

Knight Blog

The blog of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Richard Florida on driving success in cities

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Sept. 23, 2014, 6 a.m., Posted by Richard Florida



Photo of downtown Miami by Flickr user [Lonny Paul](#).

*[Knight Cities Challenge](#) offers applicants a chance to share in \$5 million by focusing on the question: "What's your best idea to make cities more successful?" The contest will test the most innovative ideas in talent, opportunity and engagement in one or more of [26 Knight Foundation communities](#). Below, urbanist [Richard Florida](#), director of the [Martin Prosperity Institute](#) at the University of Toronto, Global Research Professor at New York University, and co-founder of *The Atlantic's* [CityLab](#), writes about talent as a driver of city success.*

The Knight Cities Challenge comes at just the right time. Just as our cities are coming back, they also face new and deep challenges.

The past couple of decades have seen a dramatic back-to-the-city movement, which [Alan Ehrenhalt](#) has dubbed a “[great inversion](#).” As talented and ambitious people stream back to cities and urbanizing suburbs, the nature of city building and economic development has changed dramatically. No longer can places prosper by luring in headquarters or factories. The key to success is the attraction, retention and magnetization of talent. The great urbanist [Jane Jacobs](#) was the first to recognize the economic power that’s unleashed when talented people cluster in cities.

Talented people are diverse. Women, for example, make up more than half of the creative class. Immigrants born in foreign countries are members of the founding teams of anywhere from a quarter to half of Silicon Valley startups. The communities that attract and retain talent are open to all, regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity. But they must be more than open; they must be proactively inclusive. And that means providing not just tolerance but opportunity and engagement, making it easy for people to plug in and follow their dreams.

But the power of the clustering force means our urban world is increasingly spiky, uneven and divided. And this brings us face to face with a new urban dilemma. Just as the job market has bifurcated into high-pay, high-skill creative work and low-pay, low-skill service jobs with a missing middle of industrial jobs, middle-income neighborhoods have begun to disappear from our cities and metros. This poses a tremendous challenge, as growing urban divides threaten the cohesion and vitality of our communities.

And this is why the Knight Cities Challenge is so important. Our challenge today is not simply to stoke the fires of talent attraction, talent retention and urban economic growth, but to address the growing divides, inequality and segregation of our cities and communities. That means moving to a new model of sustainable and inclusive growth – built around the three key pillars of talent, engagement and opportunity. As I’ve long argued, every single human being is creative. The key to building successful, sustainable and prosperous communities is to stoke the creative furnace that lies deep within every single one of us.

The necessary solutions can no longer be imposed top-down but will bubble up from the bottom, as Jane Jacobs long ago showed us —from the placemakers, city builders, community activists and other neighborhood residents who are closest to the action.

The Knight Cities Challenge provides the resources that can help these kinds of people-powered community initiatives grow and thrive.

The [Knight Cities Challenge](#) runs from Oct. 1 to Nov. 14. Apply at [KnightCities.org](#).