

What do Communities Think About Globalization?

June, 2004



**Results of
Community
Forums**

southern growth policies board

What are the best choices for our communities in responding to the challenges and opportunities of globalization? To help answer this question, the Southern Growth Policies Board developed a community discussion guide, entitled *Globally Positioning the South: Making Choices for Your Community*. The goal of the guidebook was not to suggest a single correct path for all communities, but to encourage communities to hold public forums in which to explore many pathways to the future, each with its own trade-offs and consequences.

To spur conversation, deliberation, and action, three possible approaches were outlined in the *Globally Positioning the South* guidebook. Each of these represented different viewpoints that citizens might have about future directions for their community. These options and the guide itself were intended to serve as the beginning points for a community's discussion about what is important as it pursues sound, informed decisions about its future.

Approach 1: Focus on Strengthening the Workforce

In this view, strengthening the workforce is the best approach to securing our future in the global economy. We can't stop all job loss, but we can recover faster. Jobs will follow skills, so we need to make sure that everyone is upwardly mobile. This approach calls for boosting college attendance and completion, promoting training of current workers, beginning career awareness and counseling in the early grades, and internationalizing the school curricula, including putting more emphasis on foreign language training.

Approach 2: Focus on Strengthening Businesses

Losing jobs to trade and technology requires no effort, but gaining jobs does. Supporters of this view argue that we should use international trade to support business viability, in turn creating plentiful, good jobs. Strategies would focus on giving businesses access to a steady stream of useful information about global markets and new technologies and providing them with assistance until they gain experience.

Approach 3: Focus on Strengthening Civic Relationships

Supporters of this approach see overseas relationships, foreign investors and visitors, immigrants, and exporters as untapped assets in the community. They call for strategies that build on the market connections and expert knowledge of these international stakeholders. They say that our best approach for the future is to tap into these resources by convening the community's international stakeholders to plan strategically for the future, nurturing overseas relationships, and better integrating immigrants into community life.

To date, more than 500 people have participated in *Globally Positioning the South* forums in 25 communities across the South. As noted below, the forums have drawn people from a variety of perspectives.

Participants have ranged from students to seniors. Although the largest group of participants has been in the 50-64 age category, a special effort has been made to include the voices of young people. This included the convening of a Youth Summit in Oklahoma City, in partnership with Leadership Oklahoma.

- A mix of occupations has been represented, including government, business, education, and non-profits.
- Forums have tended to attract a highly educated population, with nearly two-thirds of participants holding at least a college degree.
- Participants have been divided fairly equally between urban, rural, and suburban communities.
- Many participants have had personal exposure to other countries and cultures. Over half have a current passport, and more than three-quarters have visited at least one country outside the U.S. at some point during their lifetime. Taken as a whole, participants have traveled to nearly 100 countries – from Iceland to India to the Ivory Coast.

Forum Findings

Although we heard a great variety of discussion from the participants, five major themes emerged from the forums.

- 1) Communities need to start by raising public awareness of issues and facts related to globalization;
- 2) Education is key to changing attitudes and preparing the workforce for a global future;
- 3) The global economy offers opportunities for job creation – not just job loss;
- 4) Strike a balance between expecting immigrants conform to “mainstream” culture and making efforts to identify their unique skills and talents; and
- 5) We must act now.

Each of these themes is explored in greater detail below.

Get the Facts Across

“One of the greatest threats seen by the group was a lack of public understanding regarding the costs and benefits of international trade... This means the debate is characterized more by emotion than by rational thought.”

— Report on a forum in Charleston, West Virginia

“Attitude remains the number one issue and obstacle to globalization and economic security and progress,” said a participant in Nashville, Tennessee, voicing perhaps the strongest message that emerged from forums across the region. Participants in nearly every forum expressed the need to raise citizens’ awareness of issues – and especially facts – related to globalization. “I honestly have not given much thought to how we, as the South, are affected by globalization, or what actions we should take,” said one participant in Oklahoma City. “This is the first time I have even thought about it,” added another participant in the same forum. “I knew it was important, but didn’t know how important,” echoed a participant in Pocahontas, Arkansas.

