

Understanding College Students as a Distinct Segment of Downtown Wilkes-Barre

*A Report by the
Downtown Collegetown Initiative*

Sponsored by

The Council of Presidents

*College Misericordia, King's College,
Luzerne County Community College,
Penn State University/Wilkes-Barre, and Wilkes University*

and

The Diamond City Partnership

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Introduction

Attracting and retaining young talent in downtown Wilkes-Barre is the overarching goal of the Downtown Collegetown Initiative, undertaken by students of five institutions of higher education in 2003. One objective toward reaching the goal of attracting and retaining young talent is to understand college students as a distinct group of consumers or "market segment" of downtown Wilkes-Barre, based on their characteristics, needs and behaviors.

The data gathered and analyzed for this report supplements previous market research contained in the Strategic Market Development Plan for Downtown Wilkes-Barre, completed by the Diamond City Partnership in the fall of 2003. (www.diamondcitypartnership.com).

Focus Group Project

Focus groups were designed, conducted and analyzed in October 2003 and February 2004 by project consultant Terry Clemente, MBA and 21 students enrolled her "Contemporary Business Skills" course at Penn State Wilkes-Barre. For more information about this service learning course and focus group process, contact Ms. Clemente: (570) 675-9293 or tmc12@psu.edu.

Participating in the focus groups were 54 students from the following five institutions of higher education: College Misericordia; King's College; Luzerne County Community College; Penn State University/Wilkes-Barre and Wilkes University. Among the participants were students living in residence halls, off campus housing and commuters; varied majors and years enrolled in college; local home addresses and from outside the northeast Pennsylvania region.

Characteristics of Local College Students

- Collectively, the five institutions participating in this project enroll the equivalent of more than 11,000 full-time students annually. Within downtown Wilkes-Barre alone, more than 4,500 students are enrolled at three campuses: King's College, Luzerne County Community College's Corporate Learning Center, and Wilkes University.
- Among the combined undergraduate enrollments of King's College and Wilkes University, approximately 1,300 students live in campus residence halls; an additional 850 live nearby in "off campus" housing in or near downtown; and 1,350 are commuters.
- Most students who attend colleges in Luzerne County are from suburbs, small cities and towns, or rural areas. Few are from dense, urban communities. Undergraduate enrollments at King's College and Wilkes University include approximately 2,000 "local" students, 600 students from other regions of Pennsylvania and 700 students from out-of-state or foreign countries.
- The lifestyle of college students is to be active during evening hours up to midnight on weekdays, and later on weekends. Weekdays are busy with classes, and many students work at least part-time after classes and on weekends.
- Local colleges are considered to be "suitcase schools" because most dorm students go home on weekends, citing "there is nothing to do here" as their major reason.
- Most college students do not turn twenty-one until sometime during their junior year. More students enrolled in four-year undergraduate programs are under-21 than over-21 years old.

Summary of Findings:
Common Threads from Focus Groups

a) Discretionary spending

- The main objects of "discretionary" spending among college students are: food, music compact disc recordings, movies, clubs (both under- and over-21), clothing beyond essentials, and "big name" entertainers at large performance venues.
- College is expensive, and many students work at least part-time for their "discretionary" spending money. As consumers, students look for value.
- With a few exceptions, noted below, most college students do not consider Public Square or downtown Wilkes-Barre as a destination point for discretionary spending.
- Most frequently cited destinations for discretionary spending are the Wyoming Valley Mall, the Arena Plaza stores, and the Cinemark Theater in Moosic.
- Since large numbers of students go home on weekends, many spend their discretionary dollars outside of downtown Wilkes-Barre.

b) General ambiance of downtown Wilkes-Barre

- Most student opinions about downtown are negative: rundown, empty streets, too many vacant storefronts, unsafe at night, inconvenient parking.
- "There is nothing for us there." College students seek places that are open from 6 pm until at least midnight on weekdays and later on weekends. During these hours, Public Square and downtown Wilkes-Barre are virtually shut down.
- Students are "embarrassed" when friends from other colleges visit on weekends, both by the condition of downtown Wilkes-Barre and the lack of things to do.
- Many students cite architecture and the restoration of older buildings as a positive attribute of downtown.
- "Wilkes-Barre is running on empty -- it needs our energy." Students on all five campuses are optimistic about a better future for Wilkes-Barre and many express an interest in being part of its revitalization.

