

CONNECTION

NEW ENGLAND'S JOURNAL

OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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The **New England Board of Higher Education** is a nonprofit, congressionally authorized, interstate agency whose mission is to foster cooperation and the efficient use of resources among New England's approximately 260 colleges and universities. NEBHE was established by the New England Higher Education Compact, a 1955 agreement among the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.

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EDITOR'S MEMO

A Washington State University grad with a cannon for an arm is not exactly the kind of skilled worker CONNECTION has obsessed about during its decade-plus of exploring the New England higher education-economic development nexus. But the press-time blowup over Drew Bledsoe and the New England Patriots possibly moving from Foxborough, Mass., to Hartford, Conn., could hardly be more relevant to our region-minded readers for what it says about the State of New England at the end of the 20th century.

Football fans in Greater Boston have reacted as if their Pats were being seduced by some sun-drenched upstart like Charlotte or Orlando, bent on sneaking away with the spirit of New England Sunday afternoons as surely as they once snagged New England manufacturing companies and, more recently, New England college students and research prowess.

In actuality, of course, Hartford lies north of the 41st parallel and west of the 72nd meridian—very much in New England. What's particularly odd is that when New England's prized edge in brainpower really did migrate to newer, warmer places, nary a peep was heard. Certainly, there was no broad-based call for state legislatures to keep students or research here by improving upon their generally last-in-the-nation record on funding both public higher education and university research and development (R&D).

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) recently released a study showing how the South had improved by virtually every educational measure—to say nothing of professional sports franchises—since Franklin Roosevelt declared Dixie to be “the nation's No. 1 economic problem.” Nearly half the growth in U.S. college enrollment during the past decade occurred in the South—this, while New England enrollment plunged from 825,000 to about 795,000. And between 1993 and 1996, up-and-coming universities in the South increased their R&D expenditures by 17 percent to more than \$4.2 billion, while New England university research spending rose by just 6 percent to \$1.9 billion.

How is it that the South is rising again? “There is an uncommon sense of being Southern and working together to solve problems,” reports the SREB.

Which brings us back to the state of Connecticut's offer to build the Patriots (and the would-be big time University of Connecticut Huskies football team) a \$375 million stadium in Hartford. The latest evidence of that other full-contact New England pastime where the object is to lure businesses away from your neighbors, the offer comes one year after Rhode Island dangled a stadium deal in front of the Pats. Never mind that the return on Connecticut's investment is expected to be small and many years away. States have used tax dollars to attract or keep more dubious businesses.

Culturally, the whole Pats deal was testing the “New Englandness” of Greater Boston sports fans, who had only recently watched their Red Sox drop the ball on peerless hitter and community supporter (and Connecticut native) Mo Vaughn. Sure, Bostonians are willing to trek to Vermont's ski slopes, for not since Bill Parcells left town have fans felt they could move mountains. But why, they ask, would the Pats coax them to the very spot where traffic bottles up on the way to New York?

Some of the regional dysfunction at work in the Pats deal will be clarified by a New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) survey that we told you about briefly in the Summer 1998 issue of CONNECTION. As part of its New England Public Policy Collaborative, NEBHE mailed the *1998 Future of New England Survey* to about 6,000 New England “opinion leaders” including college presidents, think tank directors and elected officials, to find out what they think makes New England a region and what challenges it faces.

In early February 1999, NEBHE will host the second annual *New England Agenda* conference in Boston to explore the survey results, and an upcoming issue of CONNECTION will feature analysis of the findings by thoughtful New Englanders.

Notably, one idea raised at the first *New England Agenda* conference was the possibility of a joint New England effort to land the Olympics. Just imagine those planning discussions!

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.