



Engaged Journalism: Assessing the Information Needs of Oakridge

Becca Weinberg

Report Author • School of Journalism and Communication

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OAKRIDGE

Andrew DeVigal

Professor of Practice • School of Journalism and Communication

JCOM 463/563: ENGAGED JOURNALISM | SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATION



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Angelica Mountainspring-Wood, Oakridge High School

Cailey Sokolowski, Oakridge High School

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Contents

4	About SCI
4	About SCYP
5	About City of Oakridge
7	Course Participants
7	Course Description
8	Executive Summary
9	Introduction
10	Methodology
13	The Numbers
23	Recommendations
26	Conclusion
27	References

About SCI

The Sustainable Cities Institute (SCI) is an applied think tank focusing on sustainability and cities through applied research, teaching, and community partnerships. We work across disciplines that match the complexity of cities to address sustainability challenges, from regional planning to building design and from enhancing engagement of diverse communities to understanding the impacts on municipal budgets from disruptive technologies and many issues in between.

SCI focuses on sustainability-based research and teaching opportunities through two primary efforts:

1. Our Sustainable City Year Program (SCYP), a massively scaled university-community partnership program that matches the resources of the University with one Oregon community each year to help advance that community's sustainability goals; and

2. Our Urbanism Next Center, which focuses on how autonomous vehicles, e-commerce, and the sharing economy will impact the form and function of cities.

In all cases, we share our expertise and experiences with scholars, policymakers, community leaders, and project partners. We further extend our impact via an annual Expert-in-Residence Program, SCI China visiting scholars program, study abroad course on redesigning cities for people on bicycle, and through our co-leadership of the Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities Network (EPIC-N), which is transferring SCYP to universities and communities across the globe. Our work connects student passion, faculty experience, and community needs to produce innovative, tangible solutions for the creation of a sustainable society.

About SCYP

The Sustainable City Year Program (SCYP) is a yearlong partnership between SCI and a partner in Oregon, in which students and faculty in courses from across the university collaborate with a public entity on sustainability and livability projects. SCYP faculty and students work in collaboration with staff from the partner agency through a variety of studio projects and service-learning courses to provide students with real-world projects to investigate. Students bring energy, enthusiasm, and innovative approaches

to difficult, persistent problems. SCYP's primary value derives from collaborations that result in on-the-ground impact and expanded conversations for a community ready to transition to a more sustainable and livable future.

Community partnerships are possible in part due to support from U.S. Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, as well as former Congressman Peter DeFazio, who secured federal funding for SCYP through Congressionally Directed Spending.

About City of Oakridge

The City of Oakridge, Oregon, is a vibrant community nestled in the foothills of the Western Cascade Mountains, with a population of approximately 3,500 residents within city limits (nearly 5,000 when including nearby Westfir and surrounding areas). Surrounded by the extensive Willamette National Forest, the city provides ample opportunities for activities such as hiking and mountain biking, with nearly 500 miles of trails and five rivers in its vicinity. Oakridge's elevation (1,200-1,700 ft.) results in a favorable climate, characterized by over 300 sunny days annually, while avoiding the fog of the valley and the heavy snowfalls of higher elevations.



Governed by a council-manager system since 1972, Oakridge residents benefit from a robust and supportive municipal administration. The City offers a comprehensive range of services, including street maintenance, water, wastewater, and park utilities, as well as police, fire, and emergency

medical services. Additional municipal services include library access, economic development, planning and zoning, and general administrative support. Funding for city operations is derived from property taxes, franchise fees, and other revenue sources, with special projects financed through grants and loans.

In the past decade, Oakridge has secured nearly \$11 million in grants and loans for community projects and maintains an annual budget of approximately \$10 million.

The citizens of Oakridge cherish their history and cultural heritage, celebrating it through a variety of events and activities throughout the year. The long-standing Tree Planting Festival pays homage to Oakridge's timber town roots, while the Concerts in the Park series offers free performances at the Banner Bank Amphitheater in Greenwaters Park. Additionally, Oakridge features four art galleries, three nearby hot springs, and is conveniently located just 25 miles from Willamette Pass Ski Resort. The Eugene-Springfield metropolitan area, approximately 35 miles away, further enriches the community's cultural

offerings with its vibrant arts scene, including music, theater, and access to the University of Oregon.

The City of Oakridge is committed to fostering a safe, livable, and sustainable environment for its residents while promoting economic development and community engagement. As part of its ongoing planning initiatives, Oakridge is exploring various strategies to enhance its sustainability and growth, ensuring that the community continues to thrive for generations to come. The partnership between the Sustainable City Year Program and the City of Oakridge is supported by local stakeholders, enabling University of Oregon students and faculty to collaborate on projects and provide recommendations to address city-identified challenges and opportunities.

About the Agora Journalism Center

The Agora Journalism Center at the School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC) is the University of Oregon's forum for the future of local news and civic health in Oregon and beyond. The center was formed in 2014 with the foundational belief that the health of democracy and journalism are inextricably linked. Since then, the center has been a critical champion for the idea that professional journalism must become more participatory and collaborative with the public if journalism is to meaningfully improve communities' information health and earn the public's trust in local news media.

Course Participants

JOURNALISM UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Allie Ivanoff

Andres Baisch

Anna Field

Bailey Meyers

Becca Weinberg

Bryan Del Fava

Claire Conger

Drew Blouin

Eli Bogatin

Georgia Tucker

Ian Proctor

James Cooper

Jess McComb

Jonathan Suni

Kendall Whiteside

Max Petkevicius

Olivia Tong

Saida Guzman

Course Description

JCOM 463/563: ENGAGED JOURNALISM

Engaged Journalism is a community-centered course designed to explore a more inclusive, responsive, and representative form of journalism. Shifting away from the traditional top-down approach, this course focuses on meeting communities' demonstratable needs through deep listening, collaboration, and reciprocal, non-extractive approach to reporting. It emphasizes building trust, understanding, and credibility with communities by producing relevant and beneficial news for their daily lives. This course addresses core journalism issues, like transparency and ensuring equitable representation.

