

OPINION

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Is our cathedral of higher education crumbling?

Every Labor Day weekend, the city utters a collective groan as 250,000 college students descend upon the Hub, clogging streets from Commonwealth Avenue to Harvard Square with U-Hauls and leaving in their wake mountains of shipping crates and worn-out futons.



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But maybe instead of dreading the annual deluge of students, Bostonians should be chanting, "Thank God they're back." Consider this: Fewer college students means fewer employees after graduation to replenish the local work force. Higher education is Boston's most important natural resource, fueling the nation's most degree-dependent economy (one of three workers graduated college). As such, this is the one competitive advantage we cannot let slip away.

Massachusetts is one of only three states in the country where college enrollment fell in the last decade. Since 1990, New England's share of the U.S. college population has dropped from 6.4 percent to just over 5 percent, as the number of students in the region dropped by 18,000.

Now, a new study by the Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies reports that while the number of college-educated people nationwide rose 63 percent between 1984 and 2001, it rose just 37 percent in Massachusetts. According to the same study, the commonwealth ranked 45th among the states in terms of rate of increase in the number of college graduates.

These are only the latest in a string of early warning signs that Boston could be heading into higher-education stagnation.

"It's a major test of our political, business and higher education leaders to keep Boston on top," believes Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation. "We tend to take the staggering benefits of higher education for granted."

As other metropolitan areas jump on the "college town" bandwagon, Boston seems to be losing its lead. Colleges in the South and the West have been making headlines for offering great educations at great prices, while around here colleges remain the nation's most expensive.

At the same time, Washington lawmakers are now directing more scientific-research funding than ever to public universities, while in New England research spending dropped by \$500 million in 2000 alone. No, Boston is not descending into an educational dark age. But the mind-set is changing - now, it's where you went to grad school that matters most, and many people choose to attend a cheaper, local, public college so they can better afford the big-name grad program down the road.

That spells t-r-o-u-b-l-e, because while four out of five students nationwide attend a public college or university, Massachusetts is the only state with more private college students than public.

The weakening of our position as "America's college town" is all the more troubling considering that it is our institutions of higher learning that provide the fuel that drives Boston's economy and key industries. As the nation's most degree-dependent economy, students are a resource we cannot afford to lose. This is a city built by those who grew up elsewhere, came here for college, and never left. Just look at Bose,

IDG and EMC. All are major local employers founded by local alumni who grew up elsewhere.

And then there are the employers attracted here by the talent pool. Graduates used to flock to where the jobs were; now the jobs come to the graduates. Intel, for example, has set up research labs across the street from Carnegie Mellon, Cal Berkeley and the University of Washington.

So who are the builders of the city's tomorrow? Are they still coming to our classrooms or are they staying home?

We already have the resources needed to preserve Boston's status as the thinking center of the planet - namely, the 65 colleges and universities in the Boston area, which educate 250,000 students and collectively account for more than 70,000 jobs in the region.

Imagine an intercollege transportation system throughout the Hub. Cross-registration programs through which students can take classes at any school in the city. Boston-only student discounts available all along Newbury Street and in Harvard Square. Or an annual college-fest at the Hatch Shell, featuring performances by the hottest bands, promotions by city retailers and restaurants and job recruiting by local companies.

Beyond campus, major area employers could lend a helping hand by serving on advisory boards and sponsoring events. And the region's tourism experts can be enlisted to roll out the red carpet for the more than 250,000 "tourists in disguise."

We need to insure that Boston's roadways will be blissfully clogged for many Labor Day weekends to come.

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