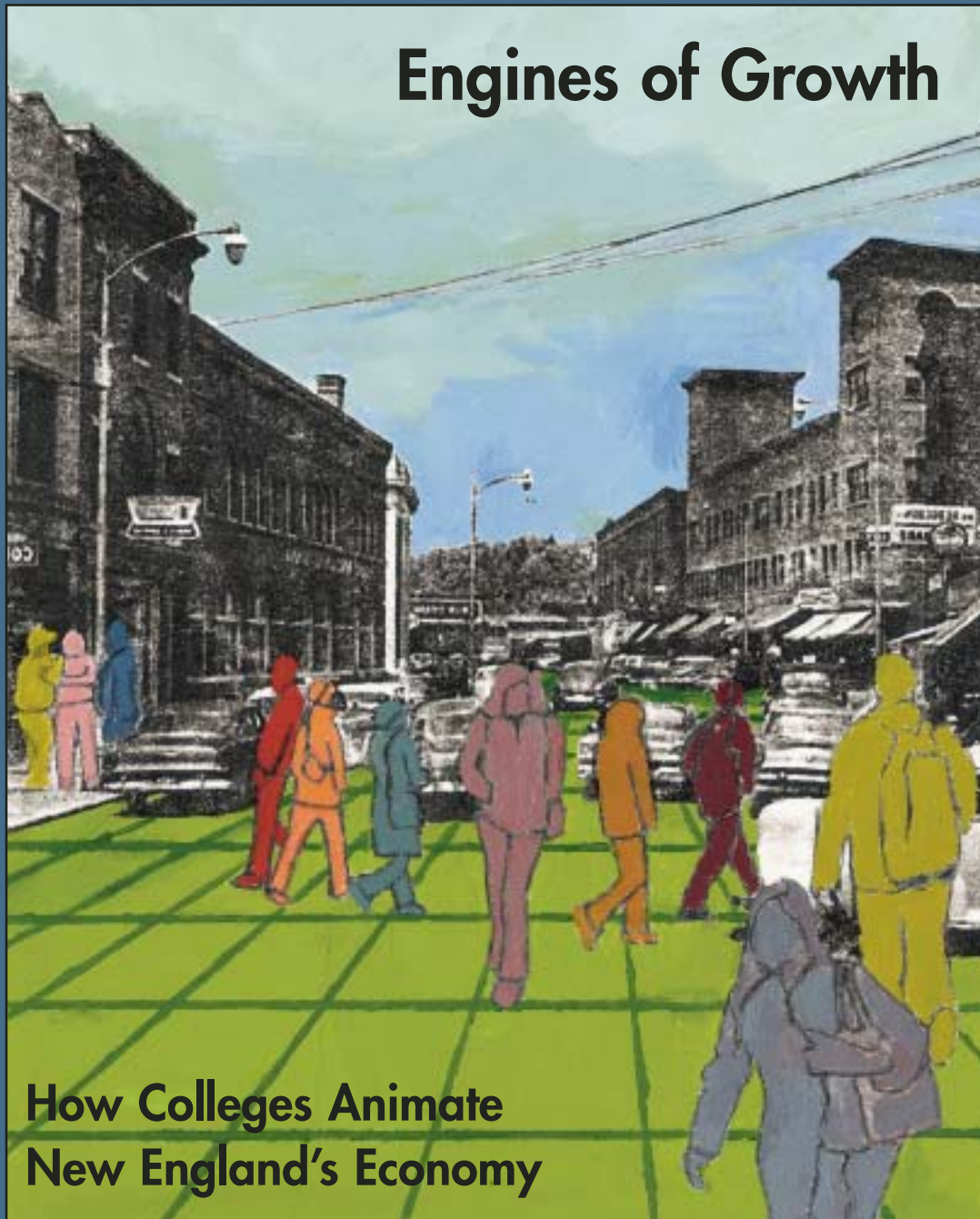


CONNECTION

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How Colleges Animate New England's Economy

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rents the little retail businesses which carry such sentimental value, for not making payments in lieu of taxes that really reflected the actual value of their properties.

Cambridge, like a lot of college towns, was experiencing a “benefit boomerang.”

To be fair, things have changed, slowly, since my first uncomfortable sit-down in 1993. There have been some real, if carefully calculated, gestures of generosity on the part of the universities: the below-market value sale to the city of 100 units of formerly rent-controlled housing, a \$10 million low-interest loan program for affordable housing, a shelter for homeless drug abusers, several lovely parks, a tangible increase in on-campus student housing to ease the citywide housing crunch and a recent landmark tax agreement occasioned by one university’s controversial purchase of a large piece of prime commercial property.

Contrary to the cynicism of the constituent who accused me of blackmail, universities in Cambridge now accept that to get major projects built in the city, they have to offer some tangible benefit in the form of a donation of real estate, a park, help with funding for an educational or social service program or, at the minimum, just plain payments in lieu of taxes.

