



Lessons From Wichita: Building an Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Through Collaboration

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December 05, 2016

Wichita-based initiative builds entrepreneurship through grassroots campaigns.

The subject of building entrepreneurship ecosystems is gaining prominence in the national dialogue. More cities and states, looking for ways to improve economic growth and diversify their economy, are focusing on the creation of small businesses and support of existing ones. This has led to the rise of entrepreneurship ecosystem building, also known as growing your own, which focuses on creating policies, networks, resources and systems to support local entrepreneurs. The end goal of this effort is to have a robust environment for entrepreneurship and small businesses that helps grow local economies.

One city that has had significant success building a local entrepreneurship ecosystem using a highly collaborative model is Wichita, Kan., a mid-sized Midwestern city of almost 400,000 residents. After the 2007-09 recession, 150 business leaders met in 2012 to discuss how to improve the local economy and create economic growth. They decided to focus on education, job training and economic diversification through entrepreneurship. In 2013, the Wichita Metro Chamber of Commerce's Leadership Council created the Entrepreneurship Task Force to develop strategies for improving entrepreneurship.

To start, the task force took a unique collaborative approach to developing entrepreneurship. Rather than take the top-down, big-funding approach of a large organization, the task force focused on building a group of highly committed and collaborative individuals and organizations. More than 40 individuals and organizations, called liaisons, are participating in the task force.

Every other week, liaisons meet for an hour, where participants introduce themselves and share major entrepreneurship activities around Wichita. One or two liaisons present major projects they are working on. The rest of the liaisons then share information, ideas and ways they can support the project or organization each presenter shared. The task force also keeps the group focused on diversity, both in the type of entrepreneurship that is supported and other forms of diversity such as race, gender and age.

Gary Oborny, chief executive officer of Occidental Management and co-chair of the task force, says having consistent meetings and diverse participation has led to a significant increase in local collaboration, connectedness and the emergence of young leaders among entrepreneurship support providers.

In the three years since the task force was launched, Wichita has seen some major achievements. Among them:

- The launch of two private investment funds that focus on entrepreneurship. To date, the funds have provided more than \$18 million in funding to local businesses. One fund invests in scalable firms; the other on startup firms.
- The creation of the mini-maker fair, which had over 2,000 attendees in its launch year. A maker fair showcases local innovation in a variety of areas, including technology, science, education and crafts.
- Helped support the growth of the Wichita Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.
- Worked with local schools to hold K-8 business-plan competitions, which are expected to reach about 2,000 kids in 2017 and offer prize money of \$3,000.
- Provided support to teachers of entrepreneurship and helped students develop entrepreneurship journals in a 10-class pilot program.
- Launched Wichita's first business accelerator, e2e, which has produced its first class of six companies.
- Supported the Create Campaign, which focuses on developing entrepreneurship among the city's African-American community.
- Brought 1 Million Cups, a national networking program developed by the Kauffman Foundation, to Wichita. Every Wednesday, two entrepreneurs make a pitch to a community that averages more than 200 people. At the end of each presentation, the community asks "what can we do to help?"

These successes also have increased the visibility of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial activities in Wichita. Many articles have recognized Wichita for identifying the need to grow entrepreneurship locally as a city priority and the Entrepreneurship Task Force as an example of what can be done through local collaboration. The work in Wichita is a useful model to cities that are thinking about or have started to grow their entrepreneurship ecosystems and are looking for a best-practices model.
