

Knowledge and Place

Jacob Hiserman

Review: *Knowledge Towns: Colleges and Universities as Talent Magnets* by David J. Staley and Dominic D.J. Endicott (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023). 415 pp. Hardcover, \$34.95; Ebook, \$34.95.

This book caught my attention for one reason: I am a higher education historian fascinated by proposals for reforming colleges. Staley and Endicott entered that conversation with *Knowledge Towns*. Between its covers, they give a creative solution: college towns need to reinvent themselves using a strategy they call “the knowledge town.”

For the co-authors, such a place has two parts: “talent magnet” and “knowledge enterprise.” One premise unites both parts: “modern society” prizes “knowledge work”—jobs which center on the use and/or creation of “information technology” such as software development, the digital cloud, smartphones, broadband, and computers (17). These are largely remote work positions. Staley and Endicott define a “talent magnet” as a community that intentionally attracts “knowledge workers” who will live and work in their town and invest in it. They cover twelve ways to forge a “talent magnet” in the first chapter before turning to the “knowledge” component of the town in chapter two. This “knowledge enterprise” revolutionizes every facet of traditional town and gown relationships along the lines of the twelve marks of a “talent magnet.” For example, Staley and Endicott speculate that students at one of the tiny microcolleges (a college with a couple of professors and approximately twenty students) in the “knowledge enterprise” will learn about how beef gets onto their plate as well as how local rewilding can change that—all while dining in the microcollege’s eating hall.

Staley and Endicott further interweave their sustainability and town-gown threads in the third chapter, which shows that one of six “archetypes” for a “knowledge town” is reshaping a town and gown relationship to meet contemporary needs. They chose Defiance, Ohio, a small midwestern farming community with an extant liberal arts college (Defiance College) and community college (Northwest State Community College), but also a highly polluted river (the Maumee) in the middle of the town. According to the authors, the town of Defiance

could use global sustainable and regenerative farming practices, link up with agricultural tech and consulting firms, and partner with Defiance College to create a new agricultural college. That would provide a healthy future for the region’s now-poisoned farmland. Lastly, Staley and Endicott provide practical suggestions for how a variety of local and collegiate leaders can transform their areas and institutions into “knowledge towns” in chapter four. The pair closes the book with a brief synopsis of the issues the “knowledge town” will tackle.

In *Knowledge Towns*, Staley and Endicott provide a way to keep the traditional humanities curriculum in the “knowledge enterprise” (88–89). Readers of this journal will find that laudable. Additionally, the authors retain some salutary discussion of a concept akin to the common good. In their chapter on archetypes, they state a “settlement” archetype should include a “town purpose strategy” based around the “common interest” of all in the community (124). They also see a possibility for moral character—nay even virtue—to become the litmus test of a community leader. Staley and Endicott hope that town managers will choose citizens to lead specific projects for the “knowledge enterprise” not because of their “qualifications, titles, or wealth” but due to “their ability to lead and inspire” (174). People concerned with preserving the land they live on will find the sections of each chapter on small-scale rewilding, regenerative agriculture, and ecological protection to be a boon to their efforts. Finally, those who love the places they inhabit will also take encouragement from Staley and Endicott’s constant call for decentralized, local leadership, planning, and pooling of resources for almost every part of their twelve-point strategy. This puts *place* first and allows the *almost* organic cultivation of the “knowledge town” from the local ‘soil’.

Yet, it is not *fully* organic in the *Knowledge Towns*. This is because Staley and Endicott give an overly optimistic evaluation of technology’s role in the “knowledge town.” They make large claims such as “where tech leads, mainstream businesses will generally follow,” that are substantiated by thin evidence such as 29 percent of workers desiring to work from home five days per week in one PricewaterhouseCooper study (4). One of their main premises, “Act local but harness the cloud” (18–19, 202), accompanies their cry for plans that include the “bionic worker” and the emigration that powers “talent magnets” in tech sector jobs (3–4, 18). Staley and Endicott provide little-to-no moral evaluation of this strategy or its potential human costs. Will the relationship between the “bionic worker” and human worker be just? How might an emphasis on the cloud crowd out the local, especially when local people do

not control the cloud or its services? Staley and Endicott also failed to account for the viability of “knowledge enterprises” when competing with state universities. Will “knowledge enterprises” draw enough local and extra-local capital to compete with the monies a state university system draws from a state government and grants? These are questions those who use Staley and Endicott’s blueprints should consider.

Lastly, the authors spend a good bit of ink on reimagining dying (and dead), denominationally rooted colleges as integral pieces of a “knowledge town” (123, 132, 135–39, 198–99). They omit the original, spiritual commitments of those colleges from their plans for reinventing those institutions. This may strike readers of this journal as a major flaw. Religious traditions have often been a key part of creating and sustaining a community. Overall, Staley and Endicott provide some excellent ideas for making *places*, but readers who prize the Ciceronian Society’s core principles will want to reflect more carefully on *which* plans in *Knowledge Towns* to use to revitalize their locales.

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