

Local View: “Prosper Lincoln, China, and Wagyu Cows”

May 28, 2016, LEIRION GAYLOR BAIRD/Lincoln Journal Star

Japanese Wagyu cows graze in the Sandhills. Beans grown in Scottsbluff end up on plates in Angola. Here in Lincoln, Kawasaki manufactures rail cars. The increasingly global economy isn't going to become a local issue. It already is one.

Good news: Lincoln is positioned well to compete. Last month, I spent a week in China, Nebraska's fourth largest trading partner, with a bipartisan delegation of state and local officials from around the U.S. What I learned in China bolstered my enthusiasm for Nebraska's international economic partnerships and reinforced my belief that Lincoln's home-grown ingenuity will carry us into a new era.

Our delegation met with dignitaries and civil servants in Beijing, Kunming, and Shanghai and discussed expanding trade and investment and finding solutions for local and global challenges. I gained insight into the political, economic and cultural differences between our countries and the similar challenges we face competing in the world economy.

To develop its competitive advantage, China invests heavily in early childhood and bilingual education. I met students who began their formal education and study of English at age three. China places great value on vocational schools and STEM (science, technology, engineering, math). Representatives of China's Ministry of Commerce said nearly half of China's five million university graduates are engineers. Innovation repeatedly surfaced as the top priority of their national growth plan. In a country with limited arable land and water sources, innovation means developing clean energy technologies and new ways to irrigate crops to feed over one billion people.

China's strategies felt remarkably familiar. In Lincoln, thousands of us recently answered this question, “What should our community do to ensure youth are successful, our economy grows and our community is strong and vibrant?” A community agenda called Prosper Lincoln emerged and prioritized three goals like those I saw China striving to achieve: nurture early childhood experiences, enhance employment skills, and create a culture of innovation.

Prosper Lincoln aims to build upon our city's successes in these three priority areas. Early childhood development is being strengthened by public, private, and philanthropic support for initiatives such as Teach a Kid to Fish and Sixpence. Recognizing the link between education and employment skills, citizens voted to create our new Career Academy, where students choose one of 12 pathways to a career. Innovative entrepreneurs are making our city a hub of the “Silicon Prairie.” UNL's Innovation Campus is home to the Water for Food Institute (WFI) which aims to play a vital role in food security domestically and abroad. WFI just might be the partner China needs to address its irrigation concerns.

Can we as a community do more? Yes, and my experiences in China showed me that we must. Prosper Lincoln's community-driven agenda focuses on local aspirations, but they have global implications. Our goal is to ensure that more of us thrive in Lincoln, but that goal is also key to ensuring our ability to compete in the global economy.

It's time for you and I to get involved. Support investment in early childhood programs and bilingual and STEM education so even more children are ready to learn and innovate. Establish an apprentice or internship program in your workplace to develop students' employment skills. Take a risk on someone else taking a risk: become a customer or a referral source for a local startup.

The Prosper Lincoln agenda cuts across cultural, socio-economic and political barriers; everyone can become part our community's efforts to help more residents rise out of poverty and help our city and state rise to the challenge of competing with and exporting goods to countries like China.

So the next time you take a friend to make something at Nebraska Innovation Studio, or take a less experienced co-worker under your wing, or take a page from the Lincoln City Libraries and read 15 minutes a day to a child, or even just take a bite of deliciously marbled Wagyu beef—what you're really taking is a step toward building Lincoln's and Nebraska's future.

To learn more about Prosper Lincoln and suggestions for how to get involved, go to www.prosperlincoln.org