

Linking Institutional Transformation to Regional Revitalization Case Study of Alvernia University, Spring 2024

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Introduction

In *Transforming for Turbulent Times*, we speak of the potential colleges and universities have to contribute to the revitalization and economic development of their communities and to the fact that this work can simultaneously serve as a vehicle for their transformation into institutions with promising futures. In this case study, we describe how one institution, Alvernia University, is meeting this challenge.

Alvernia is a comprehensive regional university located in Reading, PA. It offers over 50 undergraduate majors and minors, accelerated adult programs, and master's degrees in business administration, clinical counseling, education, leadership, nursing, occupational therapy, and social work. It delivers a seven-year Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) program, as well as Doctor of Philosophy in Leadership program. It also operates 12 fully online undergraduate and graduate programs in business, education, healthcare, and the social sciences.

Currently the University operates at three locations in eastern Pennsylvania, including Reading, Pottsville, and Philadelphia. It is in discussions about opening two more locations in Pittston in Northeastern Pennsylvania and Harrisburg, the state capitol. The University's enrollment is around 3,000 undergraduate and graduate students and has increased in each of the last three years. Alvernia is one of 22 Franciscan institutions in the United States. "As a Franciscan institution, Alvernia's mission compels it to be a source of transformation for students and the communities it serves, as St. Francis of Assisi was during his day. Just as St. Francis played a critical role in rebuilding the Church, Alvernia, collaborating with other partners, will play a key role in the revitalization of the communities it serves in Reading, Pottsville, and Philadelphia."

<https://www.alvernia.edu/CollegeTowne>

Its vision is: "To Be a Distinctive Franciscan University, Committed to Personal and Social Transformation, through Integrated, Community-based, Inclusive, and Ethical Learning."

<https://www.alvernia.edu/about/franciscan-tradition/mission>



Leadership and Strategic Plan

The transformation of Alvernia University was stated when President John Loyack joined Alvernia University in July 2019. With his background as a CEO in the for-profit sector, he had considerable experience with developing and implementing change strategies. One of his first acts was to lead the University community in the development of the Alvernia Advantage Strategic Plan 2020 to 2025. (<https://www.alvernia.edu/sites/default/files/documents/Strategic%20Plan-rev-11-22.pdf>)

The plan addressed head on the need for Alvernia to transform to address the disruptive challenges before it. These included skyrocketing costs, questions on the return on investment for college degrees, and a significant decline in the number of high school graduates in the region served by the University. The goal was to "...to effectively change how a regional institution of higher education is seen, executed and delivered." ("Alvernia University's O'Pake Institute for Economic Development and Entrepreneurship," 2022, p. 2.)

One of five pillars in the Alvernia Advantage Plan is Community Engagement, which includes two key objectives pertinent to community economic development and entrepreneurship:

- Engaging in economic development in the regions that Alvernia serves.
- Developing and maintaining partnerships in the regions that Alvernia Serves.

A series of initiatives were defined to achieve these objectives, but in this case study we concentrate on two strategies defined for their achievement.

- The CollegeTowne Initiatives
- The O'Pake Institute

In January 2020, President Loyack recruited Dr. Rodney S. Ridley, Sr. to execute both of these initiatives. Dr. Ridley has extensive experience in industry, technology and higher education. In this capacity, Dr. Ridley holds the title of Vice President of Research, Economic Development and Innovation.

Dr. Ridley's work is overseen and advised by the Innovation and Commercialization Subcommittee of the Alvernia Board of Trustees. The committee members are experienced professionals, entrepreneurs, and qualified investors dedicated to support the Institute in the achievement of its mission.

Through the first four years of work on the strategic plan economic development and entrepreneurship initiatives, Dr. Ridley worked closely with Dr. Glynis A. Fitzgerald, Senior Vice President and Provost and her three colleague academic deans. With Dr. Fitzgerald's elevation to President last year, Dr. Ridley continues reporting to Dr. Fitzgerald while working closely with the new Provost, Dr. Leamor Kahanov. The Academic Services Branch of the O'Pake Institute was established to serve as a day-to-day bridge between the Provost, the colleges and the Institute. The Provost and Deans work together to create the academic environment necessary to recruit qualified faculty into the Institute's programs. O'Pake staff also work closely with the Institutional Advancement Office to support many aspects of the work of that office. And O'Pake partners with the Center for Graduate and Adult Education to offer continuing education opportunities to graduate and adult undergraduate students and workforce development opportunities to the community.

