

Paula Abbot and the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center Story

Sidney Entrepreneurship Stories

By David Iaquinta, Ph.D. – February 11, 2024

About the Sidney Story...



For most Americans, Sidney is just one more rural community among thousands. Some may know of Sidney as the once home of **Cabela's Outfitters**. But Sidney is a community worth a deeper look as it reinvests itself one more time by focusing on and investing in entrepreneurial development. This story is part of a larger collection of Sidney stories and analysis. In these stories lessons are to be learned!

Sidney Story Collection...

Web Link

Sidney Landing Page

Background Papers

1. Sidney Story Collection by Don Macke
2. Sidney Case Study Executive Summary by Don Macke
3. Sidney, Nebraska – Entrepreneurial Community Case Study by Don Macke
4. Cheyenne County and Sidney Development Opportunity Profiles by e2 and Don Macke
5. E3 Assessment by the Sidney E3 team by David Iaquinta

Stories

6. What is a Community Champion? by David Iaquinta
7. The Sarah Sinnett Story – Sidney Champion and E2 Lead by David Iaquinta
8. The Cory Keen Story – E3 Champion by David Iaquinta
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10. The Melissa Norgard Story – Corporate Professional, Economic Development Director, Entrepreneur, and Mother by David Iaquinta
11. Stop the Swap Story by David Iaquinta
12. The eNavigator by David Iaquinta
13. The Alisha Juelfs Story – Navigator by David Iaquinta
14. The Amber Fields Entrepreneur Story with Jennifer Powell by David Iaquinta
15. Jillana Saunder... Entrepreneur – Savor and Grace – Sidney, Nebraska by Don Macke

Podcasts

16. *Community Champions...* <https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/entrepreneur-ecosystem-champions-with-pam-abbot-and-sarah-sinnett.html>
17. *Entrepreneur Navigators...* <https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/entrepreneur-navigators-with-alisha-juelfs-and-rachael-barry.html>
18. *About E3...* <https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/exploring-e3-in-nebraska.html>

Thanks David...



At e2 we want to acknowledge the remarkable work of Dr. David Laquinta in conducting interviews, site visits, and curating many of these stories. Our **Sidney Story** could not be possible without Dr. Laquinta's remarkable work. Dr. Laquinta is a 50-year veteran college and university professor recently retired from Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, Nebraska. He is an international expert in rural community economic development.

Listen to David's e2 **Pathways to Rural Prosperity** podcast from April 2022 focusing on "Community Resilience":

<https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/podcast/episode-33.html>.

SMIF Acknowledgement...



e2 would like to recognize support from the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation in hosting e2 and our **Sidney Story**. SMIF is a leader in community-centered entrepreneurship through its REV Initiative.

For more information:

<https://smifoundation.org/programs/economic-development-2/>

Why Stories Matter...

For nearly 50 years e2 has been gathering and curating stories about communities across rural North America. These stories serve to inspire and inform other communities as to what is possible with entrepreneur focused community economic development. Stories matter in that they are relatable to community builders across the continent. Sidney's stories are compelling and illustrate renewal after a massive socio-economic crisis. For more e2 stories check out...

<https://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/library/community-regional-case-studies/>

Questions and Additional Information

Don Macke – e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

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The Paula Abbot and Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center Story

by David L. Iaquina, Ph.D.



“There is always something good to find in each day.”

Paula Abbot – Synopsis

While not currently a fully engaged E3 team member, Paula has been an essential component of its success. As Director of the Entrepreneurship and Innovation (I&E) Center at WNCC, Paula has provided essential support for the E3 effort from the beginning. Her work at WNCC established a base for entrepreneurial ecosystem building through its innovations connecting entrepreneurs to resources. Today through the innovation and Entrepreneurship Center she makes office space available to E3 Navigator, AJ, and backstops certain other navigator needs. She has created a “one stop shopping” environment for entrepreneurs by bringing a range of resources together under one roof. In our experience with other communities, we have found that community colleges are important partners in entrepreneurial ecosystem development although it looks somewhat different in each community.

