out the state. Generating more than $400 million in annual research expenditures without a medical school, ASU is one of the world’s top four universities in terms of U.S. patents, one of which made it to Science magazine’s Top 10 Breakthroughs of 2013. The university focuses on advancing research and discovery of public value, along with assuming responsibility for the economic, social, cultural, and overall health of the communities it serves.

The ASU Downtown Phoenix campus was built with city dollars, not state funds. “Our direct investment in bringing ASU downtown was unprecedented and well worth it,” says Mayor Stanton, who championed those investments.

Downtown is also home to the Biomedical Campus anchored by TGen, the Translational Genomics Research Institute, a cutting-edge facility that is taking the mapping of the human genome to the next level of patient care. Then there’s the University of Arizona’s College of Medicine, which just broke ground on a $136 million research facility to accompany its brand new cancer center. The university’s Eller College of Management just moved its MBA program to the campus too.

In addition to hosting some of Arizona’s highest-ranked education opportunities downtown, Phoenix is also home to 10 community colleges. “We have the largest community college system in the country, with a laser focus on workforce development,” says the mayor. “That system is a crucial component to increasing our state’s college attainment rates. It expands higher education opportunities and brings more talented young people into the pipeline.”

Downtown’s new energy and walkability is keeping talented millennials from looking for jobs elsewhere. “People in my generation and slightly younger were leaving,” says Kimber Lanning, who runs Local First Arizona, a statewide nonprofit.

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Phoenix opened a trade office in Mexico City, which will build on $14 billion in annual trade.

**DOWNTOWN’S HIGHER EDUCATION NUCLEUS**

The city’s urban core, buoyed by the new light-rail system, is thriving with adaptive reuse projects, more than 150 restaurants, and an increasingly bustling art scene. The thousands who have migrated downtown to live within walking distance of work or school or a local brew house are sending the message that Phoenix is no longer just a suburban community.

"It’s critical for any major metropolitan area to have an identity, a focal point, an area where you bring people together, where you have all the art and culture and sports and activities, and it’s the center of commerce and government," says David Rodrique, president and CEO of the Downtown Phoenix Partnership. "It’s what makes a city great. Before it had a downtown, Phoenix was just a giant suburb."

The change is popular among locals: 93% of Phoenix residents say the city is a good place to live—the highest mark in its history. "Everywhere you look, new leaders are emerging and working to build a brighter future," says Mayor Stanton. "The excitement is palpable—and contagious."

Much of downtown’s bustle is a result of the city’s efforts to create what Stanton calls a "higher education nucleus." In just five years, more than 17,000 university students will call downtown home, the city says—up from virtually zero in 2000.

Arizona State University’s new Downtown Phoenix campus makes it a major part of the scene. All told, ASU has 82,000 students through...