

Best Practices for a Creative Economy

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For the past five years “creative economy” has been one of the more influential ideas in economic planning. More and more thinkers and policymakers are heralding the unexpected benefits that creative endeavors bring to economies as a whole. Popular writers such as Thomas Friedman, David Brooks and Daniel Pink have recently explored the impact creative culture and thought can have on the global marketplace.

Closer to home, the New England Council, the region’s oldest business group, has launched a Creative Economy Initiative to take a comprehensive look at the economic role of artists, designers, performers and related businesses. Its findings are startling: from 1997 to 2001, the number of jobs in the “creative cluster” of arts-related companies grew twice as fast as the New England economy as a whole. As of 2000, that cluster supported 245,000 jobs, or 3.5 percent of the total jobs in the region. That’s higher than the national average and a larger share than either of the better-known software or medical technology industries. The initiative has given us a clear picture of a tremendous, hitherto virtually invisible, economic engine.

This issue of CONNECTION includes three case studies of successful creative engagement. In Old Lyme, Conn., the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts has invigorated a town with a long tradition of support for the arts by teaching old methods for a new

era. In Providence, the Rhode Island School of Design has embraced a commitment to the city and helped transform a now-bustling downtown. And in North Adams, Mass., an old industrial complex now houses a world-class art museum with strong ties to the nearby Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts.

What these stories have in common is that a college in each case has taken the initiative and forged a new working relationship with the creative community in its area. From their examples, we can draw three lessons about how colleges can and should help foster the creative economy in New England.

Colleges first of all make excellent stewards of the arts. Museums such as the renowned Yale Center for British Art provide a stable home where cultural heritage can be safeguarded and shared. They also host visiting artists, hold symposia and attract touring exhibitions that would otherwise come only to major cities. This semester, the University of Maine brought Persian photography to Orono, Williams College finished construction of a cutting-edge theatre complex, and the University of Connecticut welcomed the “conceptual juggler” Michael Moschen.

Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke and Smith colleges and the University of Massachusetts Amherst have gone the extra step of coordinating their museums’ programming and promotion through the Five Colleges

consortium. Their “Museums10” initiative extends to shared thematic exhibitions, the first of which will focus on Dutch culture.

That sort of collaboration could work anywhere with several colleges, or where colleges have a neighboring independent museum. The Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass., for example, has a spectacular collection of Asian art and artifacts, with a strong emphasis on the China trade. It represents a great opportunity for nearby schools and colleges to develop a comprehensive K-16 Asian studies program that would prepare students for the post-globalization economy.

Second, there’s the matter of real estate, because another element common to all of the stories in this issue is the importance of abundant, affordable *space* where artists can do their work. Lowell, Mass., and Manchester, N.H., had enormous industrial complexes just begging for new life; Providence had the benefit of an entire downtown district ready for a makeover. In Maine, Gov. John Baldacci sees the creative economy as a vehicle for reviving old mill towns and attracting new business. He has put real weight behind that vision, raising awareness through a conference and a task force and proposing state support for art education and policy in his latest budget.

When there is space available at a reasonable price, government and smart institutions can step in and plant the seed for renovation and