On July 1, 2023 Dr. Loyack moved from the university's presidency to a new role as CEO to support the presidential transition and continue working on community and philanthropic activities for the university. Dr. Fitzgerald's elevation to President, after serving as the University's Provost, assured a smooth leadership succession and continued University commitment to the Alvernia Advantage Strategic Plan 2020 to 2025.



College Towne Initiatives

The CollegeTowne concept emerged from President John Loyack's original vision to involve the University in the revitalization of downtown Reading, while also advancing Alvernia's mission. It entailed establishment of a University physical presence in the downtown, the launch of an engineering program, the revival of the University's business major and other academic programs at the downtown location, and the establishment of a student-powered business incubator to aid startup companies.

This vision, expanded to include other cities, led to the expansion of the University into the city centers of Reading and Pottsville to bring new academic programs and student living opportunities, while also creating new community programming, expanding experiential learning for students and sparking economic redevelopment and new business creation. To date, Alvernia has secured a total of \$8 million in capital funding for the CollegeTowne initiatives, including a recent award to begin the second phase of the Reading CollegeTowne renovation. The University is in the midst of developing another location in Pittston, PA. Loyack sees that expansion as part of Alvernia efforts to become a regional university. "Our goal is to sort of have Alvernia serve all of eastern Pennsylvania," he said. "Northeast Pennsylvania was one market that we really weren't touching. It gives us a nice, broad reach." (Reading Eagle, September 16, 2022) In the O'Pake Institute Annual Report (January 2020 to June 2022), the possibility of a future Harrisburg location and expansion nationally and internationally are mentioned.

It should be noted that Alvernia offers selected programs at a Philadelphia location. There currently are no plans to make this campus a CollegeTowne location. Programs offered at the Philadelphia Campus include eight bachelor's degrees in social and health services, healthcare, and business areas and a certificate and master's degrees in education, social work and leadership areas.

Reading CollegeTowne

The John R. Post Center at Reading CollegeTowne is Alvernia's new downtown facility. It extends the main campus to the downtown and showcases Alvernia's student-centric approach to learning. The five-story complex brings hundreds of students, faculty and staff to downtown Reading every day, nurturing economic development in the City and bringing a thriving new energy center to the Penn

Street corridor.

The Center houses the University's new [John R. Post School of Engineering](#), which currently features Bachelor of Science degree programs in [Electrical](#), [Mechanical](#) and [Industrial](#) Engineering. With state-of-the-art labs and research facilities, these programs and the programs that will follow, will offer students experiential learning opportunities that rival programs at much larger schools because of the partnerships established with some of the largest businesses in the region and manufacturing companies in the country. Some of the more sophisticated student lab experiences are provided by the partners in their labs.

The market demand for the new Bachelor of Science degree programs in Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, and Industrial Engineering were identified through collaboration with the Engineering Advisory Board, a group of local community leaders and manufacturers. The board identified regional workforce gaps for engineering talent and innovation and will provide comprehensive experiential learning opportunities for students. The University's first engineering students arrived in fall 2021.

"Students in Alvernia's engineering programs are being provided applied research opportunities with faculty as undergraduates and the opportunity to engage in innovative and creative thinking and real-world problem-solving with local industry partners," said Dr. Rodney Ridley. "This gift ensures that students and faculty members will have access to the latest engineering technologies to assist them in solving the region's biggest challenges and be a catalyst for change in Reading, Berks County and the greater southeastern Pennsylvania region."

The center is also the new home for the College of Business, Communication and Leadership and adds new ways for Alvernia students to learn, research and engage with the community.

- The facility has been designed to be a superior teaching and learning space with flexible, modular classrooms integrated with the latest technology.
- A brand new trading floor and business lab, used for a variety of learning experiences over a wide range of upper-level business courses, lends to the growth of the university's enhanced Business majors, which include [accounting](#), [economics](#), [finance](#), [healthcare administration](#), [human resource management](#), [management](#), [marketing](#), [sport management](#) and the university's [MBA program](#). The lab supports simulations, research and a wide variety of other business applications to provide students with an enhanced academic and real-world learning experience.
- The expanded [Communication major](#) offers leading edge technologies through both academic coursework and collaboration with [Berks Community Television \(BCTV\)](#), one of the oldest and longest-serving cable access managers in the country. With a new studio and office on-site at 401 Penn, BCTV works closely with Communication Faculty, providing students with insight into the industry and offering hands-on experience.

