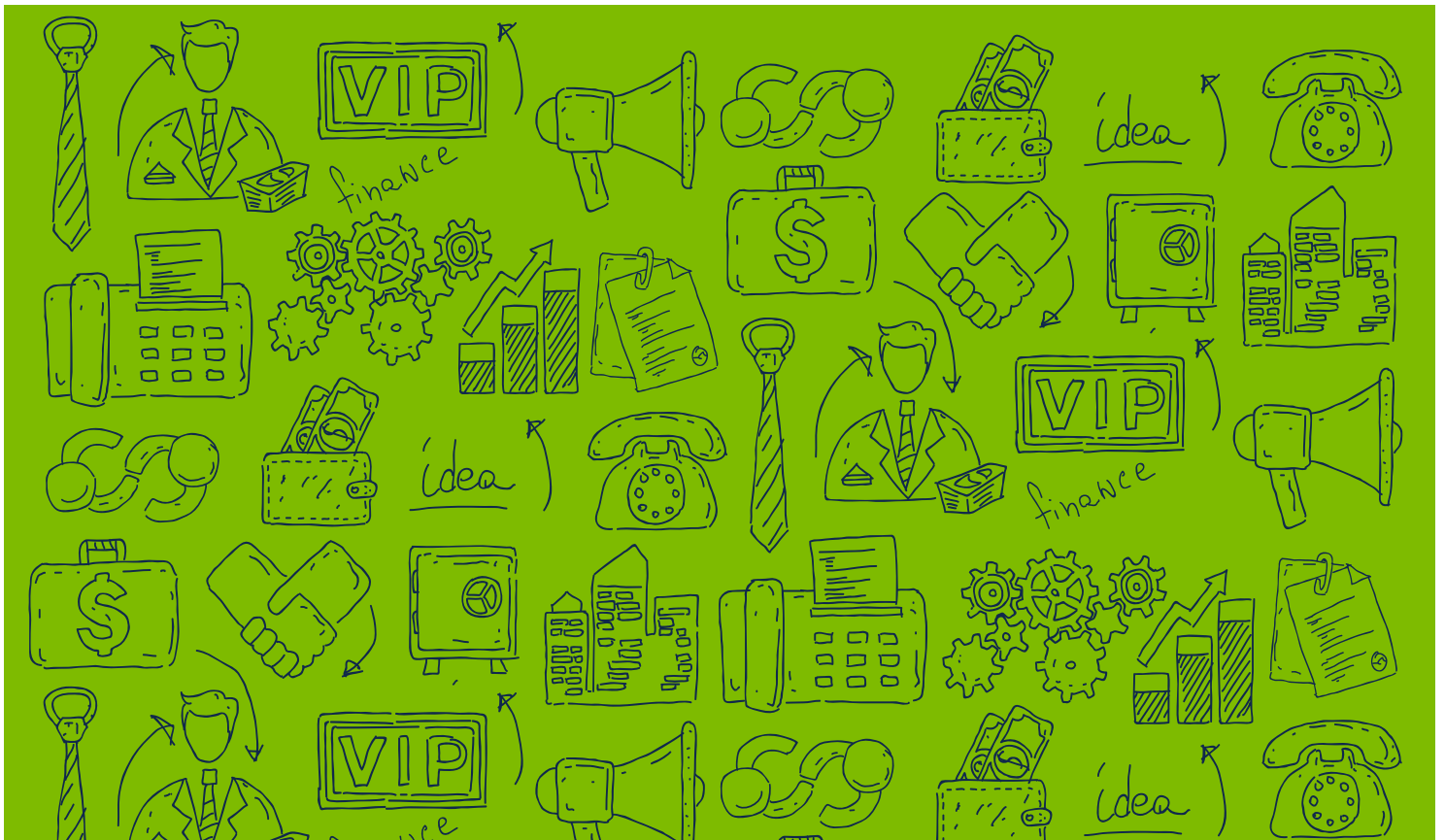




NEBRASKA STATEWIDE WORKFORCE &  
EDUCATIONAL REPORTING SYSTEM



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOPS

**SHAPING THE FUTURE OF NEBRASKA**



DECEMBER 2025 | NSWERS 2030 STRATEGIC PLANNING



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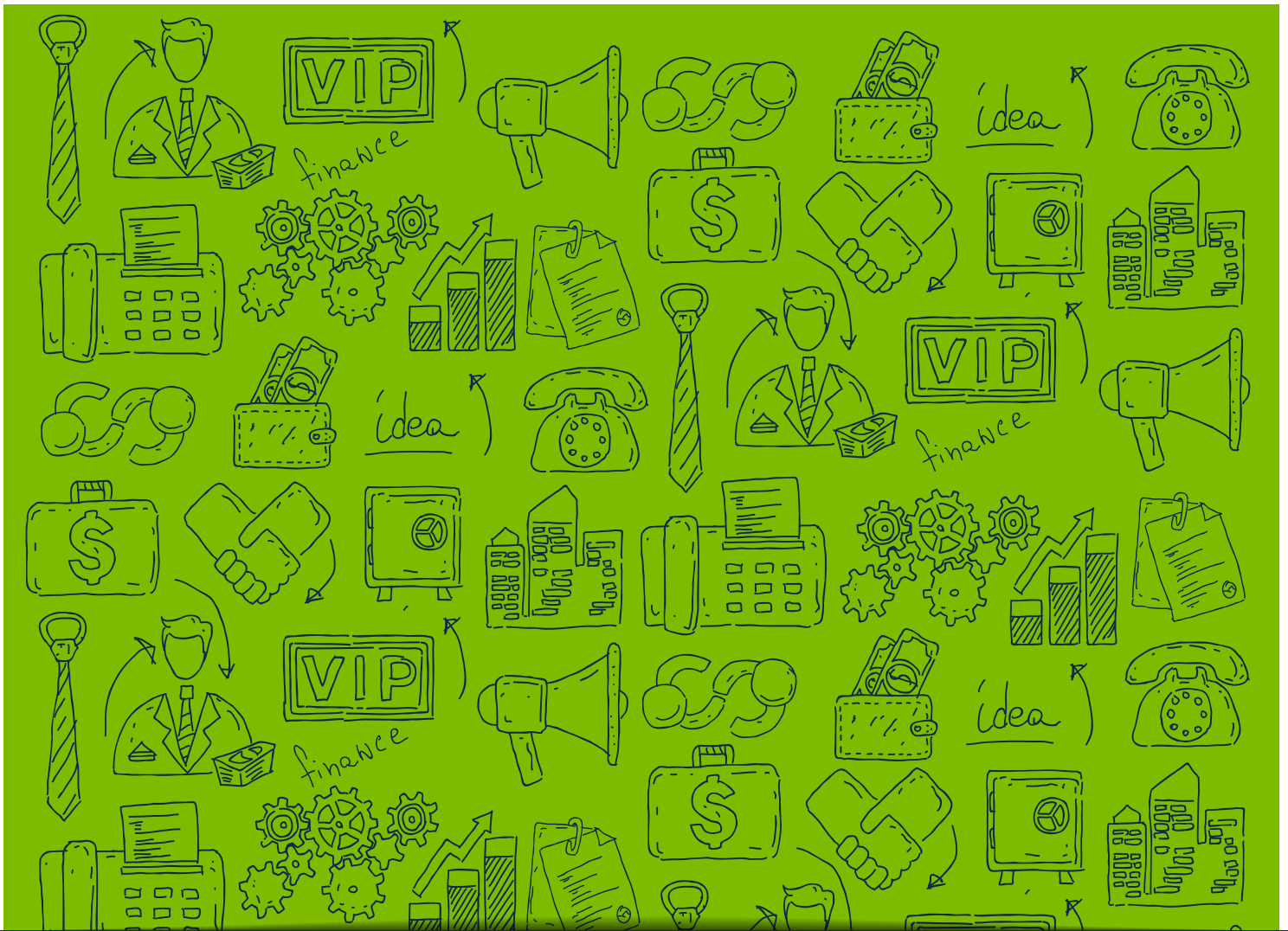
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The community workshops brought together educators, workforce leaders, and community members to share perspectives on the forces shaping Nebraska's education and workforce future. Across regions, participants emphasized the need for stronger education-to-workforce alignment, sustainable investment, collaboration across institutions, and strategies to attract and retain talent—particularly in rural areas. While each region surfaced unique priorities, common themes reflected shared concern about demographic change, workforce shortages, and the importance of preparing for emerging technologies.

Across all engagements, participants expressed strong support for NSWERS' role as a trusted, neutral source of integrated data and analysis. They emphasized the need for NSWERS to move beyond system building toward deeper use of data for decision making, evaluation, and preparedness. The insights captured through this engagement process will directly inform the strategic goals and priorities being outlined in the NSWERS 2030 Strategic Plan.





# **PART I:**

## BUILDING ON STATEWIDE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

# OVERVIEW

In November 2025, NSWERS hosted a series of three community engagement workshops in Scottsbluff, Kearney, and Omaha to gather ideas, insights, and aspirations for the future of education and the workforce in Nebraska. These events invited participants to help shape the next NSWERS strategic plan by sharing their perspectives on the trends and challenges influencing the state's long-term success. Each full-day session brought together leaders and community members for

collaborative discussions, grounded in global and regional workforce trends and enriched by the diverse experiences of attendees. Participants engaged deeply in conversations that will directly inform NSWERS' priorities and guide how the organization continues to connect data and information to improve outcomes for all Nebraskans. This summary reflects the themes, feedback, and shared vision that emerged from those workshops.



