WASHINGTON STATE
Academy of Sciences
Science in the Service of Washington State

Thought Leaders Seminar Series

Summary of Key Insights

October 2026

Overview

Scientific research and technology innovations have extraordinary potential to improve people's lives. However, only a fraction of the potential public value of these discoveries and innovations are realized and some create new challenges. How might we collectively increase the public value of research and innovation in Washington State? The Washington State Academy of Sciences (WSAS) explored this question through the Thought Leaders Seminar Series: Innovation for Public Benefit. Three public webinars in September 2026 brought together nine national and state scholars, research leaders, and public sector policy experts in regional innovation, energy, and health. The series concluded on October 8 with an in-person panel of state leaders and facilitated roundtable discussions at the WSAS Annual Member Celebration.

The series encouraged participants to think differently about innovation, looking past the conventional economic measures of patents, products, and companies to a broader view focused on public benefit. As Jodi Sandfort, Dean of the Evans School of Public Policy & Governance at the University of Washington, put it, innovation is about 'how do new ideas come into context where they haven't been used before?' The series built on that framing to explore how research and new ideas can move into practice where they are most needed.

Across all three webinars, a consistent insight emerged: achieving meaningful public benefit requires moving beyond conventional, market-driven innovation toward integrated system coordination, interdisciplinary collaboration, and sustained partnerships. The series also served a strategic purpose for the Academy, providing a shared foundation for upcoming Deep Dives in energy and health, and helping activate a network of members and collaborators to contribute.

The Series

The series included three one-hour public webinars each with three panelists and a WSAS moderator, followed by an in-person session in Seattle.

Recordings of the three webinars and the October 8 panel, along with this summary of key insights, are posted on the WSAS YouTube channel and linked on the WSAS website, where they will serve as background material for members, and future WSAS deep dives.

Session
Rethinking Regional Innovation Ecosystems
Innovation in Regional Energy Systems
Translating Research for Health Benefits
In-Person Panel and Roundtable Discussions

What We Learned

Session 1: Rethinking Regional Innovation Ecosystems

September 3, 2026

Panelists:

- Barry Bozeman, Professor Emeritus, Arizona State University
- Jodi Sandfort, Dean of the Evans School of Public Policy & Governance, University of Washington
- Erwin Gianchandani, Assistant Director for Technology, Innovation and Partnerships, National Science Foundation
- Lee Huntsman, WSAS Board Member (moderator)

The opening session asked what public benefit means, how coordinated research and innovation actually happen, and what helps or hinders their public benefits. Panelists drew a foundational distinction between conventional innovation, driven by entrepreneurship and investment, and public value innovation, whose purpose is to benefit society broadly.

- **Public value is "sector agnostic."** It describes what we want to achieve as a society. Government is often an instrument for achieving it, but public value can be created by all sectors.
- **Innovation is not beneficial by definition.** Conventional innovation can be extremely beneficial, but it can also have unexpected effects. Significant investments in innovation warrant ongoing evaluation, not a one-time review.
- **Research needs both "push" and "pull."** Federal efforts such as the National Science Foundation's Regional Innovation Engines pair the push of research with the pull of real-world demand, inviting communities, industry, and regional stakeholders to help shape research questions. NSF describes this work as an experiment.
- **Washington's innovation reputation does not fully extend to its public systems.** Constitutional, fiscal, and political constraints shape what is possible. For example, of roughly 100 innovations the state's justice system has invested in over 80 years, many were launched on intuition rather than evidence and none achieved statewide take-up.
- **Universities have built infrastructure for discovery and commercialization, but not yet for public impact.** Researchers can help by starting from the problems and context of a place and producing "knowledge for action" rather than findings that sit in journals.