Paula’s story is linked to the role Community Colleges play in many of the successful Nanopolitan communities. In Sidney it is the I&E Center at WNCC that served as the precursor to E3 creating a foundation for success. In Ord it was Central Community College that played a role, providing space and support for entrepreneurial development. In Hutchinson, Kansas it was the Quest Center at Hutchinson Community College that provided a launch pad and assistance to Jackson Swearer who expanded the entrepreneurial support as Navigator for Reno County. Existing structures and personal relationships at the community colleges in these communities served as important accelerators for building the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

“In 2017 the Chamber of Commerce director, Economic Development director and WNCC came together to develop Business Resource Meetings throughout the panhandle of Nebraska. These meetings gathered state and federal programs and entrepreneurs in one space for a meeting to share the free or low-cost resources available to the communities in Nebraska. WNCC also went one step further and created an Innovation & Entrepreneurship Center on the Sidney Campus. Entrepreneurs are given two years free office space and are then mentored to transition to a brick-and-mortar business after the two years. The I&E Center has proudly helped launch NexGen Outfitters and Karuna Counseling in Sidney, Nebraska.”

Paula’s story also shares something important with others interviewed in Sidney. There is a “Let’s just try it” attitude that shows up in many of our interviews. This willingness to go forward with an idea with no assurance of success is common to many entrepreneurs, but we find that it also characterizes social entrepreneurs and community champions. It is not the brash naivete that sometimes characterizes ill-

prepared youths, but rather a willingness to roll the dice based upon strongly held convictions and a commitment to bettering the community. You will hear this in Paula’s own words. We begin with some background.

Paula’s Profile¹

I have over 21 years of experience in higher education. I’ve spent 10 years with Morgan Community College in Fort Morgan as an academic advisor, career counselor and ADA coordinator and Campus Director in Wray, Colorado. I have been with Western Nebraska Community College since 2010 and have held several positions at WNCC including Executive Campus Director at Sidney, Partnerships and Inclusion Executive Director, Community and Business Partnerships Executive Director, and currently the Alliance & Sidney Campuses Executive Director. I was instrumental in developing the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center on WNCC’s Sidney Campus in partnership with Sidney Economic Development and Cheyenne County Chamber. The I&E Center launched successful businesses such as NexGen Outfitters and Karuna Counseling, both located in Sidney, Nebraska. I hold a master’s degree in Organizational Development, Bachelors’ Degree in Business Administration: Management, and I have a graduate credit towards a PhD in Higher Education Leadership. WNCC’s service area covers 17, 100 square miles in the panhandle of Nebraska. It is my intent to hold Business Resource Meetings and entrepreneurial trainings for individuals throughout our 13.5 counties. On the personal side Paula says,

*I’m a rural Colorado native and married with two children, four stepchildren and seven grandchildren. I survived Stage 4 cancer at the age of 26 and I raise ‘mini’ pigs named “Pork Chop” & “Pee Wee”. If I had five minutes to prepare an hourlong lecture, I would love to lecture on “Outlasting the Temporary”. This topic encompasses health concerns, work problems, and personal issues that seem to paralyze some people. **There is always something GOOD to find in each day.** I tell people I’ve never had a bad day, I never let anything ruin a whole day, time is too precious!*

Innovation and Entrepreneurship (I&E) Center Background: Precursor to E3

As City Manager Dave Scott says...

WOW! That was a huge success before E3 was ever a thing. It was a huge success for a long time. I think I was finance director then, and that happened under my predecessor. But it was mostly Paula, Melissa, me, and a couple of other people that said, “This is a good idea, and we need to do this.” Man, I can’t tell you how great that’s been for us. We wouldn’t have NexGen, Highby, and all these other places that used that center to get started. Now they’re all doing very well.

Paula describes the origins and development of the I&E Center in detail...

In 2016 early 2017 is when Bass Pro ... [took over] ... Cabela’s. We saw our town ... [in terms of] ... we had the regular people and then you had Cabela’s. You always had the people on the hill. ... This was one of the toughest economic times Sidney and surrounding communities had undergone ... We had ...

¹ From the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Website.

huge numbers of people leaving. Melissa Norgard was in economic development, and we had a Chamber director at that time. The three of us got together in this room and we were like, "We've got to do something." People were just leaving us, ... [and we were losing] ... amazing talent. [WNCC] had just closed our cosmetology program, so one-fifth of my building was empty. We started talking entrepreneurship and I said, "What if we convert this fifth of my building into an innovation and entrepreneurship center?" So, I went to our president and said, "Can we do this and what would it look like?" Our VP of finance said, "I think we give them two years free space." Our goal is to get them into brick and mortar either downtown, to help grow our downtown or a new building. We can't just say "Do you want to be an entrepreneur?" and put them in there. They need the resources.

