

The eNavigator

Sidney Entrepreneurship Stories

By David Iaquinta, Ph.D. – February 14, 2024

About the Sidney Story...



For most Americans, Sidney is just one more rural community among thousands. Some may know of Sidney as the once home of **Cabela's Outfitters**. But Sidney is a community worth a deeper look as it reinvests itself one more time by focusing on and investing in entrepreneurial development. This story is part of a larger collection of Sidney stories and analysis. In these stories lessons are to be learned!

Sidney Story Collection...

Web Link

1. Sidney Story Collection by Don Macke
2. Sidney Case Study Executive Summary by Don Macke
3. Sidney, Nebraska – Entrepreneurial Community Case Study by Don Macke
4. Cheyenne County and Sidney Development Opportunity Profiles by e2 and Don Macke
5. E3 Assessment by the Sidney E3 team by David Iaquinta

Sidney Landing Page

Background Papers

6. What is a Community Champion? by David Iaquinta
7. The Sarah Sinnett Story – Sidney Champion and E2 Lead by David Iaquinta
8. The Cory Keen Story – E3 Champion by David Iaquinta
9. The Paula Abbot and Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center Story by David Iaquinta
10. The Melissa Norgard Story – Corporate Professional, Economic Development Director, Entrepreneur, and Mother by David Iaquinta
11. Stop the Swap Story by David Iaquinta
12. The eNavigator by David Iaquinta
13. The Alisha Juelfs Story – Navigator by David Iaquinta
14. The Amber Fields Entrepreneur Story with Jennifer Powell by David Iaquinta
15. Jillana Saunder... Entrepreneur – Savor and Grace – Sidney, Nebraska by Don Macke

Stories

16. *Community Champions...* <https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/entrepreneur-ecosystem-champions-with-pam-abbot-and-sarah-sinnett.html>
17. *Entrepreneur Navigators...* <https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/entrepreneur-navigators-with-alisha-juelfs-and-rachael-barry.html>
18. *About E3...* <https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/exploring-e3-in-nebraska.html>

Podcasts

Thanks David...



At e2 we want to acknowledge the remarkable work of Dr. David Laquinta in conducting interviews, site visits, and curating many of these stories. Our **Sidney Story** could not be possible without Dr. Laquinta's remarkable work. Dr. Laquinta is a 50-year veteran college and university professor recently retired from Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, Nebraska. He is an international expert in rural community economic development.

Listen to David's e2 **Pathways to Rural Prosperity** podcast from April 2022 focusing on "Community Resilience":

<https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/episode-33.html>.

SMIF Acknowledgement...



e2 would like to recognize support from the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation in hosting e2 and our **Sidney Story**. SMIF is a leader in community-centered entrepreneurship through its REV Initiative.

For more information:

<https://smifoundation.org/programs/economic-development-2/>

Why Stories Matter...

For nearly 50 years e2 has been gathering and curating stories about communities across rural North America. These stories serve to inspire and inform other communities as to what is possible with entrepreneur focused community economic development. Stories matter in that they are relatable to community builders across the continent. Sidney's stories are compelling and illustrate renewal after a massive socio-economic crisis. For more e2 stories check out...

<https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/library/community-regional-case-studies/>

Questions and Additional Information

Don Macke – e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

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The eNavigator

BY DAVID IAQUINTA, PH.D.



“NO WRONG DOOR” THE LARGER POOL MEANS IT’S LESS CRITICAL FOR ME TO CHASE PEOPLE

Elsewhere we have made the case for why an eNavigator is an essential piece of the e2 strategy (see e2 Entrepreneur Navigator Guide). The guide provides an excellent articulation of the theoretical underpinnings of our advice to communities and has guided the development of the E3 initiative. The acquisition of an eNavigator has been an early goal for successful E3 communities as we have worked with the E3 peer-learning and entrepreneurial ecosystem building initiative. In this paper we provide evidence as to the nature of the position and document how it has been structured based on evidence from E3 communities and in the voices of E3 team members and eNavigators themselves. Our goal is to show that while it takes various forms, there are important lessons for best practices and strong support for the utility of the position. The evidence supports that communities with an eNavigator experience marked gains in entrepreneur support, increased public awareness of the importance of the entrepreneurial ecosystem to the community at large, and improved relations with public officials and institutions. Our primary goal is to extract practical lessons that can guide other communities in their quest to build stronger communities using the e2/E3 approach. Our evidence is based on a longitudinal case study of the E3 process in six rural Nebraska counties, emphasizing the experience in two communities, Sidney/Cheyenne County and Ord/Valley County. Additional reference is included for Hutchinson in Reno County, Kansas.

