

Prosper Lincoln: Waking Up Every Day to Help Lincoln Thrive

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Bryan Seck (second from right), employment skills co-developer (along with Mike Milbourn, not pictured), takes a tour with local nonprofit case managers to learn about career positions available at Lincoln Industries.

The best occupations are ones where you wake up every day with a purpose. Perhaps that purpose is to teach children, or start a business or move up the career ladder. Or perhaps your purpose is to help others find theirs.

For Michelle Suarez, Bryan Seck, Mike Milbourn and Rich Claussen, their purpose is finding ways to make sure everyone in Lincoln prospers. As “developers” for the three focus areas of the Prosper Lincoln community agenda, they are building networks and making connections to advance early childhood education, employment skills, and innovation and entrepreneurship.

Because it is a unique initiative, Prosper Lincoln is difficult to explain in a tweet, post or blog. But thanks to the relationships built by this team of passionate people over the past 18 months, progress is being made on the agenda's strategic goals set to be achieved by 2020.

A data-driven initiative

It all started with the numbers – or lack of numbers. Back in 2011, area philanthropic foundations and other funders were concerned about the impact of the recession with public funding declining and community needs rising. Several agencies had great data, but it had never been pulled together to see a clear picture.

Thirteen partners came together to initiate Lincoln Vital Signs. Commissioned by these community leaders and then curated and summarized by Nancy Shank, PhD, MBA, and her team at the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center, the first Lincoln Vital Signs report was released to the public in 2014.

That report – which included no new data but rather a comprehensive dashboard collection of existing data – showed that Lincoln was doing many things exceptionally well. With low crime and cost of living, high graduation rates, and good health and services, Lincoln was shown to be a wonderful city. In contrast, though, the report also showed that the population of those in poverty was growing and that children were especially at risk.

The question remained: What are we going to do about it?

The partners moved forward in trying to find an answer. By using collective impact methods and more than 2,000 ideas collected directly from community members, Prosper Lincoln formed to bring people together from across the community to establish a shared agenda and set priorities for positive change. Prosper Lincoln is co-chaired by Rich Bailey, founder of Bailey Lauerman; JoAnn Martin, president/CEO of Ameritas; and Barbara Bartle, president of the Lincoln Community Foundation. An oversight committee directs efforts in each focus area.

“We were fortunate to have both local and national expertise to help us through the process of narrowing down the ideas,” says Bartle. “There were so many directions we could have gone, but we were advised that to be successful, a city can really only focus on three goals.”

Three focus areas

Michelle Suarez leads the early childhood education focus area. A former elementary school principal in one of Lincoln's highest-need schools, Suarez understands how important it is for children to be ready for kindergarten.

Suarez explains, “Reading to babies and toddlers is a key activity to establish literacy and life-long learning. The quality and quantity of the language young children hear from nurturing, responsive parents and caregivers help their brains develop to optimum potential. Children who are read to as infants are more likely to do well in school, graduate from high school and pursue higher education.”

But the children who need it most – those living in poverty – are least likely to be read to due to the high stress their family may face daily. Parents working multiple jobs to make ends meet and dealing with financial instability find it difficult to achieve this simple task.

“It’s not about, ‘Let me help these poor children,’” Suarez says. “It’s about how can we work together with immensely talented and resilient staff, students and families to create a better community.”

Families in poverty have the least access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education. According to Suarez, more than 750 at-risk children are on waiting lists. She is working to establish a network of early childhood education providers in Lincoln as a way to build capacity.

The second focus area is employment skills, and Bryan Seck, former homeless outreach coordinator at Lincoln Public Schools, and Mike Milbourn, on loan one day a week from his role as learning and development manager at Lincoln Industries, lead this effort.

“Lincoln has always been proud of its low unemployment rate,” says Milbourn. “But for businesses, this presents a challenge when trying to recruit and retain employees with the skills needed to do the job.”

Unfortunately, many families are piecing together multiple low-wage jobs and still not making ends meet, according to Seck.

“We want to end poverty one family at a time through certification and connections to resources, while filling in-demand jobs from local employers that they are unable to fill,” he says. For this to occur, families need to know about the open career pathways and what it takes to begin.

One of the innovative approaches that Seck and Milbourn are using to bridge this gap is to connect businesses with case managers that help people in need. Through a multi-agency effort called the Lincoln Business Task Force, more than 80 case managers have had an opportunity to visit potential employment sites, participate in a career fair and learn about available jobs from more than 40 employers so they can help coach their clients through the application process.

Case managers serve thousands of Lincoln residents including refugees, women escaping domestic violence, people that receive income-based benefits, and others ready to begin a career.

“Some businesses first thought of Vital Signs as a poverty report,” says Bartle. “We were able to show that it was so much more. Lincoln Vital Signs is a report about our workforce and the challenges businesses are facing when trying to hire skilled professionals.”

As a prominent leader in Lincoln’s advertising industry, Rich Claussen brings excellent connections and vision to his role leading Prosper Lincoln’s innovation and entrepreneurship focus area.

“Think bigger. Act bolder. Be better,” says Claussen. “We want Lincoln to become a world-class ecosystem for innovation and start-up businesses.”

To nurture that environment, Claussen is making new connections and fueling purposeful disruption and reinvention in a variety of ways.

Claussen's work is helping to grow the next generation of Lincoln innovators. Recently, Lincoln Community Foundation funded scholarships allowing area high school students to attend the nationally recognized Inside/Outside Innovation Summit at Pinnacle Bank Arena.

“We need to inspire at a young age,” Claussen says. “It’s natural for many students to leave home and explore the world, and when they return they’ll bring back new perspectives, energies, ideas and commitment to make Lincoln even better. Making our city attractive to all talent at all ages and stages of life is the key.”

Unlike other cities

Prosper Lincoln's work is unique in that it started with the data, then developed the community agenda to address the opportunities and challenges.

Lincoln is leading the way in collective impact work, according to Bartle, though the trend is growing nationally. Because true collective impact must include a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and backbone support organizations, it isn't simple work.

“Collective impact efforts like this take public, private and philanthropic partnerships with everyone working together toward common goals,” says Bartle. “None of this could be accomplished without everyone stepping up to help. Lincoln is an amazing community.”

At the upcoming Prosper Lincoln Summit on Aug. 23 at Pinnacle Bank Arena, 1,000 attendees will learn ways they can “step up” to help. Ideas as simple as encouraging a high school student to learn a trade, or as big as opening an early childhood education center at a place of business, will help move this community agenda forward.

“We'll keep fighting the good fight,” says Suarez. “Part of this fight is to examine our own knowledge, beliefs, practices and work to keep learning and doing our part to create an equitable community.”