

Economic Development of Downtown Centers:

Fostering University-Community Relations to Encourage Local Revitalization

A research proposal

by

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INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a proposal to eliminate the negative atmosphere that can often exist in college towns. By bridging the gap between the local University and the surrounding community, economic development will result. I approached this unique relationship focusing primarily revitalization of the city's downtown.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

The American city, once a social and economic hub, now plays only a marginal role in a region's development. "For the last three decades, small cities (population of less than 100,000) all across our country have seen continued economic leakage from downtown to outlying edge locations ... downtowns have suffered the loss of retail and other business activities to sites in shopping centers and commercial strips" (UW - Extension). As cities decline and face increasing neglect, the reasons to come downtown consequently diminish.

Currently, the United States suffers nationally from a struggling economy while individual locations face declining infrastructures. To reverse this trend, and to foster economic growth, a city relies on talented individuals to bring a unique perspective and resource to the city to foster in its development - "Human creativity is the ultimate economic resource". Such individuals produce innovative technology, increasing productivity, and thus raising standards of living (Florida, "Rise" xiii).

Universities and colleges have been established, on varying levels, as magnets for some of those very same intelligent, creative individuals that Florida is referring to. For the 2007-2008 school year, it was projected that 18 million students would register to attend college in the U.S. this fall, a number that has increased by about 5 million in the past 20 years¹. Additionally, the younger student population often enrolls in schools that are located in a city or town other than the one they grew up in; this includes enrollment in state universities.

Focusing specifically on Binghamton University as a generator of educated people can be one dynamic solution to attracting a creative class to the Greater Binghamton Area. As a college town, Binghamton, N.Y., is home to thousands of creative individuals that are preparing for the future. This future, students hope, involves finding a career. However, today's students are seeking more than just jobs - They want to "live the life". This new generation will tend to select their jobs based on location and the location's amenities, because more often, with the growth of the Web, a job can be done from almost anywhere. Favored amenities include "participatory recreation ... indigenous street-level culture ... (a) blend of cafés, sidewalk musicians, and small galleries and bistros" (Florida, "Rise" 166). My research focuses on the "street-level" culture that Florida refers to, which includes "coffee shops, restaurants and bars, some which offer performance or exhibits" to enhance downtown activity and participation by its residents (183).

¹ Source: Upcoming *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2008*

APPLICATION TO BINGHAMTON

I. Utilizing the student population

Binghamton University, the “premier public university of the Northeast”, attracts the creative individuals that Florida calls for to facilitate economic growth, keeping in mind that the university is just an example of an institution that stimulates creative development. The college campus is a center for diversity, attracting students of multiple races and cultures, both nationally and internationally.

Though 55 percent of the campus population at Binghamton University is Caucasian, the university focuses on continuously diversifying its student population: 19 percent of students are Asian, 10 percent Hispanic, 7 percent are Black/non-Hispanic, and 9 percent are international². Florida argues that the idea of attracting talented, innovative individuals is not a new concept; but, “with the decline of physical constraints on cities and communities in recent decades, creativity has become *the* driving force in the growth and development of cities, regions, and nations” (“Cities” 1).

First-year students arrive on campus overwhelmed but open-minded. These students are required by the University to live in the on-campus dormitories, and are not allowed vehicles, which tends to seclude them from life outside of the campus walls. Binghamton University, a State University of New York, sees only 6 percent of first-year students come from Broome and Tioga Counties. The general student population that is settling in a new community, therefore, has relatively little knowledge about what lies beyond the campus and surrounding Vestal Parkway.

The university draws close to 12,000 undergraduate students and 3,000 graduate students, both numbers that are increasing each year². The City of Binghamton, not including the university population, is home to 47,380 people, and has suffered a negative percent change in population from 1990 to 2000³.

Long-term goals for the City are essential to revitalization, but it is the short-term goals that will build towards a better future. During the four years that a student attends school, they must be encouraged to have an awareness of the community, the community’s unique character, and the benefits that it can offer to a young professional. As more people come downtown, there will be increasing demands for its development. Additionally, money spent will spur economic revitalization that will allow such development to take place. To foster university-community relationships, the University must take the time to educate its students – this can be affectively handled in sectors like public relations, the campus paper and student affairs. Currently, the Off Campus College, a group that integrates students into the community, only promotes thirteen businesses and organizations in the community “things to do” section. There is not one restaurant that is featured. This could be the fault of the community for not purchasing advertising space; but to me, there needs to be a better system to create awareness for what goes on outside of campus.