WHAT IS A eNAVIGATOR?

The [e2 Entrepreneurial Ground Game Guide](#) a typology of jobs working with entrepreneurs, running from networkers to facilitators to coaches, as skills, experience, and expectations increase. In this context the [e2 entrepreneur Navigator Guide](#)¹ defines the eNavigator role as a “conductor who brings order and harmony to the chaos of a young venture.” The Gallop BP10ⁱⁱ designation of conductor emphasizes three qualities: relationship, delegation, and determination. The navigator undertakes the following basic e2 transaction activities:

- ✓ Work with the guidance of the community’s E-Team.
- ✓ Undertake targeted outreach to entrepreneurs.
- ✓ Work with entrepreneurs to identify needs and wants.
- ✓ Network entrepreneurs to relevant available resources.
- ✓ Ensure quality control with respect to resource assistance.
- ✓ Manage the entrepreneurial client portfolio.
- ✓ Provide insight from working with entrepreneurs on resource ecosystem needs.
- ✓ A job description for the eNavigator should contain the following responsibilities:
- ✓ Leads the community’s Ground Game.
- ✓ Is actively engaged daily in outreach to entrepreneurs and networking them to resources.
- ✓ Manages the E-Portfolio and tracking system.

- ✓ Ensures resource provider accountability.
- ✓ Advises the community's E-Team regarding gaps and needs within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.
- ✓ Supports entrepreneurial ecosystem building and operation.

In this role we add that the E3 experience demonstrates that the eNavigator must be supported by an active team of supportive entrepreneurs, public representatives (e.g., economic development director, city officials, community volunteers, etc.) who provide backstopping assistance, whether for back office tasks, client referrals, or other suitable demands of the job to prevent burnout.

THE eNAVIGATOR ROLE THROUGH AN eNAVIGATOR'S EYES

Alisha Juelfs, eNavigator for Cheyenne County Nebraska, describes the role this way...

Entrepreneurs are busy running their business while juggling their work/life balance. They may not have time to do the research or know who to reach out to for help. The navigator serves as the first point of contact for new and existing business owners that need assistance. I like to explain my role as the, "Hey, google" for small businesses. Whether it be marketing, financing, retiring, relocating, or whatever that topic is, the navigator can navigate or point business owners in the right direction. Having a neutral person to turn to for assistance can be a game changer for success.

WHO IS AN eNAVIGATOR? EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD – THE E3 EXPERIENCE

THE eNAVIGATOR ACCORDING TO SARAH SINNETT... Sarah Sinnett's involvement in birthing the Sidney eNavigator position is manifold from its key design elements, to funding the position, to how it works and is evolving today. Her insights provide a framework for introducing the comments by other E3 team members and Alisha.

KEY DESIGN REQUIREMENT OF THE eNAVIGATOR POSITION... Sarah explains the motivation for the eNavigator design in Sidney...

We do have a formal interlocal agreement, but it is not with the city or the county. We have it with Sidney Public Schools and Western Nebraska Community College (WNCC). That really came into play when we went to hire the navigator role. We were trying really hard to provide a comprehensive benefits package to enhance the desirability of the position. You can talk to anyone who is in the Chamber or a small business. It's really difficult to hire a one-off person without a comprehensive benefits package. Everyone was telling us we weren't going to get it done. The city did offer to put this role underneath them. I was really thankful, but I was adamant and said, "No, this has to be a separate entity from the city or the county or anything else or people aren't really going to understand what this is." I wanted this role getting their orders from E3 and not the city.

E3 team member Melissa Norgard agrees with Sarah describing it this way...

We have really been fortunate, especially with Alisha stepping into our navigator role. We've really been fortunate ... [that Alisha] ... didn't come from Sidney. She's from Potter, which is ... [outside but not near]

... Sidney. I think that there have been people who approached her and felt really comfortable talking to her because they felt she was a neutral party. She didn't work for the city. She didn't work for the Chamber. She didn't have a lot of connections to other people in Sidney. I know that some people approached her that would have never gone to economic development because it's part of the city and they don't have a good view of the city, or they didn't like somebody at the city, or they didn't like somebody at the Chamber. So, I feel like that just in itself ... [was key to] ... those people reaching out and having conversations with Alisha and her being able to put some resources in front of them, or help them through life plan, or getting some financial put down on paper. I think those things have proved to be super valuable for our group, specifically.

