

Promoting Latino and African American Collaboration through Dialogue and Engagement



Hosted by
The Julian Samora Research Institute
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI



A Summary Report of the Black-Brown Dialogues Summit III: Harnessing Our Potential September 6, 2019

May 2020

MICHIGAN STATE
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University Outreach
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The Julian Samora Research Institute is committed to the generation, transmission, and application of knowledge to serve the needs of Latino communities in Michigan, the Midwest, and the nation.



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Preface

The idea for the Black Brown Dialogues series of summits emerged from hallway conversations with Marvin McKinney and from the study of numerous social movements in the United States. Movements that tended to be both group-specific and broad-based. Most, unfortunately, have been group-specific, with intergroup collaboration interspersed and short-lived across time and place. While gains by one group in the courts tend to benefit all groups, the gains tend to be limited in the sense that they are incremental, few over time, and narrow in scope. The result being that the basic structures of racial domination remain intact and ethno-racial minority groups continue to occupy the lowest ranks of the occupational structure, and suffer the worst unemployment rates and limited access to the core institutions of U.S. society.

White Americans tend to deny that racism is a problem in American society and that they have privileges as a result of institutional racism, which is so ingrained in society that they don't even recognize their own racist behaviors. Take for example the case of Larry Gaynor, a celebrated MSU alumnus who is President and CEO of TNG Worldwide, a full-service manufacturer and distributor of beauty industry products. On April 29, while hosting a digital town hall for nail and salon professionals, Gaynor went on a racist rant in which he described Vietnamese in the nail salon industry as the enemy, and said he would not support any partners who supported the Vietnamese. He claimed the Vietnamese were destroying the industry and promoted industry protectionism. He mocked their English-speaking abilities, chastised them for speaking Vietnamese, and said, "We're in America, talk English. . . . We want to be treated with respect." When his rant was exposed, he apologized and was quoted as saying "I did not make any knowingly racist remarks. I don't even know what that word means. I'm not that type of guy." In 2017, Gaynor and his wife donated \$3 million to the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University to create the Larry and Teresa Gaynor Entrepreneurship Lab, a high-technology facility that supports entrepreneurial students through a variety of learning activities.

This is only one instance of how racism operates in American society. Change will only come through the proactive efforts of ethno-racial minority groups to eradicate racial structures and build a multicultural order in which all persons have the opportunities to develop their human potential in the short time they are on this Earth. To achieve a higher social order, they must work together rather than apart from each other.

Rubén O. Martinez, Director
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Executive Summary

Approximately 100 summit participants from across the state gathered in East Lansing to participate in a daylong summit on imagining what a more equitable and inclusive Michigan would look like and how this vision could be achieved. The day's events included presentations by Dr. Roberto Dansie, Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, Sylvia Puente, and Detroit's Black and Brown Theater. The following two prompts guided the summit process: 1) Identify indicators that life is getting better or worse for Black/Brown communities in Michigan, and 2) Create a brief narrative that we can make Michigan more inclusive.

Indicators that life is getting better or worse for Black/Brown communities in Michigan

Indicators of ways in which life is improving for Michigan's communities of color varied from group to group. Examples include: the election of Governor Gretchen Whitmer, specifically her support for driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants; the Detroit Public Schools Community District declaration of being a sanctuary district; increased cultural awareness and collaboration across communities of color; more people of color in elected office and other leadership positions; programs such as the Flint, Lansing and Kalamazoo Promise programs; and the emergence of social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo.

A number of common issues emerged across working groups as indicators that life has gotten worse for Michigan's communities of color. These included: poverty and income inequality; declining educational attainment and inequitable access to resources; gentrification; environmental racism; inequitable access to housing; immigration enforcement and anti-immigrant federal policies; reemergence of overt racism and White Supremacist movements; inequitable access to healthcare systems; and police violence toward communities of color.

Narratives that we can make Michigan more inclusive

Common themes also emerged in the narratives drafted by the working groups, including: acknowledgements of the indigenous peoples on whose land we are standing and the value of indigenous wisdom; intergroup unity/solidarity and greater cultural understanding and recognition of commonalities; greater representation of people of color and, in particular, women of color in elected office and positions of leadership; the protection of voting rights, increased voter participation, and an end to gerrymandering; and a need for systemic reform, embodied in one group's mission statement, "to bravely address structural racism, and to create statewide policies and laws that intentionally address areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion."

