FUTURE(S) OF INTERNATIONAL AND AREA STUDIES: Challenges, Opportunities and Goals

Conference Report

University of Pittsburgh

University Center for International Studies

May 8–10, 2026 · Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Prepared from conference transcripts, daily attendee contributions (live notes), and post-conference survey data with assistance from AI tools

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Executive Summary

The Future(s) of International and Area Studies conference May 8–10, 2026 at the University of Pittsburgh, brought together over 300 attendees, virtually and in person, to address the challenge: how can international and area studies best adapt to the collapse of the federal funding that had long influenced it. The conference was charged with three tasks: reimagining and reframing the field's value proposition, strengthening existing networks, and designing new partnership models for long-term sustainability. It advanced aspects of all three charges. Rather than definitive resolutions, however, the conference made clear that there is a striking amount of energy for collective action. Directing that action will require collaboration across multiple institutions, input from a wide range of stakeholders, and a specific commitment to and perhaps investment in some coordinating body that can work across institutions and regional alignments.

On value proposition, speakers reframed international and area studies (IAS) as suffering a classic market failure — high societal value, chronically undervalued by private and institutional decision-making. Its close relationship with the teaching and learning of less commonly taught languages is similarly challenged. Presenters made clear, however, that the value proposition for the field can be grounded in its inherent transdisciplinarity and its ability to break down disciplinary silos. It can also be based on arguments relying on public health, economic, and workforce evidence. Attendees rated this the most effectively addressed charge, though real disagreement remained over whether the field's best defense is methodological rigor or its irreducibly contextual, place-based knowledge.

On networks, the conference highlighted existing consortia, including the Big Ten Academic Alliance, a new Indigenous Latin American and Caribbean Studies Consortium, European Studies and African language-based collaborations. These demonstrated working models for course-sharing and resource pooling but also acknowledged their limitations. Those left out of the consortia or collaborations have uneven access to resources. The closing remarks deliberately reframed the entire gathering as having built a "community" rather than merely a network, suggesting that creating a space to learn from and with each other was the most immediate outcome.

On new partnership models, the work is real but unfinished. Institutions and funders described concrete adaptations already underway, but all acknowledged that private philanthropy cannot and will not replace federal support. The conference kept coming back to, without ever resolving, three consequential tensions: whether institutions should stabilize existing structures or transform them outright; how much intellectual and political risk the field can take with the administrators and donors it depends on; and whether consolidation into fewer, stronger hubs will help the field survive at the cost of widening inequities between well-resourced and under-resourced programs and regions.

Across the breakout sessions, attendees moved from diagnosis to practice. Centers described building regional consortia as direct responses to lost federal support. K-12 and community partnerships, once

treated as peripheral outreach, emerged as central survival strategies — generating both goodwill funding and grassroots advocacy. Meanwhile, theoretical panels on “anti-atlas” approaches, comparative area studies, and Africa-centered knowledge production supplied intellectual scaffolding for moving beyond area studies' colonial and Cold War origins without abandoning regional expertise altogether.

Participants and organizers alike acknowledged that the conversation remained heavily weighted toward R1 institutions, with insufficient representation from HBCUs, community colleges, and scholars based in the regions studied. Tensions between preserving legacy programs and building genuinely new models, and between multiplying value propositions for different audiences versus articulating one legible story, remain open and will likely define the field's next phase of work.

Several ideas emerged with clear potential for continued stewardship. This report recommends the co-sponsoring universities and associations treat consortium-building, funding diversification, and improving the shared data and advocacy infrastructure as the most immediately actionable charges. Sustaining the community this conference built -- through a proposed one-year check-in -- would help resolve the harder, still-open questions. That will require sustained leadership and coordination. It remains to be seen if this will be spearheaded by universities or through one or more higher education associations representing those interests.

1. Conference Themes

Seven themes recurred and deepened across the three days of the conference, tracing a consistent arc from diagnosis (Day 1) to practical experimentation (Day 2) to strategic synthesis (Day 3).

Theme 1. The Funding Crisis and the Search for New Value Propositions

Day 1: The conference opened with the funding crisis still fresh — keynote speakers Steve Hanson and Hilary Kahn framed the crisis as an opportunity to return to "first principles" rather than be bound by legacy arguments around national security. Siddharth Chandra introduced the economic language that would recur throughout: area studies is a public good suffering from market failure — high societal value, low private monetization. The tone was diagnostic and philosophical. Tom Reese's "palimpsest" metaphor — Title VI programs' original goals were smothered by decades of accreted, non-academic performance metrics — recast the immediate funding crisis as a more structural problem: the program had drifted from its founding purpose.

Day 2: In parallel and plenary sessions, conversation became more concrete and tactical. Participants debated whether rankings could force area studies into the conversation alongside physics and economics. Chandra's remark on Day 1 that Title VI funding had stood in as an informal benchmark system since there are no formal rankings for area studies. This was reprised at a breakfast hallway conversation and picked up again in Day 3's Q&A, where a former Title VI program officer pushed back that rankings flatten real differences between institutions.

The sessions on Day 2 suggested a fork in the road would require centers to choose between rigor and generalizability. Different audiences/stakeholders might urge centers to steer in different directions when defining the value proposition of the field.

Day 3: The final plenary sought to suggest potential models or toolkits: ROI metrics (and their flaws — one university's negative ROI calculation that ignored out-of-state graduates), storytelling and quantification for different audiences (donors want stories, boards want numbers, government wants career pipelines and economic impact), sustainability through diversification of funding (with endowments as the "least risky" leg of the funding portfolio). The final plenary's donor/foundation perspective reframed the whole question as whether the focus for the future of area studies should be on stabilizing or on transforming — a distinction that recurred as one of the conference's unresolved tensions.

> *Takeaway: The value proposition of IAS must be re-argued from first principles but for the next generation to appeal to multiple audiences (including prospective donors).*

Theme 2. From Competition to Collaboration: Consortia and Cross-Institutional Networks

Early framing around this theme was aspirational. One of the conference's goals was to promote "communication and collaboration across areas," with the understanding that area and international studies had historically been siloed by region, institution, and the funding logics of Title VI.

This became the dominant practical theme: The Big Ten Academic Alliance's (BTAA) course-sharing for less-commonly-taught languages, the "Masters in the Midwest" joint recruiting sessions, the Big Ten's Non-Residential Ukrainian Scholars Program, and the ILACS Indigenous-language consortium were all born directly from Title VI's collapse. But this also produced real friction: made possible by unique structures existing within the Big Ten, tuition/credit-following-instructor barriers even within the Alliance, unionization complications, and the pervasive "who gets in, who is left out" anxiety about consortium boundaries.

