

ALEXANDRIA'S ASSOCIATIONS:
SPONTANEOUS GROUPING OR ECONOMIC CLUSTER?

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A region's economic drivers offer clues to its stability and prospects for long-term growth. Clusters are one tactic to examine a regional economy. By looking at a set of related firms rather than individual firms, an economist or a planner can better understand the forces acting on an economy and help position it for long-term, sustainable growth.

Overview of Cluster Theory

The concepts of cluster theory were first described by Alfred Marshall in the late 1800s, who identified elements of the phenomenon. In subsequent works, Marshall highlighted labor market pooling, supplier specialization and knowledge spillovers as characteristics of certain markets (Mayer 2003).

Cluster theory departs from neoclassical economic theories, which emphasize both competition and a return to equilibrium. In other words, for one firm to perform well, neoclassical economics would mean that success must come at the expense of another firm that will underperform. Cluster theory instead works in concert with new growth economic theories, which argue that the facets of knowledge-based growth make increasing returns possible without a return to equilibrium. Because knowledge is a nonrival good – no one “controls” knowledge and it can be used different ways by different firms – it may yield accelerated growth.

Cluster theory is also an extension of agglomeration economies, which explain the benefits in urban economies achieved by firms who locate near each other. Agglomeration economies deal with economies of scale, and cluster theory examines certain economies of scale within a cluster.

Cluster theory also follows the branch of economic development literature that deals with flexible production and specialization (Malizia and Feser 1999). Flexible production means that

firms are able to adjust their output to meet demand from customers. They also may influence improvements from suppliers, as firms along the production chain work together to refine the process and create greater efficiencies. These concepts “are a major source of the theoretical (as opposed to technical) underpinnings of cluster strategies” (Malizia and Feser).

Cluster theory concepts were first introduced by Alfred Marshall, who noted that observations about a region could be obtained “by the concentration of large numbers of small businesses of a similar kind in the same locality” (1920). Marshall emphasized the flow of knowledge as a factor in growth, and such business groupings could facilitate knowledge transfers. Marshall noted that certain intangible externalities, such as the availability of qualified labor, factored into cluster formation (though he did not use the word “cluster”).

These ideas were later refined by economists including Michael Porter, who suggested that clusters are an element of broader competitive theory. Porter argued that a given location has endemic qualities that are naturally suited for certain types of businesses. Those businesses will be attracted to those qualities and seek them out when choosing a location. When many similar businesses co-locate, they generate economies of scale, enticing suppliers, customers and more similar businesses to the area (Porter 2000).

That growth becomes the foundation of the regional economy. Growth is driven not by an individual firm but instead by the group of firms and their related companies—the cluster itself. This extended the Marshallian concept that externalities can augment business growth.

“Clusters suggest that a good deal of competitive advantage lies *outside* companies and even outside their industries, residing instead in the locations at which their businesses are based” (Porter). Porter identified four conditions that make up the diamond of competitive advantage: factor conditions, demand conditions, related and supporting industries and firm

strategy, structure and rivalry (Mayer 2003). Clusters are a product of these four pillars, and they form a network of producers and suppliers that can in turn influence the pillars.

But what exactly is a cluster? Thus far, a precise definition has eluded the theorists. But there is a consensus that clusters have two features: geographic concentration and related business needs.

A distinctive feature of clusters is the role of geography. None of the theorists specify a precise geographic boundary, but all agree that proximity plays an important role. “Clusters are defined by relationships, not members, and spatial boundaries are variable and porous” (National Governors Association 2007). Yet those relationships depend on geography, at least to enable the sort of knowledge transfer that allows for increasing returns. It is important to note that the geography may change depending on the cluster – it could be a state, such as the North Carolina furniture makers, or just a few blocks, such as the garment district in Manhattan. The relationships by cluster members help define its boundary, which may continue to evolve.

In addition to geography, clusters are notable because of their similar business needs. “Clusters are often connected by common resource needs, technologies, or interests as well as by products” (National Governors Association). Firms may cluster based on input or output similarities. Firms in a cluster may share either, or both, of these similarities. Input similarities refers to needs in technology or workforce. Firms may cluster because they both are seeking greater efficiencies from technology or because they share a labor pool. Firms may also cluster because they are in the same production cycle, linked somewhere along the value chain.

