

“We Ain’t Got 10 Years” - Capturing the Creative Class

Presented by the

Gulf Coast Business Council – Masters Leadership Class 2011

Background

The 2011 Masters Program focused on how a community attracts and retains the creative class for powerful economic development and sustainability. The 16 members of the class engaged in a variety of activities to pursue this issue, including a 2-day visit to Lafayette, LA, cited as one the top 10 coolest cities in the U.S. for the creative class.

The creative class is a demographic and socioeconomic class comprised of about 40 million workers (30% of the US workforce). The creative class is known to bring economic growth to regions that are successful in attracting and retaining it. The creative class consists of talented and highly educated people upon whom our postindustrial economy depends, folks such as entrepreneurs, financiers, engineers, designers and other smart and creative people. These highly skilled people congregate and begin to make connections, both inside and outside of work, which elevates the GDP in these creative class hubs.

Richard Florida describes the Creative Class as comprising 40 million workers-30% of the U.S. workforce. Based on the 2011 Masters Class research, there appears to be several common requirements of this group when considering a place to call home. The communities that can deliver the most comprehensive list of these requirements have been successful in attracting and retaining the creative class.

Establishing an environment along the Gulf Coast that will attract and retain the creative class will require the work of many skilled citizens focused on the following six items, which are identified as significant enticements to the creative class. To say to creative class entrants, “Give the Gulf Coast 10 years, I promise, you’ll want to stay” will not get us where we want to be. Creative class members do not want to spend 10 years in a region before they discover the Gulf Coast is a great place to live and work. The first step is to become an attractive place for the creative class so they will embed themselves in the community and begin to make sustainable changes that retain this workforce. In order to compress that 10-year timeframe and thereby do a better job of attracting and retaining the creative class, we need to:

- I. Employ a regional economic development approach;
- II. Increase community attachment;
- III. Foster an environment that breeds vocal and credible champions of leadership;
- IV. Offer meaningful and varied cultural opportunities;
- V. Offer a 4-year residential university experience; and
- VI. Emphasize technology.

I. Making the Case for a Regional Economic Development Approach

In considering whether local economic development entities should undertake a regional approach, obvious benefits come to mind. The idea that regional initiatives and incentives make a positive difference in attracting an industry, developing a new commercial venture or attracting a residential investor is difficult to contradict because more funding and political influence can be harnessed. Simply put, the power of the whole is greater than that of the individual. While the individual characteristics of the Gulf Coast add to the overall fabric of the region, it is through the aggregation of our resources that our influence is most effectively asserted.

Similarly, it is difficult to argue against the position that a collaborative approach provides the framework to allow the Gulf Coast to collectively – and, more important, effectively - market our area. Such a marketing strategy includes the creation of a compelling brand that leverages the resources of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, like NOAA, the USM Gulf Coast Research Lab and other marine-science based entities. These resources have value and brand power and capitalizing on them could create a brand that rivals Silicon Valley or the Research Triangle Park. Developing a nationally recognized brand will provide a marketing springboard in our efforts to attract the creative class since we already have high quality schools and other quality of life attributes that attract this group.

This leads to the question: Why hasn't community leaders merged the economic development entities for the Gulf Coast yet? It appears that the most significant roadblock to such a cooperative effort is the competitive nature of political subdivisions along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Thus, we need to examine efforts that contradict regionalism and the unintended consequences that result. Doing so will shed light on the flaw in this logic. Perhaps the best example involves industrial recruitment. If two cities compete with one-another by providing the expensive infrastructure needed to develop two separate industrial parks, the outcome is that smaller parcels are made available by the individual cities for prospective industries instead of combining resources, which would result in the acquisition and development of land on a greater scale. Along with larger scale developments comes larger scale companies and, naturally, more economic and job development. Instead of combining resources to develop an industrial park that will inevitably attract larger clients in a way that meets the best interests of all parties, communities tend to work against one-another. In addition to the obvious economic losses that result from a duplication of effort, competing communities weaken themselves by offering and counter-offering incentives. When neighboring cities compete against each other for economic development, each city's fiscal ability to provide the quality of life amenities needed to attract those industries providing the jobs desired by the creative class is adversely impacted. The political costs of competition are obvious as well in that a unified position is difficult to achieve when the need arises in the future.

Instead of competing, we should consider collaborative efforts. One example of such an effort is the Gulfport/Biloxi Airport. The economic value of this facility cannot be overstated. The benefits are obvious and everyone on the Mississippi Gulf Coast benefits from the central location of the entity.

We know what to do - We have done what we need to do - We just need to do it more often.