> *"I would say it all comes down to the people. You have to have individuals who have a particular vision that they're trying to aspire toward. And you have to have … a willingness on the part of those individuals to work across, oftentimes, boundaries that are difficult to transcend, whether it be fields, whether it be sectors, whether it be geographies."*
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> ***Erwin Gianchandani, National Science Foundation***

Session 2: Innovation in Regional Energy Systems

September 16, 2026

Panelists:

- Debra Smith, former CEO, Seattle City Light
- Kurt Beckett, Chair, Washington State Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council
- David Hart, Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations
- Michael Kintner-Meyer, WSAS Member (moderator)

The second session applied the public value lens to energy, a field with many stakeholders and decisions that range from land use and siting to utility rates and public cost.

- **The grid is managed in pieces but operates as one system.** As Debra Smith put it, "the pieces may be managed separately, but electrically, they are one system," and no single organization is in charge of the whole picture.
- **Fragmentation slows progress.** Decision-making is divided, permitting happens one step at a time, planning timelines do not line up, and risk is managed in isolation.
- **The most consequential innovation may be institutional.** Panelists pointed to better shared information, earlier coordination, and broader regional cooperation, alongside demand management, distributed resources, and transmission, rather than waiting on any single new generating technology.
- **Data exists but is not integrated.** Better integration must respect the agencies, utilities, and tribes that own the data, including tribal data sovereignty.
- **Trust is built by working together.** Panelists noted that trust grows when people take on real projects together, and when communities that host infrastructure share in its benefits.
- **Washington is well positioned to lead.** Its clean energy supply, relatively low rates, strong public power tradition, and research institutions make the state an "extraordinary laboratory for institutional innovation," especially for learning from smaller, community-rooted utilities.

Panelists also offered concrete ideas: bring energy needs into local land use planning before projects arrive; track deployment against the resource targets in regional plans; and run an outcome-based pilot that starts from a real infrastructure need and the date it is needed, then works backward through every decision to see what could change.

> *"The challenge is not a shortage of smart people. It's getting many smart people and many smart institutions to act on a shared picture and a shared vision."*
>
> ***Debra Smith, former CEO, Seattle City Light***

Session 3: Translating Research for Health Benefits

September 24, 2026

Panelists:

- David Chambers, Deputy Director for Implementation Science, National Cancer Institute
- Stephen Friend, CEO, 4YouandMe
- Amanda Boyd, Director of Native American Programs, Washington State University
- Judith Wasserheit, WSAS Board Member (moderator)

The final webinar examined how discoveries become therapies and interventions that improve health at scale.

As moderator Judith Wasserheit framed it, the goal of research is not just to develop innovative technologies, products, or programs, but to develop innovations that improve health for large numbers of people.

- **Too little research reaches patients, and too slowly.** David Chambers noted that it still "takes way too long to turn way too little of what we've researched" into better patient care. Implementation science studies what it takes for effective interventions to be adopted, including acceptability, cost, quality, and whether they can be sustained, as well as how to retire practices that are ineffective or harmful.
- **Implementation questions belong at the start.** Rather than waiting until testing is complete to ask whether anyone can use an intervention, researchers should consider implementation alongside efficacy. Because both interventions and their settings keep changing, sustaining them requires ongoing adaptation, not just preserving the original design.
- **Change who drives the process.** Stephen Friend described a drug discovery effort for rare diseases in which patients and advocacy groups guide early work, data and compounds are open source, no patents are filed, and validated therapies can be produced at cost. He argued that new technologies matter less than who starts the process and who is in charge of bringing results back to patients, and that today's incentive structures in health care are the biggest barrier to that shift.
- **Engagement is the foundation, not the final step.** Amanda Boyd distinguished between informing communities and engaging them. Communities hold lived, cultural, and historical knowledge, and they are partners in deciding what research should happen, not simply places where research takes place.
- **Trust is built through action.** Trust grows when researchers listen, follow through on commitments, are transparent about who benefits, return findings to the people who contributed, and respect Indigenous data sovereignty.
- **Collaboration takes practice.** Panelists recommended defining terms rather than assuming shared meaning, showing up with humility, and listening for the questions that matter to partners.

