Adam Windram†: Good morning, and welcome to the third annual William & Mary Policy Review Symposium. Thanks for being here on this beautiful Williamsburg morning. I'm really glad you're here. This year, the review decided to do a theme-based symposium, and we voted on social justice, but we wanted to marry that to one of the strengths of the policy program, which is quantitative analysis. So that's how we landed on the theme, Quantitative Analysis Informing Social Justice. We have three great panelists here today: Dr. Caroline Hanley from the William and Mary sociology department, who uses statistical analysis to study gender and racial dimensions of economic inequality; Laura Goren from The Commonwealth Institute (TCI), who uses research to inform policy analysis in state policy in Virginia on health, education, and labor issues; and Luis Aguilar from We Are CASA, which is a Richmond-based organization, and he's an advocate for empowering immigrant communities in Richmond. Carolyn Iwicki is serving as our panel moderator today, and without further ado, let's get started. Thank you.

Carolyn Iwicki‡: Just to start off, I wanted to give you all about five minutes to tell us a bit about your background—how you've arrived at dedicating yourself and your research to social and economic justice issues and quantitative analysis as well. Professor Hanley, we could start with you.

Dr. Caroline Hanley: Sure, great. I'll give you just a little bit of what I'd like to call an intellectual biography. How did I get here? I actually am going to go way back and say that I do what I do in the way that I do it because I grew up in rural Maine in the 1980s, when everyone was losing their jobs, and my parents thought that they could be next. And in a really profound way, my entire childhood was shaped by this sense that things were changing: it was not possible to work and develop the kind of economic security necessary to really live the American dream. That was increasingly not possible, and my parents had the very strong sense that they were sort of the last ones to have the opportunity to jump on that boat of receiving security in return for hard work before it left the shore.

* This transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity.
† Adam Windram is the Editor in Chief of the William & Mary Policy Review.
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So, as I grew and took more classes and tried to learn about how the world works, this was a very powerful interest and focus for me. I went to college. I took classes in American history, government, and economics, but I very quickly fell in love with sociology as an approach to understanding these kinds of fundamental inequality and justice issues related to access to the American dream. In that discipline, I saw a framework for understanding the world that resonated with my own experience—that we as individuals are both simultaneously agents of change in our own lives and very powerfully shaped by the structures of opportunity and constraint that we find ourselves in.

I decided early on, pretty much at the age of eighteen, that I wanted to develop what sociologist C. Wright Mills in 1959 described as that quality of mind that allows us to grasp history, biography, and the relations between the two within society.¹ I took sociology on board, and I decided to develop a skill set and a knowledge base related to core questions in our society about why there are fewer good jobs in the United States than there used to be, who has access to the good jobs that continue to exist, and really what can be done about moving those things in a more just direction.

Ms. Iwicki: All right. Laura?

Laura Goren: I think I also was impacted by the loss of working class or industrial jobs in the eighties and early nineties. I grew up in Baltimore city in a mixed income neighborhood that was also mixed race. I saw, as I and my friends in my neighborhood moved from childhood to our teenage years, the ways that our parents' jobs or lack thereof really impacted our educational opportunities and other opportunities in a way that shaped our lives.

My father had a good job. I was expected to go to college. My best childhood friend’s father lost his job in the defense cuts in '91, and didn't have the prospect of college, and went into drug dealing as his profession as a young man. And there were lots of other kids in my neighborhood who I was close to whose paths were very much shaped by their parents' economic situation and by race. The [contrast in] way that the police interacted with different kids in my neighborhood was very stark.

I was also raised in a family where the structural conditions were discussed, the fact that there are structures that influence our lives and also that there are structural solutions to the challenges that we face, and that we have agency to make a difference. All that helped get me to where I am now. As an undergrad, I majored in sociology. I also got involved in a campus living wage campaign, and I saw during that campaign how even fairly basic analysis could make a difference in achieving political goals. We did some basic financial analysis of the contract between the university and their food service contractor and their janitorial service contractor, and found that there was basically space in the contract to raise wages without significantly increasing

costs to the university, and that made a big difference in winning that campaign. Now it also made a difference that students and workers and community members were organizing, and that obviously was the critical component, but seeing how some fairly basic analysis could make a difference in a social justice campaign was influential in my choosing to work at TCI eventually.

I did work in D.C. for a couple of years as a research assistant at a federal financial regulator and then went on to a Ph.D. program in sociology. I decided that I wanted to be a little bit more in the mix day-to-day of what's going on. I left that program and went to work at The Commonwealth Institute, which is where we try to use research and analysis to advance the wellbeing of low- and moderate-income Virginians.