Executive Summary

In early 2025, University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication students conducted an information needs assessment to better understand the local news and civic information flow of Oakridge. In partnership with the Sustainable City Year Program, Agora Journalism Center, and the City of Oakridge, students sought to understand how Oakridge's needs align with the broader scope of small-town news accessibility. The class co-created a survey based on the *Listening Post Collective Playbook*, which focuses on community-led, civic media projects. In addition, students spent significant time outside of the classroom within the Oakridge community through listening sessions, engagement with Oakridge High School classes, and in-person survey distribution. This project aimed to surface both the barriers to being informed and new ideas for building stronger connections throughout the area.

Based on the survey results, the Engaged Journalism class compiled the following observations about residents' passion for their community yet frustration with their fragmented local news environment:

- Residents rely heavily on Facebook and word of mouth to stay informed, while expressing deep displeasure with the bias, misinformation, and drama that often characterize those spaces.
- The Highway 58 Herald—one of the few dedicated local outlets—is seen by many as inconsistent in its coverage, too narrow in its perspectives, or lacking in trust.
- There is no single, go-to platform or publication that residents consistently trust for reliable, up-to-date civic information.
- Survey participants cited urgent needs for more frequent reporting, better coverage of community events, and a desire for professional, unbiased local journalism rooted in the lived realities of Oakridge residents.
- Physical third spaces like cafés, grocery stores, the library, and bulletin boards remain important sources for shared information—but access is uneven, and not all residents benefit equally.
- Civic hub collaboration to foster local partnerships

Oakridge residents desire a more inclusive and accessible civic infrastructure. When reliable information is limited to those who are digitally connected, socially networked, or already engaged, it deepens community divides. Not only does Oakridge need stronger coverage, but it would greatly benefit from a shared system of communication that is representative, trustworthy, and available to all.

Introduction

Access to timely, dependable, and relevant information is essential to civic life. For communities like Oakridge and many others across Oregon that are rural yet rapidly evolving, the ability to stay informed isn't just a matter of convenience; it's about connection, safety, and democratic participation.

In recent years, the local media landscape in Oakridge has grown increasingly thin. The longtime and only traditional newspaper, Dead Mountain Echo, officially closed in 2020. The nonprofit news organization Highway 58 Herald was founded a year later. With digital platforms now dominating, residents are left to navigate a challenging ecosystem of information shaped more by social media and word of mouth than by intentional, community-rooted reporting. In this context, understanding how people get their information, and what they're missing, has never been more urgent.

By distributing a survey focused on these news and information needs, Engaged Journalism students utilized the methods of local canvassing, school engagement, mail contact, and online promotion to understand how limited information flow affects news intake. The class received 109 responses for analysis, and dedicated significant class time synthesizing the data in order to provide recommendations to the community. The following questions were asked of Oakridge residents:

- How do they stay informed about their community?
- What barriers prevent them from accessing the information they need?

- Which sources and formats are most trusted—and why?
- What topics do residents feel are overlooked or misrepresented?
- What kind of local information ecosystem would best serve this community?

After learning about Oakridge's goals for news distribution yet limited resources to enact changes, students produced recommendations for residents to combat the challenges of small-town information flow using community-centered journalism practices. These recommendations centered around media literacy, community engagement, physical and digital distribution, and civic hub collaboration.

This report is a community-centered assessment of information access, equity, and opportunity intended to inform local decision-makers, journalists, civic groups, and residents alike. The findings that follow reflect not just what Oakridge is missing, but what it already values: clear, respectful, and inclusive communication that supports the health, vitality, and voice of its people.

Methodology

UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNITY

Students conducted an analysis of Oakridge's community to understand the significant places and people that would shape the class outreach survey. Students built foundational knowledge about Oakridge by mapping key community features, identifying stakeholders, and drafting initial survey questions to assess the news and information needs. Over the course of the survey development, Oakridge community partners involved in the town's news ecosystem provided feedback on which questions would generate informational responses. Students worked in groups to draft multiple different survey versions using the *Listening Post Collective Playbook* as a guide for the community-centered project. The Collective houses resources for civic media strategies, and the Playbook serves as a step-by-step process for addressing information gaps within community-centered journalism.

The students also participated in many interactive, in-class activities to visually display their thought processes surrounding recommendations. One of which, the 35 Cards activity, involved writing recommendations on note cards and trading with classmates while utilizing a ranking system. Each card was then placed on the chalkboard to initiate discussion on which topics should be further explored.

It is important to acknowledge that survey sampling methods cannot fully capture every perspective of a community, which can leave gaps in the collective identities and viewpoints. However, the students' ongoing collaboration with Oakridge community partners significantly improved the survey's quality by elevating as many different perspectives as possible.



FIG. 1

Students participating in class discussion surrounding recommendations for Oakridge.

Image Credit: Andrew DeVigal

SITE VISIT

Engaged Journalism students made two visits to the Oakridge community to hear from local stakeholders and distribute the survey. During the first trip, students presented to Oakridge High School's leadership class to gather data from a younger demographic and discuss the relevancy of the survey questions. Utilizing "Slido," a presentation tool that emphasizes audience interaction, high school students provided key perspectives and responses to the class that helped shape the final survey format.

Students returned to Oakridge later in the term to canvass local businesses, host a community listening session at the Oakridge Public Library, present to Oakridge High School's advisory class, and observe an Oakridge City Council meeting. Both visits provided the class with the opportunity to interact directly with residents. This was an important step to ensure that the eventual recommendations for Oakridge's news and information needs were relevant.

Course participants divided between local businesses to reach as many residents as possible during canvassing, while

using a clipboard with surveys to initiate discussions and complete the questions in an interactive way. The students who engaged with Oakridge High School's advisory class hosted a table during the school's lunch hour to further distribute the survey.