I don't think ... [it would have happened] ... if I didn't have Melissa, who didn't have an economic development background but was like, "Let's try it." I had a president who said, "Let's try it." We had a chamber director who said, "Let's try it." We had no idea if it was going to work or not.

And when Melissa and Paula got together to talk...

The whole time we talked about her husband because he wanted to start a brewery. "Just have him try it." I said look at the resources. Then they bought Sam and Louies. Now he has a brewery inside ... [the restaurant].

Business Resource Meetings

*So, what we did is we started **business resource meetings**. All we decided is, "The college is going to provide lunch." I said, "Every time I go to a meeting with NBDC [Nebraska Business Development Center], PADD [Panhandle Area Development District] and USDA and all these different groups saying we have money and resources for free or low cost. We need all of them to all be in one room so these entrepreneurs or current business owners can get a grasp of what resources are available. ... We just held them, and we had 25-30 people show up at a time. These were entrepreneurs or current business owners. It was amazing to watch. ... From that we launched Nexgen Outfitters and Karuna Counselling. Both launched within the first year. They didn't even need the second year, but they're still using those resources we brought in. ... I tell people this all the time, but they don't hear me say "I have these resources. That's frustrating."*

[WNCC has] ... three campuses (Alliance, Scottsbluff, and Sidney), ... [so we have a hub to work off of]. The resources that we use are mostly panhandle driven. [The business resource meeting] ... is just our way of saying, "let's just all come together." It's a two-hour meeting. It is so positive, and it costs us a lunch. It really is probably the easiest thing we've ever done. We bring in economic development and Chambers in that community so they can say, "Hey, if you do want to launch a downtown business, we'll give you six months free rent." We help with facade, or whatever it is in their area. Melissa was amazing and ... we worked together so closely. She ... [would say], ... "Ok, if you need to get into a downtown facility, I have this building open." We launched more than just ... [Nexgen and Highby Outdoors], ... but those two were actually in our center. We had an ... [entrepreneur that needed a] ... gym, but she couldn't run a gym out of our campus. So, Melissa helped her find a location. She also reaches out to me with other needs, "okay, now I'm looking at an upgrade on my building." I say, "Okay,

let's get you with PADD." All these separate resources became a team. Now if ... [we get a call we can't handle, we can say], ... "oh, that's not really my wheelhouse, call..."

Nebraska Tech Collaborative (NTC)

Now I'm kind of at a second level. ... The NTC [Nebraska Tech Collaborative] just made our whole panhandle come together because they needed the people to use our resources and we needed the resources. Melissa and I were like, "We don't have the ability to know everything about everybody." I could tell you what I know about NBDC [Nebraska Business Development Center], but guess what? It changed the day after they told me, and now I'm giving false information. Then they started coming to our campus on regular visits. ... People in the community started ... asking, "When's your next resource meeting?" That's why we're having one in Alliance; it just builds their community.

[In 2021] I got associated ... the Nebraska Tech Collaborative. The president of NTC reached out to ... and she said I heard about your I&E center, and we need people like you who are helping entrepreneurs. The NTC are connected with folks like Google and these big tech companies. They're wanting people in the panhandle - businesses - to connect with them ... [for] ... internships or mentorships. I'm hoping ... [it can help businesses] ... like Nexgen who now need the next level of web design. I reached out to the president of NTC, and she hooked me up with one of the tech people who came back and said, "Look, I think you need a specialist web designer now." And they're going to work with Nexgen on that because I don't have the ability.

*We have **angel investors** through NTC. Tomorrow I'm actually heading to Ashland. ... They're picking the college as one of their new pioneers. ... It's just another connection. ... We had the few angel investors we could contact, but this is a whole new pool.*

The brain trust for the I&E Center evolved due to repeated turnover in the Chamber position, yet Paula and Melissa kept moving forward successfully...