Ms. Iwicki: So, Luis, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Luis Aguilar: How I got to this point is very personal, directly affected by immigration policies. I actually crossed the border when I was a young kid with my family to Phoenix, Arizona. I grew up there, moved to Northern Virginia about twelve, thirteen years ago. And so especially here in Virginia, being such a state that directly impacts any policy, if you're an immigrant, there was absolutely no way that I could not be involved and use any kind of tool in favor of immigrant rights, advocating for immigrant rights.

With CASA, actually, it's one of the oldest immigrant rights organizations in the area. It's mostly based in Maryland. It started four years ago here in Virginia, but the advocacy work is critical and important because it's very clear, if you go down to Richmond, at the General Assembly, you do not see very many advocates. I mean, you do see Laura [Goren]. You do see Lana [Heath de Martínez, in audience, from the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy]. But it's very important. It's very critical to use any kind of tools, whether it's analysis, whether they're stories, or whether it's your own personal motivation and drive to go out there and speak to policymakers, but in essence, it was that. It was very personal. It directly impacted why I do the advocacy work that I do.

Ms. Iwicki: Okay. So, as you know, our theme this year is quantitative analysis and the role it plays in social justice. Could you tell us how each of you employ quantitative analysis to answer the questions you have or you found about social and economic justice, whether this is building statistical models to infer causes of injustice from hard data or survey results, using the quantitative research of others maybe to inform your own qualitative research, or on-the-ground action. Dr. Hanley, we'll start with you again.

Dr. Hanley: Okay. Well, I'm a sociologist, as I said. I'm a researcher who uses both quantitative and qualitative methods because I see value in each for answering different types of questions, and I think oftentimes we learn the most about the world when we bring the two into dialogue. I would really like to see more of that happen. I'm attracted to quantitative research for its ability to reach
conclusions that can be confidently generalized to a larger population, of course; for the greater possibility of replicability; for the credibility people in the policy world give to quantitative research because it more often uses the language of science to discuss what we know and how we know it; and also for the ability to use multivariate modeling techniques to pinpoint associations while considering confounding and intervening factors. These attributes of quantitative research can be a powerful basis for increasing the certainty of what we know and being able to potentially explain why we're so certain of it. I think we as researchers don't always do a good job of talking about methods as a political act to increase the transparency of what we do.

In my research, I try to counteract what I see as the biggest weakness of quantitative analysis, which is the difficulty of understanding how people operate within or are shaped by—and ultimately generate—social contexts, by conducting research that's comparative and historical, and by using various techniques to better account for the role of social context.

Ms. Iwicki: All right. Laura?

Ms. Goren: A lot of what we do at TCI is translate the work of academics or national researchers to the Virginia context, and particularly Virginia's policy context. For example, there was a national study by the GAO (Government Accountability Office) on increasing school segregation by race and income, and it was a really interesting study, but got very little attention in Virginia press or by Virginia policymakers and legislators. My colleague Chris looked at their methods and said, "Hey, we can do this," replicated it just with Virginia data, and put out a somewhat more readable report with graphics and a map showing where Virginia has seen increasing segregation in our schools. I think the year pair that he was looking at was 2003 to 2014.

We put that out. We sent it to all the legislators. We worked with our media contacts, and people really paid a lot of attention because it was counterintuitive to what they expected to see. So, it's not a complex quantitative analysis. It is very basic quantitative analysis, but even that, I think, can be very useful to folks in understanding what's going on in their communities when they don't necessarily see it because maybe they're in denial. Maybe they don't see it in their communities. But having the numbers behind it I think can be really useful, particularly if they're presented in an accessible way.

And, similarly, a lot of our budget analysis is not complex in terms of methodology, but we're playing the role of translating somewhat inaccessible technical jargon into letting folks know what it means for their community and for their schools and their parks and all that. We look at change over time and the adequacy of funding to meet our needs, and that's not something that the legislators themselves present. By pulling the numbers and adjusting for inflation and population growth, we can help people understand what's going on.

As an example of how it relates to racial justice, we looked at funding cuts for public education between 2009 and 2016 in the highest poverty and lowest poverty school divisions—and the school divisions that have the greater share of students of color—and then the lowest
share of students of color and found that the state funding cuts were highest in the highest poverty school divisions and in the school divisions that had the most students of color. That was a really interesting finding that we then shared with folks to help them understand the distributional effect of state funding cuts.

Ms. Iwicki: Luis?

