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Development 101: Education plays a crucial role in economic curriculum

Kansas City Business Journal - by [Tammy Worth](#) Contributing Writer

Bob Marcusse calls the link between education and economic development a virtuous circle -- good educational programs attract new business, which leads to more financing for schools, which attract more people to an area to work at those companies.

"We and (educators) clearly understand the symbiotic relationship between education and economic development," said Marcusse, CEO of the **Kansas City Area Development Council**.

Educational resources act as an economic driver in numerous ways. Schools are obviously responsible for producing the work force in any given area, but they also help recruit businesses and residents, foster research that can generate money and spawn new business, and directly funnel money back into the economy through building projects and tourism dollars.

"Education drives everything," said Bob Regnier, president of **Bank of Blue Valley**. "Pretty much every level of education has an impact. It's not unfair to say Johnson County developed the way it did and was successful because it had an unwavering support for K-12 education."

Recruitment and retention

Measuring a region can be done in many ways -- its size, demographics or work force. But the measurement that interests most potential new businesses is the quality of education.

"Companies understand that work force is closely tied to the ability of school systems to produce young people ready to go to work," Marcusse said.



Dave Kaup | KCBJ

Luanne Wolfram, an associate professor in microbiology at Johnson County Community College, and Keith Gary, director of program development for the Kansas City Area Life Sciences Institute Inc., work to improve the link between education and economic development.

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When companies are winnowing prospective locales, Marcusse said they want to know statistics such as the percentage of high school graduates, what local SAT scores are, how many college graduates are turned out and what kind of degrees they are receiving.

The statistics requested vary greatly depending on the kind of business asking, said Keith Gary, director of program development for the **Kansas City Area Life Sciences Institute Inc.** Larger organizations tend to look for bachelor's-level statistics, whereas smaller and newer companies still have a need for research and development and so tend to want master's and doctorate recipients. Other companies look for specific degrees.

Alicia Stephens, executive director of the Partnership for Community Growth and Development in Liberty, said companies trying to reduce labor costs know they need to keep turnover low. Most businesses directly connect education with the quality and stability of an area's work force.

Because Stephens' organization knows the importance of education in recruiting new companies, it keeps educational information on its Web site, providing a direct link to the Liberty Public School District and **William Jewell College.**

Speedboats and cruise ships

Stephens said it behooves those in education to have a finger on the pulse of local business and to tailor at least some of their offerings accordingly.

"If you look at what real estate taxes are on residential property, compared to property taxes business pays, (businesses) pay a lot more in comparison," she said. "Business really does carry a large part of the financial load for school districts, and I think that's why education realizes being involved is a must."

At the **University of Kansas Edwards Campus,** part of its mission is to foster economic development, Vice Chancellor Robert Clark said. The school spends a lot of time finding out what kinds of jobs are in the greatest demand and what kinds of educational backgrounds are needed for those positions.

Clark said school officials also try to touch all areas of an economic system, with large education and public administration schools as well as engineering, business and social welfare.

"A healthy society lives under the umbrella of all those things," he said. "We want to make sure that our degree programs directly relate to what employers need. We are small so we can be more responsive."

The Edwards Campus and area community colleges can easily adapt to fit work force needs. Large colleges and universities

operate more like a cruise ship than a speedboat, taking much longer to turn in a new direction. Their missions also are stated more broadly and given from the perspective of the student, not the community, Clark said.

Although community colleges and campuses like Edwards may cater to the needs of local business, Gary said, businesspeople and educators can do more.

The Kansas side has made some progress, he said, and though business should be driving curriculum, in many cases it doesn't work that way.

"Business is not driving what is coming out of educational institutions, which is why we have a large number of graduates coming out and having a hard time getting jobs," he said. "I don't intend to be negative, but there are real disconnects. Education and economic development are linked, but we could improve the strength of that linkage."

Direct effect

Aside from recruiting businesses, education directly touches the economy in numerous ways. Stephens said it is wise to look at schools not only as educational institutions but also as businesses.

For almost every one of the more than 1,200 students attending William Jewell, one or two parents come to town for weekend visits or homecoming or to help students move in the fall and spring. Stephens said this greatly adds to the city's tourism dollars, whether in hotel stays, gas purchases or restaurant patronage.

She said Jewell also creates a building project almost every other year, from new student unions to new sorority complexes. Liberty public schools also have a steady stream of new projects, including a second high school that soon will begin construction.

Good schools are a key attraction for homeowners as well -- Liberty's newest residential development sits directly adjacent to its new high school site.

Research facilities also can act as a direct economic driver.

Regnier cited the potential passage of the Johnson County Education and Research Triangle initiative. A study by **County Economic Research Institute Inc.** found that by investing \$350 million in the next 20 years on local educational institutions, the return will exceed \$1 billion -- and Regnier said that return is a low-end estimate.

"Education is right in the middle of all of this," he said. "It's good for us and for our kids and for our community."

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