Clusters are unique because their successes are due to competitive cooperation. Firms remain competitive on individual products. At the same time, “clusters emphasize cooperation primarily in terms of innovation: a recognition that knowledge spillovers help drive

technological advance and ultimately, drive growth” (Malizia and Feser). While one cluster firm may give up a bit of competitive advantage to another cluster firm, that is outweighed by the knowledge gained from the cluster itself. Additionally, all firms in a cluster have an advantage over firms farther away and outside the cluster.

The presence of a cluster may present further opportunities for growth at both the firm and the regional levels. With many similar customers, existing suppliers will have incentives to refine their expertise. Suppliers are considered part of a product-chain cluster; further refinement may attract more customers to a nimble supplier. Additionally, a principle of urbanization economies is that the presence of a large number of firms accrues certain external benefits to all colocated firms. The existence of a cluster may entice entrepreneurs to launch new firms, knowing they have the security and support of an existing cluster.

The analysis of an existing cluster has several elements, which may or may not be relevant depending on the cluster. A cluster inventory examines cluster members. This may be done quantitatively, with published data, or qualitatively, through interviews with firms to uncover linkages. A cluster is assessed based on its place in the value chain, whether it is a supplier-producer relationship or along a linear production cycle. Interfirm relationships are examined to determine whether they are cooperatively competitive or mirror a hub-and-spoke pattern with one central firm. The geographic reach of a cluster is assessed. Each cluster will be at a point in its life cycle to determine stages of growth. And relationships among cluster members will be assessed to determine the role of the cluster in facilitating growth (Mayer).

In the context of clusters, membership associations present an interesting lens for analysis. Membership associations organize people around a simple characteristic – industry, education, race, gender, hobby, product or any combination thereof. Membership in an

association is usually open to any person who pays dues. The association is staffed by both people with in-depth relevant knowledge of the group's focus as well as skilled professionals who provide services for the members.

In one sense, an association may function like a miniature cluster. It fosters knowledge-sharing through publications and education initiatives. It aligns people affiliated with firms along a value chain. Yet, because membership is voluntary, an association may not capture all activity related to a given cluster. Alternatively, an association's function may be too narrow to capture the extent of a cluster. But the presence of many membership associations in the Washington, D.C., region lends one city in the region to an evaluation of applied cluster theory.

Associations in Northern Virginia

Northern Virginia is part of the Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV Metropolitan Statistical Area as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. It is home to 2.5 million people, the preponderance of whom live in the counties closest to Washington, D.C.

Northern Virginia's strong economy indicates the presence of several clusters. There are several jurisdictions with location quotients higher than 1, meaning that the concentration of employment in that industry is greater than the national concentration. And when looking at Northern Virginia as a whole, many significant location quotients emerge (Table 1).

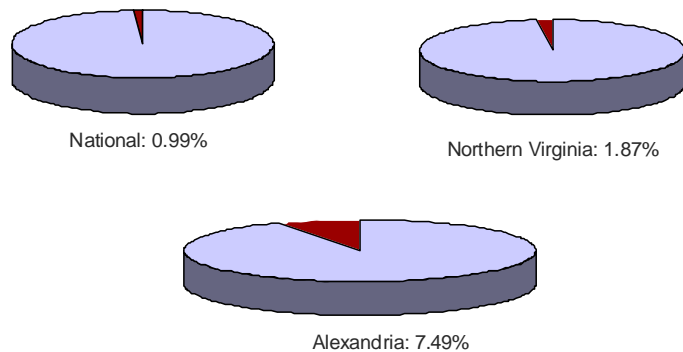
Location quotients can be useful to economic developers trying to assess a region's strengths or opportunities for growth. "Policymakers and practitioners can contribute to their regions' economic success by understanding the competitive strengths and challenges of their regions' industry clusters" (Mayer). In Northern Virginia, one such competitive strength is in membership associations. They are particularly prevalent in Alexandria, a city with 5.6 percent

of the Northern Virginia population in 2006 but 31 percent of its associations workforce; Alexandria has a location quotient of 8.26 for membership associations (Census Bureau; Bureau of Labor Statistics). More than seven percent of employees in Alexandria work for associations (Figure 1).

