

Vulnerabilities in Strengths and Strengths in Vulnerabilities in a Virginia Small City

Henry Way, Ph.D. --- Small Cities Conference 2018

In the 1970s, Harrisonburg, a small city in the central Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, contained a population of a little over 15,000, that was almost all white, and with less than half a percent being of Latino origin. In the 1980s, the former State Normal School for Women (when it was a teacher's college), now renamed James Madison University, maintained an enrollment of around 10,000 students. In the 1990s, downtown Harrisonburg was experiencing the severe economic and cultural contraction common to many smaller towns and cities. It was moribund enough for the downtown booster organization to describe it as “a place to avoid...filled with crumbling sidewalks, worn buildings, vacant storefronts, and faded pride” (HDR, via Harrisonburg Economic Development 2018).

Today, with consistent growth since the 1970s, Harrisonburg is a city with middle-sized pretensions, boasting a more diverse population of around 55,000, with nearly 20% of the population of Latino origin. James Madison University is a thriving, masters-level comprehensive university, now with almost 22,000 students, nearly 4,000 faculty and staff, and a budget of over half a billion dollars (Rephann 2016). Downtown Harrisonburg has seen a striking turn-around, winning a “Great American Main Street” award in 2014, becoming home to Virginia’s first Culinary District, with around 40 restaurants across 40 blocks, experiencing a four-fold growth in number of residential units downtown, and recipient of at least \$35 million in building renovation investment since 2006 (Accordina and Fasulo 2014), among other superlatives.

To most observers, this trajectory would seem enviable. Harrisonburg appears by most measures a success story. It has seemingly benefited enormously from the twin boosts of immigration and higher education, identified as being important to the success of smaller cities away

from larger metropolitan areas (Smith 2017). It has nurtured a revived downtown, a consistent characteristic of more successful small and mid-sized cities. Harrisonburg does indeed offer a positive, and distinctive, case study of the advantages such a three-pronged basis for growth. This paper will explore the characteristics of these factors supporting the city's growth – immigration, education, and downtown, with a particular focus on the strategies developed (or stumbled upon) to assist the revival of downtown, hopefully offering some useful comparative information for other communities.

But the paper will also take an analytic step back, and examine the more challenging reality behind these positive top-line figures and data points. In particular, it will consider how the context of the city's size shapes this three-way supported growth. A picture emerges of a city benefiting from higher education, immigration, and downtown growth, but not in an uncomplicated way. And in many ways, significant—and new—challenges are evident. Harrisonburg's perilous status as an “in-between” kind of place will be explored, and the problems of the lack of connection – both conceptually, and in the material urban geography of the city – between the three key factors in the city's growth will be emphasized. Although each city's experience is mediated by its own distinct circumstances and geographical contexts, this paper hopefully offers other communities a more nuanced perspective on the experience of growth. Even robustly supported “truths” about what stimulates economic and demographic growth – in this case the traditionally prominent forces of education, immigration, and downtown investment – might not be unalloyed panaceas, and it is worth considering ways to make the most of the benefits they bring, especially when they exist in some combination, as is the case in Harrisonburg. On a more hopeful note, the paper will end by suggesting that the vulnerabilities manifested with the growth this small city has experienced can be addressed by the distinctive characteristics of being that particular small-city size.

A quick note about the approach this paper and the research takes: the analysis is a hybrid perspective drawn from academic Human Geography (the “home” discipline of the author), and from the practical experience of city planning and green infrastructure work in Harrisonburg itself – the latter developed, for instance, through the author’s work as chair of the city’s Planning Commission, among other activities. It is hoped that this brings a distinctive disciplinary take on the vulnerability of smaller cities, as well as some “real-world” research and implementation experience. The geographical, spatial, lens is emphasized in a more theoretical way in the first part of the paper with a brief discussion of the ways Geographers have engaged with smaller cities (and urban areas more generally), but the spatial perspective will permeate the analysis throughout, hopefully offering a distinctive way to understand the conundrums of growth faced in this case study. Pertinent planning literature will also help establish the issues here, and provide a valuable frame through which to evaluate the approach taken in the city – especially with regard to downtown regrowth. The latter part of the paper both sets out the patterns and strategies for growth found in Harrisonburg, and develops a wider analytical framework for understanding the positive and problematic trajectories observed. This fusion of the theoretical/conceptual and the empirical will hopefully offer useful case-study information, and a deeper understanding of the processes at work, which may be more generally applicable.

Academic Setting and Literature

Contemporary human geography is a diverse and theoretical fertile academic field. In the economic realm, geographers emphasize the ways economic mechanisms not only exhibit spatial patterns, but are in many ways determined by the contexts of space and place (Martin 1999, 83). There is a strong critical and historical materialist streak in the economic geography literature, that

emphasizes questions of uneven development and justice at a global and local scale (Smith, 1984; Harvey 1980). Cultural geographers have similarly adopted a theoretically informed and diverse set of approaches to the world, incorporating a critical lens, post-colonial theory, humanistic approaches, or post-modern social theories, for example (see Jackson 1989; Soja 1989; Anderson, 2015, or Cresswell 2013, 2015 for accessible introductions). Urban geography is similarly diverse, including critical questions of justice (Mitchell 2003; Merrifield 2014), comparative approaches to cities across the world (see Peck, 2015 for a critical assessment of this field, and Ward, 2008 for an overview), interpretations and critiques of “global” cities (see Amin & Graham 1997; Robinson, 2005, for example), cities in particular regions (see Myers 2011 on African cities, for instance), and a broad range considerations of the challenges and opportunities of urban sustainability, among other directions.

In general, the geographical perspective can emphasize way broader processes are profoundly shaped – and in many ways emerge from – the contexts of specific places and the variegated spaces across which they operate. It is a diverse approach that draws out the specificity of particular locations, the ways space configures human relations at all scales, and the distinctive ways a range of factors (cultural, political, economic, environmental) combine to make places the way they are. As a key framing context for the processes seen in Harrisonburg, the literature concerning geographical question of city size will be highlighted and reviewed here, but a broad geographical lens with inform this entire analysis.

As a broad motivation, this focus on a smaller city heeds Robinson’s call for a more expansive engagement with the urban world: “the spatial imagination adequate to capturing cityness – in its diverse forms – must necessarily be multiple and sophisticated” (Robinson 2005, 763). Much urban geography focuses on larger metropolises or “world cities” (inspired by Sassen 1991, and

others), and has left under-theorized the question of city size. Part of the blindness to size in geography is because of some confusion about the question of “scale” – a matter explored with some sophistication by Marston et al (2005). The differentiation of size from scale is important as the former is concerned first with “intrinsic” qualities of a place – area, population, and so on, whereas scale emerges relationally (the local is positioned in relation to the global, and so on). The explicit focus on small cities – emphasizing size as an analytical lens – has been more limited partly because of this under-theorization of the value of this potentially ontological category. Size captures something usually very material (number of people, volume of objects, territorial extent, etc.) and that material nature can be considered a fundamental shaping context for economic or social processes in a place. Size is not an abstract conception helping organize the understanding of the human world in the way that “scale” might be seen to be (Way 2016, 139).

Clarifying “size” as distinct from “scale” in the geographic understanding should add a richer understanding of how cities work. Historically in geography, the work of modelers such as Christaller informed an integrated economic structuring of urban hierarchies (Christaller 1966). An array of more recent studies explores the applicability of Zipf’s law in the urban context (Gonzales-Val 2011, Holmes & Lee, 2010, for example). With more global reach, the call for attention to be given to “ordinary cities” has opened up a new momentum to consider cities that fall beneath the global megapolis in size (Amin & Graham 1997; Robinson 2002).

