Through **The Listening Project**, ideastream invites Northeast Ohio residents to describe what matters most to them and to their communities every year.

In 2014-15, ideastream asked residents what they see as pressing challenges and unique assets—both the region’s and their own. Community members also weighed in on Northeast Ohio’s pluses and minuses when it comes to health and schools. These were also topics of discussion by local leaders at conversation forums hosted by ideastream in Summit and Cuyahoga counties. A concluding survey asked residents to address the community’s self-perception, and the answers were as descriptive as they were directive: “Take a look around. Work to change things that you think drag the region down.”

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**“Media plays a big role in calling attention to the unique and great things happening in the region...”**

**“We care about what’s going on.”**

**“If you always hear the same thing, there will be no growth and no exchange of relevant information.”**

PHOTO front cover: Listening Project Health Forum at Arts Collinwood, ©ideastream
COMMUNITY ASSETS

“I am always tickled to hear when people first move here that they are surprised by how much the city has to offer.”

Listening Project Survey participant

“Northeast Ohio is a melting pot of nationalities. We tend to allow many cultures the room to grow and thrive.”

Listening Project Survey participant

What does Northeast Ohio have to offer? Plenty, according to participants in The Listening Project 14. As in years past, survey respondents celebrated the region’s high points, especially its bountiful Parks & Lake Erie (“Unique and awe-inspiring natural resources,” boasted one resident) and rich variety of Arts & Culture institutions and offerings.

This year, high numbers of residents put Academic Institutions on the honor roll of assets—and remarked not just about the quality of the region’s colleges and universities, but also their number and range. Respondents named schools across the region and of every institutional type, from community colleges (Tri-C), to public universities (Cleveland State University and Kent State University), to private colleges and specialty schools (Case Western Reserve University, Ursuline College, and Oberlin College & Conservatory).

There was a tie for the sixth spot on the list of community assets, as survey respondents praised the region’s Restaurants & Food Culture and Cultural Diversity in equal numbers. “There is an explosion of gardens and farms in the city,” observed one participant about the local food scene, while others pointed out the “great chefs,” and “great food: markets of all sorts, restaurants, and microbreweries.” Many respondents spoke about Northeast Ohio’s food culture in terms of the community’s diverse ethnic heritage. A resident explained that the region gets its “diversity of food from its vast and changing immigrant population.”

LP14 ASSETS

1. Parks & Lake Erie
2. Arts & Culture
3. Academic Institutions new
4. Community
5. Health Care
6. Restaurants & Food Culture tie with Cultural Diversity

LP13 ASSETS

Parks & Lake Erie
Arts & Culture
Cost of Living
Restaurants & Food
Community
Health Care
Listening Project participants expressed their concerns about the region. For the first time in years, respondents called out Racism & Racial Tension as a challenge in the community. They named “systemic racism,” “rising prejudice,” and “racial divisions,” as problems that result in “segregated neighborhoods” and other consequences. Many made a connection between race and community relations with police, citing “excessive police force” and “mistrust of police” as related challenges. One resident called for “de-escalation and training for law enforcement” as a necessary step, while another decried “attacks on the Cleveland police department.”

Respondents also pointed to problems of Poverty: poor neighborhoods, poor schools, poor job market, and poor prospects for the future. Many participants observed the struggles of others, but many talked about themselves. Their comments conveyed a palpable personal financial anxiety, as they listed “saving my foreclosed-upon home,” “maintaining financial security into retirement,” “paying for college for my kids,” and “helping my aging parents” among their personal challenges.

Another worry this year was the Environment, especially pollution of Northeast Ohio’s water supply. “You can’t swim in it,” one respondent lamented about Lake Erie.

“We tend to focus on what divides us rather than what binds us together as a community...east side vs. west side, black vs. white, rich vs. poor, blue collar vs. white collar, Republican vs. Democrat...”

Listening Project Survey participant
Respondents bemoaned a lack of pride among Northeast Ohioans—particularly life-long residents. “Native Clevelanders don’t seem to appreciate that we have all of the assets of a big city,” said one participant. “This is a learned attitude,” explained another.

Why such negativity? Many blamed professional sports (“Our sports teams have a habit of breaking our hearts.”), while others believe our collective sense of self is diffused by too many municipalities (“There is no regional cohesion. How many Cleveland residents have no idea what Akron has to offer?”?). One participant argued it’s not quite a question of pride: “Low self-esteem would be a better description.” Other responses conveyed a lack of hope: “I wish I felt more proud to live here,” sighed one. “Bottom line? We’re a dump,” declared another. And, most dispiriting of all: “I don’t have much hope.”

Yet, optimism cut through the gloom. “It’s time to wake up and smell the fresh air,” declared one respondent. Said another: “The ‘burning river’ and ‘Mistake on the Lake’ monikers are a worn out joke. Times have changed and so should we!”

Many survey respondents observed that its newer and younger residents are driving pride in the region. Offered one participant, “Newbies are more optimistic about CLE than long-time locals,” and, said another, “New residents are slowly reinvigorating current residents, and the people with negative perceptions are going away.”
What can local community leaders do to help reduce the Northeast Ohio dropout rate?