After holding the listening session at the Oakridge Public Library, students observed Oakridge's City Council meeting to continue notifying the community about their project and provide more context for Mayor Bryan Cutchen and the Oakridge City Council members. Through a presentation that included resources for the current news ecosystem and prompts for small group discussions, students engaged with residents to further understand how their recommendations could become more personal.

Students left the site visit with an enhanced understanding of Oakridge's news and information needs and deeper passion for collaboration with its residents to provide actionable recommendations. Their direct interaction with the community improved the survey's quality by elevating as many different perspectives as possible.



FIG. 2

Listening session presentation with students and Oakridge residents.

Image Credit: Megan Banks

The Numbers

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Students synthesized data from 109 survey responses into a variety of different categories. While this assessment aimed to hear from a broad cross-section of Oakridge residents, the data collected reflected the real-world challenges of outreach in a rural community. The survey was distributed largely online through local partners, and most successfully via Facebook-based community forums. It captured valuable insights but may not fully represent the entire demographic makeup of Oakridge.

Due to Facebook being a primary distribution channel, and one that skews towards older, more digitally active users, it's likely that the responses reflected those who are most connected to the forums and not necessarily groups who are disconnected from civic information. In this way, the data provides both a

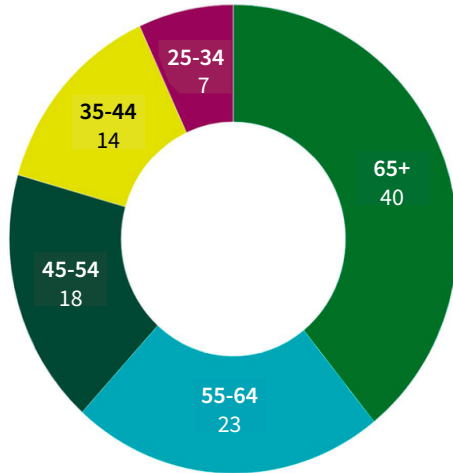
snapshot of the active civic conversation and a reminder of who might still be missing from it.

Age, Gender, and Ethnicity

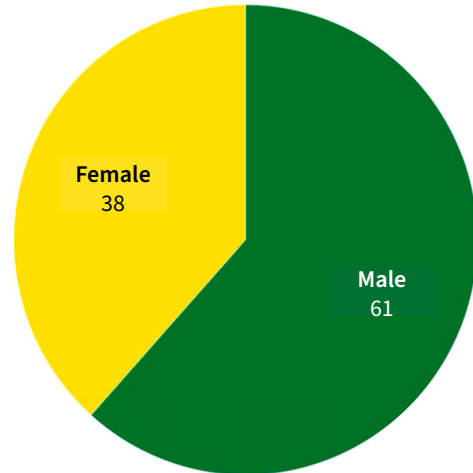
The distribution of survey participants by age and gender showed that the most popular age group was the 65+ range, with 40 responses, followed by the 55-64 range with 23 responses. Compared to Oakridge's Census data, which showed that 28.6% of all Oakridge residents are in the 65+ group, the class findings totaled 36%. Census data for the 55-64 range shows 15.3% compared to the 21% from the class survey. By gender, there were 61 male responses and 38 female responses.

By ethnicity, 94% of responses selected White, with one response for Black or African American, two responses for American Indian/Alaskan Native, and three responses for "I prefer not to say."

Age



Gender



Ethnicity



FIG. 3

Age, gender, and ethnicity survey results.

Political Party

Of the 79 responses to this question, 35 selected Democrat, 19 selected Republican, 15 selected Independent Party, and 10 preferred not to select a political party. Broken down by age, 61% of the 65+ range selected Democrat,

while the 55-64 range was split mostly between Republican and Independent Party with 36% each. The 45-54 range had more responses for Democrat with 52%, with both the 35-44 and 25-34 ranges split evenly between Democrat and Republican.

