **Mary Belk**, NC House of Representatives
9. **Tariq Bokhari**, Charlotte City Council
10. **Charles Bowman**, Bank of America
11. **Anita Brown-Graham\***, UNC School of Government
12. **Mitch Colvin**, Mayor of Fayetteville
13. **Kim Cotten-West**, NC Republican Party
14. **Donald Davis**, NC Senate
15. **Angeline Echeverria**, El Pueblo
16. **Chris Evans**, Blackstone Entrepreneurs Network
17. **Maurice “Mo” Green\***, Z Smith Reynolds Foundation
18. **John Hardister**, NC House of Representatives
19. **Doug Haynes**, Vistage Worldwide, Inc.
20. **Angela Hight**, NC Crime Victims Compensation Commission
21. **John Hood\***, John William Pope Foundation
22. **Terry Johnson**, Sheriff of Alamance County
23. **Joyce Krawiec**, NC Senate
24. **Chuck Neely\***, Williams Mullen, Former NCGA member
25. **Mujtaba Mohammed**, NC Senate
26. **Marcia Morey**, NC House of Representatives
27. **Jose Oliva**, Replacements, Ltd
28. **Jay Richardson**, New Belgium Brewing Co.
29. **Carson Smith**, NC House of Representatives
30. **Ray Starling**, NC Chamber of Commerce
31. **Suling Walker**, NC Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
32. **Melinda Wiggins**, Student Action with Farmworkers
33. **Charlotte Williams**, Hickory City Council
34. **Leslie Winner\***, Former Executive Director, Z Smith Reynolds Foundation; Former NCGA member

\*NCLF Steering Committee Member

## Appendix B | Full List of COVID-19 Concerns, as Identified by Participants

As NCLF's 2020 Cohort transitioned to talking about North Carolina's response to COVID-19, participants took several small group sessions and time during our first online meeting in July to identify a comprehensive list of concerns regarding "North Carolina in the next few years in light of COVID-19." NCLF staff recorded the concerns, which were later grouped by theme. Facilitators then narrowed the list to a select set of concerns for discussion. The original full list included the following:

- Federal spending in this period could contribute to long-term government debt;
- Economic challenges could result in NC budget shortfall and lack of funds to help people;
- Some businesses will benefit and others will fail, particularly many small businesses likely to fail;
- Damage to the economy could erode wages and potentially support reducing wage protections;
- Those who have much should provide for those who have little: some have extreme wealth; communities should come together to support those in need.
- Unsafe work environments, particularly for essential workers and vulnerable workers (i.e. immigrants in the meat industry) show a need for essential protections;
- Broken food chain limiting access to food for some people;
- Broken supply chains disrupting manufacturing;
- We should spread the cost of harm so that no one group is left behind (i.e. neither landlords nor tenants should bear the full cost of housing in the face of unemployment).
- Political leaders do not understand cost of restarting a business when it is shut down, harms to businesses could be severe, especially small businesses;
- Decisions about overlapping categories of businesses that must stay closed or can open have been arbitrary and unfair (restaurant vs. bowling alley vs. bar).
- NC and country are not prepared for recovery after the crisis;
- COVID-19 is exacerbating an existing affordable housing crisis and leading to increased evictions;
- COVID-19 and the move to distance learning may contribute to learning gaps, particularly for younger children, or lead children to fall out of the education system altogether;
- Stress on families could lead to large numbers of foster children without placement;
- Risk of long-term health effects related to COVID-19 are unknown;
- COVID-19 is exacerbating existing health care disparities, particularly by race;
- Delays in primary care during COVID-19 could lead to crush of need post-pandemic and would burden healthcare system;
- Expect long-term emotional strains on families, children, workers;
- Seeing significant loss of personal ties, for example through moving life-cycle rituals online instead of in-person;
- Immigrants are being excluded from relief efforts, but experiencing harms;
- Barriers to voting, reducing election staffing, slowed post office will reduce ability of residents to cast their votes during COVID-19 and pose other challenges to voting;
- Frustrating to lack access to good information, find available data and guidance to be vary by different geographies, different circumstances;
- US reputation as a global leader may be damaged during this period;
- People are fearful of talking about racial inequity, COVID-19, other topics, seeing general strain in social fabric of the country and state;
- Disappointing that community is not coming together to solve problems creatively and to tackle the virus, worried about a loss of common character, shared purpose.