# KEY INSIGHTS

Across the three NSWERS community engagement workshops, participants from Scottsbluff, Kearney, and Omaha expressed consistent themes about the opportunities and challenges shaping Nebraska's education and workforce future. While each region contributed unique perspectives, the discussions revealed shared priorities, a collective urgency for system-level improvements, and a commitment to advancing opportunities for all Nebraskans. The following summarizes the major similarities that emerged across all three sessions, followed by a description of the notable differences in regional focus.

## SIMILARITIES ACROSS REGIONS

### Investment Required

Participants in every region emphasized that many of the opportunities and solutions identified will require sustainable investment and dependable local or state funding. Omaha participants specifically noted the importance of framing policy discussions around a cohesive long-term vision, educating stakeholders on policy decisions, and demonstrating the return on investment for education and workforce initiatives.

### Restructuring the Education System

There was broad agreement that meaningful, top-down systemic change is needed to modernize Nebraska's education structure. Though attendees acknowledged that significant reform is challenging and often slow, they outlined similar strategies for making the system more flexible, responsive, and aligned with evolving learner and workforce needs.

### Pipeline to the Workforce

Strengthening the continuum from early education through career entry was a recurring focus. Participants stressed the importance of youth career exploration, expanded apprenticeships, internships, and certification opportunities, and greater access to on-the-job training and retraining to meet workforce demands.

### Education and Industry Partnerships

All regions recognized the critical role of collaboration between education systems and employers. Community colleges in Kearney were praised for strong business partnerships and the ability to tailor programs to industry needs. In contrast, participants noted that rural western Nebraska faces constraints that make curriculum flexibility more difficult. Strengthening these partnerships was a shared priority statewide.



## **Future-Proofing Nebraska**

Participants emphasized the need to diversify Nebraska's economic base and encourage innovation to keep the state competitive. Preparing for emerging industries and technologies was viewed as essential to long-term economic resilience.

## **Collaboration and Integrated Coordination Across Nebraska**

A common theme across all workshops was the need to break down silos and strengthen coordination across communities and institutions. Scottsbluff participants expressed particular concern that education opportunities and funding are not equitably distributed statewide.

## **Marketing Rural Nebraska**

This topic was most prominent in Scottsbluff but also surfaced in Kearney and Omaha. Participants emphasized the importance of making rural Nebraska more attractive to both residents and newcomers. Themes included expanding childcare options, supporting homeownership, improving core infrastructure, enabling remote work, and strengthening pathways for career advancement.

## **Workforce Recruitment and Retention**

All regions expressed concern about attracting and retaining a strong workforce. Omaha participants specifically highlighted the need to reduce "brain drain" and increase "brain gain," positioning Nebraska as a place where talented individuals want to live, learn, and work.

## **DIFFERENCES ACROSS REGIONS**

While many themes were shared across the three locations, each region also surfaced distinct priorities shaped by local contexts. These differences provide valuable insight into how Nebraska's communities experience education and workforce issues in unique ways.

### **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

AI emerged as a major topic of interest in the Scottsbluff session, where participants frequently discussed its implications for education, workforce development, and economic competitiveness. In contrast, AI received significantly less attention in Kearney and Omaha, where other priorities dominated the conversation.

### **Agriculture**

Despite agriculture's central role in Nebraska's economy and identity, it was not a major focus in the Kearney or Omaha discussions. Participants in these sessions concentrated more heavily on educational institutions, faculty needs, and broader workforce opportunities. This contrasted with Scottsbluff, where the rural context made agriculture a more natural part of the discussion landscape.

# STRUCTURE

## GALLERY OF THE FUTURE

Before the workshops, a visual gallery was created, featuring 30 distinct topics with significant implications for Nebraska's future. Participants explored the gallery, leaving comments and reactions on the displays. They then joined small-group discussions to share key insights and observations. Each group identified two or three major ideas to present to the full room, and these ideas were later clustered into overarching themes.

## SCENARIOS

Participants next worked in teams to explore a series of potential future scenarios. Using a set of pre-identified driving forces, they examined how different combinations of favorable and unfavorable outcomes might shape Nebraska's long-term direction. This activity encouraged participants to think expansively and consider a range of possible futures.

## IMPERATIVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the final group activity, teams discussed what they viewed as the essential imperatives for Nebraska's future and developed recommendations for strategic priorities. These recommendations were then shared and discussed in the full group.