The literature that focuses more specifically on smaller cities is growing. The works of Bell and Jayne offer a wide-ranging examination of the experiences of small cities in recent years (Bell & Jayne 2006, 2009; Jayne, Gibson, Waitt, and Bell 2010, for example). European case studies examine the role of governance in a small city context (Weck & Beisswenger 2014). More U.S.-focused collections and studies also draw out the variegated and often challenging experience of small cities (Norman 2013, Ofori-Amoah 2007, Markusen et al 1999, for example). Others have considered

especially the implications for environmental progress and sustainability in small cities (Tumber 2011; Mayer & Knox 2010; Pitt & Bassett, 2013; Friedman 2014). Recent studies have taken a more regional approach, revealing the different pathways smaller cities have taken (for the Rust Belt, see Hollingsworth and Goebel 2017, for instance).

Of particular relevance to this study is the literature that examines downtowns within the category of smaller cities. The particular emphasis here is on downtown revitalization, with much of the scholarship coming from the fields of planning and economics. Seeking to go beyond the focus on large cities, and to avoid a simply descriptive, single case study approach, a number of authors have developed an analysis of a number of small city downtown experiences and drawn out the common features of more effective downtown revival (Robertson 1999; Burayidi 2001; Faulk 2006, for example). Faulk develops a conceptual development process model for downtowns to broaden the analysis from the specific (2006, 631). In an attempt to identify the key characteristics of successful downtowns, surveying city policy-makers and key stakeholders has offered a fertile approach (Bias et al 2015; Filion et al 2004).

All the literature emphasizes the range of practices undertaken across a diverse collection of smaller cities – there is no “one size fits all” approach – but some common themes for successful small and middle-sized city downtowns can be identified. The efficacy of the “Main Street” approach (with its four-point program) is noted by some (for example, Robertson 2004; Bias et al 2015) but it has also been suggested that many cities have gone beyond this program, and the strategy leaves out critical areas of emphasis beyond the promotion of the retail environment, such as supporting immigration and downtown housing (Burayidi 2013). Beyond the “Main Street” approach, immigration, and housing (the latter often supported through the use of “mixed use” zoning), analyses of case studies and surveys of policymakers commonly flag a concern for “place-making” or the nurturing of a “sense of place” (a prominent theme within the field of humanistic

geography as well – see Tuan 1974, for example). Small cities and their downtowns should emphasize their distinctive characteristics, build on their assets, and look for niche features to promote, as well as investing in creating a pleasant, accessible urban environment. A primary broader inspiration here is the work of global practitioners such as Jan Gehl (2011, for example), and the US-based “Project for Public Spaces,” itself a development of William H. Whyte’s studies (Whyte 1980). The support for historic features, preservation, and adaptive re-use are commonly cited ways of maintaining a downtown’s identity and attractiveness. In addition to investing in the built environment, the development of strong public-private partnerships in projects and planning, and delivering meaningful civic engagement, has also been noted across many of the studies. Focusing and spearheading efforts through a downtown-focused organization, and developing a clear vision (and way of monitoring the progress of a city’s core) are also identified. Across all studies, a clear emphasis on deepening partnerships, “playing to a place’s strengths”, developing its distinctive assets and differentiating the downtown from the suburban environment is evident.

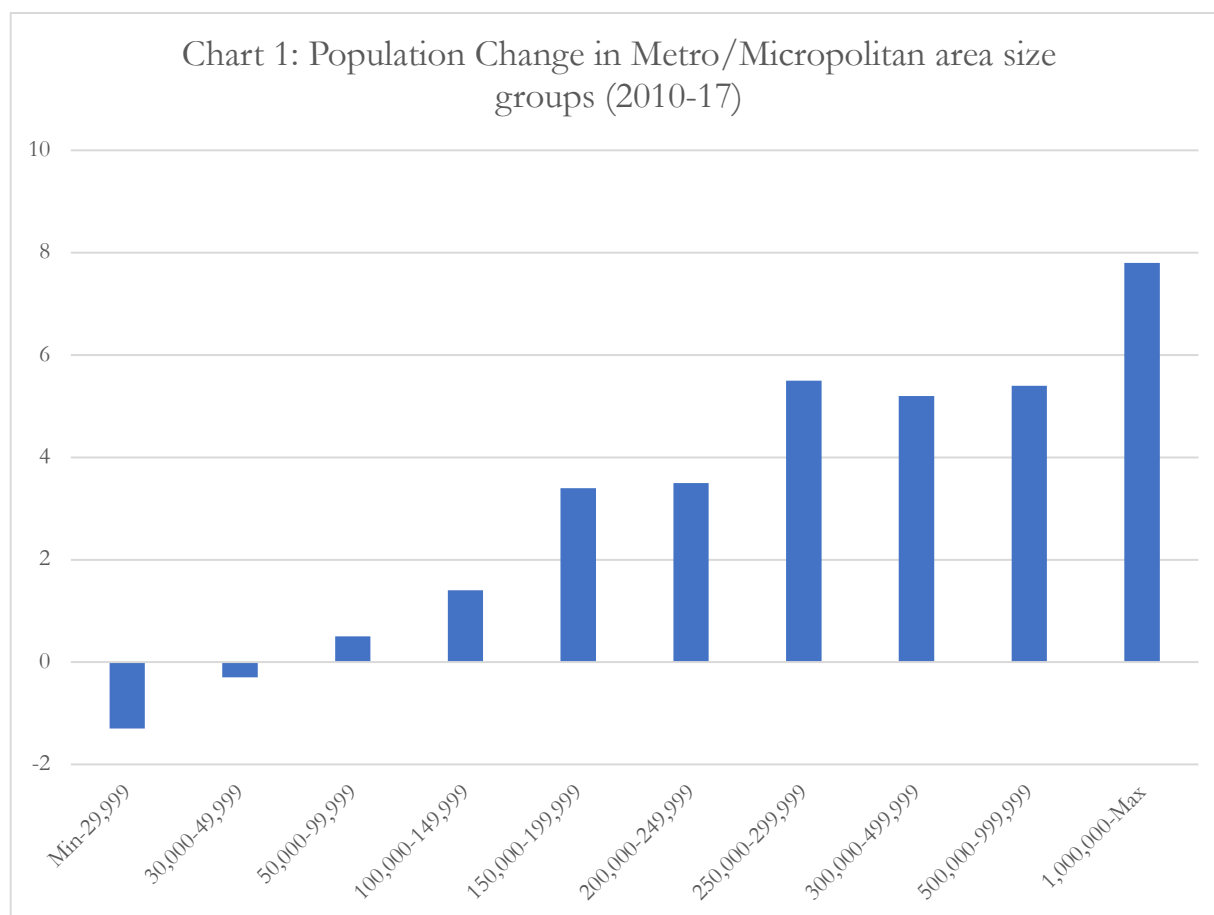
The need for a focus on small and mid-sized cities

Before examining more closely the case of Harrisonburg, the value and relevance of focusing on smaller cities should be considered. Building on Robertson’s (2001) identification of distinctions between large and small city downtowns such as pedestrian-scale development, perceptions of less crime, and less district function segmentation in smaller communities, Burayidi (2013) highlights the social differences of smaller cities, including often less international immigration. Also in distinction to larger cities, the same author highlights that small city downtowns may have more affordable land prices (relative to their suburbs), by dint of their size, be more accessible from more of their surrounding city, and generate a greater sense of pride because of that intimacy or the more singular

focus. A few prominent families may also have a larger role to play in smaller city downtowns, whilst larger cities are dominated by corporate presence (Burayidi 2013, 2-4). Hollingsworth and Goebel point to additional opportunities for smaller cities – the manageable scale, lower cost of living, quality of life, accessibility, and potential to be laboratories for urban initiatives (2017, 13). The same authors also point, however, toward the distinct challenges smaller cities face, because of their size – more limited resources to cope with changing economic or demographic circumstances, fewer civic staff to assist in economic growth initiatives, and the outsize challenge vacant land or non-profit land ownership can have on tax revenue (Hollingsworth and Goebel 2017, 12).

