Multi-Institutional Collaboration

With nearly 14,000 employees, Washington University is the third largest employer in the St. Louis region. Its direct spending of more than $2 billion supports more than 41,000 jobs in the area. And, while the majority of the university’s 13,000 students hail from other states or countries, they spend an estimated $149 million at local businesses.

Those findings from the university’s 2014 economic impact study, however, don’t tell the entire story, says Hank Webber, executive vice chancellor for administration at Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL). “An economic impact study is only one measure of value to the community,” he says. “It doesn’t capture the work in public schools or the access to cutting-edge medical care—or the fact that universities make their communities a little more interesting places to live.”

Through its Institute for School Partnership, for instance, WUSTL works with K-12 schools in the community to improve teaching and learning, particularly in STEM-related areas. The university also sponsors five charter schools in St. Louis.

Perhaps WUSTL’s most significant undertaking to improve the community while also improving itself is the Cortex Innovation Community—200 acres in midtown St. Louis being transformed into a hub for technology and biomedicine. With an eye toward redevelopment, WUSTL took the lead in creating a consortium with four other area institutions: Saint Louis University, the University of Missouri-St. Louis, the Missouri Botanical Garden, and BJC HealthCare.

“Together we raised $29 million to redevelop existing buildings and build new ones. We also saw the need to develop residential housing, retail spaces, and a park,” says Webber, who serves as vice chair of the nonprofit Cortex board.

Today, with assistance from financial incentives provided by the city, Cortex has attracted 250 employers that range from Fortune 500 companies to tech start-ups. It also has hotels, housing, restaurants, and an IKEA store, and construction will soon start on a Cortex-branded subway stop.

“Cortex has helped make St. Louis a technology center, has clearly been useful in recruiting and retaining faculty and attracting graduate students, and has improved the location of the medical school,” he reports. “For many firms and young people, being in a diverse, urban area, between two universities and in close proximity to a large research base, is a formula for success.”

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