Collaboration hardened into explicit strategy: African Studies Association's shift to "mutually beneficial collaboration" language with African partner institutions, Ohio State's hub-and-spoke model linking centers to STEM, business, and government, and Luce Foundation's explicit pivot from funding individual programs to funding "the ecosystem." The closing plenary elevated this from network to the language of community, with the closing remarks from Luis Bravo (Pitt) reminding the audience that "coalitions align interests; communities share obligation."

> *Takeaway: Resolution during the conference was never likely, but the instinct toward collaboration-over-competition was confirmed at three different scales (individual universities reorganizing in response to external and internal pressures, a foundation's grantee pool, and cross-institutional consortia). How to design field-wide best practices to provide wider access to these expanded coalitions remains unresolved.*

Theme 3. Rethinking the Geographic/Regional Paradigm

Throughout the conference, participants continued already-existing conversations about how "areas" are defined in area studies. Global Studies, examining connections, movements, processes, and systems across regions offers an already-tested complement to region-first organization. The Anti-Atlas panel supplied a related conceptual vocabulary — atlas vs. anti-atlas, totality vs. partial knowledge, verticality vs. networks — arguing area studies should study how regions are constructed rather than treat them as fixed. Keynote speaker Rudra Sil's comparative area studies framework (triangulating across regions) provided a rival and complementary model. Each argued for a change from the old paradigms that were defined by how the federal funding viewed the areas that would be considered as objects of study.

From theory to application, participants pointing to longstanding debates over whether Asian or African studies should include diaspora and Asian American/African American studies. The Luce Foundation's move toward funding "Asia-related Studies" suggested that some of this may continue to be driven by funders. Meanwhile, Latin American centers in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Michigan discussed wrestling with whether

Indigenous-language studies belong inside or alongside Latin American studies. The European Studies roundtable pushed on this point — should "Europe" include Turkey, Ukraine, the Global South entanglements of empire? Should Western and Eastern Europe centers merge? Glenn Adams's "Global Africa" and "Africa-centering" framework (thinking from Africa rather than about it) offered a more fully worked-out reimagining, paired with Rudra Sil's Comparative Area Studies volume and the Indiana and UNC provided organizational models as institutional analogues for this intellectual repositioning.

> *Takeaway: No single reconceptualization has emerged as a new dominant paradigm.*

Theme 4. AI as Threat, Tool, and Foil — the Case for Human-Centered Contextual Knowledge

Day 1: Rivers's plenary on AI and the language industry set the frame: AI lacks a "concept of the world or of time," cannot judge sources, and — crucially — was trained on data that is roughly 80% English, making it structurally incapable of capturing low-resource languages or cultural nuance.

Day 2: AI resurfaced instrumentally — as a threat to jobs (translators, interpreters) but also as a potential ally in making the case for area studies (Chandra's suggestion to ask AI to generate a ranking methodology; the idea that AI's errors demonstrate the enduring need for human expertise).

Though not explicitly developed on the conference's final day, the conference organizers' own AI-assisted note-synthesis project became a lived example of this tension, with modest uptake and at least one session's organizers explicitly opting out.

> *Takeaway: AI will need to continue to be part of the conversation. Can an area and international studies pedagogy put emphasis on learning outcomes that address the human-centeredness of deep contextual understandings of a place and its culture, while adapting to and adopting emerging technologies to enhance teaching, learning, and research?*

Theme 5. Community Engagement as Core (Not Peripheral) Strategy

In early sessions, outreach was discussed as one function of Title VI-funded centers among many, valuable but somewhat siloed from the "serious" academic conversation.

In further conversations, though, outreach became a survival strategy: UNC's Oak Foundation-funded K-12 African Studies curriculum project kept staff employed after the Title VI collapse; one panel traced Pitt's globally-minded community engagement back to the University's Nationality Rooms project, predating any federal funding stream, and connected that history to Pitt's current local and global partnerships, including the Bracui project in Brazil, framing community engagement as a matter of being 'a good neighbor,' both locally and abroad; Michigan State's "instrumentalizing Title VI" for STEM buy-in; the CLAC roundtable reframed language learning itself as a low-cost, high-impact outreach and retention tool reaching beyond area-studies. The Latin American Studies Association's diversification and establishment of a Latin American

Cultural Center independent of its host university (Pitt) was an example of building resiliency through connecting to the local community. The plenary session featuring deans of several policy schools in the U.S. specifically pointed to outreach as the thing that would be hardest to preserve without external funding, but most important to the long-term vibrancy of programs and recruitment of future students.

> *Takeaway: Participants were explicit-- "community engagement is not a peripheral activity — it is central to what we are trying to build." Future reimagining must include voices from K-12 teachers, employers, and the regions studied themselves, not just R1 university faculty and administrators. It was a direct critique of the conference's own composition and a signal for potential next steps (see below).*

Theme 6. Centering Students and the Next Generation, Not Just Institutional Survival

Day 1: Kahn's opening keynote introduced the "Platinum Rule" (do unto others as they would do unto themselves) as a corrective to designing programs based on how faculty themselves learned rather than how today's students want to learn.

Day 2: The REEES Undergraduate Think Tank breakout delivered what the daily digest called "the clearest possible summary of what the next generation is asking for: mentorship and fellowship" — not curricular redesign. Student testimony reinforced that peer community and language access mattered more than institutional prestige.

Day 3: This became a benchmark against which institutional survival strategies were judged — UNC's insistence on protecting students already "in the pipeline" over speculative new initiatives, Ohio State's undergraduate-first advocacy strategy, and the closing charge to apply the Platinum Rule to the field's own self-reinvention: build not what worked in the past, but what students need "on their terms." A REEES Undergraduate Think Tank representative spoke directly in the Plenary VII Q&A, pushing the conversation to include adjuncts and to think about outreach as human connection and invitation, not just administrator-to-administrator diplomacy.

> *Takeaway: This emerged as a recurrent theme, but only one breakout session was explicitly dedicated to it. Addressing the lack of student voices (as well as representation from non-US institutions) in future convenings could generate truly innovative ideas to keep moving the conversation beyond handwringing and self-preservation.*

Theme 7. Institutional Architecture, Metrics, and the Practicalities of Making the Case

Day 1: Framed the problem abstractly: "we need a new theoretical paradigm," "first principles," modernization theory's legacy as both blessing and curse.

