

Pembrook, chamber exec discuss region

Segue • Logan Cameron



This week on Segue on WSIE-FM 88.7, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) Chancellor Dr. Randy Pembrook hosts Greg Laposa, vice president of education strategies for the St. Louis Regional Chamber, and Joe Reagan, president and chief executive officer of the St. Louis Regional Chamber, to discuss the region's economic growth initiatives and SIUE's unique position within them.

In his role, Laposa is responsible for leading the Chamber's initiatives toward St. Louis becoming a top 10 region for educational attainment. He has managed a variety of projects focused on educational attainment in St. Louis, assuring that the work of attracting, retaining and developing talent is a core economic development strategy for the region.

Laposa serves on a number of boards and advisory committees in the area, including the St. Louis Graduates steering committee and St. Louis Youth Jobs steering committee. He is a member of the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives and the Education Attainment Division Advisory Board.

Reagan was appointed to his current title with the St. Louis Regional Chamber in December 2011. The St. Louis Regional Chamber's purpose is to inspire a greater St. Louis through passionate advocacy for enhanced education, entertainment, inclusion, talent attraction, innovation, entrepreneurship and more.

Servicing a 15-county, bi-state region, the St. Louis Regional Chamber works diligently to leverage the region's economic strengths to promote change and future growth through business development. Among the area's greatest strengths for global growth potential are financial services, healthcare, logistics and biological sciences.

"One of the bright spots and exciting parts of our economy is the work that happens in St. Louis around startups and entrepreneurship," says Reagan. "We're a region of explorers, innovators and discoverers. About 30 percent of new regional employment is being generated by startups and new businesses to the area."

As workforce development is a vital component to the success of business development, Laposa describes the recent drafting and creation of the Chamber's St. Louis Regional Education Commitment document. In essence, the document captures and frames educational attainment and the enhancement of educational opportunity in the St. Louis region, citing education as a key economic development opportunity and a priority for its communities.

"The St. Louis Regional Education Commitment is one of the most exciting developments of this year," Laposa shares. "In our region, we have a number of colleges and universities who have

been working together for some time on things such as academic programming and articulation agreements between institutions.

“Through presence from administrators and staff at those regional institutions, we’ve asked decision-makers to come together and truly think about better defining a clear and concrete pathway to see St. Louis become a top 10 region for educational attainment. In partnership with non-profit organizations, startups, and other business and community leaders, the region is coming together to forge specific strategies that will increase college attainment for people in the region through a ‘students first’ objective.

“The St. Louis region is unique in that college and university administrators are operating with the mentality that, ‘We’re all in this together and can form this collective goal.’ We are all programmatically involved and focused on, ‘How can we meet the needs of the students, first and foremost, and what strategies will improve their outcomes?’

As the most affordable traditional, public institution in the state of Illinois, SIUE will play a critical role in providing a high-quality, affordable education which provides ample opportunities for community outreach and professional experience for its students.

Laposa explains the Chamber’s most important initiatives for the coming years.

“On one hand, there are things institutions can do to lower the cost of college for individuals,” he says. “However, there are also ways the business community and the private sector can get involved in creating resources and new opportunities for families and students who have the need.

“There’s also the opportunity for public policy work at the local and state levels, placing more focus on how we expand need-based aid. There are plenty of people who would pursue a college education if they had the financial resources. But for many, it’s out of reach.

“Another key focus area is expanding on work-based learning opportunities for youth ages 16-24 in the region. We can do that at the college level through greater collaboration between business and higher education to provide internship opportunities. These opportunities can also be made earlier for youth in high school, so that they are starting to think with more intention about pursuing careers. Internships ensure that people can see the ‘full menu’ of future career options through early exposure.”

Laposa notes that these issues are meant to address the wide disparity in educational outcomes—a disparity that often falls along racial lines. “Statistically, the gap in our region between white students and African-American students in terms of bachelor degree attainment is around 10 or 11 percent. The St. Louis region must be sure we’re always focused on the effort to reduce racial inequity in educational outcomes and truly address this achievement gap.”

In order for each of these initiatives to be successful, Reagan and Laposa emphasize the importance of strong communication and relationship building between St. Louis regional decision-makers to ensure regional goals are being pursued in a synchronized manner.

Pembrook agrees, stating these initiatives may be furthered by heightened student access to paid internships. “If a student has some sort of an income stream, that makes higher education more affordable as well,” he says. “Internships are a way to help students financially, but are also a superior form of learning where students have the chance to apply their education to different things they’re working on each day. If you have students involved in internships and working in partnership with local businesses, it’s more likely our region will be able to retain those bright students. They will become committed to the area, and we want them to feel as though St. Louis is their long-term home.”

Laposa notes that a recent St. Louis Regional Chamber study on college student perceptions revealed that one of the primary, top of mind issues for college graduates is where they will find a job, and whether or not the job will be particularly interesting and meaningful for them.

“Students and young professionals are looking for cities that have career development opportunities,” Laposa explains. “The Chamber is uniquely positioned to work with higher education and reach students early to help them navigate potential options and help find the right fit for them. We want people to see there is opportunity in St. Louis – they don’t have to go to Chicago or other nearby cities because they perceive there are no jobs available here. The Chamber will be focused on regional industry forums and industrial strengths in order to match individuals with regional job opportunities and better workforce alignment with economic development.”

Tune in to WSIE 88.7 FM every Sunday at 9 a.m. as weekly guests discuss issues on SIUE’s campus.

By Logan Cameron, SIUE Marketing and Communications