New modern residences provide students with a living-learning experience in the heart of downtown Reading's thriving Penn corridor. Shuttle service to and from campus runs on a continuous loop for easy access to classes and amenities at both locations. Community gathering spaces, lounge areas, and the region's largest Starbucks in the lobby are welcoming and open to neighbors and visitors.

The Center is the University's largest single facility and also features many collaborative student gathering spaces, an esports arena, and interfaith prayer spaces, [Community First Fund](#), [La Mega Radio](#) and the [Bernardine Franciscan Sisters'](#) Mother Veronica Resource Center.

Plans for the second phase of retrofitting and renovation of the Post Center include the addition of a [physician associate program](#), a refresh of the nursing program, additional engineering tracks and expansion of downtown housing options.

Alvernia also purchased the former American House Hotel in June 2022 as part of this second phase of the Reading College Towne Initiative. The facility, located diagonally across the street from the John R. Post Center, will house an important new collaborative venture with the Berks Community Health Center (BCHC). Its mission will be to address the growing need for primary care services in Downtown Reading through the creation of a new state-of-the-art, comprehensive health center location.

The Center will serve City of Reading residents who are at risk of negative health outcomes due to elevated levels of poverty, being part of a traditionally marginalized population, language and cultural barriers, and limited access to primary care services. The building's first and second floors will be renovated to meet the critical need for primary care services and equip the BCHC to offer comprehensive wrap-around services, including nutrition and wellness education, mental health services, financial literacy education, social services assistance, and warm hand-off referrals. This site will also host clinical experiential opportunities for Alvernia's healthcare, clinical counseling, and social work students. During the first year of operation, the new BCHC location is slated to serve over 2,000 unduplicated individuals.

In addition to the clinic, the third and fourth floors will be renovated to provide additional business incubator space for the O'Pake Institute and retail space for local businesses, including Artisan Smiles, a dental office currently located in the building. With successful fund raising as part of the University's Partners in Progress Campaign, the new location will open in Spring 2025.

The new BCHC Clinic also recently received a three-year \$300,000 grant from the Wyomissing Foundation. According to Alvernia President Glynis Fitzgerald, "This grant will be instrumental in equipping the Clinic with cutting-edge technology and resources, allowing our students to engage in hands-on experiential learning alongside healthcare professionals while serving our community." [Pottsville CollegeTowne](#)

Alvernia's new 17,000-square-foot facility in downtown Pottsville, boasts high-tech academic and community space. The academic programs offered there include 13 baccalaureate degree programs in business, criminal justice, education, healthcare, and liberal studies. Also offered are a certificate in addictions and mental health and master's degrees in business and education. All programs are offered on a flexible schedule with day, evening, and weekend classes.

Alvernia serves as a strategic enabler of the Pottsville CollegeTowne location that includes a student-powered business incubator, academic programming and buildings that will enhance the experience for current and future students. Alvernia's O'Pake Institute will partner Pottsville students with regional entrepreneurs, small-business owners, faculty researchers and industry leaders to enhance economic development in the region.



O'Pake Institute

The mission of the O'Pake Institute for Economic Development and Entrepreneurship is to drive the development of entrepreneurial programs and economic growth in the CollegeTowne communities Alvernia serves.

With the development of The Reading CollegeTowne strategy, the O'Pake Institute is paving the way for the future of Alvernia. The University has entrusted the Institute to be the main catalyst for the CollegeTowne program and to oversee partnerships and collaborations that will strengthen the local economy.

At the Reading CollegeTowne, Alvernia has led by example with the purchase of a vacant building, 401 Penn Street, and the hope that other higher education institutions and community organizations will follow suit and collaborate. While the Reading Area College was already downtown, 401 Penn St. is Alvernia University's first physical presence there.

Under the leadership of Dr. Rodney Ridley, the O'Pake Institute acts as a driving force for the economic redevelopment in Downtown Reading and for the spread the spirit of entrepreneurship throughout the University and the region.

Inaugural goals have been achieved three years early (June 2022) including recruitment of 50 fellows, service to over 200 clients, attraction of significant sponsorships, identification of business funding resources, and attainment of near financial sustainability. As of June 2022, over \$1.7 million had been contributed for Center operations by the region's business and philanthropic communities; these funds fully funded all Center operations.

