

Beyond the Research Park

By John L. Gann, Jr.

DIVERSIFYING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN COLLEGE TOWNS

Changes affecting higher education are likely to challenge the unusual economic strength of the nation's college towns. And mixed past results together with increased competition disfavor exclusive reliance on research parks for off-campus job creation. But college communities can add to their successes as a Place to Learn and a Place to Research by more fully developing and marketing their advantages as a Place to Visit and a Place to Live. They can expand their roles as visitor destinations for business meetings, family vacations, spectator sports weekends, and domestic medical and wellness tourism. And the emotional significance of their role as a Third Lifetime Place for the baby boomers and subsequent generations can make them competitive as long-term residential choices for knowledge workers and retirees, as can their unusual advantages as settings for a rich and fulfilling life.

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*The Power of
Knowledge and Leadership*

beyond the research park

By John L. Gann, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

For decades the economically bullet-proof locale in this country has been the college town.

Because of massive and growing demand for higher education and its support by parents, government, philanthropy, and student loans, universities and college town businesses depending on them have done well even in economic slumps. So few college towns have seen much need for developing other mainstays for their economies.

After more than a half-century of burgeoning growth that started after WWII, mass-market higher education is now a mature industry. And there are now signs of vulnerability in the traditional economic models for both colleges and their communities. But there also appear to be new opportunities for college towns not only to hold their own but to become economically even stronger.

Economic Challenges Facing College Towns

The 12 percent drop in giving to higher education for fiscal year 2009 was the worst in 53 years¹. This was on top of an average 2009 decline of 18.7 percent in the value of universities' endowments². Support of state universities from state capitols has been dwindling for years.

Between 1990 and 2008, college tuition and fees rose 248 percent above inflation, more than any other component of the Consumer Price Index³. Loan debt per graduate in 2008 averaged \$23,300⁴. But says higher education author Anya Kamenetz,



Photo credit: Gann Associates.

The concept of college towns as exclusively places for young people and strictly for a four-year stay may become obsolete given 21st century changes in higher education. This is Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio.

"If you look at median incomes by education since 1970, there's no increasing return to a college degree to go with the increased cost⁵."

A December, 2009, survey found 60 percent of Americans think colleges care more about their finances than about educating students⁶. Last year 53 percent of college students said they were willing to borrow to support their education, a precipitous drop from 67 percent the year before⁷. More colleges are offering three-year programs that cut student time in college towns by 25 percent. And

John L. Gann, Jr., is president of Gann Associates. He is the author of *How to Evaluate (and Improve) Your Community's Marketing*, published by the International City/County Management Association. (citykid@uwalumni.com)

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with a growing number of institutions now offering both courses and degrees online, college towns are no longer the only places for either higher learning or credentialing.

Because higher education is likely to have to change to meet these challenges, college towns might do well to concern themselves more with economic development. But in the past when they have done so at all, the interest has usually taken a single form: the university-affiliated research park.

The Research Park Formula

In 1980, there were 20 university-related research parks in North America. By 2007, the numbers had swelled to 174. Over ten years ago one park director referenced “over ambitious development plans” for research parks in a “now somewhat bloated market⁸.”

More recently, Peter B. Calkins of developer Forest City Enterprises confirmed that “Every city and state with a university wants to jump on this bandwagon. Not all are well-conceived.” And jumping on the same bandwagon are places around the globe. Together, China and India award twice as many higher degrees in engineering and computer science as we do, and their holders work for a lot less money. The Internet, video teleconferencing, and other technology now make physical proximity much less of a requisite for researchers to collaborate.

Blake Gumprecht, chair of the University of New Hampshire Department of Geography, studied research park efforts in college towns and came away dismayed at the lack of success. He cited difficulties in recruiting workers as tech companies grow, remoteness from sources of venture capital, and a lack of understanding of and political hostility to business he finds peculiar to college communities¹⁰.

Results of a survey for the Association of University Research Parks nonetheless claimed significant accomplishments for these efforts. But they also acknowledged heavy competition among research parks being built here and internationally. And they confirmed Gumprecht’s warnings about college towns’ ability to access capital and attract and retain workers and the problematic differences between the objectives of academia and those of business¹¹.

