



# Micropolitan Success Stories from the Heartland

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**The Walton Family Foundation** is, at its core, a family-led foundation. The children and grandchildren of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, lead the foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving K-12 education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support, and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta. In 2016, the foundation awarded more than \$454 million in grants in support of these initiatives.

In Northwest Arkansas, having access to amenities that improve the quality of life is key to the economic growth of the region. The Walton Family Foundation supports these efforts through its Home Region Program by developing programs that retain the region’s workforce but also help recruit new talent to sustain the pace of growth of the local economy.

In the Delta, where economic activity has slowed down considerably, foundation programs support quality of life improvements that will prepare the region for strategic growth opportunities. To learn more, visit [waltonfamilyfoundation.org](http://waltonfamilyfoundation.org) and follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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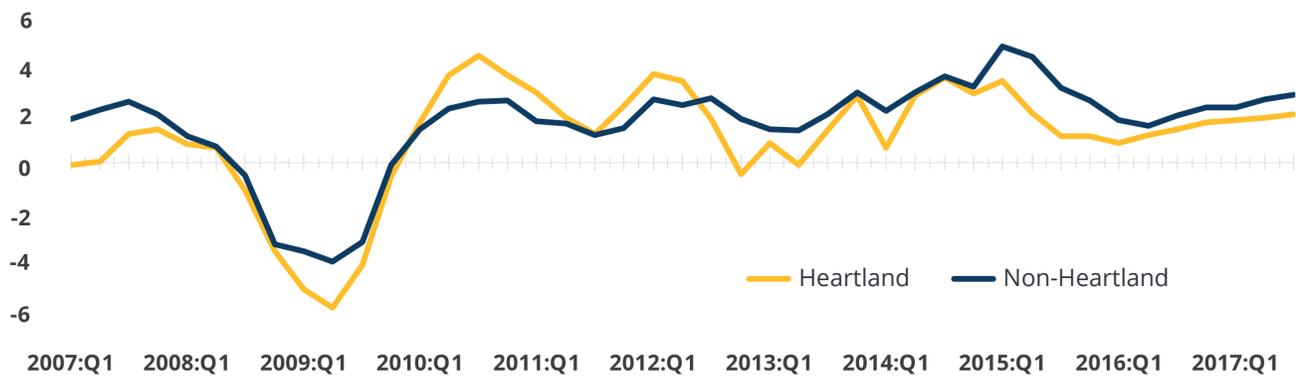
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# Executive Summary

The American Heartland has experienced weaker economic growth than the East and West Coasts since the Great Recession ended in 2009. The factors responsible for this divergence in economic performance can be debated, but the middle of the nation has lagged behind (see Figure ES1). Economic divergence appears most prevalent among smaller communities in the non-coastal areas of the country but is present in small and medium-sized metropolitan areas.

Figure ES1: Real GDP, Heartland vs. non-Heartland states



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce / BEA / Regional Product Division / Figures calculated by The Walton Family Foundation

However, several smaller communities (micropolitan areas) in the Heartland have outperformed the nation and most micropolitan areas on the Coasts. The U.S. Census Bureau defines a micropolitan statistical area as a geographic area of one or more counties with one city containing at least 10,000 but less than 50,000 in population.<sup>1</sup> There are 551 micropolitan areas in the country, and this geographic classification is growing in relevance. This paper examines five micropolitan areas in the Heartland that are experiencing strong economic growth; we explore the ingredients of their success and how the achievements are combined to form unique economic recipes.

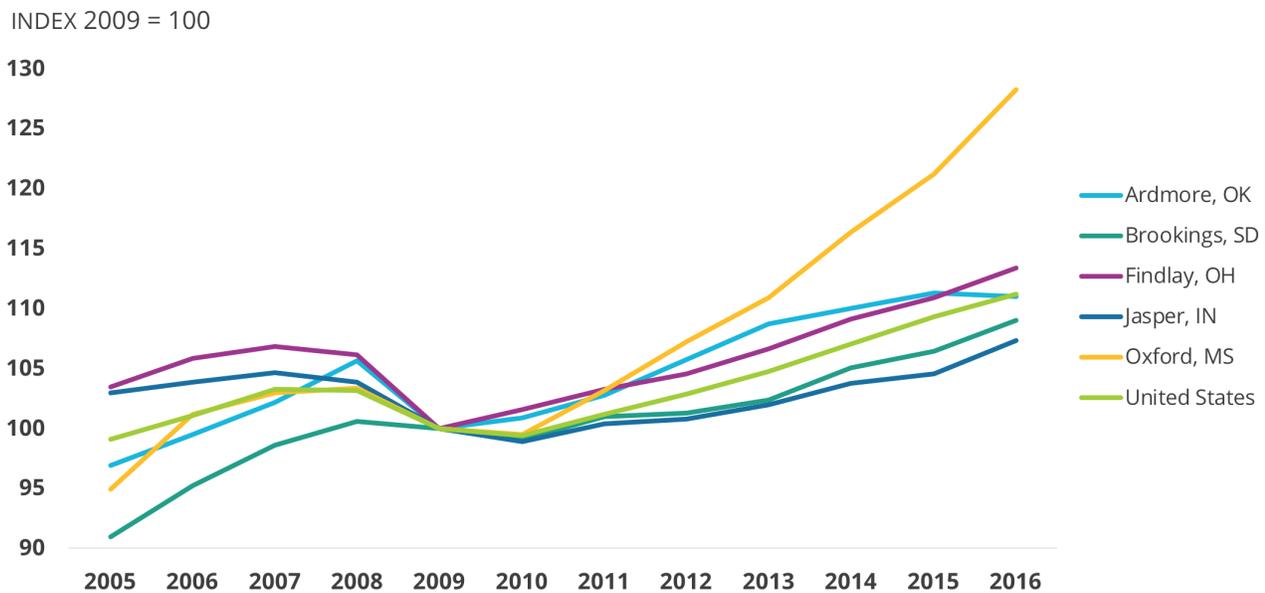
The five micropolitan areas are **Findlay, Ohio; Brookings, South Dakota; Oxford, Mississippi; Jasper, Indiana; and Ardmore, Oklahoma.**

Figure ES2: Five micropolitan locations in the Heartland



The criteria for selection include high and consistent growth in per capita income, wages and jobs. Additionally, all five micropolitans made “best lists” about economic growth and business expansion.<sup>2</sup> Figure ES3 displays the remarkable economic performance of the five micropolitan areas.

**Figure ES3: Five Heartland micropolitans outperform employment, 2005–2016**



Source: BEA CA30 economic profile

There are definite advantages attributable to concentrating innovative endeavors, talent (technical and entrepreneurial) and capital. Large metropolitan areas with Superstar City status<sup>3</sup> reap the advantages that scale bestows upon them. Clusters with a dense concentration of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) workers have important advantages, including pooling workers and creating a labor force with essential industry-specific skills.<sup>4</sup>

Smaller locales are not necessarily known for their economic dynamism. Nonetheless, cluster attributes exist through thoughtful guidance. The five communities’ economic successes were not the result of random, serendipitous events. Instead, leaders with foresight are directing the development of strategic plans. The chosen group of micropolitan areas display how innovation is found in the center of the country (the Heartland) and not just along the two U.S. coasts. Entrepreneurship, balanced with efficient management, the foresight to see how certain events will alter key industries, and the decisions to act accordingly, are key components of the achievements of the five thriving communities. In short, all five communities have carved out an economic niche for themselves.

The following sections identify and discuss **seven major attributes** for micropolitan success found in the Heartland.

# SEVEN MAJOR ATTRIBUTES FOR MICROPOLITAN SUCCESS IN THE HEARTLAND

## Universities and Research Institutions

Brookings and Oxford research universities (South Dakota State University and the University of Mississippi, respectively), with expanding enrollment, are churning out graduates. Academic entrepreneurship plays an instrumental role in catalyzing and sustaining economic growth. Several large employers evolved when faculty and administrators started firms based upon their intellectual property. In 1968, two electrical engineering faculty — Aelred Kurtenbach and Duane Sander — started a firm in Brookings to design and manufacture electronic voting systems. Fifty years later, the firm has evolved into one of the world's leading manufacturers and installers of scoreboards, video display boards, and electronic signs — Daktronics.<sup>5</sup> The firm has 1,000 employees based in Brookings and employs 3,000 worldwide. Additionally, New Media Lab LLC was founded in Oxford by a former University of Mississippi Vice Chancellor.<sup>6</sup>

## Community Colleges and Workforce Development

In Jasper, Findlay and Ardmore, community colleges are crafting curriculum and adjusting rapidly to the ever-evolving demand of local employers, who are essential ingredients to current economic advances. The Oklahoma State University Institute for Agricultural Biosciences has also contributed to Ardmore's success.

For example, one innovation workforce program that engages with local institutions of higher education is Marathon Petroleum in Findlay, Ohio. Marathon Petroleum entered into a three-year contribution/support agreement with the University of Findlay to aid their Environmental, Safety, and Occupational Health program. Marathon funds scholarships, facility and equipment upgrades, along with a faculty internship program. The program experiences nearly a 100 percent job placement within six months of graduation.<sup>7</sup>

## Entrepreneurial Awareness, Support, and Access to Early-Stage Risk Capital

Key prioritization is demonstrated in all five micropolitans by building entrepreneurial awareness with the capacity to execute accordingly. They have an enlightened economic development philosophy that recognizes entrepreneurs and small businesses are vital to long-term vibrancy and dynamism. All the communities have public-private partnerships in place to provide support services for all levels of entrepreneurs. Medgene Labs in Brookings is a biomedical research firm that develops vaccines to prevent the spread of infectious disease among livestock and was backed by venture capital firm South Dakota Innovation Partners.<sup>8</sup> All five micropolitans have investors willing to place capital in startup firms with a good business plan. Many have successful female entrepreneurs like Brenda Stallings in Jasper: Her foresight in 1979 pioneered Matrix Telecommunication, a technology solutions firm. Today, Matrix employs nearly 100 engineers, business professionals and solutions architects.<sup>9</sup>

## Diversified and Thoughtful Strategic Economic Development Planning

The five communities are actively recruiting firms from other locations to move or establish local operations, but they are not simply chasing smokestacks for job creation. Instead, their philosophies utilize a portfolio approach to economic development, with a foundation of recruiting, indigenous expansion and entrepreneurship. Economic development officials closely monitor the environment for business retention and recruitment, regulatory and tax policies, technical assistance and strategies for workforce development. They are willing to offer incentives to expanding firms, such as conditional tax credits for training grants similar to those offered to Jasper Engine Exchange, which are contingent upon the creation of jobs.

Jasper, too, is making itself attractive to businesses and residents by undergoing “smart” infrastructure investment – such as a fiber optics buildout in conjunction with Smithville Fiber – all without using public funds.<sup>10</sup>

### **Manufacturing, Logistics/Supply Chain, and Foreign Direct Investment**

In Findlay and Jasper, manufacturing is the dominant industry. Manufacturing in the two cities represents 21.5 percent and more than 30 percent of all jobs, respectively, versus 7.9 percent for the U.S. overall. Site Selection Magazine ranked Findlay first in the nation for three consecutive years for the number and size of new or expanding business facilities. Cooper Tires, headquartered in Findlay for more than 100 years, is the fourth-largest tire manufacturer in America and one of two independent tire manufacturers in the nation. Cooper carved out its niche in the replacement tire market and employs 2,400 in Findlay and 10,400 in more than one dozen countries.<sup>11</sup>

Jasper, long known as the wood office furniture capital of the world, shows how a world-class industry cluster can reside in a small community. Kimball International is the sixth-largest office furniture manufacturer in the world.<sup>12</sup> Indiana Furniture and OFS/Styleline are cluster members as well. The firms compete in some parallel markets but share tacit knowledge through pooling of workers and management focused on product quality. Alternatively, logistics are important to Ardmore, having twice the concentration in its local economy than the nation as a whole. Dollar General operates a major distribution center in Ardmore. The micropolitans validate the advantages of lower costs of doing business by showing how to capitalize.