[At the start] ... Economic Development, the college and the Chamber were the three. We just sat in here and it was like a war room, "We've got to stop this ... [community collapse]." Without the Chamber it ended up being Melissa and I. We kept the Chamber included, with every director, "Here's your role." It was amazing because it was like, "We'll just help another one." My strength was I had the I&E Center, and I was working on the connections with the resources we had. Melissa reached out to Lincoln through DED, and she was bringing in some big hitters. We brought those companies into Sidney for a day and a half, and they said, "If you want to be an entrepreneur, be in this room." We had people being very honest saying, "You're not going to get a vacation during your first five years. You will not work eight to five if you want it to be successful." We had people looking at them like, "Oh, my goodness." It was like, "I didn't see my kids for three weeks, because I was working 23 hours a day." It was that realistic, but at the same time for those that were driven it was, "Okay. I'm in for this. I can do this." [Looking] ... back now, it's like, "There's no way we could have done all that. When you're going through it, it's like, "You take this piece and I've got this piece." We were still doing our own jobs, and I don't have somebody to run my I&E Center. That's me, and I run two campuses now. I cover both Alliance and Sidney. It's like, "Okay, we're going to have a business resource meeting here. We're going to be in those communities because all you have to do is show up and buy lunch. They do the work.

Paula provides an example that is illustrative of both how they grew the center's own resources and the philosophy by which they did it. It's not a zero-sum game; it's a zero plus game.

We didn't even have an attorney. People were paying ... \$15,000 ... without even a solid plan. To get into the I&E Center you have to have a financial plan and ... a business plan which NBDC will do for free for you. Then we will work on helping you with investors. Luckily, we ended up with an attorney that was former Cabela's employee who wanted to start his own business. So, he was here, and part of the give back is you have to help mentor a new entrepreneur. ... Up until the time they had to do paperwork, he would spend that time with them from, "Should I be an LLC, or should I be a partnership?" to them having a solid plan. It was the college's answer to a prayer. Now we have an attorney on staff can help them, and I can just say, "Go talk to Jeff." ... And Melissa's doing the same thing, "Go to the college." It was just perfect.

Connecting to E3

Paula elaborates the connection between the I&E Center philosophy and E3...

Every time we meet they're taking notes, "Oh, I didn't realize you have that program." So, MBDC/PADD had this additional funding through COVID. They reached out to us which wouldn't have happened before, probably. Today we have this pot of money. "How do we help entrepreneurs?" So, we ran online marketing classes through COVID and then they became in person through PADD or MBDC money. It's just been an awesome combination of resources. So, E3 was attractive because it's this at the next level.

But E3 was more than just attractive to Paula. It was inspirational...

The story of Sidney ... that first year was tough. We felt like we were just watching this town fall apart. The newspaper put out an article [entitled], "The last one out shut off the lights." It's like, "Really?" But at the same time all of a sudden, we had tons of housing. We have no houses available now. I think it's because of this, "We're not going to bring in another big whale. Let's do these little businesses." When we went to Ord, I was so impressed because I ... [could see], ... "The E3 will help us be a community of resources. I just loved Ord. We got there and I was like, "This is amazing." And I really think we are on the right track with just the people that are on this committee. Sarah Sinnett is just, "Oh, my gosh! She is just a driver." If she had been on our team, we would probably already be back to where we were ... in 2017.

*The sporting goods store kind of touched my heart because you could give an entrepreneur a chance, "Let's see if this can work for you." And if it doesn't and they have to leave, then we still own that... You know we buy the building back or the facility back with all the merchandise." Then the new person comes in, "Okay, now you can try. You're all set up." I think for young entrepreneurs that kind of fits their, "I want it easy." And then you still have those mentors [to help] with the merchandising and marketing. You already have a set up business.
We love Bob.*

Speaking about in Sidney's early involvement with E3, Paula expressed her hopes...

For me the E3 is... We kind of when through a lull. My I&E Center had nobody. ... COVID did not help us because we could not be in person. We didn't think the resource meetings would be successful by zoom. The whole point is you come and the next time you bring three people. That's the way it's been working. With E3 we're bringing attention back to the things that are important in our community. We're having an internal partnership with my external partners. I feel like we're all just coming together really well. [As for the] ... investment part, I would love to see the Community Foundation funding piece because I do think it's needed.

Now we know that the Foundation has funded the Navigator position which is a great aid to securing funding for entrepreneurs. Paula helps us understand how painful the process was before E3 type of assistance was available using NexGen as her example...

I'm lucky NexGen survived because they got sued by Bass Pro. So, all their cash investment was paid to an attorney to defend them. That was heart breaking. I had more tears with those guys than... Now they're like my brothers because, "Gosh you guys, I can't believe you made it." They're the greatest group of people. They've been through... That was the piece that was the hardest, okay? They are just the most genuine people you'd ever want to know.