II. Making the Case for Community Attachment

LP Jacks, a Unitarian educator and minister is credited with saying:

The masters in art of living make little distinction between their work and their play, their labor and their leisure, their mind and their body, their education and their recreation, their love and their religion. They hardly know which is which. They simply pursue their vision of excellence in whatever they do, leaving others to decide whether they are working or playing. To them they are always doing both.

The attitude and joie de vivre set forth in that quote is aptly describes the creative class. To the creative class, the work-live lifestyle is merged because they have become one in the same. This is not to say that creative class folks live to work, but rather that they garner such enjoyment from work that it becomes beneficially and intrinsically intertwined with their non-work lives. A big part of creating this type of environment is mixed use zoning and creating community attachment through aesthetics and openness.

In the Knight Foundation's recently published study on community attachment noted, "Attachment is higher when residents agree that their communities provide the social offerings and aesthetics they enjoy." Research reveals a direct correlation between community attachment and GDP, and the creative class brings GDP. Thus, if the Gulf Coast provides a high level of community attachment and opportunities for the creative class to live, work and recreate, then GDP is a natural outgrowth.

The Mississippi Gulf Coast has a few excellent examples of communities that have excelled in the categories of social offerings and aesthetics, such as Ocean Springs and Bay St. Louis. These communities have prioritized quality of life and, as a result, have been successful in attracting the creative class. They have created walking neighborhoods with a mix of residential and commercial applications that co-exist and create virtual magnets for members of the creative class. Other cities, such as Gulfport, have made great strides in creating the same sort of work-live space in the downtown area but need to incentivize residents to actually live near where they work to jumpstart the establishment of creative class enclaves in the city, and ultimately throughout the Gulf Coast.

III. Making the Case for Vocal, Credible Champions for the Region

With any significant change, solid leadership must be in place. Leadership Champions are defined as those who are not afraid to lead, are open and listen to all sides, and ultimately make the hard decisions. To attract the creative class, the Gulf Coast culture must change and cultivate Leadership Champions.

We should be reaching out to other regions emphasizing all the positive aspects and resources that the Gulf Coast possesses. A great example of outreach occurred in October when our local congressional representative recognized immediately that the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee had never visited the Gulf Coast. With all the Gulf Coast has to offer by way of military and technology it is difficult to believe that the Chairman had never stepped foot on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Our leaders need to do a better job getting our message out. The Gulf Coast has so much to offer, and we rely on our vocal and credible leaders to get that message out.

Obstacles to attracting the creative class are not new; however, we are in a perfect position to overcome the injustices of the past best summed up in the essay Opening Doors In a Closed Society written by William F. Winter, a true champion for equality and acceptance in our State. “The penalty we had all paid was reflected in retarded economic development, substandard schools, inferior health care, and diminished national respect. Generations of southerners, black and white, had paid a horrendous price”. As a highly diverse populous, the Gulf Coast region should and must accelerate our position in the world economy by championing diversity and acceptance and benefitting from all this strategy has to offer in both social equality and economic benefit.

The choice to change, to open the doors to our community boundaries, to see past our county lines, to share the wealth rather than hoard, to respect all social economic classes, and to attract the creative class - is ours alone. As community leaders, we must become Champions of this great effort.

IV. Making the Case for Cultural Offerings

When speaking of the creative class, one fact stands out: the creative class is especially interested in “quality of place”. One major differentiating factor when comparing locations, in terms of quality of place, is the depth and breadth of culturing offerings that are available. The creative class assumes a certain level of livability (transportation infrastructure, parks and recreation, retail, etc.). One method members of the creative class use to decide where they should live is evaluating opportunities for exposure to art, theater, music, museums and other cultural venues. These types of cultural “perks” are what can set a community apart from others.

While somewhat spread out geographically, cultural offerings abound on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Artistic expression can be found in all three Coastal counties through museums (Walter Anderson and George Orr), studios (Shearwater Pottery), art walks (Bay St. Louis and Ocean Springs) and festivals (Peter Anderson, George Ohr). Not to be overlooked is the abundance of “public” art now available due to the impact of Hurricane Katrina. The woodcarvings along the beach and artwork that was integrated into the Bay St. Louis and Ocean Springs bridges have attracted visitors from many other regions. In addition to art offerings, there are a variety of museums – (pottery, children’s discovery, maritime are just some of the themes) that might be attractive to the creative class. Finally, the Gulf Coast is home to some truly unique historical treasures such as Beauvoir and Ship Island. The Coast’s rich historical heritage is a cultural offering within itself.