Day 2: Sharpened into structural proposals: matrix-style institutional architecture (GIGA/Oxford models), the "in vs. about" question for defining who counts as an area expert, and repeated frustration that

department-vs.-center administrative structures constrain collaboration more than intellectual disagreement does.

Day 3: Culminated in the most granular, practical exchange of the conference — how to build donor pitches, how ROI is miscalculated, how to weigh risk and return across a "portfolio" of funding sources, and explicit calls for shared, cross-institutional data infrastructure so individual centers stop reinventing the same case for the value of area and international studies from scratch.

> *Takeaway: The conference's convening function succeeded more clearly than its partnership-design ambitions. Charge 3 of the conference (imagine/design new models for partnership) was not solved. If anything, Luis Bravo's closing remarks conceded it wasn't. But arguably, the charge to redefine the value proposition for IAS was more successful, at least according to post-conference survey responses. The conference's measure of success should ultimately not be "did we design new partnership models or redefine the value proposition for the field," but rather "did we build something durable enough that new partnership models can follow?" That remains to be seen. Will other universities, professional associations, scholarly networks, and foundations answer the call to steward one or more of these themes forward?*

Cross-cutting note: mapping themes to the conference's three stated charges

Charge	Best-matched themes	Final status
1. Reimagining framing/value proposition	Themes 1, 4, 5, 6	Ended as a practical data/communication problem more than a resolved theoretical one
2. Strengthening existing networks	Themes 2, 7	The conference's clearest, most confirmed success — reinforced explicitly in participant post-conference surveys
3. Designing new models of partnership for long-term sustainability	Themes 2, 3, 5, 7	**Not resolved as originally framed** — acknowledgement that fundraising alone cannot replace Title VI (Theme 2). Final panel and closing remarks started to redefine success away from "did we design new models" toward "did we build the community durable enough to design them later"

2. Theme Network Map

The diagram below visualizes how the seven master themes clustered and connected across sessions and related to the original conference charges. The need to diversify funding sits at the hub because nearly every theme was, in practice, discussed in service of making a funding case.

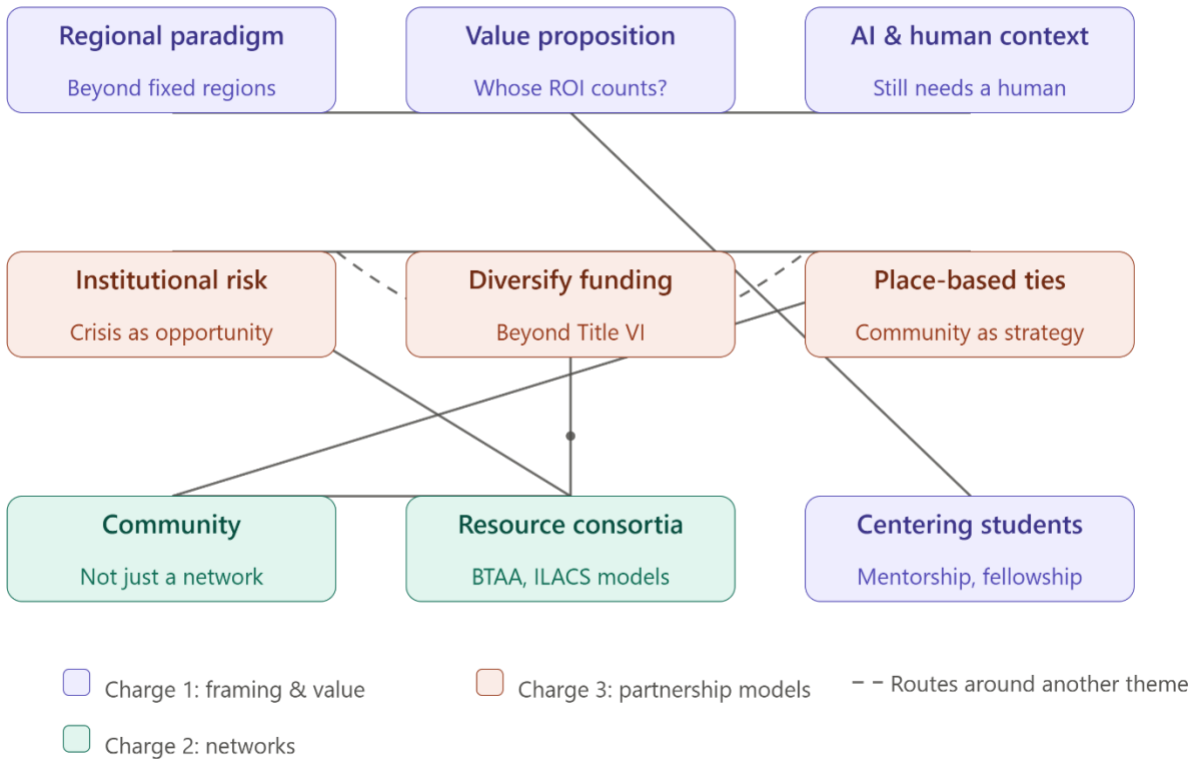


Figure 1. Network map of the conference's seven master themes and their principal connections to both the conference charges and the precipitating causes that led to the conference.

3. What Stood Out?

The following ideas stood out for combining genuine intellectual or structural novelty with real, near-term feasibility.

Topic 1. Reframing IAS as a Classic Market Failure

Siddharth Chandra, Michigan State

The idea that IAS is a classic example of market failure was the single most explicitly flagged innovation by the crowd-sourced notetakers. Chandra noted that IAS produces high societal value but low direct monetization and is therefore systematically underfunded by any decisionmaker (student, administrator, donor) who only responds to private returns. This showed up verbatim as a "standout moment" in two independent note-takers' files, and it functions as the analytical backbone for everything the conference later tried to do with value-proposition language (Theme 1). It's less an innovation than a diagnostic lens, but it's the lens nearly everyone else's practical ideas seemed to be viewed through.

