

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

2025 Q1



ECONOMIC
GROWTH & OPPORTUNITY

Redefining the Norm

Variety and diversity increase the possibility of success and fuel the bioscience and technology industries booming in Lawrence.

by Darin White, aerial photography courtesy Innovation Park

**16 TO 19.3% GROWTH
IN TECH WORKERS
PER CAPITA FROM
2019-2020**

In 1605, Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra wrote the novel “Don Quixote,” exploring tensions between idealism and materialism. He wrote, “... it is the part of wise men to preserve themselves to-day for to-morrow, and not risk all in one day” This quote combined with an old Italian proverb was later translated as, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.” Other ways to say the same thing: “Don’t put all your marbles in one jar,” or “Don’t bet on one horse.” An even earlier version in the Old Testament with a similar meaning is written, “Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth.”

Most likely your financial planner has recommended at some point that you should diversify your portfolio. All of these analogies are related in that it is considered wise to not put your hope and resources into a single venture, but to spread them out to increase the probability of success. There is strength in diversity, a concept that can certainly be applied to cities and regions.

Technology and Supporting Organizations

We are fortunate in Lawrence to have a wide variety of businesses that provide different products and services for our community, as well as companies that offer their goods and services to quite literally the world. What are companies doing in Lawrence to maintain a healthy economy? How are the businesses in our town creating new opportunities for economic growth? What organizations help support current businesses and are looking to grow in our community or draw new businesses to the area?

One sector in which our community is really growing is bioscience and technology, creating an influx of new tech workers to Lawrence. According to Brookings Institution and the U.S. Census Bureau, as well as reports by Axios and Nucamp, Lawrence, Kansas, had a 16 to 19.3 percent growth in percentage of tech workers per capita from 2019–2020, which was the highest in tech workers per capita. Jaime Gassmann, part of the Lawrence Tech Guild, a grassroots organization that brings tech workers together for social and networking events, says through a combination of factors including COVID-19, remote work has become a viable situation and has caused a trend toward “reverse brain drain,” a concept where human capital moves in reverse from a more developed area to a less developed area that is developing rapidly. Essentially, highly talented individuals who graduated from The University of Kansas (KU) who would have loved to stay in Lawrence early on ended up moving to other tech hub cities to find work. Because of the switch to remote work allowing them to work anywhere they desire, many have chosen to return and make Lawrence their home base.

Adam Courtney-CEO KUIP



KU Innovation Park

Another driving factor in tech workers moving to Lawrence is growth from tech companies choosing to move or create a startup business here. One of those companies is KU Innovation Park (KUIP). The mission of KUIP is to “... create, recruit, grow and retain technology and bioscience businesses in northeast Kansas with the ultimate vision to build a more modern, resilient and diverse regional economy.” It is committed to innovation and economic development. The Park includes four founding partners based on a public-private partnership among the City of Lawrence, Douglas County, the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce and The University of Kansas. Through this unique model and the addition of many biotech- and technology-based businesses, the Park has been growing exponentially.

Adam Courtney, CEO and board president for KUIP, writes, “KU Innovation Park remains steadfast in its mission to support bioscience and technology companies, a focus that inherently diversifies the Lawrence and Douglas County economy. Rather than shifting directions, the Park has strategically expanded its impact by fostering a dynamic ecosystem where research-driven startups, scaling ventures and industry leaders all have a place.”

He says in keeping with the Park’s founding goal of supporting the bioscience and technology industries, the Park attracts startups and companies alike with high-growth, high-wage potential. “This specialization strengthens the local economy and broadens opportunities for talent development, investment and commercialization of research coming out of the University of Kansas.”

KUIP has been expanding rapidly but thoughtfully. Courtney reveals that, “The Park has evolved by scaling our capacity to support more companies, from early stage startups to established firms.” He says over the past decade, the Park has added 47 companies to its system, growing from 27 in 2014 to 74 at the end of 2024. In 2014, Park companies employed

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111 people. At the end of 2024, that number was 750. And since 2014, the total annual payroll of Park companies has increased from \$7.2 million to \$49.7 million, growth of over \$42 million. “This evolution is reflected in the Park’s physical growth, too, with new facilities that increase access to specialized office and lab space,” he adds.

With expansion, there can be growing pains, whether a startup or a larger company. Companies might struggle with high operational costs, limited access to capital and the challenge of navigating commercialization. “The Park reduces these risks by offering state-of-the-art lab and office space, connecting companies with funding opportunities and facilitating collaborations with KU researchers and industry partners,” Courtney explains. “We’ve also increased our business support services and local investment opportunities by launching the Oread Angel Investors network.” These advancements have strengthened the local innovation economy, making Lawrence and Douglas County a more competitive hub for high-tech, high-growth industries.

KU Innovation Park provides much-needed support to local companies by design, Courtney continues. By providing specialized infrastructure, business support services and access to KU, the Park’s environment is meant to help bioscience and technology companies grow with fewer barriers to entry.

KUIP is committed to Lawrence and its partnerships, and will continue to build a resilient and healthy economy, as well as remain a competitive hub for high-growth businesses focused on bioscience and technology. “With the emergence of cybersecurity as a focus for KU, we are mirroring that emphasis through our Phase IV facility, which will include the Kansas National Security Innovation Center,” Courtney says.

