

Imagining Place, Space, and Community:
Thoughts on Town-Gown Relations and Our Future Together

by

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Throughout the five years that I have had the privilege of living in our community and serving as Chico State University's president, I have often had the opportunity to share my thoughts on the importance and the nature of the relationship between the city of Chico and the University. The occasions for this have usually been neighborhood meetings, presentations to local civic and service organizations, interviews with the press, and campus talks and other in-house communications that have emphasized the University's responsibility to, and interactions with, our host city and region.

Although audiences have varied, my message has been the same. Namely, neither the University nor the city would prosper without the other and we connect, first and foremost, through a set of values that are as critical to the functioning of a university as they are to the success of a city or a town and, even, a neighborhood. Fundamentally, these are reason and respect, civility and community, and a strong sense of place and purpose.

I have been thinking, though, as both city and University face daunting budget and environmental challenges, key questions regarding growth, and important choices about our future, that it might be useful to share more fully and formally my views on these matters. I do so to join conversations already underway regarding city and county planning and to suggest some considerations for the direction in which our shared future might go.

My views are shaped by deeply considered values (which I will identify and discuss throughout this piece), scores of conversations over the years with long-time Chico and Northern California leaders and other members of our community, experience in other settings (for example, Cal Poly and San Luis Obispo, CA, and the University of Pennsylvania and west Philadelphia, PA) where town/gown relationships were very important, and extensive readings in these matters. The latter particularly have focused on such topics as globalization, the digital revolution, sustainability, community development, change dynamics, and the importance of a sense of place. I mention five fairly recent books below, which may already be familiar to many of you who will read this piece, as particularly worthwhile:

Florida, Richard, *Who's Your City: How the Creative Economy is Making Where to Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

Friedman, Thomas L., *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005).

Gladwell, Malcolm, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Random House, 2000).

Kotkin, Joel, *The New Geography: How the Digital Revolution is Reshaping the American Landscape* (New York: Random House, 2002).

Schultz, Jack, *Boomtown, USA: The 7 ½ Keys to Big Success in Small Towns* (Herndon, VA: National Association of Industrial and Office Properties, 2004).

The most important message that I have understood from these works is that our future is built on our strengths, that our assets always require nurturing, and the nurturing process is a proactive exercise that requires energy, confidence, intuition, and imagination. In short, we must be globally-aware, locally-committed, historically-informed, entrepreneurially-inclined, vision-directed, future-focused, and values-based.

Three key observations underscore my sense – and confidence – of how we can build a very bright future together.

First, the paradox of place: We are still at the beginning of a digital technology revolution that is remaking the economic and social geography of our nation and influencing, in fact, a “placeless society.” Yet, paradoxically, a sense of place has become increasingly valued and important to cultivate and achieve.

Like railroads after the Civil War, highways and air travel after the Second World War, and the World Wide Web in the late 20th century, digital communications in the early 21st century have transformed our nation’s economic and social landscapes and encouraged both connection and separation. We have the capability to do business anywhere, anytime, now and to do so instantaneously, unbounded by any distance or geographic boundaries. People meet on-line, court on-line, maintain relationships on-line, and end them on-line. Home theater packages provide an extraordinary viewing experience of any movie without standing in line for a ticket or popcorn and Wii-technology and other products enable one to race Jimmy Johnson around Daytona, direct a scoring drive against any NFL team, play Pebble Beach with Tiger Woods, and defend our planet against any alien invaders. Albeit, virtually.

And there’s the rub. The digital revolution has provided unprecedented freedom to do things – alone. This technology will only improve and new applications will serve such isolation even more. As so many folks who fled cities and their crowded work environments in the 1970s and 1980s for a home in the suburbs, or a time-share in the mountains, or the attractions of gated golf communities are now discovering, there is

something critically missing when flight and isolation take precedence over community and connection.

What we are now experiencing is a “new localism,” a renewed appreciation for the importance of place where one – whether digital workers or not – can experience the arts, cultural amenities, entertainment, face-to-face meetings in real pubs and restaurants, and a “Main Street” *agora* where shopping, business, local politics, and social encounters meet, mix, and mingle naturally. These are places where the innate energy and creative joy of people define the scene. These are places where the “quality of life” is tangible and attractive to visitors and permanent residents alike. In a word, place matters.

Second, the power of choice: Increasingly, companies and people now locate not where they must, but where they choose and where they will. That is, enabled by the digital revolution, through which people and companies can truly live anywhere, the question of where to live becomes increasingly contingent on the character, attributes, and attractions of any given location, beyond such traditional business location factors as land costs, taxes, and the local and state regulatory environment.

When asked about life’s biggest decisions, most of us start with two things. First, the “what” decision, namely, finding out what work we want to do and the promise of a prosperous and fulfilling life that comes with the right career choice. Second, the “who” decision, that is, finding the right life partner who will support our endeavors, love us unconditionally along the way, and provide the foundation for a happy life.