Attracting foreign direct investment provides insulation from the vicissitudes of regional and national economic forces. For example, Findlay has experienced an influx of foreign-owned businesses, including a German/Japanese seal technologies product producer and a Danish livestock feed company. International firms like these provide further diversification for an economy in two ways: diverse origins and diverse industries.

### **Technology, Professional, Scientific and Technical Services**

While large metropolitan areas have distinct advantages in creating and attracting talent, several of the micropolitan communities are successful in fostering growth in technology, professional and scientific services. The services diversify their economies and increase average compensation. FNC, an Oxford-based software firm specializing in real estate appraisals, streamlined mortgage originators’ approval processes and expanded through a combination of organic growth and acquisitions over the years. FNC employed more than 250 people just before their acquisition by CoreLogic in 2016 for \$475 million.<sup>13</sup> CoreLogic decided to keep the firm in Oxford by establishing an innovation center. They are expected to increase employment by 600 positions in Oxford.

Amethyst Research, Inc. is located in Ardmore primarily due to the small ecosystem of high-tech companies involved in semiconductor devices. Amethyst Research Inc. specializes in materials and manufacturing processes for high-performance sensors and electro-optical devices, developing proprietary processing and quality control methods to assemble semiconductor devices and improve their operability.<sup>14</sup> More than 50 percent of their employees hold PhDs.

### **Quality of Place**

These five communities benefit from low business and housing costs with additional offerings of cultural, recreational and lifestyle amenities. Safety, good K through 12 education, access to quality healthcare, low commute times and an equitable work-life balance are present. They retain families and attract new families with young children. For example, Brookings’ Children’s Museum receives high accolades, and the South Dakota Art Museum is a tourist destination. Oxford is home to author William Faulkner, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. His home, Rowan Oak, is a cherished tourist attraction. The Jasper Community Arts Center offers a diverse performing arts series and is a Kennedy Center partner.

# CONCLUSIONS

It is a challenge to overcome the lack of scale in many communities in the Heartland, but the five researched communities are emblematic of how challenges can be overcome. As Shakespeare's Hamlet stated, "To thine own self be true." Each community must examine its assets, understand its gaps, and confront its weaknesses head-on with an economic development strategy uniquely tailored for itself. Equally important, it must commit to executing their implementation plan. No place in America should feel its economic future is without hope.

# Introduction

There is an escalating rural versus urban — but increasingly East and West Coasts versus Middle America — economic and cultural divide in the nation. Many rural Americans feel that elites on the Coasts are not listening to them and certainly don't understand the challenges they face. Some people on the Coasts point the finger back at residents in Middle America. Recently, a West Coast tech executive commented on why Heartland communities cannot generate more jobs. In paraphrasing the comments to reduce their offensiveness, the executive expressed how educated people do not want to live in rundown locations with unenlightened, unintelligent people. This executive might have fallen into a hyperbole trap to attract attention in the Twitter age. The narrowed perspective illustrates how some individuals on the Coasts view the challenges facing the American Heartland by expressing they are beyond hope.

The economic divide appears most prevalent among smaller communities in the non-coastal areas of the country, but it is also present in small to medium-sized metropolitan areas. A general consensus is that the two Coasts are witnessing stronger economic growth than Middle America. At a high level, this perspective is correct. Historical data indicates that most small metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas in the Heartland have witnessed weaker economic growth than larger metropolitan areas in the region or than their peers to the east and west. This pattern of performance has been prevalent mainly since the Great Recession ended in 2009.

A micropolitan statistical area is defined as a geographic area of one or more counties with one city containing at least 10,000 but less than 50,000 in population.<sup>15</sup> The Census Bureau has been tracking this geographic unit for a number of years, but little research has been undertaken on this group's performance. Recently, the Census Bureau has identified micropolitan areas as potential “emerging metropolitan areas.”

Technology and knowledge-based economic development have been concentrated along the Coasts, mostly in metropolitan areas and a few micropolitan areas. For example, along the East Coast, Cambridge, MA, and Raleigh, NC have been leaders. On the West Coast, places such as San Jose (Silicon Valley), CA and Seattle, WA are creating high-wage jobs and are the fastest growing. In the Heartland, Nashville, TN, and Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers, AR-MO are best performers. However, there are many untold or unacknowledged micropolitan area economic success stories in the center of the country. This paper identifies five micropolitan areas in America's Heartland that have experienced economic growth above the national average. The criteria include consistent growth in per capita income, wages and jobs. Additionally, all five micropolitan areas made “best lists” reflecting economic growth.

In this paper, we highlight the metrics for success and the ingredients behind those metrics, and we examine the blending of ingredients that create the unique recipes underpinning economic success in each micropolitan. Further, we analyze the management of key firms and industries and the role entrepreneurs play in sustaining the communities we examined. Additional factors assessed include local universities, community colleges, workforce development training programs, access to early-stage financing, tech and high-valued industries, firm recruitment incentives, tax rates, business climates, and quality of place cultural elements like museums and recreational amenities.

The discussion is centered on the compilation of precisely measured ingredients and how they coalesce into a strategic economic development recipe for each community. We hope other communities in the Heartland can acquire beneficial knowledge from the findings and implement economic plans to overcome their current obstacles. There is no better learning opportunity than from one's peers.

# Five Micropolitans' Stories

## FINDLAY, OHIO

While Ohio is proud to claim John Glenn, the first American to orbit the earth, and Neil Armstrong, the first person to walk on the moon, the state also takes great pride in being home to one of the fastest-growing micropolitan economies in the nation: Findlay.

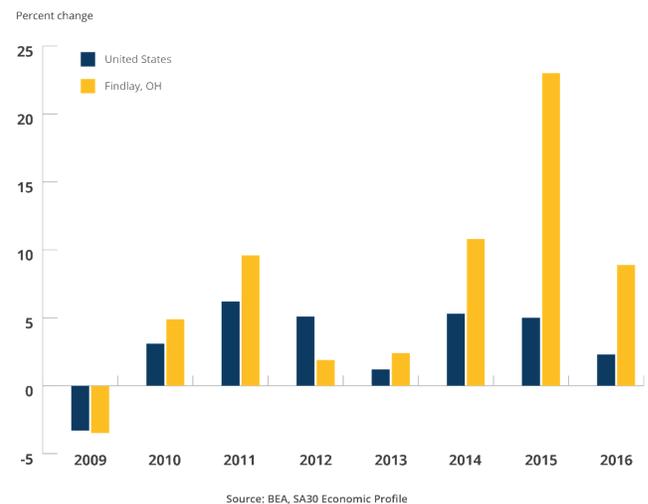
### Overall Economic Performance

Findlay, Ohio, the county seat of Hancock County, has been ranked the top micropolitan community in the U.S. for three consecutive years by Site Selection Magazine, the official publication of the Global FDI Association and the Industrial Asset Management Council. This award is based on the number and size of new or expanding business facilities. Site Selection cited Findlay's success stamina to the "Findlay formula": remarkable cooperation between local businesses, government and nonprofit organizations in creating an environment conducive to company location and expansion. Economic development officials closely monitor the environment for business retention and recruitment, regulatory and tax policies, technical assistance and strategies for workforce development.<sup>16</sup>

Findlay and Hancock County are the headquarters of several prominent corporations. Fifteen high-profile Fortune 500 companies have chosen to locate operations in this well-established micropolitan area, and their economic impact is felt worldwide.<sup>17</sup>

BizJournals.com has identified Findlay as one of the top 40 "Dream Towns" in the U.S. for its strong economy, moderate cost of living, well-educated population, manageable traffic and ease of access to many urban centers.<sup>18</sup> The community has seen remarkable growth, as indicated by multiple economic measures since the 2008–2009 recession. Between 2009 and 2016, wage growth averaged 5.2 percent on an annual basis. More impressive, personal income growth averaged 8.8 percent over the same period (see Figure 1). Rapid gains in non-farm proprietors' income explain most of the gap between wage and income growth.

Figure 1: Findlay, OH growing faster than U.S. personal income growth



A few notable homegrown and recent startup companies include Garner Trucking Inc., Plumblin Consulting, LLC, Cooper Tire & Rubber Company, and Marathon Petroleum Company. Findlay is also the site of the Whirlpool Corporation's dishwasher manufacturing plant, the largest dishwasher plant in the world.

### Manufacturing

Manufacturing is the backbone of Findlay, accounting for 22.3 percent of total employment in the micropolitan area. Even more extraordinary, this share has barely nudged lower during the past 30 years. Manufacturing employment in 2016 exceeded the pre-recession peak reached in 2007. Findlay is one of the few small communities in the country that can make this claim. Manufacturing careers in Findlay are lucrative: The average annual wage was \$53,400 in 2016.<sup>19</sup>

More than 100 years ago, brothers-in-law John F. Schaefer and Claude E. Hart opened Cooper Tires in Findlay. Together, they purchased the Giant Tire & Rubber Company of Akron, a tire rebuilding business, and two years later, they moved the company headquarters and factory to Findlay, Ohio. Over decades, the company grew through mergers, acquisitions and organic expansion. Today, they are the fourth largest tire manufacturer in America. Cooper Tire & Rubber Company is one of only two independent tire manufacturers in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Cooper developed a niche market within a vast commodity by focusing on the manufacturing of replacement tires.

Cooper employs more than 10,400 people and operates in more than one dozen countries around the world — yet their global headquarters remain in Findlay, where they employ 2,400 individuals from the local workforce.<sup>21</sup> Cooper's evolved business model positions the company well to succeed long-term in the highly competitive global tire business, and in 2016, Cooper Tire & Rubber had \$2.9 billion in revenue.<sup>22</sup> Also in 2016, Cooper Tire marked its second year as a member of the Manufacturing Institutes (MI) Dream It. Do It. Program and the National Association of Manufacturers' (NAM) program, where they connected with more than 950 students from 11 area schools for Manufacturing Day (MFG Day) events at their Findlay plant.<sup>23</sup> The highly interactive, hands-on activities included demonstrations in 3D modeling, tire assembly, mold design and tire finishing and testing. The ultimate goal was to provide the students with an enhanced understanding of how technology-driven the manufacturing industry is today, in addition to serving as an essential training ground and recruitment tool for the firm.

