The Opportunity Project Summit

Director's remarks as prepared for delivery

February 23, 2023

- Thank you, and hello, everyone! ¡Buenos días! It's an honor to join you at our TOP Summit this morning.

- I had a chance to review a few of the projects and I was amazed at their sophistication and how they spoke to community needs.

- The Opportunity Project supports projects that require a special kind of creativity and critical thinking by entrepreneurs. What I really like is that it brings together aspirational thinkers, dreamers, and technical expertise. And THEN, it enables them with federal data and technology.

- The results are tools that help society in a way that addresses problems from a community perspective. Hey, it doesn't get any better than that!

- In fact, each year, TOP brings together diverse groups of creative thinkers to address some of our nation's major data and technology challenges. To date, thousands of people, hundreds of organizations, and 30 federal agencies have participated in The Opportunity Project sprints.

- These efforts bore fruit, with over 200 new open data tools covering environmental, health, and social problems, as well as our economy.

- As a special shout-out, on behalf of the Census Bureau we'd like to thank everyone who participated in our latest sprint on the Puerto Rico challenge. We appreciate and applaud your help in using federal data to tell stories and improve lives.

- All this is why I'm so excited to address you in my role as director of the Census Bureau!

- But let me caution you: as a relatively new director, I confess to being a bit of a weirdo . . . a little different than maybe those who came before me. (Just ask the staff!)

- You see, I was trained as a mathematical statistician. You know, mathematical proofs 24/7 with lots of formal logic, pages of math symbols and Greek letters, subscripts and superscripts; the whole nine yards.

- I accidentally fell into survey sampling and ended up becoming a sampling statistician, then a survey director, manager, and down the road I immersed myself in policy research.

- My four-decade experience in policy research has been, let's say, quite enlightening.

- Let me share a little of what I learned, because it ties in with the approach used by The Opportunity Project.

- For instance, I discovered you don't really need a probability sample to survey and understand the plight of runaway teens who were victims of human trafficking. The tragic uniformity of their horrendous experience allowed a convenience sample to suffice for the purpose of gaining the knowledge that was needed to develop interventions . . . to help them.

- And I've often spoken of the sufficiency of a sample of n=1 to make impactful policy recommendations.

- In that instance, I worked on a study on the impact of ICE raids on families and local communities. The insight required just one interview of one family whose breastfeeding mom was transferred out of state without her child. The simple policy recommendation called for authorities to ask detainees if they had children at home so that family separations were averted.

- Now, I've often been the sole person of color in a room full of decision-makers.

- I once found that I needed to argue against funding a sound scientific research project that would only promote a two-tier health care system for those with and those without health insurance. The project had been pitched as a way to provide the uninsured with cheap, less effective care for a chronic condition, while the insured would continue to receive conventional treatments.

- I argued against a beautifully designed project that would teach the homeless how to reduce or eliminate smoking cigarettes because of the cancer risk it posed twenty years hence. Yet it totally ignored the grave, immediate threats that the homeless faced in their daily struggle with survival.

- I've witnessed countless health care research projects try with futility to get underserved, non-English speakers to improve their access and use of clinics. Yet no one saw—literally before their very eyes—that the real solution was for the health care industry itself to acculturate to a more diverse population, which it is now doing inevitably after about 30 years.

- You see, I had brought my whole self to the table for my work as a statistician. I brought my life experience, my culture and values as a Latino, and my technical training as a statistician and mathematician.

- That combination allowed me to think differently and unconventionally about problems facing society. It empowered within me a different lens, a different perspective.

- And in a real sense, it advanced a community-based participator research perspective, one that uses a community's lens to not only define the problem, but to develop the solution as well.

- And that's exactly what I see in the people and the solutions being developed through the The Opportunity Project. These projects embrace community engagement by asking participants to view problems and develop solutions from their own communities' perspectives. And the magic elixir that crystalizes the solution is data!

- So, I'd like to congratulate the current and former participants in The Opportunity Project.

- We've never been in a better position to use federal data to engage in inclusive innovation. Inclusive innovation is not easy, but the challenges can be tackled by leveraging federal data and community perspectives. And the solutions are only limited by your creativity and determination.

- I challenge you to bring your life experience, your culture, your values, and training to the table.

- Study the projects at this summit, their articulation of the problems, their approaches, uses of data, and especially the creative, critical thinking that led to their solution. Then take a look at your community and find problems using your own unique, powerful lens. Invite others' perspectives, too.

- And if you need help developing a solution, we at The Opportunity Project are at your service.

- Thank you so much for joining us for this summit and for all your work on this sprint.