So even to fully sustain tech, single-purpose economic development plans dealing only with research operations may not be enough. “It is a given that other complementary strategies for community economic development must also be pursued in conjunction with a [research] park,” advises Eileen Walker, CEO of the Association of University Research Parks, “to make both the community and the park itself as successful as possible.”

Photo credit: Gann Associates.



Research parks have been a popular economic development strategy in university towns, but experts have warned that in a crowded market not all can succeed.



Photo credit: Gann Associates

The lakeshore terrace at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Memorial Union is the kind of almost resort-like, high-amenity gathering place that can give college towns special appeal as places to live or visit.

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But perhaps the most limiting factor for the research park strategy is that at best it works only for towns with large research universities and not for the much larger number of communities hosting smaller institutions.

Benefits to College Towns

Diversifying beyond traditional education and research functions may accordingly be advantageous to multiple stakeholders in college towns.

1. The college

A college in an economically diversified college town can benefit from visibility to more prospective students, parents, alumni, and investors. That can mean a better quality student body and more successful fund raising. And it can lead to greater local political support for the college as a wider range of unaffiliated residents and businesspeople enjoy benefits from the presence of the institution.

The college can also make more efficient and greater revenue-producing use of its physical plant, especially during summer and break periods. With the funding crisis that hit colleges hard beginning in 2008, colleges must find new sources of revenue. No factory, office, or store operating only nine months out of the year would ever imagine it could not do better financially.

2. Local government

Local government tax bases that suffer from the exemption of high-value college property can be strengthened. This can mean less of the tension between municipal and college administrations that was famously dramatized recently by a mayoral proposal in Pittsburgh to impose a city tax on tuition.

3. The business community

The local business community can benefit not only from a larger population and less dependence on a single industry but also from less seasonality in its trade. Like vacation areas, college towns are unique in providing stores, rental housing, entertainment, and services that are intensively used only part of the year.

4. Students

Students desiring to stay in town after graduation benefit from more non-academic jobs locally, the shortage of which forces college towns every year to expel their best and brightest. And while they're still in school, more and better-paying part-time jobs could help students pay the increasingly high cost of their educations.

New Place Roles

Many college communities have been single-purpose company towns, making them potentially as vulnerable as towns built around steel or auto plants proved to be. Fortunately, their special nature offers other economic opportunities.

There are four place roles for college towns that can be sources of economic benefit:

1. A Place to Learn
2. A Place to Research
3. A Place to Visit
4. A Place to Live.

The first two roles assume the important economic asset is knowledge translated into formal pre-career instruction or into research findings. But this concept may now be too limiting. New opportunities may lie in the college town as a place to visit and a place to live.

A PLACE TO VISIT

College towns can play multiple roles as A Place to Visit. They can function as A Place to Meet, A Place to Vacation, A Place for Sports and Entertainment, and A Place to Heal.

A Place to Meet

College towns have always hosted scholarly gatherings, but now campuses are branching out to non-academic meetings.

Prompting this extension has been the downturn that compelled companies to economize in their meeting planning¹². Colleges and universities are well-endowed with facilities – seminar rooms, lecture halls, and arenas and stadiums – able to accommodate gatherings of different sizes in addition to lodging and food service facilities. Their smaller towns offer less costly off-campus lodging,

restaurants, and entertainment than popular convention cities. And the austerity once associated with their meeting spaces, recreation facilities, and residential complexes has been dispelled by more luxurious accommodations as colleges have competed to attract the best students.

The depressed economy, moreover, has made companies also sensitive to the appearance to the public and to legislators of holding meetings at luxury resorts in glamorous sun-and-fun locales. Even good-time Las Vegas has incongruously rebranded itself as a no-nonsense choice for serious business meetings. There may be no conference venue appearing more sober and unostentatious than a university campus. On-campus hotel conference centers are already found at Ohio State, Georgia Tech, and other schools.

Campus towns do have a number of drawbacks for meetings relating to location, parking, capacity for large events, and free-hours attractions. Some conference planners will always prefer the advantages of traditional destinations. But others wanting to cut costs or offer attendees a different experience may find the college town an appealing venue.



Photo credit: Gann Associates.

The youthful vibe in college towns can be a tonic for retirees and a stark contrast with age-restricted retirement communities. This is The Commons in Ithaca, New York.