They were going to be online only, but everybody in the community knew them so they became a retail ... [store as well]. I think that's the piece I missed. Now ... [the needed piece is] ... the resources for the next step like web design. They're up and going, but now they have these additional needs, and I need people to help me with those. This is where the NTC could incorporate that into E3. Because that is the piece I need next. ... We can't just let them launch and then leave them or they're not going to survive. What are those next steps, whether it's investment, an investor, the resources, or... Those are the pieces where I can see I really need help.

Business Succession

Paula emphasizes how E3 has brought intentionality and agency to working on business transition in Sidney and why E3 is a level beyond the original I&E approach. Like economic development the original approach was a "wait for them to come in and ask." E3 takes a proactive and intentional approach of "go out and ask people what they need and help them see what they will need in the future even if it isn't on their radar at present."

I would say with the E3, that we are intentional right now. Our plan [for] resource meetings fell into place because we are just doers. Now we're being intentional about what ... we knew six or eight years ago." It's not new stuff. But now we're being intentional about how we pull those pieces in. Sarah's been here probably her whole life, although she left for a little bit. ... [Still even] ... she didn't know about the business resource meetings. I said, "But we advertise them everywhere." She goes, "I didn't know what they were." We were in the paper. See that's... because it wasn't important to her at that time. You just have to keep putting that in front of people.

Importantly, Paula is pointing out that whether it is advertising available services and assistance or approaching aging business owners about transition planning, the story has to be told over and over. the story has to become embedded in the community narrative and culture so that people become

proactive about their needs, or the community suffers. Paula also provides an example of when it didn't work and a later one where it did.

We had Nienhueser Construction who had been here forever. Sarah's dad is a Nienhueser. There were some health issues, and they were in their 70s running a huge construction company, ... [filling] ... a huge need in the panhandle. They just closed the doors. None of their kids wanted to be in the business. But it's like, "What about somebody else?" They sold all their equipment for like nothing. That is heart breaking because we have a huge need, and with their experience, they could have mentored somebody outside their family. So as team members we've been talking a lot about succession. ... We did end up having somebody succeed the grocery store in Chapple, and it's like, "See!" The doors never closed, the same products with an upgrade.

Paula was left pondering a couple of questions for Sidney residents.

I think one of the questions is how much do they really know about the resources we have available? I mean everybody. The high school does great things with entrepreneurs, but they don't connect with us. ... We need to work with them. That's the whole point. The second part of that is how do we get that information out? How do we share those things? Maybe on a continual basis, not just once. It's got to be everybody should know.

[E3 is] ... more like a nucleus. This team, they know. But we have all these people out here that ... [don't know]. It's kind of like Nexgen – I keep going back to them – I kept introducing them to the Department of Labor and they were like, we don't need the Department of Labor. I said, "Maybe not now, but you might." They needed two IT people. Well, we just had two IT graduates. So, they hired them as their PTs and then they became employees, and the whole time the Department of Labor was paying their wages and they reimbursed them. And they were like, "Oh my gosh. We didn't know." And I'm like, "See." Don't ever assume you don't need somebody because as soon as you ask me, I'm going to send you to them because they're the people with the resources. They had so many "Nos". That's what is so frustrating; they were reaching out to angel investors, and they were like, "No, we don't do that. No, we don't do that." I was like, "Somebody has to help them."

This community deserves to be recognized. This E3... When we first went, I was like, "Why are we going?" And the more it develops, "This is exactly where we need to be." You know we've had aviation maintenance since the seventies. We still have people in Sidney that don't know we have the aviation program. And I'm like, "We market to everyone but Sidney. We need to tell Sidney, we have aviation." And they just look at me like, "Shouldn't they know?" But they don't.

The Lost Years at the College and Coming in from the Cold

Asked about how the I&E Center has done in the past two years, Paula's response reveals how important it is for formal leadership to be on board with an initiative like E3...

I think because there was a little period ... [where] ... we had a change in presidents, and ... the former was not as big an advocate for entrepreneurship. [Our] new President is 180% in support of it. So now we're starting to see huge leaps just even since July. As far as E3, having Alisha here has been huge. There's a lot more interest and I'm getting a lot more phone calls that I'm directing to her because,

“that’s not me anymore.” She did a presentation during the workshop and was like, “you guys, you can use this space.” And people are like, “Really!” I don’t know how many times we have to say it... but a thousand times, you know?

I've kind of stepped back from E3 only during that period ... with the other President. I wasn't really involved. Pre that president I could tell you ... [about E3 successes], ... but post I just haven't been involved enough. I'm starting to step back in. Other than them asking me questions I haven't been able to attend E3 meetings.

