The following, "Economic innovation is key to success," was written by Dr. Judith A. Ramaley and published as the "Final Word" guest column in the spring 2008 issue of Southern Minnesota magazine. The issue featured a Higher Education section comparing schools in southern Minnesota, including Winona State University.

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Minnesota is a very special place. I have enjoyed getting to know my neighbors and learning about how together we can create opportunities for the people who live here.

The region I know best is Southeast Minnesota, anchored at one end by Rochester and at the other end by Winona, Minn., and La Crosse, Wis., the Seven Rivers Region. When I scan across this area in my mind, I think about the growing emphasis that economic developers and community planners are making on regional innovation. In today’s economy, competition between nations is less relevant than competition between regions of innovation. Regions are formed around larger communities that are healthy, diverse and sustainable. These hubs must also offer historical context, engaging physical and cultural environments, opportunities for exchange and exploration that encourage different perspectives, and deep understanding and appreciation of human diversity. A region needs clusters of high wage, rapidly growing businesses that are closely linked through collaboration, research efforts, common products and services, and mutual strategies. Together these related companies generate a local high skilled labor pool, by attracting new talent to the region and retaining local talent. A region also needs smaller towns that are livable and sustainable places connected to the centers socially, economically, educationally and culturally.

I often think about how a strong education system creates the conditions for a strong regional economy and attractive living environments. Winona State University (WSU), like many other higher education institutions, is addressing the realities of a 21st century education---the knowledge that can support this new regional strategy as well as the skill sets that promote creativity, innovation and the transfer of knowledge into the process of finding workable solutions to really important problems. Unlike entrepreneurship, which tends to focus upon supporting individuals with creative ideas, the concept of regional innovation requires a larger collaborative environment and new kinds of working relationships to facilitate the generation of knowledge and its effective use both in education and in regional advancement. To support regions of innovation, we need to link our educational systems (both K-12 and postsecondary) to resources in the community to address both workforce development and economic and community development. The result will be to create new approaches to education, workforce development, environmental sustainability and diversification and growth of our economy, the vital infrastructure for regional development.

The pivotal change required to make this alignment work is to have well-placed colleges and universities that are equipped and able to engage in meaningful, sustainable and effective collaborations across all sectors. That is why WSU is working more and more closely with regional governments, organizations and businesses to bring our own resources into alignment with the interests and assets of our partners.

All of the likely industry/economic clusters in the region (healthcare, value-added agriculture, high tech and manufacturing) have a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) base. To be successful, Southern Minnesota must increase the science and mathematics competencies of its students and its businesses, and the capacity of its educational institutions to provide effective instruction in STEM, as well as provide technical assistance for industries that are STEM-based.

Last fall, we invited people from around the region to talk about the challenges they face and what they are doing to address those challenges. We learned a lot in a very short period of time and the lessons will form an agenda for several years to come.

This is what we have heard.

• It is a challenge to attract and retain highly skilled workers within a context of a rapidly changing workplace and competitive environment. Employers often struggle to help incumbent workers stay current. A great deal of retooling will be needed as the economy continues to change. We all need to work at staying up to speed. Whole businesses need to rethink their strategies and develop new core competencies. A regional strategy will be needed to provide the support needed for retooling.
• Regional businesses also must develop the ability to respond to global markets. This will require cultural knowledge as well as the ability to integrate business practices such as marketing, project management, logistics and concurrent engineering in different regions of the world.
• Our communities are dealing with the **impact of changing regional demographics**. Among the elements mentioned were the multiple generations in the workforce and the problems they often have understanding each other and working together, the growing number of new immigrants and the diversity that they bring.

• People from smaller communities talked about the challenge of **staying connected with larger centers in the region** in order to take advantage of their infrastructure, their technical assistance and their investments in economic and community development. **Public transportation** to link these communities together is important, along with **regional roads and bridges** to connect communities together and to afford access to larger markets and distribution sites.

• Smaller communities face the problem of **finding and keeping businesses** that can do well in rural settings and keeping those businesses current and competitive as the demand for customization grows. A related concern is the need to **foster entrepreneurship** in smaller communities as well as the larger centers and to link the two sets of communities together to provide an environment in the region that encourages creativity. Smaller communities need a “hub” that ties people together and keeps a **sense of place** as more and more residents either commute to larger centers to work or seek education or to explore opportunities elsewhere (“brain drain”).

• Smaller communities and the larger centers need to cooperate to **create family wage jobs** in the region and to develop **mixed use and affordable housing** and **sustainable communities**. Sustainability includes such elements as accessible healthcare and sound environmental practices.

• **Schools in smaller communities** lack sufficient opportunities for students and K-12 faculty to explore the applications of classroom knowledge in various settings. Smaller employers cannot accommodate many interns or provide much meaningful work experience for young people. In the absence of these experiences, students and their families lack the motivation to stay in those communities or to return to them. Many communities worry about how to help students who have difficulties in school. There is a need for regional collaboration to support schools and teachers and to assist families that require help.

• Throughout the region, there is a need to recruit younger people as well as older people to **public service**, as members of boards and commissions, community volunteers, and candidates for elected office or appointed office. There is a need for continuing professional education to support people who take on these responsibilities either as volunteers or as office holders.

I am grateful to be here as a member of a **community of learners improving our world**. Our mission serves as a guide and an inspiration as we make Winona State University into a 21st Century University attuned to the needs of our region and its people.