Sociologists refer to roles like this in the family as an insider/outsider role. When asked directly if she thought this was a good characterization and that it was a necessary prescription for a successful eNavigator, Melissa replied...

Yeah. I think people saying, "Oh, well, she doesn't already have a preconceived ... notion of me or my business or doesn't even know me." I think that coming from a small town, people think those things or "my business wasn't ... [a success the] ... first time I tried to open it. So now people consider me a failure." and Alisha never knew them when their previous business failed. And so now she's gonna try to work through it with them, "Why did the business fail? And what are some things that we can do to make a restarting of another business successful."

Given her experience as the former economic development director, E3 member and entrepreneur Melissa Norgard provides more insight when asked to consider what is different about the eNavigator role in Sidney...

I think the biggest thing is the approachability and that the economic development role in Sidney lives under the city. If someone doesn't like somebody who sits on City Council and they go talk to the Economic Development Director, they think that the Economic Development Director has to tell the City Council every conversation that they have, which is not true. There are lots of confidential conversations that I had as the economic development ... [director] ... that I didn't ever tell anybody about. I think some people might have a bad perception of the City Manager, or they don't like him for whatever reason, so they don't want to talk to Economic Development, because that's part of the city. I think it's just that stigma of, "Well that job lives with the city, and I don't like the city for these XYZ reasons." It's unfortunate because I think that they are a good resource as Economic Development.

This is a point emphasized in separate interviews with the eNavigator Alisha. She indicates that structural separation from government and groups like the Chamber is key to establishing trust with her clients both in terms of their willingness to reach out in the first place and second in terms of their ability to be comfortable with their vulnerability. Being honest about one's problems requires a willingness to be vulnerable and this is generally anathema to an entrepreneur's mindset where projecting confidence seems imperative. eNavigator, Alisha Juelfs describes it this way...

We know a lot of things that most people don't. The level of confidentiality you have to have to be in this position is a big reason why people hesitate coming in because they don't want people to know their business.

In short, all three of these women feel the eNavigator needs to be an “insider-outsider,” someone who both “gets” the community, and its culture yet is perceived as safe, rather like a kindly aunt or uncle with whom a child can share personal information. Fear, stereotypes, ideological jingoism, collective myths and ego defense all work against being vulnerable and asking for help. Structural insulation from the city reduces the social psychological barrier to connecting.

Cory Keen goes as far as to say that Alisha was a preferred choice for the eNavigator position exactly because she resided outside Sidney in Potter...

Alisha lives in Potter, and she's very involved with everything. That town is hopping. She knows everybody there. Her social network is awesome. Strategically when we interviewed everybody ... one of the check boxes for Alisha was Potter. That's the kind of community that does well, it's small. They're kind of self-sustaining. They're entrepreneurial. It's a really cool community. One of the things we liked about her when we interviewed for the navigator position was, she was from Potter. That was a positive.

Funding the position required several tactical pivots, creativity, collaboration, and structural reinforcement. The pivot involves moving off the original plan which sought to combine funding from the Chamber, Tourism and Economic Development into a single position under E3 team management. Obviously, this led to significant resistance as referred to above since it appeared to be a turf grab on the part of E3. Creativity and collaboration involved thinking more broadly about new potential partnerships and marshaling already existing relationships with NCF, e2 and the local donor advised fund. Structural reinforcement involved ensuring durability of the relationship by entering an interinstitutional agreement. This latter point was something Sarah Sinnett learned from her extended talks with Bob Stowell who emphasized that it was THE necessary first step to a solid foundation. Importantly, it would not have been part of her operational planning without her involvement in E3 and its attendant peer relationships with other successful communities. As Sarah says..

I approached the superintendent of the schools initially with the ask to employ the eNavigator position in order to obtain benefits. E3 has a strong relationship with the school system and has developed programs and funding to benefit the organization. Since E3 was already involved in the school and providing value, the superintendent agreed to house the role and E3 would reimburse 100% of salary and benefits allotted to the role. I was surprised to find the conversation was so easy and we had an immediate “Yes.” But the superintendent noted it was because E3 was perceived as “difference makers” in the community and since it cost the school nothing, it would be foolish to not continue to support. After the initial handshake agreement, he signed an interlocal agreement with E3. The existing superintendent left after that school term, but because of our formal agreement, the school continues to honor the arrangement with E3. The new superintendent is also on board and supports E3 initiatives. So, Alisha is technically a school employee, and we reimburse the school for everything, and their benefits are amazing. So, when you think about a total benefits package overall and what it could look like, it made that much more attractive for a candidate to apply to it.

