Emphasizing Impact: Exploring Effective Project Reporting Strategies for Grant-Funded Sustainability Initiatives

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Background

- Grant-funded efforts are integral to tackling climate change and addressing environmental injustice, yet it is difficult to measure the impact of these interdisciplinary projects.
  - Thus, project reporting must be conducted in order to gauge impact, progress, and support needed.
- The Campus Sustainability Fund is a student-run grant program at UW whose mission is to promote resilience, equity, and justice-centered sustainability on campus.
  - Since 2010, the CSF has funded nearly 4 million dollars in interdisciplinary student projects **(Figure 1)**.
- The CSF's quarterly reporting process is used as a case study to investigate how to improve project impact measurement.
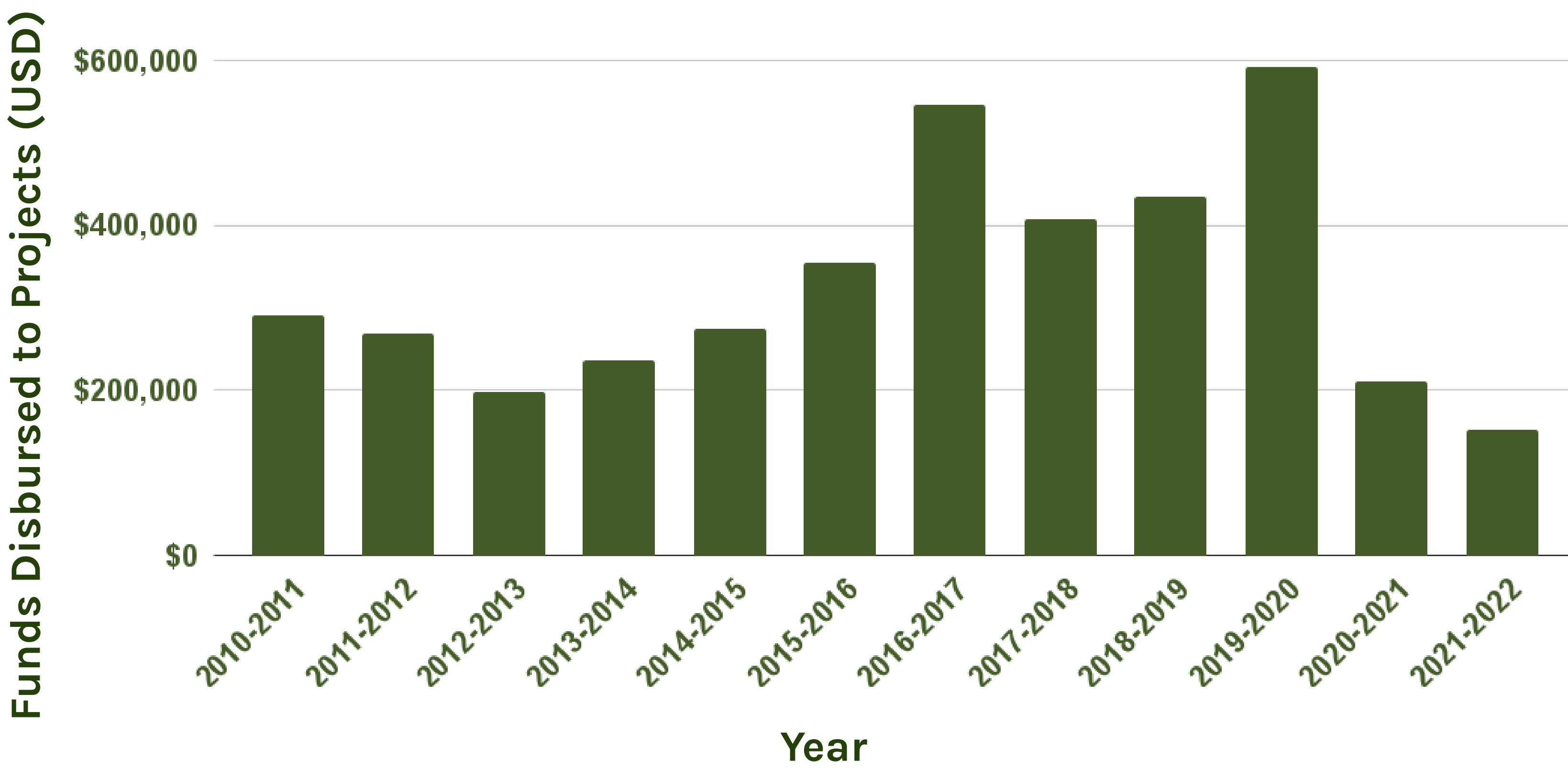

Figure 1: Total CSF funds disbursed to projects by fiscal year since 2010.

Research Question

How can project reporting processes be improved to more effectively communicate the impact of interdisciplinary, grant-funded sustainability initiatives?

Internship & Methods

Internship
- Interned as the Project Development Specialist at the CSF.
- Worked to foster strong and communicative relationships with funded projects, keep consistent project records, and strengthen the growing network of sustainability efforts on campus.