Mr. Aguilar: Yes. So, we actually do a lot of coalition work. We're part of a coalition as well with Laura, with The Commonwealth Institute. We talk a lot about any kind of research that is produced. We directly use it, whether it be in a study or directly on the legislature. We participated in a DMV (Department of Motor Vehicles) study, a stakeholder group with the DMV, the commissioner, and helped produce a hands-on-wheel study that we used to say how many undocumented drivers we have, what impact it would have if we had access to driver's licenses. That same type of analysis—the policymakers do not even have an idea how it would impact, whether it would be beneficial or not—the DMV itself uses that kind of data. TCI also released an immigrants' contributions study as well.

So, any kind of analysis we have, we use it as a tool, and we overlay it with community outreach that we do, and we obviously include advocacy. We conduct advocacy work and community organizing work, but we also have a 501(c)4. So, we also do electoral work. While we are a nonprofit organization, we're not partisan. What we tend to do is focus on the community organizing aspect and tie it to the electoral aspect to make sure that we are reaching out to the Latino community, the African-American community, the Asian and Pacific Islander community, and we talk to them, we tag them. We try to figure out what kind of issues they're interested in, whether it be environmental justice, immigrant rights, economic justice, Fight for 15. We tag them. We gather that information. We figure out if they match with any of the campaigns down in Richmond, and then we funnel them, in general, because we obviously are one organization, and we try to work with interfaith organizations, with The Commonwealth Institute, with the New Virginia Majority, and see how we can, as a coalition, work together on these various issues.

Ms. Iwicki: So now we all have more specific questions planned for each of you. I'll go more in depth into what it is that you do. So, Dr. Hanley, we'll start with you again. What role do you think academic research should be playing in informing public policy as it relates to social justice and economic inequality?

Dr. Hanley: I'm going to answer that by talking about academic research in general, and also you had asked me about my academic research in particular. I'll try to hit both of those points. As I said, my research examines the sources of earnings inequality in the United States. I started out  

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2 Fight for 15 is a national minimum-wage campaign.
being very interested in class issues and the generation of class-based inequalities, and I've gotten deeper as my career has progressed into issues of class intersecting with race and with gender.

But throughout this, I've been particularly interested in using quantitative research methods to study inequalities within local labor markets. I think that local labor market research can be powerful because it can move us past some of the individualistic biases that often come out of the use of survey research, which is collected in such a way that it extracts individuals from their contexts. I think that when we do that, when we focus only on the results of individual-level survey research, we oftentimes become pointed towards policy interventions that focus on individual skill or capital accumulation—giving individuals more schooling, helping individuals move through unequal institutions—which is incredibly important and valuable, but is only half the equation. I think that when we don't use contextual data to identify the sources of problems, we sometimes lose sight of policy interventions that aim to change the way those institutions themselves operate.

In my research, what I've tried to do is use a variety of techniques to overcome what I see as that weakness in a lot of quantitative research. I built analytic models, using data that can show how the relationship between variables like hourly earnings and race and gender, for instance, can vary over time and across labor markets. This approach of generating nested data structures along with a set of analytic tools called multilevel modeling allows me to compare local labor markets themselves across the United States, and over time, to identify factors that are associated with higher or lower levels of earnings inequality.

People are often surprised to learn that in the recent, let's say, thirty- to forty-year period of economic restructuring—when many of us know that inequalities have absolutely skyrocketed within the United States—some localities have actually had only mild upticks in earnings inequality, and some have actually gotten more equal across class, race, and gender lines over that period. I think it's a really powerful, potentially powerful thing to bring those stories to the fore, and to make those stories part of the conversation. I'll give you a couple of examples from my research along with a co-author, Enobong Hannah Branch at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. We've done research to look at how race and gender intersect differently across U.S. regions and over time.3 We show in one paper that low-wage black women in the South actually made enormous progress in occupational attainment compared to low-wage white women in the South, but this occupational attainment didn't improve their quality of life because they, as well as black men, were gaining greater access to the types of jobs that were traditionally associated with higher wages and more stable employment, just as the jobs themselves were changing.

The economic benefits associated with retail and other types of non-professional white collar work were actually declining, and that resulted in heightened experiences of economic insecurity for all Americans, even those with a college degree. I think one of the broad takeaway messages from this type of research is that little snippets of quantitative findings like, “Black women’s lives are getting better,” can be extracted from a more nuanced and complex data story that can distort people’s understandings on inequality. In our research, we try to redirect attention to that complexity, to the contextual nature of those findings—that we see progress in Southern low-wage black women’s earnings from an incredibly low starting point to a low level of parity—that is really best characterized as convergence downward, to a low level of economic security.