A Place to Vacation

The hospitality industry is beginning to see advantages in combining vacation with education, especially for families. Upscale hotels and resorts including the Ritz-Carlton, Hyatt, and Rosewood chains offer summer educational programs to both occupy youngsters while parents relax and to give them a competitive edge when they go back to school¹³.

Family trade can help make up for the falloff in business travel occasioned by the economic downturn. Educational offerings attract affluent parents with aspirations for their youngsters. Many parents travel with their children these days, and families tend to stay longer and spend more.

This activity is a natural for college towns. Unlike at resorts, educational experiences are built-in as a special-

ization rather than having to be added on as a sideline. Learning about nature at Hyatt doesn't expose a high schooler to a prospective campus choice nor bring him or her advantageously to the attention of important faculty. Some schools already sponsor summer camp experiences for youngsters. Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, offers a Sports School for teens and pre-teens. For all but freshman high school students, the campus offers three- and six-week college courses for credit as well as special one-week engineering academies.

Ithaca has already made its mark as a vacation destination. It was included in *Money* magazine's "Best places to vacation" list in April, 2002. *Travel & Leisure* magazine named it one of the top ten of its 100 Great Escapes. And in 2008 the Adventure Travel Trade Association named it a top 10 global travel destination.

With a number of former college students in the population that is larger than ever before and continues to grow, such recreational-educational programs might well be extended to parents and adults without young children as well. College Days 2010 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison offered a three-day "education vacation" bringing



Photo credit: Garn Associates

More and more enterprises benefit from associating themselves with sports, but few have as strong a tie as colleges do. This "sports" eatery is appropriately near the Penn State campus in State College.

adults the complete undergraduate redux experience. Included were dormitory accommodations, dining hall food, and lectures and tours relating to a variety of disciplines.

Largely empty of students, college towns can be relaxing places just when summer vacation hubs are becoming crowded. Their hotel rooms, going begging during sleepy summer months, are less costly than in resort towns. And the sophisticated dining spots, book stores, and shops geared for demanding faculty and student populations and excellent college athletic, recreational and other facilities are still there even when their usual customers aren't. Some smaller institutions like Hope College and College of the Atlantic have rented

dorm rooms to non-student vacationers during summer months. And having attracted international students, many college towns have become diverse places with ethnic restaurants and international cultural events that can make them even more interesting to visit.

A Place for Sports and Entertainment

Sports are a prominent part of our economy. Today we have sports bars, sports channels like ESPN, and sporting goods superstores anchoring our malls. Season tickets and team-branded apparel and other merchandise sell well.

Local governments have enthusiastically built new stadiums, and corporations have just as eagerly paid well to put their names on them. Cities now vie to be chosen as Olympics or Super Bowl sites. Indianapolis has made itself into a sports center as an explicit economic development strategy.

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College towns are exceptionally well-positioned to take even greater advantage of the economic payoff from sports. College athletics rival professional sports in popularity. Universities have already-built stadiums and athletic fields. Varsity games are played in cities too small to support major league baseball, NBA, NFL, or NHL teams.

College teams are now even spurring condominium developments for alumni coming in for football weekends but unable to find scarce hotel rooms or unhappy with their high prices. Condos allow ticket holders to spend the entire weekend (a plus for the local economy) while the team shares a percentage of the sales. Football weekend condos serve the University of Georgia, Kansas State, the University of Kentucky, and Louisiana State, among other institutions.

And of course, it's not just the game. Football weekends also mean getting together with old college friends for pre- and post-game tailgating activity. Nor need the action be confined to game days or even the season. The National College Football Hall of Fame – open year-round – is located in South Bend, Indiana, home of the quintessential college team, Notre Dame's Fighting Irish. UNC's Chapel Hill, North Carolina, hosts the Carolina Basketball Museum.

Other entertainment both on- and off-campus can draw visitors to college towns. Campus departments produce dramatic performances and concerts open to the public, and a large population of young people assures an ample provision of popular entertainment as well. These events are, however, seldom marketed beyond the local area.

A Place to Heal

As A Place to Visit, college towns might also carve out a role as A Place to Heal. Health care, 16 percent of the national economy, has enormous economic development potential. College towns can be pre-eminent health centers as well as knowledge centers. The market for health is vastly greater even than the massive market for higher education and is becoming more so as the huge baby boom cohort that swelled our campuses decades ago reaches old age.