## Appendix C

In early March, the 2020 Cohort convened to address immigration and immigrants generally in North Carolina. The following list summarizes some of the concerns that participants were asked to share to frame the discussion. We did not ultimately address this set of concerns, but focused instead on the impact of COVID-19 on immigrants in North Carolina and how the state might address that population's needs:

*Examples of pre-COVID concerns regarding immigration in NC shared by individual participants:*

- The media and public perpetuate stereotypes about immigrants that are negative, people also have misperceptions about the diversity and sources of immigration in NC and the US;
- People are very focused on “illegal immigrants,” not immigration policy in general;
- We have a tiered, unfair, and inconsistent immigration system that doesn't adequately address immigrant needs, but the American public doesn't understand the complexity of our immigration policies or how to best reform them;
- People are concerned specifically about immigrants that cross the border and cause crime or lead crime cartels and bring drugs into the community;
- Employers need immigrants to fulfill the need for qualified workers, there are more jobs than there are qualified Americans willing to do them;
- Immigrants are in hiding, afraid to seek support (i.e. healthcare, economic) and help because they are afraid of being arrested or deported;
- Minorities worry that new immigrants will gain a “preferred minority status,” perhaps take over our best institutions;
- Immigrants are creating infrastructure challenges, for example by attending public schools or seeking health care at public institutions supported by American taxpayers;
- Immigrants pay taxes on their wages, but do not enjoy the benefits of public supports;
- Immigrants could bring new strains of disease to North Carolina or the United States and affect public health;
- People don't know how to talk about immigrants and immigration and taking a position can become a type of “virtue signaling”;
- America is losing its innovation edge by including fewer immigrants;
- It is appropriate to enforce our existing immigration laws (or change them), and immigrants should not violate our laws;
- We contributed to poverty dynamics in foreign countries, and now immigrants are coming to the US out of necessity to earn a living.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> NC DHHS

<sup>ii</sup> NC DHHS <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/dashboard>

<sup>iii</sup> NC Government <https://www.nc.gov/covid-19/covid-19-orders-directives#executive-orders>

<sup>iv</sup> NC DHHS <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/dashboard>

<sup>v</sup> NC DHHS <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/843/download>

<sup>vi</sup> ABC 11 <https://abc11.com/nc-coronavirus-map-update-covid-19/6087356/>

<sup>vii</sup> NC Health News <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2020/06/19/north-carolina-lacks-critical-racial-data-for-a-third-of-its-covid-19-cases-heres-why/>

<sup>viii</sup> NC Health News <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2021/02/15/prisons-contribute-to-racial-imbalance-in-covid-19-impact-in-nc/>

<sup>ix</sup> NC Health News <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2021/01/22/concerns-grow-over-covid-fatalities-in-nc-assisted-living-facilities/>

<sup>x</sup> UNC Kenan Flagler <https://kenaninstitute.unc.edu/kenan-insight/seven-forces-reshaping-the-economy-amid-and-beyond-covid-19/>

<sup>xi</sup> ABC 11 <https://abc11.com/unemployment-pandemic-assistance-troubleshooter/10426224/>

<sup>xii</sup> ABC 11 <https://abc11.com/unemployment-pandemic-assistance-troubleshooter/10426224/>

<sup>xiii</sup> WBTV <https://www.wbtv.com/2020/12/14/first-person-nc-receives-covid-vaccine-i-couldnt-be-more-excited/>

<sup>xiv</sup> NC DHHS <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/963/download>

<sup>xv</sup> Duke Today <https://today.duke.edu/2020/05/survey-nc-becoming-more-polarized-over-pandemic-threat>

<sup>xvi</sup> Ed NC <https://www.ednc.org/north-carolina-daunting-decisions-on-schools-in-a-battleground-state/>

<sup>xvii</sup> Meredith College <https://www.meredith.edu/news/spring-2021-meredith-poll-explores-n.c.-voter-attitudes-about-political-lea>

<sup>xviii</sup> Of note, at the time that we held the NCLF discussions, the effects of COVID-19 on state finances were unclear. In June 2021, new state forecasts showed an increase in revenue collection above expectations. See e.g. Dawn Baumgartner Vaughn, "NC Will Collect \$6.5 billion more in taxes than expected." News and Observer (June 15, 2021).

<sup>xix</sup> Of note is that North Carolina has a unique Council of State (CoS), consisting of 10 independently-elected statewide officials. While some other states have similar councils, none are as large as the one in NC, and no other states grant specific power to these officials in case of emergency. In NC, the governor may exercise some emergency powers at his or her discretion, others require CoS concurrence (see figure). While Governor Cooper initially sought concurrence from the Council of State, he bypassed them after encountering resistance.

<sup>xx</sup> In March 2020, the federal CARES Act authorized the Paycheck Protection Program, adding to the program in August 2020 and March 2021, ultimately extending \$943 billion in forgivable loans to small businesses to pay their employees during the COVID-19 crisis.

<sup>xxi</sup> For the full student memo, see the NCLF website at <https://sites.duke.edu/nclf/files/2021/06/Cohort-4-Memo-1.pdf>.

<sup>xxii</sup> Beyond this cohort, the NC Leadership Forum [co-sponsored a webinar](#) with the Duke Law Global Financial Markets Center that featured housing experts and policymakers from a variety of perspectives to discuss the potential Eviction Crisis that resulted from COVID-19 and a range of possible policy responses. A diverse Eviction Working Group emerged from the effort and the group submitted two letters ([February 2021](#) and [May 2021](#)) to North Carolina leaders with further insight into how NC might respond to support renters and landlords during this period. In 2021, NCLF plans to work with regional cohorts in NC to further consider how communities can address longer-term housing needs in the state.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See note 19.

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