## ONE BIG IDEA

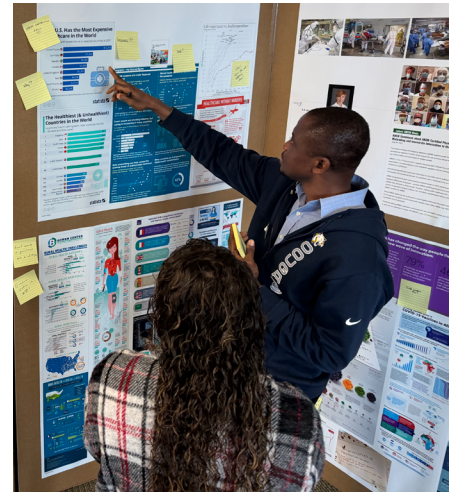
To conclude the day, each participant was asked to reflect individually and share "one big idea" that captured their overall perspective from the workshop. This final reflection helped surface the most resonant insights and emphasized the collective aspirations of the group.





# GALLERY OF THE FUTURE

The first activity of the workshop centered on a detailed review of the Gallery of the Future, a compilation of information about our rapidly changing world presented on large-format posters. Participants spent approximately one hour exploring the gallery and reflecting on the trends, data, and ideas displayed. They then worked in small teams to identify the key themes and issues they felt would be most important for Nebraska's future.





# SCENARIOS

The second major activity of the workshop invited participants to engage in a series of “future-thinking” exercises designed to explore a range of plausible scenarios for Nebraska’s long-term future. Over the course of an hour, participants worked in teams to examine multiple possibilities shaped by key driving forces—factors that could significantly influence education, the workforce, and the state as a whole.

To guide their discussions, each team used a structured worksheet to complete two pairs of contrasting scenarios, ultimately developing four distinct visions of the future. These scenarios were grounded in a set of critical driving forces, each presented with two divergent outcomes.

Examples included:

- Climate Change: Bad Case vs. Worst Case
- Immigration in Nebraska: Declining vs. Significantly Increasing
- Geopolitics: Greater Stability vs. Rising Tension and Superpower Conflict
- U.S. Economy: Continued Growth vs. Stagnation and Deflation
- Government Budgets: Stable Spending vs. Significant Cutbacks
- Technology: AI Causing Mass Unemployment vs. AI Increasing Productivity and Expanding Employment
- U.S. Politics: Worsening Polarization vs. Greater Compromise and Problem Solving
- Nebraska Population: More High School Graduates Leaving vs. More Choosing to Stay
- Health Care Costs: Becoming Far Less Affordable vs. Becoming Affordable for Most People

By intentionally considering both favorable and unfavorable outcomes, participants were encouraged to broaden their thinking and recognize that the future is inherently uncertain. The exercise helped them see that examining a variety of possible futures—some hopeful and others more troubling—can deepen understanding of the patterns and forces that shape long-term change.

While many found the scenarios challenging due to the wide range of alternatives they were asked to imagine, nearly all participants agreed afterward that both the optimistic and pessimistic futures they explored were plausible. This realization naturally led to the critical question: How do we work toward the future we want and avoid the outcomes we hope to prevent?

Across the workshop groups, the response was consistent: achieving desirable futures will require strong policy choices and reliable data to inform those decisions.

# IMPERATIVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants were asked to identify their key imperatives for Nebraska, Nebraska's education system, and the state's workforce. Using a structured worksheet, they reflected on the day's discussions and contributed a wide range of thoughtful and actionable insights. Below is a sample of the key ideas that were shared across groups.

## COLLABORATION

- Participants emphasized the importance of strengthening connections across sectors.
- Many highlighted the need for deeper collaboration between workforce and education partners to ensure Nebraska can meet its future talent needs.
- Groups stressed the value of seamless collaboration across K-12, two-year institutions, and four-year institutions.
- Several noted that aligning education programs with market needs is essential for retaining talent and supporting the growth of local businesses.

## CIVILITY/COMMUNITY

- Participants expressed a desire for more welcoming communities supported by human-centered policies rather than individualistic approaches.
- They also underscored the need to restore civil discourse and foster more collaborative engagement across the state.

## AI & EDUCATION

- Participants recommended continuing to promote the value and return on investment of education in Nebraska.
- They also encouraged thoughtful, policy-guided integration of artificial intelligence into both education and workforce development systems.

## RETAINING POPULATION

- Groups consistently identified addressing both “brain drain” and “brain gain” as critical to Nebraska's long-term success.

## DATA

- Participants stressed the importance of engaging and educating local communities on the impact of policy decisions using both data and compelling stories.
- They also recommended expanding education in data literacy, media literacy, and civics.

## ENVIRONMENT

- Protecting Nebraska's natural resources was identified as an important priority, with an emphasis on preservation without large-scale or controversial development projects.

## CHILD CARE

- Participants highlighted the urgent need to expand access to affordable, high-quality child care across the state.