Party Registration

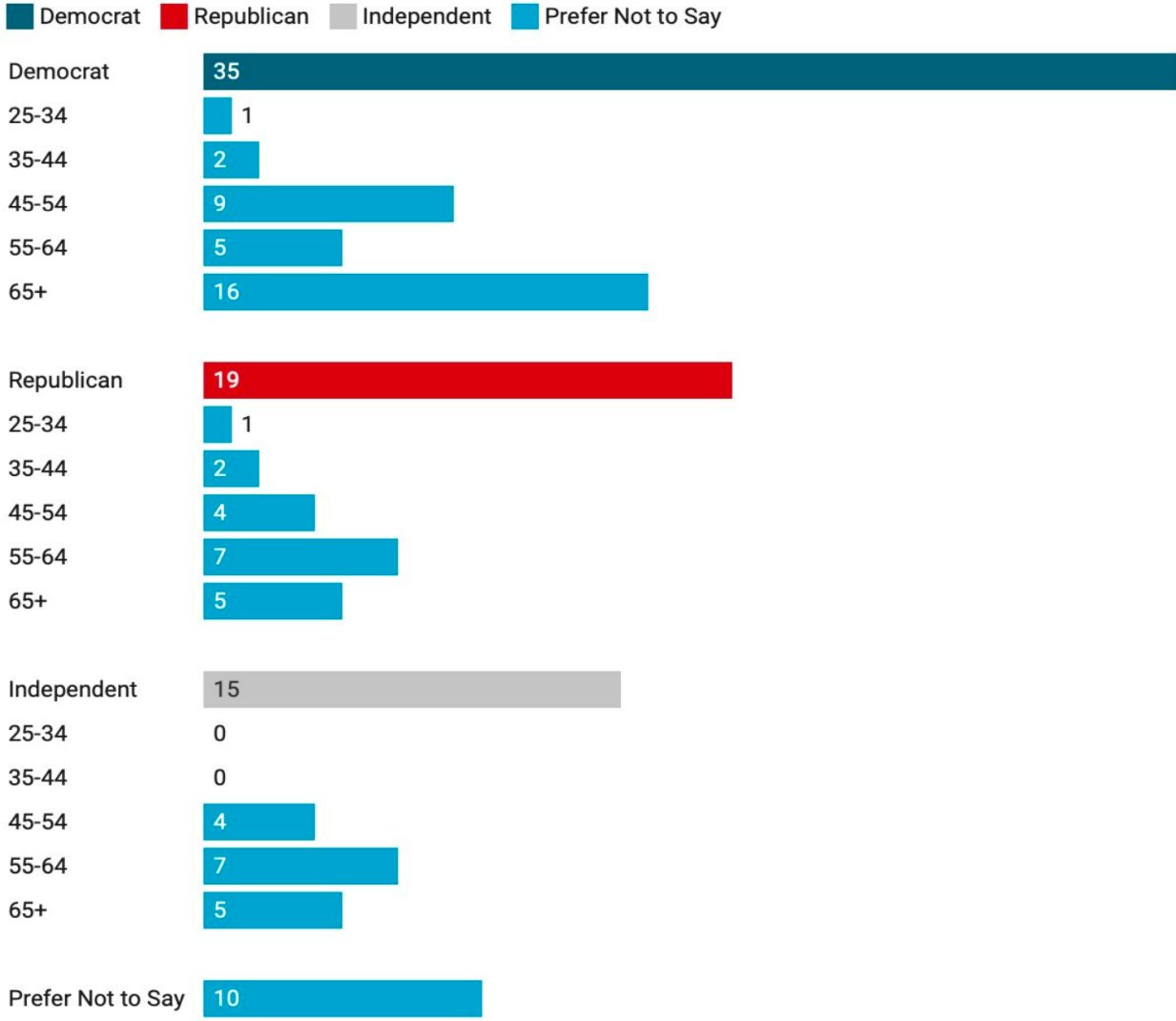


FIG. 4
Political party survey results.

Employment Status

Of the 96 responses to this question, 36 selected retired, 27 selected full-time, 15 selected business owner or self-employed, 12 selected part time, and six

selected “other.” The survey responses of employed residents equated to 56%, compared to Oakridge’s employment rate of 38.7%.

Employment Status

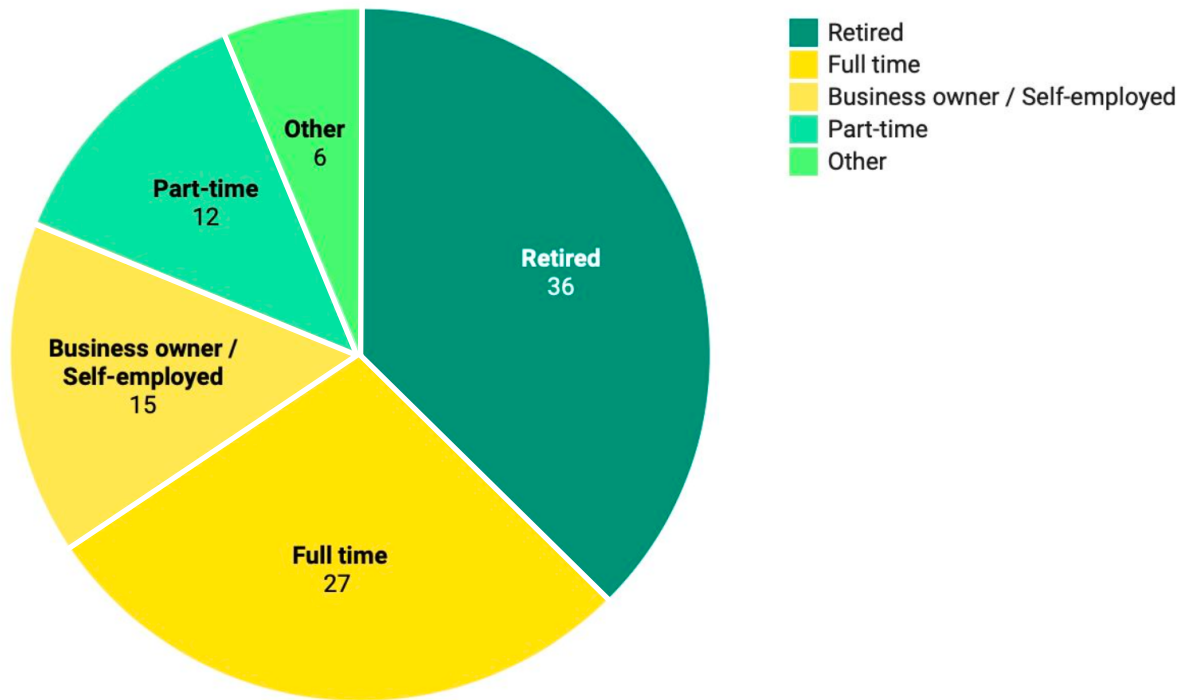
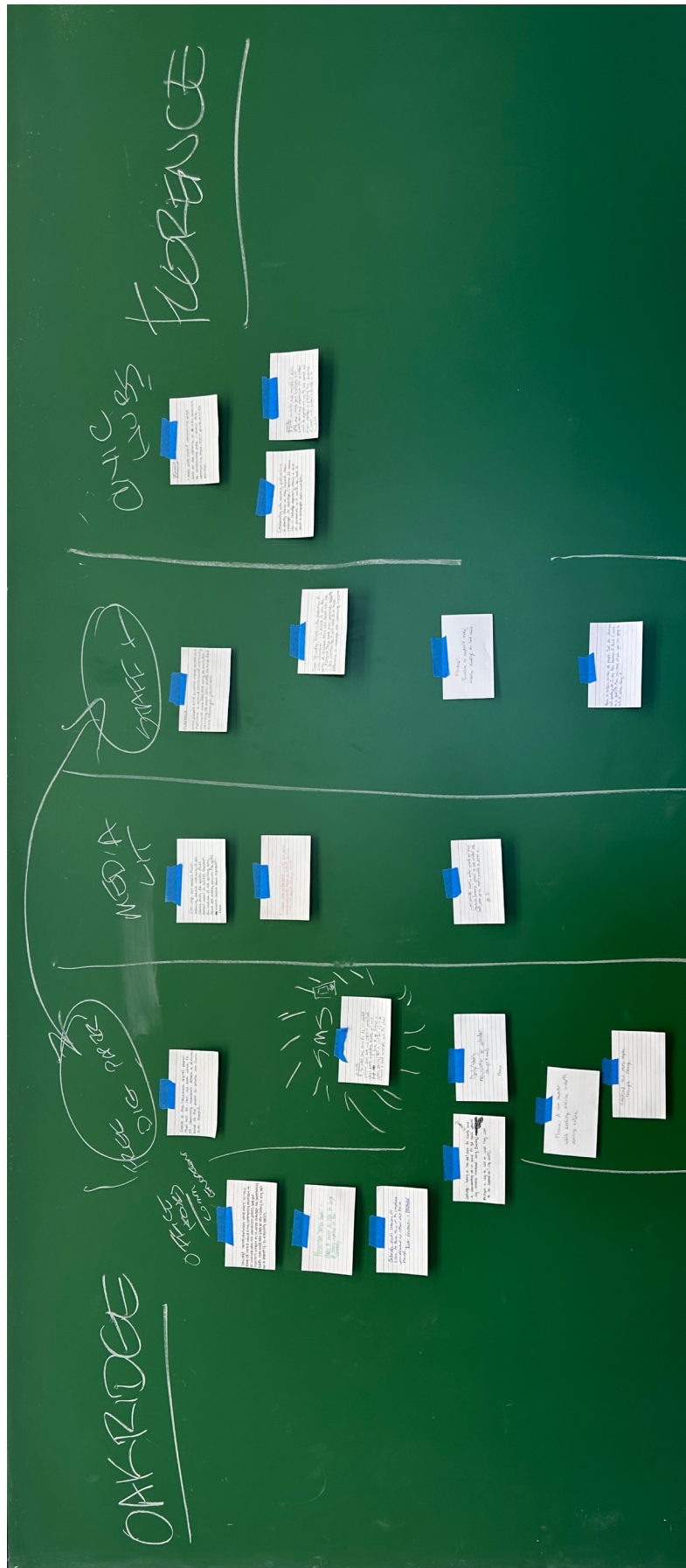