Like Cooper Tire, Whirlpool's contribution to Findlay's economy began more than 100 years ago, going from a humble machine company to the world's leading global manufacturer of home appliances. Whirlpool sold approximately \$21 billion annually in 2017 while operating in nearly every country around the globe.<sup>24</sup> The Findlay plant is the sole assembly operation for dishwasher products manufactured under familiar name brands like Maytag, Jenn-Air, and KitchenAid, and the plant builds approximately 12,500 dishwashers a day. Whirlpool announced it was embarking upon a \$40.6 million expansion of their assembly plant in

Findlay, the only dishwasher manufacturing facility in the United States. They demonstrate how America can compete in appliance manufacturing on a global basis. The expansion will add 86,400 square feet to boost production and more than 50 new positions, bringing the total of workers at the plant to well in excess of 2,400.<sup>25</sup>

Whirlpool is very conscious of its carbon footprint, always researching ways to be more sustainable. In 2016, they completed construction of an on-site wind farm that generates about 10 percent of the electricity used at the Findlay dishwasher plant. The current wind farm project has been so successful that the company is now building two additional wind farms at other Ohio plants. Wind energy is changing the lives of local STEM students. Through a Whirlpool scholarship program, two local graduating high school seniors will be awarded a \$5,000 scholarship per wind turbine, which translates into \$200,000 of allocated funds in Findlay over the next two decades. The Megawatt Scholarship program was developed as an incentive to encourage young people to seek degrees in the STEM programs at local universities and colleges.<sup>26</sup>

Marathon Petroleum Corporation (MPC) is the nation's third-largest refiner and has been headquartered in Findlay for 130 years.<sup>27</sup> Marathon currently has 1,900 employees working out of its Findlay headquarters, and in 2012, the Ohio Department of Development said that Marathon, with 9,500 employees, was the 30th largest employer in Ohio. Recently, the Ohio Tax Credit Authority provided Marathon a job-creation tax credit; in return, Marathon expanded its headquarters, adding more than 200 jobs.<sup>28</sup>

In 2016, Marathon completed its expansion, spending \$90 million in downtown Findlay proving their commitment to Findlay and the region. The corporate facilities included two new buildings, two parking garages and green space for employees. The campus will be home to nearly 2,500 employees as part of Marathon's expanding refining, transportation and marketing business.<sup>29</sup> Since the new expansion mirrors a college campus-like setting, Marathon hopes to attract recent top-tier college graduates.

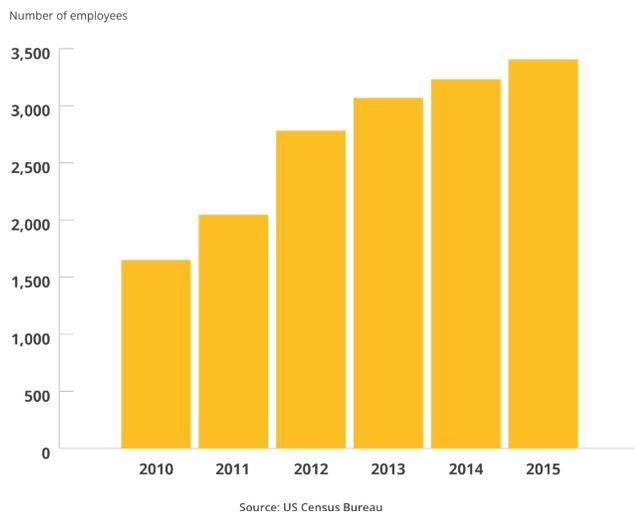
MPC also announced the construction of a \$20 million independent boutique hotel on the Marathon campus. The five-story, 100-room/suite hotel will feature

European architecture to complement the existing historic district.<sup>30</sup> The project has a completion goal of early 2018.<sup>31</sup> MPC knows how vital it is to offer visitors a quality hotel with all the amenities and to provide an excellent environment for meetings and special events.

## Logistics/Supply Chain

Findlay's strategic location and lower cost of doing business have positioned it as an ideal expansion site for warehousing, distribution, logistics and transportation services. Transportation and warehousing employment reached 3,408 in 2015 – more than doubling since 2011 (see Figure 2). For example, McLane Co. completed construction of a grocery distribution center that will employ 425 workers. Many of the positions include engineers and other technical workers. The jobs will average \$57,000 in wages per year.<sup>32</sup> Ohio Logistics, headquartered in Findlay, is another vital player in this sector and has undergone expansion. Transportation and warehousing have been a major source of wage and income growth in the region.

**Figure 2: Transportation and warehousing jobs double in Findlay, OH**



Garner Trucking Inc., established in 1960, is one of the very few woman-owned trucking companies in the United States. Entrepreneur Sherri Garner Brumbaugh provides national transportation, warehousing and logistics services, with a fleet of more than 100 trucks and 10,000 square feet of warehousing space at Garner's main terminal.<sup>33</sup> She has spent 18 years working alongside her parents, learning and growing in the industry, and she now runs the day-to-day operations

of the company as president and owner. Her passion for the trucking industry began as a teenager, and she often reflects back on her humble beginnings as a family company.

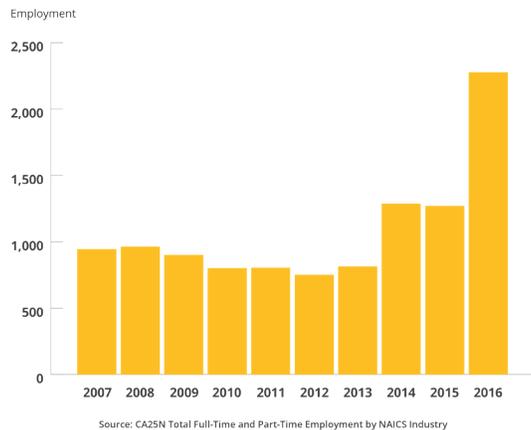
Sherri's hard work ethic, commitment to her customers and happy employees is evident in her history of average on-time delivery of 99.7 percent.<sup>34</sup> Sherri is faced daily with business challenges, such as finding and retaining skilled laborers, and has to meet the evolving demands of government regulations. However, despite obstacles in her pathway, she is determined to fulfill her ultimate goal of owning a fleet of 300 trucks in her hometown of Findlay. Various public/private organizations provide startup support programs to budding entrepreneurs to encourage the formation of new locally based businesses.

## Technology, Professional, Scientific and Technical Services

Information and communications technology, along with scientific and professional services, are underrepresented in the region (4.1 percent of total employment in 2016) relative to the nation as a whole, but they are close to the micropolitan area average. As more firms have established or expanded operations in the area, especially with more management employees, the demand for specialized professional, scientific and technical services have increased. As shown in Figure 3, this industry sector more than doubled employment between 2012 and 2016 when it hit 2,278.<sup>35</sup> Professional, scientific and technology positions have a high multiplier impact on the regional economy, as employees earn elevated wages and the firms purchase a large proportion of goods and services locally.<sup>36</sup> In Findlay, this industry sector paid average annual wages of \$76,840 in 2016.<sup>37</sup> The strong growth rate in this industry sector diversifies the economy and should provide some additional stability during future business cycle downturns.

Plumblin Consulting LLC is becoming a key player in Findlay's tech sector. Joseph Longo purchased Plumblin Consulting in 2006 after the Microsoft Corporation decided to leave Findlay in 2004, abruptly eliminating 177 tech jobs.<sup>38</sup> Mr. Longo recognized the loss as an opportunity to employ many of the experienced tech personnel and today operates

**Figure 3: Professional, scientific, and technical services employment more than doubled in Findlay, OH**



with more than 50 workers. Plumblin Consulting provides software engineering and consulting services for Microsoft and others, with additional offerings in software development, technology, and business process consulting with application support.<sup>39</sup> Plumblin Consulting earned the #5 spot on the 2017 Best Employers in Ohio small/medium size company list, which marked their third consecutive year for making the prestigious list managed by the Ohio SHRM State Council and Best Companies Group.<sup>40</sup> The nomination reflects the company’s continued commitment to their employees, clients and partners. The Findlay community has continued to support Plumblin’s growth and offers a tech-talented enclave. Other local tech-related firms that are thriving include Tour de Force, Six Disciplines, Beyond Software and CentraComm (a networking and communications firm).

### Community Colleges

Another key player in the region’s ecosystem is the University of Findlay, a progressive college that continuously seeks out new ways to serve its students and community. The school is always adapting classroom curriculum to meet current needs of the student population as they prepare for future emerging careers. The University is recognized for its nuclear medicine technology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, equestrian studies, pre-veterinary medicine, and environmental, safety and occupational health management programs.<sup>41</sup> Although Findlay has a lower proportion of adults with a bachelor’s degree or above than the national average (25.8 versus 29.8 percent

for the U.S.),<sup>42</sup> it excels in attracting and graduating individuals with associate’s degrees, especially in career technical education. Findlay has a higher proportion of adults with an associate’s degree than the U.S. overall.

Marathon Petroleum actively engages with local institutions of higher education. Recently, Marathon entered into a three-year contribution/support agreement with the University of Findlay to aid their Environmental, Safety, and Occupational Health (ESOH) Program. Marathon will fund scholarships, facility and equipment upgrades, along with a faculty internship program. The program experiences nearly a 100 percent job placement within six months of graduation, an excellent example of a progressive university tailoring its curriculum to the needs of local companies.<sup>43</sup>

“Many of our graduates have taken the skills they have learned at Findlay and gone on to be a part of the company,” said Dr. Tim Murphy, associate professor and chair of the Environmental, Safety and Health Management Program. “We are looking forward to strengthening our relationship with Marathon Petroleum, which allows students and employees to work together through hands-on projects and future employment opportunities. As part of the program, all of our students must have experiential learning opportunities, and this is one of the ways we’re doing just that.”<sup>44</sup>

### Foreign Direct Investment

In recent years, Findlay has experienced an influx of foreign-owned businesses, including a Danish livestock feed company and a German/Japanese seal technologies product producer. International firms like these provide further diversification for Findlay’s economy in two ways: diverse origins and diverse industries. A foreign direct investment like this provides insulation from the vicissitudes of regional and national economic forces.

Hamlet Protein, a Danish company, has opened a livestock feed production facility in Findlay where they produce soy-based animal feed. The company offers protein feeds for various farm and domesticated animals. The company, founded in 1992, is based in Horsens, Denmark, with two production facilities —

one in Horsens, and one in Findlay. The 88,000-square-foot Findlay plant is modeled after the Denmark facility, but nearly all of the \$16 million in equipment for the local plant was made in the U.S., with at least 70 percent originating within Ohio.<sup>45</sup> Hamlet Protein received support from the City of Findlay, the Hancock County Alliance and Job Solutions during their hiring event.

Freudenberg-NOK is a joint venture between Freudenberg and Co. (from Germany) and NOK (from Japan). Together, they specialize in 700 different automotive seals and high-performance plastic parts for customers including wholesale vehicle manufacturers. The company has invested \$8.6 million in construction and equipment upgrades to the 43,000-square-foot factory, resulting in 148 jobs at the plant. The plant

manufactures 185 million seals and related components annually, with the new addition increasing production by approximately 25 percent per year.<sup>46</sup> Freudenberg-NOK's Findlay plant is considered a premier employer in Hancock County, and in 2014, the company was awarded a finalist position in *IndustryWeek's* 2014 Best Plants competition. The annual competition recognizes the best manufacturing plants in North America.<sup>47</sup>

### Quality of Place

As the region's economy expands, the demand for healthcare services has grown. Therefore, more specialized care is required. Healthcare employment rose from 5,007 in 2010 to 5,829 in 2016, an increase of 16.4 percent.<sup>48</sup>

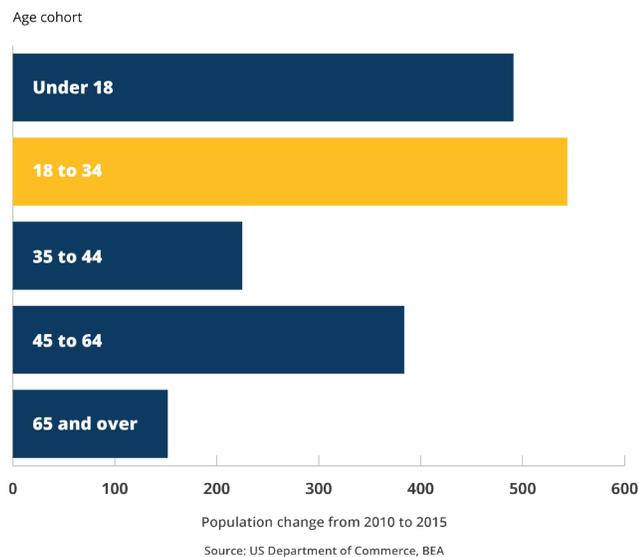
# BROOKINGS, SOUTH DAKOTA

When we envision South Dakota, we automatically think of the four presidents carved into Mount Rushmore, the pinnacles and spires formed millions of years ago adorning the landscape of Badlands State park, or even the historical pilgrimage of miners flooding into South Dakota to find fame and fortune during the boom days of the gold rush. We do not automatically think of South Dakota as home to one of the best-performing micropolitan areas in the nation.