Topic 2. Africa-Centering / Global Africa — Rethinking Area Studies from the Inside Out

Glenn Adams, University of Kansas

Rather than treating Africa as an object to be studied from a US vantage point, the Kansas African Studies Center builds its enterprise around thinking from African knowledge systems as the standpoint for theorizing about the world generally. This was paired with two structural moves: making virtual and hybrid participation a permanent core feature so African scholars sit as chairs, panelists, and co-teachers despite travel bans and visa barriers; and reorganizing the center as a university-wide “hub” housed under International Affairs rather than the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, making any STEM, business, or professional-school activity touching Africa visible to the center. That participants highlighted this presentation in notes suggests the importance of decentering the U.S., of institutional structures, and of the ways in which technology can be leveraged to better engage area experts from and trained in the areas in question, not just as guest speakers or “visitors,” but as co-developers of a center’s core activities.

Topic 3. The Continuing Search for a Genuinely New Epistemology for “What Counts as an Area”

Timothy Beasley-Murray and panel, Nicholas Rush-Smith, Rudy Sil, others

The anti-atlas concept (atlases as technologies of power vs. anti-atlases embracing partial knowledge, networks, and situated perspectives) provided one theoretical model in day one. The discussion continued in day two with Ahmed expanding the conversation to include the U.S., Kubik proposing another model, and Rush-Smith providing a practical example of a program built on the logic of place-driven (not problem-driven) methods training. The “matrix” institutional design suggested by Rudy Sil’s Comparative Area Studies retains traditional area-studies units but layers rotating cross-regional thematic platforms on top and therefore tries to solve both the institutional problem (silos, redundant staffing, invisibility to deans) and the

intellectual problem (contextualized, non-generalizing comparison across regions) with a single structural fix. But the question of what counts as area studies and what doesn't was also implicitly expressed in discussions of consortia, sustainability, and defining the value proposition. It is not a new debate in IAS, but it is one that continues to shape discussions related to funding, centering students, institutional support, and, of course, the future of the field itself.

Topic 4. Luce Foundation's Shift from Funding Programs to Funding the Ecosystem

Yuting Li, Henry Luce Foundation

Luce's pivot from seeding individual professorships and programs to explicitly funding collaborative infrastructure (cross-institution library mini-grants that deliberately blur Asian Studies and Asian American Studies boundaries Title VI would never allow) is a funder-side structural response to the "competition vs. collaboration" problem. Tracking how foundations respond to the changing philanthropic landscape will be a critical piece to designing a future for international and area studies.

4. Unresolved Tensions

Three tensions surfaced repeatedly without resolution and will likely define the field's next phase of work.

Tension 1. Stabilize vs. Transform — Preserve the Field We Had, or Build Something Genuinely New?

- This tension was named explicitly but never resolved, and arguably cannot be resolved with a single answer. The two impulses pull in opposite directions under scarce resources.
- Funders vs. field: Luce is deliberately avoiding "sending the wrong signal" that it can replace federal funding while wanting grantees to jump out of Title VI's old boxes — but every dollar spent stabilizing a legacy program is a dollar not spent piloting something new.
- Reese's palimpsest critique argued the honest move is to strip Title VI back to its original academic-quality criteria and rebuild from first principles; with the prospect of no Title VI, though, others advocated adding new justifications on top of or in place of the existing structure.

Tension 2. Who Gets to Be in the Room — Elite/R1 Consolidation vs. Genuine Inclusion

- This was raised repeatedly and was explicitly flagged by the conference's own closing speaker: the conference itself was largely a conversation among R1 institutions in the United States (see Appendix B).
- One speaker's worry, voiced in the final plenary, was that "strong institutions [could carve] up remaining space and funds" while smaller-institution specialists get squeezed out — a concern raised in other panels and in the participant surveys but not answered.
- A pointed Q&A question — "did you email us?" — landed as an indictment. NRCs have historically defaulted to networking within their existing peer circle unless deliberately prompted otherwise.

- The consortium model itself structurally excludes non-member institutions, and no funding or governance mechanism was proposed that would concretely open consortia to community colleges, HBCUs, or scholars based in the regions being studied.

Tension 3. A Single Justifying Story, or Deliberately Multiplied Value Propositions?

- The conference's title opened the possibility to "future(s)" and the closing speaker treated this plurality as a settled answer — but the substantive content of the three days shows this is actually contested, not resolved.
- Several speakers were implicitly reaching for a single, legible, portable justification that could travel from a provost's office to a congressional staffer's desk (rankings, first principles, palimpsest-stripping), because multiplicity is exactly what makes area studies illegible to administrators using standardized metrics.
- Others argued the opposite: that the old singular Cold War justification needs to be abandoned, and that proliferating definitions and audiences is the actual survival strategy — even if it makes the field harder to summarize in one sentence. We may need different summaries for different audiences.
- No one at the conference offered a test for telling principled pragmatism apart from capitulation to whichever funder currently holds the power of the purse.

5. Call to Steward

The May 2026 conference was meant to advance existing conversations and hopefully inspire new ones. From the participant surveys, it is clear that the conference generated good energy. Responses to the call for papers and sponsorship requests also suggested there is strong engagement. The work will not be done through one conference or by one institution. But a question that came up repeatedly in the post-conference surveys was "who leads?" and "what's next?" What follows is a list of themes, ranked by a combination of the energy they generated in the room, the number of distinct sessions in which they surfaced, and the specificity of the open questions left behind — that is, whether the next step is concrete and assignable or requires further conceptual work.

With this report, the conference organizers at Pitt are issuing a charge to other institutions/associations/consortia to take up one or more of these themes and carry it forward in some meaningful way.

Rank	Theme or Call to Action	Ripeness
1	Cross-Institutional Consortia & Course-Sharing Infrastructure	Very High
2	Building a Shared Data / Advocacy Infrastructure	High
3	Institutional Architecture Redesign	Medium-High
4	CLAC / Language-Across-the-Curriculum as Low-Cost Force Multiplier	Medium
5	Redefining the Object of Study	Medium
6	Widening Who Is in the Room	Medium-Low
7	Stabilize vs. Transform (Risk Posture)	Low-Medium

Call 1. Cross-Institutional Consortia & Course-Sharing Infrastructure — Very High

Appeared in nearly every breakout across all three days. Multiple attendees volunteered on the spot to keep working together, and the open questions (BTAA expansion, shared websites, renegotiated tuition rules) are concrete and administratively actionable. Some regular convening for continuing to **share best practices for consortia building** in this field may help ensure broad access for more institutions.

