



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Insights from the Emerging Issues Forum

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I just returned from the Emerging Issues Forum in Raleigh (February 8-9) and am still, as they say, “taking it all in.” The theme this year was creativity and the program was loaded with some of the leading thinkers (and doers) on this topic in the world. It was one of the most intellectually stimulating events I have ever been to and Governor Hunt and Institute for Emerging Issues director Anita Brown-Graham deserve a lot of credit for their leadership in making such an event possible. I want to highlight a few of the big ideas I’ve taken away from the conference that I believe anyone concerned with community and economic development ought to be thinking about.

The first and most dominant theme had to do with the notion that creativity and innovation is the key to our nation’s economic competitiveness moving forward. Many experts made a strong (empirically backed) case for this point: jobs—both physical and analytical—that can be routinized are being or will be outsourced. Therefore, state-side opportunities for competitive advantage lie in jobs that require creative thinking. Daniel Pink uses a metaphor of the brain to explain this point and how “right-brainers will rule the future.” After hearing Pink’s excellent presentation I can tell you that his books *A Whole New Mind* and *Drive* are in my “to read” queue now.

Another key theme had to do with the implications of the creativity argument. Chief among these are what communities are doing to nurture creativity and innovation, particularly in the realm of education. Unfortunately in most cases we are doing exactly the wrong thing. Our education system is very focused on developing “left brain” skills and is stifling creativity. We are cutting the arts out of schools just at the time when we should be expanding the arts throughout our education system. Daniel Pink says that there is a “hard-headed” case for infusing arts education throughout curricula, “the arts aren’t ornamental, they are fundamental.” Expert after expert (from the business world I should add) came back to this same finding: that we need to foster creativity in K-12 and college education. So how are we doing in North Carolina? Are our school systems fostering creativity? Are the arts supported and seen as fundamental and not a luxury (when resources allow)? Are students graduating with the tools needed for a creative economy? Is there a role for economic developers in making a “business case” for teaching creativity generally and the arts specifically in our schools?



There are many more important insights that I gleaned from the EIF speakers, but I will end this post with a profound one made by the last speaker, Bill Strickland. If you haven't heard of this man's work you ought to find out about it. An earlier version of his slideshow can be viewed on the TED website. He also has a new book out. He is a leading practitioner of community transformation and the work he has done in Pittsburgh is now being "taken to scale" in communities throughout the world. It is an amazing success story in community development and basically boils down to what we might term a paradigm shift in how poor people and communities are viewed. Strickland says that he begins with the point of view that "everyone is born into this world as an asset, not a liability." Everyone has gifts to offer, and he has found that when you treat people as assets, their behavior reflects that. Strickland's observation is not a new discovery of course. This point of view is reflected in the asset-based approach to community development. What Strickland's model gives us though is a vivid and powerful demonstration of the possibilities of the assets-based approach. The results speak for themselves. As I listened to Strickland I couldn't help but think of the many rural, poor communities in North Carolina and wondered to what extent we look at those communities from the traditional needs-based lens—seeing (and treating) them as liabilities. On the other hand, what might change (in terms of community and economic development strategies) with a more assets-based approach (specifically, viewing *people as assets*)? What do you think? I know there are many assets-based efforts going on in North Carolina and beyond. I'd love to hear your stories.