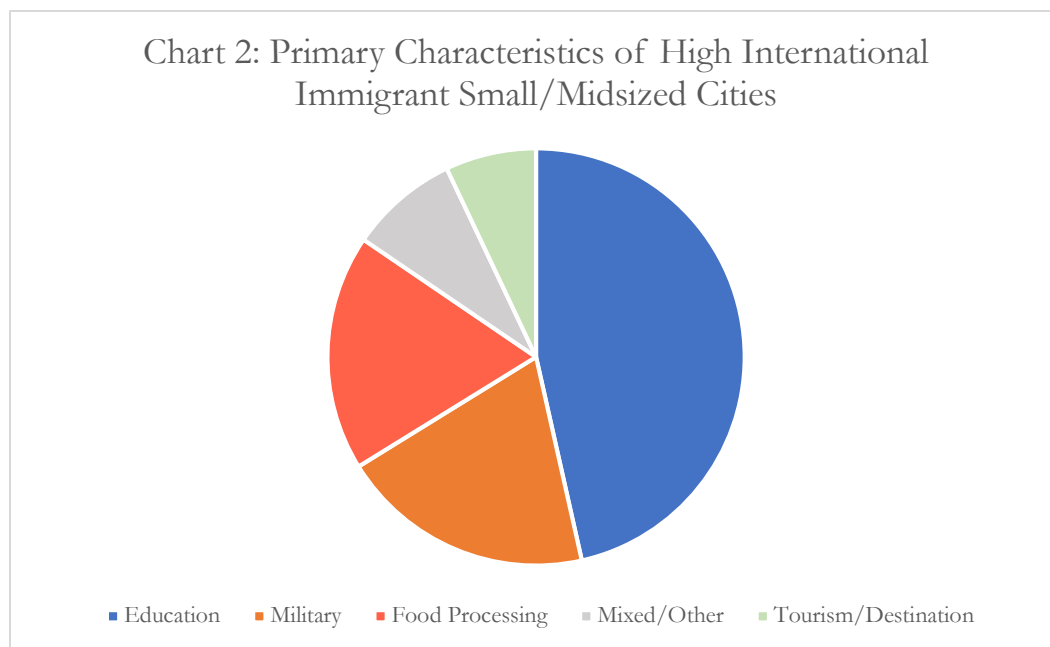
These discussions point to broader issues concerning small and middle-sized cities. While each community is shaped by geographically specific forces, it is an interesting question to consider whether small cities have the “best of both worlds” – features people value about smaller community settings, mixed with the greater opportunities of an urban environment – or fall perilously in between – suffering from the “worst” sides of rural and metropolitan systems. This dilemma, and the balance between these size-oriented poles, is clearly a tension many smaller cities are grappling with, and one that is clearly evident in Harrisonburg. Many of those examining small cities point to the relative absence of this type of settlement in the planning (or economics, or geography) literature. Small cities are a somewhat overlooked category (despite the excellent scholarship that has emerged in the past two decades). This lacuna warrants filling with well-informed, critical, and analytical scholarship.

A few statistically informed reasons might illustrate how these places are overlooked, and why that may be a problem. Chart 1 shows population changes in different population categories of metropolitan and micropolitan areas between 2010 and 2017 (the most recent figures available from the US Census).



Academic and policy attention will naturally be drawn to the challenges of those places at the two extremes – those places (smaller communities) losing population, and those gaining significantly (at the larger end of the range). Are the places in the lower end of the middle (the smaller cities in these metropolitan area ranges) experiencing manageable levels of population change, or is this typical amount challenging for these places because of the relatively less diversified economies and populations? Moderation hides all manner of interesting questions and contexts. The experience of international migration also reveals some distinct patterns (and potential challenges) worth considering in the context of smaller cities. Whilst much of the international migration to urban areas is to be found in the largest metropolises, some smaller cities have witnessed enormous – and disproportionately significant – growth in their foreign-born population. Again, the impact of a large

international migration to a smaller community is going to be larger than that in a much greater (and, likely, already diverse) population center. An analysis of some of the patterns of this international diversification in small cities reveals some common characteristics of those places that have received large number of international migrants. Chart 2 illustrates how around 85% of the smaller metropolitan/micropolitan areas with high levels of international migration¹ are cities characterized as college towns (“Education”), housing a military establishment (typically an army base), or the presence of a significant food processing facility (such as a meatpacking or poultry processing plant).



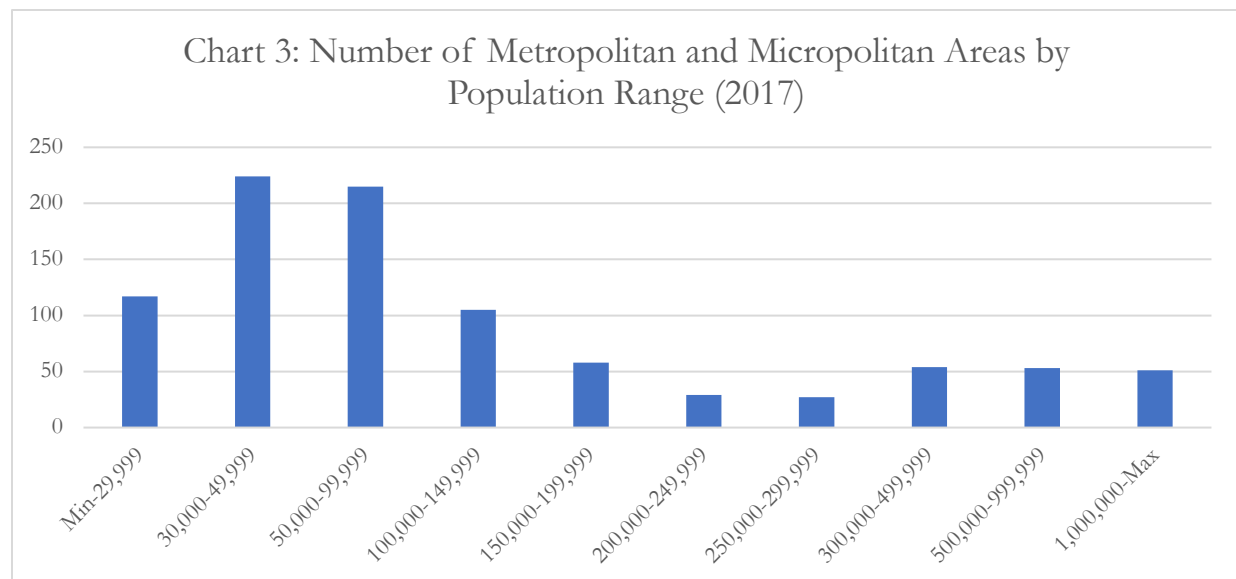
A hybrid feature—quantitative analysis such as this can illustrate the oversize influence a particular economic factor can have on the demographic and cultural character of a smaller city, in distinction to the more diversified economies of larger cities. It also reveals that many small cities are

¹ Defined as those in the top 100 ranked nationwide for international migrants as a percentage of their total population; n = 71; large metropolitan areas [those ranked in the top 100 by total size in the US] and two cities that are on the US-Mexico border are excluded from this analysis.

indeed experiencing high levels of international migration, perhaps at odds with the more typical demographically stable or homogenous small city idea.

