

The Institute Compass



Note from the Executive Director

We will create a new paradigm for productive dialogue and scientific engagement in the policy landscape.

Our vision for the future is clear and ambitious. We see a world where science and policy are intertwined, fostering a society that is informed, engaged, and proactive in addressing its most pressing challenges. Our dreams are big, and our commitment to making them a reality is unwavering. Here's how we hope to transform society through our work.



Kristan Uhlenbrock

Be a Welcoming Place for Open and Informed Policy Dialogue

We aspire to create a dynamic space where diverse voices come together, united by a common purpose: to explore, understand, and address the complex challenges facing our world. Our goal is to foster an environment that is inclusive and well-informed, where every perspective is valued, and innovative thinking is encouraged. The Institute will be a haven for civil discourse, where respect and empathy are paramount. By pushing the boundaries of our collective understanding, we aim to cultivate a culture of dialogue that transcends barriers, allowing for robust and meaningful policy discussions that lead to actionable solutions.

Create Excitement and Inspire Trust

We hope to ignite a passion for science and policy across all segments of society. Our commitment is to serve as a trusted, non-partisan source of scientific information, providing clarity and insight in an often-murky landscape – one that's often filled with negative rhetoric, cherry-picked data, misinformation, and polarization. By making science

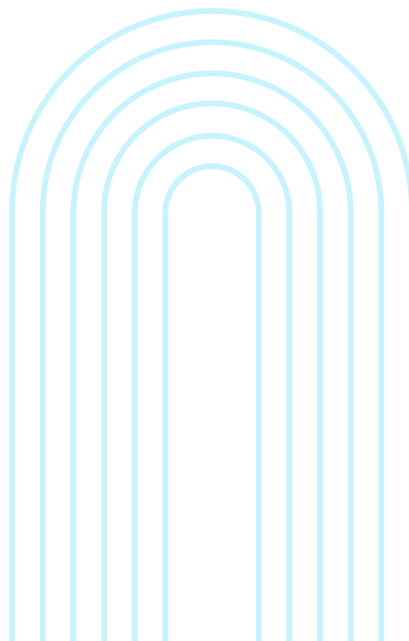
accessible and engaging, we aim to motivate individuals to engage with issues and contribute to informed decision-making. Our vision is a society where science is celebrated, its insights valued, and its impact felt in every community.

Lead with Integrity and Vision

We strive to be a respected leader in Colorado, throughout the region, and across the nation – to set the standard for excellence in scientific engagement and policy dialogue. By demonstrating how the process of inquiry and critical thinking can work hand-in-hand, we can create a better future. We are committed to integrity, transparency, and collaboration, setting an example for others to follow. We believe that by leading with this vision, we can be a beacon of hope and progress in building a world where science can shape the decisions that impact us today and into the future.

In dreaming of this future, we acknowledge the immense challenges ahead but are fueled by the possibilities. We are dedicated to the relentless pursuit of knowledge, the fearless exploration of ideas, and the steadfast commitment to making a difference. Together, we can shape a world where informed dialogue, inspired action, and visionary leadership pave the way for a brighter, more equitable future for all.

Kristan Uhlenbrock



Note from our Founder



“Our vision is a society where science is celebrated, its insights valued, and its impact felt in every community.”

- George Sparks

There have been moments throughout my career that have seen great ups and downs. But in my tenure as the President and CEO of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, it's felt like our country has been stuck at a crossroads, where the role of science is being questioned and divisions are growing bigger. We are looking for answers to problems that seem bigger than ever before. This is why in 2018, we launched the Institute for Science & Policy – a place to seek solutions, build bigger tables for civil conversations, and rethink the way cultural institutions interact with policies that impact all of us. Creating the Institute was important not only for the legacy of this museum, but for our staff, our community, and our state. I believe that together we can learn to listen better, bridge our divides, and forge a path forward.