As illustrated by Table 1, Northern Virginia has a concentration of associations. Associations in the United States are rooted in the tradition of British guilds, which were made up of experts in their field. British guilds lobbied for their members

Figure 1

Associations' Share of Employment



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics.

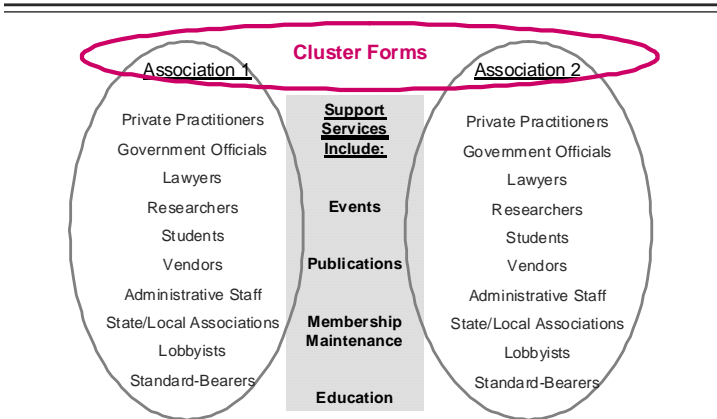
and facilitated exchanges of information (Bostain 2008). In the United States, associations of all types govern the organization of people along different characteristics. Cluster theory views guilds as supporting organizations, not as primary cluster elements. Associations could be considered the same way when taken singly, but a group of similar associations displays elements of an industry cluster and may share information about related organizational missions (Figure 2).

Some associations are based on religious affiliation. Others are organized around a foundation or a health issue, such as the American Diabetes Association, headquartered in Alexandria. Social advocacy groups, such as the American Civil Liberties Union or the American Association of Retired Persons (both based in Washington) or environmental groups such as the National Wildlife Federation (based in Reston) are also considered associations.

Political parties and civic associations, such as tenant associations, are also counted. Business and professional associations such as the American Academy of Otolaryngology, in Alexandria, serve another purpose. The NAICS definition of business associations (code 813910) says that such associations are “engaged in promoting the business interests of members. May conduct research on products and services, develop market statistics, sponsor quality and certifications standards, lobby officials and publish newsletters and books for member distribution” (BLS).

Figure 2

Associations as Cluster



Conceptualization by Ann Thompson.

Associations do not compete for customers or members as a general rule, though some people may be members of more than one association. One example would be a landscape architect who is a member of the American Planning Association and the American Society of Landscape Architects; that same person might also be eligible for membership in the American Association of Retired Persons. However, the multiple associations would not be competing for that member at the exclusion of another association. A hallmark of associations is that many of them are open to any dues-paying member, including students and enthusiasts.

Clusters do compete with each other for labor. Association staff are highly trained and tend to be well-educated, hard workers (Bostain). The broad functions of associations tend to be similar, so workers skilled in event planning, publications or member outreach may be desirable to other potential employers in the cluster. Such transferable labor skills are a characteristic of a

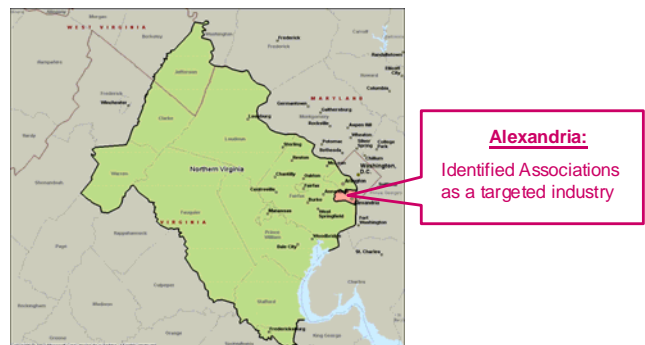
tightly knit cluster. Additionally, associations may compete for suppliers. Examples of such vendors might include conference venues, membership-tracking software and publishing tools.

Associations in Alexandria

Alexandria, Virginia, is a small city that is home to a large number of membership associations. The city has a population of 136,000 people in about 15 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau). Alexandria was originally founded as a port town in 1749; part of the city was included in the original boundary of the District of Columbia (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Northern Virginia and Alexandria



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

There are 100,000 people who work in Alexandria, and 7,500 of them work for associations. Dating back at least 20 years, Alexandria has worked to attract associations to the city (Krupicka 2007). Associations are now a targeted industry for the city, and Alexandria and associations have forged a mutually beneficial relationship (AEDP b).