Projected for inclusion in a second strategic plan for the Institute in 2025 are: growth to 100 Fellows, staff expansion to assure the Institute's capacity to fulfill its mission, development of a financial model that is self-sustaining, enhancements to Academic Services to expand the Institute's impact on AU research, increased scholarships and internships, a substantial growth in non-traditional revenue, increases in giving and grants, growth in loan and grant activities for start-up businesses, and a number of other objectives.

NSF Grant

In 2023, the National Science Foundation (NSF) invested \$400,000 over three years in the O'Pake Institute through the first ever Enabling Partnerships to Increase Innovation Capacity (EPIIC) Grants. The grant will allow the Institute to expand applied research activities in partnership with local industry and faculty "scholarpreneurs," increase O'Pake's full-time staffing and student capacity by 25% year over year to enhance student experiential learning, maximize partnership

engagement, and ultimately increase Alvernia’s impact on regional economic and cultural development.

“Partnerships with our region’s primary agencies and employers in key industries have been instrumental in the O’Pake Institute’s growth and sustainability since its inception in 2020,” said Vice President for Research, Economic Development, and Innovation Rodney S. Ridley. “This grant will allow us to maximize partnership engagement while adding additional staff to bolster student experiential learning through increased research opportunities with Alvernia’s faculty members and engaging in projects that serve our local and regional SPARK Business Incubator clients and tenants in Reading and Pottsville.”

O’Pake Fellows

The O’Pake Fellows Program provides elite undergraduate and graduate students from diverse majors and backgrounds with hands-on experiential learning opportunities. The Fellows work directly with regional entrepreneurs, small business owners, faculty researchers and industry leaders. The long-term goal is to have at least 100 fellows in the program.

While fellows grow both personally and professionally, they are also put in an environment where they can think outside the box, experiment, fail, grow, and succeed. Through this type of environment, students can transition into their desired professions while being creative and ethical leaders.

The program’s mission is to be the premier student-powered organization at Alvernia University and to be a catalyst for entrepreneurship and positive economic change in Reading and Berks County. Simultaneously, the program will provide long term enhancement of Alvernia University’s academic reputation, student experience and resources.

Fellows work 15-20 hours a week, with majors including:

- Accounting
- Business
- Communications
- Engineering
- Marketing
- Science

Business Services

Spark Business Incubator. In collaboration with the Berks Community Foundation, the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance, and other partners, Dr. Ridley leads the student-centered Spark Business Incubator. The Incubator’s purpose is to elevate aspiring and existing entrepreneurs as well as provide experiential learning opportunities for students, clients, and mentors. The support and learning opportunities include business planning, brand development, website development and redesign, social media marketing, traditional marketing, digital marketing, and technology transfer.

Between March 2021 and June 2022, the Incubator provided nearly 25,000 client service hours—over three quarters of which were provided by O’Pake Fellows. Twenty-three businesses were started, and 126 existing businesses were served. With the opening of the Reading College Towne building, the incubator facility was inaugurated and since that time the facility has been

constantly filled to its eight-client capacity. Plans are in the works to open an O’Pake General Store and launch a Pottsville Spark Business Incubator.

Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership. This collaboration is designed to strengthen closely held businesses and provide support at every step of the business life cycle. The goal of the Center is to provide business owners and key personnel with timely and valuable information through a series of educational programs on relevant business topics. Membership is available to entrepreneurs, families in business, and strategic level executives with closely held firms, and offers opportunities for professional, personal, and business growth.

The Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership also provides these services:

- **Corporate Education Partnerships.** Alvernia focuses on real-world, experimental learning opportunities and incorporates this approach into nearly every degree program through hands-on-learning. The University’s learn-by-doing approach nurtures and develops the skillsets that organizations look for in their employees.

The University’s corporate partners receive exclusive preferred tuition pricing for employees who enroll in its School of Graduate and Adult Education degree programs. This preferred pricing is offered in addition to any employer tuition reimbursement assistance.

- **Professional Development Programs.** Alvernia’s Professional Development Programs are tailored to the core values and needs of the people and organization served. The Alvernia team works to customize these topics and more to find the development solutions that best suit customer needs. The leadership development program draws on a rich array of training modules.
- **Consulting Services.** Alvernia’s business education and services programs are designed to help organizations grow their people and their enterprises. They include business education, consulting and research services, and customized programs to meet specific organizational needs either at an Alvernia site or at the corporate location. The programming provided helps with leadership development, employee skills development, strategic planning, market research, and customized programs. Consultants are drawn from the University faculty and the program.

