

Richard Florida: Converting creativity into economic development

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by Karen Brune Mathis, Managing Editor

Richard Florida, the international consultant and author of best-sellers "The Rise of the Creative Class" and "Who's Your City?" and the new "The Great Reset," will speak Friday at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Jacksonville University College of Fine Arts.

"The CFA Soiree," co-chaired by Linda Berry Stein and Irene Lazzara, will feature JU artists and also recognize JU Chancellor Emeritus Frances Bartlett Kinne, who founded the College of Fine Arts and served as its dean for 18 years.

The event is scheduled at The Museum in Midtown Centre, at 4160 Boulevard Center Drive.

Florida responded by email to several questions from the Daily Record.

What will be your message in Jacksonville?

I plan to address how creativity is the driver of the new economy. Creativity, "the ability to create meaningful new forms," is the force of economic progress and the absolute source of competitive advantage in a future driven by knowledge.

The "creative class" — workers in science and technology, arts, culture and entertainment, health care, law and management, whose occupations are based on mental or creative labor — drives America's creative economy. They comprise 30 percent of the workforce, 50 percent of wages and income and 70 percent of discretionary income.

Not only are the "creative class" the producers of the new discoveries, innovations and designs changing our lives, they are the consumers fueling the demand.



I will also cover the new social compact that we must adopt to help foster and grow creativity in our communities.

Jacksonville wants to compete with other cities around the country and around the world for economic development. What are Jacksonville's challenges in doing so?

One of the key issues that Jacksonville can do is better focus on tapping into the creativity of all its residents. As I wrote in "The Rise of the Creative Class" 10 years ago and in this revision, I still believe every single human being is creative. Economic growth in today's economy is driven by creativity, so if we want to increase it, we have to tap into the creativity of everyone.

This should be the single point of focus for all economic development policies.

It's also critical to ensuring an equitable future for all workers. The new economy is assigning a greater value to human creativity. Therefore, we have to create the support structures and systems to elevate our workforce and skills sets. This is why I called for a creative compact in "The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited" and will be speaking about it during my talk at Jacksonville University.

Are there common denominators in creating a "creative" class – and how can Jacksonville enable the development of a creative class?

We've developed a framework that we think is important in attracting the creative class. I call it the "3Ts" of economic development — technology, talent and tolerance.

Technology: The first T is technology. The ability to support research and innovation and transfer that into marketable products and great companies are critical components of economic growth. The Jacksonville metro area ranks No. 134 out of 361 metros across the U.S. Universities are key hub institutions of the creative age. This is why institutions like Jacksonville University are critically important to the region's economic development efforts.

Talent: The driving force behind any effective economic strategy is talented people. And people these days, especially talented people, move around a lot. Approximately 31 percent of Jacksonville's workforce makes up the creative class, nearly 173,000 workers.

Tolerance: When I discuss tolerance, I mean a place that is open to all kinds of talent. Approximately half of the new startups in Silicon Valley include at least one immigrant among its founders, so it's absolutely critical to be welcoming to people who are from different places. It's important to be open to gays and lesbians as well — not because they stimulate growth directly but because they reflect a community that is open. On the tolerance metrics, Jacksonville ranks No. 115 in the country.

Jacksonville City Council voted 10-9 in April against expanding the City's Human Rights Ordinance to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination, a bill that was supported by the JAX Chamber and other business leaders. Does this vote by Council have an effect on economic development?

A great people climate is as important as a great business climate. Creativity comes in all different kinds of packages, so a community has to be open to everyone. Government officials and city leaders must set the tone for social inclusion and tolerance. My research has shown time and time again that places receptive to immigration, alternative lifestyles and new views on social status and power structures will benefit significantly in the creative age. We need to support and embrace diversity and difference, not squelch different viewpoints and perspectives.

Jacksonville continues to try to redevelop its Downtown, while at the same time a suburban lifestyle center, St. Johns Town Center, is very successful in attracting the retail and entertainment venues that Downtown would like to attract. Downtown also has 3,000 or so residents, less than the 10,000 Downtown leaders target. What do you see as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in these efforts?

We know that downtowns across the country are growing again and they are critically important to a region's vitality. According to a recent report from the U.S. Census, many regions across the country are experiencing population growth within their downtown areas as more and more people are attracted to urban living. We also know that young creative workers are looking for communities that have active denser communities that are walkable and provide an array of amenities. Despite the challenges, it is important for Jacksonville to keep up its efforts to revitalize its downtown core.

The schedule, including entertainment, is 6:30 p.m.-midnight, with Florida speaking 8:30-9 p.m., followed by a book-signing.

Funds raised by the event will be directed to capital projects that enhance student learning.

Florida is senior editor for The Atlantic magazine and a regular CNN contributor. He has written for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, The Economist, The Globe and Mail and Harvard Business Review. He has been featured as an expert on MSNBC, BBC, NPR and CBS, among other media outlets.

He is director of the Martin Prosperity Institute and professor of Business and Creativity at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto.

He previously was a professor at George Mason University and Carnegie Mellon University and taught as a visiting professor at Harvard and MIT.

He earned his bachelor's degree from Rutgers University and his doctorate from Columbia University.

For information about the event, call (904) 256-7345 or visit cfasoiree.ju.edu.