But there is a third decision: the “where” decision, that is, finding the right place to live and work and recognizing the relationship between place and our economic future and personal happiness. Like the other two choices, where to live is not an arbitrary one, for it affects every aspect of our being, including what we do and with whom.

The search for the right place to live, though, is elusive. The average American moves every seven years; more than forty million relocate every year; fifteen million make significant moves of more than 50 or 100 miles. And notions of the right “where” will likely change with the circumstances and needs in one’s life and how they affect a sense of the quality of life one would like to achieve. So, too, there are trade-offs in these matters, as no place offers all things, to all people, at all times.

But the evidence suggests that places with a clear sense of their identity and spirit and values can attract, and keep, people who want not only to be there, but to contribute to the community’s well-being. And, just as important, places that emphasize talent, tolerance, innovation, inclusion, and creativity – and have the local institutions and organizations to promote such – will succeed no matter how challenging the larger economic environment might be.

Third, the case for Chico: If we evaluate our assets honestly, if we resolve to sustain them firmly, if we plan intentionally, and if we act with integrity and imagination, Chico can be even more so a community that thrives and succeeds **as a place and as a choice.**

This is not some fanciful notion or impossible task. In fact, it can be a likely one because we are already, I believe, a community with shared values and engagements that are clear, compelling, and impressive.

Assets

No list can be complete. And I expect that folks will point out how incomplete mine is. But suggesting a list is less a risk to take, than an invitation to extend, because a sense of our community's strengths should be broadly formed. My list focuses on the elements and evidence of a community with shared values and engagements.

A college town.

We are a unique college town in California, where no physical barriers or distance separate the campus of the University from the city and its neighborhoods. A vibrant intellectual and cultural scene flows from this identity and extends to a fine K-12 school system and community college. The University's Master Plan envisions significant, pedestrian-friendly improvements to First Street, especially the intersections of First and Salem and Second and Normal, that will more fully develop and integrate the edges and entrances of the campus with the city.

A charming downtown.

High quality local businesses, first-rate restaurants, beautifully restored buildings, and several art galleries and shops, framed with tree-lined streets and graced with murals and other expressions of public art, are just the beginning of Chico's downtown attractions. Flowing from the city center are the University campus and neighborhoods that showcase the city's history and a rich architectural landscape. The renovation of the Old Municipal Building and the relocation of Nantucket to 6th and Broadway are important contributions to the southward expansion of the downtown from city plaza to the "five points" area of Broadway, Main, Humboldt, Eighth and Ninth streets.

A place of natural beauty.

From the defining creek that runs through our town and university campus, to the magnificence of Bidwell Park and the Sierra foothills beyond, to the distant coastal range and the rich agricultural lands of the northern Central Valley, we are surrounded by green views, flowing rivers, open spaces, and protected natural spaces. In many respects, we are a community that has purposefully sought to achieve harmony between our natural and built environments.

An arts community.

Chico is ranked among the nation's finest small town/city arts communities. And for very good reasons. The University offers an extraordinary community of faculty,

students, and visiting artists in all performance and creative arts areas. Local artists in such media as glass, ceramics, print-making, sculpture, weaving, photography, and painting complement a rich community performing arts scene that includes a children's choir, a symphony orchestra, and live theater. Murals, sculptures, and "art" benches enliven both the downtown area and the campus and suggest how much more we can be doing in the area of public art. Attractive galleries and studios abound on campus and throughout the city, showcasing the talents of our local artists and bringing other artists of renown and accomplishment to the attention of our community.

A "green" community.

Although there are many definitions to "sustainability," perhaps the most common focuses on environmental issues and "green" values. These things matter at our University and in our community. We do not have to look far to find businesses, non-profits and private organizations, city government and public agencies, and thousands of individual citizens engaged in sustainable practices to protect our environment, conserve scarce resources, and improve our quality of life. Moreover, we have the people and programs at the University, in particular, ready to support a "green New Deal."

A recreation community.

The same elements of our outdoor environment that makes our region so beautiful set the tone for a rich recreational scene. With as many sunny days as some destination cities in the Arizona and southern California deserts, ski slopes and lakes within one or two hour's driving distance, an avid cycling community, a professional baseball team, and one of the largest urban parks in the nation only a few steps away, Chico provides an extraordinary variety of venues and organized recreation programs for those who seek outdoor recreation. Both the city and the University promote a healthy and safe balance between pedestrians and cyclists. Moreover, through its faculty and programs in physical education and kinesiology, the University offers expertise in recreation planning, accessibility, and teaching.

An entrepreneurial community.