Professional Mentor Program. The Mentor Network is a key element in enhancing student and client experiences. O’Pake Fellows are linked with professional mentors to promote personal and professional development. Clients are then able to receive discounted or pro bono services from those professional service providers and industry experts. The level of commitment for an O’Pake Mentor varies based on services offered. O’Pake representatives work with mentors to formalize the details of each relationship agreement.

Additional Services. A series of additional business services are offered:

- **Technology Transfer.** According to [AUTM](#), technology transfer, and the professionals who work in the field, change the world one discovery at a time. They’re responsible for successful innovation management, corporate engagement, protecting and licensing inventions to companies, new venture creation and incubation, and economic development. The O’Pake Institute is constantly seeking new discoveries! It offers assistance in Intellectual Property (IP) Training and feasibility analyses, IP management and valuation, and commercialization of

intellectual property. The institute has access to the Innovation Q Software and partnerships with IP Attorneys and licensing experts.

- **Financial Services and Partnerships.** Through O’Pake Institute’s unique relationships and partnerships, O’Pake offers financial services to support business and foster professional growth. The services offered are suitable for any local business looking for financial support, advice and resources. O’Pake leverages staff and partners to ensure financial security for clients seeking business advancement.
- **Financial Lending & Innovation Collaborative (FLIC).** FLIC assists the O’Pake Institute in helping community entrepreneurs and small businesses by providing access to funding during the early stages of the business. These funds will be provided by participating financial institutions, foundations, philanthropic donors, and community organizations to assist early-stage entrepreneurs in obtaining funds.
- **Client Services in addition to the Spark Business Incubator services:**
 - Unique Business Curriculum (Due Diligence)
 - Microgrants and Microlending
 - Economic Development Relationships with Venture Capitalists
 - Preparation for loans and grants in enhancing our student and client experiences. The O’Pake

Academic Services

The Academic Services branch acts as an internal bridge for the O’Pake Institute to the University community, providing the Alvernia faculty, staff, students with valuable resources while facilitating synergy. The services include:

- Enhancement of Student Engagement.
- Oversight of accreditation, grants, and compliance.
- Oversight partnerships with higher education and K-12.
- Serving as an interface with departments, faculty, and faculty research.

Fellows, Graduate Assistant and Executive GA. Under Dr. Ridley’s visionary leadership, the O’Pake Institute has adopted a recruitment model akin to that commonly employed by universities for assembling their sports teams. Dr. Ridley emphasized the idea: "If colleges can recruit for their football team or soccer team, why can't we recruit our fellows?" This perspective has guided the innovative approach to fellow recruitment within the O’Pake model.

O’Pake fellows fall into three categories: undergraduate fellows, graduate assistants, and executive graduate assistants. Undergraduate fellows are matched with graduate assistants who act as project managers across various projects. To qualify as project managers, O’Pake Institute graduate assistants undergo a Project Management Certification course in their initial semester. This certification equips them with the essential tools, resources, and guidance required for their roles, designed to benefit O’Pake clients and the staff, students, and community they serve. Graduate assistants specialize in marketing, design, operations, and client services, fostering skill development in their respective fields.

Upon showcasing aptitude and dedication, graduate assistants are elevated to the executive level. Executive graduate assistants gain access to crucial meetings, learn directly from leadership, and acquire insights into the intricacies of running a business.

While fellows and graduate assistants gain valuable real-world experience, the impact extends beyond reaching students through the EmpowerED program. This initiative introduces K-12 students to entrepreneurship. It also offers high school students the chance to intern at the O'Pake Institute, providing resources and guidance for diverse learners.

O'Pake Services

The O'Pake Institute excels in providing experiential learning for students, offering a comprehensive range of services that empower them with practical skills and knowledge across various domains. One of the Institute's offerings is Business Model Canvasing, tailored for both For-Profit and Nonprofit ventures. This tool equips students with the ability to visualize and strategize to assist a business concept effectively. The services also include Business Plan Development, enabling students to turn ideas into detailed, actionable plans to assist the O'Pake clients.

The Institute's emphasis on Feasibility Analysis and Financial Services allows students to assess the viability of their ventures and master the financial intricacies of their projects. Furthermore, it supports students in navigating the complex world of Intellectual Property (IP) through services like IP Acquisition, Management, Search, and Strategy. This prepares them to protect and leverage the innovations of the clients they serve.