Intermittent rumblings in places like Madison Wis., Palo Alto, Calif., and closer to home in Providence, have raised the tax-exemption issue as it relates to research buildings. In Connecticut, cities are reimbursed by the state for some of the taxes institutions don’t pay. Perhaps with Harvard’s unprecedented major expansion planned in Boston’s Allston neighborhood, there will finally be the resolve to make fundamental changes in state law that could offer Massachusetts cities compensation for tax revenue unrealized when universities expand.

Sim City has changed in the last decade too. The 2004 version, Sim City 4, places far greater value on the contentment of the “Sims,” the people who live there,

and less value on continued growth. Quality of life is now equally or more important to the success of the city than its rate of growth. This quality of life theme, played out in various guises—affordable housing to ensure diversity, affordable commercial rents to support small businesses, less traffic, less noise, preservation of historic buildings and open spaces—has moved front and center in Cambridge politics.

Furthermore, after voters abolished rent control in 1993 and the city was grappling with demographic change and gentrification, an interesting phenomena emerged almost unnoticed: Cambridge began to be seen as a retirement community. Empty-nesters are attracted by the walkability of the city, the restaurants, shops and the abundance of cultural attractions, many of them university-related. Many of these new residents are *actually* returning to the city where they spent their college days in the 1950s and the ’60s. They remember when cars were fewer, parking was easier, a meal out and a movie was a cheap date. Increasingly we find these savvy new residents at the forefront of political issues involving escalating property taxes, civic developments such as a new library, parks, natural areas, recreational facilities, changes to roads and traffic patterns, the mix of retail in the squares and, ironically, university expansion and the effects of new development related to university spinoff businesses. Maybe this group will be the key to bridging the old “pomp and whine” divide between the universities and elected officials in Cambridge. Maybe they will be the ones with the clout to finally convince their alma maters to offer the city the substantial resources, both financial and knowledge-based, that will be needed to help Cambridge survive its own success.

Kathleen Leahy Born is an architect with Arrowstreet Inc. and a former Cambridge, Mass., city councilor.



Comic Relief for White River Junction

JAMES STURM

When I decided to start a college for cartoonists in Vermont, I knew I would be tapping into an unprecedented excitement about graphic novels in the literary, publishing and art worlds. What I didn’t know was that I would

also be tapping into the energy swirling around New England’s so-called “Creative Economy.”

This Creative Economy encompasses a rich array of arts and culture organizations from commercial design shops to symphony orchestras as well as nearly a quarter-million New Englanders working as individual

artists or in arts and cultural fields. In fact, more people work in New England's Creative Economy than in the region's fabled software and medical technology sectors, according to a 2000 study by the New England Council, the alliance of New England businesses that has spearheaded efforts to boost the region's creative industries. The study also noted that Creative Economy jobs were growing at twice the rate of the overall economy in New England (and Vermont's creative cluster is growing fastest of all the New England states).

Perhaps more importantly, the Creative Economy is helping to revitalize distressed New England downtowns, influence development planning and contribute to quality of life.

Which brings us to White River Junction.

Sixty years ago, WRJ was one of the busiest railroad towns in New England. Scores of trains passed through the town every day; the local economy thrived. Today, just one Amtrak train makes a daily stop. Students, tourists and traders are more likely to experience White River Junction's fast food joints and gas stations at the intersection of Interstate 89 and 91 than the struggling downtown a mile away. Vermont lost 8,100 manufacturing jobs between 2001 and the end of 2003. And with tax-free New Hampshire just a stone's throw away, White River Junction has had particular difficulty keeping retail stores afloat.

Still, a palpable feeling of nostalgia permeates WRJ. While it may disappoint the leaf peepers who trek through Vermont each autumn, White River Junction is visually compelling on its own terms. A small urban center set against an agricultural backdrop, it is a place where characters from a Raymond Carver or Charles Bukowski tale would feel comfortable. Embedded in each of its historic buildings are countless untold stories.

My attraction to White River Junction was not unique. Other creative entrepreneurs are contributing to the town's economic transformation. The village's eclectic stock of antique brick and wooden buildings now house artists' studios, a printmaking cooperative, a used book store, a costume shop, a retro-clothing store and a quirky museum. The old opera house on Main Street is home to Northern Stage, a regional theater company that stages plays year round featuring equity actors straight from Broadway and London.

The Center for Cartoon Studies (CCS) will open in fall 2005 with a two-year curriculum of art, graphic design and literature, reflecting the array of skills needed to create comics and graphic novels. CCS will emphasize self-publishing and prepare its students to print, market and disseminate their work. For a new generation of cartoonists, comics are first and foremost a personal means of expression; yet most schools offer no programs that validate their artistic ambitions. For cartooning students, whose medium of choice is generally considered juvenile, CCS will be a revelation.