> *"Trust isn't something that researchers can simply ask communities to give us… It's built through action. It's built when we listen, when we make commitments and actually follow through."*
>
> ***Amanda Boyd, Director of Native American Programs, Washington State University; WSAS Board Member***

October 8 in-person panel and discussion

The concluding session took place at the WSAS Annual Member Celebration. It opened with a panel of state leaders, each of whom described an issue facing Washington that involves multiple, sometimes conflicting goals and would benefit from shared understanding and collaboration across sectors, including science and technology. The state leaders' remarks covered a wide range of issues, but they shared a common request of the research community: engage with policymakers early and help build decisions the public can trust.

- **Energy and the future workforce.** Senator Matt Boehnke described the challenge of meeting rising energy demand while preparing Washington's next generation for an economy being reshaped by AI, including protecting students and seniors from AI-enabled fraud. He sees the state's growing wealth of data as an asset: "We have more data than ever. And with those data, we can get better decisions that usually equal better solutions."

- **Disaster preparedness and infrastructure.** Representative Cindy Ryu focused on the state's growing wildfire and flood seasons in a tight budget year with less federal support. She noted that mitigation and preparedness pay far-reaching returns, from keeping insurance available and affordable to reducing the loss of lives, property, and infrastructure. She asked for help with early fire detection, smarter power systems, and the water and power demands of data centers, and posed a central question: how can Washington future-proof its infrastructure and align it with business, societal, and environmental outcomes? She urged researchers to "talk with us earlier, not later."
- **Health care costs and rural sustainability.** Senator Ron Muzzall described rising health care costs, low reimbursement rates for the roughly one in four Washingtonians on publicly subsidized care, the resulting strain on rural hospitals and primary care practices, and the difficult economics facing Washington agriculture. He pointed to AI, for example in reading radiology images, as one tool to help a health care system facing labor shortages at every level.
- **Science, trust, and policymaking.** Gael Tarleton noted that only 22 states have committed in law to using the best available science in policymaking, and only two have adopted basic scientific integrity standards, at a time when public trust is eroding. She encouraged researchers to engage the public early, treat initial policy proposals as hypotheses to be tested, take part in the political process, and evaluate policies after they are enacted.

Panelists also offered practical advice for researchers who want their work to inform policy. Representative Ryu called for system-wide, life-cycle planning that looks beyond the two- and four-year horizons of election and budget cycles. Senator Boehnke stressed keeping lines of communication open so that shared data can lead to better decisions. Senator Muzzall cautioned against blaming any single part of a complex system, noting that every part of health care has "a little bit of angel and a little bit of devil." And Tarleton reminded the room that no one is exempt from the policy process. "You aren't exempted from working the politics," she said, because that engagement is what helps policymakers avoid "really, really bad mistakes."

Jodi Sandfort, a speaker from the first webinar, then drew on social science research about how research is actually used in policy. Research is rarely used "instrumentally," as a direct solution handed to a policymaker. It is far more often used "conceptually," helping decision-makers see a problem in a new way. Without trusted relationships, research tends to be used "symbolically," pulled off the shelf to support an argument already made. She urged scientists to understand how policy is actually made, including at the front lines where agencies carry it out, and to create products that help people put knowledge into action rather than relying on white papers and policy briefs.

> *"We have to get better at helping people take knowledge into action."*
>
> ***Jodi Sandfort, University of Washington***

Participants then joined facilitated table discussions about where Washington's research and technology communities could do more for public benefit, and what each of them could do to help. The "Ideas Worth Sharing" they submitted clustered around a handful of themes:

- **Rebuilding trust in science and expertise.** This was the most common theme. Participants proposed town halls co-hosted by legislators from both parties that bring researchers and communities together around local problems, and urged scientists to listen first. As one participant wrote, "Be a trusted person first, then the science will be trusted."