c) Safety and Security

- The perception of "danger" in downtown Wilkes-Barre comes from lack of street lighting, no one on the streets after dark, and lack of police presence -- not from actual encounters with street crime.
- Since safety and security are a paramount concern for parents, this also concerns students.
- Most concerns about safety relate to walking after dark -- from campus to cars or from parking lots to residences on or near campus
- Most students feel very safe once they are in their dorms, houses or apartments.

d) Transportation and parking

- Many students would like to walk to a variety of downtown places and not be dependent upon cars.
- Lack of free and convenient parking downtown and close to campuses is considered a barrier to increasing student patronage of downtown establishments.
- Most students are unaware of public transportation options and schedules. Some colleges offer student vans and shuttle service to the mall and/or movies.
- Students without cars often rely on Martz Trailways bus service to go home or away on weekends.

e) Housing

- There are few well-maintained, fairly priced rental options in downtown Wilkes-Barre, close to King's or Wilkes campuses.
- Many students report problems with landlords who are difficult to reach and who may live out of town.
- Location of housing in safe neighborhood is important to students, since they frequently go out in the evenings and return at late hours.
- Students who consider remaining in Wilkes-Barre after college indicate a desire for affordable rental housing choices for young professionals:
 - Well maintained or renovated older buildings with interesting architecture
 - Lofts or open space design
 - Modern apartments with views and/or balconies

f) Restaurants and cafes

- Establishments in Wilkes-Barre that are open for late hours are rare.
- Downtown establishments do not consciously cater to college student clientele, with a few notable exceptions: Café Rouge (reported by Wilkes students), Gonda's and Senunas' (reported by King's students).
- Students want to eat in places where they are also welcome to socialize in groups. "Eat, drink coffee and relax."
- Favored food types: pizza, burgers, light meals, Chinese food, coffee varieties.
- Outdoor eateries, with patios or sidewalk tables in nice weather, respond to the "see and be seen" ambiance that students and young adults seek.

(continued)

g) Entertainment

- Venues that permit under- and over-21 are desired, where drinking is not the sole activity but alcohol is available
- Most students desire a variety of entertainment options: live music, outdoor events, arts, comedy, and sports.
- Many students like active, lively, moving places where young people congregate (ex: ESPN Zone-type virtual sports arcades; Hard Rock-type bar/restaurants)
- Indoor space for recreational sports and exercise is at a premium on most campuses. Outdoor facilities for "pick up" games and recreational sports are also limited within the downtown area.
- A movie theater would draw large numbers of college students downtown (both pedestrians and cars). It would also likely lead to more places to meet, eat and socialize before and after movies
- A downtown museum for arts, history, and/or local culture would be a destination place for students, their families and out-of-town friends

h) Shopping

- Clothing and music cd's are the two most frequent items for which students shop.
- Most students do not think about downtown Wilkes-Barre as a shopping destination for either of these items
- Some students like Boscov's, while others complain that their preferred clothing styles are difficult to find downtown.
- There is only limited "convenience" shopping near the two campuses for snacks, prepared foods and personal care items.

i) Communication among college students and among campuses

- Students do not feel connected to a "college community" by any form of communication. Communication on even single campuses is limited; there is virtually no regular communication among five local campuses.
- Local daily newspapers seldom cover college student events and activities. Some students read The Weekender to find out what is going on.
- College radio stations are not popular. Most students listen to BHT or KRZ.
- Students do not feel that businesses, retailers or employers use student-friendly communication methods. "They don't even try to advertise to us."
- Best ways to communicate with college students on campus are email, college websites, posters and word of mouth.

j) Life after college

- Most students do not expect to find satisfactory employment in or near Wilkes-Barre upon graduation. Many cite low-paying service jobs as the predominant type of employment available.
- Of those who would prefer to remain in this region, connection with family is the reason cited most often.
- Those who consider staying in the area expect to live in Kingston, the Back Mountain, or "out in the country." Many would consider living in downtown Wilkes-Barre in restored, architecturally interesting buildings, if affordable.