

# The Importance of Missouri State University to Springfield

It has always been a benefit to a community to have a large public university located within it. Thousands of students live there and spend money in the local economy. It is a major employer. It holds athletic contests, concerts, various arts events and brings in interesting public speakers that community members enjoy.

The role and importance of a large university to its community today has expanded beyond providing these traditional benefits. This is in part because of the decreasing role of government in providing and supporting our public schools, driving economic development and performing other traditional functions. As a result, universities have partnered with local governments, school districts, other universities, philanthropic organizations and the private sector to take on new responsibilities. In this essay, I will describe three examples of how Missouri State University, an organization of more than 24,000 students and 3500 employees located in Springfield, Missouri, has done just that with surprising results.

## **The IDEA Commons Initiative**

For the last fifteen years, Missouri State University has been committed to economic development. Our commitment includes creating higher wage jobs, assisting in creating new companies, developing new technologies, and providing students with experiential learning opportunities.

Missouri State University's economic development efforts are largely concentrated in IDEA Commons, an innovation district located in downtown Springfield that was established in collaboration with the City of Springfield, Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce, City Utilities, and other local organizations. This district is anchored by the Roy Blunt Jordan Valley Innovation Center, the Robert W. Plaster Free Enterprise Center, and Brick City. The Jordan Valley Innovation Center (JVIC) opened in 2007 after a two-year renovation and repurposing of the former MFA feed mill. JVIC includes two research centers that focus on high tech research and new technology development by partnering with the private business and federal agencies. The unique JVIC model allows corporate partners to collaborate with the University to create new high wage jobs for the community, retain our graduates, and provide tremendous experiential learning opportunities for students.

The success of JVIC has led to an expansion project, which involves demolishing the last portion of the former feed mill and constructing a new three-story facility. This project would not have occurred without the university's community collaboration and strong relationships with the City, Chamber of Commerce, City Utilities and the State of Missouri. JVIC is also collaborating with the Missouri Cybersecurity Center of Excellence to develop a cybersecurity operations center to train students and professionals for nationally recognized certifications. The operations

center will also provide cybersecurity services to small business and non-profits to ensure their systems are secure. This is more important than ever as business is utilizing more online and virtual services, as well as remote work for employees.

The Robert W. Plaster Free Enterprise Center opened in 2013 in its initial phase. The former poultry processing facility is home to the efactory business incubator, the Cooperative Engineering program and the University's printing and postal services. The efactory is a multifaceted business incubator and entrepreneurship center. The efactory operates an incubator, coworking facility and accelerator program, in addition to the Small Business Development Center and Management Development Institute. The efactory focuses on startups, small businesses and workforce development training, new business and job creation, capital formation and engaging students for experiential learning opportunities. The Small Business Development Center also works closely with the College of Business and other academic departments to connect students to business projects.

The efactory collaborates with a significant number of organizations to support startups and small business. It has over 45 startup companies onsite, 19 Corporate Partners that provide professional service expertise and other services, and over 30 other organizations that are either located onsite or utilize the facility for user group meetings. The efactory is the hub of entrepreneurship for the Springfield region.

Economic development is about creating opportunities, and Missouri State University is committed to growing these efforts for the community, students, businesses and other organizations. This would not happen without the relationships and partnerships of so many people and organizations. Most universities develop programs and facilities like JVIC and the efactory solely to benefit the university. Missouri State University has created programs that support and benefit the community, region, and state.

### **Public School Partnerships**

Missouri State University has long partnered with area K-12 schools and non-profits to lead the greater education community in the Springfield area. Most recently, Missouri State partnered with the Darr Family Foundation and Springfield Public School (SPS) to build an agriculture magnet school for elementary and middle school students on the university's agricultural campus. This effort builds on the success of SPS and the university's existing partnership to house the business and entrepreneurship strand of SPS's profession-based learning GOCAPS program at the efactory. Missouri State University also provides college credit for participants in five of SPS's GOCAPS programs and hosts the annual Southwest District FFA contest, the annual Children's Literature Festival of the Ozarks, middle school and high school writing workshops, and the Ozarks Writing Project's annual summer institute for K-12 teachers.