Domestic Medical Tourism

In recent years, both insured and uninsured patients needing major medical work have been having it done overseas. There, costs can be a fraction of those in this country, care is often of high quality, and patients are treated as preferred customers. Six million are expected to be medical tourists this year, eight times the number just three years ago¹⁴.

Two of the factors in both the low cost and high quality of medical tourist care are a scale and super-specialization seldom seen on our own shores. At the 1,000-bed Narayana Hrudalaya Hospital in Bangalore, for example, open-heart surgery is billed at an average of \$2,000, one-twentieth to one-fiftieth the tab in the U.S. Massive volume for particular procedures (600 heart operations a week at Narayana) allows surgeons to specialize, equipment and facilities to be used more intensively, and supplies' costs to be cut through volume purchasing¹⁵.

And it's not just low-cost labor. Better management, specialization, and volume account for much of the success. Uwe Reinhart, Princeton health care economist, says foreign competition "has the potential of doing to the U.S. health care system what the Japanese auto industry did to American car-makers¹⁶." But elements of the competitiveness of overseas care can be applied over here as well, just as Detroit learned to build better cars from Honda and Toyota.

Towns with university schools or departments of medicine, dentistry, psychology, nursing, pharmacy, public health, veterinary medicine, athletics, or nutrition may be especially well-positioned to do this. These schools and associated hospitals and clinical practices can be more open to innovation than other providers. They can use their knowledge and cutting-edge research to develop efficiency and exceptional proficiency in par-

ticular therapies and procedures, thereby becoming able to draw patients from all over. And they can avoid the downsides of international medical tourism. Campus business schools can help with management innovations to improve performance and reduce costs.

Patients and their families visiting college towns for specialty medical services can mean more business and jobs not only for health workers but also for other local businesses. Depending on their condition, they may be able to spend recuperation time visiting and spending money at the same places as other tourists. And trips for health care expose more people to localities they might later find appealing destinations for other purposes.

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Photo credit: Gann Associates.

The populations of college towns and neighborhoods support cultural events that make them stimulating places to live in or visit. The 57th Street Art Fair is held annually a stone's throw from the University of Chicago campus.

Health Innovation

Innovative approaches to health – both treatment and prevention and both conventional and alternative – are more commonly found at universities than elsewhere. Both the well who seek to be healthier and the ailing for whom standard therapies haven't worked may seek to visit the sources of such innovation.

Dr. Andrew Weil, nationally-known author and advocate of a combination of orthodox and alternative approaches he calls integrative medicine, teaches and researches at the University of Arizona College of Medicine. Mind-body medical analyst and author Dr. Kenneth R. Pelletier directs a unit at the same college.

Dr. Dean Ornish, clinical professor of medicine at the University of California-San Francisco, has shown that a low-fat diet can reverse heart disease. And Dr. T. Colin Campbell, professor emeritus at Cornell University, headed a study of the salutary effects on health of the

diet of the rural Chinese. Other breakthrough findings on nutrition have come out of state universities' schools of agriculture and human ecology.

Such innovators and their teachings and practice might with development and marketing turn university towns into destinations for the ill seeking leading edge expertise. They could also appeal to well people seeking to preserve or improve their health or appearance, lose weight, boost fitness, pursue sports training, or just better enjoy life. Consultations with national experts, adult instruction, clinics, wellness regimens, or weight loss treatments can add new dimensions to vacations or weekends.

A Healthy Leisure Environment

The essence of the vacation or holiday weekend is a time to refresh and replenish mind and body. That may best happen in a special place that, being more than just a change of scene, actively supports such restoration.

Much like resorts, many colleges and universities are found in quiet rural areas. But unlike popular vacation locales, in many college towns the local ethic is greener, tourists are fewer, and the pace of activity more relaxed.



Photo credit: Garn Associates.

Good walking environments that promote fitness and weight control are hard to find in contemporary suburbs but not on college campuses or in their environs. This is Michigan State University in East Lansing.

Penn State University in State College, for example, is nestled in mountains of north central Pennsylvania that lack the crowds of the state's resort-oriented Poconos to the east. Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, treats students and visitors to hills, waterfalls, gorges, stunning views, and the south end of a 38-mile-long lake not found in the Catskill Mountain tourist hub a hundred miles away.