- **Changing how academia rewards work.** Many called for recognizing community engagement and public impact alongside publications and grant dollars, training new faculty in public engagement and policymaking, and building flexibility into faculty workloads to make that possible.
- **Building lasting relationships with policymakers.** Ideas included sustained dialogues with legislators, field tours where researchers listen to policymakers and implementers to seed new research questions.
- **Prototyping solutions.** Several participants proposed prototyping social systems quickly and iteratively to test new policy approaches to hard interdisciplinary problems, such as transmission siting.
- **Navigating AI together.** Participants saw AI as both a shared challenge requiring leadership and a potential rallying point, and called for AI literacy starting in schools. One noted that AI is making us very good at solving problems, while scientists and engineers still struggle to define and prioritize which problems matter most.

Participants also named specific issues where they would like to see cross-sector work, including nutrition for schoolchildren, preconception health, prioritizing health threats to inform the policy agenda, and helping state agencies weigh the long-range effects of today's decisions.

Cross-cutting lessons

Although the three webinars covered different fields, they converged on a common message, and the October 8 discussions reinforced it: research that delivers public benefit must move past a linear model in which work is carried out without regard to its potential uses or users. To achieve public benefit, research should:

- **Not assume benefits will trickle down.** New products and companies do not automatically translate into benefit for a region.
- **Start from the context and needs of users,** whether patients, communities, regions, or institutions.
- **Prioritize interdisciplinary approaches** and coordination across institutions and systems.
- **Include communities in setting research agendas,** not only in sharing results.
- **Treat new approaches as experiments,** with evaluation built in from the start.
- **Invest in trust,** by building relationships with communities and policymakers before they are needed.

Looking Ahead

The series was designed as a starting point, and several of its ideas are already shaping how WSAS approaches its upcoming work:

- **An experimental mindset.** Panelists encouraged treating new approaches as experiments to be tested and learned from. WSAS is approaching its Deep Dive and other new programming in the same spirit.
- **Keeping multiple values in view.** Panelists noted that public value is often contested, and that research can help people find common ground. WSAS Deep Dives are designed to bring together a mix of perspectives, and help participants build shared understanding even where they disagree.
- **Filling gaps that plans alone cannot.** Regional plans set direction, but panelists pointed to needs they do not meet on their own, such as tracking progress against targets, convening across institutional boundaries, and designing practical pilots. These are areas where an independent, science-based convener like WSAS can add distinctive value. As Jodi Sandfort noted on October 8, research often matters

most by helping decision-makers see a problem in a new way, rather than by handing them a single answer. WSAS strives to advance this conceptual use of science.

- **Opportunities for WSAS.** Participants suggested roles for WSAS that include policy training or fellowships for members, field tours with policymakers and implementers, and convenings that bring researchers, legislators, and communities together.

These ideas will inform two upcoming WSAS initiatives:

- **Long-Term Energy Planning.** The energy session's emphasis on system integration, institutional coordination, and partnership with community-rooted public utilities offers a framework for this work. We will ask deep dive advisors and participants to view the recording of this session as background.
- **Health & Well-being.** The health session's focus on implementation science and early, sustained community partnership will help shape how we frame questions and engage stakeholders for our Deep Dive on health and well-being and serve as key background for advisors and participants.

More broadly, the series has given WSAS **a shared vocabulary for public value innovation** that we can carry into future programming.

Thank You

We are grateful to the Hoveida Family Foundation for supporting this series, which brought together an exceptional group of national and state leaders and began a conversation that will shape our work for years to come.

We also want to thank our panelists and moderators for their time and insight; the state leaders who joined us on October 8; facilitator Bridget Kelly and our table hosts; our advisors Lee Huntsman, Judith Wasserheit, Betty Bekemeier, and Michael Kintner-Meyer; and WSAS early career fellow Becca Blynn, who prepared a series summary.

Lead WSAS staff were Director of Programs, Renske Dyedov, and Executive Director, Melanie Roberts. Please share your questions or comments with Melanie at melanie.roberts@washacad.org.

This report was prepared using generative AI tools with specific prompts to extract and summarize key points from the Thought Leader discussions. WSAS staff heavily edited and reviewed content for accuracy.