From the city's perspective, associations are stable, desirable businesses that augment the tax base and have spillover effects to local businesses. Associations are a core industry for the city—that is, they import capital and export a good or a service. Associations headquartered in Alexandria represent at least 5.8 million members (ASAE). If each member pays \$10 a year, that means that associations represent a \$58 million business. Some membership fees run into the hundreds of dollars. The revenue generation of associations translates into comfortable wages for

its employees. The average association employee in Alexandria earns more than \$70,000 annually, compared with a citywide average wage of \$58,780 – a differential of more than 20 percent. (Figure 4; BLS).

Associations are a relatively stable employer for a city.

Membership may fluctuate in a given year, but it is rare that an

association will fold. More

commonly, they tend to merge. The

Commercial Law League merged

with the American Board of

Certification in 1998, and the board moved from Alexandria to Iowa.

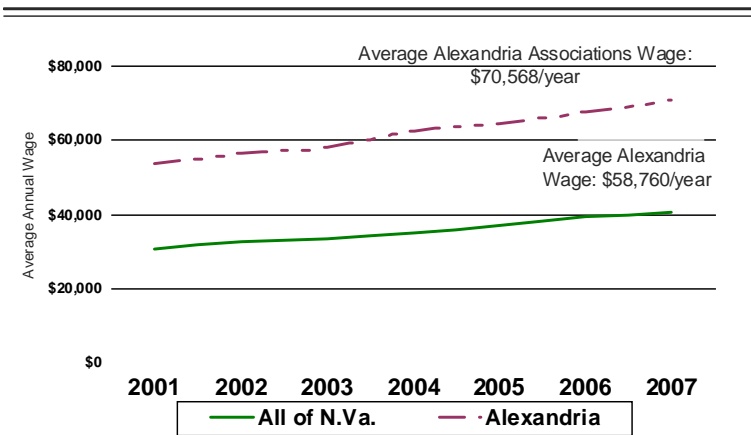
Associations tend to be fairly conservative about expansion. Because many are non-profits, they are unlikely to be volatile in either employee counts or earnings. They have to balance the pursuit of their mission with reasonable budgets. At the same time, many are run by experienced boards who demand quality interactions for association members.

From an association’s perspective, Alexandria offers many desirable features. It is close to federal Washington – desirable for associations who want to lobby policymakers on behalf of their members – but lacks the traffic congestion of the downtown core. Alexandria is accessible by transit. And it has a multitude of high-quality office space in quantities appropriate for a membership association.

The availability of appropriate office space is often the key determinant in an association’s location decision. “Most associations are small, but they want a prestigious

Figure 4

Wage Growth of Association Employees



Source: BLS (QCEW); BEA.

address” (Bostain). Many of the Old Town office buildings are historic and are smaller in size, making them undesirable for a large law firm but well-suited for an association, which average about 276 SF per employee. In Alexandria, that works out to an average of 5,500 SF per association.

The space available is less expensive than space in Washington’s central core. Office rental rates in Old Town Alexandria average \$30.50 per square foot, compared with \$48.60 in Washington (Delta Associates 2008). If an association were to buy its office space, that too would be cheaper in Alexandria, averaging \$346 per square foot compared with \$589 per square foot in Washington (ibid).

Many associations seek space that reflects well on their members and their mission. Members and public officials will visit the space, so an impressive location is important to facilitate a favorable impression. “In one example, a marketing group – an association whose members trade on their design skills – was located in a relatively bland, dated office building. The organization relocated to more upbeat space in Alexandria that better matched its mission. The move boosted employee morale, and the organization was better positioned to represent its members” (Delta Associates 2003). Alexandria’s stock of quaint, historic office buildings in neighborhoods close to major transportation routes is a characteristic that the city can leverage to attract associations.

The maturity of an association can impact its location decisions as well. Associations that have been around for decades—and have endured several economic recessions—will be better able to predict their financial stability and make a long-term investment in a location. For many associations, this may mean buying or building an office facility rather than continuing to lease, though it depends on the association. One executive at a District-based health research

association “noted that her organization leases space because at 13 years old, it is not yet mature enough to make an informed long-term investment in a headquarters facility” (ibid).