Indeed, one of the most compelling reasons to develop analyses of the smaller/mid-sized city experience is that they are numerous and have consequently a wide range of distinct experiences.

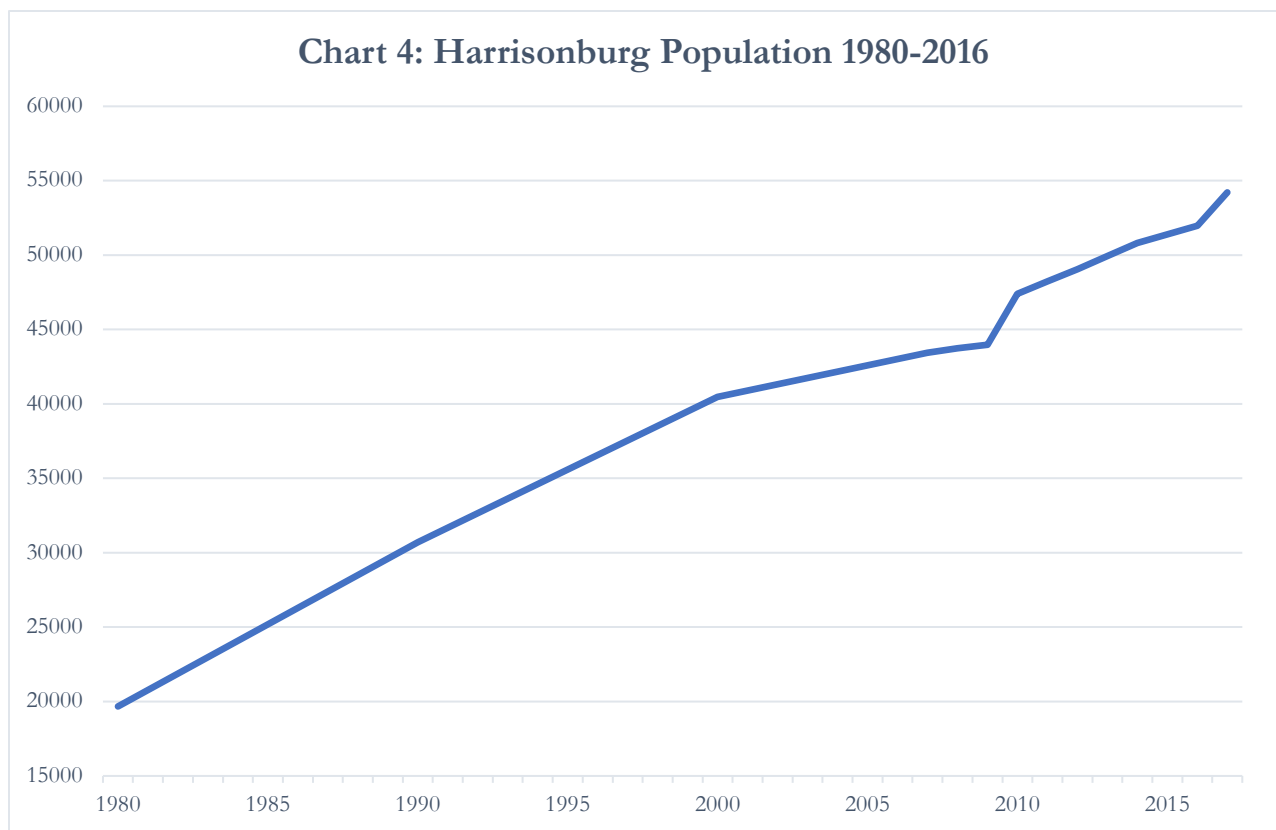
Chart 3 illustrates this graphically.



Although a greater population lives in the largest metropolises in the US, still over 60 million people – roughly a fifth of the US population – is to be found in metropolitan (and micropolitan) areas of between 30,000 and 300,000 people. This in itself is a not insignificant number, but as chart 3 indicates, the *number* of cities in this smaller size range is much greater than those that are larger. There are 658 different metropolitan and micropolitan areas in that 30-300,000 range. In terms of academic and policy-oriented study, this makes them a fascinatingly numerous and broad collection of entities with which to engage and of which to make some sense.

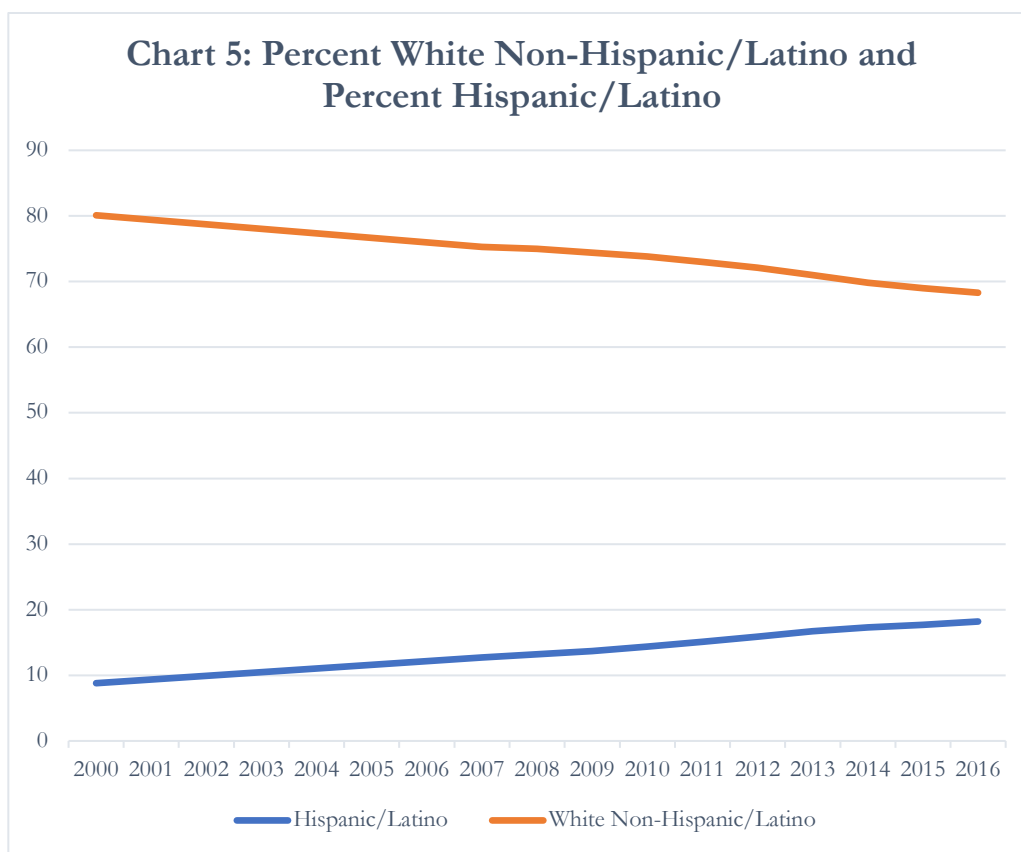
The place: Harrisonburg, Virginia

Some facts and trends for the place in question for this paper, Harrisonburg, are useful for setting the scene for this analysis. As indicated in the introduction, Harrisonburg has grown quite significantly in recent decades. Chart 4 shows the population growth, from less than 20,000 in 1980, to nearly 55,000 today.