The question is how all of this matters, or should matter for public policy and social justice. I will admit that I, like many academic researchers, am not thinking about public policy at all when I choose a research project. I don't do policy evaluation, although many sociologists and other social scientists do. I identify what I see as gaps in understanding in the research literature on the causes and consequences of social inequality. And a lot of what I do feels very divorced from the actual work of making social change that, luckily, we have other people here to talk about, to report on from the front lines.

But I don't think that means that there's no policy relevance for academic research. Drawing specifically from the research that I've done, I think the point is a simple one, that context matters; that, unfortunately, in this age of sound bites, nuance and care in discussing findings matters. Policymakers and those attuned to social justice should seek to understand how individuals operate within their social settings and should look for both individualist and structuralist solutions, helping individuals move through social institutions and reforming those institutions themselves. And I think another important lesson that can come from this historical and comparative research is that rising inequality is not inevitable. I think it can be powerful to actually be able to pull out specific examples and show, “Hey, look, some people are doing it better than us.” And not just Europeans: I think people who are perhaps dubious about justice-oriented and socially progressive policy are tired of hearing about examples from other countries. They often say, “Well, we're Americans. We don't want socialism like they have in other countries.”

I think there's something doubly powerful about pointing to American examples of doing better in terms of social equality and justice. In my day-to-day life of doing scholarly research, I like to think that is the payoff of all the hard work of creating the data to identify such examples and identify places that are actually becoming more equal and “doing it right” in terms of balancing economic growth and social equality. The hard work constructing such data and extracting meaning and interpretation along those lines is the role I see for eggheads like me who don't have time to talk to real-world social justice practitioners, but who are content to spend their entire adult lives coding at the computer.

I like to think that hard work is not just going into a void but, rather, that that hard work of creating the data to be able to identify and point to encouraging patterns has the potential to be influential. That said, I think those data products could be more powerful and more influential if
there were better ties between people like me and people like you [to the other panelists]. We have time in our research lives to do analyses that could be useful to policy practitioners; we have money in research budgets and, importantly, we have really skilled students who want research experience, who are looking for projects and for ways to bridge some of these gaps between the university and the real world. So how can research like that be involved and influential in the policy process? It's not by moving away from the kind of egg-headed, purely academic research studies that we do but perhaps, by developing better networks for bridging those gaps between academia and policy. That's my view.

Ms. Iwicki: Thank you. That's actually really nice to hear. Yay, students can help! So, Laura, we'll move on to you now. You've mentioned before taking some of these more really technical and jargon-y reports from federal agencies and think tanks up in the D.C. area, and making them more accessible. And then you're also in Richmond. So, you're interacting with the General Assembly a little bit more than most people typically do. When you're taking some of the reports that you produced with TCI to Virginia lawmakers, how do you normally frame them and actually present them? Do lawmakers state preferences for how quantitative research should be presented to them in general? Do lawmakers have an individual preference more of how they accept the data or understand it or like to have it presented to them?

Ms. Goren: I think in general legislators are interested in how many people in their district it's [a policy] going to impact, either positive or negative, how much it's going to cost. Some pretty basic questions are usually what they're interested in first. And then we have a part-time legislature in Virginia. A lot of those folks have day jobs, so they don't have a lot of time to be reading long reports. We'll take a two- or four-page report that we've written, and we'll summarize that down into two or three bullet points, and that will be what we give to legislators first, and then we'll have a link to our longer report, or we'll also give them our longer report behind it, but we found that brevity is very appreciated by Virginia lawmakers.

I think more generally in terms of quantitative analysis, focusing on the findings rather than the methods, and I know Dr. Hanley has just said, and I think it's interesting, that we need to do a better job of explaining our methods so that folks trust the work better, I think that's basically what you're saying, and I think that there is a place for that. And we find legislators want us to lead with the bottom line, like what is this going to do? What will this bill result in in my district? So, it's a very sort of concrete thing they're looking for.

Ms. Iwicki: Just a minor dovetail off of that, in terms of making the reports accessible to everybody: how often do you see average citizens coming up to you with or pulling out polls—probably not the statistical part—but reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, or referring to academic research, or the reports that you make, such as if they're going to town halls or something like that.
Ms. Goren: Generally, folks are not going to come across something unless it makes it into the newspaper or the nightly news. Most folks don't have the time or even the access to read academic journals. That said, we and lots of our partner organizations do try to distill findings into fact sheets and other simpler-to-understand forms of information that we can then distribute to not only the press and legislators, but also through our memberships, to regular Virginians so that they can go into town halls and other settings armed with some good information that will support their personal stories. We do encourage people in those settings to start with their personal story because that's the way legislators tend to think is in personal stories, but then if you can back that up with some research, that makes it even more powerful.