As with many other things that the Coast has to offer, cultural venues are sometimes poorly “packaged” for visitors, potential newcomers and members of the creative class. Perhaps what is needed is some sort of Coast-wide culture and arts authority that can take all of the Coast’s cultural “raw ingredients” and develop those ingredients into a cohesive product. The foundation is already here.

V. Making the Case for a Four-Year Residential University

The main objective for students attending universities with two-year academic programs is to continue to live at home to save money and then transfer to a four-year school to complete a bachelor's degree. We must stem the exodus of our talent from the Gulf Coast in search of advanced degrees and employment diversification. For the Mississippi Gulf Coast to thrive, we must diversify and grow by retaining our talent. Four year university programming and on-campus housing are integral to the Gulf Coast’s sustainability and prognosis for the future. We need four years to indoctrinate these students into the Gulf Coast’s creative class vibe of life. Further, we can use the 4-year university as a fertile breeding ground for future creative class residents for the city.

The benefits of a 4-year university are not limited to the students. Professors and other professionals that work at 4-year residential universities live in local neighborhoods where they eat, drink, shop and recreate, thereby creating enclaves of creative class residents throughout the city. These enclaves welcome new entrants to the creative class. Simply put, a 4-year residential university is a baked in recruitment tool for the Gulf Coast to add to its creative class population.

The benefits of having a Gulf Coast residential university offering exclusively four-year academic programming are measured nationally and include: increasing full-time enrollment, offering a true college experience, and diversifying the student body via lowering transportation costs and easing physical and economic strain on students who live farther

away. Finally, on-campus housing allows for innovative programming, such as students who live above the laboratories in which they gain skills and work.

Future prospects for on-campus housing at a Gulf Coast university are bright due to rising student demand and a positive impact on unrestricted revenues at a time of declining state investment. Universities that offer minimal opportunity for four-year degrees and do not offer on-campus housing are competitively disadvantaged compared to community colleges who offer two-year programming. Mississippi as a whole and the Gulf Coast in particular have a strong and vital community college system, and we are not proposing any alterations to that system. However, we must offer our local youth as well as students from outside of Mississippi the opportunity to obtain a 4-year degree at a residential university on the Gulf Coast.

In short, a university that offers two-year programs may succeed by filling a local niche by offering particular programs nearby community colleges do not offer, but the university fails to draw the nonlocal and international students attracted to universities and, as a result, suffers in both opportunity and revenue— as does the Mississippi Coast as a region. The region needs a 4-year university with on-campus housing.

VI. Making the Case for Continued Emphasis on Technology

The Gulf Coast is an obvious technology leader in the state of Mississippi. The evidence is clear with the work at Stennis Space Center in Hancock County, Gulf Coast Research Lab in Ocean Springs, Ingalls Shipbuilding in Pascagoula, Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, and many other opportunities across the coast. The Gulf Coast boasts a vast array of opportunities to attract the creative class. Prior to this program, we were unaware of all the excellent technological opportunities that the Gulf Coast has to offer. These professions bring the type of positions and families that foster a growing creative class. The Mississippi Gulf Coast region should be emphasizing all the positive opportunities that we have to offer and a much stronger regional or national effort should be made to attract and retain creative class professionals.

The Gulf Coast will benefit from the continued tech boom for the next decade, even if the recession lingers. What the interstate highway system was to economic development in the 1960's, large bandwidth is to economic development this century. We need to position ourselves to maximize potential gains during this time to strengthen our communities permanently. We currently have the high bandwidth infrastructure along I-10 with no "off ramps" into the communities on the Coast. When and if the technology boom slows, the Gulf Coast needs to be positioned as a community that retains the class of families that sustain an attractive community. Several surveys have shown that college graduates that move to the Gulf Coast in a professional or skilled career field only stay a resident less than four years before moving on to another locale. These efforts quite possibly could retain a college graduate longer than several years if they were aware of what the Gulf Coast region has to offer. Conversely,

new college graduates are showing up one month after graduation and taking the first promotion opportunity to move on, and historically that is in different region.

Recommendations

- Champion the unification of the economic development organizations on the Coast. Look at Hattiesburg as a model.
- Create a Technology Task Force to understand the gaps in technology and bandwidth to support the new global economy. Use current studies with National LambdaRail (NLR) and the Governor's office to support technology improvements on the Coast.
- Add to the Education Committee the task of championing comprehensive residential 4 year university with traditional campus life on the Coast. A significant improvement of bachelor degree offerings is required to attract younger populations to the Coast.
- Create a Community Attachment and Culture Committee to develop opportunities to attract creative class citizens. Ideas include broadening internship programs for public and private industry (KAFB, SSC, non-profits), connecting with Coast Young Professionals and developing key messages that will retain creative class members to the Coast.