Health food stores, organic produce, vegetarian and ethnic restaurants, and farmers markets are more available in college towns than in most vacation spots. College towns are more likely to boast cycling, fitness, and jogging trails. Colleges have facilities for participation sports and fitness, and their communities commonly offer classes in self-help techniques like yoga and meditation. According to the International Spa Association,

health-oriented spas are a \$10 billion business and have replaced golf as the most popular leisure activity at meetings and corporate events.

"Green" lifestyle enhancements, including earth-friendly vacation trips, are becoming big business. College town environments can offer a destination that reflects environmental values and supports recharging physical and mental batteries. And they're typically less crowded, costly, and commercialized than resort and tourist venues.

A PLACE TO LIVE

The idea of the college town as A Place to Live reflects the broader choice of a residential location that transportation and technology are giving us. It also affirms the idea that human capital is the ultimate economic resource. The number and kind of people working, earning, spending, and supporting institutions locally is the real wealth of any community.

The Third Lifetime Place

According to sociologist Ray Oldenburg, we all need a Third Place in our daily lives: a comfortable spot of refuge – tavern, lodge, coffee house, or country club – that is neither home, our First Place, nor workplace, our Second¹⁷.

Over the course of a lifetime, there are typically also three places of significance that might be called Lifetime Places. The First Lifetime Place is the home town, the place where you grew up. The Second Lifetime Place is where you lived for the better part of your adult life. Like Oldenburg's Third Place, the Third Lifetime Place (TLP) is a place not associated with life's regular responsibilities but that has served as a temporary respite from them¹⁸.

In the past for many families the TLP has been the regular vacation locale – the site of the revealingly-named "second home" or of the resort they came back to year after year. This TLP was emotionally significant enough to exclude the many competing vacation destinations and, for many, to eventually become the retirement locale as well.

But starting after WWII and growing phenomenally since, the important TLP in many of our lives has been not the vacation spot but the college town. There are likely more Americans alive today who have spent part of their lives in such communities than ever before in history.

The College Town TLP

Like the vacation retreat, the college town is associated with freedom from job responsibilities and with good times in a beautiful setting. Both are typically places for meeting and associating with interesting people from other places. But in emotional significance that spot in the mountains or on the shore doesn't compare with the college town.

The college town TLP was a place for living year-round (except summers) rather than a couple of weeks a year. For four or more years, it was more of a home

than home was. And it is the place associated with some of life's most meaningful and fondly remembered years. The college years were a time of transition from childhood dependency to adult independence. A relatively carefree place of youthful exuberance, it reflects a time when we did things we'd never do again and so created memories unlike any others.

And the college town was a place of achievement, where one's abilities were developed and recognized with academic or athletic honors. Ending a vacation never gave the ego boost that completing college did. And it was a place where life directions were set in work and nonwork interests, sometimes in the choice of a lifetime partner. It was a place where we made friends that may have lasted for decades. Vacation areas don't have alumni associations or reunions.

Customers' emotional involvement is known to be a competitive advantage in business success, and it can also be potent in economic development. Former students' attachment to the college towns of their youth can be used advantageously for purposes other than attracting alumni financial support and selling football tickets.

Associated with pleasurable if fleeting times, vacation-land TLPs like those in Florida have often had the edge as a choice of a new place to live full-time--whether in retirement, in changing jobs, or in starting a business. And transportation and technology promise to give more people that choice than in the past.

Some "knowledge workers" and telecommuters with loosened physical ties to traditional work locales have made their homes in beautiful but isolated vacation ar-

eas. But not set up for many year-round workers, such locales have limitations in their ability to support such lifestyles. Having always been both preserves of knowledge and homes for hundreds or thousands of demanding outsiders year round, college towns don't face the same constraints. They can be delightful and productive places to live and work for those who are neither students nor professors. Blake Gumprecht notes the phenomenon of city workers choosing long commutes in order to live in outlying college towns rather than close-in suburban subdivisions¹⁹.