Ms. Iwicki: All right. Luis, we'll move on to you now. With the change in administration that's going on right now—to the degree that you present quantitative analysis to policymakers—have you seen any kind of change in how it's received with the different levels of government that you work with? So, say the General Assembly in Richmond, have they become more or less receptive to social justice issues or quantitative analysis in general, since you have some of these groups like Black Lives Matter growing in prominence, the voices of Latino and immigrant groups growing stronger—what have you seen?

Mr. Aguilar: What I would say is they have grown less receptive. That's one of the realities of it. However—and it's very interesting because we have actually turned out more people with groups such as Black Lives Matter—the Latino community also has been participating more. We actually filled up various committee rooms in the General Assembly. So, it's a combination of both the analysis that we bring up, but they [the legislators] also want to see faces. They want to see the story behind it, and we do provide that. We provide the turnout. However, they're not as—you would expect that would have some kind of change, whether they have the analysis or whether they have the people there, but not as of now. They seem to be less and less receptive. That's why we as advocacy groups, we gather. We figure out what kind of methods do we have to implement to actually make that change and what kind of stories that we tell, and what kind of information are we giving them.

Ms. Iwicki: Going back to within CASA itself, how do you use the quantitative research you come across to actually benefit your community development efforts and all of your outreach initiatives? In other words, how does CASA go about translating these quantitative findings into on-the-ground action and results for Latinos and [other] immigrants in the area?

Mr. Aguilar: As I mentioned earlier, when we focus on the electoral aspects, we try to figure out where—we just research where the demographics are at, where the voters are at, at the most basic level of that kind of information. But, we also have our staff in Maryland that focuses on surveying
the community and figuring out from the very base level: what are their most specific needs? We tie that into communication with other organizations on how we can have a direct change in that specific issue. How do we mobilize that group of people to directly affect that issue?

Ms. Iwicki: Thank you very much. What we move into now is more group questions. Feel free to take your time to respond to these. If you want to play off of each other's responses, that will be great. The first question that we have moving forward is, given the rise in opposition to some social justice groups, so groups such as Blue Lives Matter coming about, some of these anti-immigrant rallies we've been seeing, the alt-right growing in prominence. Are you at all concerned about your ability to reach people who are on the fence about such issues in a meaningful way?

Ms. Goren: I would say that the folks on the fence are not the ones going to those anti-immigrant rallies and participating in the alt-right movement. Those are not folks on the fence. There are, however, folks on the fence, and I think a lot of folks have contradictory frames in their minds about most of these social issues. If you talk about policing issues, most folks have a number of frames through which they view that. They might view police as somebody who protects them. They might also view police as scary when they get pulled over. People have these different frames in their minds that you can call up through the messaging and rhetoric that you use. Something we tend to do when we talk to folks—particularly audiences where we think there might be a lot more folks who are on the fence or opposed to us on whatever the issue is—we try to start with shared value messages, like we all want a country where every child has a chance to succeed, and right now, that's not happening because of x, y, and z. So, we start with the shared values message before we get into our critique of what's currently happening and our proposed solutions for how to make it better.

I think most folks are reachable. That does not mean everybody is reachable. That's what I would say.

Mr. Aguilar: I would say very similar to that, the people on the fence are typically not the people that you're going to reach. People have already made up their mind, and whether it be electoral or there be actual—any kind of specific issue, especially when we do immigrant rights issues. They already have their mind made up whether they're going to—sometimes they need that extra push. And the people on the fence, it typically tends to be a lot more work.

When you do have groups such as Blue Lives Matters or you have anti-immigrant rights organizations or groups that target you directly, [for example] there is a chairman in Prince William County who actually comes out and speaks to us, speaks out against our organization and the type of work that we do. We don't necessarily see them as taking away those people on the fence. They have their small group, and they do not make it more difficult to reach our base. It just motivates the base to work even harder to reach other people.
Dr. Hanley: I would just add that, speaking as an academic and a professor, the public that we are interacting with are the students in the classroom. I have conversations with people who are on the fence about these issues all the time, and it's not my role to have any particular political opinion or to advocate for one particular direction or another, but it is my role to point out research studies and talk about the methodologies that lead to different conclusions. And it helps to have a captive audience to listen to those conversations about methods, but I genuinely believe that people—the students that I'm lucky enough to interact with, who are on the fence—genuinely want to develop a language for sorting through conflicting claims; they genuinely are hungry for that kind of skill acquisition that can provide them with a rigorous basis for sorting through opposite claims.

