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The Creative Economy in Maine

by Evan S. Dobelle

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, NEW England's cities have looked with considerable success to the "creative economy" to spark revitalization efforts. The term refers to a host of economic factors, ranging from the role of arts and cultural assets, such as museums and symphony orchestras in local communities, to the rising importance of artistic and creative thinking skills in all kinds of occupations.

This "creative cluster" has gotten much attention lately thanks to researchers like Richard Florida, who have shown that its members are net moneymakers for cities and towns. Painters and gallery owners, writers and booksellers, actors, musicians, theater managers, restaurateurs and chefs attract tourists, renovate old neighborhoods, draw media attention, and create jobs.

Meanwhile the New England Council, the region's oldest business organization, has issued a series of reports documenting this impact regionally, giving us a clear picture of a tremendous, hitherto virtually invisible, economic engine. Among the council's findings: from 1997 to 2001, the number of jobs in the creative cluster of art-related companies grew twice as fast as the New England economy as a whole. As of 2000, that cluster supported 245,000 jobs, or 3.5% of the total jobs in the region. That's a larger share of New England jobs than either of the better-known software or medical technology industries can claim.

A regional perspective, though, can obscure the local character of this model. The creative economy is not a one-size-fits-all economic panacea. In fact, creative economies—their foundations, health, and potential—vary from city to city, town to town. For a state like Maine that encompasses both rural and urban areas, those variations can be enormous. Maine's creative workforce runs the gamut from the more than 20 rural artisans and businesses affiliated under the Maine Highlands Guild, to the nationally respected Portland Stage Company that draws actors from New York City and beyond; from Bath's Chocolate Church Arts Center to "craft communities" such as the H.O.M.E. co-op in Orland. The needs, missions, and interests of these organizations could not be more different from one another, and yet each has a role in the tapestry of Maine's cultural offerings.

The emerging creative economy will help to ensure that Maine does not urbanize haphazardly, without design, and lose the qualities that make it unique. Creative workers gravitate away from sprawl and toward higher-density, more livable communities. In turn, they help those communities "keep it real": their work tends to be rooted where they live, and to reflect and to preserve the local character. By guiding development with an eye toward attracting these workers, cities and towns can avoid the worst excesses of expansion.

Governor John Baldacci recognizes this and has actively promoted research on and support for Maine's creative cluster. A key piece of that research is a report issued this past February by the University of Southern Maine's *Southern Maine Review*. The authors of "The Creative Economy in Maine" take the New England Council's work as a starting point and look at the unique features of Maine's creative workforce (Barringer et al. 2005). They point out that one of the best ways to ensure a strong creative community is to coordinate urban development with colleges and universities. Colleges are anchors for the creative economy. They build museums and theaters, hold concerts and symposia, and generally bring institutional support and structure to a variety of cultural activities. They attract students with disposable income, and provide jobs for faculty and staff.

In fact, higher education is a superb industry in its own right (though I confess I may be professionally biased on the matter). It sells a clean product, the jobs it provides generally pay well, and it contributes mightily to the long-term economic and civic well-being of a community.

Maine's cities have had tremendous success by working with their local campuses. The University of Maine gave downtown Bangor a boost when it built a new art museum there rather than on the main campus in Orono. The museum has hosted a range of exhibits from Persian photography to African-American quilting. In Portland, the downtown renovations spearheaded by the Maine College of Art (MECA) have transformed once-derelect storefronts into a startling showcase of local artistic talent. Those art windows, in turn, have drawn the visitors, restaurants, and businesses that

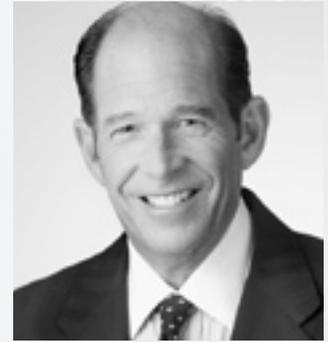
make Portland one of the most satisfying cities for walking in New England.

Of course, higher education also supports the creative economy in the most obvious way: by educating the creators. Art programs are no longer luxuries, and art in its many forms is not the privilege of an elite. As author Daniel Pink argues (Harney 2005), the demand for more creative ideas means that MFAs will become as valuable to companies as MBAs. And the spinoff benefits of artists, art organizations, and arts-related businesses reach all levels of society.

The type of thinking encouraged by artistic study is in demand in all sorts of fields, even those not necessarily considered "creative." Maine's best investment in its future right now is to ensure that the resources at hand—its arts groups, colleges, and entrepreneurs—work together effectively to share that kind of thinking with as many residents as possible. 🐟

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