FIG. 5
Employment status survey results.

FIG. 6

Engaged Journalism students using the 35 Cards activity to analyze common themes.

Image Credit: Andrew DeVigal



NEWS ACCESSIBILITY: GAPS AND BARRIERS

A key survey question asked where residents look first to access news and information about current events in the Oakridge area. One of the strongest themes to emerge was the desire to stay informed yet difficulty in accessing timely, relevant, and trusted local information.

Facebook was overwhelmingly selected as the top place that residents look at first, specifically the Oakridge Chat Forum, with 66 total responses (60%). The next most popular option selected was word of mouth with 24 total responses (22%), in reference to discussions with family, friends, neighbors, and local businesses. The third choice was bulletin boards with 21 total responses (19%). This refers to the various boards posted around Oakridge at local businesses, schools, city hall, and the library.

“Most people look to Facebook for up-to-date info,” said a full-time worker in the 25-34 age range. “The Oakridge Chat Forum has great info, but it is a lot and sometimes things are missing because there are so many posts.”

It’s also important to address the challenges of accessing news and information in the Oakridge community. The top selection for this question was that news feels biased, untrustworthy, or unreliable with 29 total responses (26%). The second most common responses were both selected at 19% and expressed that local news doesn’t represent the community and is behind a paywall or too expensive.

Facebook groups were just as often criticized as they were used, with participants describing them as unmoderated, driven by personal agendas, and prone to misinformation. The Highway 58 Herald was similarly double-edged. While it’s one of the only local, written news sources, respondents noted frustrations with its limited reporting capacity, perceived bias, inconsistent updates, and prohibitive subscription cost- a significant barrier in a community with a low median income.

“Getting reliable news in Oakridge is a read-between-the-lines situation,” a local business owner in the 35-44 age range said. “The Facebook groups do not include all members of the community, and the Herald unfortunately intersperses vitriolic editorials into otherwise decent reporting, greatly reducing its credibility and broad appeal.”

At the time of this assessment, however, the Herald was transitioning away from a paywall model and instead inviting donations and sponsorships to support its journalism. This shift may increase accessibility and reshape how residents engage with the outlet going forward.

Rather than relying on a single trusted outlet, residents described a challenging experience of understanding local happenings. They rely on a mix of Facebook posts, word-of-mouth conversations, sporadic updates from the city’s website, and local radio or regional newspapers. Several barriers stood out in the responses, including digital limitations, cost, and awareness of where to look or who to trust.

There is nowhere with reliable information. We need a single source for emergency updates—not Facebook,” said a retired executive assistant in the 65+ age range.

This information ecosystem reveals both the urgency and opportunity to rethink how information circulates in Oakridge, and how that flow can be made more consistent, inclusive, and credible.

Over the past week, where was the first place you looked for news and information about what’s happening around the Oakridge area?