This location is home to street-savvy entrepreneurs, a highly educated workforce, a university churning out graduates for local companies, academic entrepreneurs establishing tech companies, access to early-stage risk capital, bioscience firms and advanced manufacturing operating in a networked ecosystem. The description above appears more like somewhere in the San Francisco Bay Area<sup>49</sup> but describes the micropolitan area of Brookings, South Dakota. After the 2008–2009 recession ended, personal income growth through 2016 averaged 4.5 percent, far exceeding the nation’s performance.<sup>50</sup> Further, job and wage growth remains on a steady advance.

Brookings, once considered a quasi-rural area, now is classified as a micropolitan area. Its location on the Eastern side of the state provides the city with easy access to large Midwestern markets, making their geographic coordinates a gravitational hub for existing and future companies to locate for commerce. Current business migration patterns to Brookings are creating remarkable economic strength, defined by the long-term tendency for an area to grow in a consistent size and quality. Brookings does not suffer from outmigration or an aging population; in fact, the 18–34 age-category had the largest population change from 2010 to 2015, while the 65 and over age cohort had the lowest population increase over the past decade (see Figure 4).<sup>51</sup> It is safe to say that Brookings is not a place that millennials are fleeing en masse.

**Figure 4: Largest population increase category is 18–34 in Brookings, SD**



## Diversified and Thoughtful Strategic Economic Development Planning

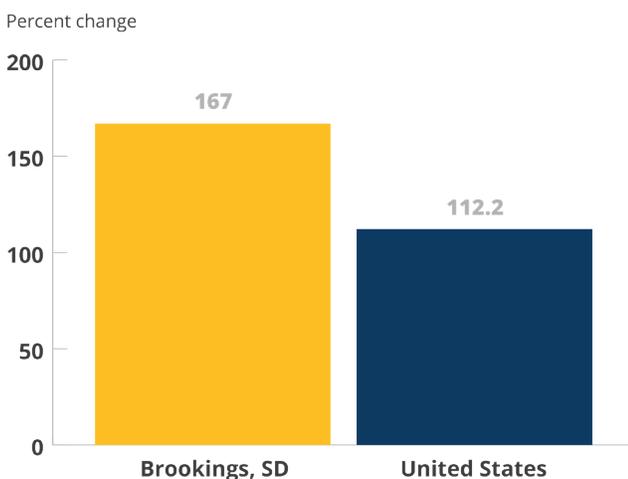
Brookings’ economic success was not the result of random events: Vision Brookings, a strategic plan borne out of a collaboration between Brookings Economic Development Corporation, Brookings Area Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Brookings, Inc., has been a driving force behind the city’s prosperity. Vision Brookings commenced in 2005 and reviewed strategic assets (such as South Dakota State University) and established means to build upon them, while recognizing that more prioritization should be focused on building entrepreneurial awareness and capacity to execute should be prioritized. The plan also called for targeted business expansion and local workforce development. A critical component of Vision Brookings’ success was the establishment of the aforementioned Innovation Campus, now Research Park at South Dakota State University, to create an environment that fosters collaboration and partnership with industries and to encourage startup firms.

## Overall Economic Performance

Significant accolades extended to Brookings include recognition in *Entrepreneur Magazine's* 25 Best Cities for Entrepreneurs list.<sup>52</sup> Brookings had the second-fastest growth in high-wage jobs and the second-lowest unemployment rate. Policom Corporation, an independent economic research firm, analyzed Brookings' current economic growth, which landed the city at 15th on Policom's 2017 Metropolitan/Micropolitan Economic Strength Rankings.<sup>53</sup> Brookings also found its way onto the Top Micropolitans of 2016 list from *Site Selection Magazine*.<sup>54</sup> The study compiled factors crucial to the success of a micropolitan economy, such as community commitment to growth, the supply of permitted land, a diversified economy, varying transportation choices, low cost of doing business, incentives and an abundant, qualified workforce.

Brookings' economic performance relative to other micropolitan areas and the U.S. overall has improved in recent years, and the long-term trends look favorable. For example, between 1970 and 2016, Brookings' employment rose by 167 percent, outstripping the U.S. gain of 112.2 percent (see Figure 5). Brookings' personal income levels rose 290.3 percent, while the U.S. experienced a gain of 201.2 percent, respectively, from 1970 to 2016.<sup>55</sup>

**Figure 5: Employment gains from 1970–2016 Brookings, SD vs. United States**



Source: US Department of Commerce, 2017, BEA

The labor market has been strong over the last few years. Wage growth in the community averaged 6 percent from 2014 to 2016.<sup>56</sup> A key structural change in employment is occurring in Brookings: Professional and technical jobs' share of total employment has risen from 3.0 percent in 2005 to 3.4 percent in 2016. This bodes well for wage gains and economic growth in the future, as professional and technical jobs pay above the average for all industries. Unlike most other micropolitan areas, finance and insurance have recovered all the jobs lost in the recession and now stand 18.7 percent above their 2010 low.

The Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) lists Brookings with a 2016 population of 34,135, ranking fifth in the state. This is a 6.8 percent increase over the 2010 population of 31,965.<sup>57</sup> Brookings had a per capita personal income (PCPI) of \$43,111, which is 90 percent of the average in South Dakota (\$47,834) and 88 percent of the national average (\$49,246). However, when adjusted for the lower cost of living (mainly housing prices), Brookings' real per capita income is higher than that of the broader U.S. Also in 2016, based upon personal income, the size of Brookings' economy was \$1.47 billion (not adjusted for inflation).<sup>58</sup>

Data collected by Electronic Modeling Specialist International (EMSI) for a 2016 survey of South Dakota's science and technology industries found that 28 percent of South Dakota's total job growth during the past five years was captured in these industries. Brookings has shared in those gains. Sectors experiencing steady PCPI and economic growth specific to Brookings includes advanced manufacturing, agriculture, and education.<sup>59</sup> After the 2011 fallout from the Great Recession, manufacturing jobs recovered, growing 10.4 percent by 2015; a disproportionate share of those jobs was in advanced manufacturing. Overall, employment increased 7.2 percent between 2011 and 2015.<sup>60</sup>

## Manufacturing

Counterpart Inc. plays a major role in the manufacturing growth occurring in Brookings. Counterpart Inc. is a 20-year-old industrial metal fabrication company incorporated in 1995 that began by producing quality parts for local businesses. In conjunction with South Dakota State University (SDSU), Lake Area Technical Institute, and area high schools, the company hosts educational tours of its manufacturing facility to show students what exactly is made in their community and how manufacturing production impacts the world around them. Being proactively hands-on encourages students to consider job options at the company. Since their incorporation, Counterpart has grown to a full scale, 80,000 square foot facility, employing more than 60 people.<sup>61</sup>

Another powerhouse driving Brookings' economic climate is Daktronics which was founded 45 years ago and employs more than 1,600 workers.<sup>62</sup> Daktronics designs, manufactures, sells and services large-screen video displays and scoreboards, most of which are made in the Brookings Facility, and has installed 75,000 video display units around the globe. Nearly 1,000 residents work in the massive facility, including several hundred SDSU students. Daktronics' direct economic impact on the community cannot be ignored: The company probably supports another 1,000 to 1,500 jobs through indirect and induced impacts.<sup>63</sup>

Falcon Plastics, another essential company in Brookings, just celebrated 40 years of business in the unassuming South Dakota town. When entrepreneurs Don and Carol Bender decided to move from Minneapolis to Brookings to establish Falcon Plastics, they knew their strong family business principles would set positive examples to create loyal employees and lasting company partners. Three of their 250 highly skilled employees have been working at Falcon Plastics for 35 of the 40 years in business.<sup>64</sup>

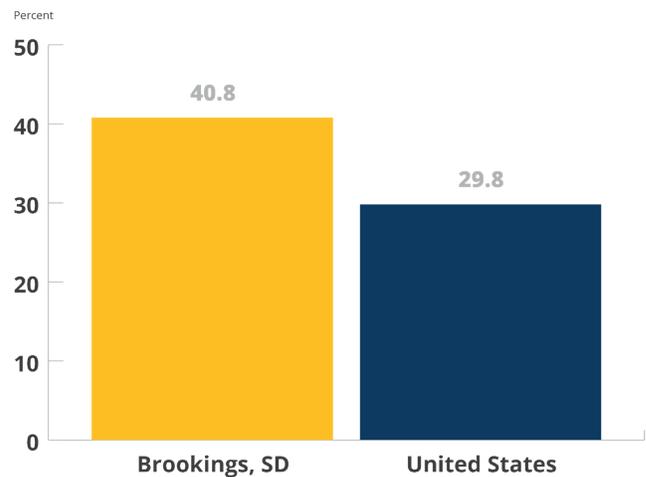
Raven industries, one of Falcon Plastics' earliest customers, also invested in the plastic molding manufacturer in its beginning days. Today, the two companies still share a devoted business relationship. Other noteworthy business relationships with Falcon Plastics includes Daktronics, 3M, Toshiba, Yeti and Stanley-Black & Decker. More than 50 percent of Falcon

Plastics business occurs with South Dakota companies, and the Bender family continues to use their family business dynamics to grow lasting ties with new and existing customers. The family attributes their success to Brookings' favorable tax climate and business-friendly community, along with a stable, trade-specific workforce.

## University and Research Centers

South Dakota State University, a land grant institution and the city's largest employer, brings a regular population influx of around 2,500 students per year to Brookings, who contribute to employment through the ripple effect of their spending.<sup>65</sup> However, the university's most significant contribution to Brookings' economy is the human capital its graduates represent, which attracts firms looking to expand from other locations and retains many desiring to expand their existing presence in Brookings. Brookings has one of the highest shares of the population aged 25 years and older with a bachelor's degree (40.8 percent) or above, while the U.S. as a whole is at 29.8 percent, based on 2015 data (see Figure 6). Further, only 5.3 percent of the adult population has less than a high school degree, as opposed to 13.3 percent for the nation.<sup>66</sup>

**Figure 6: Population 25 years and older with a bachelor's degree, Brookings, SD vs. U.S., 2015**



Source: US Department of Commerce, 2016, Census Bureau, ACS

SDSU also contributes to Brookings' economy through academic entrepreneurship and its role in growing companies to maturity. Entrepreneurs find additional support through both public and private research parks located close to campus, which serve to launch startups and incubate some to maturity.<sup>67</sup> History demonstrates how SDSU moves university research to the private sector through commercialization: In 1968, two electrical engineering faculty, Aelred Kurtenbach and Duane Sander, started a firm to design and manufacture electronic voting systems. Nearly 50 years later, that firm has evolved into one of the world's leading manufacturers and installers of scoreboards, video display boards, and electronic signs: Daktronics.<sup>68</sup>

Medgene Labs, some of whose founders attended SDSU, was established in 2011. Medgene Labs conducts biomedical research to develop vaccines that prevent the spread of infectious disease among livestock and identify less expensive and more efficient methods for diagnosing and treating animals with infectious diseases. Much of the company's initial financial backing was through South Dakota Innovation Partners, a venture capital firm based in Sioux Falls that also has operations in Brookings.<sup>69</sup> South Dakota graduates a high concentration of students in bio-related programs, creating a skilled and ready workforce.