Many more were concerned, not that citizens had no interest in the topic, but that they held strong opinions based on inaccurate, or incomplete, information. “People concentrate too much on the negative effects rather than the good,” said a participant in Oklahoma City. Likewise, participants in San Juan, Puerto Rico expressed concern about what they perceived to be an emphasis on the risks or negative aspects of globalization. Participants in Charleston, West Virginia commented that “widespread ignorance is a barrier to creating public policy that could address the issues. On occasion this lack of understanding results in hostility that creates a negative image for West Virginia and retards foreign investment in the state.” A participant in Montgomery, Alabama agreed that cultivating citizen support was critical to enabling political leaders to “generate the dollars and the jobs” available through international trade.

Unrealistic beliefs that things would “return to normal” – if only the federal government would restrict imports – were seen as an obstacle to forward movement in many communities. As a woman in Raleigh, North Carolina pointed out, many workers in rural areas think that a new textile plant will come in and bring back jobs – they don’t realize or accept that the economy has changed and there is no turning back. “Globalization is coming whether we like it or not,” said a participant in Huntsville, Alabama. “We must help change those attitudes [of resistance].” “It is going to happen whether we want it to or not, so we may as well prepare to help in whatever way we can” echoed a participant in Knoxville, Tennessee.

The media was seen as a key culprit in presenting a one-sided story on globalization. Participants in Huntsville, Alabama had an extended conversation about what they viewed as “negative press,” noting that it resulted in widespread misperceptions about the impact of globalization. “Globalization has become a negative or dirty word,” emphasized one participant. Tellingly, many participants changed their personal viewpoints about globalization after hearing a more balanced review of the issues at their forum. “Learning some more facts helps me understand the importance of exporting rather than hearing some slanted news reports,” commented a participant in Meridian, Mississippi. In fact, over half of all participants said that they were thinking differently about the issue after participating in their community’s forum.

Education is the Key

"Education is the number one issue!"

— Forum participant in Birmingham, Alabama

The importance of education was a common thread throughout many of the forum discussions. For one, participants saw a need to begin early in changing attitudes about globalization. "Opinions and beliefs take a long time to change," emphasized a woman in Raleigh, North Carolina. Participants in Huntsville, Alabama agreed on the need to start early, noting that many young, college-age adults already have a negative view of globalization. "Communicate global ideas to educators, even down to elementary levels, so teachers can begin to inform students and thus families on how they need to prepare for the future," suggested a participant in Oklahoma City.

For the most part, forum participants didn't think that schools were doing an adequate job of preparing young people to participate in the global economy. The high school and college students participating in a forum in Oklahoma City gave low marks to their schools when asked about offerings in foreign languages, geography, culture, and economics. The general consensus was that these topics were not covered at all until high school, and then not in much depth – especially in the area of global economics. Students in rural schools were seen to be at a particular disadvantage. "Urban schools at least offered classes where you heard about it," said one group of students. "Rural schools heard nothing." Participants in Knoxville, Tennessee expressed similar concerns about students on a vocational path. They noted that, while college bound students in the community were required to take some foreign language training, vocational students were not.

In a post-forum questionnaire, more than 96 percent of the region's forum participants agreed that all students should be required to take a foreign language in high school. Participants in Newton, Georgia advocated starting early, noting that children can often learn a foreign language more easily if they have early exposure. They felt that this type of training would also help to create a discipline in learning that would carry over to other academic areas.

Participants saw a need to strengthen other areas of the educational system, beyond an increased emphasis on global culture and economics. "Before we spend too much time and money emphasizing foreign language skills, we need to help our children master the English language," emphasized a group in Birmingham, Alabama. Participants in Fort Smith, Arkansas expressed a need to develop entrepreneurial skills as early as elementary school, and to instill a strong work ethic at an early age. Participants in Atlanta and Raleigh also called for more emphasis on creativity and entrepreneurship. "Improved basic education in math, communications and science at the elementary and secondary level is seen as the most important single step to be taken," said participants in Charleston, West Virginia.

Forum participants also discussed the issue of re-training for workers who had suffered trade-related job losses. Just as important as reaching laid-off workers, but often more difficult, said a participant in Raleigh, is reaching vulnerable workers before a crisis hits. "How do we persuade someone who currently has a job in a vulnerable industry to get ready for change?" Forum participants saw a need to engage business owners in this task.

Globalization Offers Job Opportunities – Not Just Job Losses

"We need to get past the negative impression caused by job losses overseas."