Introduction

This report presents a summary of the proceedings of the third and final summit in the Black-Brown Dialogues Summit Series, launched by the Julian Samora Research Institute and the Department of African and African American Studies. Collectively, the summit series was designed to foster lasting relationships between African Americans and Latina/os—as well as other communities of color and White allies—in the State of Michigan that move beyond siloed struggles and previous models of coalitions, with the goal of building a more equitable and inclusive Michigan.

The first summit in the series was held in November of 2017, on the theme of “Working toward Common Ground.” Over 80 participants, consisting of community members, organizational leaders, foundation officials, graduate students, and researchers, engaged in a daylong series of dialogues. Participants identified common challenges facing Latina/o and African American communities in Michigan and examined contemporary barriers to effective collaboration. Ten key challenges were identified and rank-ordered, including among the highest priority issues more equitable educational and healthcare (including mental health) systems, as well as improved cross-cultural communication and collaboration. The results of this summit are included in a report, available online at: <https://jsri.msu.edu/dialogue>.

The second summit, held in September of 2018, had as its theme “Expanding Community.” This summit also worked to foster dialogue between African American and Latina/o communities, while expanding to include in the conversation members of other communities of color in Michigan. Over 90 participants from across the state gathered to engage in a daylong process of developing a vision for a more equitable and inclusive Michigan, guided by the following questions: 1) What does a just, equitable, and inclusive Michigan look like?; 2) How can we work together to create such a society?; and 3) Is there need for an organization? What would it do? A summary report of this summit is available online at: <https://jsri.msu.edu/dialogue2>.

Held on September 6, 2019, the final summit was organized around the theme of “Harnessing our Potential,” focused on creating a systematic platform to promote sustainable intergroup collaboration across organizations and societal sectors. Approximately 100 participants gathered to hear guest speakers deliver addresses that were both aspirational and practical. Participants also engaged in dialogue on the ways in which life has improved or gotten worse for communities of color in Michigan. In working groups, participants drafted narratives on how Michigan can become more just, equitable, and inclusive.

Black-Brown Dialogues History: Welcome and Overview

Dr. Rubén Martínez, Director of the Julian Samora Research Institute at Michigan State University, welcomed participants and provided introductory remarks. He provided an overview of the first two summits in the series, and then introduced the following objectives for the second: 1) harnessing our potential; 2) pursuing an inclusive Michigan; and 3) building a sustainable collaboration. He identified as a basic premise of the summit that “These are our cities, our state, and our country, too!” Historically, governments and institutions have not been working for all populations. Socially constructed divisions, propaganda, and group-centric interests have contributed to and perpetuate separate struggles. But historically, African Americans and Latina/os in the United States have much in common, which Martínez demonstrated through shared histories

of racial divisions of labor, segregation, lynchings, poll taxes, intertwined civil rights struggles, and subjection to a neoliberal order.

Martinez then noted that the Black-Brown Dialogues series is about inclusive intergroup collaboration, not just between African Americans and Latina/os. Using comments made by a candidate for city council in Marysville, MI, he demonstrated that racism on an interpersonal level is an irrational system of thought based on sentiments that divide people into binaries such as White and non-White. All people of color, not only African Americans and Latina/os, are excluded from ownership of the community according to the logic of this candidate who wished to keep Marysville “as White as possible.” This statement is demonstrative of the first of several key challenges presently facing communities of color, which is the resurgence of overt racism. Martinez also identified as key challenges: 1) intergroup competition rather than collaboration; 2) institutional structures, policies, and practices that continue to limit the voice and influence of people of color; and 3) the muting of subordinate group voices in shaping Michigan as an inclusive state.

“Native Wisdom for Racial Cooperation”

Dr. Roberto Dansie, Founder of Cultural Wisdom, delivered the first keynote address of the day. Dansie began by discussing words indigenous peoples used to describe European colonizers in the Americas. For instance, the Lakota described the colonizers as “Wasishu,” literally “he takes fat.” By this they meant the ones who would deprive those of greatest need of the fat (“Shu”) that was meant to keep them alive in the Winter. The most able were sent to hunt buffalo, and then they would offer the hump of the animal to the ones who needed it the most: children and elders. This was an honorable gesture; the hunter, usually young and strong, deprived himself of the prized food and gave it to his relations. *Wasishu* meant the ultimate betrayal. It meant one had been taken over by the meanest of all spirits: greed. Because the word was usually associated with the behavior of White people, newcomers concluded that it meant “White people.” But *Wasishu* was never about color; it meant an action, a bad behavior—one that always involved a choice. *Wasishu* was someone who had made the choice to behave badly.