## EDUCATION

- Groups stressed the importance of building vibrant, accessible community and statewide education systems.
- Participants emphasized the need to frame policy discussions in ways that create a coherent long-term vision for investment, including tax policy.
- Many underscored the importance of ending cuts to Nebraska education and instead increasing investment in educational opportunities and data-informed interventions aligned with workforce needs.
- Paying educators and public servants competitive wages was identified as a key strategy for strengthening Nebraska's workforce.
- Participants supported data-informed investments in both people and schools.
- Finally, they noted that competitive salaries and career opportunities are essential for attracting and retaining a strong Nebraska workforce.



# ONE BIG IDEA

Each workshop concluded by inviting participants to share their “one big idea”—a key insight, learning, observation, or suggestion that captured what resonated most with them throughout the day. The ideas shared reflected both optimism and realism, highlighting the state’s opportunities, challenges, and aspirations for the future. Below is a selection of the reflections participants offered:

- Participants emphasized that meaningful connection, when paired with innovation, can create unstoppable momentum for progress.
- Many encouraged Nebraska to embrace change, noting that the state’s workforce is already rapidly adapting to new technologies and evolving needs.
- Several participants posed the question of how Nebraska can move from great ideas to effective action.
- Groups reflected on the importance of establishing programs that both meet workforce needs and align with what students want to learn and find motivating.
- Some emphasized that Nebraska must think more boldly about its potential, rather than simply maintaining the status quo.
- Participants noted that even worst-case scenarios can spark innovative thinking and prompt new solutions.
- Several highlighted the power of having the information needed to be the architects of our own future.
- Many reinforced the importance of continuing to work together and finding additional avenues to expand opportunity across the state.
- Participants stressed the value of cultivating critical thinking as an essential skill for Nebraska’s future.
- Some noted that embracing change requires getting all stakeholders to the table—and that forward movement is difficult unless those with decision-making power also adopt a change-oriented mindset.
- Collaboration was repeatedly described as essential for success.
- Participants reflected on the importance of ensuring that all Nebraskans have access to the skills and knowledge needed to build the lives they want.
- Several encouraged others to use their voices and remain relentless in pressing for the changes they hope to see.
- The idea of building stackable credentials or degrees was identified as a promising strategy for supporting lifelong learning.
- Participants emphasized that incremental change can be extremely powerful when sustained over time.
- Many highlighted the need for flexibility and strong partnerships to continue moving forward effectively.
- Finally, participants stressed the importance of keeping the challenges and opportunities of Western Nebraska, the Panhandle, and rural communities at the forefront of statewide planning.



# WORKSHOP LOCATIONS

## SCOTTSBLUFF

**NOVEMBER 10, 2025**

Western Nebraska  
Community College  
John N. Harms Center  
2620 College Park  
Scottsbluff, NE 69361



## KEARNEY

**NOVEMBER 12, 2025**

University of Nebraska  
at Kearney  
Regional Engagement  
Center, Gala Rooms  
2204 University Dr  
Kearney, NE 68845



## OMAHA

**NOVEMBER 14, 2025**

Metropolitan Community  
College, Fort Omaha Campus  
Center for Advanced and  
Emerging Technology (CAET)  
5300 N 30th Street,  
Building 24  
Omaha, NE 68111