Call 2. Building a Shared Data / Advocacy Infrastructure — High

Raised independently across three separate sessions, with high frustration-driven energy and a named, willing volunteer (a former Title VI program officer) as well as a potential existing organization (**Council of National Resource Centers**) to lead the analytic work and organize the infrastructure. But it would need to be re-imagined to take on that role. Advocating for an external ranking/designation could be part of this work. The main gap is coordinating capacity, not willingness.

Call 3. Institutional Architecture Redesign — Medium-High

The most theoretically generative material at the conference, cutting across humanities, African studies, and European studies sessions alike. There was strong advocacy for more integration with libraries and for

including area studies librarians as area experts and partners. Successful stewardship may be more about **case-study sharing** than a single coordinated project. Individual institutions may benefit from **site visits**.

Call 4. CLAC / Language-Across-the-Curriculum as Low-Cost Force Multiplier — Medium

An existing, if under-resourced, consortium actively recruiting members during the session itself. Extremely low-friction for individual institutions to pilot within a semester; slightly less ripe for conference-wide collective action. Ideally carried on by the **CLAC Consortium**, with increased visibility.

Call 5. Redefining the Object of Study — Medium

High engagement in the room, but the open questions are foundational and unresolved by design — better suited to **a follow-up conference session, edited volume, or working group** than quick operational stewardship.

Call 6. Widening Who Is in the Room — Medium-Low

Named directly by conference leadership as a structural gap, generating real moral urgency — but currently under-specified relative to that urgency, with no funding line or governance mechanism yet proposed. If there is motivation to host **another convening**, we encourage consideration of how best to include more voices (students, non-US institutions and "experts", staff and faculty from institutions with diverse profiles, etc).

Call 7. Stabilize vs. Transform (Risk Posture) — Low-Medium

A valuable shared vocabulary and diagnostic lens, but a framework for individual institutions to apply rather than a standalone collective project with an obvious owner or next meeting.



Figure 2. A word cloud generated from the transcripts and submitted participant notes from the conference.

Appendix A: Session-by-Session Highlights (AI Generated from submitted transcripts)

DAY 1 — Friday, May 8, 2026

Opening Plenary: New Frontiers for International and Area Studies

Stephen Hanson (William & Mary), Hilary Kahn (Indiana University) · Moderator: Allyson Delnore (Pitt)

Hanson opened by tracing the field's Cold War-era foundations in modernization theory and argued the field can no longer justify itself on legacy grounds: "old justifications do not resonate the way they used to... we must make our case on the basis of first principles."

Kahn countered with a student-centered "platinum rule" — do unto others as they would do unto themselves — as the organizing ethic for reimagining the field's value proposition.

Standout quote: "Students are different — have we adapted to them, or are we trying to get them back to where we think they should be?"

Note: Kahn broke conference news: APLU and the Department of Education have had positive early conversations about an FY26 Title VI competition, focused on NRCs — a moment of cautious optimism that recurred all weekend. It materialized in June with the CAANN competition announcement from the US Department of Education.

Plenary II: Reckoning with Uncertainty — Why the Field Matters Now

Melissa Baralt (FIU), Siddharth Chandra (Michigan State), Kislaya Prasad (Maryland) · Moderator: Michael Goodhart (Pitt)

Baralt presented public-health evidence that bilingualism improves executive function in preterm infants, reframing language study as a health and equity issue.

Chandra introduced the “market failure” framework used throughout the conference: high societal value, low private monetization. He proposed rankings as a way to get area studies “into the conversation.”

Prasad presented survey data showing firms report growing demand for international business skills alongside a persistent, widening skills gap.

Audience pushback from former Title VI program officers challenged the rankings idea directly, arguing differences between similarly ranked programs are often negligible.

Breakout 1.A. African Languages in an Era of Shifting U.S. Global Priorities: Reframing Value, Relevance, and Resilience

John Mugane (Harvard University), Zoliswa Mali (Boston University), Maryame Sy (Columbia University); chair: Filipo Gao Lubua (Pitt)

Opened the conference's language-education track by naming directly what later sessions would circle around more abstractly: African languages have never had enrollment numbers large enough to justify funding on their own, and the field's original justification — Cold War/War-on-Terror strategic-language logic dating to Title VI's 1958 origins — is fading as "strategic competition" framing shifts toward China, AI, and critical minerals, pushing Africa further down the priority list. The panel's answer was to reconnect to currently rising US priorities (great-power competition in Africa, migration/diaspora policy, health security and climate adaptation) rather than keep defending a fading one.

Standout quote: "If the money disappeared again tomorrow, what would still be standing?" — one of three framing questions posed to the audience, mapped respectively to value, relevance, and resilience

Breakout 1.B. Workshop on Recognizing K-12 Teachers as Leaders: K-12 Curriculum Development and Institutional Survival

Laura Cox (UNC-Chapel Hill African Studies Center)

Delivered against the backdrop of UNC announcing the elimination of all six area studies centers in 2026; Cox's position survives specifically because it is funded by the Oak Foundation rather than Title VI. The Oak-funded project (over $800,000 across two rounds) pairs K-12 teachers with UNC faculty to co-develop African studies curriculum, sending teachers to Ghana, Senegal, Kenya, and Morocco. Key strategic insight: current funders are explicitly looking for projects with a track record, not new pilots — centers should pitch proven programming, not untested initiatives, in this funding environment.

Breakout I.C.1: Establishing the Indigenous Latin American and Caribbean Studies Consortium in the Great Lakes Region

Leila Vieira (Ohio State), Gavin Arnall (Michigan), Sara McKinnon (Wisconsin), Kasia Szremski (Illinois)

A working consortium built explicitly in response to Title VI's loss, sharing enrollment across seven institutions to keep low-enrollment indigenous-language instruction (Quechua, Nawat, Haitian Creole) viable. Surfaced real friction: competing for the same grants, and an open question about whether membership could ever extend to smaller liberal arts colleges.

Breakout I.C-2: Mapping Europe Anew: Collaborative Futures for European Studies

Elizabeth Covington (Wisconsin), Abby Lewis (Council for European Studies), Amy Kreppel (Florida), Erica Edwards (Pitt), Akasemi Newsome (Berkeley) · Moderator: Randall Halle

Newsome's provocation — “the future of Europe is going to be found outside of Europe” — was illustrated through case studies tracing empire's afterlives shaping “European” outcomes. Kreppel's argument for

pragmatic engagement over symbolic boycott and Covington's proposal for defensive consolidation of fragmented language departments into unified "world languages and cultures" structures both generated pushback from attendees.

