
How UMass Lowell can boost the downtown

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In it's heyday, as the booming textile capital of the United States, Lowell flourished with economic activity and opportunity. However, as the country evolved, the city fell on difficult times as mill owners and textile companies began their mass exodus to the South in the first decade of the 20th century.

Lowell struggled to recover, and in recent years attention was paid to crafting a more sustainable economic development plan. The creation of an arts district, a National Heritage Park, a Riverwalk, and new landmarks such as LeLacheur Park and the Tsongas Arena all helped to reverse the fortunes of the city.

However, to continue promoting economic growth, there is an increasing need to link UMass Lowell (UML), Middlesex Community College, and Lowell High School with businesses and other services downtown. These institutions and their students, staff and faculty are a vital catalyst for downtown growth and long-term sustainability.

As we mentioned in an August Sun column, the CITA team had two objectives: 1) to find out more about the experiences of immigrants in Lowell, and 2) to document ways that UML could have a more significant presence in Lowell's downtown. In August, we shared what we learned from speaking with some of the city's recent immigrants. We now share with you the other half of our summer's inquiries.

We compiled a *Best Practices Guide* of strategies UML can use. The project complemented the city's recent downtown summits and asked these important questions:

- * How do we increase the numbers of UML students, staff, and faculty in downtown?
- * How can UML expand its links to cultural activities downtown?
- * How can we help to reduce the barriers (transportation, perceptions of safety) to greater downtown involvement?

It is our hope that the strategies in the guide will contribute positively to sustainable and creative economic development in the Merrimack River valley.

To carry out our work we identified two Massachusetts universities that are active in their communities. We learned that Clark University in Worcester and UMass Dartmouth in New Bedford and Fall River strove to increase their presence in the community as a way to become more appealing to students and to improve the quality of life in the cities nearest them. We also spoke with businesses and organizations in Lowell to hear their perspectives about this issue.

We outline three ways to help boost the economy that involve partnerships with UML, Middlesex Community College and Lowell High School: buying and/or leasing real estate, better marketing and improved transportation.

Real estate in downtown Lowell could be turned into new student-operated businesses, classroom space, and affordable housing to attract students, and thus more people to the area. For example, at Clark University we learned that they purchased and restored buildings and now lease office space, thus creating revenue for the university. UML could make just such a long-term investment. Also, creating affordable downtown housing for students can only have a positive impact on the city.

Soon, Clark and other universities in Worcester will benefit from a collective downtown Campus Center. This project, initiated by the Worcester Colleges Consortium, will bring masses of students to the city center. In Lowell, such a center could unite UML, Middlesex Community College, and Lowell High students in the downtown area.

UMass Dartmouth also leased buildings in New Bedford and Fall River, two cities once in economic decline. In New Bedford, the school leased and restored two buildings. One became the University Art Gallery, where student art is displayed and classes and workshops are held. In keeping with the arts movement in Lowell, a UML art gallery and campus center could be very successful. Last year's CITA Team movie, *What's Art Got To Do With It?* noted that one way to strengthen partnerships, opportunity, and sustainability downtown is with the establishment of a Center for the Arts.

We spoke with several downtown businesses and organizations to gauge their interest in hosting university classes, events, or meetings; 12 of them were interested in doing so. In addition, several businesses were willing to give discounts to students.

The second way to increase the university's presence is to provide creative incentives to bring students there. Lowell's variety of ethnic restaurants and markets need to be promoted more to students, staff, and faculty. One way to do this is to host on-campus fairs for businesses, which will expose everyone to potential points of interest, and provide more reasons to travel into the city center. Another way to get students to restaurants is to follow in the footsteps of many colleges that offer joint meal plans with local businesses.

Businesses expressed their appreciation for their existing student customers and wished they saw more professors and staff downtown, too. Restaurants and businesses were also enthusiastic about providing students with discounts and other reasons to spend their money downtown. Several businesses already participated in UML's Student Savings Club. Getting more businesses to join the club and educating more students as to its existence should be a priority.

Many students now take advantage of events hosted by local businesses, such as open mic night at Brew'd Awakenings Coffee Haus. However, there is a lack of events open to individuals under age 21. This excludes a large population of university and high-school students. Making more students feel welcome downtown is a high priority. Surveying

students and other members of the University about ways to make downtown more appealing would be useful, too.

The third way to increase UML's downtown presence is through improved transportation from North and South campus. A free university shuttle runs between the campus and the dormitories, but right now it does not swing through the downtown.

Two LRTA buses run near the downtown area, though not directly into downtown. But stop times are not posted at bus stops, making it difficult to use the system. With a population of more than 100,000, Lowell should do better at getting people to key spots around the city. And, for special downtown events like concerts, plays, poetry readings, and gallery openings, UML should consider running shuttle buses.

Besides public transport, providing less expensive parking downtown may also increase student visits. We spoke with the parking director and downtown coordinator. They were enthusiastic about partnering with UML for student parking and discounts.

We believe our suggestions are logical and doable. If the University has a larger presence downtown via a Center or holds classes/meetings, there will be more students, faculty, and staff there. If downtown businesses create more incentives for students to shop and dine there, we are convinced students will show up. And, for this to work, the transportation and parking situation needs to be addressed.

When people think of Lowell, the first thought is of its great history and its importance today as a regional economic development engine. We believe Lowell's future and the University's is in part tied to the growth of a series of ever-expanding partnerships between the two. Central to the development of these partnerships is a growing student, staff, and faculty presence downtown. Much work needs to be done by UML to discover what students are looking for in their downtown. This effort will benefit all concerned.

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