South Dakota's tax climate is among the best in the nation, which contributes to Brookings' strong economy. The state has the fourth-lowest operating costs in the country, with no personal income tax, corporate income tax, business inventory tax, personal property tax or inheritance tax. This results in an optimal economic climate for companies to conduct business and for smooth business startups.

## Entrepreneurs

Brookings is home to many business ventures, both large and small. Intrepid female duo Renee Halgerson and Carrie Kuhl brought their collective dreams to life upon opening Hitch Design Studios on February 6, 2014. The two creative visionaries shared a burning passion for graphic design and knew Brookings would support a graphic design and stationery enterprise. Instead of being competitors, they joined forces to establish knowledge diversity. Their business concept now extends into community outreach — including teaching graphic design at SDSU, where their lessons focus not only on graphic design, but also on running a business built on passion, setting goals, and letting nothing stand in your way of attaining a dream. The entrepreneurial duo are advocates of Brookings as a hub for entrepreneurs and call the city a “golden community” based on its business incentives and community receptivity.<sup>70</sup>

## Quality of Place

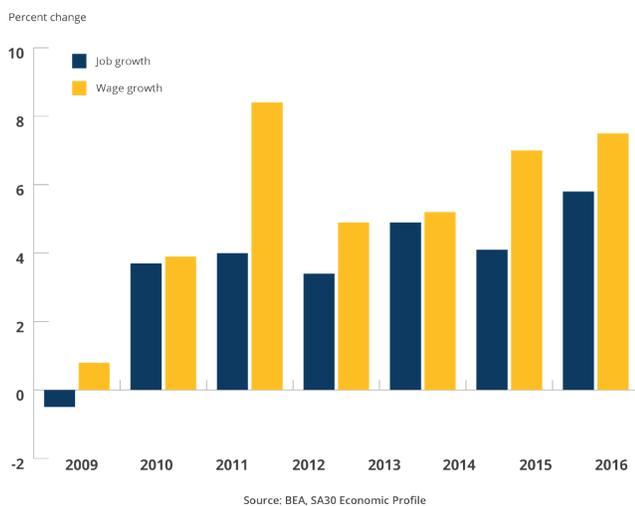
Brookings ranks high in a number of Best Places lists, from livability to safest college towns.<sup>71</sup> The city has many arts and cultural amenities: Its Children's Museum receives high accolades, the South Dakota Art Museum is a prominent tourist destination, and Prairie Repertory Theatre recently marked its 48th year providing annual entertainment and outstanding training to its student company.<sup>72</sup> The Brookings Health System also provides excellent medical care. Brookings has a unique combination of a low cost of doing business and other positive attributes necessary to compete in the knowledge-based economy.

# OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI

Oxford, Mississippi is well known for its tumultuous history. During the Civil Rights movement, Oxford gained the attention of the nation when the Ole Miss Riot, triggered by an African American man attempting to enroll at the University of Mississippi, broke out on campus. Oxford's history also includes the renowned, genteel Southern author, William Faulkner, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949. His home, Rowan Oak, has become a favored tourist attraction, drawing thousands of visitors each year. Today, however, Oxford should be best known as one of the fastest-growing micropolitan areas in the nation.

The Oxford micropolitan area shows that innovative activities targeted at economic development and diversification are not just the purview of big-city technology clusters located on the two Coasts. For example, from 2011 to 2016, job growth averaged 4.4 percent, and wage gains averaged 6.2 percent – vastly outstripping the U.S. averages of 1.7 percent and 4.1 percent, respectively, over the same period (see Figure 7).<sup>73</sup>

**Figure 7: Wage and job growth in Oxford, MS**



## Overall Economic Performance

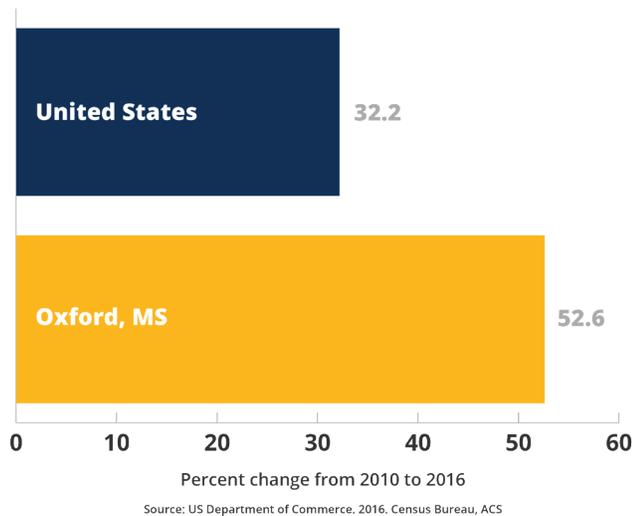
According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Oxford's Lafayette County had a 2016 population estimate of 53,796 – a 38.8 percentage increase from 2000 to 2016 – while the U.S. benchmark fell in at only 14.5 percent.<sup>74</sup> More impressive, between 2000 and 2016, net migration into the Oxford region, the single best indicator of the economic dynamism of a regional economy, accounted for 77 percent of the total population increase.<sup>75</sup> This community is creating jobs and attracting people because they desire to be there as a recipe for economic success.

Oxford's network of octo-highways forms the transportation lifeline into the city, allowing workers, suppliers, and consumers exceptional ease and accessibility to businesses and creating a positive environment is an attraction for new industries and startups.

Policom Corporation analyzed Oxford's recent economic growth, and based on their methodology; the city ranks 36th out of 551 micropolitan areas on Policom's 2017 Metropolitan Micropolitan Economic Strength Rankings list. The economic strength ratings study the characteristics of robust economies relative to weaker ones, and Oxford has proven itself as a vibrant ecosystem. According to Policom, Oxford has demonstrated rapid, consistent growth in both size and quality for an extended period.<sup>76</sup>

Longer-term, Oxford's economic performance has been exceptional. Reports from the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Bureau of Economic Analysis indicate Oxford's population increased 122 percent and employment rose from 9,292 to 33,875 (a 265 percent gain) from 1970 to 2016. Oxford also experienced personal income growth from \$366.7 million to \$2,034.8 million (a 455 percent increase), compared to a gain of 201.2 percent for the U.S. overall, during the same period. More recently, the relative performance for personal income saw a 52.6 percentage change from 2000 to 2016, with the U.S. benchmark at only 32.2 percent (see Figure 8).<sup>77</sup>

**Figure 8: Performance for personal income Oxford, MS vs. U.S.**



It is essential to understand which sectors represent export industries — those that produce more than is consumed locally — in determining the economic drivers of a community.<sup>78</sup> Specific sectors showing growth lend valuable information to the economic base that exists in a city. Oxford has demonstrated remarkable employment growth in two major categories: government (University of Mississippi) and travel and tourism-related industries.

### Diversified and Thoughtful Strategic Economic Development Planning

Oxford has been fortunate to have the Lafayette County Economic Development Foundation and Oxford-Lafayette County Chamber of Commerce stewarding its economic development. Together, the two organizations advocated for a multifaceted approach that relied on both a bottom-up, entrepreneurial-led agenda and a top-down, more traditional recruitment strategy.<sup>79</sup> The economic development strategy also relied upon recruiting and retaining talent, not just companies. Promoting cultural, arts, and other amenities reinforces the quality-of-place attributes of the region and supports the recruitment of talent.

### Universities and Academic Entrepreneurs

Oxford is the home of Ole Miss, formally known as The University of Mississippi, the state’s flagship university. Included in the elite group of R1: Doctoral Universities

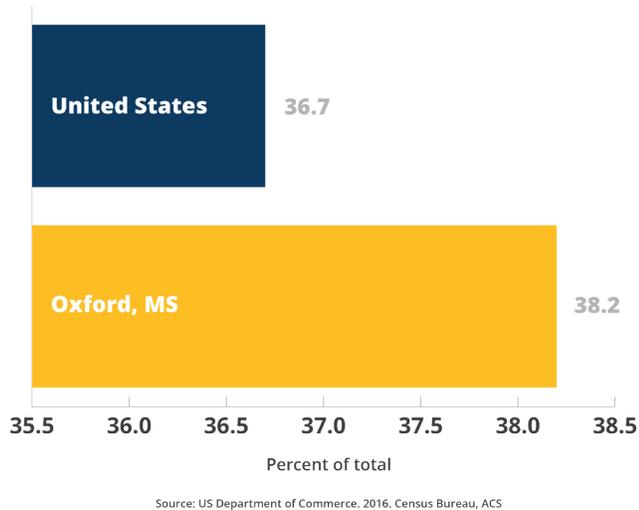
— Highest Research Activity by the Carnegie Classification, it has a long history of producing leaders in public service, academics and business.<sup>80</sup> With more than 24,000 students, Ole Miss is the state’s largest university and is ranked among the nation’s fastest-growing by the Almanac of Higher Education,<sup>81</sup> while still maintaining close to a one-to-one ratio of students to residents for nearly three decades. Between 2001 and 2016, earnings in government (where public university and college jobs are recorded) grew from \$320.8 million to \$492.1 million, a 53 percent increase during the 15-year span.

The University is the crowning jewel of the city of Oxford. Enrollment at Ole Miss has doubled over the past 20 years; construction of new dormitories and other related educational facilities has led to brisk economic growth, creating hundreds of jobs in both construction and the university itself. The deep and expanding human capital Ole Miss creates is an economic development boon as well. In the past, many graduates left the Oxford area to seek career opportunities; now, many graduates have the opportunity to find employment in their field within the region. For example, in 2015, 38.3 percent of the population 25 years or older in the Oxford area had obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher — nearly ten percentage points above the U.S. average.

Additionally, 38.2 percent of Oxford’s occupational employment is in management, professional and related sectors, exceeding the U.S. share of 36.7 percent (see Figure 9).<sup>82</sup> These metrics are atypical for a micropolitan area and provide perspective on the creation of quality of jobs.

Many Ole Miss Alumni have even brought their businesses to Oxford. Morrow Creative, a firm that specializes in designing marketing communication plans for a variety of industry sectors, was founded in Georgia in 2014 by Ole Miss Alum Will Morrow and his father.<sup>83</sup> The Oxford office targets corporate logistics and women’s health clients. The firm’s director of business development is Angela Morrow, Will’s wife. They met at Ole Miss while in college and welcomed the opportunity to move back to Oxford because they believed it offered viable business possibilities.

**Figure 9. Employment in management and professional occupations, 2015**



The University of Mississippi has spawned many businesses that assist in diversifying Oxford’s economy by expanding the number of technology-based jobs in the region. The university helps to form new entrepreneurial legacies for the town, a legacy with an economic foothold that penetrates deep into every sector of Oxford’s micropolitan community.<sup>84</sup> Its economic development agencies work closely with the University of Mississippi’s University Technologies to support and facilitate job creation by spinning off research into new firms.<sup>85</sup>

One example of university research impact is the story of FNC, a software firm specializing in real estate appraisals. FNC was launched in 1995 by Bill Rayburn and three other University of Mississippi business professors who set out to streamline mortgage originators’ approval processes. Through a combination of organic growth and acquisitions over the years, the firm grew to employ more than 250 people just before its acquisition by CoreLogic (based in Irvine, California) in 2016 for \$475 million.<sup>86</sup> CoreLogic is a leading provider of consumer, financial and property information, analytics, and services to business and government. FNC’s software was used by 18 of the 20 largest American banks just before the acquisition. CoreLogic decided to keep the firm in Oxford by establishing an innovation center, which stands to bring a forecasted 600 additional jobs to the city, once again demonstrating its commitment to the region.