The funds come from our local donor advised fund. We approached them last fall. I think I asked them for a total of \$240,000 (\$60,000 a year) over a three-year period, and they came back and gave us \$270,000 (\$90,000 a year over a three-year period.) So, they were more than gracious and generous to

what we are trying to achieve. Our focus right now is continuing to create value and the funding will probably follow.

Funding the position is about more than simply dollars. Other resources are important as well and they may even reduce the need for dollars while providing added synergies...

The other part of the support is WNCC. Paula Abbott is the Sidney site director at WNCC and started the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center (I&E). She is 100% our champion, and she just wanted to support it. So, that part of interlocal agreement is we continue to support those services but the eNavigator [Alisha Juelfs] sits out at the campus and has an office rent free.

How E2 and the eNavigator Positions Work Today

The structure of the local E3 team falls into several layers. At the center is Sarah Sinnett, who has been the key driving force. Tied tightly to her are Cory Keen and Melissa Norgard who are key players alongside Sarah as her comments make clear. Rounding out the core group is Paula Abbott who has not been as directly involved in daily tasks but is an integral part of what makes the team successful due to her structural support and early involvement with E3. Finally, Alisha Juelfs as eNavigator is central to the direct assistance to entrepreneurs as well as E3 strategic visioning. As Sarah says...

Cory is my champion too. So, things that I can't get done, Cory picks up the pieces. So, he's not just the E3 champion, he's my champion in keeping my crap together too. ... Melissa Norgard's background is so valuable in what she did as an economic development director and what she continues to do as a small business owner. She is just invaluable, and I turn to her for just about everything I need to bounce ideas off of. And we tend to bring Paula into all leadership conversations because of her creative thinking to achieve an end goal.

eNavigator Alisha Juelfs describes her "inner council" this way when talking about how to deal with feeling overwhelmed by her job demands...

I do have a smaller navigator team and that is with Melissa, Cory, Paula and Sarah, my trusted advisors, the perfect team. They're phenomenal. They're so supportive. We decided, "let's start taking this back to the committee. Now it's ready." Before I didn't have the right questions. I didn't even know what to ask for in terms of help. Now they are like, "Why are you doing this alone?" I said, "Just help me figure out how to delegate because I'm so far into it, I'm having a hard time stepping back and looking at [the situation]."

The broader E3 team is comprised of various resource persons such as City Manager, David Scott and, Chamber of Commerce, Tourism, Nebraska Extension, and many local entrepreneurs. This membership is a bit more fluid with respect to meeting attendance but nonetheless robust.

The supporting structures for E3 in Sidney are of many types. They are embedded in the larger statewide E3 initiative that provides peer-learning opportunities from other communities engaged in energizing entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial ecosystem building. This larger initiative was funded by the Nebraska Community Foundation for three years to jump start local initiatives. NCF representative

Jana Jensen has provided continuing advisory support for the E3 team in Sidney including helping design the fiscal management arrangements system with NCF. Continuing operational support has been provided through e2 in the form of coaching and story capture. The local community college, WNCC, has provided office space and linkages to the navigator and E3 team for meetings and one-on-one client consulting. The Sidney donor advised fund was instrumental in providing the funding for the eNavigator position for three years from its inception. The City Manager and a former mayor are active members of the E3 group providing increasingly supportive roles in Sidney. As described in the Sarah Sinnett story, former mayor Wendell Gaston was the E3 interface with the donor advised fund and critical to funding the eNavigator position.

Here's how eNavigator Alisha Juelfs describes the development and working relationship between herself and the E3 support team...

Even the biggest cheerleader needs a team to back them. They created my network before I even came in here a year and a half into a pilot program. They had to build this network and build these relationships. They build awareness because that's how I knew about the position. I started following the group and I wanted to be a part of it. I didn't know what it was, but it looked exciting. It was for businesses, by businesses and I wanted to be a part of something bigger than myself. So, I followed the group and that's how I found out about this role.

The longer I've been in the role ... I have so much respect for the hard work that all those individuals had to put in to get it to this place and the people that you have to face. Not everybody understands the movement, and not everybody is supportive. It's important to understand where that friction is and help with that narrative. Coming in as a neutral person from a Potter community where most of the leaders are from Sidney, but also trying to represent Gurley, and Dalton and Lodgepole who are also in the county, it's super important to have that body of leadership that is supportive of the bigger picture. We have that here, and we're really fortunate. Otherwise, it wouldn't be happening. Anyone I've come into contact with that gives me the time to talk about what we are doing and what my role is, is on board, "How do I help?" Eventually I will need their help. I just haven't gotten there yet. It's a game changer. You have to have a supportive group of people.

