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Rainforest in the Desert

August 1, 2012

Lisa Kuutilla, President and CEO of STC.UNM (link to stc.unm.edu) recently recommended a book that has captured my attention. In *The Rainforest: The Secret to Building the Next Silicon Valley*, authors and venture capitalists Victor Hwang and Greg Horowitt explore why the Silicon Valley blossomed when other areas have not. They found the best parallel to conditions needed to spawn the type of creativity and innovation that flourished in that entrepreneurial environment is the fragile ecosystem of the rainforest.

Hwang and Horowitt point out that a rainforest does not control or plan the emergence of new species, but rather promotes conditions that allow the ecosystem to create robust life forms that compete successfully in unimagined ways. They suggest that in a rainforest, weeds are nurtured to grow, and that some of these weeds become complex flowers that are valued. Likewise, Hwang and Horowitt argue a community wishing to enhance innovation and new, unimagined products, should foster operations like a rainforest – not controlling processes, but creating a fertile environment in which new "weeds" can sprout and grow into viable businesses. Human connectivity is the fertile ground for cultivating communities that enhance the melding of science and innovation into new business and economic opportunity. Hwang’s and Horowitt’s thesis is that Silicon Valley and other places that engender creativity and significant output arise from the development of human ecosystems dedicated to diverse talents, trust across social barriers and support for "promiscuous" collaboration. Their work is highly applicable to New Mexico, where we need to develop knowledge businesses. Research hospitals and research universities are primary drivers in the emerging innovation economy. Across the nation, as jobs have evaporated in the manufacturing sector, new opportunities have developed in education, professional services and health care related services. A recent report by the Urban Land Institute noted the “technology and information economy has created a tempo of quick speed change and public/private community interdependencies have grown so great they have generated a new paradigm of local economic development and city building”. The report goes on to say “the ability of the United States to compete depends on countless decisions by thousands of local leaders in virtually every community”. Cities must embrace cross sector collaboration and partnerships to create viable economic opportunities in the future. Successful communities in the 21st century will focus on combining the quality of daily life with vibrant, rich economic opportunities fostered by research universities partnering with business and civic leadership. These types of partnerships can diversity the economy creating greater buffers for recessions.

The Urban Land Report states the top technology drivers over the next five years will be clean technologies, health care services, new media and social networking, medical devices and equipment, and biopharmaceuticals. Albuquerque and New Mexico could focus on these sectors and prosper. New Mexico has the potential to develop a robust and viable economy while positioning ourselves to become more competitive. To do this, we must enhance the collaboration between the business community, civic leadership and UNM. We must better emphasize the development of new knowledge businesses.
UNM has already done a good job of fostering spin-offs, but we can do much more. To that end as part of my listening campaign, we will sponsor a day of conversation on this issue September 21st. We have tentative commitments from Victor Hwang and Governor Susanna Martinez. I will let you know more information when we finalize plans for the day.