Lawrence Tech Guild



l-r Jaime Gassman and Mike Silverman of Lawrence Tech Guild



Lawrence Tech Guild is a group of individuals who work in the tech sector and have an interest in keeping their finger on the pulse of developing technology. Some simply want to hang out with other like-minded individuals. Jaime Gassmann describes it as, “a grassroots organization [that] has no structure, no bank account, and it is what people want it to be. It is a starting point where we make the connections. It is social, it is networking, and it is open to anyone who considers themselves a tech worker.”

Gassmann attended KU and, after moving away for work, ended up realizing along with many others that, “remote work freed us up to make the choice to be in a place we care about.” She chose to come back to Lawrence in 2022 as part of this arc of tech workers who came before her and many after. Some never had to leave because of new opportunities in town or remote work. When she moved back, Gassmann

asked a friend where tech workers hung out after working from their spare rooms or houses. She found a Slack Channel of tech workers who were getting together and joined the group. She wondered what could be done to get this group even more connected, and in the summer of 2022, she helped set up a gathering after work. The Lawrence Chamber of Commerce heard about the group and wanted to help support it, so it paid for them to have beer and appetizers. The Lawrence Tech Guild has been meeting each month ever since.

Mike Silverman moved to Lawrence to attend The University of Kansas in 1992, got an internship and then a job in tech, and has stayed here ever since. He works as a quality assurance engineer for Matterport, a remote-only company based in Silicon Valley. “I helped start the Tech Guild because I felt that Lawrence needed its own informal way for those of us in the tech industry to connect with each other,” he says. “This

is the era of ‘work from home,’ plus Lawrence is often seen as merely a satellite for the KC metro. However, there’s a ton of cool folks in town in the technology industry—so many startups, entrepreneurs, folks working for companies large and small—and we are all kind of in our own worlds.” He describes tech in Lawrence as somewhat of an archipelago, folks on their own “islands” working remotely for a company located elsewhere or in a small team. “Connecting these folks is part of why the Guild exists. I also think because Lawrence is not seen from the outside as a ‘tech town’ that a lot of people, especially outside of tech, don’t realize what exists here.”

Gassmann believes Lawrence has an interesting and rich history for tech work, referencing local businessman Brian McClendon, who is known worldwide for his work on Google Maps, Google Earth, Local Search, Street View and Ground Truth, as well as being a tech venture investor and supporter of Lawrence. If you zoom in on Google Earth, it first takes you to Lawrence. After working in Silicon Valley, McClendon came back to Lawrence, is still working in tech and is leading the platform engineering groups at Niantic Inc. “He (McClendon) is one of 50 stories I could tell you of people who have done incredibly interesting things,” Gassmann says.

KU Small Business Development Center



Kristina Edwards-Regional Director KU SBDC



The KU Small Business Development Center (KUSBDC) is a huge asset to the Lawrence business community. Kristina Edwards is the regional director of the Center, which is based in Lawrence and also serves the surrounding communities, working with more than 500 businesses each year.

“At the KU Small Business Development Center, our mission is simple: Do great work and help people,” Edwards says. “Our core focus is one-on-one business advising, providing tailored guidance to meet the unique needs of each entrepreneur.” She believes their long-term commitment to the businesses they serve and their highly trained advisors set them apart as an organization. Its advising services are free and confidential. In addition, the professional “guidance is not based on anecdotal experience but on proven business strategies,” she adds.

“At KUSBDC, staying ahead of new trends and opportunities is a top priority,” Edwards continues. “Our role is not just to support small businesses today but to prepare them for the future

by equipping them with the latest insights, tools and resources to help them stay competitive. One of our biggest advantages is that we are part of a larger national network.”

In addition to working with a larger network, the KUSBDC “works closely with local, state and federal agencies to advocate for small businesses. Our partnerships with universities, including KU, strengthen business education and create opportunities for students to engage in real-world entrepreneurship,” she says. “Collaboration isn’t just something we do at the KU Small Business Development Center, it’s built into how we operate. We know that by tapping into our expertise, resources, and networks—locally, statewide and nationally—we can make a bigger impact on the businesses we serve. [It] is another key driver of our impact.”

Edwards believes our community should have a greater understanding of collaboration through the diverse population of businesses here leading to more solid economic growth. “We

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also helped lead the entrepreneurial listening session with Douglas County and other partners to better understand challenges local BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and People of Color] businesses face.”

KUSBDC has many collaborations with local entities, including KU programs such as KU MBA, Jayhawk Consulting and the KU Catalyst program. Local partners such as the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce support business growth and economic resilience. The partner list is quite extensive and includes Lawrence Public Schools; Lawrence Special Education Advisory Council; NetWork Kansas; Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge (YEC) Programming; Online Restaurant Academy (ORA); Douglas County Food Policy Council; Lawrence EDC Diversify Douglas County Loan Program; Lawrence Public Library; Ice House Entrepreneurial Training; Chamber of Commerce; Vocational Rehabilitation; Boots to Business; Veteran Business Outreach Center (VBOC); Boys & Girls Club; and other community-based nonprofit organizations.

Economic growth in a community is about people, diversity and using the necessary skills to create businesses as diverse as the community is. In our differences, we also can find commonality that allows us to focus on our work but also to support one another, providing an overall stronger community. ▲



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