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## **Community is Key at The Innovation Station**

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The importance of community has been clear to me since I was young. I grew up in a small town and witnessed the power of community in situations as frivolous as high school homecoming or as serious as devastating floods. Communities thrive when they come together based on a shared challenge, and when I joined the U.S. Department of State last fall, I was struck by how many community challenges here in the United States are shared by other communities around the world.

At the State Department, I was being introduced to communities I never knew existed, yet somehow they all brought to life a favorite proverb of mine: “Necessity is the mother of invention.” One of the most effective ways to address challenges is to tap into the innovative spirit of the community members directly affected. So, if challenges are shared by communities in different locations, that

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means there are thousands of innovators around the world developing solutions to each other's problems without even knowing it.

What if we could connect those communities to the innovators creating solutions? Not only would the innovators benefit from reaching new audiences, but the communities could overcome years- or decades-old challenges. In the process, these innovation-based relationships would effectively create new, global communities. This was the motivation for establishing "The Innovation Station," a platform for connecting communities around the world to turn their shared challenges into shared opportunities.

The first step was to launch a series of events that would make those innovator-community introductions. Recognizing the importance of subnational diplomacy, each event was inspired by a particular U.S. city, state, or region. We spent weeks getting to know each community through conversations with local citizens and identifying their recurring challenges. We then worked with local organizations, our U.S. Missions, and other collaborators to identify domestic and international innovators creating inspired solutions.

The Innovation Station convened three virtual community programs in the latter half of 2020. The events, inspired by the "Garden State," "Four Corners," and "Motor City," demonstrated a versatile framework that allowed us to tackle a broad range of challenges such as business development, education, mobility, rural development, water management, and more. What has been most exciting, however, has been The Innovation Station's ability to make connections between communities, innovators, and U.S. Missions in more than 20 countries and 30 U.S. states. The next round of community events is anticipated to begin in spring 2021.

One unexpected consequence of The Innovation Station's community programs was the realization that innovation is inextricably linked to storytelling. This became apparent during The Innovation Station's Four Corners event, which discussed challenges and opportunities in the creative industries. Our innovators explained how creators benefit from innovation (think of the technologies employed in film, for example), but they also made clear how innovations can benefit from creators (since storytelling can shape the public's perception of these innovations). And that is how the Creative Industry Lab was born.

The Creative Industry Lab is the latest initiative within The Innovation Station, seeking to institutionalize engagement with the Creative Industries of America and counterparts around the world to enhance the cultural-economic diplomacy opportunities they provide. To learn more, check out the fireside chat below. The initiative was informed by conversations with film offices, guilds, producers, and other industry organizations. As a result of these conversations, projects have been designed to increase access to the creative industries, share stories of global communities, and promote exhibition of creative work. These projects are currently in various stages of development.

[Catalyst Live Chat Video \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZzaw47MIAE&feature=youtu.be&ab\\_channel=CatalystStorieroad\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZzaw47MIAE&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=CatalystStorieroad)

One of these projects, described in the video above, involves a new collaboration with Catalyst, a nonprofit organization that helps episodic content creators enter the marketplace. The Creative Industry Lab and Catalyst have been working together to plan a sister cities-inspired program that will link creators in the United States and around the world while helping them find ways to develop their projects. Cultural affairs and public diplomacy officers at many U.S. Missions have been key collaborators, and participating countries and U.S. regional hubs will be announced in early 2021.

Over the past few months, I believe that we, too, have demonstrated that necessity is the mother of invention. Content creators need access to global partners to tell their stories, so we invented a collaboration with Catalyst. The State Department needs to work with the creative industries to maximize cultural-economic potential, so we invented the Creative Industry Lab. And communities need access to the innovators creating solutions to their challenges, so we invented The Innovation Station.

Community is key, and at The Innovation Station, we will be celebrating community invention—and innovation—for many years to come.

Image: PIRO4D, Pixabay.

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- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZzaw47MIAE&feature=youtu.be&ab\\_channel=CatalystStorieroad](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZzaw47MIAE&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=CatalystStorieroad)