The economic impact of this educational institution

in the small community of White River Junction is also likely to be significant. Research shows that investment in higher education, and the infrastructure supporting it, promotes subsequent growth far better than investments in physical infrastructure like canals, railroads and highways. Richard Florida, author of the creative economy bible, *The Rise of the Creative Class* writes, "Colleges are amazingly effective talent attractors and their effect is truly magnetic. By attracting eminent talent they in turn attract graduate students, generate spinoff companies and encourage other companies to locate nearby in a cycle of self-reinforcing growth."

Consider the case of Savannah, Ga. Now considered the "Jewel of the South," just 20 years ago, Savannah was a city in disrepair. The city's economic turnaround has been largely credited to its art school, the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). As the college population increased, it generated more restoration of old properties; the opening of cafes, specialty shops and rental spaces; and the development of the city's waterfront. SCAD spent more than \$30 million over two decades buying and repairing 52 downtown buildings for its own use. This, in turn, renewed interest in renovating hundreds of residences in the Savannah Historic Landmark District, raising property values by at least 25 percent. According to Cora Bett Thomas, a real estate broker who specializes in selling homes in the city's 2.2 square-mile historic district, many homes have doubled in value. "The school saved this community, you cannot overstate that," says Thomas.

The Creative Economy is helping to revitalize distressed New England downtowns, influence development planning and contribute to quality of life.

Inspired by SCAD's impact on Savannah's economy, business leaders in Wilmington, Del., initiated the creation of the Delaware College of Art and Design (DCAD). Now in its fifth year, DCAD is having a major effect on the city. "DCAD is an inspiration," says William C. Wyer, managing director of the Wilmington Renaissance Corp. "The more the art college grows, the more critical mass we get downtown, and the more we realize the economic spillover into local shops and restaurants."

In Vermont, meanwhile, eight in 10 residents rate state support for the arts as either "important" or "very important," according to a poll conducted by the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies. Vermont legislators, town planners and financial institutions are excited by the Center for Cartoon Studies' interest in locating in their midst. The Legislature voted to set aside \$30,000 to renovate an old downtown department store (circa 1929) to be used as the school's flagship building. And local supporters who want to see White River Junction thrive again have

already donated more than \$80,000 to help get the school up and running.

In the fall of 2005, 20 freshmen from all over the country will come to White River Junction to begin two years of study at the new college. Many will live downtown, where they can walk to the local P&C for their groceries or shop at Aubuchon hardware across the street from the college. The local typewriter repair shop has agreed to carry a line of inks, brushes, nibs and paper for the students. A new generation will join the regulars at the Polka Dot Diner and buy their coffee and bagels from The Baker's Studio. More importantly, students will study and learn the skills to create comics: graphic design, writing, desktop publishing and drawing.

As a requirement of the curriculum, CCS students will perform community service activities from teaching cartooning at public schools to creating web sites for local nonprofits and tourist maps for the local chamber of commerce. Upon graduation, some will stay in the White River Junction area and provide a creative workforce—or, as the New England Council puts it, “the thinkers and doers, trained in specific cultural and artistic skills.” Their diverse skill set will add a crucial

element to the region's long-term economic health.

Starting a school from scratch is no easy task but the timing, location and quality of people involved make our chances for success exponentially greater. The growing recognition of the importance of the Creative Economy has given the Center for Cartoon Studies fertile ground in which to take root. As the *Rutland Herald* editorialized: “The alternative to the Creative Economy is economic passivity—Vermonters sitting back and waiting for whatever economic development comes their way. But passivity leaves the state vulnerable to less desirable forms of economic development—suburbanization, sprawl and the transformation of communities from vital, unique, historically grounded places to the kind of nowhere defined by America's big box economy.”

As an agent for economic revitalization, a school for cartoonists is serious business.

James Sturm is founder of the Center for Cartoon Studies and the National Association of Comics Art Educators, and author of the award-winning graphic novel, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*.



The Economic Impact of Educational Opportunity

BLENDA J. WILSON

New England colleges and universities impact their local and regional economies in many well-documented ways. They are often major employers and purchasers. They construct new facilities, attract many visitors, provide cultural and intellectual enrichment for the community and boost property values. The knowledge produced by New England's many higher education institutions is both a major export and a continuously renewable regional resource.

Still, the most significant value that colleges and universities deliver is the social and economic impact of turning a high school graduate or potential dropout into a college-educated citizen.

Higher education institutions, therefore, can bolster their economic impact by providing access and support for more students from currently underserved populations—including the young people of color, immigrants and the poor who will grow to represent more than one-third of the population by 2020. It is on these students' shoulders that New England's economic future rests.

The data on the benefit of higher education to individuals is widely available and compelling. It is no longer possible for a high school graduate to enter the middle class through hard work in a factory. A postsecondary credential is a requirement for most 21st century jobs. Over their lifetime, college graduates earn twice as much as someone without a college education. A college degree has replaced the high school diploma as the ticket to a middle-class life.

In addition to the value of advanced education to individuals, it is widely understood that better-educated