

# CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Minding our Business

Our usual "Books" section is on sabbatical, so to speak, returning in the spring. But let me say a word here about a book whose very name conjures up this issue's focus on business-higher education collaboration. The book is titled *Route 128 and the Birth of the Age of High Tech*. It was written by former *Mass High Tech* newspaper editor Alan R. Earls and published in the fall as part of Arcadia Publishing's *Images of America* series of local history picture books.

Full disclosure: I've known Alan Earls a long time. When I was a freelance writer in the mid-1980s, Earls edited a magazine called *s/f* on the then-booming New England real estate development market. I wrote a few pieces for the magazine and got a taste of the business media's slant on growth and priorities. Since I began editing CONNECTION more than a decade ago, and Earls became the freelancer, he has been providing our readers with no-nonsense reportage on issues from research commercialization to campus privacy. Note his piece in this issue on public higher education's role in business collaboration 140 years after Vermont Congressman Justin Morrill pushed landmark legislation creating Land Grant universities.

For the 128 book, I provided Earls with a photo of my in-laws strolling through the Pleasure Island amusement park, one of the many open spaces along the fabled Boston beltway that would be gobbled up by one after another "knowledge-based" companies with names like Analogic, Millipore or Xenergy. Route 128 is, or was, the world's preeminent model of how business-higher education collaboration spawns high-tech economic development. And the more than 200 photos that Earls has assembled depicting room-size computers, primitive Radars and rockets show the circumferential road in all its gadgetary glory. (No wonder my in-laws wound up on the proverbial cutting-room floor.)

But anyone interested in education and quality of life can fairly have a few gripes with the historical development of "America's Technology Highway" and with the Earls book's uncritical treatment of it.

For one, released as Washington was beating the war drums over Iraq, the book offers a sad reminder of how much the Route 128 version of business-higher education partnership has been channeled into destructive force. The book is in no small part a celebration of Hawk missiles and phased array radar, delivered deadpan, with no suggestion of how those ventures have diverted investment away from, say, health research or education itself.

Secondly, the playful photos and cutlines depicting the emergence in the late 1970s of high-tech business councils seem to suggest an era of limitless, backslapping collaboration. What really emerged were deep strains in the business-higher ed nexus, as the councils adopted the role of reformer, launching tirades against tenure, faculty workloads and frivolous (read social sciences) curricula. With no war to rally around, they began a full-scale offensive to make academia safe for market principles.

Still, 128's glory days also remind us that there remains great promise for constructive forms of business-higher education collaboration aimed at preparing not compliant workers, but critical thinkers, capable of leading New England through future economic and civic storms. There is certainly enough expertise in both sectors to make a better region. Now to harness it.

"Books" will be back in the spring.

*John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.*