Methods
- Investigated how project reporting can be utilized to provide holistic insight into impact and progress through conducting stakeholder interviews with:
  - Current CSF-funded project teams that have completed the quarterly metrics collection process at least twice
  - Sustainability-focused grant organizations at other universities
- Developed recommendations for improving the CSF's project reporting process using data from stakeholder interviews.
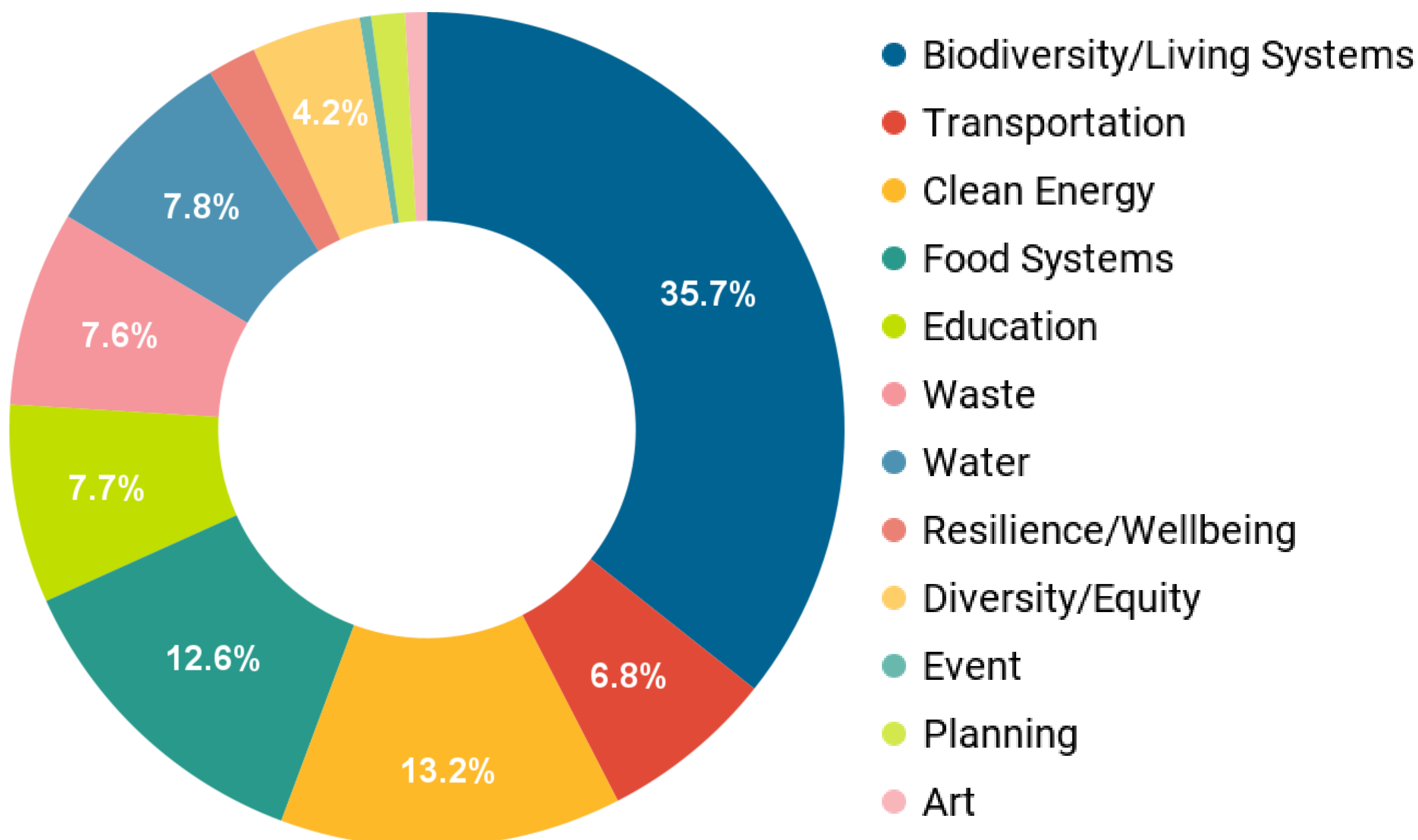

Figure 2: CSF funding by category from 2010-2022. Upon approval, each project is assigned a category based on its focus and discipline.

Significance

Recommendations from this research will enable the CSF and other grant organizations to:
- Improve existing reporting processes, enabling teams to more holistically convey their impact.
- Support interdisciplinary projects. CSF-funded projects span across 12 different funding categories **(Figure 2)**.
- Foster stronger, more communicative relationships with funded project teams.
- More broadly communicate sustainability efforts, which is essential to increasing access and engagement for communities that have been historically excluded from the environmental movement.
- Maintain and expand funding opportunities.
- Provide the necessary support for intersectional sustainability initiatives through sustaining a larger, more diverse array of projects and programs.

Recommendation-Oriented Results

Dedicate time to building support for the existing reporting process, instead of building a new process

Interviews with current project teams revealed little to no challenges with the structural functionality of the reporting system. Instead, the critiques focused on how form components could be improved.

Implement a more structured schedule for project check-ins

Creating a built-in structure for check-ins would prevent outdated and irrelevant metrics from lingering on reporting forms and would enable the CSF to provide the project team with support needed to complete the reporting process on time.

Explore additional routes for project categorization and metric development

Interviews with current projects identified limitations associated with the current "Planning Phase" and "Post-Implementation Phase" categories, especially for projects that do not have a defined planning and implementation progression within their structure.

Assess supplementary, creatively-focused routes for reporting project impact

Findings indicated the importance of acknowledging the limitations of applying a structured, systematic evaluation mechanism to cross-disciplinary projects that deeply engage with a variety of groups, stakeholders, and ideas.

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