² Statistics provided by Binghamton University’s “Facts & Figures” link:
<<http://www.binghamton.edu/home/about/facts.html>>

²

³ Data derived from Population Estimates, 2000 Census of Population and Housing

a. Guiding students downtown

In order to draw college students into the downtown, I have implemented a plan to develop a guide to the City's local restaurants. Many newspapers across the United States, as well as right here in Binghamton at the Press and Sun-Bulletin, have created "guides" to their area. The guides took a variety of approaches to offer a community dining-finder tool, including reviews, "best-of" lists, and basic searches with a simple breakdown and analysis of a restaurant.

Similar guides have also been implemented into college newspapers; however, they are done on a smaller scale as these organizations have a smaller financial budget. Campus papers that have offered this tool used a platform called the College Publisher. It has recently joined with the New Digital Group to offer additional functions, including a restaurant guide.

Campus papers have approached restaurant guide in different ways: The Long Island Restaurant Guide for the Hofstra Chronicle chose to print an article to discuss just a few restaurants; the Daily Trojan for the University of Southern California prints a one-page weekly guide that lists places by category and submits a map of the area to pinpoint each location (please visit <www.dailytrojan.com/dining> to view example). Binghamton obviously has a much smaller database of restaurants than Southern California; therefore, this can be appropriated for Binghamton University. The Pipe Dream, BU's campus paper, need only create a yearly guide, but following similar organization.

To encourage participation in Binghamton's downtown, destinations can be chosen based on their location within the downtown center. The list will identify restaurants by type – for example, Italian restaurants, cafés and coffee shops, bars and grills. As in other campus guides, each restaurant listed should be accompanied by an average price range, supply a basic food list (for example, a particular restaurant might have vegan selections or homemade specialties), and describe the local atmosphere.

As each restaurant or café is defined and distinguished, it creates an opportunity for students to find their own niche. Catherine Glover, hired to research revitalization tactics for the downtown of Mansfield, Ohio, interviewed community members to test her theory that in a small city, local and regional businesses would succeed over large chains. She found that "people of all ages ... wanted local restaurants and pubs where ownership are rooted in the community ... Chains make people feel like strangers in their own town" (Gratz and Mintz, 23).

Her research directly relates to Florida's remarks about the attractiveness of an "indigenous culture" – this culture can not be found in large venues, but the indigenous appeal is because "it grows organically from its surroundings ... and the creators and patrons of the culture live close by" (Florida, "Rise" 182).

Florida says that these venues can be difficult to find. Introducing a compilation of restaurants (some that also have music) eliminates this middle step. Students do not have to be proactive. When they are struggling for a new experience or an escape from the chains, the guide will be accessible to offer suggestions.

The Pipe Dream is currently considering the publication of a restaurant guide to be presented in next year's paper. They hope to allow for around 5,000 copies of a 20-page insert in color, which would be an estimated cost of \$1,000 to \$2,000. By promoting the guide in a widely-read campus publication, students are likely to discover previously

unknown restaurants and entertainment venues. The Pipe Dream will exist as the bridge between the local community and the university.

b. Recommendations

The Pipe Dream can further a community connection, and cover costs, by utilizing advertisements paid for by featured restaurants. Binghamton's downtown restaurants participated in the "Hot Lunch Tours" this year, offering student discounts on Tuesdays at restaurants nearby the University Downtown Center. The tour saw little participation due to a lack of promotion – most students had no idea the tour existed, and it should have encouraged students who take classes on the Vestal Parkway campus to participate as well. A dining guide can integrate discount opportunities like Hot Lunch Tours to entice students to downtown restaurants who are happy to see an influx of new diners.

As newspapers across the nation continue to expand their websites, implement blogging, text and podcasts, so too will college papers. Binghamton University's free press has upgraded their website in the past year. However, it is basically a second copy of the print version. They can utilize the College Publisher to create a restaurant guide with user-review capabilities. The Daily Collegian of California State University in Fresno uses a program facilitated by Community Walk, which allows users to search and comment on restaurants using a map similar to Google maps. Such capabilities are available in city papers, like Long Island's Newsday, where a new food critic visits restaurants and updates a map with reviews and ratings. The Pipe Dream, by creating a more user-friendly website and dining guide, will foster student interaction with the community. Finally, students coming into the community are going to create the "people climate" that Florida speaks of.

b. Analysis Review

The guide will start with restaurants, but if it proves to be a useful tool, the project can be expanded to all other venues, such as music and recreation. A successful city is a city that, in short, offers a variety of unique activities and a diverse atmosphere all in a pedestrian-friendly setting. Therefore, the first phase of the guide should include restaurants within a five-mile radius of the city's center.