## PART II: NSWERS PARTNERS & KEY STAKEHOLDERS STRATEGIC PLANNING WORKSHOP

**LINCOLN**

**DECEMBER 2, 2025**

The Lincoln Marriott Cornhusker Hotel

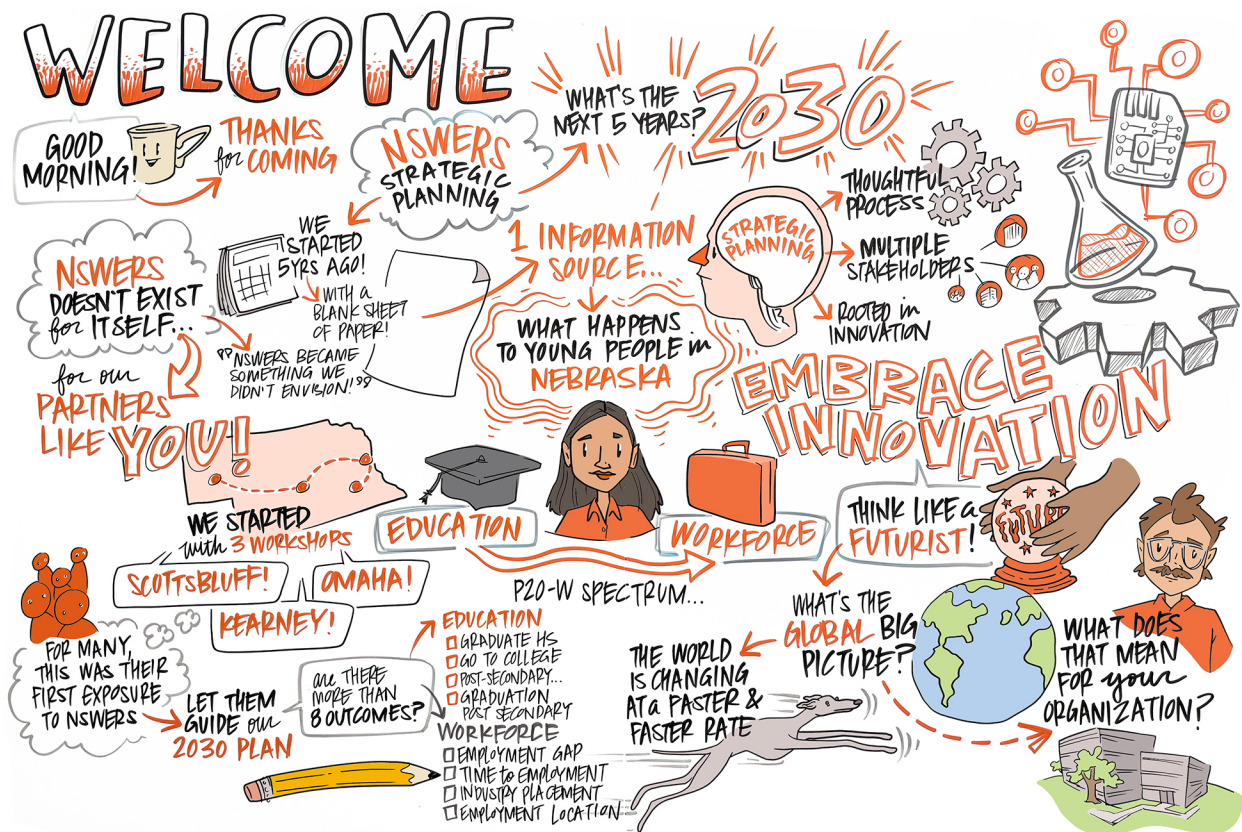
333 S 13th St

Lincoln, NE 68508

# PURPOSE

Following the November 2025 community engagement workshops held in Scottsbluff, Kearney, and Omaha, NSWERS convened a strategic planning workshop in Lincoln with members of the NSWERS Executive Council, partner organizations, philanthropic supporters, and NSWERS staff. This session was intentionally designed to build upon what was heard across the state by synthesizing themes, exploring future uncertainty, and identifying implications for NSWERS' role heading toward 2030.

While the November workshops centered on regional perspectives and lived experiences, the December workshop focused on system-level thinking. Participants examined how demographic, technological, economic, and social forces could interact over time and what those dynamics may mean for Nebraska's education and workforce systems. The session emphasized scenario-based thinking, policy preparedness, and the role of data in navigating uncertainty.



# KEY DRIVING FORCES

Through facilitated discussion and affinity mapping, participants identified a set of major driving forces expected to shape Nebraska's future. These forces reflect both opportunities and risks and were frequently referenced throughout the day's scenario and strategy discussions.

## MAJOR DRIVING FORCES INCLUDED:

- **Population Change:** Declining birth rates, aging populations, and migration patterns affecting workforce supply.
- **Technology and Artificial Intelligence:** Rapid adoption with implications for jobs, skills, productivity, and education delivery.
- **Education-Workforce Alignment:** The pace at which education systems adapt to changing labor market needs.
- **Trust in Institutions and Information:** Public confidence in education systems, data, and governance.
- **Talent Attraction and Retention:** Nebraska's ability to retain graduates and attract new residents.
- **Resource Constraints:** Fiscal pressures on public systems and the need to demonstrate return on investment.
- **Pace of Change:** Increasing speed and unpredictability of economic and social shifts.
- **Availability and Use of Data:** Access to timely, integrated, and trusted information for decision making.

Participants emphasized that the significance of these forces lies not only in their impact, but also in their uncertainty—reinforcing the importance of preparedness rather than prediction.





# EXPLORING POSSIBLE FUTURES

Participants worked in teams to explore a range of plausible future scenarios shaped by combinations of the driving forces. Each scenario examined contrasting outcomes—both favorable and unfavorable—to highlight how different choices and external conditions could influence Nebraska’s long-term trajectory.

Across the scenarios, several consistent insights emerged. Participants noted that no single future is inevitable and that policy decisions, investments, and institutional

responsiveness play a critical role in shaping outcomes. Scenarios underscored risks such as talent loss, misalignment between education and workforce needs, and erosion of public trust, as well as opportunities related to innovation, collaboration, and strategic investment.

Importantly, the exercise reinforced a shared conclusion: navigating uncertainty requires reliable, integrated data that helps leaders understand trade offs, evaluate policy impacts, and adjust course over time.