Impact of the Navigator Role in Sidney Today

Asked to elaborate on the importance of adding the navigator position in Sidney...

The navigator was key. Four or five years ago I kept telling the college, “We need a person to do this full time,” because it was just too much trying to run two campuses, Alliance and Sydney. I just can't take the time ... [to do] ...that mentorship piece. I can give them free resources. And that's about it. When Alicia came on, I was like a hundred percent. That's what you need is that person building those relationships, and them knowing that you will keep coming back. That's what we're seeing happen with her.

Asked how Alisha is doing in the role, Paula expresses high praise and clarifies exactly how the navigator role is about building relationships first and providing resources second...

As for the person, they couldn't have picked a better person. She's very caring and charismatic, but she's trustworthy. And I think that trustworthiness is the big thing in Sydney. In these small communities it's, “Don't tell Paula; she'll tell everybody.” You can't have that kind of relationship. ... Not that I did that, but ... you have to build that report. They have to know that you're not just spilling the beans every time you turn around. With Alicia things stay close to her chest. Unless she comes and says, “Hey, I have this ... [situation].” But she never mentions people by name. It's like, “What other resources am I not thinking of? That's amazing. You know she's really done it by herself.

As pointed out in the Navigator Narrative, trust and confidentiality are paramount. This has been periodically a problem in Sidney when confidential information was shared with others. Paula goes on to talk about Alisha being a kind of insider-outsider in the navigator role and how this fosters trust...

She's even talked to me about that. ... When ... Sidney people say, “so and so are this or that”, she said, I can come at every person not knowing them. I don't know their background. I don't know ... [if] ... they've tried 5 businesses. Maybe they just didn't have the resources, and this is the one.” I said, “That's kind of that's kind of where I was excited about my role because I'm not from here either.” And it's like, “Why can't you try that in Sydney? Let's try it.” So, I do think, not being from here ... but being in the panhandle ... has made a big difference. She's from Nebraska, but she's just not from Sidney. That's made a big difference.

What specific skills does Alisha bring to the navigator role?

*Number one ... what I like is she listens. [For example], ... this business plan workshop isn't something I'd ever done before. I just did the business resource meetings. She had a good draw, ... 17 or 23 people, ... because **she listened to what they needed**. ... We could offer a thousand workshops, but if nobody shows up, you're not doing what they need. The second thing is, **she goes to them**. She is constantly saying, "Hey, I've run into someone, so I'm running late. She doesn't make them come here, that's a big deal. **Meet them where they are**. And so those are probably two of her greatest strengths, and she's just willing to meet people where they are.*

Asked about how Alicia refers to the entrepreneurs that she works with, Paula couldn't identify a specific term such as customer, potential client, contact, etc. However, she did provide a telling response...

A lot of times she just says, "I have this business." But it's not a business... She just holds them very close to her, which I appreciate. Keeping ... [identities] ... in the abstract.

E3 Outcomes in Sidney Today

Despite her reduced involvement in E3 itself, Paula is able to identify a number of E3 outcomes that she sees in the community...

The Community Foundation and that community fund has been a huge talk. People realize there are local resources for them now. When I used to say, "We have this group or these resources," people were like, "Okay, whatever." But I think now they're starting to realize, "Okay, that includes state resources like USDA. PADD, and NBDC." [It used to be] ... "Oh, I've talked to them," or poor reports like "Who? I don't even know where they are." I think [E3 has] given local recognition to those State agencies. The Community Foundation ... [itself] ... has been a biggie because you have big players in that.

One of the outcomes involves the connections to the high school, something Paula identified several years earlier that needed attention...

The connection with the high school, that's our next step. I just met with the president, and I said, "I really think we need to focus on entrepreneurship and our connection to the high school. He said, "I totally agree." I finally have somebody that understands the work we did. I mean. The other President between us just kept saying, "We need to bring cosmetology back." [For me it was] ... "No, that program is gone. Let's keep what we have." So, it was a rough couple of years. But now it's like, "Okay, let's really work with the high school. And what do we need to do as a college to help us engage those entrepreneurs?" That's really the future.

Tess Plumber was actually recognized one or two years ago as a leader in entrepreneurship ... at one of the conferences we go to. ... That's big for a high school teacher to be recognized. So, ... [The college and E3] ... need to have a better connection. We just really need to work together on, "What does this look like and how do we help?"

