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VOICES OF INNOVATION

Richard Florida: Geography Is Destiny

If you're not in a creative city, says the George Mason University professor, you won't attract top talent

In 1994, Carnegie Mellon University professor Richard Florida was paging through a newspaper when a headline triggered what he calls a "holy moly" moment. Lycos, a search-engine company spun out of CMU, announced it was moving from Pittsburgh to Boston. When Florida asked why, colleagues told him that "Boston offered the lifestyle options that made it easier for Lycos to attract top creative and entrepreneurial talent," he recalls.

This explanation sparked a powerful insight: Clustered in certain U.S. cities, there is a group of innovative people -- about 38 million of them, by Florida's latest calculation -- that generate far more than their proportionate share of wealth. Florida pegged their annual wages and salaries at about \$1.7 trillion in 2003, and he has chronicled their behavior and motivations in two influential books: *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) and *The Flight of the Creative Class* (2005).

Based on U.S. labor and census statistics, Florida, 48, figures the members of this cadre, including entrepreneurs, musicians, scientists, designers, and engineers, made up 10% of the workforce in 1900. Today they account for almost 30%, produce nearly half the country's yearly wages and salaries, and are far more mobile than ever before.

Since 2002 thousands of mayors, urban planners, and business leaders around the world have relied on Florida's research and consulting services to lure talent. Rise includes a Creativity Index that ranks U.S. cities based on how well they foster technology, tolerance, and talent, which Florida calls "the three Ts." Leading the 2004 ranking of 276 metro areas were Austin, Tex., San Francisco, and Seattle. New York was No. 20.

In *Flight*, Florida broadened the picture, drawing on International Labor Organization data to develop a Global Creativity Index, which ranks countries as well as cities. The U.S. came in fourth -- behind Sweden, Japan, and Finland -- as a "global talent magnet." U.S. visa and immigration obstacles, Florida says, now deter the kinds of foreigners who helped fuel American economic growth and innovation in the past. The U.S. should emulate Canada's famous "mosaic" model, which nourishes the creativity of individuals by offering social support to ethnically diverse communities.

Florida woke up to innovation as a child, when he visited his father's eyeglass-frame factory in Newark, N.J. His father was a manager at a plant where German and Italian machinists experimented on the shop floor, spawning ideas that anticipated today's colored frames. His father, a first-generation American from a large Italian family, said something that eventually became a mantra: It's not the machines or the technology that matter, but "the knowledge, intelligence, and creativity of the people."

In the 1960s, Florida watched as Newark, a thriving industrial city, was ripped apart by riots. This inspired Florida to study urban planning at Rutgers, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Columbia University, where he received his PhD in 1986.

Some of the indexes that Florida developed to measure his three Ts have sparked controversy. For example, he included a Gay Index in his calculations of a region's tolerance, arguing that the area's appeal to homosexuals is a gauge of its openness to all newcomers. But Florida laughs when he is accused of harboring a diversity agenda. "I'm a science, technology, and economic growth geek, that's all," he says.

Now a public policy professor at George Mason University, Florida continues to look at how different regions -- especially in China and India -- compete for talent. He has also worked locally, collaborating with various groups on the regeneration of Lower Manhattan. His next book, due in 2007, continues to connect the dots between people and places. "Where you choose to live is the most important decision of your life," he says. "This book will explain why."

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