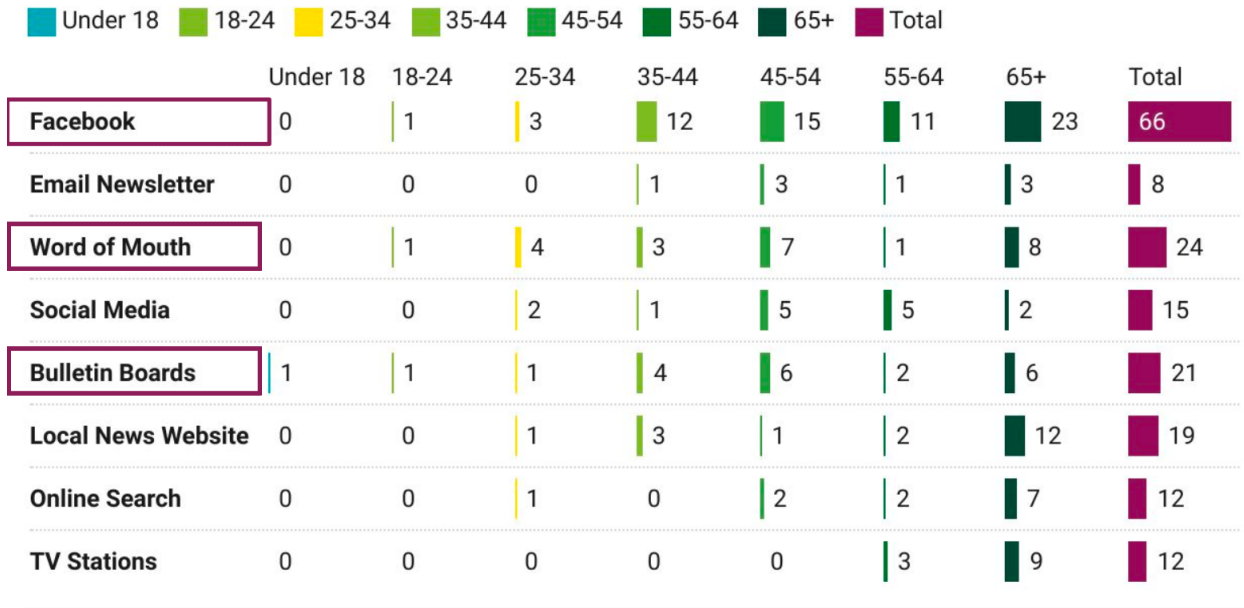


FIG. 7
Survey results of where residents look first for news and information.

What are your biggest challenges in getting news and information about your community?

■ N/A
 ■ Under 18
 ■ 18-24
 ■ 25-34
 ■ 35-44
 ■ 45-54
 ■ 55-64
 ■ 65+
 ■ Total

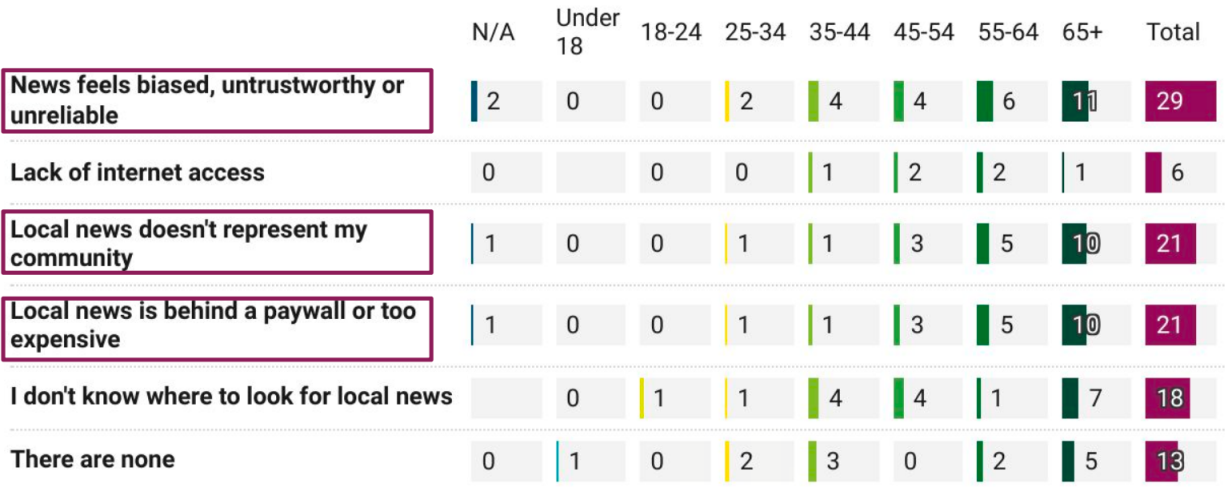


FIG. 8

Survey results of the biggest challenges in accessing news and information.

THIRD SPACES

While much of Oakridge’s information flow happens digitally, the community continues to rely on “third spaces” to connect, share news, and stay informed.

These are social gathering hubs that are neither a person’s home nor place of work, but serve as a different space where residents can foster casual interaction, civic dialogue, and social trust.

Coffee shops and cafés, such as Sweetvine, were the most frequently cited spaces (33%), pointing to their role as informal town squares where neighbors exchange updates and community members check in with one another. Grocery stores, such as Ray’s Food Place, followed closely behind (24%), offering visibility for flyers, bulletin boards, and

in-person exchanges. The third-most mentioned places were restaurants and bars (22%), such as the 3-Legged Crane and The Logger’s Den, where residents interact in a casual pub setting.

Other residents highlighted gatherings such as “home parties,” “farmers’ markets,” or local organization meetings as information-rich gathering spaces. These responses underscore the opportunity for Oakridge to better utilize and support third spaces as intentional parts of its local information ecosystem. Partnerships with cafés, stores, libraries, and places of worship could help ensure that accurate, up-to-date, and community-driven information reaches more residents.

What are the physical spaces where you go to gather and share information about your community?