I'm going to just go all out and say that talking about research methodology in a clear accessible way can be very helpful at least when the public on the fence that you're talking to is students, and I'd like to think that those skills influence them as they move forward and become voters and adults that you [the other panelists] interact with.

Ms. Iwicki: Great. Going even farther off of that, how would you actually go about successfully touting evidence in support of social justice issues like social economic justice in a world where, in a famous Brexit quote, people have had enough of experts. In general, people seem to be more skeptical of how traditionally respected informational authorities can actually impact their lives, and some people even like to say now we're in a post-truth age of perhaps more emotional reasoning versus rational or academically-based reasoning. So how would you go about presenting your quantitative evidence, academic or otherwise, in this changing informational environment that we're starting to see?

Dr. Hanley: I could start. So, if the problem is “We're tired of experts,” let me appeal to some expert knowledge and research findings, while acknowledging the irony of answering the question in this way. Sociologists who do in-depth interviewing using highly precise sampling methods and non-biased methods of data analysis, have again and again found that when you talk to people who are angry, who feel invisible, who seem to be supporting the rise of a certain defensive or defiant populism that goes alongside this rejection of expertise—those people are tired of being lectured to and judged. They feel that the teachers in their children's schools and their doctors, for example, are always telling them, “You're doing it wrong. Your kid needs to watch less TV and drink less soda. You need to drink less soda and exercise more.” People are tired of being lectured to, especially in the context of feeling locked into certain choices, like “I need to let my kid watch TV because I need to work a second job to bring food home at the end of the day.”

One of the findings that comes out of this research is the idea that experts—and maybe some of this applies to policymakers and political advocates—is that they should listen more before they think about advocating for change, before they think about sharing a particular research finding. This type of expert fatigue and desire to be heard and respected, not judged or condescended to, is supported by numerous sociologists' work. I try to take very seriously the idea
of starting with expressions of respect and listening, and of taking people's definitions of their own situations very seriously before you judge them from the outside. I think that, after you do that, you open up a space for a genuine exchange of information. I think that process has to be at the beginning of building a renewed role for expert knowledge in the future; it has to begin with listening and respect, and cultivating genuine exchange to rebuild trust.

Ms. Iwicki: Laura or Luis? Going off of that thrust, I imagine that you guys can build a little more easily, being these grassroots organizations who are directly interviewing people.

Mr. Aguilar: I think that the most important thing is actually listening. As an example, we are forming a coalition in Prince William County with Muslims of Virginia. A community that has been directly attacked by Islamophobia, and they are uniting with not only the Latino community but the undocumented [immigrant] community. If you come in and you tell them, “These are the issues that we're going to advocate” or “We're only going to advocate for school issues,” they will automatically say, “Wait, what?” They will not work with you.

Whether it's academic or whether it's an advocate coming in and telling people what to do, telling them that we must fight for $15—which is a great campaign, which we joined with full support—that is not the frame that we go into these types of conversations [with], especially when we're advocating, and we want those people to come out and advocate for themselves and use the research and use this as tools, but we can never see ourselves as the experts, regardless of how many years we've been doing this because people will just disconnect.

I believe that we are in this age of instant gratification. We have social media, and we want this different result. That's why we joined that community organizing aspect with the electoral aspect of it's not just one campaign where the Democrats and the Republicans come in and they rile things up and they leave. We actually stay with the communities and do that long-term work that has to be done.

Ms. Goren: I think at TCI we have different strategies with different audiences, I would say. With the people we know are with us on a particular issue, often what we're trying to do is arm them with information they can use in whatever the conversations are that they're having, and then when we're doing that, we're fairly straightforward in terms of [informing people that] Medicaid expansion will provide access to health coverage for 15,000 people in your legislative district. So that's one of our strategies is with our people who are already with us on an issue, we just arm them with information and then encourage them to continue to lead with their personal stories and their values before they use the facts, because we know that facts unfortunately don't persuade people. Used alone, they don't persuade people.

I think with broader audiences—every once in a while, we do a call-in radio, talk radio program or something like that—I think there is a lot of listening to what people have to say and acknowledging the truth of their lives. I mean, people are the experts on their own lives. We're not
going to get anywhere by trying to tell people what their lives are like. One thing we can do is try to provide some broader context for them. For example, we need to acknowledge that, yes, good jobs have largely gone away in southwest Virginia, and then we can add that we need to find ways that we can rebuild the economy, whether it's through healthcare, jobs, or other methods. I would agree with a lot of what both of you were saying about we need to listen to people first, and I think there is a role of providing people with useful information to them.