Dansie described this greed as a three-headed monster of racism, sexism, and White supremacy, which have been codified in our political institutions. In order to unite our communities as one people, he argued, we must sever these three heads. He identified four key factors that will enable us to do so: consciousness, conduct, culture, and community. Increased consciousness, he argued, will decrease suffering through the pursuit of social justice. On conduct, he stated that there are behaviors that are wrong and that we need to name them. For culture, he stated that the disease of *Wasishu* is a culture of oppression, exploitation, and narcissism that we must heal through a culture of awareness. Community, he said, is the factor that unites us all—when we are enlightened and feel each other’s pain as our own pain, solidarity takes over and the community blossoms.

“We, the People: Intersectional Empathy and the Future of Us”

During the lunch plenary, Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, Founder and Chair of Southpaw Michigan, delivered a meditation on the opening two clauses of the U.S. Constitution, “We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union.” Noting first the contradiction in the

phrase “more perfect,” as perfection is an absolute state, El-Sayed argued that to strive for a more perfect union means to asymptotically approach what we are after. That is, we may never achieve it, but we can make significant improvements. He then questioned what it is we are after, arguing that rather than all the words that follow this phrase in the Constitution the ideal we are approaching is about “We the people.” He asked, “What does it mean to be included, to be inclusive of We the people? Who is included in that and who is not?”

Discussing the term, “identity politics,” coined by the Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based group of Black feminists, in the 1970s, El-Sayed argued that identity politics have actually existed in the United States since the day the country was founded. Built on slavery and genocide, the U.S. was founded on an exclusive definition of “We the people” that only included White men. El-Sayed described the identity politics of the nation’s founding as a politics of White supremacy, division, and hatred, one that was reborn in 2016 with the presidential campaign of Donald Trump. But he also noted that 2016 was the first year in which the median child born in the U.S. was a child of color, which must cause us to question who should be included in “We the people” in this moment. Rather than a politics of hatred and exclusion, he argued that a politics that moves toward a more expansive “We the people” must be built on love, empowerment, and inclusion. Where Trump and his ilk come with a politics of Us vs. Them, we must come with a radical empathy that acknowledges that communities of color and low-income Whites are all experiencing profound levels of pain under the current economic and political system in order to collectively reshape the system.

“Education, Knowledge, Experience, Wisdom”

The afternoon session began with a panel discussion between Tedda Hughes and Marvin McKinney of the Black-Brown Founding Committee and Richard Davila of the Black-Brown Task Force. The panelists were asked to respond to three questions, the first of which was how can trust be built across ethno-racial groups? McKinney argued for dispelling the common notion of a zero-sum game in which one group’s gains come at another group’s expense, as well as facing hard questions about why historically we have not been able to come together in sustainable ways. Hughes emphasized sharing of information and data across groups, which she contended could be achieved through greater proximity. Davila reemphasized the issue raised in previous summits of acknowledging our own privileges and internal biases. He also offered practical suggestions any organization arising from the summit series might take, namely maintaining event calendars and building repositories of information that would increase knowledge and understanding across groups.

The second question posed to the panelists was how can trust be built across the generations? McKinney spoke of the importance of understanding the historical context in which other generations came of age, as well as avoiding making assumptions about individuals through labeling. Hughes also spoke of approaching intergenerational communication in a non-judgmental way to allow for deeper understanding. Davila spoke against the idea that younger generations are significantly better off than their elders, but instead that they face different challenges. He also advocated for co-mentoring between younger and older people, rather than unidirectional mentoring.

The final question was how can trust be built across classes within groups? McKinney

stressed the importance of listening attentively to others across class lines and respecting differences in language and communication styles, as well as maintaining an openness to learning. Hughes likewise reemphasized the importance of proximity, and of listening and understanding that the truth is often somewhere in the middle of differing perspectives. Davila noted that intergenerational memory of poverty can help to create empathy for people who do not have the same degree of privilege or social and economic standing as we do. He also stressed the importance of acknowledging how different factors such as skin privilege, language ability, sexuality, gender identity, and immigration status intersect with questions of class.

“Addressing Black/Brown Policy Issues Together”

Sylvia Puente, Director of the Latino Policy Forum, joined the summit by video to discuss the Forum’s efforts to bridge divides between Black and Brown communities in Chicago through the Multicultural Leadership Academy. The Academy brings together African American and Latina/o community leaders from Chicago and across the region to engage in relationship building and frank conversations on mutual understandings and misunderstandings across communities within a frame of racial equity and racial inequality in order to drive policy.