Additionally, entrepreneur Garret Gray established a new Oxford tech startup called Next Gear Solutions in 2008. Next Gear Solutions works to address the lack of job and workflow management software solutions in the restoration industry, launched its first software, DASH, in 2009. The dynamic firm utilizes new technology to create highly efficient online management systems for restoration contractors with supplemental consulting services. Next Gear’s software suite has grown to consist of franchise and insurance solutions, including options for home and business owners who experience losses.<sup>87</sup>

Next Gear recently announced an expansion, adding more than 125 new jobs in Oxford’s micropolitan area. Sixty new positions will focus solely on customer service.<sup>88</sup> The job gains are reflective of the company’s continuous acquisitions: Recently, it purchased ClientRunner Software, Luxor CRM and the currently pending acquisition of MICA Software.<sup>89</sup> Next Gear has support from The Mississippi Development Authority, which provided supplemental funding for building improvements; the city of Oxford and Lafayette County also assisted with the project through the Oxford-Lafayette County Economic Development Foundation. Next Gear Solutions is an outstanding example of how Oxford’s economy is expanding and how economic development efforts continue to yield success.

Oxford continues to demonstrate how new technological innovations can happen in its geography. The latest business to spur job creation in the micropolitan is New Media Lab LLC. New Media Lab LLC is the parent company of HottyToddy.com and Experience Oxford Magazine, a marketing and digital media think tank with multiple ventures inspired by entrepreneurship and innovation. The company was founded by Dr. Ed Meek, a forward-thinking, successful entrepreneur and former Ole Miss University Vice-Chancellor. New Media Lab LLC has created a profitable digital product in HottyToddy.com, a website that has gathered an audience of 1.8 million exclusive readers and 9.8 million page views in the past year. The Oxford-based company is experiencing explosive growth on social media, reaching over 15.6 million people per year on Facebook and garnering 13.2 million impressions annually on Twitter.<sup>90</sup>

New Media Lab LLC prefers to hire Ole Miss Alumni from the Meek School of Journalism at the University of Mississippi. The Journalism School, founded by Dr. Meek, is financially supported by the profits from New Media Lab, which provides enriching experiences for students and support for the college's faculty. New Media Lab LLC has added to their dynamic team, bringing in Allison Buchanan as CEO. Allison is an Ole Miss alumna who has a demonstrated record of achievement and leadership in business communication and innovation. She will assist in the formation of the new National Graphene Association.<sup>91</sup>

## Travel and Tourism

Oxford's thriving travel and tourism sector attracts thousands of visitors on an annual basis; it is home to a contemporary culinary scene, William Faulkner's home (Rowan Oak), hip nightlife, and Ole Miss Football in the fall. As residents like to say, they may not win all their football games, but they never lose a party. Oxford sets the bar high with diverse cultural experiences: In 2016, an estimated 2,000 jobs had direct association to the travel and tourism industry in the Oxford micropolitan area.<sup>92</sup> Tourists spent \$156.6 million in Oxford in 2016, a remarkable gain of 13.9 percent from 2015. The figures reflect new hotel construction, hotel renovation, new restaurants and retail capacity; it is estimated that capital expansion quadrupled between 2015 and 2016. This high rate of travel and tourism-related growth is not just a new feature: Wages in accommodation and food services rose from \$30.1 million in 2001 to \$92.6 million in 2016, a leap of 308 percent. More recently, between 2008 and 2016, annual job growth in accommodation and food services averaged 9.3 percent.<sup>93</sup>

Home 2 Suites by Hilton illustrates accommodation capacity additions in Oxford. The newly built hotel complex opened for business in late October 2017. The four-story, 93-suite hotel, which is located across the street from the newly constructed Baptist Hospital, is a complementary neighbor to the hotel and a welcome addition to out-of-town guests. The property is under development in two phases: Phase one encompassed the entire hotel facility, and phase two, which is currently in progress, will be a 37,000-square-foot mixed-use property housing several new restaurants.<sup>94</sup>

The additional travel and tourism-related attractions new to Oxford will bring a positive economic impact to the community, not just during the construction phase, but by expanding commerce and jobs.

## Healthcare

The newly built Baptist memorial hospital is a welcome addition to the health services in Oxford. On November 25th, 2017, the hospital — servicing Oxford and ten other surrounding counties — opened its doors to the public. The new facility proudly features advanced technologies including a hybrid operating room designed to provide better patient flow and to serve outpatients efficiently. Oxford's existing hospital had 100,000 interactions a year with people in need of services, but only 8,000 had been admitted overnight.<sup>95</sup> The new facility will handle the overflow with speed and accuracy, giving the community a renewed sense of healthcare security. The rapid influx of population has created demand for expanded medical services in the community.

## Entrepreneurs

Oxford Mississippi businesswoman Karen Kurr is creating economic history in her community. In 2005, she began No Time 2 Cook from her home kitchen, where she prepared, froze and sold her Cajun concoctions at local farmer's markets. She quickly caught the attention of a large chain grocer and now sells her meals in more than 200 Kroger stores.<sup>96</sup> However, this is only the beginning of her story: Before her Kroger connection, Karen found herself enrolled in a nine-month entrepreneurial initiative presented by the Oxford-Lafayette County Economic Development Foundation, where she networked alongside other entrepreneurs to develop contacts who could help her sell her made-from-scratch, whole-food frozen dinners. Almost immediately, she hit pay dirt: A former Walmart buyer, who connected her to a consulting group in Bentonville, led her to land a deal in her first meeting with Walmart.

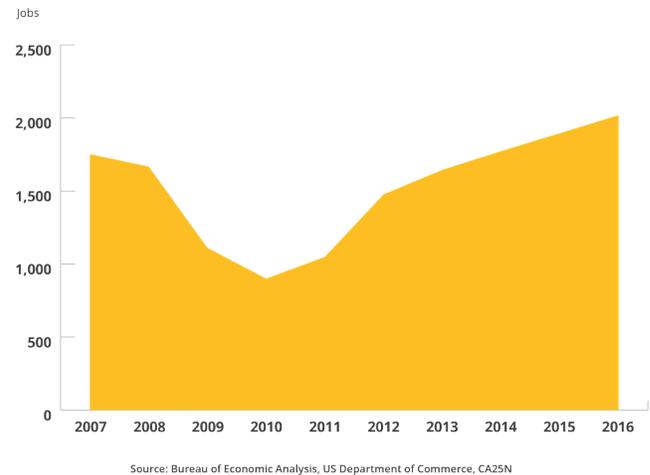
Karen applied for Walmart's annual open call event, which is a highly competitive process designed to fulfill Walmart's commitment to sell products made in the U.S. She soon received the invitation to go to

Bentonville to pitch her products; now, Karen’s meals, No Time 2 Cook, will find their way to 250 Deep South Walmart stores. To fulfill Walmart’s orders, Kurr is considering hiring more employees to run additional equipment, and she will double her production by adding a second shift. Her winning combination of fresh ingredients and updated packaging helped her strike retail gold in Bentonville, but it all began with her concept and productive networking back home.<sup>97</sup>

## Manufacturing

While not heavily dependent on manufacturing, Lafayette County witnessed strong growth in recent years. It is one of a few micropolitan areas in the nation which has created more manufacturing jobs than were lost during the Great Recession. As shown in Figure 10, manufacturing employment stood at 2,019 in 2016, up from 1,774 in 2007.<sup>98</sup> Major employers include Olin Corporation-Winchester Division, which manufactures ammunition and specialized gun parts; Borg Warner’s Water Valley plant, which produces automotive throttle bodies; and SMW Manufacturing, which creates components for heavy trucks, automotives, mining and construction. Borg Warner has benefitted from the recovery in auto sales since the recession and from being recognized as a leader in its field. SMW manufacturing purchased Caterpillar’s former plant, infusing substantial capital investment into the facility.<sup>99</sup>

Figure 10: Manufacturing employment in Oxford, MS



## Quality of Place

Oxford has experienced further success by attracting recent retirees to the area. Many of the retirees are returnees having gone to Ole Miss, due to the lower cost of living and access to the amenities available at and around the University, Oxford has become a Baby Boomer-magnate. The word has spread about the appeal of Oxford to non-alumni as well. Oxford has been named as one the top small-town retirement destinations in the country.<sup>100</sup>

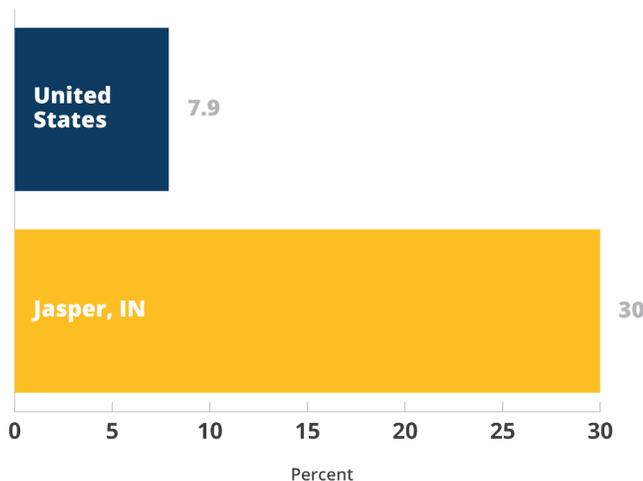
# JASPER, INDIANA

The City of Jasper, Indiana is home to more than a dozen international, national and regional firms with a specialization in office, hospitality, home and institutional furnishings. Located nearby in the micropolitan area is Huntingburg. Huntingburg is known for its famed appearance in the 1992 movie *A League of Their Own*. Filmed at the historic League Stadium, the location was home to the Rockford Peaches in the hit movie. Today, the stadium is home of the Bombers; and the stadium’s ambiance gives you the sensation of stepping back into the golden age of the ballgame, where the vintage signage, scoreboard, and atmosphere remain. This nostalgia embodies the social and cultural attributes that make this community attractive to residents. Economic development and elected officials are confident that potential migrants are enticed by the area’s progressive attributes to fill open positions at area firms.