The city does not employ an outbound recruitment strategy for associations. Instead, it waits for an association to signal its interest in relocating to the city, and then it works with potential relocations to make the process as smooth as possible. Such a laissez-faire approach may not work for all economic development agencies, but there appears to be sufficient interest in Alexandria space such that poaching tactics are unnecessary.

Typically, an association may work with a real estate broker to help identify a new home. That broker will contact the Alexandria Economic Development Partnership Inc. (AEDP). The AEDP is a public-private partnership that facilitates economic development in Alexandria. AEDP employees are well-versed in the complex process of business relocation and will work with the association to help them navigate the city agencies. The city does not have an associations specialist on staff, but the AEDP staffers have extensive knowledge about city agencies to aid a relocation.

Application of Cluster Theory

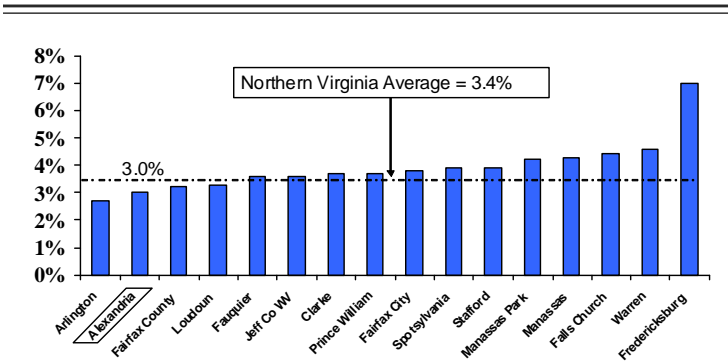
As previously stated, Porter’s diamond of competitive advantage is based on factor conditions, demand conditions, related and supporting industries and firm strategy, structure and rivalry. In Alexandria, factor conditions are primarily labor. Alexandria enjoys a labor market that is highly educated: 54 percent of the residents have a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau). A robust labor market is a consideration in business location.

However, Alexandria does have a very low unemployment rate of 3.0 percent in July 2008, below the regional rate of 3.4 percent and well below the national rate of 5.7 percent

(Figure 5; Bureau of Labor Statistics). Therefore, an association may need to attract workers from nearby jurisdictions to work in an Alexandria office. That may be a consideration for some people, as the Urban Mobility Study ranked the Washington region's traffic as third-worst in the country (Lomax and Schrank 2007). Alexandria does have some access to transit, with three Metrorail subway stations inside its borders and a fourth, at Potomac Yards, slated to be added in by 2020.

Demand conditions for associations are regional in nature. Associations lobby governmental officials on behalf of their members. They may lobby elected members of Congress or they may work closely with agency or executive officials to advance their agendas. In any event, proximity to federal Washington is a necessity to most associations who count lobbying as a priority. The Washington region has nearly twice number of associations as the next largest metropolitan area, New York. Within the Washington area, the 98,000 employees are spread among agencies in the District, Northern Virginia and Suburban Maryland. Northern Virginia is home to 28 percent of the association employment (Figure 6; Delta Associates 2003).

Figure 5
Northern Virginia* Unemployment Rates



Source: BLS.

* As of July 2008. Includes Jefferson County, WV.

For related and supporting industries, Alexandria associations have access to the healthy Business and Professional services sector in the Washington economy. There are numerous vendors to help associations reach their members through marketing, publications, outreach and conferences.

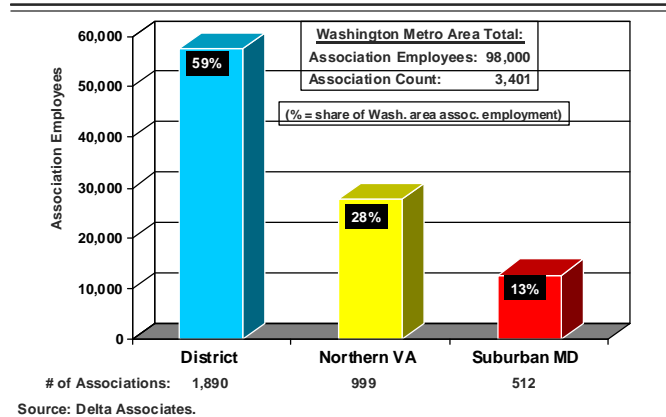
In considering structure and rivalry, associations are more collaborative than competitive. Because they do not compete explicitly for capital and members, they are

more likely to share ideas. An umbrella organization based in the District of Columbia, the American Society of Association Executives, could be considered a supporting organization for the region’s cluster of associations. The ASAE has more than 22,000 members representing 10,000 membership associations—which in turn represent more than 287 million members (ASAE 2008).