Cities of the past relied on the arrival of new companies; this was a development strategy of Binghamton, which experienced a time of prosper with the advent of E.J.'s shoe factory and the IBM industry. However, we cannot rely solely on the attraction and retention of new business, though this does play a role in a city's development. Today, "cities need a *people climate* even more than they need a business climate" ("Rise" 283).

Thus, the University and the community must work together to better promote a community atmosphere. Florida references the 2000 census, which demonstrates that there has been a "resurgence" of cities. Binghamton, N.Y., with the motto "restoring the pride", has been trying to play into this trend and revive the city. Most recently, the City has provided wireless access in the city's core, which encourages the technology-oriented generation to come downtown. As the City works to create a bustling downtown, the university must also contribute. Inviting students Downtown will spur economic

development, bringing “outside” money that is vital to growth. New money is cycled through as commuting students spend money at local attractions. The community will benefit from economic growth, while students enjoy the fruits of a guide’s labor.

II. Community reception

College-towns, as they have come to be known, often experience tension between college students and local residents. This condition may be the result of generational gaps and the stereotypical stigmas that, as a result of society’s need to identify and isolate, define each group. No matter the reason, tensions exist, deterring the city from fully utilizing the part-time addition of thousands of residents.

Florida says that to stimulate downtown revitalization and attract the “creative class” a city must be tolerant of the very diverse community it is hoping to attract. Binghamton, N.Y., has a 17.6% population over the age of 65. The constantly aging community focuses on the aging baby boomers. Florida’s creative class theory, and research obtained by Glover, reveals the types of interests of the rising creative class are similar to what the aging boomers would enjoy – livable, walk-able communities with music, arts and other forms of intellectual stimulation. It is important that students learn to respect the community, but the community must also be educated on the benefits of Binghamton University and its students.

A group of Binghamton University students helped found a student-led economic think tank that allows students to play a role in Binghamton’s economic and community development. The group, called Catalysts for Intellectual Capital 2020, or CIC2020, hopes to retain 20 percent of graduates by the year 2020, but during the interim, works to educate students on the opportunities available right here in the Greater Binghamton Area.

The group has developed a credit-bearing course called the CIC Leadership Institute that enlightens students on the local economy and invites them to correspond with local leaders. More recently, the CIC Career Partnership was launched to match Binghamton students with local mentors. This creates opportunities for students to find internships and future jobs, as well as make networking connections. Likewise, the students aid in the success of the local businesses. The Career Partnership will also instill a greater awareness on campus of these local organizations.

The existence of this group has succeeded in relieving some of the tension that exists between Binghamton students and local residents. However, many of those “relieved” community members are the leaders that are meeting with the CIC 2020 students and directors. Therefore, it is important to expand awareness of students’ positive involvement in their city’s success.

a. Positive press

The second part of my implementation plan reaches the opposite end of the spectrum. I have already addressed creating awareness among students, so now it is important to provide information to the community. The community has been accepting of college students, in my experience; however, students often receive bad press. This is sometimes well-deserved, as it is not uncommon for college students to go overboard when looking to have a good time. The Press and Sun-Bulletin is the local newspaper for

the Binghamton region. The majority of its readers are local residents, not students. Though paper boxes are located on campus, many students choose to read their free, student-published press.

Journalists and their respective papers try to take unbiased stances on most issues, but the fact of the matter is that a newspaper is still a business. It is necessary to the survival of the paper to market to their customers. The Press and Sun-Bulletin has covered both the positive and negative events that occur on campus. On their website, pressconnects.com, there is a messaging system that allows readers to post comments. This is called “story chat”.

Most recently, a number of students organized an anti-war protest for the fifth anniversary of the war in Iraq. The protest got out of hand as students took to Vestal Parkway and barricaded the roadway by walking down the street with a sign stretched across the width. The story chat comments quickly added up, teeming with negative opinions.