An example may again be Cornell's Ithaca, New York. The city was ranked as the number one green commuter city in September, 2008, by *AARP Magazine*. It placed second in *Country Home* magazine's "Best Green Places to Live" in April, 2007. The following April, its EcoVillage made *Forbes* magazine's top eight "ecotopias." The city was also named one of the "12 Hippest Hometowns for Vegetarians" by *VegNews* magazine in July/August, 2006. And *Organic Style* found it the "best healthy city in the Northeast" in its September-October, 2003, issue.

A Place to Retire

The baby boom generation made higher education big business as they flocked to the campuses in the 1960s and 1970s. The next boom industry they will create will be retirement.

Retirement will be the next big thing in our economy not only because of the massive size of this generation but also because boomers' retirements are apt to be the lengthiest ever. Their retirement locale is likely to amount to a commitment of 20 to 30 years, almost as long as their working life. And rather than fading away, boomers will probably enjoy the most active retirements ever.

Aware of these prospects, states seeking economic growth like Alabama, Arkansas, Utah, and the Carolinas are challenging the pre-eminence of Florida by courting retirees with marketing programs. But a fourth characteristic of the 78 million prospective boomer retirees offers special opportunity to college towns: fully 57 percent of this generation went to college.

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Photo credit: Gann Associates.



As the marquee of an old movie house near the University of Iowa campus in Iowa City suggests, university towns are often rich with educational and entertainment opportunities non-students can enjoy as well.

Developers, often working in conjunction with universities, are already catching on, building near-campus retirement destinations around Dartmouth, the University of Michigan, Stanford, Iowa State, Oberlin, Notre Dame, and other institutions. Campus Continuum, one such developer, surveyed people of retirement age and found 58 percent expressing interest in retiring in or near a small college campus²⁰.

Localities see retirees as economic assets because they often buy expensive homes and spend pension and Social Security checks locally but neither compete with younger workers for jobs nor add youngsters to the public schools.

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Throughout their lives, boomers have been trend-setters. Never content to drive “their father’s Oldsmobile,” they are unlikely to be as partial as dad was to a traditional sun, golf, and bingo retirement lifestyle. And a good college town can offer much more in a number of ways.

1. Retiring in a college town can mean being close to college-age grandchildren. Grandparents often have a special relationship with grandkids that even the parents don’t have.
2. Retired alumni back in town can strengthen their ties with the alma mater. Reconnecting with youthful pleasure and achievement can be uniquely satisfying to alums as well as financially advantageous to the college. Retirees are no longer spending on children, often have substantial assets, and are good prospects for donations and bequests. And college town retirees can best see, and even benefit directly from, where their gift money is going.
3. Seniors – alums and non-alums alike – in many college towns enjoy a unique perk. They can go back to school and audit regular college classes free or for greatly reduced tuition. Research has confirmed the value of later-year intellectual stimulation in fore-stalling cognitive decline. There may be no more pleasurable way to achieve that than regular association with scholars and bright young people.

WHAT ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS CAN DO

In localities without a research park to administer or any ambitions for one, the idea of a college town economic developer or economic development consultant may seem just a bit oxymoronic. It shouldn’t. There are benefits to broadening even a college town’s economic base, and there are things economic developers can do to that end.

Resourceful economic developers can find the non-obvious higher-hanging fruit that college-bred economic security has left unpicked. One good place to look is on campus. Academia can be a world unto itself, but enterprising economic developers can penetrate the sheepskin curtain by talking (and listening) to college leaders, going beyond the community relations office. Reading the alumni magazine and the campus newspaper, going to the game and to homecoming, connecting with B-school students, and interfacing

with the college’s development people can pay off with ideas. Just because tenured professors may not be primarily concerned with creating off-campus commercial value doesn’t mean it can’t be found. You seldom find what you’re not looking for.

College town politics can be a challenge, being diffident about if not hostile to business, development, and growth. In college towns, economic development advocates had better be good persuaders. And because college towns are often small, little-known, and out of the way, economic developers may need to enhance their visibility with strong marketing efforts.

College towns need more than literal or figurative “smokestack chasers.” Of course, no one in college towns wants actual smokestacks. But just as trying to import industrial plants hasn’t been the economic development answer for every community, a single-minded quest for the scientific

“smokestacks” of research laboratories can also fall short due both to its narrow focus and to the intense competition that the latest well-publicized tech-of-the-month usually attracts. In college towns, economic developers do well to be entrepreneurial, turning over every rock to find not-so-usual ways to create jobs and grow tax revenues.