George Sparks

MISSION

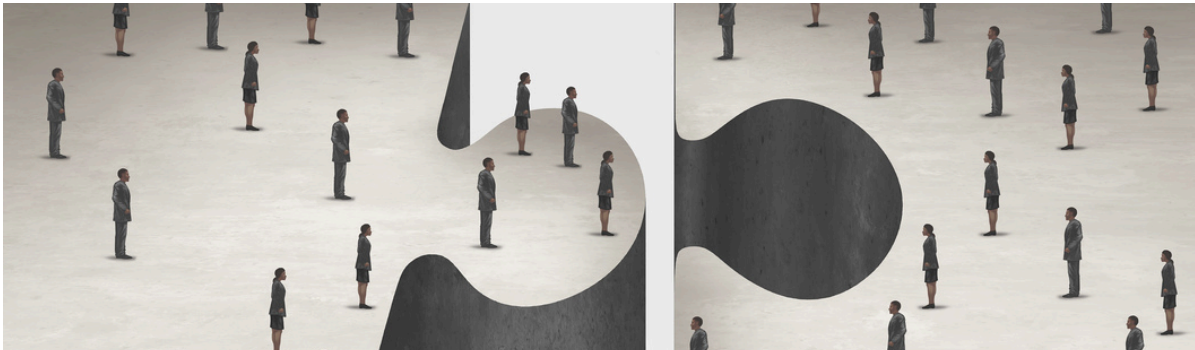
A catalyst for thoughtful dialogue, working toward solutions for society's greatest challenges with scientific thinking, empathy, and inclusivity.



VISION

A future in which all people honor our common humanity and science has a respected seat at the public policy table.

OUR STORY



We believe that working across divides helps us solve our most complex statewide, national, and global challenges.

With polarization rising, trust in institutions falling, the media seen as increasingly biased, and cultural divides creating challenges for our common humanity, the Institute is positioned to address the issues that define our modern world. If we are to make progress, we need a trusted space where people can learn, share, and work towards science-informed solutions.

Throughout the United States, civil discourse and trust in many institutions is declining. About [85% of Americans](#) feel incivility is worse than 10 years ago, and most point to social media and the media as contributing factors. Similarly, [partisan divides](#) between the two major political parties have grown over the past two decades, along with antipathy for one another in the public sphere. And yet the public still holds scientists and the [research they conduct](#) in high regard. That trust, however, has been [wavering](#) and can be influenced by politics and major events like the pandemic.

It's hard to ignore the historic election year of 2016, where rhetoric around the role of

science in society seemed to reach a fever pitch by either becoming a rallying cry or point of contention. Many were calling it a “war on science”. It felt that science was becoming about choosing a team. But the politicization of science is not new. For years, people across the political spectrum have chosen to rally around scientific theories, applications, and innovations when it aligns with their interests, and ignore or disparage those that don't. Think about issues like climate change, vaccinations, genetically modified organisms, weapons, or smoking. The why behind this acknowledges the influence of people's morals, religion, values, socioeconomics, and biases, as well as how politics and political identity can shape one's views.

As our systems and society become more complex and increasingly reliant on scientific information and technical expertise, shoring up trust in scientific institutions, processes, and thinking is paramount. And this is why the Institute for Science & Policy was established.

OUR STORY

The Institute was founded on the concept that pairing scientific data and evidence with civil discourse can help address wicked problems — those that are difficult to define, socially complex, with myriad interdependencies, multiple causes, and no clear solutions. Wicked problems often push up against our traditional ways of problem solving, making them unique to our time and place: problems like the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated stresses and health inequities, or climate change and the resulting impacts and disasters like wildfires, or the influence of misinformation that continues to challenge our society. The steps we can take to solve these problems benefit from embedding critical thinking with evidence and data into decisions – whether those are policy or individual decisions.