## Overall Economic Performance

Jasper was originally settled by German immigrants, whose strong work ethic is still present in the area’s business community — particularly in manufacturing, the micropolitan’s most significant industry. In 2016, manufacturing employed 12,100 people, representing more than 30 percent of all employment (see Figure 11). In contrast, manufacturing only accounts for 7.9 percent of jobs in the U.S. economy.<sup>101</sup>

**Figure 11: 2016 manufacturing employment U.S. vs. Jasper, IN as share of total**

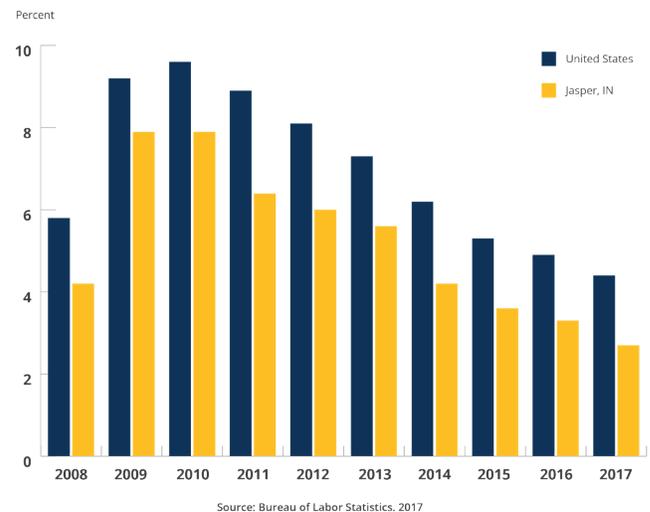


Source: US Department of Commerce, 2017, BEA, Regional Economic Accounts, Table CA05N

Jasper’s micropolitan area is made up of two counties: Dubois County and Pike County. Dubois County, the largest employer of the two, has a 2016 population of 42,552. Pike County’s 2016 population totaled 12,431.<sup>102</sup> Jasper city officials are excited to share how their city receives attention from websites like Movoto.com and Nerdwallet.com, which have both ranked Jasper as one of the best places to live in the state of Indiana based

on features like available amenities, quality of life, commute times and crime rates. Movoto.com ranked the City of Jasper #5 of the Top 10 Best Places to Live in Indiana. Jasper embraces its number five spot and attributes its position to a very low unemployment rate (currently at 3.1 percent), short commute times and economic stability (see Figure 12).<sup>103</sup>

**Figure 12: Annual unemployment rate Jasper, IN vs. U.S.**



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017

The Jasper micropolitan area has been creating jobs and generating wage gains for its workers in recent years; for example, between 2011 and 2016, wage growth averaged 3.8 percent. Wage gains slowed in 2015 and 2016 as weak commodity prices harmed farm incomes and restrained overall economic growth. Farm proprietors’ income declined 52.2 percent in 2016 but jumped by triple digits from 2010 to 2013,<sup>104</sup> and continuing advances demonstrate Jasper’s economic vibrancy despite softness in the farming sector.

According to statistics from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), Jasper is the leading micropolitan statistical area in per capita income in Indiana, with per capita income at \$46,993 in 2016.<sup>105</sup> The city ranks 67th out of 551 micropolitan statistical areas in the United States.<sup>106</sup> Several manufacturing industries pay above-average wages, and professional and business services and financial activities boast annual wages above \$51,000, exceeding the average wage of \$40,666. Construction pays above \$50,000 annually as well.<sup>107</sup>

### **Manufacturing and the Wood Office Furniture Cluster**

Jasper, long known as the “Wood Office Furniture Capital of the World,” is home to many companies that manufacture home and office furniture and kitchen cabinets and ship their fine lines of furniture all over the world. Furniture is also an “export” industry for the community in the sense that production exceeds local consumption. One furniture giant in Jasper is Kimball International, the sixth-largest office furniture company in the nation, which employs more than 1,400 workers in Dubois County. Since 2014, Kimball International has focused its efforts on profitable growth of its three brands, Kimball, National and Kimball Hospitality.<sup>108</sup> All three brands service the furnishing needs of the commercial office, learning, healing and hospitality markets.

The furniture supply chain is a vital industry cluster to the region’s broader economy. Leading firms are among the most innovative in the industry, allowing the cluster to adapt and expand with consumer demand. Today, Indiana Furniture employs 350 workers, but that was not the case in 2001 after the September 11 attacks: The deteriorated economic climate severely affected business and led to substantial staff cutbacks. To improve competitiveness in the industry, Indiana Furniture Industries built a new flatline plant and implemented an innovative manufacturing process that involves cutting and finishing components before the assembly of the finished products.<sup>109</sup> The redesigned production increased product quality at a reduced cost, allowing for improved responsiveness to customers’ timeline – a primary factor in Indiana Furniture’s leadership in the industry for 112 years.

Another regional cluster firm calling Jasper home is OFS/Styline, which has been located in the area for 75 years. OFS/Styline believes that it is important to connect people with architecture, which they do through their innovative furniture designs. The company is deeply committed to environmentally sustainable practices, which they instill in every employee, differentiating the firm from many of its competitors by improving customer loyalty. OFS/Styline employs over 1,300 people in the Jasper micropolitan area.<sup>110</sup>

The manufacturer with the highest employee count, employing over 2,600 locally-based workers, is Jasper Engine & Transmission.<sup>111</sup> Jasper Engine & Transmission has been remanufacturing quality products since 1942 and is currently, the nation’s largest remanufacturer of gas and diesel engines, transmissions, marine and performance engines and electric motors.

The original Jasper factory has undergone ten expansions since 1965, and the firm is currently investing more than \$6.9 million in Dubois County to equip and renovate an existing 220,000-square-foot vacant building. The company is creating new employment opportunities and will hire information technology, engineering and manufacturing positions to fulfill the employment demand of their newly renovated building.

### **Diversified and Thoughtful Strategic Economic Development Planning**

Jasper is also making itself attractive for businesses and residents by undergoing “smart” infrastructure investment. In conjunction with Smithville Fiber, and without the use of public funds, the city is in the midst of an improved fiber optics buildout. Smithville currently expects that by the end of 2016 it will complete about 33 percent of the gigabit fiber build, with another 33 percent by the end of 2017 and full completion by the end of 2018.<sup>112</sup>

Other strategic economic developments include conditional tax credits issued to Jasper Engine Exchange, Inc. by the Indiana Economic Development Corporation – up to \$1,150,000 in conditional tax

credits and up to \$200,000 in training grants based on the company’s job creation plans. The tax credits are performance-based, meaning until employees are hired, the company is not eligible to claim incentives.<sup>113</sup> Performance-based hiring incentives reward firms that adhere to their expansion promises and minimize financial risk to economic development officials and their communities. These are smart tax credits, given the high wages associated with the positions and the potential broader ripple effects across the area economy.

### Community College

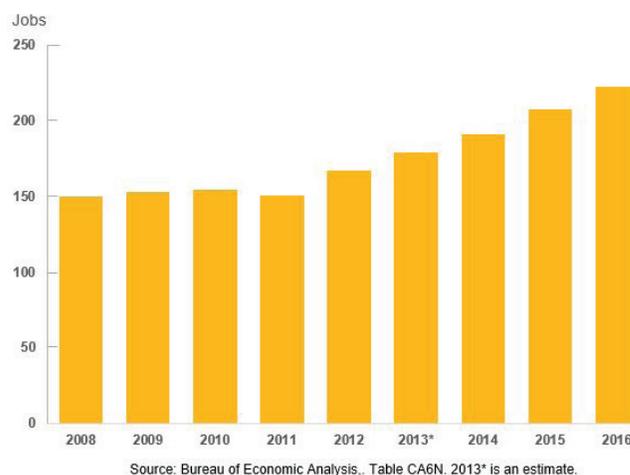
Vincennes University Jasper Campus is dedicated to the Jasper community and has collaborated with Jasper Engines and Transmissions, Indiana Furniture Industries, Kimball Electronics, Kimball International and Masterbrand Cabinets to develop a specialized curriculum integrated with these major local employers. Jointly, they have created a workforce development initiative called the Career Advancement Partnership (CAP). The program enhances a two-year degree program with technical maintenance by employing students part-time, allowing them to accumulate paid work experience while enrolled in the full-time college program. Fourteen classes are offered, with a focus in general and electronic technologies. Partnerships between Vincennes University and local industries will provide an environment conducive to supporting future economic growth in the Jasper micropolitan area. While the region may not have a leading research university within its geography to assist in propelling its economy forward, the Jasper micropolitan area capitalizes effectively on available educational assets.

### Financial Services and Health Care

Jobs in financial services have recovered somewhat after the Great Recession, although many communities have witnessed a decline in banking employment without any recovery. The Jasper area still has a local banking sector that serves its needs by providing capital for small business expansion: Jasper-based German American Bancorp is planning to build a new 40,000 square-foot operations center to expand after the bank’s acquisition of River Valley Bancorp.<sup>114</sup>

Since the recession ended in 2010, healthcare, a source of job growth, has increased employment by 18.3 percent (see Figure 13). While many rural areas have experienced hospital closings in recent years, Memorial Hospital has expanded to offer new specialized medical services to the Jasper area, increasing its capacity in radiology, urology, and pulmonology. Cancer and heart treatment services must be expanded for the area’s residents. Memorial Hospital executes a community health assessment every three years to gauge access to care, measure the quality of care and identify primary strengths and weakness in care around the region. This innovative approach allows it to respond to customer and resident demand addressing areas of care that require improvement, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for residents.<sup>115</sup>

**Figure 13: Jasper, IN healthcare and social assistance employment**



Additionally, Jasper’s incredibly low unemployment rate has caused Mayor Terry Seitz to invite individuals who are looking for work to relocate to Jasper. Mayor Seitz feels the most significant challenge facing the micropolitan is not finding jobs for people but finding people for all the job postings currently available: The Jasper micropolitan area has approximately 1,000 more positions available than qualified workers to fill them. Mayor Seitz recently stated, “Statistics like these lend supporting research to what we see occurring in our community. We have more than \$100 million of new projects underway and over 98 percent employment. If

you want to work and a safe place to raise your family, make Jasper your home.”<sup>116</sup> The Jasper area faces challenges similar to other smaller communities in recruiting talent to relocate.

### Entrepreneurial Awareness and Support

Economic development officials recognized the importance of entrepreneurship and have made it a key priority in promoting job creation and economic growth in the region. DuBois Strong, a public-private partnership which provides support services for local entrepreneurs, is an economic development program in Dubois County. Within DuBois Strong is the Young Entrepreneurial Program, whose philosophy is to make the process of starting a business as simple as possible by offering an Enterprise Loan Fund for gap financing of business ventures in the county.<sup>117</sup>

Pike County Economic Development Corp. received a significant grant from the Economic Development Administration to continue to develop future entrepreneurial supports in Jasper. A seven-year collaboration between local government officials and the business community has resulted in the funding for The Entrepreneurship and Technology Center of Pike County,<sup>118</sup> a facility that will offer co-working space and maker spaces with prototyping capabilities, in addition to performing small-scale mass production. It will also house a training center that provides workforce development needs for both small and large existing businesses.

The region has a strong track record of successful entrepreneurs. Brenda Stallings, a local entrepreneur who calls Jasper, Indiana home, has created an award-winning business on the square in downtown Jasper. Without a college degree, and well before information technology was popular, she recognized a growing demand for two new related sectors: computers and telecommunications equipment. In 1979, she opened The Computer Center and Commsound Telecommunications. Today, Brenda is the founder,

president and chief executive officer of Matrix Integration, her female-owned technology solutions company that has been recognized countless times with awards — most recently the 2017 Indiana Women’s Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) Award of the Year.<sup>119</sup> Brenda accepted the award for leading a female-owned enterprise that contributes to and connects other diverse businesses.

Brenda’s company’s focus is both national and regional and provides need-based comprehensive business information technology services to government, education and healthcare sectors. They collaborate with their clients by asking direct questions to reveal the client’s needs; then, they follow through with a candid, trustworthy analysis and actionable advice. Matrix services more than 1,000 clients in more than a dozen industries nationwide. Brenda knows the importance of quality employees and how valuable their contributions are to a company’s success. Her team is comprised of nearly 100 engineers, business professionals and solutions architects, many of whom have been employed with Matrix for more than twenty years. Barbara contributes this tenure to the regular, ramped-up staff meetings and her daily engagement.<sup>120</sup>

### Quality of Place

A myriad of art and cultural amenities offered in the community also contribute to economic growth. Jasper, known for its long cultural Germanic history, continues to reap the rewards of the ethnic contributions made by its German ancestors. When the Germans homesteaded in Jasper and Dubois County, they brought with them permanence, a hard work ethic, stability and fantastic craftsmanship skills. This heritage is celebrated at Strassenfest, an annual five-day festival that attracts more than 35,000 visitors.<sup>121</sup> There are many other arts and other cultural amenities available as well, and the Jasper Community Arts Center — a Kennedy Center Partner — offers a diverse yearly performing arts series.