How does Paula see the E3role in the Sidney ecosystem?

I see the connection to the ecosystem kind of as the ED job. ... because I really see the navigator as being the person that is that mentor. They're finding resources, and they're tracking those people. I could go back to the very first resource meeting and say, "Okay, one of those people launched." ... We had like 350 people who attended all of those, and the number was so small. Because ... [for] ... people ... [in their] ... forties, fifties, and sixties it's like, "Man, but I like the insurance. I like the paycheck." So, I think we're gonna see a difference. But right now, I think those people need that encouragement. ... "Here's how you could do insurance. Here's how you could do those kinds of things." I think the kids have no fear. ... I just see that they have no fear. It's Sarah's daughter's 8 or or 9, and she started her own company doing t-shirts. Man, I was coloring and playing with Barbies at 8.

I really think that's ... gonna change, but at this point the navigator is key to really keep those entrepreneurs on the right path and kind of nudge them. Doing the business plan is not a big deal. You just have to get in, ... get the data, and just do it. I think for those kids ... that's going to be a no brainer to them, especially with AI. I think they're going to be like I just tell it, it gives me a profile, and we're done.

The Future of E3 in Sidney

You know, the thing E3 did well was taking people to the communities. We didn't just hear about Ord. We went and saw Ord, and you made those connections. Even though I kind of had to step out a little bit, I still ... [think], "Man, if somebody could do this in our community..." It's those connections, the physically being there, and knowing you have those people in your bag of tricks.

Right now, we are driven by some amazing people. Sarah, Cory... I would do whatever Sarah tells me. She scares me in a good way. Oh, my gosh! I love her to death; she's like one of my kids. You know they are so driven, and I'm learning from them. ... I watch them, and they make me tired. They're doing 400 things at a time.

I know my time is limited; ... I hope I make it to 65. But their passion and just their legacy, I think that's their generation. My parents, generation, you were totally involved. My generation. was, "Oh, you need focus on home." Now. I think this group is back to, "You're committed to your community," and they prove it. ... Like the [Sidney] playground, [Sarah] rallied people, and it wasn't just her. This group of people just keeps pushing the envelope.

I don't see [E3] dying, and I know we have commitment from the local foundation. Like, "Whatever you want. We have money." Even ... [high school Vice Principal, Tess Plumber], got told that by Greg Dart ... [WNCC President who was here when] ... we had an open house. ... He said, ... "Hey, we have money. Whatever your ask is, let me know." And she's like, "Alright, can I think big?" And he said, "Yes." So, I think we have a financial commitment for years. ... That gives us time to ... [figure out], "Okay, how do we make E3 self-sufficient?"

Transformation of Thinking Stimulated by E3 and Spiritual Capital

Talking about access to loans and financial support for entrepreneurial ventures, Paula elucidates how things have changed in Sidney due to the work of E3 and the addition of an E-navigator. Central to her narrative is the spiritual capital that E3 has helped the community build. While the impact of spiritual

capital cannot be directly monetized, it is clear that Paula sees it as one of the greatest contributions of E3 locally...

Yes, that's happened in Sydney. Oh, absolutely. When you go to a bank, they just say "yes" or "no," and they ask you probing questions. Whereas when you sit with Alicia it's like, "but have you thought about..." or "Hey, if you have these 3 ideas. This one is something I've heard people talk about." You know it's kind of that guiding. "If you need to pick one of the 3 ideas this might be the one." A bank won't do that, they just say "yes" or "no". "You figure it out and then come back." And then they don't come back. The bank crushes their spirit. Whereas you watch these guys and it's like. "Well, maybe I wanna..." Melissa is a perfect example.

She sat in all these resource meetings as the ED. And she said, "You know what? I'm quitting." I said, "You can't." And she said, "We're gonna buy Sam and Louies," and I'm like, "Holy Cow." The banks wouldn't loan them money. ... The E3 would've supported her because she was passionate. We could see that.

*I mean, they [E3] are just exploding. ... I feel like we've given spirit to the community. It's rallying behind it, instead of just resources, which is kind of what I felt I was doing. I would get excited for them, and I would give them resources, but I didn't have the capacity to follow through. And that's what I kept telling them we needed. You know, it's like we need somebody that can commit to these people and be excited for their wins, but know you are part of that, too. So, **giving spirit to the community** is yet another kind of success.*

Paula goes on to talk about how E3 has made even her job easier at WNCC and with the I&E Center...

