

Boston Business Journal

EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

From the April 29, 2005 print edition

Hub commencements: Squandered opportunity

As 56,000 prepare to graduate, critics say state fumbles chance to market college prowess

[Tom Witkowski](#)

Journal Staff

Over the next six weeks, nearly 60 college commencements will give Greater Boston its annual financial adrenaline rush. But an opportunity for long-term economic gain is missed every year, some say.

Boston and Massachusetts have a captive audience of tens of thousands of college graduates and their families during graduation season, yet little concerted effort is made to promote the region as a place to live and do business, critics said. May and June provide an opportunity to combat the trend of people leaving Massachusetts and to hold onto college graduates who could boost the state's economic growth, they said.

The season also brings myriad corporate decision-makers here to attend their children's graduations, providing the commonwealth a chance to market itself to business leaders. And while Massachusetts takes this opportunity for granted, other cities nationally are aggressively marketing themselves as academic centers and great places to live.

"Graduations are probably a significantly bigger deal than World Series or Super Bowls," said Victor Matheson, an economics professor at the [College of the Holy Cross](#) in Worcester, an expert on the economic impact of large sporting events. The five largest commencements, [Northeastern University](#), [Harvard University](#), [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#), [Boston University](#) and Boston College, bring in \$7.5 million in hotel room revenue alone, according to the [Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau](#). (See related story, Page 1.)

The season could be a marketing bonanza, some said.

"It certainly is something we could invest in. Every May could be 'Commencement Month' in Boston, with banners where we could say this is America's college town," said

Todd Hoffman, president of [Collegia Inc.](#), a Wellesley-based consulting company that helps colleges and their respective communities market themselves. Collegia has a Web site that, in fact, does call Boston "America's College Town" and links to partner hotels, some universities and area attractions.

The number of visitors to Boston in May and June is not to be taken lightly. Members of the [Association of Independent Colleges and Universities](#) in Massachusetts confer 56,000 undergraduate and graduate degrees annually. Over two-thirds of those graduates are from out of state and usually have at least two guests at their commencement.

"We have more than 30 universities and colleges around the Greater Boston area, which generate in visitors and economic activity the equivalent of back-to-back Super Bowls," said Richard Doherty, president of Boston-based AICUM.

But local leaders should look beyond the short term financial gain from commencement season, Hoffman and others said: "There's no reason the schools wouldn't want the city, for example, to roll out the red carpet, to put signs up at the airport that say, 'Welcome parents.' A lot of these parents are CEOs, a lot of these parents are making pretty major decisions," Hoffman said.

Meanwhile, the threats to Massachusetts are growing. Last year, the commonwealth suffered a population loss, with 3,850 fewer people living here than in 2003, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And a 2003 report by The [Boston Foundation](#) and the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce showed that half of all new college graduates leave the state. Better jobs elsewhere and a "better city experience" in another location, combined, draw away 52 percent of departing graduates. Cost of living is a factor for 27 percent of those leaving.

"While there are a number of organizations and stakeholders working to address cost-of-living issues and groups like the chamber are working to strengthen local job fairs, I would suggest there is a better opportunity to capture students ... to make them feel more welcome and likely to stay in the area," said James Davitt Rooney, a Boston-based consultant and former director of policy for CEOs for Cities, a Chicago-based group.

Taking advantage of commencement season is on Susan Hartnett's agenda. As director of Boston's Office of Arts, Tourism and Special Events, however, she is currently working on the city's 375th anniversary celebration. A welcome-back event for students in the fall is something to consider, she said.

The [Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism](#) does not use commencement season to promote the region, said Executive Director Paul Sacco. "We're promoting the entire state, to bring tourists into the state. If we tried to do that under our budget for the 13 regions, we wouldn't be able to."

The Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau, while it does promote the city for school vacation week, does not specifically target graduation season, according to the

bureau. The GBCVB's Web site, however, does provide some information about graduation season, along with tourist activities and places to stay.

The Greater Boston Chamber has not done any joint promotion or outreach to capitalize on the season, but it has focused on retaining graduates for the long term.

"Retaining talent, retaining the kind of entrepreneurship and spirit of our graduating students -- that has long-term implications," said Paul Guzzi, president and CEO of the chamber.

Last fall, the chamber kicked off the Hub Crawl, which introduces college students -- before they graduate -- to company executives. It exposes them to the kinds of jobs and opportunities they might seek locally after college. More than 200 students from different colleges participate in sessions with the participating companies.

"There are a number of cities aggressively trying to eat some of our lunch -- cities like Atlanta or Philadelphia that Boston does compete with in certain areas," said Rooney, adding that growth in the number of degrees attained now has a bigger effect on per capita income than population growth.

"It's increasingly more important to grow smart than to grow big," he said.

Not only is Massachusetts facing competition from other states, Massachusetts' academic institutions face increasing competition, said Paul Grogan, CEO of The Boston Foundation.

In recent years, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh were heavily marketed as academic centers with Collegia's help, said Hoffman. The state of Pennsylvania spent \$3 million promoting itself to prospective students, he said.

Not surprisingly, in 2004, Pennsylvania became the No. 1 state nationally in attracting out-of-state students to local colleges and universities, bumping New York and Massachusetts down to two and three, respectively.

"The competition for students, the competition for faculty research dollars, is only going to intensify," said Grogan. "The state and city should be marketing Boston as the premier place to go to college in America."

Part of that includes making students feel more welcome and recognizing them as an economic blessing, rather than only focusing on the problems a large student population causes, he said. "The message to students should be 'You're a Bostonian. You're not some invading pestilence,'" Grogan said.

TOM WITKOWSKI can be reached at twitkowski@bizjournals.com. Naomi R. Kooker (nkooker@bizjournals.com) contributed to this report.

© 2005 *American City Business Journals Inc.*

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.