Ms. Iwicki: Luis, you brought up social media and instant gratification, and something else we're starting to see is that people essentially “bubble” away. They get stuck in these information bubbles that reinforce their own worldview, their biases. I don't know if you've heard at all about Facebook having to change its algorithm for how suggested links are presented to people.

When you're communicating, whether it's your data, your advocacy arguments, any of those sorts of things, have you had to put thought into how you will cross this information bubble or this ideological barrier, when you're trying to reach out to somebody on the other side? Or if you're trying not to put yourself in a bubble when you're thinking of creating more policy work, when you're really just trying to understand the truth on the ground for the research—have you had to put any thought into that?

Mr. Aguilar: So many of the issues that directly affect the immigrant community—[on those issues] we work very closely with Democrats. However, the main sponsors for the bills we work on are sponsored by Republicans. A lot of the time, I'm in the position of: how will I present data from the DMV study and how will they [the legislators] see it as something that's beneficial, rather than “the immigrants are going to take resources away.” So, it's using the data in that sense, that they're able to see that, and that I'm not bubbling away with my arguments, with my information, and that, “Oh, this is the right thing to do,” and I'm going to advocate myself and ally myself into winning the position, which typically does not seem to work. I've never experienced once that it will work that way.

Ms. Goren: I think that we do still have some sources that are broadly read across the political spectrum. We work a lot with certain reporters from the Richmond Times Dispatch. It probably has a somewhat elite readership compared to the general population of the region, but it is read across the political spectrum. By trying to work with some of those traditional media outlets that have a more politically-broad reach, I think it's one way we try to break through that bubble. One of my colleagues lives in a conservative suburban neighborhood, and he always brings that lens to his work, to our work, of “How would my neighbors receive this?” And, at the same time, I think sometimes progressive advocates will spend too much energy trying to reach middle class white suburban voters and not enough time providing folks who are in their base with the information that they need. I think that's a balancing act there in terms of trying to work broadly across the political spectrum and provide everybody with information that's useful to them and building a
broader coalition, which I think is important, while also making sure that we don't forget that people who are already with us are important to nurture and provide information to.

Dr. Hanley: I would just add, from my position as a university professor, that I think of my role as helping students learn the right skeptical questions to ask of all sources, whatever their sources may be. Maybe that comes through in our teaching on critical thinking and research methods, and is carried forward by our students. Maybe it's not. But that is the role that I think is best filled by universities.

Ms. Iwicki: This is all really good. We see all these communication errors and barriers coming up now. This will be our last question to round out the panel, so feel free to take as much time as you need to really answer this: to what degree do you think forms of quantitative analysis, and the numbers that you can find hidden behind people's lives and their experiences, should be used to inform public policy, perhaps over the more emotional story? Do you think maybe there could be some sort of danger that arises if we rely on this hard data more than emotional or personal experiences when we're creating public policy, or do you think it's more of a fine balance between, “Yes, we do need to look into these numbers to really see what's fundamentally happening here,” while at the same time, addressing people's emotional needs and respecting how they're the experts of their own lives?

Ms. Goren: Speaking about the Virginia General Assembly, I don't think we're in any danger of the technocrats taking over and everything being driven purely by quantitative analysis. Lawmakers think in personal stories. They're basically charismatic people. That's how you become a state delegate or state senator. That's their first inclination is to think in personal stories. I think part of our role is to make sure that they're also getting information such as, “Does this policy that you're proposing really accomplish its goal?” There was a proposal this last year to change Virginia's food stamp program, SNAP, so that folks who live in high unemployment areas can no longer get waivers from the work requirements. And the folks pushing that said, “Oh, this will increase work participation by low income single adults.” Unfortunately, that's not true. It doesn't increase work participation because, by definition, these are high unemployment areas where it's hard to get jobs. Those waivers are not available in areas where there are more jobs available with low unemployment rates. That was another thing where we didn't do that research. Some national folks did that research, and then we applied it, and we brought it to our legislators to help them understand that this goal that you want to achieve is unlikely to be achieved in this way.

I think that I would not necessarily want to live in a world where pure quantitative analysis ruled the day for the reasons both of you brought up, that there's this nuance in people's lives, that sometimes it's hard to draw out with the numbers alone, and you need the more nuanced stories in
order to craft policies and laws that are actually helpful to people instead of just well intentioned. But I don't think we're in any danger of that [laughs] at least for legislative policy.