—Report from a forum in Lexington, Kentucky

A high school student from Seminole, Oklahoma shared a story about one of his best friends, whose single mother recently lost her job when Wrangler Jeans moved much of its production to Mexico. "Now they don't even have a home," he said, explaining how the family had been forced to move in with the grandmother after their sole source of income was lost. "His mother had worked for Wrangler her whole life," he explained, adding that this was true for many of the adults in the community.

Similar stories were told in forums throughout the region. In Fort Smith, Arkansas, appliance-maker Whirlpool – the area's largest manufacturing company – had announced that it would soon be moving production to Mexico. In Sumter, South Carolina, the Robert Bosch Corporation had announced that it would be closing its automotive brake manufacturing plant by the end of 2006, again moving jobs to Mexico. "The impact on West Virginia by foreign competition has been great," added those participating in a forum in Charleston. "Thousands of manufacturing jobs have been lost as steel, chemical and other manufacturing plants have relocated overseas." Manufacturing job losses were not the only job-related concern mentioned in the regional forums. In fact, the loss of white-collar jobs was a particular concern to participants in Oklahoma City.

Some of the concern over job losses was tempered by optimism that the region's states and communities could rebound if they developed clear strategies to take advantage of global opportunities. As one participant in Charleston, West Virginia observed, the situation "doesn't seem as hopeless as earlier perceived." Many forum participants suggested a focus on developing the export potential of existing businesses. "Exporting seems to be the only way Mississippi can compete," commented a participant in Greenwood, Mississippi. Another participant there agreed that we needed to "take exporting more seriously," suggesting a "plan to promote more existing companies." Participants in Nashville, Raleigh, St. Louis, and other locales felt that there was a need to make businesses more aware of export opportunities. Those in Fort Smith, Arkansas suggested a training program to teach local entrepreneurs how to export their goods and services to other countries. Participants in Bullitt County, Kentucky saw a need to reach start-up companies in the concept phase to get them thinking "bigger" and "more globally."

Participants also saw an opportunity to build on communities' unique strengths and resources, pointing to efforts such as Handmade in America's work to promote traditional crafts in western North Carolina. "We need to recognize the strengths of the region and find ways to capitalize on them," emphasized a participant in Athens, Georgia. A class of graduate students in Birmingham, Alabama talked about the benefits of attracting foreign businesses to the state.

The need to focus on increasing the competitiveness of existing businesses also emerged as a theme in many discussions. Technology was seen as playing a major role. “Some politicians decry the loss of manufacturing jobs, but ignore the fact that we have to be more competitive (e.g. use of robots) to compete,” wrote an Oklahoma City participant in a post-forum questionnaire. “We can’t ‘out cheap’ the world,” emphasized another participant. “We must be smarter and faster!” Participants in Raleigh felt that we needed to do more to create a climate for innovation and to encourage businesses to constantly “reinvent” themselves through advanced technologies, customization, and branding. “Lifelong learning has to exist for businesses too,” emphasized one woman in the group.

Some expressed concern that their states or communities were headed in the wrong direction, with participants in Arkansas and Alabama pointing to cuts in state international economic development efforts due to budget shortfalls. Others called for economic development players – from departments of commerce to chambers of commerce – to re-think their roles in view of the changing economy. They called for less emphasis on industrial recruitment and more emphasis on connecting existing businesses and entrepreneurs to the resources they need to be competitive – from university research to global market opportunities. A participant in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee was troubled that “government is doing so little to help American companies to stay viable without having to move off-shore.”

There were mixed opinions about whether rural areas could benefit from global opportunities. “I know it’s good for a lot of a lot of urban towns, but not so good for rural areas,” said a student in Oklahoma. “Some rural areas seem to have no hope or way to tie into global economy,” added a participant in West Virginia. A participant in Summit, Mississippi pointed out that many manufacturing companies in rural areas are not locally controlled. “Decision makers at headquarters don’t see or don’t communicate global advantages or disadvantages to local management,” he said, adding that most decisions were made away from the rural community. Others, such as a woman in Raleigh, North Carolina, expressed optimism that technology and globalization would open more opportunities for rural areas – so long as rural areas had access to advanced telecommunications infrastructure.

Balance Expectations About Immigrants

“Instead of viewing many immigrants as burdens, we should utilize their skills and connections to improve business.”

— Forum Participant in Oklahoma City

Participants had varied views on the topic of immigration. Concern about the demands placed on social services by Latino newcomers was expressed in Athens, Georgia. A participant in St. Louis, Missouri voiced the opinion that immigrants needed to conform more to our culture. “If I became an immigrant to France, I would speak French,” he commented. “I do not like the immigrants coming and not knowing our main language,” an Oklahoma City participant agreed.