As we do in the economic development arena, Missouri State serves as a leader in education for the whole state, partnering with schools and organizations throughout the state of Missouri. Missouri State hosts state high school basketball and debate championships. The university has also developed an impressive array of camps, conferences and other pre-college experiences—such as the Missouri Fine Arts Academy, the Missouri Public Affairs Academy,

and the World Languages Showcase—directed at enhancing educational opportunities for high performing high school students throughout the state. Missouri State also partners directly with K-12 school districts and teachers throughout the state. For example, through its Bear in Every Building program, Missouri State works to ensure that all schools in the state of Missouri have teachers committed to promoting college attainment.

In recent years, Missouri State University leveraged its reputation and partnerships to dramatically increase college access for students with limited financial resources. The university made the bold move to provide free dual credit classes to high school students on free and reduced lunch. This cost the university substantial revenue at a time when finances were very tight. However, university leaders knew the free classes would have a massive impact on the degree and career attainment of high schoolers with limited means. Free dual credit courses provided these students the same advantage their counterparts with greater wealth already have—to prove that they are able to perform college level work, to earn college credits before they graduate high school, and to shorten their time to graduation when they enroll in college fulltime. The project started with a partnership with SPS and then expanded statewide.

### **Leadership Values the Inclusion of Diversity**

Missouri State University is a predominantly white institution in a predominantly white community. As the underrepresented population of students has grown, the university has dedicated itself to providing those students the same kind of experience as the majority students have. That meant leading our community and region to become more welcoming to those students, faculty and staff from diverse backgrounds.

The first step was to establish a chief diversity officer to lead those efforts. Now most local large organizations have followed our lead. The next step involved working to improve the climate through professional development and training. We have trained our own administrative, academic and student leadership as well as many community leaders. One very successful program is the Facing Racism Institute. More than 500 community, public sector, business, faith and nonprofit leaders have gone through this program in the last five years.

Campus and community climate is also critical. After the Michael Brown death in Ferguson, demonstrations and uprisings, the university began holding “Tough Talks” for students to share their experiences, and emotions related to those events. Recently, this program expanded into the community as people expressed interest in wanting to understand each other better after a series of racially-charged national events occurred last summer. Our public affairs conference theme this year was “The Power of Voice” <https://publicaffairs.missouristate.edu/conference/>. Many of the sessions focused on race relations, civil interaction and law enforcement reform.

Hiring and retention of a diverse work force is critical to the success of serving a diverse student population. To achieve this, our employees of color must be able to identify with and enjoy living in the community. Connecting employees of color with each other, assigning new employees of color a mentor, creating affinity groups, and hosting special activities have helped us make progress in this area. While much is still to be done, the university’s commitment to inclusive excellence and valuing the inclusion of diversity has inspired other individuals, groups

and organizations to undertake similar initiatives and make our community more culturally conscious and welcoming.

Twenty five years ago, Missouri State University attained a statewide mission in public affairs. At the time, it was contemplated that students graduating from such a university would be citizen scholars. Later the mission was further defined as producing citizen scholars who would become engaged in their communities, were ethical leaders and were culturally competent. We call these our three pillars of public affairs.

The university must exemplify those same values. We believe we are up to the task. Through this work, the university community and the City of Springfield have become intertwined. The success of one is now the success of the other. Both are thriving at a level neither would have attained independently of the other. And many citizens of Springfield now identify with and support the University even if they attended college elsewhere or nowhere. Likewise, many of our employees and students have taken ownership of Springfield as they have seen the city change for the better as a result of the kind of partnerships described herein. Thus the profile of the university has been raised and university leadership has a seat at the table when major community decisions are made.