

# Return of the student tempo 9/2/87

## Chester Smolski

It's that great time of the year again when summer wanes and fall approaches. In the minds of many, this change to autumn occurs around Labor Day when the kids go back to school, rather than at the official, later occurring, Autumnal Equinox. So, another season and the new academic year is upon us.

The beginning of the school year also heralds the return to college and university campuses of the older student back from summer holiday, eager to meet returning friends and to take on the challenges of another year. The 11 institutions of higher learning in Rhode Island will greet approximately 70,000 students this fall.

The presence of so many young, energetic, eager and talented young people in the community and in the state has a tremendous impact, one that is often not fully appreciated by the public.

Too often the negative aspects of so many vibrant people in one locale get the headlines; whether this be competition for housing in Fox Point, partying on Eaton Street or fraternity hazings in Kingston. Certainly some problems are bound to arise but, on balance, colleges and their students make communities better and more interesting places in which to live.

It was Providence College that put the capital city in the national limelight during the NCAA tourney this past season (and what a spirit it generated throughout the whole state); Brown continues as one of the most sought out of the Ivy League schools; Newport now has "its" college at Salve Regina; the culinary arts program at Johnson and Wales receives national recognition;

and it is always a delight to observe the creative and eye-catching attire and make-up of the RISD students on Benefit Street.

Besides being places where minds are stretched through teaching and discussion, these 11 Rhode Island institutions do research to find better techniques in robotic engineering, to help neighborhoods identify and solve problems and to provide sophisticated commercial fishing systems and a host of other projects that will make our lives more comfortable, long-lasting and fulfilling.

Public service is the other domain where colleges make a considerable contribution; whether this be a faculty member talking to a Rotary or church group, serving on countless community committees or a student intern providing planning help to a city.

Teaching, research and public service are the normal workings of colleges and universities that reach the public beyond the confines of the campus, but one must be mindful of the contributions for the public found on campus: Here is found the music, art and theater that enhance our lives, the visits by noted personalities and the amateur sports that can be so enthusiastic and exciting.

Finally, one must be cognizant of the economic benefits of higher education. Consider Providence where 42 percent of the state's enrollment is located in four colleges, one university and three branch campuses of other schools.

In a study done last year by the state Office of Higher Education, it was determined that these schools pumped \$364 million into the Providence and Rhode Island economy, or 60 percent of the \$606 million generated throughout the entire state. Jobs on campus, school expenditures and purchases of clothes

and stereos and restaurant spending by students are some of the economic benefits from this service "industry."

Of interest also, college students living in dormitories and nearby houses are counted as residents of that city when a census is taken; thus, the 16,600 out-of-staters attending schools in Providence make up more than 10 percent of the city's population. This has marked implications for federal and state programs that are based on population, also elections for city council where often students are deemed "invisible voters" because they are part of the total population but often do not register or vote.

Colleges and universities are normally one of the criteria used to determine quality of life in the rankings of cities, and Providence is among the front runners in this respect.

So as Rhode Islanders watch the newly-arrived college students unload clothes, computer, guitar and tennis racket, let's remember how they help our community through their association with institutions that sometimes are heavily criticized for intrusion into our neighborhoods.

For myself, I see them as eager, energetic and bright young persons (these adjectives often change over the semester) who bring youth with its ideas to the classroom. We all should enjoy and try to understand this changing and growing phenomenon, the college student, for he or she can be one of the most satisfying and frustrating experiences any of us will ever have.

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