Sarah Sinnett gives more clarity as to just how important support for the eNavigator is to success...

That girl has more than enough work. She can't keep up with it already. That's one thing that's critical in this position that I don't think is talked about enough. Alisha can't do this job on her own, and I think that's why a lot of board-led roles fail. They're just put out there and they flail, and they make the decisions that are best for them, but they often aren't either getting any direction or there or too many directives flying at them. I meet with Alisha at least once a week. I spend at least an hour with her and say, "stop focusing on this. Let's redirect, let's pivot over here. Let's put together a meeting with the leadership team to get some more feedback on this." She can't do that on her own.

[The eNavigator] role needs support, and it needs a sounding board almost like a boss in a way. I hate to say that I'm Alisha's boss because we are really more peers. But ... [she needs] ... somebody she can go to as a sounding board because if you just throw somebody in there and expect to get outcomes without measuring and support ... [it won't work]. I plan to give her performance evaluations and feedback because if it gets measured, it gets managed. I think a lot of these roles, they just go out and flounder

because there are no ... [defined] ... outcomes or support. Even when talking with some of her peers in similar roles they get so frustrated because they don't have guidance, or a vision, or a strategy ... [regarding] ... anything they are supposed to be working on. E3 is different in that Alisha often comments on the full support and guidance she feels she receives from the team.

Current Status

Melissa Norgard assesses the current status of the eNavigator and E3 this way...

We're gaining exposure, and it's all been positive exposure. And I think it'll only continue to grow. I know Alisha has people stopping in her office all the time, either dropping in ... [or by appointment]. She's going out in the community visiting with people or people are making appointments to come in, "How can I get started on my business plan?" She ... and the Chamber did a business plan writing workshops 10 days ago, and had, I think, like 22 people show up. I think that she's doing all the right things, and we are as a group trying to be supportive and make sure ... [she gets support when] ... she needs help. She was asking, "Well, I'm not sure what I do about Facebook. Because what do you want me posting on Facebook for marketing and getting the word out?" and "Should we be posting every day." I think that she's doing the right things at the right time to make an impact.

The role of community colleges such as WNCC has arisen in interviews with other communities as a significant resource for ecosystem development. While Paula Abbott is a uniquely energetic supporter of E3, her creative work on the part of local entrepreneurs predates E3. As Director and founder of the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Center at WNCC-Sidney, she already had working relationships with both resource providers such as the Department of Labor and with entrepreneurs such as NextGen Outfitters. In both cases she has used the physical resources of the college to provide space for groups in order to create an increasingly one-stop shopping environment for entrepreneurs. We have seen similar types of creative arrangements in other communities such as Ord Nebraska and Hutchinson Kansas. Alisha describes the situation in Sidney...

WNCC just got their new president in July. Today we had their open house at the Sidney campus. Paula had a meeting for him to meet Sarah, Cory and me. He really engaged and he was really excited. He was really open to what we had to say, and that "we need business classes here." As great as Paula is, there is still an opportunity for WNCC to do better. With this new president, we are hoping that we can help them level up too. What we are hearing and learning from businesses, there is an opportunity to have a monthly series of different things they can learn. Things that they don't know. Some people need to dedicate time and go somewhere to learn. They don't like to do it online. That has been my goal from the very beginning. I told Paula, "If I can't pull this off by Q4, it's for sure a Q1 thing next year. We are going to have a monthly series because there is a need. Even if four people show up, that's four people that benefit and it's worth the time. I think it's exciting too, to have this new president that seems to be energized by the potential in Sidney too as kind of a forgotten campus. But, having met community members that care, I think we're going to get back on track, and Paula is going to get the support that she needs to finish her vision for what this was meant to be. I can't wait for that. It might take a year. It might take two years. But I think there is just such an opportunity for us to do better.

The eNavigator? Evidence from the Field – The Hutchinson Kansas Experience

Jackson Swearer has served as the Hutchinson Kansas eNavigator for several years. It was a role he grew into after working in housing and on health equity with the local health department. Branded as Startup Hutch, his eNavigator role grew out of the former Quest Center and is housed at the local community college as was the Quest Center. He enjoys a strong relationship with the Hutch Community Foundation and has abundant incoming traffic, which is a boon, but in some ways presents some time crunch challenges in terms of more strategic tasking issues. He does provide an interesting take on ecosystem building in terms of the nexus of political alignments and public funding sources...

