

CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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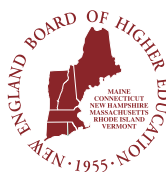
The New England Board of Higher Education is a

nonprofit, congressionally authorized, interstate agency whose mission is to promote greater educational opportunities and services for the residents of New England.

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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Regionalism and Affordability

A few years back, we published a particularly rich issue of CONNECTION, titled "The State of New England," which featured the results of a major survey on the region's future and the proceedings of a mock debate among candidates for the fictitious position of Governor of New England. For the cover, we commissioned an illustration of a finned hot rod parked in the foreground of the Old Man of the Mountain. That hot rod's "New England" license plate carried the motto "Live Regionally or Die" and, with apologies to Abbey Road, the clue, "NE 6R1."

Few regionalists, and for that matter, few geologists, could have guessed at the time that this cryptic bit of regional sentiment would outlive the revered granite profile in the background. But Evan Richert might have.

In an essay published this summer by the Maine Center for Economic Policy, the former Maine state planning director turned University of Southern Maine professor, observes, "Shortfalls in state revenues in New England are reviving a word that is spoken freely only in difficult times: regionalism."

Richert's focus is on Maine Gov. John Baldacci's proposed "municipal service districts," designed to encourage regional cooperation among adjoining towns. Without them, Richert notes: "The signal in one town might be 'more young children moving in,' and in the next town over, it might be 'surplus school capacity.' But there isn't a mechanism to quickly and easily engender a coordinated response."

To further illustrate the pitfalls of individualism, Richert points out that the adjacent but proudly independent communities of South Portland and Cape Elizabeth, Maine, recently built separate new public safety buildings located just five miles apart.

As it happens, colleges and universities plan their growth with the same pride of institution that well-intentioned town elders do. And as they independently launch new programs and build new centers—their version of public safety buildings—costs for students go up.

Fortunately, there is a nearly half-century old *interstate* analogue to Baldacci's municipal service districts idea, which readers should bear in mind as they consider this issue of CONNECTION's discussion of college affordability.

The New England Board of Higher Education's Regional Student Program (RSP) gives New England residents a substantial tuition break at *out-of-state* public colleges and universities within the six-state region when they enroll in certain degree programs that are not offered by the public institutions in their home states. More than 8,000 New England residents are enrolled through the RSP this academic year. Full-time students in the program are saving an average of \$5,800 on their annual tuition bills.

Perhaps as importantly, the six states save untold millions of dollars annually through the RSP because they don't have to start up and run high-cost academic programs that are available in other New England states.

In September, when New England's real governors urged the Bush administration not to allow Midwestern power plants to delay pollution controls, a Massachusetts State House News Service reporter observed: "A classic trans-boundary topic, air pollution tends to unite the region's governors."

Guess what? Citizens migrate as freely across our compact state lines as sulfur emissions do. If ever there were a trans-boundary issue facing slow-growing New England, it is the development of an educated citizenry. So, by extension, it is college affordability. That topic united New England's governors 50 years ago when they planted the seeds of the New England Board of Higher Education and the RSP. It should unite them today.

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.