Harrisonburg city (in the context of Virginia, an “Independent City” – i.e. functioning as a “county”) is surrounded by the more rural Rockingham County. Rockingham County is the leading agricultural producer of the commonwealth of Virginia, and is also seeing more suburban “overspill”

growth from Harrisonburg, which sits at its center. The overall population of the Harrisonburg metropolitan area – which includes the city of Harrisonburg, and Rockingham County – is around 135,000 people (all population figures are from the US Census). These topline population figures conceal some interesting transitions in the city. The city of Harrisonburg has witnessed a significant increase in the Latino population, for instance, to around 20% of the total population today, as shown in chart 5.



Although the city is still mostly white, the proportion of non-Hispanic white residents in the city has declined to around 68% (from around 95% in the 1970s). The foreign-born population, from a range of countries, not just Latin America, stands at about 17% of the overall population. Other important geographical “facts” about the city include its location at the center of the

Shenandoah Valley, around 120 miles from Washington DC and Richmond, surrounded on two sides by mountains – the Alleghenies to the west, the Blue Ridge to the east, home to Shenandoah National Park – but well connected by interstate highways – I-81 runs through the city, and is part of a major trucking route for the east coast. It is somewhat remote from larger metropolitan areas, but is acknowledged to be reasonably well-connected by road. It has always been (indeed from pre-European settlement times) a crossroads, a meeting point between north-south routes through the Shenandoah Valley, and east-west trails. Its heritage is as this connecting point, which allowed it to grow as an agricultural market town through much of its history, serving the productive agricultural economy of that part of the valley. Today, the legacy of this agricultural role is still present – grain elevators still rise above the northern part of the downtown, for example – and the newer function as a poultry processing center in the city and its environs reflects a new form of agricultural industry. As well as being a smaller sized regional retail and service center, the economy today is also supported by the presence of institutions of higher education, most notably James Madison University.

Analyzing the issues

The paper will now turn to analyze how the three distinct factors of Harrisonburg's growth – the university, diverse immigration, and a revived downtown – each offer an example of surface-level success, but also some particular limitations and challenges, especially as contextualized by the city's size. Following this examination, the way these forces exist somewhat independently – both conceptually as social or economic process, and in the literal geographical space of the city – is discussed as an underlying challenge. The paper will conclude by considering how opportunities to address these issues lies in the characteristics of being a smaller or mid-sized city.

Becoming a “College Town”

The presence of a university in a community has long been heralded as an economic, cultural, and demographic boon – and this is especially the case for attracting businesses and new residents to smaller cities (see Liu 2015, Andersson et al 2009, for example). In the case of Harrisonburg, the presence of both a smaller college (Eastern Mennonite University, with about 1,200 students) and a growing large comprehensive university (James Madison University) have



brought an influx of people and spending. James Madison University is located just under a mile south of downtown, and is itself extended over a mile and a half of the city, crossing

Interstate-81, and incorporating an expansive – and growing – footprint of a little under 750 acres. It is a master’s level university, with relatively few graduate students (around 2,000) but a large number of undergraduates (about 22,000). The student population is mostly non-minority, about three-quarters from Virginia, with the largest significant portion coming from the mostly suburban “Northern Virginia” area around Washington, DC, and suburban Richmond and Virginia Beach (all figures from James Madison University 2018). As indicated above, the head-count of the university has increased markedly over the past two decades, and the faculty and staff employment has similarly expanded (to around 3,745 in full or part-time jobs). A recent study estimates that James Madison University has a significant local economic impact – to the tune of around \$516 million. It is estimated that almost 8,500 local jobs are supported by the presence of the university (figures

from Rephann 2016). Beyond the immediate numbers of people and their spending, the university has helped bring more attention to the city, through its arts and cultural activities, and modest sporting success.

Immigration Boom

Immigration to Harrisonburg is augmented to some extent by the university, but two other drivers have propelled international and especially Latino immigrant growth. As outlined above, the foreign-born population has risen to around 17% of the population, and ethnic diversity has grown significantly, to the extent that the city is less than 70% white (very low for the Shenandoah Valley). One driver has been the role Harrisonburg has played as a refugee resettlement center. The Church World Service has been active in the resettling of refugees in Harrisonburg from places of conflict for thirty years, averaging between 100-250 per year, and offering a focus for immigration of others from the homelands of these refugees (Zarrugh 2008; Community Land Use & Economics Group, 2017). The other principal driver of – especially Latino – immigration is the agricultural industry, most particularly the various poultry processing plants in the area (Zarrugh 2008). The Latino population is estimated to be around 20% of the city total (US Census, 2017).

More than just these particular draws for an international (and recent-immigrant) population, many non-immigrant and non-Latino residents have been active in living up to the city's motto of, appropriately, the "Friendly City." This largely



welcoming attitude toward immigrants is reflected in a popular yard sign, originating in Harrisonburg and commonly seen around the city, and now spreading throughout the state, and beyond (see photo, and also see Domonoske 2016). For the most part, the city has been supportive of the more diverse newcomers.

Downtown Re-emergence

The trajectory of Harrisonburg’s downtown has been one not simply of revival, but of a refocusing. Similar to many other small city downtowns (illustrated in the case studies in the literature discussed earlier), the CBD has transitioned from being primarily a business/professional and retail center, to include a much greater focus on recreational or “lifestyle” amenities, such as



restaurants, coffee shops – and a recent blossoming of microbreweries (the number of these in downtown in 2018 is four, from none five years previously). The retail offerings have become more “niche”, and especially oriented toward artistic endeavors, and outdoor activities. More than just a refocusing in terms of the types

of economic activities found in the center of the city, in the past 10-15 years, the downtown has become more iconic to the identity of Harrisonburg as a whole, and has itself been more clearly branded, incorporating heritage and architectural iconography and drawing on a clear sense of the place. This bears the hallmarks of the “Main Street” approach (with which Harrisonburg has been

The actions taken downtown (and echoed in some ways more broadly in planning across the city) follow many of the precepts laid out in the small city and downtown revitalization literature, with some particular local approaches, which are worth presenting. As a way of distinguishing the downtown from the suburbs, and helping put Harrisonburg more distinctly “on the map,” icons of downtown architecture – such as an historic well, and the courthouse – are used assertively across promotional material and city way-finding. Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance has been instrumental in this messaging. Going further, the fusion of downtown sense of place or iconography and the leisure and “lifestyle” urbanism that has become a larger cultural and economic draw has been notable. The downtown has been officially designated as Virginia’s first “Arts and Cultural District,” for instance. Revealing of this fusion between place icons and cultural/economic identity, recent promotional materials superimpose modern lifestyle-type activities on to the historic shape of the iconic downtown courthouse (see image). Echoing the recommendations of Burayidi (2001) and others, the city has



been purposeful about emphasizing distinctive, heritage-oriented, and walkable street design through instruments such as the “Downtown Streetscape Plan” (2014).