Breakout I.D.: Anti-Atlas — Toward a Critical Area Studies

Timothy Beasley-Murray (UCL), Rudra Sil (Penn), Nancy Condee (Pitt), Ida Bagus (Florida, online) · Moderator: Andre Domoski

Beasley-Murray argued area studies should reject the totalizing "atlas" model in favor of an "anti-atlas" model treating regions as constructed and best understood through networks and partial knowledge. Sil reframed partial knowledge as pragmatic: totalizing frameworks failed to predict Tahrir Square or 1989; deep area expertise anticipates surprise better than generalized theory. Condee challenged the panel, questioning whether the anti-atlas dyad repackages existing cultural-studies critiques.

Breakout I.E.: From Crisis to Collaboration: Building the Future of Area and International Studies

Ivy Hamerly (International Studies), Xin Wang (Asian Studies), Joanne Cummings (Middle East Studies), and Adrienne Harris (Russian, Slavic & East European Studies), all from Baylor University

Four Baylor programs (Middle East, Asian, Russian/SEES, International Studies) described a shared pattern: repeated relocation across departments, treated as discretionary rather than core mission, responding through thematic/professional reorientation and evidence-based recruiting rather than waiting for funding to return. Focused on strategic collaboration, despite different administrative homes.

Plenary III: In the Age of AI — Language and Training Needs in the Language Industry

Bill Rivers (WP Rivers & Associates)

Grounded by industry data: a language industry projected to reach $92B by 2029, alongside a measured ~16% decline in language-study enrollment. Made the case that AI amplifies rather than replaces the value of human language expertise, while flagging concrete AI limitations (English-data dominance, gender bias in translation).

Reception note: This was the one session where live-room reception and post-conference survey judgment diverged sharply — some survey respondents did not find it useful, but crowd-sourced reflections submitted day of suggested that it was proof that the field is "still relevant."

Plenary IV: Title VI — From Origins to Legacy

Thomas Reese (Tulane), Rudra Sil (Penn)

Reese's "palimpsest" metaphor: decades of reauthorizations have buried Title VI's original six academic-quality criteria under accumulated administrative metrics.

Reese's Tulane data showed tenured-faculty hires funded through Title VI built lasting departmental strength through the 2000s, before a 1988 rule and a 2006 shift quietly eroded that mechanism years before the 2025 collapse.

Sil traced how “peaceful coexistence” between area experts and disciplinary social scientists collapsed post-Cold War as quantitative rigor displaced qualitative area scholarship in top journals — a second, independent cause of the crisis.

Sil's proposed remedy, Comparative Area Studies, pairs a “matrix” institutional architecture with a methodology for generating modest, contextualized cross-regional propositions.

DAY 2 — Saturday, May 9, 2026

Plenary V: Building Shared Futures — Libraries as Partners

Anna Arays (Yale), Esmerelda Kalé (Northwestern), Mary Rader (UT Austin), Brian Vivier (Penn), Steven Witt (Illinois)

Framed area studies librarianship as facing a genuine expertise-pipeline crisis — retiring subject specialists, no clear recruitment strategy, and AI unable to substitute for language- and area-specific cataloging judgment — layered on top of ethical questions about extraction and stewardship in Global South collections.

Breakout II.A: CLAC (Cultures and Languages Across the Curriculum) Roundtable

Danielle Salas (Colorado Boulder), JY Zhou (James Madison), Veronica Vegna (Chicago)

A genuinely low-cost model: teaching content courses (sociology, history) in the target language itself, using international and heritage-speaker students as near-zero-cost facilitators. Case studies from SUNY Binghamton and James Madison showed measurably increased enrollment and proficiency.

Breakout II.B: Campus and Community: Building on Institutional Strengths to Design New Models for Globally-Minded, Community-Engaged Scholarship

Shannon Wanless (University of Pittsburgh), Veronica Dristas (University of Pittsburgh), Kati Csoman (University of Pittsburgh), Keila Grinberg (University of Pittsburgh), Chair: Allyson Delnore (Pitt)

Csoman outlined the history of the University of Pittsburgh’s Nationality and Heritage Rooms as an early example of Pitt’s globally minded community engagement. Wanless discussed her role at Pitt’s University Center for Social and Urban Research, which connects community-engaged research across campus. Both are part of a broad institutional commitment to being a good neighbor. Grinberg and Dristas then discussed ways to connect this University mission to global engagement, through sustained partnerships with K-12 educators and students and other communities in the Pittsburgh region and across Pennsylvania, as well as through community-engaged work abroad, as in a decades-long engagement with the Quilombo of Bracuí in Brazil.

The session offered other institutions a template for grounding “community as strategy” (Theme 5) to something more durable than a reactive response to Title VI’s collapse.

Breakout II.C: Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA) Collaboration Panel

Jennifer Tishler (Wisconsin), Emma Pratt (Ohio State), Lindsey Grutchfield (Indiana, remote)

Four programs discussed: LCTL Course Share (537 students in 2024–25, with roughly 25% of matched course-shares cancelled annually); “Masters in the Midwest” joint recruiting; the Non-Residential Scholars Program for Ukraine; and the Midwest Slavic Conference. The Ukraine scholars program is the clearest case at the conference of a single-institution emergency response evolving into multi-institution infrastructure once single-institution funding proved unsustainable.

Breakout II.D. Reimagining Area Studies: Sustained Knowledge Production and Global Scholarship in Times of Uncertainty

Jesus Alonso-Regalado (Albany), Manuel Ostos (Penn State); Martha Mantilla, Runxiao Zhu, Arif Jamal (Pitt)

Introduced a framing device that echoed through the rest of the conference: a "fourth wave" of area studies (following imperial-administrative, Cold War, and critical/postcolonial waves) defined by simultaneous ideological attack, AI disruption, and metrics-driven institutional neglect.

Breakout II.E: Communication, Collaboration, and Comparison Across Area Studies

Amel Ahmed (UMass Amherst), Jan Kubik (Rutgers/UCL), Ryan Saylor (Tulsa), Erica Simmons (Wisconsin), Nicholas Rush Smith (SOAS) · Discussant: Rudra Sil

Ahmed argued American politics is itself an “area of area studies” that has historically refused to see itself that way, now shifting as the domestic democratic crisis forces comparative engagement. Kubik offered a rigorous definition of “area”: geographic proximity plus either shared culture or detectable networks of cooperation and conflict. Saylor argued “area studies gives us deep context” is true but not a winning argument in a discipline that treats methodological rigor as its arbiter of quality. He argued area studies needs more rigor and should present itself as a methodological alternative. Rush Smith reported his SOAS methods workshop received over 100 applications for 30 spots on almost no advertising — evidence area studies is “alive and well” outside the US, driven by decolonial interest.