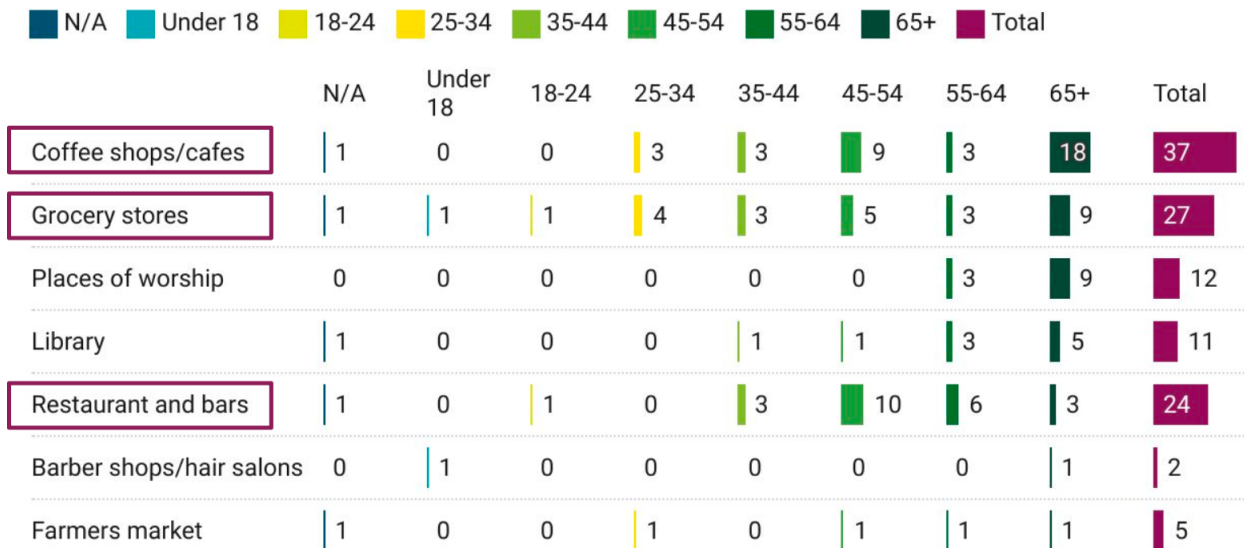


FIG. 9
Survey results of the most popular third spaces in Oakridge.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION NEEDS: WHAT'S MISSING IN THE HEADLINES

Oakridge residents were also asked which topics they would like the local news coverage to pay more attention to. Community events had the most responses with 19, followed by safety with 13 responses, and housing and

homelessness with 11 responses. Other popular topics included local politics and government, schools and youth education, and environmental concerns. The clear throughline of the responses showed that Oakridge residents want more consistent, in-depth, and community-focused coverage that reflects their lived realities and concerns.

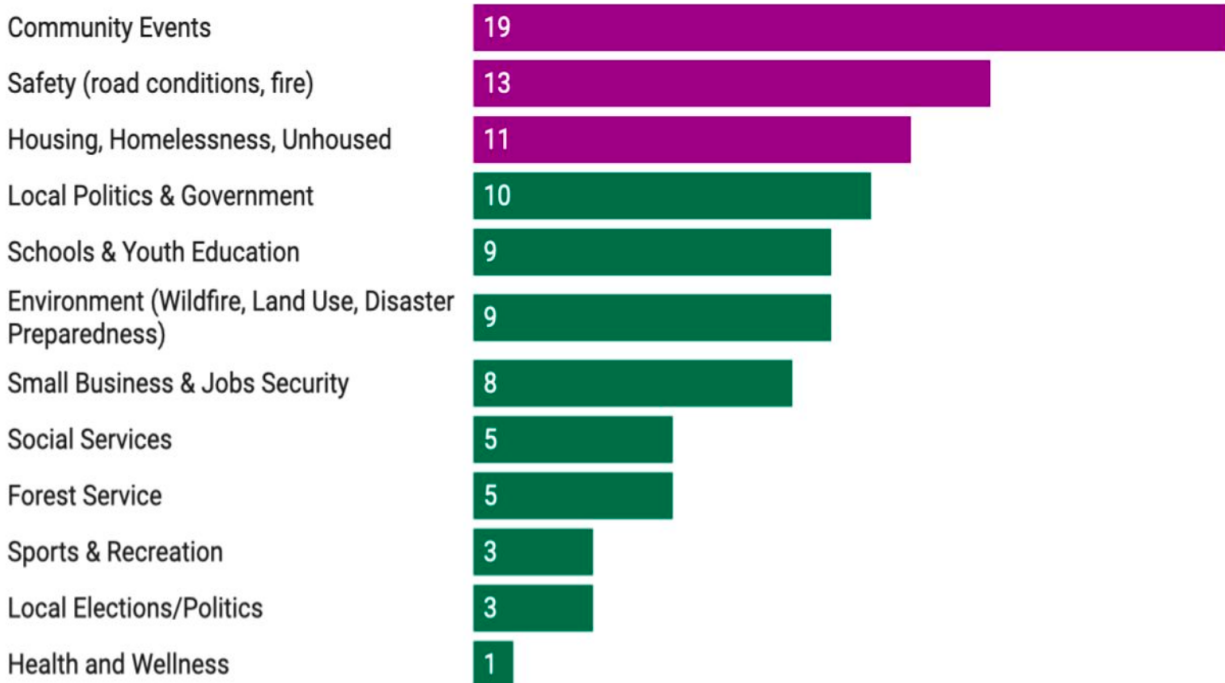


FIG. 10
Survey results of the most important community topics.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerge from a combination of resident survey responses, community listening sessions, and student analysis grounded in national practices. The recommendations aim to address the core challenges surfaced through this report: lack of trust, barriers to access, fragmented information systems, and underrepresentation in local coverage. Together, these ideas offer a roadmap for strengthening Oakridge's civic information infrastructure and making it more inclusive, transparent, and sustainable for all.

MEDIA LITERACY: TRUST BUILDING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The foundation of community-centered journalism enables media literacy through trust building and civic engagement. Community input on local topics is crucial in creating news that benefits the community, and media literacy is a process that involves informing the community how they can constructively evaluate news and information.

Oakridge residents expressed widespread skepticism towards local news sources, citing bias, misinformation, and limited opportunities for feedback. These concerns are compounded by a growing reliance on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, that no longer maintain basic safeguards against misinformation.