Perhaps most significantly, in college towns there can be a unique opportunity to apply intelligence and discerning analysis, the local stock in trade, to economic development by harnessing campus brainpower on official commissions or advisory committees. Ineffective practices often survive and multiply elsewhere as places mindlessly copy other places. But in college towns, prescriptive formulas can be put under the microscope both before adoption and after an initial trial and discarded if they don’t measure up. That might not be a bad thing to do in other kinds of communities as well.

Students who give new meaning to the term “senior class” can audit classes at Princeton, Penn State, the University of Pennsylvania, and Boston University. Classes are gratis at the University of Georgia in Athens for the 62-plus crowd, while Brunswick, Maine, retirees have their choice of audits at three different colleges. Free instruction is sometimes a perk coming with the retirement residence. Retired alums and emeriti of the University of Michigan living at University Commons condominiums are free to resume their studies on campus. Not so free, however, are retirees living in Lasell Village in Newton, Massachusetts. As a condition of their residency, they are required to enroll in a minimum number of courses every year at affiliated Lasell College, writing papers and submitting to quizzes just like the undergrads.

4. College towns are geared to the lifestyles of students, which counterintuitively have much in common with those of many seniors. Singles or couples without dependent children, working part-time or not at all, free from career and suburban social status strivings, seeking often to get by on limited budgets yet having time and taste for entertainment and recreation: are we talking about students or retirees?

College towns have small, affordable rental housing units, low-cost eating places, inexpensive entertainment, and public transportation for those who don't drive. They can work as well at age 71 as at age 21.

5. College town traditions of social activism yield unusually rich opportunities for volunteer pursuits. These can be perfect for retirees wanting to stay active and feel needed without the burdens of a job. Social idealism having been part of the experience of boomers who were in college in the '60s, late-life involvement in causes can serve to rekindle youthful fires.
6. The least tangible benefit of college town retirement may also be the most pleasurable. Life in a college town can be youth serum.

College town traditions of social activism yield unusually rich opportunities for volunteer pursuits. These can be perfect for retirees wanting to stay active and feel needed without the burdens of a job. Social idealism having been part of the experience of boomers who were in college in the '60s, late-life involvement in causes can serve to rekindle youthful fires.



Photo credit: Garn Associates.

Corporate “campuses” intended as agreeable environments for businesses’ employees seldom offer the beauty of the sites of older colleges and universities, such as that of Northern Illinois University in DeKalb.

In traditional age-restricted retirement developments, residents see and associate with age and infirmity. Daily life is an incessant reminder of the old and the declining. Even seniors who remain in the old homestead often see the population of the neighborhood age with them. What we see and experience every day affects both our outlook and, some think, even our physical functioning.

College towns are by contrast disproportionately young places. Walk their streets or visit their parks or restaurants and you are surrounded by active, vigorous, laughing young people enjoying life rather than waiting languidly for its end. Alums were once like them, and living in a college town they can feel that way again.

7. Seniors seeking traditional retirement desiderata can also find them in college towns. There are excellent golf courses in many such communities. Austin, Ann Arbor, Madison, Fort Collins, and other university cities offer a choice of well-regarded fairways. And towns with medical schools tend to have outstanding health care facilities.

CONCLUSION

With electronic technology and increasing competition making their stock in trade of knowledge, organized instruction, and even formal credentialing available almost anywhere, college towns will need a new economic strategy. A good model may be that of Starbucks.

Coffee was a commodity product available almost everywhere until Starbucks changed the rules of the game. Part of what made the company successful was selling the point of sale itself as a place and an experience. Starbucks became a comfortable Oldenburg Third Place refuge and not just a caffeine fix that can be procured from any drive-through or supermarket shelf.

College towns may now similarly have to sell themselves as distinctive Third Lifetime Places to live in or just special places to visit, not only for the acquisition of knowledge or credentials but also for other purposes.

But this strategy will entail marketing college towns in ways few have done heretofore. And there are obstacles

posed by academic culture and college town politics to be overcome in launching more comprehensive economic development efforts. But the potential economic payoff for places with a future that is apt to be very different from their past is likely to be worth many times the new investment that will take. ☺

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