Changing perceptions of Baltimore is at the core of how to capitalize on the region’s higher education strengths, according to local officials and the sponsors of a new economic impact report.

The region’s academic institutions, including research hospitals, contribute more than $17.2 billion to the state’s economy, according to a study released Tuesday by the Baltimore Collegetown Network.

That number is just the beginning of higher education’s potential, but first Baltimore needs to become known as more of a college town and less like the setting of “The Wire,” said elected officials at the study’s unveiling in Towson.

Baltimore Collegetown, a nonprofit consortium of 16 area colleges and universities, agrees, and wants to be a part of the dialogue, said Executive Director Kristen Campbell.

“This study emphasizes that higher education is an important industry in Baltimore, and we want to be a partner in regional development,” she said.

The region’s universities and its two academic hospitals are the sixth largest employer in the region, employing more than 63,000 directly and more than 163,000 indirectly, according to the study.

That represents more than 12.5 percent of the total Baltimore metropolitan area employment market.

Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon and Baltimore County Executive James T. Smith Jr. both said the study’s numbers contradict commonly held perceptions of the region.

Through the lens of “The Wire,” people in Maryland and abroad see Baltimore as a dangerous place to live and work, noted Dixon, or as the blue-collar industrial city it used to be, said Smith.

But Baltimore needs to turn itself into a thriving college town to attract and retain better quality students and build a work force to draw new and the support the ones already in Maryland, according to the study’s researchers, from the Regional Economic Studies Institute, or RESI, at Towson University and the Jacob France Institute at the University of Baltimore.

Growing higher education requires more public-private partnerships, better “quality-of-life” and a stronger infrastructure to link learning and industry, the report found.

And it requires convincing people those changes are happening.

That’s exactly the reason Baltimore Collegetown was formed a decade ago, to market the area’s schools to prospective students for both education and beginning their careers afterward, said Campbell.

Just 31 percent of the Baltimore region’s college students remain near the city after graduation, and only 51 percent remain in the state, according to Baltimore Collegetown.

The 15 colleges, universities and academic hospitals — the University of Maryland Medical Center and the Johns Hopkins Hospital — that participated in the report award 20,000 degrees annually, the researchers found.

The city and state are missing economic development opportunities with each student who relocates after graduation, Campbell said.

Baltimore needs to build transportation resources and housing stock, increase retail, restaurant and entertainment opportunities, and create strong partnerships with businesses to help students transition into work at local companies, the report found.

The study came about when Baltimore Collegetown officials realized hard numbers were needed to make the case for higher education as an economic engine, Campbell said.
Marketing the region’s strengths is critical if Baltimore is to catch up to higher learning hotbeds such as the Research Triangle in North Carolina, the Route 128 corridor in Boston and Silicon Valley in California, said RESI Director Daraius Irani.

Those areas have been building up their higher education resources for 50 years or longer, but the right strategy could boost Baltimore.

“We have all the pieces in place, but many people view Baltimore as ‘The Wire,’” he said. “We need a counteraction of perception.”