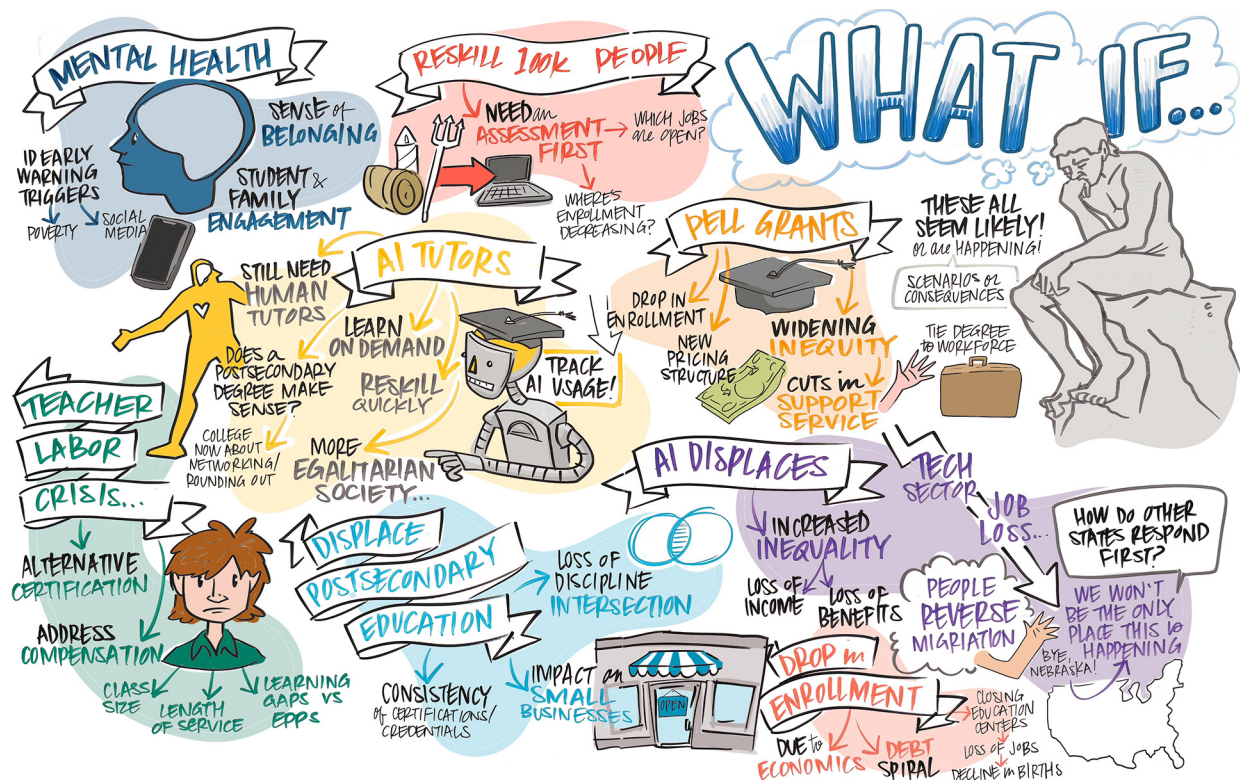




# WHAT IF'S AND EARLY WARNING SIGNS

The workshop also challenged participants to consider a set of “What If” questions designed to surface high-impact risks and opportunities facing Nebraska within the next three to five years. Topics included workforce displacement due to automation, changes to federal financial aid, teacher labor shortages, mental health challenges, and the expansion of alternative credentials.

Rather than focusing solely on outcomes, participants were asked to identify early warning signals that could indicate whether these situations are emerging. This exercise highlighted the value of tracking timely indicators and reinforced expectations that NSWERS play a role in helping leaders monitor trends before they become crises.



