

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP: UNION AND SCHENECTADY COUNTY TEAM UP TO BUILD A NEW CAMPUS

By: *Laura Schweitzer, Ph.D., President, Union Graduate College*



Looking at the brand new, three-story building and surrounding campus of Union Graduate College in downtown Schenectady, it is hard to imagine that just two years ago it was the overgrown site of an abandoned Sunoco gas station. From my office on the third floor, I enjoy stunning views of the Mohawk Valley – but I can also see the vibrant revitalization of downtown Schenectady taking place before my eyes.

When the Graduate College first recognized that its growing programs in management, engineering, education and bioethics needed a bigger campus, it looked to Schenectady County officials for help. In the last six years, more than \$400 million dollars has been invested in the county's economic development.

Union Graduate College wanted to be a part of this exciting rebirth.

As an upstate New York native, I have seen – first-hand – the challenges our region faces. But as a former University of Louisville and Syracuse University administrator, I have also seen the powerful role institutions of higher learning can play in spurring growth in their communities. Beyond service learning and community outreach, colleges make a very tangible economic impact. Upon joining the Graduate College last year, I set out to find out exactly how much impact we are having on our region.

Using U.S. Department of Labor data, I determined that employees with a Master's level education earn, on average, \$25,000 a year more than those with a four-year college degree. Many of our students are retained in the Capital Region, so multiplying that additional income times more than 2,000 regional alumni works out to more than \$50 million in additional income.

Dr. Jim Lambrinos, an economics professor in our School of Management, took my findings and through modeling estimates this additional income alone translates into an overall economic impact on the Capital Region (a four-county area) of more than \$650 million each year! We may be small, but our impact certainly isn't.

Thankfully, Schenectady County leaders recognize our value and have been willing partners in creating a new campus. Together with Brian Stratton, Mayor of Schenectady, Susan Savage, Chair of the Schenectady County Legislature and Ray Gillen, Chairman of the Schenectady Metroplex Development Authority, the county's



economic development agency, the search began for a site that not only met the Graduate College's needs, but would also contribute to the momentum of revitalization they had already begun.

It is all about location in real estate, and the site we chose stood at a critical intersection: a well-traveled entry point to downtown that was close to highways – a big plus for graduate students. Sure it was an eyesore, but the college and county officials shared a vision for what the abandoned gas station could be.

There was only one problem: it wasn't for sale!

Schenectady County helped solve that issue and dozens of others along the way. Helping bring the eventual sellers to the table, assisting with site clean-up and shepherding financing through the IDA process are some examples. As the real estate experts, they anticipated our needs and helped communicate with the involved parties to keep the project on track. We couldn't have done it without them.

And today our new Graduate Center has transformed the neighborhood. Ripped up concrete, overgrown weeds and soil that we discovered needed remediation have been replaced with a model of sustainability—a LEED-certified, state-of-the-art educational facility. As part of our commitment to revitalizing the area, our campus has also re-introduced special American Elm trees—a species that was largely wiped out by disease several decades ago. A swale system redirects runoff to prevent flooding (a common problem in older communities). And our roof is designed to house solar panels, which will be used in our new "Emerging Energy Systems" engineering degree.

Schenectady County Legislature's Chairwoman Susan Savage has been a key partner and champion of our efforts. She explains, "Higher education is at the very heart of economic development in New York State. We are very proud Union Graduate College has made its permanent home in the heart of our community. This provides opportunities for this generation and the next to learn and work right here in the original Tech Valley."

In more than a dozen years as a college administrator, I have seen the powerful difference it makes when colleges and local leaders work together. Private colleges like Union Graduate College are anchors in New York State's communities – but we cannot be islands. We must be part of the plan. In Schenectady County, officials have played a hundred roles – both large and small – in helping to bring our new campus to life. In turn, we are deeply committed to helping continue the successful renaissance already underway. 🏡