Several participants in Nashville saw immigrants as “good hard workers,” noting that they filled jobs that would otherwise go unfilled. “Our economy would collapse without them,”

said one participant. On the other hand, a participant in Atlanta commented that “Latinos have more skills than our dropouts and are taking jobs from our people.”

The moderator in Fort Smith, Arkansas reported that his group had a lively discussion about the delicate balance between expecting immigrants to “conform” to English and local customs, versus long-time residents respecting and learning about the cultures of their new neighbors. In the end, the group came to a consensus that they “must not only address multicultural issues, but...must also embrace the opportunities a diverse ethnic culture brings to our community.”

Participants identified a number of challenges related to integrating newcomers into the community. A participant in Huntsville pointed out that many newcomers seemed to feel few ties to the community, as illustrated by the fact that many sent their money back to their home country rather than spending or investing it in the community. A participant in Atlanta commented that language and cultural barriers were difficult to overcome, in part because immigrants tended to stay to themselves and were not visible in the community.

A number of suggestions were made regarding ways of better integrating newcomers into community life. Participants in Fort Smith suggested identifying immigrant leaders and hearing their ideas, while also doing outreach through schools, churches, and the community’s new multi-cultural center. A high school student in Oklahoma City suggested getting immigrants involved in community service activities as a means of increasing their connections to the community, while also giving them an opportunity to improve their English language skills. She pointed out that her mother was often misperceived as being uneducated when she first arrived in the U.S., due to her lack of knowledge of English. In fact, she had been trained as an accountant in Venezuela and had much to offer the community.

Along those same lines, participants in a number of forums saw an opportunity for Southern communities to take better economic advantage of the skills and connections of new immigrants. “We need to utilize the immigrant population as a resource for trade,” emphasized a participant in Nashville. At the Montgomery, Alabama forum, a representative from Troy State University talked about their efforts to capitalize on the connections of foreign students. “They’re at an exciting time in their lives,” she said, noting that getting a degree from an American university was a dream come true for many of them. “This is a time where they’re open to dialogue and meeting people,” she added. She went on to describe how the university had arranged for foreign students to learn more about economic development and state government in Alabama, including visits with economic development officials and tours of the state capital. As evidence of the potential in this approach, she reported that one student from Taiwan, who already had offices in 12 different countries, was looking at creating a new office near the port in Alabama – rather than New York, as he had originally planned.

Act Now!

"We must act now!"

— Forum participant in Charleston, West Virginia

Participants in forums throughout the region saw a sense of urgency in addressing issues related to globalization. "I have a better understanding of the urgency involved," said a participant in Athens, Georgia. "It is important now," emphasized a participant in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

Participants in many forums saw the need to pursue elements of all three approaches – strengthening the workforce, businesses, and civic relationships – in planning for their community's future in the global economy. In Montgomery, Alabama, for example, participants felt that job training was useless unless there was also job development. "Even if people are re-trained, there aren't jobs for them," they said.

Several forums resulted in specific recommendations for community action. In Huntsville, Alabama, for example, recommendations included bringing together existing international organizations in the community to develop a strategic plan related to globalization, adding a global component to the community's leadership program, holding a forum on global issues for elected officials in the region, and expanding the community's capacity to help small firms develop international business.

In addition to seeing the importance of community action, many forum participants expressed a desire to make more personal commitments to action. Participants in Nashville, Knoxville, and Jackson, Tennessee, for example, made commitments to, "Spend more time with immigrants in our community," "Reach out to immigrants more," and "Be more responsive and sensitive to other ethnic groups." As a participant in Oklahoma City concluded, "This forum has opened my mind and got my wheels turning."

Forum Locations

Birmingham, AL
Huntsville, AL (3)
Montgomery, AL
Fort Smith, AR
Pocahontas, AR
Athens, GA
Atlanta, GA
Newton, GA
Bullitt County, KY
Lexington, KY
St. Louis, MO
Greenwood, MS
Meridian, MS
Summit, MS
Raleigh, NC
Oklahoma City, OK (3)
San Juan, PR (2)
Barnwell, SC
Charleston, SC
Sumter, SC
Jackson, TN
Knoxville, TN
Lawrenceburg, TN
Nashville, TN
Charleston, WV