Entrepreneurship and ecosystem work presents an opportunity in some ways in that space because it's apolitical and it's the kind of thing that most people agree that we ought to be doing. Even locally my policy makers that don't want to continue our funding from the county, their argument for why is 100% libertarian ideology. It's just, "We don't want the government to pay for that at all." What they say is, "This is great work. We should be doing this. We don't think the government should be paying for it, but somebody should be doing it." So, even the people who don't want to fund it, want us to be doing it.

He describes his key partners in his work as...

Ciara is my coach for Network Kansas. She is critical for relating to them.

Commercial lenders as a category has to be at the top of the list, for sure. They are a big source of potential deals and clients. It's mostly the individual commercial bankers. For instance, we've hosted a lenders luncheon to get all those people in the room. When the new GROW Kansas money got launched, we did that. Those relationships are important for lead generation.

The Chamber is another key connection. Both because they have resources for small businesses, and they also have their own revolving loan fund for main street businesses.

The random Economic Development oriented people – whatever their job title is for the small towns all around the county – are really important to me. ... [For example], Haven has a part time economic development person.

Outreach to small communities in the county is a challenge for Jackson as was evident in Sidney. Actually, if there is an evaluation of where to put my time and attention that I do and that I need to do more of, it's probably less to do with specific entrepreneurs and more to do with different communities, both communities within Hutchinson and communities around the county. That's particularly fraught for us because part of our funding comes from the county, and historically the county has funded this work more than the city has. So, there's a pretty big emphasis on getting out into the county. Actually, the term we use is "out in the county" is all the rest of the county other than Hutchinson, those connections. But it's different people in all the different towns.

So, on the positive side, Jackson recognizes both the need and the demand for outreach on the one hand and his own need for a way to better prioritize his target communities and contact focal points within them. On the negative side is that this need bumps up against his own time constraints due to high

volume of incoming on the one hand and on the other hand the lack of standardized contact position within each community which implies a tailored strategy for each community. One way that he has dealt with this is identified under scale issue #3 below.

Considering the necessary eNavigator traits, Jackson provided his own list and then responded to a series of prompts based on the e2 guide....

Unfortunately, I think you need to be reasonably well connected. I think being open to different kinds of ideas is critically important. I do my best not to prejudge other people's ideas for their business based on my opinions about whether it's a good idea, which sometimes probably leads to me not telling people not to do stuff that I probably ought to tell them not to do. I'd rather err in that direction, I guess. My strategy is I tell them to go away and do the math. And if they do the math and they don't figure out it's a bad idea, then that's not my fault.

One thing that I think is important that I need to work on a little more ... is you need to be willing to disappoint people. My commercial lender friends are better at this. I'm developing some capacity from this with them. You have to be able to tell people, "No" because you're going to get people coming to you asking for help that can't get the help from somewhere else. Sometimes you can provide the financial help or other kinds of help, but sometimes not because ... [the idea] ... is not viable. That's really hard for me, but something that I think is probably really important. You've got to have some sense for the math and the financial part. But I actually don't think that's the most important thing. There are lots of resources in the system to look at financial statements and help people put those together and build business plans. ... I view my role as mostly trying to connect people to those resources, but I need to have at least the literacy to look at the spreadsheets.

Jackson responded to some direct prompts about eNavigator traits drawn from the [e2 Navigator Guide](#)ⁱⁱⁱ Listening to entrepreneurs needs... *"That's critically important."*

Being vulnerable to not having immediate answers... *"Also, critical. Easy for me."*

Comfort with and professional capacity for finding needed answers... *"I would frame that a little differently. I would frame that as comfort and ability to know where to go to get the answers. As much as possible to send people off to get the answers for themselves so they have that experiential learning."*

Timely responses to entrepreneurs with solutions... *"My immediate reaction is that doesn't feel important to me although people are usually getting their responses from me immediately because they're meeting with me a lot. That would be a concern if I weren't doing it. That would be important."*

Monitoring entrepreneurs regarding their ability to follow up on suggestions you give them... *"We don't do a good job of this. We should probably do more. We're lousy at follow up. I have too much incoming. I don't think what we are doing here is the best practice."*

Asked about Peer Navigators, Jackson points out he does have conversation partners but no true eNavigator peers that he converses with regularly. This is a problem not shared by the E3 eNavigators in Nebraska who are in conversation with each other as resources. This is clear from comments by both Caleb and Alisha. Additionally, the E3 eNavigators have access to highly involved support teams...

