WEST VIRGINIA FORWARD
Our state faces challenges. A convergence of factors — including the financial crisis, a loss of manufacturing jobs and the downturn of the coal industry — has sparked an economic crisis. And although the national economy is sprinting toward recovery and growth, West Virginia is straggling far behind.

We need to turn strategies into success stories. We must have the courage to chart a new course and pursue prosperity with abandon.

As Franklin D. Roosevelt urged in the bleak atmosphere of 1932: “Above all, try something.”

And so we are.

This year, West Virginia University partnered with the state Department of Commerce and Marshall University to commission the McKinsey & Company in a search for a fresh look at our problems and new pathways to solving them.

We asked them to consult local and regional community leaders who are working diligently to support economic recovery and growth, such as the Chamber, the National Guard, Vision Shared, Imagine, the Business Roundtable, Tech Connect, and Discover the Real West Virginia Foundation.

Together, we have blazed a path that we call West Virginia Forward.
This path has three objectives.

Identify potential sectors in which West Virginia can grow to diversify our economy.

Reinforce the foundation that supports economic growth, including our infrastructure, talent base and business climate.

Create a clear roadmap, helping partners around the state navigate these new pathways toward our shared destination: A prosperous West Virginia.

The process

A fact-based process united expertise from around the world with deep awareness of West Virginia’s unique identity. Interviews with industry leaders, as well as with state partners, identified areas of strength and opportunity for future growth. A working group met weekly to align their thinking on the most optimistic solutions for West Virginia. They shared their key decisions with a steering committee comprising senior leadership and major initiative donors.

Five guiding principles anchored the process:

- Build on existing assets.
- Grow and diversify beyond the sectors already established.
- Find disruptive trends.
- Consider our regional impact.
- Find the quick wins.
STRENGTHENING EXISTING INDUSTRIES

These simple principles led us to discoveries that can change the future of West Virginia. Discoveries such as our state having many robust industries that we can grow, such as aerospace maintenance, repair and overhaul; automotive parts manufacturing; and metals manufacturing.

DIFFERENTIATION

West Virginia also has sectors that are growing more slowly here than nationally, but we can succeed by differentiating ourselves from the competition. One area is downstream oil and gas manufacturing, specifically in carbon-fiber-reinforced plastics and fine chemicals.

CREATING NEW SECTORS

New sectors the state can capture that promise high growth are cybersecurity, cloud services and data centers, and higher-end tourism. And two areas that create distinct opportunities in West Virginia are the life sciences and automotive assembly.

ATTRACTING NEW BUSINESSES

We must also turn our attention to creating incentives for innovation and business development. For example, we should consider creating a one-stop shop that aligns current resources with business needs and directs businesses to the right offices for help, thus nurturing a business-friendly environment.

And though the state’s infrastructure poses challenges, we must improve roads and bridges, increase broadband access and develop a landscape where data centers can thrive.

DEVELOPING OUR PEOPLE

Perhaps our biggest opportunity is also our biggest asset: our people. However, circumstances such as a mismatch between labor supply and demand, the opioid crisis and large waves of out-migration have left that asset in short supply.

If we can create jobs and the space where businesses can succeed, West Virginians will come home.

We can do this by building our future talent pool, especially in STEM areas, and expanding vocational training. We need to improve the health and skill of our existing workforce to attract employers, and we need to engage our universities’ alumni to reach out to the talent we have lost.
West Virginia Forward is a collaboration between West Virginia University, the West Virginia Department of Commerce and Marshall University to identify short-term, larger-scale projects that will boost West Virginia’s economic development efforts. The collaboration was supported by analysis from McKinsey & Company, which was focused on trending business sectors that could provide potential avenues for job growth and economic stability.

For the past several months, there have been working groups with staff from West Virginia University, the Department of Commerce, Marshall University and McKinsey. In addition, we have met with state business experts, the Chamber of Commerce, the National Guard, Vision Shared, Imagine, the Business Roundtable, Tech Connect and Discover the Real West Virginia Foundation to ensure we are gaining feedback from all of the State’s partners.

While all possibilities are being considered, a few key opportunities include workforce, business climate, entrepreneurship and infrastructure. In the past, the State and other organizations have addressed specific areas of concern. However, this collaborative partnership aims to look at West Virginia’s assets from a global perspective and pair them with economic trends we can leverage for future growth.

The report will be specific for West Virginia. It will be aspirational but realistic, and there will be no other report like it in the region. The state has phenomenal assets, such as energy and healthcare. But we need to know what business sectors are most likely to grow in the coming years and then determine if we have the right attributes to attract them here.

The state is in a transition economy. Our communities are struggling while jobs have disappeared. Our talent has been forced to leave the state they love to pursue opportunity. We need to embrace all that West Virginia has to offer and believe that we can create a new path forward. It is not about rising from the bottom of a poll or stat. It’s about moving West Virginia Forward.
**NEXT STEPS**

Our next steps include asking each stakeholder to undertake projects to implement these recommendations. With our partners, the Commerce Department and Marshall University, we are in the final stages of executing a Memorandum of Understanding that formalizes the partnership through commitments from each, outlining specific actions and dedicating resources. Teams have been in preliminary discussions, and implementation meetings will start in September. We will be reaching out to experts across the state to work together as we move forward.

**COST TO TAXPAYERS**

Nothing. The research and report were paid for through the support of private donors and foundations.

**GET INVOLVED AND STAY INFORMED**

If you have ideas you would like to share, or would like to get involved with the teams moving forward, contact Rochelle Goodwin at wvforward@mail.wvu.edu. You also can stay updated on progress and the latest information at wvforward.wvu.edu.