



Lectures to examine impact of creative economy on Eastern Ontario

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EMC Business - Over the past five years, the idea that creative types drive economic development has generated much debate. While the theories of Richard Florida and others have been criticized, there is no denying that they have caught the attention of Ontario policymakers.

In his report to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty last February, Florida, a professor at the University of Toronto, said Ontario should aim to have half of the province's workforce in the "high-value, high-paying jobs of the creative economy by 2030."

Much of the research and case studies have focused on urban environments. But how do semi-urban and rural areas of Ontario fit into the theories? More importantly, is the creative economy Eastern Ontario's future?

That very question is the focus of a public lecture series hosted by the Monieson Centre at the Queen's University School of Business. The five-part series began Tuesday with a presentation by Dr. Betsy Donald entitled "The Creative Economy: Fact & Fiction." The series continues until May with one lecture each month.

The Monieson Centre launched the Knowledge Impact in Society (KIS) project two years ago in collaboration with Eastern Ontario Community Futures Development Corporation Network and the Prince Edward/Lennox and Addington Community Futures Development Corporation. KIS, which received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, endeavours to "increase the economic vitality of Eastern Ontario."

Yolande Chan, director the Monieson Centre, said over the last two years researchers at the centre have been debating whether the creative class theory is valid. Furthermore, the researchers have been thinking about the limitations of the theory as it applies to rural Canada.

"This discussion series is designed to ensure that the rural areas of Canada are not neglected when we take our attention and focus on the rise of the creative class," Chan said, "because a lot of the current discussion focuses on Montreal, Toronto or Waterloo. It doesn't focus on Peterborough, Renfrew, Belleville or Kingston. It focuses on clusters that tend to be urban.

"This series is designed to force attention on the more vulnerable communities that are semi-urban and rural communities," she added.

Chan said the literature points out that three "Ts" are prerequisites for the rise of the creative economy: talent, technology and tolerance. The three Ts are not typically the strong points of semi-urban and rural communities, Chan said.

"Rural communities... tend to lose the youth and their talent, they tend not to be high-tech areas, they tend to be remote, and they don't tend to be what I would call extremely tolerant environments and settings where basically you promote diversity and where you are a very welcoming community in terms of race, gender, all kinds of preferences of lifestyle. That tends not to happen so much in a rural area," she said.

When policymakers adopt a creative-economy model, there is the risk that rural communities will be left behind, Chan said.

"If you are using the creative economy argument as the main argument for economic development for Canada, there's a danger that you disadvantage rural communities and the poor become more poor. So you create inequities between the urban clusters which are vibrant and non-urban areas," she said.

That's not to say rural communities in Eastern Ontario are not interested in the creative economy. It's quite the opposite, according to Jeff Dixon, a project coordinator with KIS.

"The 12 Eastern Ontario communities are distinct because they have identified the creative economy as the No. 1 economic development priority that they want to know more about. They believe it is key to their economic development," he said.

Getting to that point will be the main topic of the next lecture in the series. Kevin Stolarick of the Martin Prosperity Institute will present on Feb. 16. Stolarick, nicknamed the official statistician of the creative class, will present on the topic "The Rural Creative Economy: Issues and Challenges."

The March 23 lecture looks at Prince Edward County as a case example of the creative economy in Ontario. The presentation on April 27 focuses on the rural policy implications of the creative economy. The series concludes on May 25 by looking at future research possibilities for the rural creative economy.

All of the lectures are free and open to the public. A light lunch will be served at 11:45 a.m. followed by the lecture from noon until 12:55 p.m. Lecture series organizers ask that you make reservations by calling (613) 533-2350.

More information on the Monieson Centre and the KIS project can be found at www.business.queensu.ca/knowledge