When considering Alexandria’s strategy to attract associations, it is also worth considering the city’s endemic features. Cluster strategy works best when it builds on existing strengths. For Alexandria, those key strengths are proximity to Washington, suitable office space and an appropriate labor market.

But endemic characteristics are not enough for vibrant cluster development. Policies should be designed to carefully leverage those natural features and entice further members to the cluster. Alexandria has developed policies designed to attract associations, enable them to purchase property, reduce operational costs and access a premier labor market.

Figure 6 Association Presence by Sub-state Area Washington Metropolitan Area



Alexandria positions itself in a way that an association would be remiss to not consider it as a location. The AEDP will work with the city to solicit tax-based incentives to entice the association. These vary based on the association's size, the specific details of the move and the city's fiscal position at the time of the request. The association may receive reduced payroll or property taxes for a few years after the move (Bostain).

If eligible, an association may choose to take advantage of the Alexandria Enterprise Zone, which is the only state-sponsored enterprise zone in Northern Virginia (AEDP b). The Alexandria Enterprise Zone targets parcels of property in northern Del Ray and the Arlandria neighborhood, which has lagged the city in economic revitalization. The Enterprise Zone, which was established in 2005, offers job creation and property investment grants. An organization is eligible for a job creation grant if it adds at least four full-time jobs at 175 percent of the federal minimum wage, which is \$6.55 per hour. An organization is eligible for a grant of \$500 if it pays at least \$11.46 per hour and an \$800 grant if it pays at least \$13.10 per hour (Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development 2008).

To encourage property investment, an enterprise zone property grant is eligible for up to 20 percent of a property's price. The grant is capped at \$125,000 for purchases less than \$5 million and \$250,000 for purchases of \$5 million or more (ibid). The grant recipient must use the building as a place of business and not simply as an investment property.

For an association's property purchase, the city has policies in place that will lower financing charges. Nonprofit associations—those categorized 501(c)(3)—are eligible to use the Industrial Development Authority bond to construct their own space. The minimum bond size is typically \$1 million and it can be used for new construction or renovation of an existing space to better suit the association. Bonds may be issued in as little as three months. The interest on the

bonds is tax-exempt under both federal and Virginia tax code, so the financing is generally at lower interest rates than other construction bonds. In 2007, two bonds totaling \$80 million were issued for such construction (AEDP a).

Once an association is located in Alexandria, it can take advantage of operational tax benefits. The city exempts gross receipts taxes on business-related revenues for non-profit organizations. For associations, this means that publication sales, advertising and trade shows are tax-exempt.

Finally, Alexandria has worked with the AEDP to foster job training and job placement for associations. While not a formal program, the AEDP will work with staffing firms and the associations to identify possible employees.

Cluster theory holds that the presence of businesses in the cluster will attract more firms to the cluster, and it seems to be working in Alexandria. The number of associations in Alexandria has risen from 340 in 2001 to 379 in 2007. In 2005, Alexandria lured the American Correctional Association, which serves 21,000 members in the correctional field, from Lanham, Maryland. The 100-person staff now occupies a 49,000 SF building on North Washington Street, which was purchased for \$9.2 million.

Co-Location of Similar Associations in Alexandria

There appears to be a propensity for similar associations to cluster together, though not for the reasons theorized by Porter. In examining Alexandria, Porter may be correct that location—in this case, proximity to federal Washington—is an endemic quality that can foster cluster development. But that notion is the limit of Porter's theory. While associations may loosely collaborate via labor or supplier linkages, it is not a formal collaboration. There is no

evidence of product-driven competition among associations. This would suggest that Marshall's thinking – cluster growth is rooted in knowledge flows – is more applicable to Alexandria and its associations.

