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Editorial: We're greedy for more

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The Dispatch and The Rock Island Argus

With construction on the first building of Western Illinois University's Quad-Cities full-scale campus more than three-quarters complete, you'd think we'd be content.

We're not, and you shouldn't be either.

Of course, we're thrilled that the project appears to be a scant month away from looking like the beginnings of a real campus on Moline's riverfront. And who wouldn't be doing cartwheels? The ongoing work on Building One is a sure visual sign that a long-time dream is at last becoming a reality. As an added bonus, reconstruction of the former Deere & Co. administrative center is ahead of schedule AND on budget.

But as the decades-long struggle to win money for Phase 1 of this game-changing Quad-Cities education and economic development engine has shown, this is no time to declare, "Mission accomplished."

Far from it.

There already are more than 9,000 Western alumni living and working in the Quad-Cities area. Those numbers are sure to skyrocket with the addition of the riverfront campus. So, yes, the present is looking mighty good, as WIU-QC readies to enroll 750-850 students at the riverfront campus for the January opening. But even as the grand atrium of the structure on Moline's River Drive shines in the sun and the second building gets ready to move from drawings to construction, local leaders already have an eye to the future.

Those who worked hard on the project know just how important it was that the community worked together to make it happen. Illinois legislative leaders like Sen. Mike Jacobs, D-East Moline, and Rep. Pat Verschoore, D-Milan, of course, deserve a large measure of credit for guiding funding for the project through the General Assembly and securing the governor's support in tough economic times. But it's doubtful it would ever have gotten that far if it was not also blessed with an energetic and effective public-private partnership.

In a Viewpoint's op-ed in late May, Thomas Robinson, chair of the board of Renew Moline,



Photo: Nicole Lauer

Crews are seen working on the two-story glass atrium Tuesday at the new Western Illinois University Quad Cities campus on River Drive. Work is on budget and on schedule for classes in building one to begin in the fall, according to Joe Rives, vice president of the Quad Cities campus.

wrote, "To gain support from the State of Illinois, we built a regional coalition that advocated on a regional, and regular, basis. The heart of that strategy -- to convince state and federal policymakers that building the WIU-QC Riverfront Campus will help transform our Q-C regional economy -- was hatched mostly in meetings at Renew Moline where leaders from WIU, the chamber of commerce, the City of Moline, Deere & Co., the Moline Foundation and others brainstormed about ways to generate support for a capital bill that included full funding for the WIU-QC Riverfront Campus."

They were armed with some pretty powerful arguments. "The new campus will help our region close the workforce gap, will expand affordable higher educational course offerings to the young people in our region, will help regional employers by educating and training future employees in engineering, will build on our region's strong manufacturing base by offering advanced manufacturing technology courses, will help spark a new riverfront technology corridor comprised of both private-and-public-sector jobs, will help us transition to a knowledge-based economy, will fortify our regional economy at a time when global economic factors are challenging every community," he wrote. "And, perhaps most importantly, the new campus will help attract and retain talented young people in our Q-C region."

What's happening on the riverfront is the first step in accomplishing those goals, but it is just the first step. There is more to be done. "The time has come to refine our message, renew our mission and refresh our momentum," Mr Robinson urged our readers. He's right.

Our new wish list includes money to expand the Riverfront Campus to 3,000 students. For that to happen, we need release of previously promised state funding for Phase II and \$30 million for the design and construction of Phase III.

"We can't rest on our laurels. Now is the time to remind legislators, legislative leaders and Gov. Pat Quinn that these funding requests are required in order for us to 'finish the job' on the riverfront," Mr. Robinson said.

The effort needs your support. Join us and get greedy.