



Creating the College Town

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Abstract.

The divide between Binghamton University and the City of Binghamton has long plagued the region, creating a poor relationship between its citizens and students. However, a positive relationship is not an impossible one to establish and maintain. Ultimately, both entities are working towards the same goal: creating a thriving, safe community. The City of Binghamton has been an industrial town since its inception and Harpur College was founded just as the idea of suburbia was taking its first steps in the United States but the global economy has changed since then. The outsourcing of industries has forced America to refocus on smaller, independent businesses and students have become more interested in attending a college that has a sense of place. It is for this reason that the city should look forward in establishing itself as a college town, not waiting for another industry giant to root itself in the area. College towns are distinctive from other small cities in that they provide a niche culture that is attractive to highly educated, and highly motivated young professionals and retirees. Not only are they a nice place to live, they are also more economically stable than other areas and do not depend on as many changing variables. Instead, they enjoy a constant stream of young people who are willing and able to invest in their community.

Keywords: “college town, place making, incentive plans, economic development”

Binghamton Keywords: “...”

I. INTRODUCTION

College towns, a largely American phenomenon, are communities that are filled with a university population. A college town is “any city where a college or university and the culture it creates exert a dominant influence over the character of the community” (Guprecht). Though the sizes of college towns vary, one thing is certain: having a thriving town is beneficial to both local residents and students in that they provide both economic and social development within the town or city.

Since the City of Binghamton’s establishment in the mid-19th century, it has been considered a manufacturing town. The dependency on major corporations such as Endicott-Johnson, IBM and Lockheed Martin as sources of economic income has created a culture that is dependent on an independent source – the economic state of the United States, but more importantly, a reliance on large national corporations rather than small local enterprises. In today’s economy, relying on large industries to economically support an area is unwise. There are many examples of traditionally industrial towns who suffered at the end of the manufacturing economy, with Detroit, MI being the most obvious example. Research suggests utilizing the talent in universities to boost the economy once again. It is up to the community the university resides in to retain this talent. There are successful communities that have created thriving college towns to retain their talented graduates. By making Binghamton more similar to a college town, as opposed to an industry town, the city will become thriving with not only students, but will also attract young professionals, academia and educated retirees.

A. Importance of a college town

Colleges and universities have realized that having only an impressive academic record and winning sports team may not create a successful environment for attracting students and faculty. The surrounding area of campus has become a major deciding factor in both prospective students and faculty. It is for this reason that some colleges have taken it upon themselves to create college towns by investing in outside areas, buying land, and developing new businesses. The university can “anchor a place and provide it with a sense of identity” (Stout). While cities can become synonymous with the colleges that reside in them, it is important not to stop there. Instead, the cities should build itself up as a way to attract more students. At the end of the day, both the college and the city are working towards the same goal – to create an environment where new students want to live. Therefore, the college and the town are intrinsically combined – they are one in the same. They provide a sense of place for their students.

B. What makes a college town successful?

College towns also have a tendency to avoid economical depressions and low unemployment rates. “College towns ... have a distinct advantage over many other cities: They enjoy a constant stream of graduates, some who stay put and others who return years later -- and each year brings a new crop of students and potential residents to the area” (Evans). The most successful towns are not only education centers, but also hubs that draw people into the city and benefit from a stable, educated, highly skilled work force

The relationship between college degrees and financial success is undeniable. Edward Glaeser, an economics professor at Harvard University, said that as the share of the adult population with college degrees in a city increases by 10%, wages correspondingly rise by about 7.8%. "Apart from weather, human capital has been the best long-run predictor of urban success in the last century," (Glaser). At the same time, college towns are able to stay below the national employment rate, (Figure 1). In March 2011, the national unemployment rate was 9.2 but cities considered college towns were generally much below that, with Ithaca at 4.9 and Charlottesville, VA at 5.2

Figure 1.

City	City Population (2006)	College/ University	Number of Undergraduates	Total	Unemployment Rates (March 2011)
Binghamton, NY	45,217	Binghamton University	11,787	57,004	8.4
Burlington, VT	38,358	University of Vermont	11,593	49,951	4.9
Chapel Hill, NC	49,919	University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill	18,579	68,498	7.1
Ithaca, NY	29,829	Cornell University; Ithaca College	13,935 6,442	50,206	5.4
Davis, CA	60,964	University of California, Davis	24,737	85,701	N/A
Charlottesville, VA	40,315	University of Virginia	15,595	55,910	5.2

College towns not only appeal to undergraduates but to young professionals and retirees. People wish to live in an area that allows for intellectual stimulation. A 2008 New York Times article examined the recent trend of retirees moving to Hanover, NH, the home of Dartmouth College. Though many were alumni of the college, a good number simply chose the area for many of the same reasons as prospective undergraduates – its vibrant nightlife, arts, and a sense of community. Ultimately, college towns should attract not only out of state students but out of state young professionals and retirees to create a diverse population.

Campuses are pedestrian friendly, easily walkable and college towns should be too. The downtown center should be compressed and easy to navigate without the use of a car unlike the sprawl-like nature of many suburban towns.

C. Transportation

Accessible transportation is another important factor of a college town. The inability of freshmen to have a car forces them to be dependent on public transportation. This can serve as a benefit to cities in that by increasing accessibility, you increase the chances of students participating in the local economy. Besides driving cars, buses and bicycles are popular, green modes of transportation preferred by students.

