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A Model to Transform A Nation

The Cincinnati Innovation District® (CID) is successfully growing because it is a purpose-built innovation district intentionally built in years, not serendipitously in decades. The University of Cincinnati recognized that connecting the economic engine of the university with the business community was imperative to creating a strong regional economy – in summary, it’s all about talent. The Cincinnati region has a diverse set of industries that matches the diversity of the university with 14 distinct colleges, nearly 50K students and \$500M+ in research. The focus: connect the economic engine of the university – the talent supply chain – with the business community to strengthen Cincinnati economically. The one area in common is that all sectors of our economy are being ‘digitally transformed’.

The university created the office of innovation in 2017 and announced the first-ever Chief Innovation Officer with a goal of seamlessly connecting the supply chain of talent with the businesses seeking that talent. The office was charged with rehabilitating a university acquired 1929 Sears retail store and established the newly minted 1819 Innovation Hub as its nerve center. From its grand opening in 2018, it has established corporate partnerships, developed a robust start-up ecosystem and is at capacity in less than three years. In 2019, the ‘Digital Futures’ complex was announced connecting interdisciplinary research digitally centered (hardware/software/human) teams with industry to focus on problems that matter. The first 400K SF, of a planned 600K SF development, is scheduled to be completed in June 2022. Building upon the significant investments by the university and its partners, in 2020, the efforts were further expanded by the state of Ohio with a \$100M seed investment. This investment will accelerate STEM graduates by 15K, research by \$2B, and placemaking with the measurable goal of creating 20K new knowledge jobs and \$3B in annual economic impact by 2030 in the CID. Why does this work?

Establishing a physical presence near a major research institution (proximity matters) where people and industry connect resulting in greater agglomeration and connectivity is imperative. In Cincinnati, the community is fortunate that other ‘innovation assets’ are located near the university, including nationally ranked Cincinnati Children’s Hospital and the EPA. The CID is also working with other colleges and universities in the region to engage talent needed to fuel businesses.

Beyond this, it is the CID’s purpose-built mission and subsequent approach, or model, to industry that differentiates and produces rapid outcomes.

- Needs-based – ‘listening’ to the needs of the corporate partners and delivering value
- Speed – reduction or elimination of friction in processes and interactions
- Access – to talent (students, research and educational resources - including upskilling and reskilling of highly skilled and low income, underemployed and unemployed) to build a stronger talent pipeline.
- Bold leadership – led by an entrepreneurial champion, determined to break barriers at the intersection of education and industry

The model created here is one that has become the model for the state of Ohio with the announcement of the Cleveland Innovation District in January 2021 and the Columbus Innovation District in February 2021. Leadership believes this model can be ‘a’ model for other heartland cities challenged with the mobility of talent to the so-called ‘superstar cities’ – nationally and internationally.

The CID is both a living district as well as a model that can transform other cities in the heartland. It is both physical and digital. It is a model built in years, not decades. CID leadership recognizes that being successful in Cincinnati alone does nothing to solve the national problem – the talent crisis; a crisis where the heartland is hit the hardest. To maximize impact, the CID is poised to deliver this model and serve as a nexus for the nation so it is transferrable to other leaders, other cities, policy makers and institutions.

The \$100M seed investment, along with significant co-investments from the anchor institutions, served to prove the ability to accelerate the talent pipeline and build stronger, more tightly connected supply chains of talent. Detailed plans, with measurable outcomes, timelines and contractual terms, were developed to support this investment. What is needed is additional fuel to further accelerate this effort here and throughout the heartland. The CID can be ‘a’ model for other communities to understand and utilize to accelerate their efforts. Time is the enemy and the model developed here can be a blueprint for others to learn from and implement.

Workforce and research needs, and areas of specialization, will evolve as the talent supply chain connections are more tightly integrated. From a workforce perspective, this model is not just focused on ‘highly skilled (degreed)’ talent but on bringing our entire state forward through skilling programs to assist all individuals in this ‘digital economy’. From a research perspective, our focus will be on the core needs core to our region: digital technologies to support transformation of organizations and advanced manufacturing. The model is based on ‘developing solutions to identified problems’ as opposed to ‘solutions chasing problems’ – a major paradigm shift.

Talent is drawn to locations (innovation districts/talent clusters) where innovation occurs, and organizations are drawn to locations that have the talent. The CID (and other heartland cities) must be recognized as beacons for this talent.