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Our Universities: College Towns

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Our Universities: College Towns

Tenth in the series, Follow the money

From Boston to Austin and Oxford, Mississippi, to West Lafayette, Indiana, big and small, prosperous or starving, universities are married to communities, for better or worse. When one hurts, both do.

“The relationship is not without tension, but both realize that they are bound together.”

Christopher Taylor, Ann Arbor City Council

One man with a perverse sense of self, driven by disease or the devil, through the most heinous acts imaginable, altered the course of a university and a community. Utilizing position and power, provided by a university that drifted from primary purpose, his crimes are predicted to have a \$50 million negative economic impact on the Penn State surrounding community.

One man? Don't believe it. Rather, a complex combination of community and campus compatriots. State College, Pennsylvania, aka, Happy Valley, is challenged.

In ever-increasing ways, university communities are affected by the interactions of the people that populate university campuses and the towns of which they are a part. The interdependence grows as the university and permanent resident population become nearly equal in number.

This town/gown relationship has been evolving for the past thousand years. The Latin Quarter on the *Left Bank*, at the time, home to the University of Paris -- now Sorbonne University -- benefitted from a steady stream of money from the Catholic Church. It appeared to be a win-win relationship although it was not always a comfortable fit.

Student riots, arrogance by university professors and leadership, and community indifference created challenges. The 1229 riot at the University of Paris, ignited on pre-Lenten Fat Tuesday, closed the institution for two years.

In the 21st century university resources from the church have been replaced by resources from the state. A few decades ago the well began drying up and the resource flow sputtered.

It's bone dry now.

New models for integration of university life in university towns are being created. In the *Arizona Republic* on July 9, 2012, Gary Nelson reports that Mesa, Arizona, is transforming itself from a community of mobile homes for rust-belt retirees to a university town for rust-belt colleges. Wilkes University of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, is

establishing a campus in Mesa, as have Benedictine University of Illinois, and Westminster College of Missouri.

Enlightened civic leadership has opened its doors. Mesa Mayor Scott Smith, shared this view: "We're looking for institutions that have a legacy, which is more than a history." Mayor Smith sounds like an enlightened university president, calling for "a legacy of excellence in providing quality, unique educational opportunities." He wants universities with a strong liberal arts tradition.

The genius of Mayor Smith's vision is to create a community responsive to the needs of students and good universities. This is a view that treats institutions like a market sector to be attracted to a prosperous and desirable geographic setting.

University visionaries for the past two decades have predicted that land-based campuses would become dinosaurs. James Duderstadt, former president of the University of Michigan, was the first university leader that I heard make that proclamation with bravado. I was not sure I believed it at the time but did recognize that the Internet would have a profound impact on the campus and university life.

What I could not fathom was a vision like Mayor Smith has: A post-Internet perspective of the relationship between towns and university campuses. I always thought online education would drive students to study in their bedrooms, in pajamas, eating day-old pizza, gazing at CRT's, LED's or LCD's. But in destination towns populated with branch campuses from around the nation, maybe the world eventually? Never.

Mayor Smith sees the geographic detachment precipitated by the Internet, *a la* the University of Phoenix just down the road, and ubiquitous access to insight and ideas, not as a way to kill campuses, but as a way to treat them as a civic investment rather than an Internet address.

The Mesa method won't work everywhere, but a clear sense of mission and ingenuity will.

Tuition can't be hiked high enough to preserve campus jobs as a means to support local economies. Students, families, and bankers have already emptied their pockets.

Economic development from athletics is fragile: too much humanity in stars, coaches and players. Better to invest in ideas and human potential through academic excellence and the development of critical thinking.

Our universities and communities need a fresh view of themselves, soaked in understanding the primary purpose of campus and community; and it's not entertainment, employment or economic growth, but education.