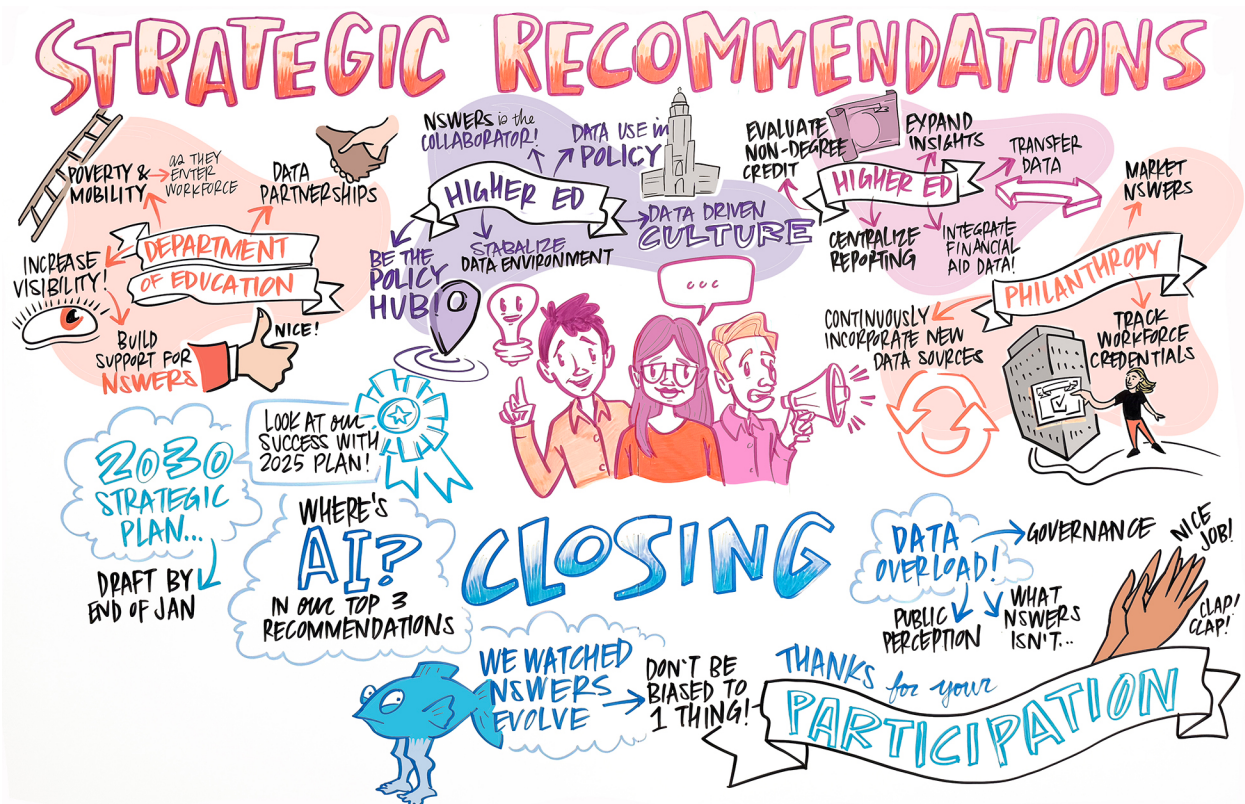
# STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Across discussions, participants articulated a clear set of expectations for NSWERS' future role. These included:

- Providing trusted, neutral data to inform policy and investment decisions.
- Expanding integration of broader education, workforce, and related data sources.
- Improving access to and communication of insights for policymakers and practitioners.

- Supporting evaluation and learning across programs and initiatives.
- Helping Nebraska anticipate and prepare for uncertainty, not simply describe past outcomes.

These expectations will directly inform the development of NSWERS' 2030 Strategic Plan.





## **PART III:**

# SYNTHESIS ACROSS ALL ENGAGEMENTS

# WHAT WE HEARD ACROSS NEBRASKA

## SHARED THEMES ACROSS COMMUNITY AND PARTNER ENGAGEMENTS

When viewed together, the November community workshops and the December Partners and Key Stakeholders session revealed strong alignment around several core themes. Participants across all settings emphasized the need for stronger education-to-workforce alignment, data-informed decision making, and coordinated action across institutions and regions. Concerns about population trends, workforce shortages, and talent retention were echoed consistently, as was recognition of the growing influence of technology and artificial intelligence.

Equally important was a shared call for trusted, neutral information to support long-term planning. Participants expressed a desire for data that goes beyond compliance reporting to help leaders understand system dynamics, evaluate policy choices, and prepare for future challenges.

## DIFFERENCES IN PERSPECTIVE—AND WHY THEY MATTER

While themes were consistent, the engagement formats surfaced different but complementary perspectives. Community workshops highlighted regional realities, lived experiences, and local priorities. The December workshop emphasized system-level risks, policy trade offs, and future uncertainty.

Together, these perspectives provide a more complete understanding of Nebraska's education and workforce landscape. Community input grounded the conversation in place, while partner and board engagement elevated the discussion toward statewide strategy and preparedness.





## IMPLICATIONS FOR NSWERS' 2030 STRATEGIC PLAN

Taken together, the engagement process signaled a clear shift in expectations for NSWERS. Stakeholders affirmed the importance of NSWERS' foundational work and expressed strong support for a next phase focused on use, impact, and preparedness.

The insights gathered across Nebraska will directly shape the strategic priorities being crafted for the NSWERS 2030 Strategic Plan, including an emphasis on evidence-based decision making, integrated data systems, partner capacity building, workforce insight, and readiness for technological and social change.



## **FROM ENGAGEMENT TO ACTION**

NSWERS is deeply grateful to the hundreds of Nebraskans who participated in these engagement efforts. Their insights, questions, and aspirations will form the foundation of the 2030 Strategic Plan and continue to guide NSWERS' work in service of learners, workers, employers, and communities across the state.