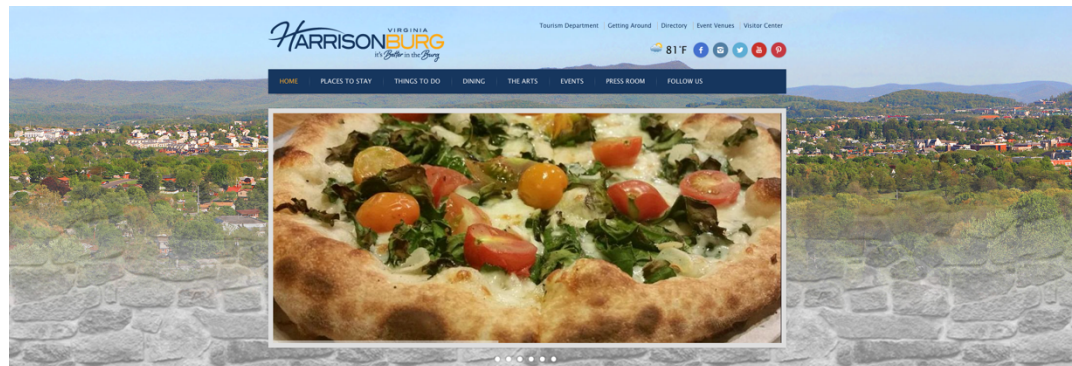
Historic preservation and adaptive reuse of older structures has similarly been emphasized in the downtown core. Such preservation helps maintain the aesthetics and distinctive “place” of downtown. Indeed, historic resources, and their economic and cultural value, are given a prominent place in the city’s Comprehensive Plan, reflecting this concern for maintaining and drawing value from the distinctive elements of the city’s built environment. A further purposefulness can be seen in the robust use of tax credits to support some of the costs of older building rehabilitation. Virginia generally has been a leader in preserving, and supporting the preservation of, historic structures (Accordino & Fasulo, 2014, 1). Offering a further 25% tax credit for qualified rehabilitation expenditures through the Virginia Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program, on top of the Federal Historic Tax Credit program, many cities in the state have seen substantial preservation efforts. Over the ten years between 2006 and 2016, Harrisonburg has seen almost \$36 million spent in the downtown area on historic structures, all supported by these tax credits. Over the life of Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance (since 2003) there have been 250 historic preservation projects of various sizes downtown. This aggressive use of these rehabilitation tax credits have been of particular value to a small city such as Harrisonburg, where older properties make up much of the more distinctive downtown building stock, and where other financial resources are limited.

This rehabilitation of buildings has also generated a small boom in adaptive reuse projects that bring in new “lifestyle” amenities and housing to the city’s core. A recent \$14 million project to rehabilitate an unsightly ice plant downtown has turned it into a complex of apartments, restaurants, a microbrewery, yoga studio, jewelry workshop, coffee shop, and offices. The largest of such a phenomenon, there have also been a number of smaller scale projects which have turned older buildings into restaurants, coffee shops, retail, or galleries on the first floor, with residential units

above. Supported by the city’s Planning Commission and Comprehensive Plan, there is a growing downtown “mixed use” zoned area, and developers have been supported in their initiatives to bring new life to these older buildings, and more residents downtown. There are now almost 600 residential units downtown (from just 150 in 2003).

Developing the cultural or “lifestyle” focus of downtown, a notable growth in the number of restaurants has been supported, and can be seen in the economic landscape. Reflecting growth initiated in part by a “Downtown Dining Alliance” – an organization formed by downtown restaurant owners to cooperate in supporting establishments downtown – the city is home to Virginia’s first “Culinary District” (2014). There are now 40 mostly locally owned restaurants in this downtown district, and the city is marketing and promoting this very sellable distinctive strength (see website banner image). The rise of craft breweries and the successful development of large events –

such as an
annual “Beer
and Music
Festival”
downtown add
to this sense of



its recreational purpose and role as a gathering place. Local food and agriculture have been further emphasized (noting the city’s historic place as an agricultural market center), with well-supported features such as an active farmers’ market downtown.

The recreational and leisure-oriented draw extends to the recognition of the city’s geographical location near a national park and national forests. Successful stores include outdoor gear and, especially, bicycle retailers. The city has been recognized as a “Top 10 Mountain Biking Town” by National Geographic for the various efforts to support bicycling. The city has been

purposeful about this in terms of internal infrastructure with an official “Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan” (2017). New multi-use trails recently completed or in planning have helped offer alternative routes within the city. Securing designation as an “Appalachian Trail Community” and developing the idea of a “Mountains 2 Main Street” connection with other local cities, has reinforced this connection with outdoor recreation. The city’s new branding scheme uses the tagline “by nature” as a further emphasis on its geographical situation and opportunities outside.

It is clear that the city – especially downtown – is focusing on its distinctive strengths and assets to build economic resiliency with this cultural and recreational lens. Beyond building on these strengths, the city government has also been supportive of developing public-private partnerships (for example, with an under-construction hotel and conference center, Hotel Madison, and a potential downtown park), but has been especially proactive in developing meaningful engagement

with city residents in the development of plans and initiatives. The most recent Comprehensive Plan revision has included numerous workshops and genuinely focused and productive community engagement sessions (see photo). A very active Bicycle and



Pedestrian committee made up of interested community members and relevant city staff has been especially effective and prominent in supporting the biking and walking infrastructure and activities of the city. Public design charrettes for the development of a new downtown park were very well attended, and drew much local interest, for example. Perhaps drawing on one of the advantages smaller cities might boast, it reflects a greater civic accessibility for the citizenry with their government.

Underlying Strains

On the surface, then, things are looking good for Harrisonburg. Many cities in the U.S. would be thrilled to experience the three-pronged growth Harrisonburg is experiencing, with momentum coming from the university, immigration, and a revived downtown. And indeed, most people in Harrisonburg itself have, of course, welcomed this growth and the opportunities it brings. But this analysis should also evaluate these forces thoroughly and consider the challenges or inconsistencies found beneath the encouraging numbers. Partly this will illustrate the sorts of issues growth, and even growth spurred by things (education, immigration, downtowns) considered central to smaller city success in the twenty-first century, can generate. It will also deepen the understanding and analysis of how the spurs to growth, and the challenges they prompt, can be tied to the smaller size of these cities. And finally how, in this case at least, the nature of the interaction of these phenomena might exacerbate some of the limits to resiliency in a small city.

First, the challenges posed by the growth of the university. The most obvious challenge here is the rapid expansion of James Madison University, which has left the city sometimes scrambling to catch up when it comes to transportation services and infrastructure, and for the sensible planning of off-campus housing. The spatial extent of the university, and its continued attention to providing car parking to as many student and faculty/staff commuters as possible, has exacerbated the suburban-sprawl type growth that is predominant on much of the southern and eastern sides of the city. Student housing is isolated in homogenous areas, spread across the city, but somehow set apart from the fabric of the place, partly because of the rapid, ill-planned growth, and the focus on automobile transportation.