Based on the experience of the Leadership Academy, Puente offered practical advice for any organization that may arise from the Black-Brown Dialogues summit series. On the question of sustainability, Puente said that evaluations of the program are conducted with each cohort to inform the evolution of the program going forward and demonstrate its impact to funders. She also noted that compared to Illinois, which is a solidly blue state, multiracial collaboration in Michigan has the potential to influence not only state policy, but also the results of the upcoming national election. She emphasized the importance of building intergroup trust and of coming together in a shared physical space, especially for a statewide initiative such as the Black-Brown Dialogues, in order to maintain networks and have the strength to impact policy.

The Summit Process

The summit series was designed as a dialogic process to facilitate constructive discussion among participants at the events. At the summit, this was accomplished by facilitating a general working session in the morning. Participants were asked to respond to two prompts:

- Identify indicators that life is getting better or worse for Black/Brown communities in Michigan;
- Create a brief narrative that we can make Michigan more inclusive.

Representatives from each table then reported their answers to the plenary group. Responses are summarized thematically in this report.

Identify indicators that life is getting better or worse for Black/Brown communities in Michigan

Indicators of ways in which life is improving for Michigan’s communities of color varied from group to group. One group, for instance, identified the election of Governor Gretchen Whitmer as an indicator of positive change, specifically her support for driver’s licenses for undocumented immigrants. This group also noted that the Detroit Public Schools Community District has declared itself a sanctuary district. Other groups identified increased cultural awareness and

collaboration across communities of color, as well as more people of color in elected office and other leadership positions. Others noted specific programs such as the Flint, Lansing and Kalamazoo Promise programs. The emergence of social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo were also identified as indicators.

A number of common issues emerged across working groups as indicators that life has gotten worse for Michigan's communities of color. These include: increasing poverty and income inequality; declining educational attainment and inequitable access to resources; gentrification; environmental racism; inequitable access to housing; immigration enforcement and anti-immigrant federal policies; reemergence of overt racism and White Supremacist movements; inequitable access to healthcare systems; and police violence toward communities of color.

Create a brief narrative that we can make Michigan more inclusive

Common themes also emerged in the narratives drafted by the working groups. Several began with acknowledgements of the indigenous peoples on whose land we are standing and the value of indigenous wisdom. Numerous groups pointed to a need for intergroup unity/solidarity, as well as greater cultural understanding and recognition of commonalities. Several mentioned the importance of greater representation of people of color, and in particular women of color, in elected office and positions of leadership. Key to this is the protection of voting rights, increased voter participation, and an end to gerrymandering. Multiple groups also identified a need for systemic reform. One group, for instance, began its narrative with a mission: to bravely address structural racism, and to create statewide policies and laws that intentionally address areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Next Steps

At the close of the summit, Dr. Rubén Martínez introduced the members of the Black-Brown Dialogues Founding Committee who are tasked with transforming the vision laid out in the summit series into a sustainable advocacy organization that will work toward a more just, equitable, and inclusive Michigan. The members of the initial committee announced at the summit were Mark Fancher of the ACLU of Michigan, MSU doctoral student Joy Hannibal, Tedda Hughes of REACH Art Studio of Lansing, Marvin McKinney of University Outreach and Engagement at MSU, Angela Reyes of the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation, Gabriela Santiago-Romero of the Michigan Center for Civic Education, Don Weatherspoon (retired), and Asa Zuccaro of the Latinx Technology & Community Center of Flint. Members of the JSRI team committed to remain involved with the committee in an advisory capacity as the group works toward the creation of an independent organization.

Suggested Readings

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Appendix A: List of Participants

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|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Amas Adovini | Sonja Forte | Ofelia Martinez |
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| Marvin Cato | Giancarlo Guzman | Yesenia Murillo |
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| Michelle Davidson | Rubbie Hodge | J. R. Reynolds |
| E. Abby Davis | Alescia Hollowell | Rodney Robinson |
| Leticia De La Paz | Alexis Horton | Emilio Rodriguez |
| Debbie DeLeon | Tedda Hughes | Nino Rodriguez |
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| Julie Dye | Ana Jose | Aurora Saucedo |
| Patricia Edwards | Lee June | Leonard Savala |
| Maria Enriquez | Jessica Ledesma | Cady Short-Thompson |
| Carlton Evans | Anthony Lewis | Nolan Shropshire |
| Denise Evans | Kyle Lim | Mildred Silva-Zuccaro |
| Mark Fancher | Lorenzo Lopez | Kelly Simmons |
| Anna Maria Flores | Guillermo Z Lopez | Jason Smith |
| Juan Flores | Mariah Martin | Valerie Smith |
| Leyla Flores Morales | Clara Martinez | Justino Solis |

