

David G. Wallace

Tapping the “3 T’s” In Our Community

Creativity. The attribute that distinguishes humans from other species is valued in our society more highly than ever. In business, it is a decisive source of competitive advantage that is cultivated and rewarded at all levels. Further, communities that cultivate and attract creative people are becoming the preeminent cities of the 21st century. Richard Florida, a professor of economics at Carnegie Mellon University, asserts in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* that today’s regional economic growth is driven by the location choices of creative people, who prefer places that are diverse, tolerant, and open to new ideas. I recently met with Dr. Florida in Washington, D.C., and was amazed at the insightfulness of his findings.

Here in Fort Bend County, we live in an area rich in history and on the verge of a future that few of our forefathers could have imagined. Sugar Land, together with its ETJ, has grown by a factor of 5 in just the last 10 years. Today, people from a wide cross-section of ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and religions choose this as their home. How effectively we nurture our diverse community and embrace our differences will have a dramatic impact on the future of our city and region.

The Creative Class

Dr. Florida states that the norm-setting class of our time is the Creative Class. These people value creativity, individuality, difference and merit; they have a high level of education, engage in complex problem solving and account for approximately 30% of the workforce today. Members of the Creative Class may work in the areas of science, engineering, architecture and design, education, the arts, and may include professionals in business, finance, law and health care.

Creative people tend to be identified, not by the company they work for, but by where they live and what they do. They expect a “no-collar workplace,” flexible hours, and an environment that encourages diversity and independent thinking. Today, people don’t just “move to where the jobs are.” Rather, they cluster in places that are centers of creativity and where they like to live.

According to Dr. Florida’s Creativity Index Ranking (measuring high-tech, innovation, diversity, and percent Creative Class) of the 49 regions with populations over 1 million people, Texas fares well. With Austin at #2, Houston #7 and Dallas #10, Texas leads all other states, with three cities in the top ten.

The Power of Place

Since members of the Creative Class come in all shapes, sizes, colors and lifestyles, the most successful cities offer something for them all. Essentially, they look for three things – what’s there (a combination of natural surroundings and built environment), who’s there (a diverse population that interacts well), and what’s going on (a vibrancy in the community). Coffee shops, book stores and cafes – the heart of a community’s social vitality – have taken on greater importance. Bike lanes and off-road trails for running and cycling, important for creative people to “re-charge their batteries,” also benefit the entire community. Additionally, creative people appreciate authenticity – a place with real buildings, real people and a real history.

Of greatest significance, creative people are drawn to places known for diversity of thought and open-mindedness. They enjoy a mix of influences and appreciate diverse backgrounds and perspectives. According to fellow author Bonnie Menes Kahn, a great city has two hallmarks – tolerance for strangers and intolerance for mediocrity.

Technology, Talent and Tolerance

The “Three T’s” – Technology, Talent and Tolerance – are key to a region’s economic growth and prosperity. To attract creative people, a place must have all three T’s. Clearly, technology is a driver in today’s economy. The most vital cities are those that have cultivated high-tech industry. Talent is evident in a highly educated and innovative workforce and creative community. Tolerance – for differences in ethnicity, culture, religion and lifestyle – is essential for a region to prosper, both economically and as a unified and inter-dependent community.

Importantly, a university helps to cultivate all three. The Sugar Land campus of the University of Houston, with 2000 students in its first year, will continue to grow as an important creative hub, but we must be prepared to support the innovation the university generates and make the most of the talent that has always been inherent within our own community.

Sugar Land – A Unified Society

Throughout our nation’s history, America’s success is directly tied to its openness to innovative and energetic people from around the world, and Sugar Land is no exception. As we continue to grow to a minority-majority community, especially in light of the heightened conflict on the international stage, we must be ever mindful of our tolerance and continue to celebrate the richly diverse cultures that combine to make Sugar Land the unique and wonderful community it is.

But I believe we can go a step further. To encourage and sustain a truly unified community, a multicultural leadership team has been formed to discuss this important issue and ensure that diversity remains a strength for our community. It is my hope that the dialogue begun on this team extends through every organization, to each member of the community, to enlighten, enhance and strengthen our relationships with one another.

We each recognize the gift of diversity within this wonderful community. Together, we can tap the riches inherent with this gift and evolve into the creative and cohesive society we desire Sugar Land to be. In closing, to quote Dr. Florida, “the task of building a truly creative society is not a game of solitaire. This game, we play as a team.”

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