Survey respondents and community leaders also agreed on the necessity of quality pre-K, kindergarten preparedness, and improved child and parent literacy. Said Kurt Karakul, President and Executive Director of the Third Federal Foundation, “Kids unprepared for kindergarten are unprepared to read. That creates a huge burden on the school system.” And Bonnie Entler, Executive Director of Seeds of Literacy, explained that unprepared kids often come from unprepared parents: “Two-thirds of Cleveland adults have weak reading skills themselves, rendering them unable to help educate their own children.” The result, added Allison Wallace, Executive Director of the Greater Cleveland Neighborhood Centers Association, is that “it is really difficult for kids to ever catch up.”

Many hopeful survey participants see a crucial role that members of the community can play to support and motivate students: “Mentor a child. Visit the schools and teach the importance of staying in school,” said one respondent. Said another: “Enlist the help of those who made it through the difficulties of poverty and homelessness. Let them talk to the kids. Let them share their experiences, lessons learned, and where they are now.”

“Until Cleveland can get on top of improving its schools and dropout rate, it will be forever strangled.”

Listening Project Survey participant
“Students who are able to form connections, who are able to ask for help, who are able to find the resources they need to solve problems, are much more able to succeed in the workforce and beyond.”

Kirstin Toth, Senior Vice President, The GAR Foundation

“I think it is really powerful when you talk to some of our students and their families about the impact that many of the volunteers, teachers, principals, programs, and industry partners have had on those students’ lives.”

David James, Superintendent, Akron Public Schools

Watch the full education forum at ideastream.org/lp/dropout
Most Listening Project survey participants (66%) said they view themselves as “healthy” or even “very healthy.” Yet few respondents (4%) rated Northeast Ohio as “healthy” when considering its residents as a whole. “Looking around, I am struck by the average girth of my fellow Ohioans. We are a fat state as well as a swing state,” observed one participant.

In fact, the majority described the region’s overall health as merely “average” (58%) or even flat out “unhealthy” (37%). Their diagnosis? “I see too many still smoking and eating out a lot,” one respondent offered, “and kids don’t play outside as much.”

Survey respondents counted mental health, cancer, and heart disease as their most urgent concerns about their own health, as well as the health of their friends, family, and colleagues. Their concerns for the wider community centered on food and fitness. They placed obesity and diabetes, limited access to healthy food, and lack of exercise as the region’s leading health threats.

Community leaders from Summit and Cuyahoga counties came together to offer their own prognosis on the health of residents. They echoed many of the concerns raised by survey participants and raised some others, including infant mortality, opiate addiction, and lack of funding for preventative health care. “There’s no economic incentive for the kinds of things that keep people healthy,” observed Jean Polster, President and CEO of Neighborhood Family Practice.

Many leaders pointed out the consequences of poverty and substandard housing on the health of residents. “Your zip code is more important than your genetic code in terms of health outcomes,” said Lisa Nelson from the Community Development Department of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland.

Still, leaders recognized that health problems threaten residents across Northeast Ohio, in all our communities, from the youngest children to the elderly. “You go to Bath and they’ve got problems. You come out to Stow, they have problems. It’s not just an urban or an inner ring issue,” commented Sheila Williams, a Board of Health Member at Summit County Public Health. Added Dr. Amy Lee, Professor at Northeast Ohio Medical University, “We really do need to involve the entire village—everybody—to try to improve the community’s health, because we all affect the conditions where people live, work, worship, and play.”
“There is an issue with a lack of resources, whether it’s economic resources, health literacy, or access to care, that can get in the way of someone making healthy choices and result in health problems.”

Dr. Terry Albanese, Assistant to the Mayor for Education, Health and Families, City of Akron

Watch the full health forum at ideastream.org/lp/health

“Having insurance doesn’t mean a thing if you don’t know how to use it. So we’re looking at empowering people by giving them information that they need...”

Yvonne Oliver, NE Ohio Advocacy Coordinator, UHCAN Ohio

“In the cancer world, we worry about tobacco, obesity, and nutrition...In our city, I think poverty is a root cause that trumps all three of those others.”

Dr. Stanton Gerson, Director, Case Comprehensive Cancer Center

“There’s a clear lack of psychiatric health care in Northeastern Ohio, which really is a problem. All the mental health and psychiatric beds are tight, tight, tight. There is no access.”

Dr. Tom Tulisiak, President, Medina Hospital, Cleveland Clinic
By “Listening to the Community and Looking for What Matters,” ideastream seeks to hear and understand the experience of life in the region. It’s this understanding that allows ideastream to shape content, programs, and services that matter to the people of Northeast Ohio.

ideastream does more than listen: ideastream convenes.

“Here in Northeast Ohio we’re tough. We don’t give up. We’re more creative than you think. We’re always trying to do the right thing.”

Listening Project Survey participant

“We need to work together to help solve problems.”

Listening Project Survey participant

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ideastream does more than listen: ideastream convenes. Through The Listening Project, ideastream brings the voices of the community together. And by representing the sum of their comments, stories, and observations on these pages, ideastream is able to reflect something of the Northeast Ohio character and spirit back to the community.

Your participation in The Listening Project is important to ideastream. To provide feedback or see previous Listening Project reports, visit ideastream.org/lp
“Our community needs to keep building up not only Public Square, the Theatre District, and University Circle, but **spread the expansion and investment into neighborhoods**; each one has something special.”

Listening Project Survey participant