# ARDMORE, OKLAHOMA

Shopping carts are ubiquitous at grocery and retail stores. But have you ever stopped to consider how they came to be? Where were they invented, and by whom? Many great inventions are created out of necessity by entrepreneurs, and many great entrepreneurs come from small communities. Ardmore, Oklahoma native Sylvan N. Goldman owned a grocery store chain and recognized how women would stop shopping when their arm-carried baskets became too full or heavy. Mr. Goldman solved this problem by creating the very first pushable shopping device we use today, which he invented and patented in Ardmore.

## Overall Economic Performance

Ardmore has spawned several famous inventions and entrepreneurs, placing them on the map as one of the most sought-after, cohesively organized micropolitans for new businesses to start up and existing ones to relocate. Ardmore's micropolitan consists of Carter and Love Counties; together, they have a combined 2016 estimated population of 58,553.<sup>122</sup> In 2012, 24/7 Wall St. assessed small towns with the most significant opportunities for employment growth, and the Ardmore micropolitan area topped the list.<sup>123</sup>

The community has an enlightened development philosophy that recognizes how entrepreneurs and small businesses are vital to the long-term vibrancy and dynamism of its economy. This economic development approach is combined with a culture of hard-working, rural labor toughness, and an experienced workforce reduces the supplemental recruiting and training expenses that companies may encounter in other locations. The community's economic structure is diverse, with key reliance on energy, research, agriculture, manufacturing and aviation.

## Retail

Ardmore's central location has made it the retail destination of choice for seven surrounding counties of southern Oklahoma. The region's retail trade area serves more than 128,000 people, with more than 400 general merchandise and specialty stores, creating in excess of \$700 million of economic commerce. It is also home to more 3,000 businesses,<sup>124</sup> which generate average annual revenue of \$1.88 million. The area also features theaters, museums, University Center of Southern Oklahoma (UCSO), a state park, a casino and many more luring attractions.

## Energy

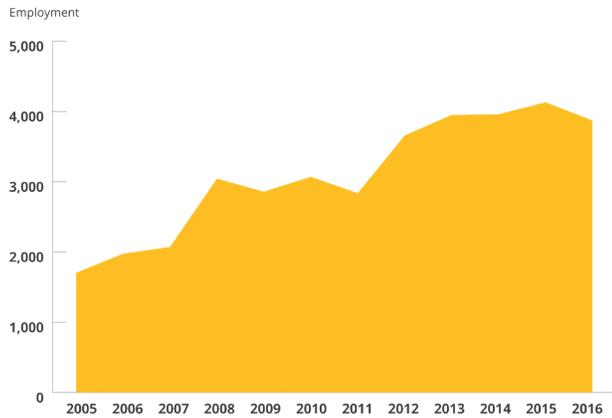
Initially, Ardmore was an energy-rich, oil town, which fueled its early economic growth. Carter County, the northernmost of the two-county area, is the most dependent county in Oklahoma on the oil and gas industry. More than 12 percent of all jobs and 140 business establishments in Carter County are in oil and gas.<sup>125</sup> Technological advances in horizontal drilling and new fracking methods have provided the opportunity to rejuvenate oil and gas exploration in the region. Although weak oil prices in 2015 and 2016 curtailed drilling activity, in the longer term, oil and gas exploration will remain a vital part of this community's economic health.

The Ardmore area, home to Valero Energy's refinery, employs more than 300 workers.<sup>126</sup> The refinery has a throughput of approximately 90,000 barrels per day, 2.4 million barrels of storage capacity for refined products, and access to four major pipelines for transport.<sup>127</sup> Overall annual manufacturing wages were \$59,345 per employee in 2016, boosted by the high pay of oil refinery jobs. Mining, mostly oil, paid average annual wages of more than \$55,000.<sup>128</sup> While mining employment fluctuated somewhat in recent years due to swings in oil prices, nearly 4,100 workers were employed in 2016 (see Figure 14), up from roughly 1,700 in 2005 just before the upswing in exploration activity.<sup>129</sup>

## Diversified and Thoughtful Strategic Economic Development Planning

The Ardmore Development Authority (ADA), a premier economic development organization recognized nationally for its thought leadership, focuses primarily on attracting and retaining businesses in the southern Oklahoma region. It offers a single point of information

**Figure 14: Mining employment in Ardmore, OK**



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2017, Table CA25N

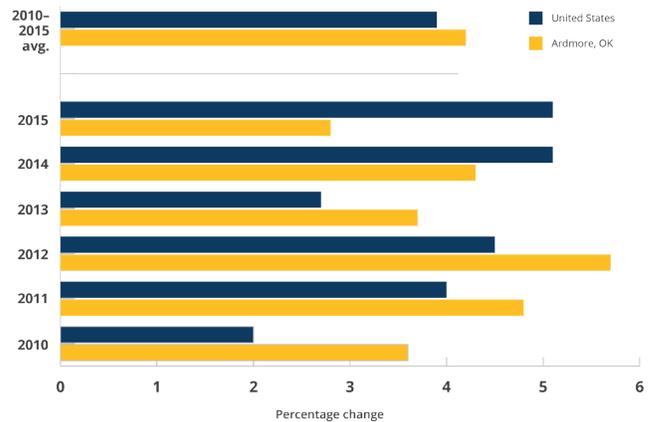
contact, and proposals, with planning and site assistance to invite entrepreneurs to the area. The ADA owns and operates four industrial parks, with over 3,400 industrial acres and 3 million square feet under lease.<sup>130</sup>

The ADA is not just chasing smokestacks, like many other economic development agencies in smaller communities around the country. Attracting a manufacturing plant allows officials to point to a single, large job gain, but this should not be the primary focus for job creation: Instead, recruiting manufacturing operations should be part of a portfolio approach to economic development. Ardmore’s economic performance shows that its strategy is working. Between 2010 and 2016 the Ardmore micropolitan area added 5,273 jobs, a gain of 14.4 percent or an average annual increase of 2.4 percent.<sup>131</sup> During the same period, Ardmore experienced average annual wage growth of 4.1 percent and personal income growth of 4.7 percent (see Figure 15), far outpacing the micropolitan average performance and the U.S. overall performance between 2010 and 2015.

### Manufacturing

Beetle Plastics, a primary tenant of the ADA, was founded in the 1950s in Ardmore. The homegrown company specializes in the manufacturing of custom fiberglass pipe and large diameter fiberglass ductwork. Today, Beetle is owned by Midwest Towers, Inc., which is headquartered in Chickasha, Oklahoma.<sup>132</sup> The 2003 acquisition has been advantageous for Ardmore’s economic development plan; Beetle Plastics determined that it was economically advantageous to expand its

**Figure 15: Average annual wage growth Ardmore, OK vs. U.S.**



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2017, Table CA30, SA30

manufacturing operation at the Ardmore Airpark location rather than another location. The expansion included an enlarged building footprint, with an allowance for increased inventory storage capacity to ensure faster order completion and employment for more than 60 workers.<sup>133</sup>

### Logistics/Supply Chain/Aviation

Transportation and warehousing, another major contributor to the Ardmore economy, represent twice as many jobs in the community proportionately as compared to the U.S. overall. A significant tenant of the ADA, and third largest employer in Ardmore, is Dollar General Distribution Center, which who employs 750 residents.<sup>134</sup> A recent \$23 million expansion — the third since 1994 — has allowed Dollar General to service 1,225 retail stores in the surrounding area.<sup>135</sup>

Ardmore also has a small collection of aviation-related firms. Their specialties range from retrofitting corporate and private jets with the latest in aviation electronics to fleet management services. For example, King Aerospace Commercial Corporation Avionics exclusively upgrades current systems by installing state-of-the-art equipment for corporate or large-body jets.<sup>136</sup>

### Entrepreneurs

A true entrepreneurial success story making an economic impact on Ardmore’s service industry is Collision Works LLC. Owner Jacob Nossaman’s dream came true when he opened not one or two but 13

collision repair shops in Oklahoma, with shop number six located in Ardmore. The company plans to open three more locations, two in the Tulsa area and one in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area, before the end of 2017.<sup>137</sup> Nossaman offers Ardmore's community high quality, technologically-advanced car repair services. Collision Works ranked ninth among Oklahoma companies with less than 125 employees in the Daily Oklahoma's 2014 Top Workplaces list and made the "Metro 50" in 2015. In 2016, Collision Works was recognized as one of the fastest growing companies in the United States by Inc. 5000 Magazine. Nossaman, a three-time honoree by the Journal Record, was identified as one of "Oklahoma's Most Admired CEO's." His company, which currently employs about 185 people, is on target to reach a projected \$36 million in annual revenues.<sup>138</sup>

### Research and University Centers

A supplementary strategy to diversify the region's economy and increase the knowledge-based intensive aspects were pursued through a specialized technology park in Ardmore. The park is attracting new startup companies, giving them the ability to leverage the research and development base that already exists with the Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation, Amethyst Research, Inc., and Southwest Silicon Technologies.

Amethyst Research, Inc. is located in Ardmore, primarily due to the small ecosystem of high-tech companies involved in semiconductor devices. Amethyst Research Inc. specializes in materials and manufacturing processes for high-performance sensors and electro-optical devices, creating proprietary processing and quality control methods to improve the operability and to assemble semiconductor devices. The company's 11,000-square-foot facility houses state-of-the-art materials processing and characterization tools. Amethyst is small, employing only 15 people; however, they are all highly educated, with more than half having PhDs. The company has built a robust business and technology acumen through deliberate and award-winning research. Their innovative research challenges the status quo, fostering avant-garde technology that

leads to winning products in the marketplace.<sup>139</sup>

Ardmore is the proud home to Oklahoma State University Institute for Agricultural Biosciences (IAB), whose basic and applied research focuses on crop improvement genetics, molecular biology, plant breeding and management. The research takes place at the 33,000-square-foot state-of-the-art facility, which includes an auditorium and conference rooms equipped with advanced telecommunications systems for worldwide conferencing and distance education programs. The Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation was a significant factor in Oklahoma State University choosing to locate this facility in Ardmore.<sup>140</sup> Innovation is not just found along the two coasts or in big cities but can occur anywhere in America, as Ardmore demonstrates.

### National Guard

Further supporting Ardmore's economy is the recently announced \$22 million National Guard Readiness Center, with construction set to begin in January 2018.<sup>141</sup> According to a 2014 report by Southeastern Oklahoma State University's Center for Economic and Business Development, the Oklahoma National Guard is engendering substantial spillover effects for both Ardmore's and the state's economies. The study estimates that the Oklahoma National Guard boosted economic output across the state by \$2.5 billion and increased employment by an average of 13,557 jobs annually over the past few years.<sup>142</sup> The Ardmore ADA and the City of Ardmore partnered by providing the site for construction of the Readiness Center and future facilities and are optimistic the Readiness Center will provide additional stability for the area's economy.

Ardmore's geographic location and business tax incentives, along with a stable, trained workforce and economic development organizations like the ADA, make the community very enticing for startups and relocations. The region's economic recipe is destined to make Ardmore an alluring economic location for years to come.

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