In a digital age, the O'Pake Institute provides guidance in the realms of Logo Development, Website Development, and Social Media Marketing, ensuring that students understand the critical elements of brand identity and digital presence, which, in turn, provides the clients with the necessary tools they need to market their organization. In parallel, Market Research, SWOT Analysis, and Traditional Marketing services help students gain insights into consumer behavior and competition.

Moreover, the Institute's services extend to Nonprofit Advising, Opportunity Assessment, Product and Prototype Development, Publishing, and Venture Investment Preparation. This approach fosters student entrepreneurial thinking and equips them with the tools to bring ideas to life. At the O'Pake Institute, students are equipped with knowledge and the practical skills to succeed in today's dynamic business landscape.

Pottsville CollegeTowne: PADCO and Ignite Schuylkill Collaboration

Alvernia University's O'Pake Institute has made a collaborative partnership with PADCO (Pottsville Area Development Corporation) and Ignite Schuylkill. This partnership represents a dynamic alliance aimed at fostering community growth and innovation in the Schuylkill County region. Alvernia's O'Pake Institute brings academic expertise and resources to the table, supporting education, research, and workforce development. PADCO, a critical economic development player, contributes its local insights and networking, enhancing the region's economic vitality. Ignite Schuylkill, an entrepreneurial hub, promotes innovation and startup culture.

Through joint initiatives, this partnership seeks to not only enhance educational and economic opportunities but also address various community needs. By actively engaging with local residents and businesses, the collaborative aims to identify and address specific challenges faced by the community. This inclusive approach ensures that the initiatives developed are tailored to the unique

needs of the Pottsville community. This partnership leverages its unique strengths to drive educational, economic, and entrepreneurial advancement, ultimately benefiting the Pottsville community by creating new opportunities and fostering growth. O'Pake services are now available in the Alvernia University Pottsville College Campus location.

Notre Dame Agreement

The partnership between Alvernia University's O'Pake Institute and Notre Dame is a dynamic collaboration that brings together two esteemed educational institutions to foster innovation, research, and community engagement. The O'Pake Institute, known for its commitment to ethics, leadership, and community involvement, aligns perfectly with Notre Dame's mission of advancing knowledge and promoting social justice.

Through this partnership, students and faculty from both institutions have access to a wealth of resources, research opportunities, and a vibrant academic environment. The exchange of ideas and expertise between these two institutions enriches the learning experience, offering a diverse range of perspectives and skills. This collaboration enables joint research projects, educational programs, and community outreach initiatives, strengthening the impact of both universities in their respective communities and beyond.

By combining the strengths and values of Alvernia University's O'Pake Institute and Notre Dame, this partnership is a testament to the power of education in driving positive change and promoting social responsibility. It exemplifies the potential for higher education institutions to work together for the greater good.

Additional Trainings

Alvernia University's O'Pake Institute offers its students a comprehensive and transformative training experience, equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in the dynamic world of entrepreneurship and venture capital. The journey begins with PAN Angels meetings, where students gain hands-on experience in angel investing. Here, they learn to assess startup pitches, evaluate business models, and make informed investment decisions.

Following this, students delve into IP (Intellectual Property) training with Chuck Valauskas, immersing themselves in the intricacies of protecting innovative ideas and technologies. This training is invaluable in startups, where IP can be a critical asset.

Additionally, O'Pake Institute students receive thorough due diligence training from Jeff Snellenburg, allowing them to hone their ability to conduct comprehensive research and analysis on potential investments. This skill is essential in making informed investment choices and mitigating risks.

A highlight of the program is the privilege of having guest speaker John Arnold, a renowned entrepreneur and investor, share his insights and experiences. Arnold's guidance provides invaluable real-world perspective to entrepreneurs. Through their training programs, Alvernia University students are well-prepared to navigate the world of startups and venture capital confidently and competently.



Impact Reports

In 2020 Alvernia commissioned the Institute to complete a multi-year economic study of the Reading CollegeTowne to gauge its impact on the Penn Street Corridor in Downtown Reading. The institute is an economic and applied research consulting group that provides customized studies to inform strategies and decision making that enhance client organization growth, impact and sustainability.

The first study completed by the Institute using data inputs provided by Alvernia and IMPLAN regional multiplier software showed that the impact of the renovation and associated construction of the CollegeTowne building at 401 Penn Street in Downtown Reading reached \$22 million.