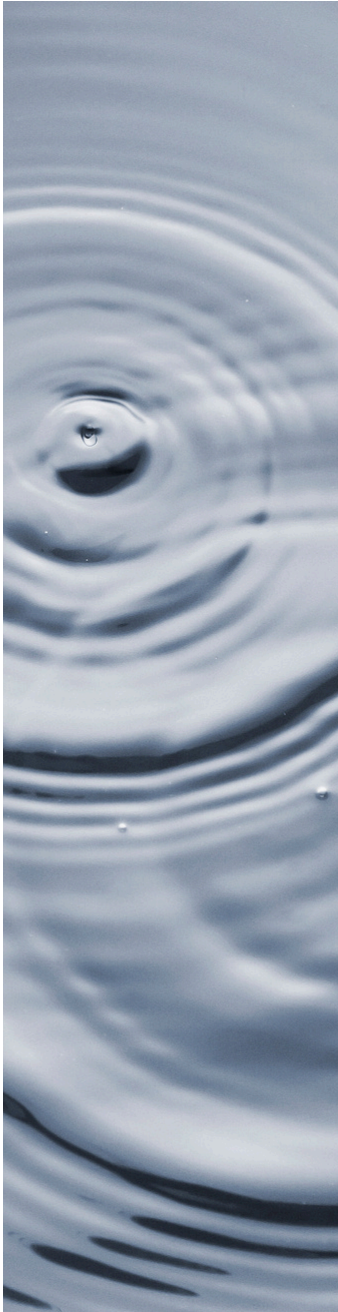
One of the most critical components of our work is recognizing the role of human nature while empowering individuals and communities to engage in difficult discussions. We believe that working across divides helps us solve our most complex statewide, national, and global challenges. Yet this requires individuals and groups to be respectful, kind, and empathetic – key aspects of human dignity. Which is why as perceptions of [incivility worsen](#), we need to find pathways for engaging one another in productive dialogue, healthy disagreement, and critical thinking. Luckily, [many people](#) understand that it's their responsibility to engage in respectful discourse and are willing to take action to do so. Now we just need to tap into that desire.

There is power and possibility in cultural institutions taking on a larger role in society as trusted conveners and boundary spanners while promoting respectful discourse and elevating scientific thinking. One reason is because museums [consistently rank](#) as one of the top trusted institutions that exist in the U.S. and, specifically, serve as highly credible sources of information. Additionally, museums are increasingly becoming forums for community engagement across generations and political divides because they are viewed as expert, factual, and impartial. Which is why leveraging the Denver Museum of Nature & Science's strong reputation as a trusted institution, the Institute for Science & Policy can expand our organization's reach and relevancy by bringing people together to connect, learn, and make progress on important societal issues of today.



WHAT WE STAND FOR

Defining our values to build respect, trust, and cooperation.



Using science to inform and support decision making is easier said than done. We all carry different sets of values and identities in our lives. Plus, science is a human endeavor, so it faces the same biases and challenges that make our society the rich, complex amalgamation it is today. Science alone cannot tell us what we ought to do, as these are often moral and philosophical decisions. But what it can do is provide important data and information to help us be better informed. Because science has been one of our modern society's greatest collective endeavors. It's brought us hope, understanding of our world and universe, and solutions to better our lives. Yet scientific inventions and practices have not all been positive – think weapon development, environmental impacts, medical misuse, or the rise of cyberattacks through technology channels. And while all these things can be true, it's hard to imagine a world without the scientific process and knowledge it generates.

Science is inextricably linked to society, which is why working within the policy landscape should not be shied away from. Science can influence policy, and policy can influence science. It's a circular endeavor – one that is done by people and shaped by politics. Integrating science and policy more fully will help us better address societal needs and create public value. This is why defining our values and how we approach these endeavors is essential to building respect, trust, and cooperation.

WE VALUE SCIENCE

Science is a process to gain knowledge, meaning it's always evolving, contains uncertainty, and has limitations. Very little about scientific knowledge is stagnant, meaning that we need to focus on inquiry, remain curious, and continuously update our thinking – traits that push against natural tendencies for consistency or simplicity, but also tap into our innate appetite for growth. We also respect the importance of [scientific consensus](#), where multiple lines of evidence lead to well supported conclusions. From climate change to vaccine efficacy to the agreement that genetically modified foods are safe to eat, the role of scientific consensus is important in that it gives a foundation for decision-making based on the best available knowledge.

