

# The Future of Wichita and WSU's Critical

IN THIS SECTION



By Dr. John Bardo

The Wichita Community Foundation has done a great service for the region by bringing [James Chung](#) back for a series of research engagements on how to rebuild this area's capacities for the future. The Wichita Eagle has a [summary of the latest research](#) on its webpage, and everyone who cares about this area should take the time to read it.



What Chung highlights is that this area is falling substantially behind similar cities in the Midwest; that people here earn substantially less than others in the region; and that it is going to take a substantial change of both attitudes and community investments to turn around the economic stagnation that has defined this region. It won't be easy, but the community's trajectory can be turned around.

### A catalyst for change

Wichita State University is becoming known both locally and statewide as a critical component of recreating the intellectual and business excitement that created such huge opportunities here over the decades. These opportunities ranged from creating a massive aviation industry, developing new consumer products and ideas (such as the Coleman lantern), and new food and hospitality enterprises. Wichita can, and must, recreate opportunities for its people, and WSU has to be one of the critical drivers.

We want you to know that this is a responsibility we take very seriously. Here are some examples of how Wichita State is leading the way during this critical time:

- In the 1980s, due largely to strong support from business, WSU's mission was changed so that it became a "research university." While both KU and KSU also are research universities, what makes us unique is our urban location. Implementing this mission in its modern form is absolutely critical to the future of this region. Universities like WSU nationally are increasingly being viewed as engines of development for their regions and the centers of "innovation districts" that generate new jobs, increased quality of life and opportunity for broad ranges of people.
- Implementing modern approaches to the research mission has led us to create an "Innovation Campus," new degrees and approaches to recruiting students. We also are creating greater emphasis on funded research and development, along with the expectation that our research will be meaningful and impactful.
- WSU and the former Wichita Area Technical College (now WSU Tech) affiliated to encourage greater opportunities for new, integrated programs based on emerging needs of the community, and greater opportunities for people of all educational backgrounds and interests. This partnership also encourages expanded relationships with the areas high school students to better prepare them for further education and training. Post high school education is crucial for the future.
- WSU faculty are experimenting with new course and program formats (including half-credit hour badges), expanding distance education and even examining how to modify some existing degrees to make them more accessible. Most recently, WSU has added both Bachelor of Applied Arts and a Bachelor of Applied Science degrees to allow for new approaches to education that meet emerging needs of the 21st century.

### Challenges remain

These are just a few of the innovations here at WSU, and we have the potential to be a major driver of this region and state for the future. But, there are issues that can, and will, undermine both the future of the university, the city and state:

- The role and mission of an urban-based research university focused on the needs of the people is not, and cannot be, a partisan political issue if it is to succeed. While the political parties may differ in many parts of their agendas, building community capacity that provides opportunities for the people of the city, region and state cannot be one of them.
- It is time for serious redirection of the public conversation at all levels regarding investments that need to be made if the current stagnation is to be overcome. These conversations are going to be difficult because they will require different investments from those who supported older approaches to economic and community development. The "new economic infrastructure" is focused on technology, creativity, innovation and quality of life. How often are these issues seriously discussed in public forums or by political candidates of any stripe?
- There needs to be a serious reconsideration of support for education at all levels. Some of this may require money, but much of it requires policy that supports new rewards systems, simplifies and encourages institutional action, and strongly supports development of public-private partnerships (P3s) that are so critical to successful research universities that are future focused.
- Much of the recent conversation about education and the economy of the state has been backward looking and not based either on what has worked across the country (and increasingly the world). Some of what WSU is doing is "new and cutting edge," but much of it is simply applying what has been known and practiced for decades. For example, innovation campuses are a form of "research and development park," the first several of which were created in the late 1940s and early 1950s. There are hundreds of such parks worldwide and all of them involve universities working closely with businesses in joint public-private organizations, mostly by bringing businesses to publicly owned land that are part of campuses or near campuses. While these concepts may be "new around here," they are not new, a great deal is known about how to make them successful, and they require public policy support to be effective.

What James Chung is showing those of us who love and value this community is that together we can make a difference. We must be focused on the needs of the people as they emerge, be committed to developing a sustainable community for the future, and put the interests of the people who created, sustain and nurture both the community and WSU first in our thoughts and actions.

If we can act together, to paraphrase the title of an old rock song, "The future is so bright, we've got to wear shades!"



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— Samantha Stinson, Airbus Americas intern

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