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**Appendix B:
Task Force Members**

Richard Davila

Deb DeLeon

Mark Fancher

Nabih Haddad

Rubén Martinez

Marvin McKinney

John Norder

Angela Reyes

Monica Reyes

J.R. Reynolds

Oswaldo “Ozzie” Rivera

Donald Weatherspoon

Notes

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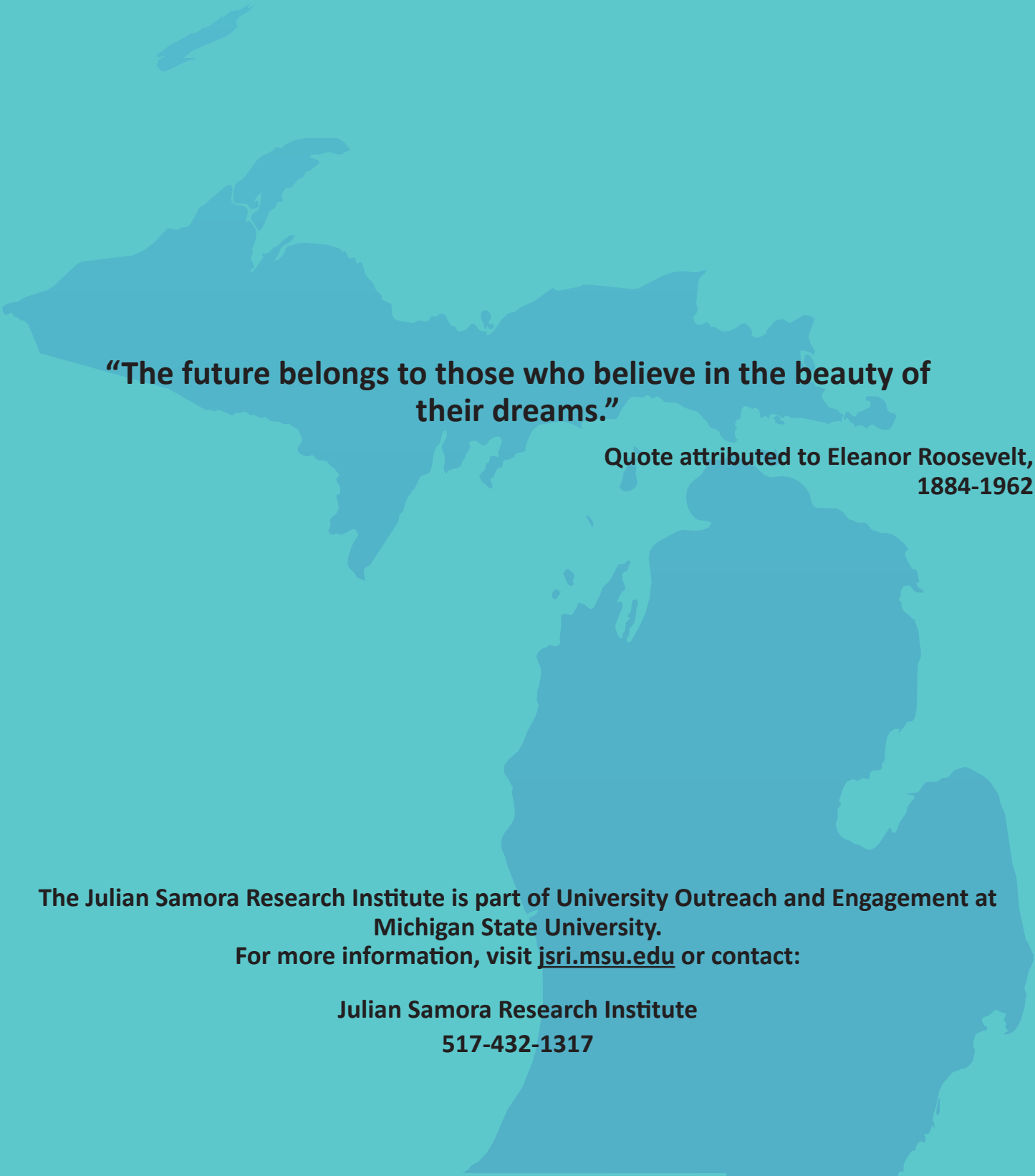
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“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

**Quote attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt,
1884-1962**

The Julian Samora Research Institute is part of University Outreach and Engagement at Michigan State University.

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