Yes, one hundred percent. It really was a struggle with the former President. It just crushed my spirit, so I can only imagine what entrepreneurs felt. People would reach out to me, and before Alicia it was, ... "Well, I just can't spend as much time with this. I can't do resource meetings." There was a huge gap in our ability. Alisha came on and it was, "Okay, I'll push people to you, but I have to be careful helping you, because that's not really where the President sees my job." Now ... [with the new president], ... it's, "Okay, this is yours, but whatever I can do to help. It was pretty tough there for a while, because I wanted to help everybody, but at the same time ... I am the campus director for 2 campuses with a personal passion ... [for the entrepreneur work], but I just don't have the ability to get it all done. ... I felt like I was leaving people hanging, and that was hard to go home with. E3 made my job so much easier because they are a resource, and I trust them. That's all I needed.

And Paula's positive view of the impact of E3 in Sidney is supported by what she hears from the community itself...

Absolutely. Yes. You know, it doesn't matter where I go. People already know Alicia. They know Cory. They know Sarah. They know Melissa. So, it's not like there's a couple of us trying to push the train. Just today I got another call, and it's like, "Oh, ... I'm still one of them," thank goodness. There's always a team of people. For a while if it wasn't in the paper, nobody knew. "What's the I&E Center? What do you guys do again?" Having Forest Hershberger ... he was at the paper ... our visibility has tripled just by his being on radio instead of at the paper. He's on E3, and he is a big advocate for what we're doing. He has been since the beginning. So, Forest might be a good one to talk to just from the media aspect.

Paula agrees that three things have been key to Sidney’s success in building its entrepreneurial ecosystem: Cabela’s leaving, an abundance of human capital in the form of former Cabela’s employees with corporate experience and diverse skill sets, and a commitment to place in those who remained after Cabela’s left.

it would not have been the same. I agree. If Cabela’s hadn’t left, nothing would have changed. There was no urgency. ... We had a vice president at that time, and I was like, “Oh, everybody’s leaving.” She said, “Never waste a good storm.” I said, “Are you kidding me?” But that’s the truth. And those three things are what I tell everybody. You know it was triggered by Cabela’s leaving, but they have a lot of talent. We wanted to stop that ... wave of people leaving the community. Those that stayed are the ones that said, “I’m not leaving. I’m here for this play.” That’s why I think Nexgen and Karuna are so close to me. Because I was with them when we were crying, and I was like a parent. All 3 of those pieces are key, and you’re right we would have never been here. I don’t think the college would have been an I&E center. We would have still been doing programs, you know, instead of really ... [making a difference. At that time two presidents ago] ... we had a president who said, “We’re a community college. We need to be the community right now.” That’s how it was the perfect storm. It really was. I asked, “What do we charge them?” And the Vice President of Finance said, “Nothing. We do a 2 year ... [commitment].” You just don’t hear that from people.

Paula sums up the way Sidney has become whole... *Just talking about like the Nexgen guys. We became a family. When my mom died a month ago, they we’re at my mom’s funeral. My mom and my kids, my husband. We go to next, and we pay a little extra money because we are supporting them. When I looked up, they were at my Grandma’s funeral because it was their Grandma. That’s kind of the feel. When I first started. It was 13 years ago, there was downtown and the hill. ... You don’t feel that anymore. Businesses up there are just as important as down here. It’s just more of a community. When you talk about Sydney, it’s the whole. It’s everybody, not just Cabela’s.*

That said, Paula acknowledges that there are still real challenges for E3 and Sidney, particularly with the city...

Melissa and I had not worked ... much together until his happened. All of a sudden, it’s like we were a team. “How do we all keep people here?” I said, “I do more for Sydney than I do for my own town in Colorado. This is my home; it’s my work home.” We just assumed that everything we did was for us. Nobody took credit. It was a team effort. We don’t have that right now. [The city] ... should be Alisha’s best friend. Like, “How do we push this together? How do we...? And it’s not like that. ... That city piece is kind of disjointed. It really is and I don’t think there’s trust in the city.

E3 is a journey and one that Sidney has embraced. There will continue to be bumps in the road but together and with intention they will continue to progress. From the beginning, Paula Abbott and the I&E Center at WNCC likely will continue to play a vital role in the journey. The arc of hope is alive in Sidney and their future is bright.

ⁱ <https://nebtechcollab.com/paula-j-abbott-western-nebraska-community-college/>