



# Is St. Louis Successful?

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What makes a successful city? Recently, the Show-Me Institute, in collaboration with the Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason University, sponsored an academic research seminar to explore that question. The event featured presentations from prominent researchers and thought-provoking discussions among attendees representing over forty different universities and think tanks across the country.

So how should cities measure success? Typically, city success is characterized by periods of sustained growth, whether that growth is in population or employment. Booming local economies bring businesses to an area, and those businesses bring more people to a region who can then contribute to the same economy. The idea seems simple, but not every city is going to have a booming economy. So what can struggling cities do to turn things around and grow their economy?

Figuring out how to attract new residents and businesses is something cities of all sizes across the country struggle with. Aaron Renn, of the Manhattan Institute, argued that cities should take steps to harness their unique characteristics and build a more desirable brand. Gary Ritter, of St. Louis University, explained that quality schools are essential to the recruitment of businesses and their employee's families, but also help adequately train the workforce for the emerging jobs in that city's economy. Howard Wall, of the Hammond Institute at Lindenwood University, asserted that rapid population growth for cities over an extended period of time is rare and quite difficult,

and that perhaps St. Louis's success has been hampered by its previous growth.

Eileen Norcross, of the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, discussed some of her research surrounding the rise and fall of historically successful cities. She found ultimate success for older cities was tied to how it responded to the decline of the local manufacturing sector.

Despite her assertion that regulatory and institutional environments are more important for prospective businesses, many of these cities spent incredible sums of tax payer dollars to lure businesses without otherwise addressing the business environment. In the end, those moves hurt the city's long-term financial health without providing the desired opportunity for future economic growth.

While there doesn't appear to be a silver bullet for city success, the seminar provided a variety of ideas for research and reform, including occupational licensing, regulatory changes, and tax policy.

## About the Author



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