I kind of do. There aren't that many people that do precisely what I do around. Most of the other people who are the lead person for an e-community, the Network Kansas e-community, are pretty good peers for me. We get together fairly regularly through Network Kansas. That's my primary peer network, people who are running other entrepreneurship communities. They don't all do the work in the same way that I'm doing it though. A lot of those agencies just operate a lot differently, much more just give out a few loans a year. They are more like Chambers. This work often funneled off into the Chamber bucket. When we have a mingle event, the population that is coming is different. It's lenders and people who are thinking about starting a business, and small business owners. When the Chamber hosts a mingle, it's all the big established businesses and their employees.

This is problematic and Jackson was encouraged to reach out to some of the E3 eNavigators.

Scale Issue #1: Diversity as an eNavigator Trait

In our many interviews Jackson is the first person to broach the subject of ethnic diversity without prompting. This may be a telling function of community scale since all previous interviews took place in much smaller places. Because Hutchinson has a population of around 40,000, there is much greater capacity for a sizable minority population forming a critical mass of need that cannot be individualized. In his surprisingly open and thoughtful self-reflection, Jackson indicates that some eNavigators may be more sensitive to this issue than others and this should be considered when hiring and onboarding an eNavigator...

I think not just somebody who's open to new ideas ... [is an important trait], ... but you have to have somebody that's willing and capable of working with all of the different kinds of people that you are going to have in your community. So that's going to change from place to place. So, in my community that means being able to talk to people with a wide variety of political backgrounds and some capacity to talk to people in the Hispanic community and having at least good systems to try to plug in people who primarily speak Spanish. That's a population segment that we could miss.

I bring this DEI work into the work sort of organically since it was the kind of work I was doing before this. A lot of what I studied was about this political philosophy while I was at school, so I'm pretty familiar with it. That maybe is a little bit of my bias coming in, how important that is. But I think that is a pretty important aspect of ... [eNavigator] ... work to the extent that I would say, "I'm not sure hiring an upper middle class white guy that's a member of the country club was actually the right idea." That line of thought is leading us to at least think about, "What would it look like to try to diversify the pool of available coaches or navigators?" What does that look like? What would a funding model look like for that? To bring it full circle, in most communities you are going to be lucky to get a navigator, so you have got to make sure that person can work with everybody in your community.

An implication of Jackson's point of view is that at a larger scale (population size) a community has to work more intentionally at developing bridging social capital and that this requires champions from the various constituent communities. There is more on this in the accompanying Champion Narrative.]

Scale Issue #2: Funding Frustrating

Jackson identifies his personal discomfort with annual funding renewals exposing a problem that arises when the long-term nature of the eNavigator role bumps up against the short-term thinking of funding the position. The problem is compounded by the divergent context for evaluating success employed by the eNavigator versus bureaucratic funders. Without using the words Jackson is alluding to a process that to some degree feels like shaming. The sociologist, Irving Goffman (1961)^{iv}, refers to shaming processes as “degradation ceremonies” when they take place in public settings. When Jackson talks about having to justify his success to policy makers, this occurs on the public record and thus goes beyond simply frustration and includes some aspects of belittlement or shaming as an internal social psychological experience. This experience is not something that has arisen in interviews with other eNavigators since the financing for their positions was made on a multiyear basis by sympathetic funders. In these instances, there was greater concordance in the time frame and evaluative context surrounding the eNavigator position. We suspect that this is a significant scale issue that emerges in larger communities due to the increased number of constituencies involved, the need to balance the wishes of competing publics in the Gesellschaft^v environment of the city, and the greater demand for transparency under the public microscope...

I’m trying to think of an answer other than asking for money every year from the local policy makers. The number one answer for sure is having to ask for money every year from policy makers... and being somehow constantly asked to justify that we are doing an okay job when I’m in the middle of conversations like this because I know we are one of the best entrepreneurship ecosystems in the state. That felt a little bit conceited to say, but that is also how I really feel. Like, “How do you guys not see this? We’re doing such awesome work. You’re bludgeoning me.”

The other part of it that’s frustrating is the cyclical nature of it. Every year I have to go back, which is really incompatible with the long-term nature of the work. That’s like the subpoint (b) here. Your point about having to prove it – and I understand the need for metrics and that kind of things, I’m here for that – but I’m not going to help the local economy in one year on something that is easily definable as a measure that will give them a clear ROI on tax money. That seems very hard to do. Not that we couldn’t do some calculations like total revenue, sales tax receipts, property values. There are some ways to get at some of those numbers, but to me the value of what we are doing is so much more in the stories and so much more in the connections that are being made and the possibility that somebody that met somebody at an event we did will three years from now have the connection that they need when that idea finally matures in their head. That’s how I think about it, that ... long-term nature. I don’t think that policy makers always see it that way, and they’re not really primed to see it that way either. That’s not the nature of their jobs.