Successful start-ups, home-grown businesses, and local efforts to generate investments in Chico and the immediate surrounding area provide evidence of a local entrepreneurial spirit. The University supports a strong economic environment through such organizations as the Center for Economic Development and the Northern California Small Business Development Center. They will conduct their ninth annual Tri-County Economic Forecast Conference in January '09. Also, the University's College of Business has identified entrepreneurial studies and values among its strategic emphases for the future.

An altruistic community.

The University's purposeful orientation to civic engagement and community service complements values that are a Chico hallmark. These are reflected in numerous service organizations, boards, and causes. But the high value our community places on service goes well beyond fundraising and volunteering. Our highest community honors recognize those who have served our community through the force of their personal

example, citizens whose caring, generosity, and vision uplift all of us. There may be no better “brand” for any community than to be known as a place that cares and welcomes.

Values-Based and Future-Focused

When we recognize what our community can do and provide for both visitors and current and prospective residents, what qualities and attributes make it attractive, and what strengths can be organized and enhanced, we are well on our way to solidifying our identity and charting our future. All of this, though, begins with attitude, that is, confidence that we have a compelling story to tell, a great future to build, and both the willingness and the wisdom to choose well together.

What follows now are several specific observations regarding the geography of our community, namely, the ensemble of the University, downtown, and immediate adjacent neighborhoods. All of these observations incorporate the assets and the values noted above. Most importantly, these are “seed” ideas, designed to spark others’ imaginations and contribute to continuing conversations.

The “gateway” neighborhood

Approaching the downtown area and the University campus from the north along the Esplanade (itself a defining feature of our community), one will first encounter the new Northern California Natural History Museum and the Bidwell Mansion. Both celebrate our region and heritage and complement each other with their different missions. They are appropriately located next to each other. Across the Esplanade from them is the old Veteran’s Memorial Building, an important architectural and historical asset, but needing tenants and a seismic retrofit among other major repairs.

They introduce an **historical and cultural corridor** that extends both south through the center of downtown and west through the campus of the University. In both directions, attractions abound: Children’s Park, Bidwell Bowl (a marvelous small town example of WPA New Deal architecture, but in desperate need of restoration), the Chico History Museum, the University Anthropology Museum, the campus arboretum, the Janet Turner Print Museum, several other University galleries and exhibit spaces, downtown art galleries and shops, the Diamond Hotel, the Stansbury House, and city plaza.

The area can be enhanced in several ways:

1. **Signage and wayfinding.** The history of Chico and the University can be presented through an integrated, interpretive signage package that uses banners, historical markers, building plaques, and guide maps. These could further serve as a “soft” interface between the downtown and the university campus, reinforcing common historical elements and values.

2. A permanent home for **The Turner**. This is a world class collection, in fact, a destination attraction. A possible location could be the old Carnegie library, currently housing the Chico History Museum at the corner of 2nd and Salem.
3. If The Turner occupied this site, then the Far West Heritage Association could concentrate its efforts on the **Patrick Ranch**, developing that facility as a premier 19th century agricultural history living/learning center. The papers and records of the Ranch, now located at the airport, are so valuable that they are worthy of a first-rate archival facility for scholarly study and display. University faculty and students could play a major role in developing this resource, too, as another destination attraction for Chico, much like a California mission site or the Farmer's Museum in Cooperstown, NY.
4. **Public art** further represents a dialogue between the city and the University and significantly enhances our community's character and sense of place. Both can highlight such expressions as murals, sculpture, and benches so that a guide to the public art of our community would lead people seamlessly through the downtown and the campus.

The "five points" neighborhood

This is the neighborhood where Eighth and Ninth Streets, Broadway, Main and Humboldt Streets converge. It marks the direction in which the downtown is expanding and even now incorporates an art presence (galleries, studios, and a local fashion collective), restaurants, specialty shops, a theater, and mixed use (commercial and residential) buildings. It has features, albeit, on a much smaller scale, like the "gourmet ghettos" of north and west Berkeley.

This neighborhood can be strengthened in several ways.

1. It needs to articulate a balance between its **own identity and its ties** to the historic downtown area. It could do so in any number of ways, including developing a concentration of galleries and studios, gourmet specialty shops, professional offices, and a theater "culture" around the Senator Theater. All of these could provide a foundation of customers and clients for each other. It might, in fact, officially be tagged "Five Points" or "SOFA" (South of Fifth Area).
2. The attractiveness of the area might further be enhanced with a **boutique hotel**. Again, north Berkeley comes to mind with its French Hotel directly across the street from the world famous Chez Panisse restaurant or the Montecito Inn south of Santa Barbara. One of the functions of such a facility might be to provide late night entertainment and dining apart from the current student-oriented downtown scene.
3. This neighborhood might also serve to cluster an e-business or digital worker community, thus playing the role of an **innovation center** for the city. In other words, if a technology, research, or business incubator "park" is not in the city or county's

immediate future, perhaps something on a smaller scale, closer to the downtown and the University might be. Perhaps the Diamond Match site might be the location for this with its proximity to “Five Points” and its amenities.

