

How Premier Organizations Collaborated with the Philadelphia Ecosystem: A Q&A with Anthony P. Sorrentino

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Keywords: Philadelphia, population loss, strategy, non profits, academia, businesses

Abstract

With Philadelphia's ecosystem improving from 2009 when the city earned the dubious honor of a faster rate of population loss than any other American city, what have been the successful strategies deployed to help stabilize this pain point? Equally, what are some greater-Philadelphia leaders' plans to continue this momentum so that more people can understand why our metro area offers so much in terms of being a "trendy and affordable city" and tops for retirement? In this Social Innovations' Q&A, Anthony P. (Tony) Sorrentino (Associate Vice President, Office of the Executive Vice President (EVP) at the University of Pennsylvania) explains how this premier organization has collaborated with the Philadelphia ecosystem of business, non-profits, and academia to revitalize the city.

Q. As the University of Pennsylvania has earned a number of firsts, including recognition as the first medical school as well as its MBA program ranked first in the world according to the Financial Times, what was the school's role in helping catalyze improvements?

A. (Sorrentino)

Penn has leveraged its global academic eminence to collaborate with others to make Philadelphia an appealing place to learn and earn. As a magnet for students, the largest private employer in the city, a significant builder of facilities, a purchaser of goods, and a creator of new companies based on our innovations, Penn contributes economically to Philadelphia in important and significant ways. Pointing to a recent economic report¹, Penn's expenditures on its employees' wages and purchases have contributed over \$2.3 billion in annual activity. Penn by itself contributed \$272M in annual city tax, equivalent to 6% of the city's entire general fund.

Also, Penn has been a job creator. One in eight employed Philadelphians is part of the Penn family, directly or indirectly employed by Penn. Especially during these turbulent times of continued layoffs across the country, Penn has enabled attractive employment opportunities via internal career progression as well as options with external organizations that recognize the value of Penn's work experience on candidates' resumes.

Finally, Penn's strategic investments, like the Pennovation Centerⁱⁱ, an incubator for science and technology startups, many of which have origins within the University, have incentivized Penn alumni to stay upon graduation and Penn scholars to start new companies. Unlike in the early 2000s, when some of the world's best students came to Penn to study but departed for other cities given career prospects, that rubric has changed. For instance, the Greater Philadelphia area ranked fifth in the U.S. for the most closed venture capital deals in 2022 and has since held that spot to begin 2023.ⁱⁱⁱ Surpassing other cities like Seattle, Chicago, and Washington, DC, Philadelphia's growing VC reputation has provided a new lens for students to consider the city as an attractive long-term location given its job prospects and the city's cost/value equation compared to other cities. So, it was not surprising to me that Philadelphia landed 19th on U.S. News & World Report's 2022-2023 Best Places to Retire rankings for the second year in a row.

Q. What should Greater Philadelphia leaders do to improve the well-being of current and future residents?

A. (Sorrentino)

First, we need to provide pragmatic solutions to help make our city safer. While an easy answer might be to say that we need to pivot more dollars for the police force, budget constraints are all around us. Instead, I would point to how some police departments have leveraged emerging technologies to predict the likelihood of criminal activities, given historical variables that came into play for past crimes. By doing so, the police could pivot some officers from lower-risk areas to higher-risk parts of the city in order to deter potential crimes. Creating a safer city could enable even greater growth in tourism and other benefits.

Second, reframing potential future Philadelphians' perceptions of our city could address some of the misguided assumptions that people have of Philadelphia as America's rudest city. For instance, many of your readers might be surprised that Philadelphia was recently ranked second in a survey for civic engagement.^{iv} I know of Penn's direct social engagement such as how they had 15,600 faculty, students and staff contributing 344,000 hours in 2020 to the community.

Finally, Philadelphia leaders need to accelerate their engagement with others in our innovation district and create new playbooks for growth. When I say innovation district, I am referring to a Brookings Institution's report where it was defined as "Innovation districts constitute the ultimate mash up of entrepreneurs and educational institutions, start-ups and schools, mixed-use development and medical innovations, bike-sharing and bankable investments—all connected by transit, powered by clean energy, wired for digital technology, and fueled by caffeine."^v

Philadelphia has a tremendous value proposition to offer, but our leaders need to be willing to engage with new contacts who together might co-create valued offerings to prospective clients and investors. By doing so, we can continue the multiplier effect of creating new jobs, leading to additional tax revenue, and resulting in reinvestment for the Philadelphia community.

ⁱ [Penn's Civic Engagement \(upenn.edu\)](https://www.upenn.edu/civic-engagement)

ⁱⁱ [A \\$365 million development will expand the life sciences hub at Pennovation Works | Penn Today \(upenn.edu\)](https://www.upenn.edu/penn-today)

ⁱⁱⁱ Mulligan, Ryan, *Philadelphia lands among top five most active regions for venture capital in 1Q*, PHLINNO, April 13, 2023

^{iv} Bloch, Emily, *Brilliant, accurate study ranks Philly among most helpful cities in the country*, The Inquirer, April 3, 2023

^v Katz, Bruce, Wagner, Julie, *The Rise of Innovation Districts: A New Geography Of Innovation In America*, Brookings Institution, June 9, 2014