Plenary VI: A Lost Generation for International Affairs?

Alyssa Ayres (George Washington), David Bosco (Indiana), Scott Taylor (Boston University) · Moderator: Carissa Slotterback

Reframed the crisis as "not a lost generation, but a restructuring moment" — private-sector demand for regional expertise remains strong even as government capacity for it declines, meaning the field's expertise may be relocating rather than disappearing.

FLAS cancellations hit students already admitted after institutional budgets had already been finalized.

Outreach cited as an important tool for recruitment, not easily replaced without external funding.

Donors respond to specific, personal opportunities, not abstract appeals to “area studies” as a category — pitches need to be granular.

Advocacy formula: combine concrete placement data with individual student stories when lobbying legislatures.

Breakout III.A. From the Transnational to the Translational: Rethinking Language Instruction in Humanities Programs

Aron Aji (Iowa), Brian Baer (Kent State), Christi Merrill (Michigan)

Argued that translation studies itself — not just translated content — offers a pedagogical model for language and area studies, since "a text doesn't move from one language to another like carrying coal... students are always in the in-between space."

Breakout III.B. Content-Driven Collaborations Promoting Global Citizenship Education

Intentionally excluded from the note taking project at the presenters' request.

Breakout III.C: The Future of African Studies — A Roundtable

Elizabeth Smith (Loyola Maryland), Alix Saba (ASA, remote), Usman Kobo (Ohio State), Glenn Adams (Kansas), Moderator: Assan Sarr (Pitt)

Smith framed the 2025 cuts as the most severe instance of a recurring seven-decade cycle of Republican administrations pushing to defund Title VI, not an anomaly. ASA's capital campaign has already raised $1.1 million against a $900,000 three-year goal, funding five new grants targeted at junior scholars, non-R1 faculty, and advocacy travel. Kobo's Ohio State case study detailed proactive stakeholder-network building spanning the mayor's office, the Ohio National Guard, and a defense-ally bid for Angola — the center's endowment grew from near-zero to $225,000. Adams's Kansas model articulated “Africa-centering” as both intellectual and structural strategy, with permanent virtual participation and a university-wide hub restructuring.

Introduced a dimension the rest of the conference didn't fully absorb: funding cuts are not evenly distributed. African- and Middle East-focused programs described themselves as facing compounding "racial and economic obstacles" beyond the general Title VI cliff, making foundation and endowment fundraising specifically harder to attract to the continent.

Breakout III.D. Comparative Colonial Knowledge: Archives, Pedagogy, and the Future of Area Studies

Vipin Krishna, James Pickett, Mari Webel, John Boonstra — University of Pittsburgh

Argued that area studies is inherently interdisciplinary but gets narrowed by institutional structure, funding categories, and inherited colonial geography — using the colonial division of Africa into "Sub-Saharan" and "North/Arab" Africa as a live example of a boundary that still shapes funding and curriculum decisions today, often in ways that don't match how people in those regions actually understand themselves. The panel's proposed alternative was organizing thematically (e.g., global health, migration) across inherited regional lines rather than within them.

Breakout III.E-1. Listening to the Next Generation: Student Voices, Value Narratives, and Funding the Future of Area Studies

Kelly Knickmeier Cummings (REEES Undergraduate Think Tank), De'Vonte Tinsley (University of Pennsylvania), Kale Fuller (The Ohio State University), Christian Milford Ortiz (University of Miami)

The conference's most consistently praised session (independently, in both note-takers' records and the survey). The finding was strikingly simple: when asked what they need, students said two things — mentorship and fellowship — not curriculum redesign or the elaborate value-proposition language much of the rest of the conference generated on their behalf. Student testimony reinforced that peer community and language access mattered more than institutional prestige.

Breakout III.E-2: Mobilizing Community Support for Area Studies

Jennifer Tishler (Wisconsin), Miguel Rosas-Buendía (Duke), Isaac Kalumbu (Michigan State), Kanchana Podirak (Northern Illinois); Chair: Akasemi Newsome (Berkeley)

Panelists defined "community" strikingly differently — heritage-language clubs, a rapidly growing Latino population, land-grant outreach to rural schools and prisons, and first-generation students for whom the center is a one-stop shop. Each center reported staff cuts but also at least one unexpected community partner stepping in — a museum permanently absorbing a teacher program, a foreign donor funding study abroad, endowment income sustaining a visiting-professor line. Closing anecdote: the most passionate area-studies advocate one program officer ever met was a primate biologist whose fieldwork depended on language training — area studies' best advocates are often outsiders who experienced its value instrumentally.

DAY 3 — Sunday, May 10, 2026

Plenary VII: Lessons Learned from the Past Year — Diverse Perspectives

Allyson Delnore (CNRC/Pitt), Manuel Roman-Lacayo (LASA), Yuting Li (Henry Luce Foundation), Priscilla Layne (UNC) · Moderator: Kevin Meskill (Indiana)

Li introduced the "stabilizing vs. transforming" framing, explaining Luce provided emergency bridging support while being explicit that foundations cannot signal they can replace federal funding.

Roman-Lacayo described LASA's decade-plus diversification strategy — owning its own building, a self-sustaining conference-management nonprofit, and a majority-international membership base insulated from any single country's politics.

Layne detailed UNC's mobilization (over 500 personalized letters) but flagged institutional-neutrality policies as a real constraint on public advocacy.

Delnore's assessment: CNRC's playbook has been largely limited to information-sharing and advocacy so far and floated transforming it into a genuinely cross-regional coordinating body.

Closing Remarks

Luis Bravo (Pitt)

Bravo used an extended bus-ride metaphor to argue the conference produced something closer to community — mutual obligation — than a mere coalition of aligned interests. Identified “context” as the word that recurred across nearly every analytical argument for the field's value — the closest thing to a unifying intellectual thesis the weekend produced. Issued four closing charges: complete the post-conference survey; name one specific idea to carry home; “widen the room” for future convenings; and apply the Platinum Rule to the field's own self-reinvention.