1. Buses

Buses are not only beneficial to students, but it is one of the ways a city can affect the number of students coming to the downtown center. Through its department of transportation, a city can be proactive in encouraging students to participate in the local culture. It can also help to remove any isolation from the city some students may feel.

One of the first instances of a city accommodating the college population was between Ithaca, NY and Cornell University in 1889. Students began to rent houses in Collegetown, an area still present today, though a common complaint among students was its lack of transportation. The city extended a streetcar line in 1893 which ultimately led to businesses created specifically to serve students.

2. Bicycles

Bicycles are another popular mode of transportation for students who are unable to have or afford cars. In fact, one of the first initiatives for bicycle use was by UC Davis. They are believed to be the first city in the world to install bike traffic circles, bike-only left turn lanes and bicycle traffic signals. By 2006, the city had 50 miles of bike lanes and 53 miles of bike paths. In 1999, 19% of Davis citizens walked or biked to work, 43% of Ithacans did the same, while Binghamton had only 6% of residents who did not use a car as transportation.

Figure 2

Town	Enrollment as a percent of population	18-24 year olds	Bachelor degrees or higher	Median family income	Resided elsewhere in 1995	Walked or biked to work
Binghamton	26%	13%	21%	\$36,137	28%	6%
Ithaca	90%	54%	58%	\$42,304	67%	43%
Burlington	33%	25%	42%	\$36,012	45%	18%

Davis	43%	31%	69%	\$74,051	55%	19%
Chapel Hill	51%	37%	74%	\$73,483	61%	18%
Charlottesville	50%	34%	41%	\$45,110	56%	18%

* Research conducted by B. Gumprecht in 1999

D. The City Downtown

Regardless of whether they are independent of a city's downtown or one and the same, two differences distinguish campus-adjacent commercial districts from the business districts of non-college towns: Certain types of businesses are more abundant, and numerous businesses cater primarily to the needs and desires of a college community. (Gumprecht)

Common stores in college towns are coffeehouses, bookstores, pizzerias, ethnic restaurants, Laundromats, bicycle shops, and, of course, a large number of bars per capita. These types of businesses not only suit a college student's lifestyle but draw other people to the area as well, whether they are young professionals or retirees. They are generally open later than normal store hours in order to better serve student's lifestyle.

II. Best Practices

A. Creating a condensed, accessible downtown center

Ithaca has tried to maintain a centralized, traditional downtown to promote tax revenue for the city. Both Ithaca Commons and Collegetown feature pedestrian malls that are easily accessible to students. In 2010, the city created a 10-year package to revitalize the urban core, reduce regional sprawl, reduce our community carbon footprint, bolster tourism, and strengthen the linkages between our institutions of higher education and downtown. To do this, the city has committed to recognize downtown as the community center. They recognize the need for a dense, urban core of mixed-use development, while at the same time reducing automobile usage.

In order to accomplish these goals, Ithaca will add 78,000 square feet of new retail, up to 500 units of urban housing and 200,000 square feet of offices. They will also maintain an ongoing commitment to diversity in downtown programs and policies.

B. Making transportation even easier, decreasing auto traffic

Though Davis has established itself as a bicycle city, as it approached the twenty-first century, the popularity of bicycle transit faces many threats. People just moving in to the city don't necessarily understand or accept the established culture. In order to cope, the city has hired a full-time city bicycle/pedestrian coordinator and established city and campus bicycle advisory committees. They also maintain an earnest effort to take advantage of local, state and federal monies to fund a wide range of facilities development and programmatic improvements. By

creating a working partnership with the university, the city has been able to succeed in not only keeping the bicycle culture that is so loved by its residence but also establishing a better relationship between the two entities.

C. Public/private partnerships

The University of Notre Dame in South Bend, IN had gained a reputation for its lackluster downtown area due to high crime rates. However, in 2008 the university developed a partnership with Kite Realty Group in creating Eddy Street Commons, a development adjacent to the university. The Commons is a mixed-use project composed of retail, residential, hotel and office spaces frequented by both students and locals. Less than a mile from campus, the area encourages students to both leave campus and help the local economy. It also establishes a better relationship between residents and students.

III. Recommendations

In order to become successful as a city, Binghamton must stop viewing itself as a post-industrial town and rebuild itself as one that is more dependent on the college as a source of economical growth. There has grown a culture among residents where they look down upon college students as people who stay for four years and then leave. While the ultimate goal may be for students to stay in the area after graduation, the primary goal should be to make the city a hub frequented by current students. Though it may not be the same students, there is a constant stream of 18- to 24-year-olds that calls Binghamton their home, albeit for a short time.

To do this, there must be an increase in retail, office and residential space within the downtown whether this is through state or federal funding or private partnerships. There should be more of a focus on building up the central downtown area, from North Shore Drive to Lewis Street, between Front Street and Exchange Street, as seen in Figure 3. By centralizing housing and businesses, this will also increase foot traffic among the downtown. Increased foot traffic will not only encourage shopping at local businesses but will allow students and business owners to form positive relationships, decrease crime and overall provide a more friendly atmosphere.

Appendix

Figure 3



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