Dr. Hanley: I guess I would say that I understand the rhetorical value of stories, and I understand the importance to people of being able to tell their own stories and to feel that those stories are being heard. But in the policy and advocacy process, not all stories are the same. We can all find a story that illustrates a conclusion we've already made, or we can choose stories that actually reflect what the quantitative data are telling us are the general trends. I think that's an important addition to the conversation, making sure that we use quantitative analysis to establish those broad patterns to tell us which are the right, or most representative, personal stories to use to make our point—which stories actually reflect a larger reality, rather than just a pre-existing argument that you want to make.

You can call me an idealist about methodology, but I think that reminding people that there is rigor and there is precision in choosing which stories to tell is important. There's rigor and precision in qualitative research too! In the space between quantitative analysis and anecdote, there's this thing we call qualitative research, which uses systematic procedures for ensuring transparency and rigor and avoiding bias in a similar way as quantitative research, but then also gives us this wonderful and important context.

So again, I think that using language to explain the social scientific infrastructure for avoiding bias can help remind people that there's more going on with expertise, in the work that we do, than just manufacturing stories out of thin air to fit pre-existing ideological goals.

Ms. Goren: Yeah.

Dr. Hanley: [To the other panelists] I recognize that I work in a world with a captive audience. That's why my answers to these questions are longer than yours. I'm not a battle-hardened concise oral communicator like you guys. But I do think that there's value in finding a way, a pithy way, to remind people of that rigor and to be transparent about it.

Mr. Aguilar: Yes, I think it's a combination, a fine balance of using the research as well as the stories themselves. Emotion is very powerful, but just in itself, it's not going to achieve the goal. A very clear example is, when the current administration has targeted undocumented immigrants, to have this narrative of criminalization—that undocumented immigrants commit more crime. It creates policy, and it creates new programs such as VOICE that want to criminalize immigrants, and what I see some of the national organizations do is they throw numbers. They throw research, and they say, “There's research saying that cities with undocumented populations, they have a lower crime rate.” But what has it done? We can throw research via Twitter, and we can advocate with it, and it hasn't done anything. It hasn't produced anything.
It has to be in combination with stories. Okay, we have these immigrant stories. They're turning out and advocating for themselves. Not only that, but they're also voting. It's once again a longer-term combination of efforts, both with academic research but also with advocacy work, that complement each other. All of them are tools. Both the story and the research are tools to actually get that agenda push, whether it's our agenda or the opposition agenda because, at the end of the day, that's what it is. It's a clash of ideas and which one ends up winning, which one has the better tools.

Ms. Iwicki: All right. That concludes all the questions that we have right now, thank you. I don't know if any of you had any concluding remarks you wanted to give at all, if there are any stray observations, or fun anecdotes that you always like to say or throw out while you still have a captive audience. [laughter] So, other than that, I'll give you some final time to say what you wanted to say.

Mr. Aguilar: Well, something that happens very often in the Richmond [Virginia] General Assembly, even a one-pager might be a lot of information for policymakers. You might have a meeting with them, but you will catch them when they're going to a meeting or to the session itself. You would just want to provide that bullet point you have on that piece of paper, you might just want to tap them [on the shoulder] and say it, give them that information, and then hand them the paper. But most of the time, they're not even going to read it. They're going to have an aide read it, and then they'll make a decision about what the aide thinks. It's very important to remember who your audience is and whether they will actually take the time to do that.

Ms. Goren: I think, just building off something that you said earlier, I think there is an important role for academics in terms of shaping public policy, even if that's not the goal [laughs], your goal, and you don't necessarily have a particular conclusion in your mind because it is important to understand—what are the underlying trends going on, what's happening with people's lives and with our social structures, and what policies actually work to make a difference. So, those cross-state studies that look at different policies—if we think of the 50 U.S. states as little policy experiments, and what works to address different things and what doesn't, that study is never probably going to make it onto the desk of a legislator, but organizations like mine do read them and do use them to inform, such as what are the things that we're going to propose that we do in Virginia, when we're coming up with our policies.

I think even though it looks sometimes like there's no communication between more applied research groups or think tanks like ours and more academic work, I think we do really benefit from the work of academics. It makes a difference.

Mr. Aguilar: Yeah.
Dr. Hanley: That's nice to hear. I don't have a lot to add. I'll just say that I think more feedback in terms of what type of information—and also what type of platform for disseminating that information—is actually accessible and useful for what you do would be helpful because people like to feel that what they do matters in some small way, and I think that you can always think of us academic researchers and student research assistants as unpaid labor that you can call on to help find answers to questions that you deem important for creating social change.

Ms. Iwicki: Thank you very much.

The William & Mary Policy Review would like to once again thank Dr. Caroline Hanley, Ms. Laura Goren, and Mr. Luis Aguilar for their participation in this enlightening discussion.