An analysis of more than 300 associations in Alexandria revealed that there is a high number of transportation-related and medical-related associations. There also are a number of associations dealing with food and drink.

The transportation-related associations tend to be organized vertically, covering aspects of the entire transportation industry. In the transportation cluster, the American Trucking Association (ATA) is the national association for truck drivers. It educates its members about current issues, such as those affecting energy usage and fuel prices. Because truckers are responsible for distributing the majority goods throughout the country, the American Trucking Association is also closely related to distribution and warehousing associations. In addition to the ATA, Alexandria is home to other transportation-related associations. The Commission of Accredited Truck Driving Schools oversees the education of future truckers. The Truck Trailer Manufacturers Association organizes the manufacturers of cargo trucks to meet the needs of customers and drivers. The Truckload Carriers Association serves truckers and operators who deliver goods. National Private Truck Council is the association for corporate fleets of truckers. The Household Goods Forwarders Association of America is the industry source for moving companies. NATSO is the association representing operators of travel plazas and truck stops across the country, who will serve truckers as they work.

The transportation association cluster shows evidence of cross-collaboration to benefit their members. They worked together to stage an April 2008 rally of truckers on Capitol Hill to

If cluster theory is correct, then the presence of so many associations should entice related businesses to develop in close proximity. The precise nature of all of the associated businesses is beyond the scope of this paper, given the breadth of the Washington metropolitan area. However, there is evidence that supportive services have emerged in Alexandria that offer services to associations.

Altarum is a nonprofit research institute that has its headquarters in Ann Arbor, Michigan, but also has an office in Alexandria. Following the principles of flexible specialization, Altarum has developed a niche business programming and presenting meetings and conferences. They can produce policy meetings, national summits or expert meetings (Altarum). With a background in medical research, Altarum's conference services are particularly well-suited to Alexandria's medical associations cluster.

Other association support businesses have developed in the region, though not in Alexandria. GoMembers is a technology company that specializes in membership management for associations. It has an office in Herndon, in Loudoun County, Virginia, which is close to associations in both Alexandria and Washington.

Opportunities for Improvement

Over many years, Alexandria has developed a robust cluster of associations. Alexandria used its desirable proximity to Washington and its supply of smaller office buildings to attract the associations. In turn, associations attracted other associations, and there is now a viable cluster to help propel the city's economic growth.

There are opportunities for improvement in Alexandria's cluster strategy. Although associations are a priority of the AEDP, there is no specific person on staff at the agency or in the

city to help facilitate association moves. Although Alexandria is an attractive location, rising vacancy rates in other suburbs may be able to lure associations with cheaper rents. The ability to streamline the association relocation could make a difference in attracting future associations.

Conclusion

The Delta Associates report found that “associations like to be around other associations—to share resources, experiences, and for the feel of community and shared mission.” Alexandria has succeeded in fostering an associations-friendly environment that has generated some spillover benefits. Alexandria has encouraged associations to locate in the city through tax incentives. Further incentives are available for associations willing to locate in a targeted enterprise zone.

The cluster is healthy and growing steadily, but there is room for improvement. Alexandria should dedicate a person within the city to handle association communication and better facilitate transactions. The AEDP should formalize job training programs to help ensure that there are high-quality employees to help sustain long-term growth.

Alexandria’s association cluster does not neatly fit into either the Marshallian or Porter theories. Clearly, associations are drawn to an area that is close to federal Washington and can offer premium office space without Washington’s premium prices. These endemic qualities are unlikely to change soon. Yet the cluster theories assume a goal of growth, whereas the goals of associations are stability, maturity and longevity.

At the same time, intangible externalities such as a skilled labor pool and knowledge transfer have helped sustain a high concentration of associations. Alexandria may want to refine its policies to continue attracting associations, but economic planners should not become

distracted by strict applications of theories that may not precisely fit. Alexandria has a strong, stable base of associations, and the mutually beneficial relationship should continue to reap advantages for all parties in the future.

Table 1

Select Northern Virginia Industries With Location Quotients Above 1.5	
Professional/Tech Services	3.29
Data Processing/Hosting	2.6
Telecommunications	2.54
Air Transportation	2.54
Membership Associations	1.93
Other Information Services	1.68
Company/Enterprise Management	1.57

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

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