The Institute next completed a baseline economic study of the Penn Street Corridor in 2022. This study will be followed by others in succeeding years to gauge the economic impact of Reading College Towne on the Penn Street Corridor over time. This information will be used to inform decision making about the initiatives undertaken related to College Towne programs. The study measures variables including Building Asset Mapping, Demographic Characteristics, Education Levels, Economic Characteristics, Social Service Characteristics and Housing and Transportation Characteristics. Using these measures, a Downtown Profile will be created, which can be tracked over time.

Conclusions from the baseline study are that the Penn Street Corridor is an active and fairly healthy area. The impact of COVID-19 on long-term office space demand is an important unresolved question. Like many cities of its size and age, Reading needs physical enhancement of the condition and facades of many of its buildings and the development of underutilized space in many of those buildings. Work also needs to be done to dispel misinformation about public safety. In this context, it is apparent the Reading CollegeTowne has been and will be critical to a full revitalization of the city.

In 2023 the Institute completed an extensive update of a profile of City of Reading Demographic and Economic status. This information is used to provide a data context for O’Pake Institute projects and reports.

Case Study Conclusions

This case study reports on Alvernia University’s efforts to transform itself, with the goal of changing “how a regional institution of higher education is seen, executed and delivered.” In four short years, the University has made great progress toward this goal and is likely to fully achieve it in the years ahead. In this section, we summarize in the table below the key elements of the strategy to achieve this goal and the status of its execution.

Table 1: Case Study Conclusions
Linking Institutional Transformation to Regional Revitalization -Alvernia University

Key Strategy Elements	Alvernia’s Approach
Ambitious and Visionary Strategic Plan	The 2020 to 25 Alvernia Advantage Strategic Plan set the tone for a university transformation. It seeks, in line with the Franciscan Tradition and in collaboration with community partners, for the University to play a key role in the revitalization of the communities it serves in eastern Pennsylvania. It will do this by becoming the “regional university of the future.”
Two Innovative Strategies to Drive Change and Innovation	The strategies selected to drive the needed change and innovation at Alvernia are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● CollegeTowne Initiatives were originally designed to involve the University in the revitalization of downtown Reading, while also advancing Alvernia’s mission. It entailed establishment of a university physical presence in the downtown, the launch of an engineering program, the revival of the University’s business major and location of other academic programs at the downtown location, and the establishment of a student-powered business incubator to aid startup companies. It has been expanded to include CollegeTowne Centers in other cities in Eastern Pennsylvania. ● O’Pake Institute: The mission of the O’Pake Institute for Economic Development and Entrepreneurship is to drive the development of entrepreneurial programs and economic growth in the CollegeTowne communities Alvernia serves. With a deep roster of programs, the Institute is providing Alvernia students a unique education and starting to revitalize Downtown Reading.
Relocation of Substantial Portion of Academic Program from Legacy Campus to Downtown Center	To better link the University’s students and faculty to the realities of Downtown Reading, the O’Pake institute, two colleges and several health care programs were or will be moved from the legacy campus to newly renovated University facilities in downtown Reading. Initial reports suggest that the move has had the desired effect.
Growing a Satellite Campus System	The University has recently opened a CollegeTowne Center in Pottsville, PA. The campus is delivering Alvernia academic programs in demand in the region and economic development services offered by O’Pake Institute Fellows. On the way is a center in Pittston and planned is a center in Harrisburg.
Heavy Emphasis on Governmental and Industry Partnerships to Support and Benefit from Program	The Alvernia leadership has done an excellent job of forming government and industry partnerships to advance its programs, renovate facilities, gain access to high end laboratories, and receive ongoing operating support. In the four-year period covered by this case study upwards of \$25m in resources have been received.
Strong Visionary Leaders and Unique Succession Approach	Two of the key leaders in the Alvernia transformation, President Loyack and Dr. Rodney Ridley, bring an unusual combination industry and higher education leadership experience to the effort. Both are charismatic and strong leaders who have achieved much of their vision in a short period of time. They were assisted for much of this time by Provost Glynis Fitzgerald, who ensured support from the academic core. In a succession move unusual in higher education Dr. Loyack decided in 2022 that he wanted to become the Alvernia CEO and turn over the Presidency to Dr. Fitzgerald. The University Board concurred, demonstrating its ongoing support for the Alvernia transformation effort.