Scale Issue #3

When asked about whether he tracks entrepreneurs regarding their follow up on assignments and suggestions from the eNavigator, Jackson admitted that they don’t do a good job of this. When prompted further asking about his approach to prioritizing entrepreneurs based on their task completion and subsequent check ins with poor performers, he went on to say,

I don't do any of that. ... Mostly people either do it or they don't in my experience. My tactic for that is I let them come back to me. I put the time and energy into those who put the most time and energy into me.

Jackson's answer here may also be a function of scale since there is simply more ambient entrepreneurial churning going on in the larger population than a small one. Less follow-up might be needed with the larger population since there will not be a shortage of new inquiries...

The other thing that we did really well early on when we rebranded from the Quest Center to Startup Hutch was, we nailed the marketing and comms aspect of it. We spent some money to do that. That contributed to the fact that I have so much incoming ... [business]. ... It's not just the size of the community that I'm getting at there. It has to do with how you communicate about the organization and the available resources because what I'm doing is in many ways not fundamentally different from what David Dukart was doing before when it was the Quest Center, but I have way more people coming through the door because of the way we market it. You are clearly right that the larger pool means it's less critical for me to chase people because I've got enough coming through the door without it.

On further reflection Jackson noted...

In a few years it will be worth looking back and seeing if I still think this. After talking with you while you were here and going through this Heartland Together process with KLC and Kauffman, I'm starting to think that if we could expand our navigator capacity to match our scale and increase our follow-up, then we might be able to multiply our impact considerably.

It's important to see that Jackson continues to see the eNavigator role as a process rather than a destination reached. It evidences a perceived reflexive and dynamic understanding of the eNavigator role. One that responds to conditions on the ground and changing needs of the community and not just personal skills acquisition.

Advice for New eNavigators

Advice from Jackson Swearer (Hutchinson, KS)...

It's really fun to talk to people about their ideas. The hard part is figuring out how to tell people that their ideas won't work. Your first loan rejection will suck. It'll be okay. They might never talk to you again. Just try to be open and make as many connections to as many different people as possible. Both so that you have resources for people and so that people know you and can get people to you. Both of those because you never know where people are going to land when they say to their friend, "Hey, I'm thinking about starting a business." There's all kinds of different people they're going to get sent to first. Our hope is that I get them second. From that point of view the relationship development is the most important part.

The best part is when we get to approve a loan and I get to go into somebody's business has opened and can say at least with some real feeling that they might not have been able to do this if we hadn't been there to help. That's the best part for sure. I really love sitting down with people and just talking

through their ideas. Even when people come in and it's just a one-time consult and I give them the two contacts they need to make to progress on to the next step and they never come back, I still love those conversations. So, loan closings and initial consults are my two favorite parts of the job.

Advice from, Alisha Juelfs (Sidney NE).

Building relationships and gaining trust are priorities. And trust goes into the confidentiality piece. You have to show that you are someone worth trusting, and you have to hold yourself to the same standard as them. All of that aimed at just building a relationship.

[Another] ... one I would say is always build your networks because that looks different. It's not just what you expect with resource partners. It's the moms at the playground. It is your neighbor's barbeque. It's the youth counselors and schools. There are so many networks. You have to always stay in the loop with networks. There's always something new. There's always something changing. I would just say, always building your network because that's how you get the resources to the entrepreneurs.

ⁱ Downloadable pdf at <https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/entrepreneur-navigators-with-alisha-juelfs-and-rachael-barry.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gallup.com/builder/225332/builder-rofile-10.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ Downloadable pdf at <https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/the-e2-ground-game.html>

^{iv} Goffman, Irving. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York: Anchor Books.

^v *Gesellschaft* roughly translates to Society. Concept developed by Ferdinand Tonnies referring to a rationally developed mechanistic type of social relationship characterized by impersonally contracted associations between persons. also: a community or society characterized by this relationship. The polar opposite of *gemeinschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* roughly translates to community. It is a spontaneously arising organic social relationship characterized by strong reciprocal bonds of sentiment and kinship within a common tradition. also: a community characterized by this relationship. [Merriam-Webster]