James Madison University (JMU) has developed into a significantly sized institution, but it remains a predominantly undergraduate focused university – it has few doctoral programs or major research funding. In this way it provides a valuable role in the state’s higher education landscape, but it does mean that locally there are fewer of the research/business-oriented “spillovers” and spin-offs associated with more comprehensive research-focused universities. This, combined with internal urban geography of the college presence, the isolation of the younger, undergraduate population, and a strong ebb-and-flow of the student population as the undergraduates depart for the summer, means that despite JMU being a large force in the city, Harrisonburg is not quite yet a “college town” in a cultural sense. Indeed, the university is such a formidable presence – its budget is twice that of the municipal government, and its student population is around 40% of the total city figure – this has sometimes led to some griping from the non-collegiate population, and some tension with the city, especially when it comes to property and transportation development. One anxiety is that as the university purchases real estate, that property is then not subject to city zoning ordinances (potentially undermining planning efforts), and is removed from taxation. As the university displaces more commercial and residential activities (perhaps over the city line into Rockingham County), this may become more of a financial concern. It is perhaps more difficult for the city (government, or populace) to embrace the university when it is such a large force, and when the city is not yet culturally a “college town” in the way nearby city’s such as Charlottesville (University of Virginia) and Blacksburg (Virginia Tech) are.

Immigration brings people, spending, and diversity to a place, and Harrisonburg has undoubtedly been stimulated by the infusion of life and income the large immigrant communities have brought over the past twenty or so years. But again, while the headline numbers are enviable, they have also brought challenges. The very rapid growth in international migrants (and especially the Latino population) has not brought too much in the way of cultural tension, but has put significant pressure on the city's budget, especially regarding the city's public schools. The latest Harrisonburg City Public Schools figures indicate that 56 different languages are spoken in the schools, with students coming from 52 different countries. 46% of school students are of "limited English proficiency" (English Language Learners), and 71% of the school population is from an economically disadvantaged background. This is a challenge for any school system, let alone one that just two decades ago was much smaller, predominantly native-born, and relatively stable. It is an especial challenge for a small city like Harrisonburg, with limited financial resources. A recent study reported that the Harrisonburg school division had the fastest growing enrollment in the state between 2010 and 2016 (all figures from HCPS 2018). This enrollment growth has to be accommodated, and a new elementary school has recently opened, and the School Board and City Council have recently been engaged in an intensive debate over the potential of building a second high school. The perceived lack of resources (or rather, the impact on the city's borrowing limits) has



meant a delay for the \$80 million (or so) plan – but the community was highly energized over the issue, and it has been the biggest political story of the past year. One of the financial challenges is that despite the burgeoning population numbers – driven largely by students and new immigrants –

these groups have not brought vast wealth. The city's per capita income (skewed by the student population especially at just over \$18,000) and household income (just under \$40,000) are on the low side because these are not high-income employed populations. The poverty rate is around 28%. This has also tended to put an upper cap on property prices in the city, with the changes in the public schools also speculated to dampen demand for city housing, especially vis-à-vis the more suburban surrounding Rockingham County. Another marker that does not help is the low owner-occupied housing proportion of around 37%. With many of the new immigrants to the city taking up less-desirable former student rentals, the fragmented urban geography of this distribution has also undermined more coherent city planning.

Finally, the “renaissance” of the downtown has been an economic and iconic boost to Harrisonburg. But here again, the picture is not uncomplicated. There are still many physical “gaps” in the built environment, some of them self-inflicted from an earlier phase of urban renewal (Ehrenpreis 2017, 165), some a result of the sprawl-focused development and economic transitions common to most American cities in the twentieth century (see Duany et al 2000, for example). Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance – the downtown supporting organization helping promote the redevelopment of the core, has been highly energetic and has successfully helped brand the downtown, and support the growth of the restaurant and “lifestyle” focus so clearly evident today. But that organization, and other initiatives, have also been slowed by the limited resources available because of the small size of the city and the relatively less well-off population within the city. Needs such as the new high school meant that other initiatives – such as a proposed new downtown park – come up as an either/or proposition against that more pressing need. There is still a more modest view of the role of government that means that sometimes it can take some time to see downtown-supportive ideas turned into practice. One of the main challenges for the revival of downtown lies in the “in between” state the city in many ways finds itself, a brief analysis the paper will turn to next.

Understanding the Challenges: In-betweenness and Disconnection

In trying to make sense of the underlying challenges that these three dimensions of growth have brought to Harrisonburg, two analytic observations might be offered: the perils of being a smaller city with the “in-between” status that might imply, and the lack of integration between the three poles of growth.

There is a small/mid-sized city paradox and a perilous state of “in-betweenness” that has emerged in Harrisonburg’s experience. These tensions are manifested in different ways, and can be seen to emerge from – or lie behind – some of the challenges outlined above. Conversations in policy-making circles in the city have talked about how Harrisonburg currently falls in a zone of economic moderation, which has had a tendency to disincentivize significant governmental support for downtown projects. Part of the lack of urgency from the city in regard to a plan for a downtown park that has been around since 2011 is because there is not actually a pressing need for it – this is not a decrepit “Rust Belt” scenario, for instance – but neither is there the diversified and extensive resources that may be found to support such a modest (around \$4 to 5 million) proposal that might be available in a larger metropolitan area. Harrisonburg finds itself in a position where things are “ok” which undermines any urgency or significant creativity in downtown or wider city projects; it is not spurred into action because of imminent or existential crises, or able to throw abundant city funds at things. Hollingsworth and Goebel point to a similar picture in Lowell, Massachusetts, where the city had to be really facing a crisis before it was prompted into meaningful action; “this shows that in smaller cities conditions often do get really bad before successful revitalization efforts can take hold” (2017, 38).

This “in-betweenness” or state of being in transition that small cities may find themselves in – especially as being neither truly “rural” nor perhaps fully “urban” or “metropolitan” in the qualitative sense of those terms – is exhibited in additional ways in Harrisonburg. Conversations in Planning Commission and Comprehensive Plan work sessions have grappled with how the city can balance appealing to outsiders and visitors as part of an economic strategy, while at the same time ensuring a keen focus on developing the community and quality of life features for its residents. In a small city like Harrisonburg, with some energy behind the downtown as a “destination,” it might be tempting to overlook the need for addressing the less glamorous issues within the city limits. The cultural and heritage-oriented focus for downtown might be a sensible approach, but it does reveal another tension between the almost backward-looking appeal to the past identity of the city as a smaller, agricultural “authentic” local center, with the more global reach of both the current population, and its economic orientation.

Whilst overall the smaller size and more limited resources that brings to the city has exacerbated some of the problems of growth described above (this being in many ways the essence of the “paradox” – growth, but with a struggle to support that expansion at this size), the transitional nature of the city’s culture and politics also adds a material context. Although the city’s politics have moved more in a pro-government direction, and real estate tax rates have increased somewhat, there is still a distinctly “careful” attitude in the city when it comes to fiscal matters. The city council is relatively balanced in a political sense, and there is a hesitancy about increasing taxes or being aggressive with things like BIDs or TIFs (or even architectural review boards) which stems from the more rural, small-town age of the city’s heritage. The city has some of the challenges of larger urban areas, but is still, at heart, more of a small, conservative, polity. There is something of an interesting bifurcation within the municipal government of more “progressive” and more traditional city workers and leaders. The discussion above already described the difficulties that

come with not-quite-being a college town, and the challenges that come with receiving a large immigrant population, without the diversified economy to fully support opportunities for these groups. Both these things have meant some more significant turnover in population, with students not staying in the city after they graduate, and less stable immigrant family presence in the public schools, for instance.