The south of campus neighborhood

Here is a neighborhood of extraordinary possibility. Victorians, Julia Morgan bungalows, craftsman-style houses, and some impressively-restored homes from the 1920s and earlier mix along mature tree-lined streets. A modest commercial district offers convenient services. An attractive grammar school and places of worship further grace the area. Its borders are the downtown, the University campus, and the train station. It is officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Chico South of Campus Historic District. What a delightful place to live.

And then there are the down sides: party central Chico at Fifth and Ivy, poorly maintained houses by student residents and absentee landlords, and garbage-strewn sidewalks and yards just about every weekend morning when the University is in session.

The University has taken sure steps with its officially recognized Greek chapters which have houses there to clean up their act. Part of the new Greek code of behavior includes the care and appearance of their houses. Similarly, the MOU between the Chico Police Department and the University Police Department regarding community policing has made the area safer and saner.

But there is so much more to be done that requires town/gown cooperation. The University pledges to improve the properties which it owns or acquires there, especially to support the reason why many are on the historic registry. Signage, a guidebook, and incentives to treat properties with care will help. The University can also encourage its faculty and staff to live in the area and to explore incentives to this effect.

The issue of absentee landlords, though, who ignore bad occupant behavior and poor property care, requires city attention and action. One lever might be the city’s Mills Act Ordinance, which gives property tax reductions in exchange for historic preservation and maintenance. A bottom line message is that growth and development is not incompatible with historic preservation and neighborhood integrity.

A Tipping Point?

Malcolm Gladwell argues in his insightful book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, that there occasionally comes a time when forces align to make change desirable, even unstoppable. Although I am not so fatalistic, I am optimistic that we – city and University – may be at such a point as we consider our connected future and the opportunities that present themselves. These are opportunities that play directly into our values-based strengths and assets as enumerated above.

First, **leadership** at the University, in city government, and throughout our community appreciates the sustainability movement, the digital technology revolution, and the need to balance community values and historical sensitivity with an opportunity-conscious entrepreneurialism.

Second, we have people throughout our community who are successful because they are **effective environmental scanners**, that is, they understand both local contexts and global influences and are committed to our community and helping improve the quality of life here.

Third, there exists both at the University and throughout our community a **wealth of talent, creativity, and innovation**. These are self-confident folks, brimming with curiosity, sociability, and energy. Moreover, such folks lead by example, effectively championing ideas and concepts and products and compelling others to pay attention to their success.

Fourth, matters are never so dire as “march or die.” But we cannot stand still, oblivious to the forces of change around us, arguing only that things “are fine, just the way they are.” Yes, we need to understand why things “are fine, just the way they are,” if that is the case. And we need that understanding to guide us. But, we also need to **welcome new energy and ideas** into our community and to **raise up new leaders** within it. Efforts to **prevent a “brain drain”** from the area of our University graduates, to encourage University alumni to **come back to Chico**, and to provide a **leadership development** environment through forums, seminars, and, most of all, inclusivity, all should be encouraged.

Fifth, the **power of place** and the **importance of choice** cannot be overstated. As the mysterious voice in *Field of Dreams* intoned, “If you build it, they will come.” What has been built in Chico towards achieving a satisfying and meaningful life for those who live here, and what we have yet to build and achieve, will enable us to weather any economic or budgetary storm. Make no mistake about it, our fiscal challenges – city and University – are very real and very grave. We will not escape the ill-effects of a recession. But we can manage from our strengths and we can forge a compelling story that will encourage and enrich us and inspire and attract others.

Sixth, building on the example of the successful Community Youth Alcohol Committee (CYAC) and its contributions to town/gown cooperation, I intend to **convene a similar University/community group** to discuss and explore the ideas and issues raised in this paper, and beyond. I imagine that its agenda will be fairly open-ended, but focused on strengthening both our community and University through recognizing their vital ties and mutual roles. This group will complement the efforts of the Town and Gown Task Force, recently established by the Chico Economic Planning Corporation. The principal goal of the CEPSCO group is to support public policies and to foster conditions that will help develop the workforce to meet the existing and emerging needs of a vibrant local and regional economy.

Seventh, after all is said and done, **it comes down to values** – values that are clearly articulated, commonly embraced, actively pursued. No values are more important than civility, respect, tolerance, and service. They enable us – fellow citizens and neighbors – to have productive and positive conversations on even the most difficult and potentially divisive issues. They enable us to imagine boldly, to take risks together, to trust intuition, to seek agreement – and to avoid paralysis, cynicism, and polarization. Most of all, they are the foundation for choosing wisely and moving forward in new, creative ways.

We are positioned to see beyond our challenges and to make wise choices – and so much depends that we do so.