WE VALUE BUILDING TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT

We must learn how to navigate emotionally charged topics with empathy and understanding to build trust and make durable progress. To do so, we also must have intellectual humility, which allows us to be open to new ideas and recognize limitations. Because progress only moves at the speed of trust, whether that's with institutions, across communities, or between individuals.

WE VALUE ADVANCING EQUITY

Our democracy and society were established upon aspirations towards equality, fairness, justice, and opportunity. Yet we acknowledge that the pathway to many of these principles is not inclusive of all. To uphold these values and work towards a better society, we must embed and advance efforts to be more diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive. We need to bring new and unheard voices to the conversation and respect the diversity of knowledge and people that make up our society and the ways cultural experiences, traditions, and practices are part of it.

WE VALUE ENGAGING IN POLICY

Engaging in policy is a multidirectional and moving intersection of the people involved, the information used, the processes to participate, and the outcomes desired. Engagement is complicated and messy, and boundary spanning organizations, like the Institute, can play an important part by maintaining ourselves as a trusted convener willing to question assumptions, recognize tradeoffs, and create connections with science.

WE VALUE EMBRACING OUR HUMAN NATURE

Accepting that scientific processes, decision-making, and policies are done by humans means recognizing how our behavior and thinking are influenced by identity, relationships, biases, values, and power. Because people do not think or behave the same way, our processes for engaging with one another and problem solving must bring forward our motivations, strengths, weaknesses, and inconsistencies. Our experiences shape our knowledge and understanding of the world. The more we can acknowledge and respect the diversity of our lived experiences, the more likely we can find common ground and work towards a greater future for all.

VALUES



Build Trust & Engagement

Establish and maintain public trust through humility and empathy.



Value Science

Use inquiry, consensus science, and scientific processes.



Advance Equity

Embed diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion in all we do.



Engage Policy

Question assumptions, recognize tradeoffs, and create connections with science.



Embrace Human Nature

Recognize how behavior and thinking is influenced by identity, relationships, biases, values, and power.

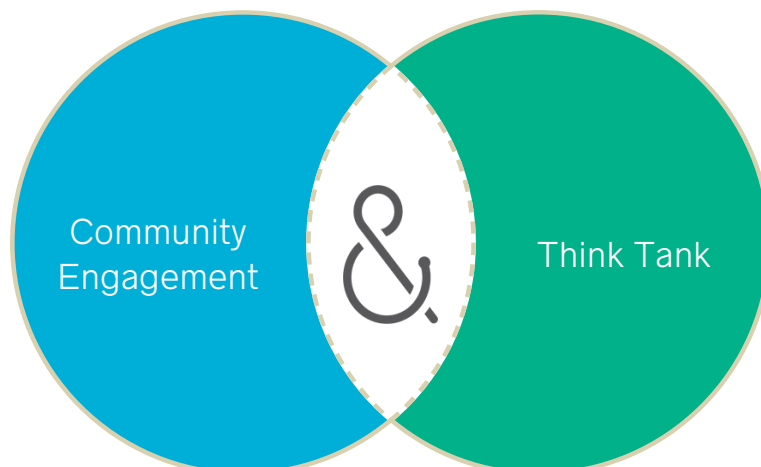
WHAT WE DO



We create space for science-informed dialogue and embrace the human elements of decision-making.

The Institute exists at the intersection of community engagement and a think tank. This means we center communities' perspectives, experiences, and needs with ideas, thought leadership, and critical thinking to help address and solve problems. Our approach to this work encompasses the following principles:

- Create a welcoming, inclusive environment where people can have deliberative conversations.
- Center scientific understanding and evidence-based approaches to decisions and solutions.
- Build lasting relationships, engagement, and impact in Colorado and beyond.



THE 3 PILLARS OF THE INSTITUTE



Convening

Creating space for science-informed dialogue and policy conversations that are inclusive, well-informed, and stretch the boundaries of our thinking.



Storytelling

Inspiring others about science and data and serving as a trustworthy source of scientific information.