In 2024, Meta's decision to abandon fact-checking on Facebook further eroded public trust. Critics warn that without those protections, both misinformation and disinformation are likely to resurface and spread unchecked, making it harder for residents to distinguish between reliable information and manipulation.

Rebuilding trust in this environment requires local institutions and news sources to be more transparent, accessible, and proactive in their engagement with the community. An example of this is Trusting News' Training and Resource Kits, which provide guidelines for newsroom culture, news engagement, ethics and fairness, topics and platforms, and more. The organization has partnered with countless online publications to highlight how newsrooms benefit from building trust.

The main importance of media literacy is to give the public the ability to critically evaluate different types of media and understand how changes can be made to further build trust and engagement within the community. The City of Oakridge could partner with local community organizations to host trusted forums and provide training for residents to provide constructive input on local news coverage and its priorities.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: OFFICE HOURS AND LISTENING SESSIONS

Community-centered storytelling requires both representation and participation. Residents want their voices reflected and involved in the editorial process.

A resource to help Oakridge residents feel more connected to their news and information systems is to host office hours and listening sessions to promote community engagement. An inspiring model is Honolulu Civil Beat’s newsroom office hours, a weekly livestream where reporters respond to public questions and highlight recent work. Users can submit questions via livestream, and reporters answer them on air. The entire broadcast is recorded and made easily accessible once the stream ends.

Oakridge could host regular listening sessions or “office hours” with Highway 58 Herald editors and Oakridge Chat Forum moderators to create a more transparent, dialogic local news culture. The outlets could also create avenues for guest columns, youth reporting, and community-contributed content.

A local version of the City Bureau’s Documenters program, where community members are trained to attend and report on public meetings, could also be beneficial. By encouraging newsrooms to clarify the reporting process and inviting collaboration on local priorities, efforts can be made to promote more collective storytelling.

DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL DISTRIBUTION: SMS AND NEWSLETTERS

A recurring theme in Oakridge is that information often arrives too late or not at all, with many residents mentioning that by the time they saw news or information about an event, the headline was already irrelevant. A recommendation to solve this problem is the utilization of Short Message Service (SMS) texting and physical newsletters posted around local business and other frequented buildings.

An example of this is Outlier Media’s SMS service to help low-income news consumers in the Detroit area. The company used a texting service to communicate with its audience and produce more effective reporting. Detroit residents can text the news source’s number to receive direct information about housing, utilities, and other on-demand topics.

To reach a broader cross-section of the community, especially those who avoid social media, Oakridge could launch an SMS-based alert system that is controlled by trusted people within the community who could provide urgent information directly to residents. Additionally, distributing a printed newsletter weekly or monthly would provide the same type of urgent news distribution for those who are more inclined to use a print source. Oakridge could also leverage existing digital signage and bulletin boards around town as part of a centralized, curated information system that is updated regularly with verified announcements.

CIVIC HUBS COLLABORATION: GRANT-FUNDING AND CONTENT SHARING

The City of Oakridge could further support local civic hubs such as collaborations between libraries, non-profits, and advocacy groups that connect residents with information, facilitate dialogue, and help translate engagement. An example of this is the Center for Cooperative Media in New Jersey, which works with over 150 news organizations to exchange stories and report partnerships that help strengthen public interest in journalism. The Center has a grant-funded program, with the goals of making content sharing easy for news partners and helping news organizations understand how collaboration can benefit them.

By encouraging partnerships between moderators of Facebook groups and local reporters, issues raised online can inform and extend into verified coverage. Cross-platform community forums could also be enacted to elevate shared concerns across outlets and formats. These civic hubs should not only support information exchange but also serve as indicators of community resilience based on the Civic Information Index. Partnerships among hubs and media organizations should aim to ensure that every resident has access to the spaces and systems that support informed participation.

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY: SECURE SUSTAINABLE FUNDING FOR LOCAL JOURNALISM

Sustaining meaningful local reporting requires long-term, diversified support. Given Oakridge's economic constraints, new funding models are necessary to protect and grow public-interest journalism. Drawing on Agora Journalism Center's "three-legged stool" funding model from their 2025 Local News and Information Ecosystem report, there are many different efforts that could be made to increase funding.

Philanthropy and grants from foundations would provide increased support for Oakridge's news outlets. Institutional partnerships with local schools, non-profits, and public agencies could help share infrastructure and reach different audiences. Community contributions, such as voluntary subscriptions and reader donations, could also generate new ways of collecting funding. Ensuring that community storytelling is a shared responsibility and is backed by shared investment is key to the future of community-centered journalism.

Conclusion

Through survey creation, engagement with community members, and primary research, Engaged Journalism students developed a deeper understanding and passion for the importance of community-centered journalism and how its principles can be applied in Oakridge. Students found that Oakridge's news and information systems lacked trust due to the limited viewpoints of their local outlets, and that residents had a desire for more accessible and timely news.

Based on these findings, the Engaged Journalism class developed four recommendations, which center around media literacy, community engagement,

digital and physical distribution, and civic hubs collaboration.

Community-centered journalism is increasingly necessary in the current media landscape, and the response to a community's news and information needs must be developed out of their own experiences. By utilizing Oakridge's existing news outlets to improve upon the community's access to information, the development and application of timely and convenient strategies can help the City of Oakridge engage residents to share and take in the information that matters most to them.

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SCI Directors and Staff

Marc Schlossberg	SCI Co-Director, and Professor of Planning, Public Policy and Management, University of Oregon
Nico Larco	SCI Co-Director, and Professor of Architecture, University of Oregon
Megan Banks	SCYP Director, University of Oregon
Lindsey Hayward	SCYP Assistant Program Manager, University of Oregon
Marsha Gravesen	SCI Fiscal and Office Manager
Grace Craven	Report Coordinator
Danielle Lewis	Graphic Designer