Appendix B: Participant Breakdown

Institution	In-Person Participants	Virtual Participants	Total Participants
University of Pittsburgh	98	19	117
University of Wisconsin - Madison	5	10	15
The Ohio State University	6	6	12
Indiana University	4	7	11
University of Texas at Austin	7	3	10
University of California, Los Angeles	8	0	8
Tulane University	8	0	8
University of Michigan	4	3	7
University of California, Berkeley	3	4	7
University of Colorado Boulder	3	1	4
The Catholic University of Korea	0	4	4
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	2	2	4
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	2	2	4
Brigham Young University	1	3	4
Baylor University	4	0	4
Northern Illinois University	0	4	4
University of Kansas	2	1	3
Ohio University	2	1	3
Harvard University	2	1	3
University of Florida	2	1	3
United States Military Academy	1	2	3
Yale University	2	1	3
Henry Luce Foundation	1	2	3
University of Chicago	1	2	3
Stanford University	1	2	3
University of Illinois	2	0	2
Columbia University	0	2	2
Florida International University	1	1	2
James Madison University	0	2	2
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa	2	0	2
Michigan State University	2	0	2
Duke University	0	2	2
American Councils for International Education	2	0	2
University of Utah	1	1	2
University at Albany, SUNY	1	1	2
University of Washington	2	0	2
Connecticut College	0	1	1
University of San Francisco	0	1	1
University of Miami	0	1	1

Institution	In-Person Participants	Virtual Participants	Total Participants
NCEEER	0	1	1
University of Arizona and MESA	0	1	1
American Council of Learned Societies	1	0	1
Council for European Studies/Temple University	1	0	1
Baylor University	1	0	1
University of Pennsylvania	0	1	1
Princeton University	0	1	1
Indiana University Bloomington	1	0	1
REEES Undergraduate Think Tank	1	0	1
Assoc for Slavic, East European & Eurasian Studies	1	0	1
Rutgers University	1	0	1
Kent State University	1	0	1
Rutgers University and University College London	0	1	1
Loyola University Maryland	1	0	1
Seoul Women's University	1	0	1
University of Montana	0	1	1
SOAS University of London	0	1	1
Association for Asian Studies	0	1	1
St Olaf College	0	1	1
Modern Language Association	0	1	1
Boston University	0	1	1
University College London	1	0	1
African Studies Association	1	0	1
Colgate University	0	1	1
Syracuse University	1	0	1
Columbia University	0	1	1
Indiana University	1	0	1
Cornell University	1	0	1
The Center for Research Libraries	1	0	1
Knox College	0	1	1
The College of New Jersey	0	1	1
University of Iowa	1	0	1
The New York Public Library	0	1	1
University of Massachusetts Amherst	0	1	1
Brown University	1	0	1
EEPS Foundation	1	0	1
University of Virginia	0	1	1

Institution	In-Person Participants	Virtual Participants	Total Participants
Five Colleges, Inc	1	0	1
Grinnell College	0	1	1
University of Pennsylvania	1	0	1
Vanderbilt University	0	1	1
University of San Diego	1	0	1
Washington and Lee University	1	0	1
Global Scholars Network	1	0	1
William & Mary	1	0	1
N/A	0	1	1
American Institute of Indian Studies	1	0	1
The Pennsylvania State University	1	0	1
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee	0	1	1
The University of Chicago	0	1	1
Virginia Tech	0	1	1
The University of Tulsa	0	1	1
Wayne State University	0	1	1
CAORC	0	1	1
WP Rivers & Associates	1	0	1
Unaffiliated	1	0	1
Central Eurasian Studies Society	0	1	1
Stony Brook University	0	1	1
Grand Total	**211**	**122**	**333**

A Note on Methodology: The Notes Synthesis Project

This report was prepared with assistance by AI Tools (Claude for Education, developed by Anthropic). All inputs to and outputs from AI were reviewed and enhanced by the conference organizing team (humans).

During the conference, participants were asked to use a templated notetaking form to provide structured observations and reflections and then to submit those notes for inclusion in the Notes Synthesis Project. Participation was entirely voluntary. Panelists were also asked to allow transcripts for their sessions. Some panelists opted out.

Due to the limitations of a crowd-sourced note taking approach, the final report is not a complete representation of all of the sessions and ideas presented. It is only as complete as the voluntary submission of notes allowed it to be. If presenters opted out of the project, or if attendees at particular panels never submitted notes, some panels may be underrepresented. Consequently, the AI synthesis and summaries of individual panels likely over-represents certain voices, particularly if they were commented on more than once in the submitted notes.

The objectives of the project were to:

- Unite in-person and virtual participants in shared reflection.
- Build a corpus of conference artifacts.
- Inspire a commitment to stewardship to ensure meaningful outcomes.

For the final report, the following artifacts (around 660 pages of data) were uploaded to Claude:

- Notes submitted by participants (estimate roughly 25 individuals contributed)
- Daily Digests
- Conference Program
- Edited transcripts of sessions (when available; presenters were able to opt out)
- Survey of Attendees (distributed after the conference; 86 attendees completed it, including open response questions).

The Note Synthesis Project leveraged new technology to achieve something that would not have been possible without AI tools. No human labor was replaced. The intention was to be additive, not to supplant. The final product would not have been possible without initial human reflections and observations being submitted and will require informed human interventions, creativity, and action to be meaningful once circulated.

The particular AI tool was chosen after close collaboration with colleagues at Pitt Digital working on best practices for collecting, sharing, and processing information. For this project, we followed protocols to ensure that Claude for Education was used within the Pitt security environment. This allowed us to maintain our University's security standards. In addition, Claude did not use any data we fed into it for the purposes of this project to train generative models.

As an added protection, our human-driven team anonymized all crowd-sourced inputs and reviewed and augmented all outputs to ensure privacy and protect intellectual property. Finally, an analysis of the project and the processing power required to complete it included an environmental impact estimate. Estimates ranged from the equivalent of powering a laptop for less than an hour to powering the same laptop for three hours. But that does not take into account the power generation being used for the data centers that will process this work. We cannot know the full environmental impact. To offset this, the conference employed other green practices, including providing opportunities for virtual participation, limiting printing, and working to reduce food waste.

Special thanks to Jocelyn Duffy, Stephanie Confer, and Ruslan Abramov for their assistance with the Notes Synthesis project and to all of the colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh and the University Center for International Studies who assisted in the organization and execution of the event.

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