Research

Addressing wicked problems that define our modern world by researching, learning, sharing, and working towards science-based solutions.

Our approach is multifaceted and was developed to bring people together to discover their commonalities even where on the surface there may be none, to understand our biases and challenge our thinking, and work together to solve problems with solutions that benefit many over a few. We strive to be inclusionary in everything we do, meet people where they are, and think critically about the issues and world around us. We use science as a tool to bring people together and create shared futures.

PROJECT SELECTION

When selecting our project, we take our values and bring them to life by focusing on some of the factors

THEMATIC AREAS

Our work often fits into the following categories: the energy transition, climate change, natural resources, public health, and human nature. Defining the spaces that we work in does not limit our ability to be a conduit for advancing the use of scientific considerations in public discourse and policy making, but rather allows us to develop and create a lane for

these discussions that has not existed previously in this format. Our audience and community members know The Institute as a trusted source for scientific information in these theme areas, and their alignment with the work of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science establishes credibility to programs and offerings.

INCLUSIVITY

We value inclusivity by including a range of voices, striving to include those that may not always be the most obvious choice but provide an invaluable perspective. We ensure broad representation across our panel, speaker, and guest selections, and include people with diverse lived experiences, backgrounds, different ways of thinking, myriad alignments along the political and socioeconomic spectrums, as well as geographical and professional or occupational diversity. We look to socioeconomic barriers that could prevent inclusion and provide honorariums to support people's time, travel, food, and childcare costs, when necessary.

PARTNERSHIPS & IMPACT

We believe in the adage that together we can be greater than the sum of our parts. Wicked problems, like those we work on at The Institute, are complex and require collective engagement if we are to make progress. This is where partnerships truly thrive and can be leveraged so that our work has a larger reach, greater depth, and stronger impact. From individual to community to institutional level change, partnerships are how we contribute to the broader landscape.

EXAMINE BIASES & CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS

We all move through our daily lives, viewing and experiencing the world through a lens which is shaped by our own beliefs, morals, experiences, and situations. These factors allow us to create biases for how to navigate the world – both good and bad. When we recognize that we each have a bias – or a subjective point-of-view – and work to understand others', we can work towards creating a more objective reality in which we can better understand and learn from one another. When we challenge assumptions, we can expand our thinking and knowledge of human nature and allow us to dive deep into further understanding.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING & TRUST

Just as trust in institutions is declining, so is trust in [each other](#). According to a study from the Pew Research center, 79% of American have “far too little” or “too little” confidence in each other. This makes it more difficult to find agreement and solve problems. The Institute breaks down the barriers and silos that might prevent trust from building, by working to find commonalities before working to solve problems. Relationships are central to our work and approach. We must see each other’s common humanity as a starting place for decision making.

BALANCE TRADEOFFS & CELEBRATE DIFFERENCES

Everyone brings a unique perspective and sets of wants and needs to the decision-making table. When we celebrate these differences and work to find and amplify solutions that can benefit everyone, while balancing the necessary tradeoffs, the result is better communication, better understanding of our neighbors and community, and a more positive and civil discussion.

GUARDRAILS

Both science and policy are wide ranging areas, and it is paramount to establish boundaries for our work. This allows us to focus our efforts and expertise on the conversations, methodologies, and guidelines that uphold our mission, vision, and values and allow us to excel.

In addition to outlining the thematic areas of our work, we also have established guardrails around engaging in these topics. These include:

- Not advocating for specific policies
- Not believing in the us vs. them
- Not ignoring nuance
- Not accepting that there is a “one-size-fits-all” solution or answer
- Not ignoring evidence and data
- Not valuing the loudest voices in the room

Our approach is both unique and not at the same time. We rely on others for their expertise and experience, while contributing our knowledge and lessons to the broader landscape. Our partners, participants, advisors, and communities help us continually strive for better and more meaningful engagement. We will be forever learning.



The Institute for Science & Policy

institute.dmns.org

A PROJECT OF THE DENVER MUSEUM OF NATURE & SCIENCE