Such reactions are bound to occur; combating the negative with more of the positive can only prevent this. I have instituted, with the approval of the Press and Sun-Bulletin, a CIC 2020 column that will educate local readers on the group and its projects. The guest viewpoint will run monthly. The initial article ran on Friday, May 9, 2008. Entitled “BU Students Work to Raise Tier Grades”, the report briefly explained what exactly CIC 2020 is, and what they hope to achieve (**See Appendix**)

According to the Downtown Business and Marketing Analysis, “input and participation from the broader community is important” (University of Wisconsin-Extension). The story chat will allow readers to participate in CIC 2020’s progress. The column will in turn allow CIC 2020 to spread their message. It is not possible to monitor the comments that are received, but by focusing on a positive message, I hope to invite readers to view college students in a different way. These students desire to embrace the community, and hopefully, the column will continue to encourage local leaders and other community members to in turn embrace the University. Likewise, the city restaurant brochure will be the invitation students need to take a step off campus and into the Downtown. As students begin contributing to the city’s economy, the community will feed off the positive, thus giving more strength to the column. The key to success lies in the commitment of both the University and the community.

b. A Better Understanding

The link between a guide and a news column is simple – information. By encouraging students to experience the community, they can begin to feel a part of this community. It is one step towards destroying the Binghamton stigma of a being “local”. For the community, hearing the truth will promote a better understanding of the relationship that exists between the town and the University and just how beneficial this relationship can be.

According to Stringfellow Barr, author of The Republic of Letters: Town and Gown, the most important relationship in a college town is when “two men have a common love of the good”. A business-only relationship will eventually disintegrate, but if both the students and the community love their city, it will develop into a livable and loveable place as organizations like CIC 2020 nurture the bond.

Appendix

Press and Sun-Bulletin Column:

Friday, May 9, 2008

GUEST VIEWPOINTS; BU students work to raise Tier grades

Group wants better ties between campus, community

By **Kelly Haslinger**

This nation prides itself on being a land of opportunity. In American culture, we are always looking to make things better — no matter how luxuriously we live, work, and play. We naturally lean towards progress, constantly improving our existing lifestyles, technological systems, government laws, you name it.

Binghamton is no exception to this trend. But there is one trend Binghamton has seemed not to follow. It is no secret that the national economy is struggling; but in this community, the economy, so I have both heard and experienced, is stable.

I have given up believing that the weather patterns, particularly the clouds and rain, will be scientifically altered. Even if there is no hope in that, there is hope that change can happen. It is up to us, the community, to help initiate and support the change that can be controlled — attracting entrepreneurs, developing the downtown, cleaning up the community, going green, some of the very topics that have been discussed in other small cities.

A group of Binghamton University students is working to initiate some of this change. The Catalysts for Intellectual Capital 2020 (CIC 2020) hopes to highlight the opportunities of the Greater Binghamton region in an effort to increase student retention by the year 2020 and enhance the connections between the university and community.

The student-led economic think-tank explores the positive development that can result from university-community collaborations. It envisions a future where both entities grow together. Change can happen, but it may be that this change comes one building at a time, one student or community member at a time.

One of the primary projects of the group is the CIC (pronounced “kick”) Leadership Institute (CIC-LI), an initiative being administered by the CIC 2020 directorate for the third consecutive year. The CIC class is now a credit-bearing course that meets twice a week.

Community leaders are invited into the classroom every Tuesday at the new University Downtown Center to engage in discussion with students, exposing them to different ideas for potentially enhancing the Greater Binghamton area. Discussion topics range from natural resource development to business attraction and retention.

On Fridays, students venture into the community to visit locations that complement the classroom discussions. Each site contributes in some way to Binghamton’s cultural or economic success. This could mean providing art for public viewing or employing thousands of local workers.

It always comes back to the community. All those involved have one goal in mind: how can the city become a better place for you, for us?

Over the course of the semester, students have the opportunity to meet with key leaders in different sectors, including health care, industry, culture and politics.

In addition to their participation in these workshops, individual members of the CIC-LI perform integrative research projects that explore ways to revitalize the communities and neighborhoods of Binghamton. This year, students have focused specifically on the "Confluence Project," researching development issues for the city in relation to the new University Downtown Center.

The CIC-LI represents just one of many relationships fostered between the university and community. But a mission like that of the Catalysts for Intellectual Capital is only attainable with the support of leaders from both entities. Therefore, the newest initiative, the CIC Career Partnership, intends to utilize community members as mentors to Binghamton University students — yet another effort that will call for support and encouragement.

Mayor Matthew T. Ryan wrote that to "(go) forward, we need partnerships, not partisanship." With spring cleaning around the corner, it will take time to throw away some of the old and fix up some of the new — the same is true with restoring Binghamton. Change does not and will not happen in a day, but with compassion and optimism, together we can stimulate economic progress in our community.

Haslinger is a Binghamton University student and Press & Sun-Bulletin intern.

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