One can conceptualize some of the overlaps in the challenges identified above, and draw out a broader issue with these problems, with a diagram (figure 1):

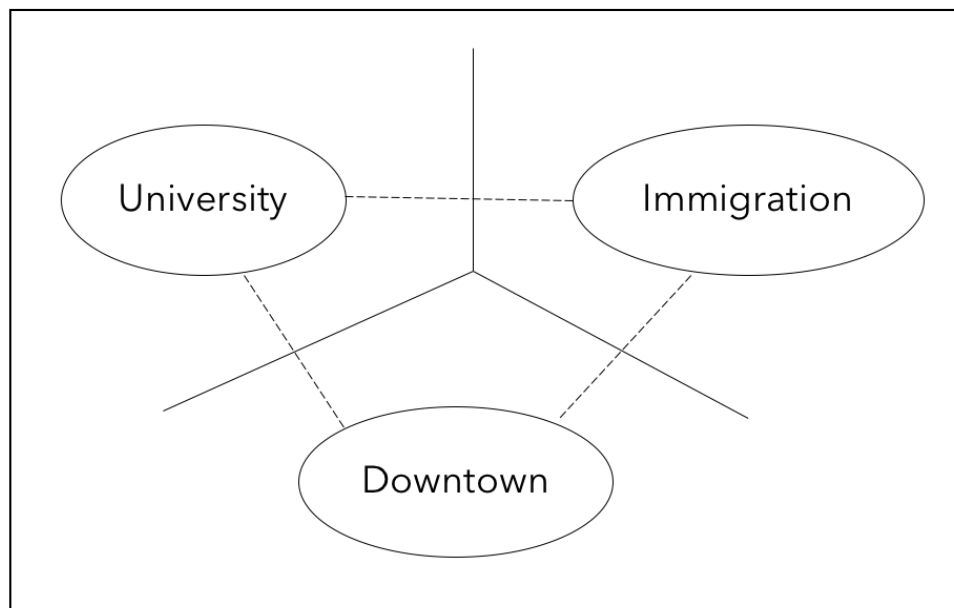


Figure 1: conceptual model of the three poles of growth in Harrisonburg.

Harrisonburg is the beneficiary of these three areas of growth – the university, immigration, and the downtown. But the very characteristics of growth in one of these areas can have some problematic ramifications for other areas in some circumstances, as indicated above: the relatively low incomes

found in the immigrant and student communities, for instance, means less money available for downtown revival projects. These three growth factors are in some ways interrelated, but to a striking degree in Harrisonburg these three things are significantly disconnected, conceptually, in terms of many processes, and in the physical space of the city.

There is very little immigrant presence either demographically or in the cultural presentation of the downtown. The promotion – while not excluding the large Latino, or other groups – emphasizes recreational lifestyle urban amenities beyond the affordability, one could argue, of the typical local incomes of these groups. Again, there is not any explicit exclusion, and in many ways the city is thoughtful about being as open as possible in its promotion; there is just relatively little recognition of the Latino (or other diverse group) cultural presence in the way it is presented, given the contemporary demographic significance of these groups. As indicated above with the notion of the transitional status many growing smaller cities will find themselves in, perhaps the culture and promotion of downtown will in time “catch up” with this demographic shift. Similarly, there appears to be room to develop the interaction between James Madison University and the immigrant communities. The “bubble” of the somewhat non-diverse university appears to preclude much wide-spread meaningful engagement, especially on the part of the students, despite some notably active individual examples of connection and learning. And the student population of the university seems little engaged in the life of the downtown, and this may partly be a product of the undergraduate focused nature of the college.

This conceptual disconnection is mirrored and perhaps propelled by a set of physical disconnections in the space of the city. The urban geography may undermine efforts to integrate these growth factors. James Madison University, for instance, is a large physical presence, but it is almost a mile remote from the downtown core, across barriers such as recently-widened roadways which undermine much interaction between the two. If the college was more physically integrated

into the central city fabric, the city would likely be more quickly recognized as a college town. Exacerbating this tendency toward locational diffusion is the fragmentation of student off-campus living, and its separation away from downtown toward more peripheral parts. This also serves to undermine the vitality of downtown. Along with the similar fragmentation of much of the immigrant community (and the dispersal of many neighborhoods away from downtown), this means that downtown is forced to focus on “enticing” people in (rather than just being naturally part of the urban day-to-day spatial existence), and provide for extensive parking – which has the effect of “suburbanizing” the downtown and undermining its walkability and distinctiveness.

Reconnecting the Growth

This is clearly a more qualitative, and subjective, assessment, but there is this sense that Harrisonburg is somehow less than the sum of these three parts, that it is still an “emergent” city, that there remains a good deal of fragmentation between these things, in concept and in space, which is undermining how much the city is getting from these forces. The three-way disconnections is also hampering the management of the inconsistencies and challenges the growth in these areas brings, and exacerbating some of the pressures wrought simply by facing these things as a small city. Attempts should be made, therefore, to develop better connections between these growth poles. Again, these should be both in terms of processes and the physical space of the city. Already,



projects such as a new 231-bed hotel and conference center – Hotel Madison – are showing the potential way forward. This project is the product of a partnership between the city government, JMU, and a private developer, and is located on a

prime site in the area between downtown and the campus. This fusion of city-university action, and the fusion of these two hitherto separated spaces illustrates how meaningful connections have the potential to be transformative. The university has recently supported efforts to connect more with diverse neighborhoods in the city. A recent gallery, book, and set of events have recognized and celebrated the diverse heritage of one of the city’s historically more marginalized neighborhoods (Ehrenpreis, 2017). The refugee and Latino populations were very consciously considered and

invited to the city’s Comprehensive Plan revision work groups and discussions, incorporating a much more diverse set of perspectives than the previous iteration. Connecting three worlds, students at JMU have been investigating as part of their academic work the opportunities for



marginalized neighborhood development that might come from a new multiuse greenway trail connecting the north part of the city with the downtown. Members of the university and the

immigrant community have been important partners in the planning for the Northend Greenway, which should help connect more people to the downtown.

A number of good projects and efforts such as these are underway, and they certainly help. But keeping a focus on tying together these three important assets for the city to truly mobilize the advantages they bring, and ensure broader, more resilient growth for the city is essential. Currently these three things are divided in space, and more should be done in the city's land-use planning and transportation infrastructure to bring them together geographically. This is especially the case if the city is to realize one of the key quality of life benefits of being a smaller city – that of greater spatial proximity and (walkable) accessibility. Infill developments should be encouraged, and a deeper focus on residential neighborhoods proximate to downtown would also help develop this spatial connection.

Another advantage of being a small city, the deeper civic government accessibility and closer social and professional networks, can also be mobilized and refined to ensure not only better communication between the university and other parts of the city, but especially between immigrant and minority communities and their city government. Relative smallness, quality of life, and accessibility are key advantages of small cities that can serve to help connect these fragmented forces in Harrisonburg.

This paper has described the distinctively small-to-mid-sized experience of Harrisonburg, Virginia. It has shown a city benefitting from forces many smaller cities either partially enjoy or currently lack, and has illustrated the complex contribution, and underlying challenges, these can bring. It has demonstrated that Harrisonburg is fortunate to witness three important boosts—immigration, university education, and downtown—in concurrence, but perhaps not in deep combination. There is significant disconnection between these three elements of growth, in concept and in space, which has perhaps served to hinder the ability to manage some of the more challenging

features of change. Harrisonburg, it is evident, is a community “in-between” in many ways. It is hoped that as it grows and develops it can use some of the distinctive things about itself and its size and tie together these fragmented elements to fully realize the opportunities this growth brings.

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