Education Partnerships and the Creative Economy
by Evan S. Dobelle

It is a great personal and professional pleasure to serve as President of Westfield State College. Making a difference for students and communities, through efforts in higher education, has been a strong focus of my life work. To direct these efforts at a college in Western Massachusetts is a significant opportunity for me to join with area colleagues to contribute in a meaningful way toward enhancing the strengths of our region.

Westfield State College has been a good neighbor since 1838, and many are well aware of the beauty, academic strengths, and friendly atmosphere of the residential campus. However, the importance of this institution in our region, and the critical role of higher education as a major player in the Creative Economy, is a significant reality, that may not be fully understood.

Founded by Horace Mann as the first, public coeducational school for teacher training in the United States, the college now prepares our 5,000-member student body for a wide range of careers that contributes so much to the ongoing success of our communities.

Today, Westfield State has a growing number of successful programs that offer great resources for the region. They include: the Center for Teacher Education and Research, law enforcement training programs, the master’s in public administration, the Westfield River Environmental Center, our regional planning expertise, and our Community Service Clearinghouse. This is just the beginning. The time is now for Westfield, as a higher education resource, to play an increasingly important partnership role.

Education is at the heart of the Creative Economy. The Mass Insight Corporation has pointed out that “high-quality education is the cornerstone of any talent-based economic development strategy.” Studies we did recently when I led the New England Board of Higher Education determined that the education sector is the leading employer in New England, with more than 250,000 employees and spending $20 billion annually in operating costs. College and university students and faculty infuse Massachusetts with talent, skills, knowledge, and energy. Locally, the Berkshire Economic Development Corporation has consistently emphasized the importance of education in training and sustaining a highly skilled workforce.

Westfield offers students a broad range of 22 undergraduate major fields of study, based on a liberal arts core curriculum, and a host of graduate programs, but remains accessible and affordable. Our yearly tuition, fees, and room and board at $13,000 provide the academic challenge and career preparation usually associated with much higher cost at private institutions. The students in residence at state-of-the-art facilities and dormitories have internships and service learning opportunities that build their pre-graduation resumes and bolster community linkages.

As this historic college’s nineteenth president, my goals include nurturing and growing Westfield State’s community partnerships and extending our outreach. I have been very pleased to meet with many interested individuals and groups who have reached out to begin to explore the possibilities.

The institutions where I have previously served as President provide examples of projects that enhanced institutions and met community needs. At the University of Hawaii, we revitalized a Honolulu neighborhood through strategic placement of a new medical school complex. At Trinity College, we developed a $175 million Learning Corridor of public schools, improved housing, and a new Boys and Girls Club on campus. At City College of San Francisco, we expanded community-centered programs such as Allied Health, and Occupational Technology, and English as a Second Language training. At Middlesex Community College, we worked to revitalize Lowell with a downtown campus.
Based on this range of experience, as well as my longtime involvement in Western Massachusetts, I am well aware of the interrelationship of various interests. As Mayor of Pittsfield I served on the school committee, and particularly encouraged regional cooperation. My understanding of the role of the arts in our local economy was greatly enhanced during the 1980s when, as Chair of the Board of Jacob’s Pillow, we created a destination campus, relocated the parking lot, and established the existing Great Lawn.

Working cooperatively, higher education can play a significant role in addressing a number of challenges. They include:

Globalization. We’re competing not only with other regions and other states, but also with other nations. Those that outpace our investment in education increase their attractiveness to students and to diversified business. I hope that as we invigorate our international programs, Westfield State will both give our students a cross-cultural background and give our region international exposure.

Creativity and entrepreneurship. Colleges are centers of creativity, not only in the arts, but also for ideas. Revitalization begins with imagination. We need to ensure that our communities remain attractive to imaginative people who set the pace in the Creative Economy. We can prepare students for work in fields such as alternative energy, media production, high tech, and design.

Work force. Massachusetts has seen an out-migration of people with advanced degrees. This has resulted in a shrinking, aging workforce. In contrast, graduates of Westfield and other state colleges are most likely to stay in Massachusetts, and over 76% of Westfield State’s alumni live and work here in the Commonwealth, 8,000 in Western Massachusetts alone. Investment in public higher education pays significant economic dividends.

Maintaining critical access, affordability, and programs with the flexibility to meet emerging needs requires serious commitment from the state, and invites involvement from private sector and community partners. I look forward to working with the wide range of educational, government, cultural, business, and community leaders who are so committed to finding ways to sustain and enhance our region.