Twitter Thread by Noah Smith



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1/OK, I should really write another thread about university-centric regional development, because I think people often make some (very understandable) mistakes when thinking about this issue.

2/The biggest myth, I think, is that universities help regions by educating locals as undergraduates.

Skeptics of universities say: "But most of the people who graduate end up leaving."

3/In fact, most of what a university does for a regional economy is NOT about educating local kids.

Educating local kids is good for the nation, but doesn't help a region much.

The way a university helps a region is through RESEARCH.

https://t.co/zud8wNQDTh

4/Undergraduates usually leave town after graduation.

But university RESEARCH pulls in OTHER smart people from other regions, and they stay there.

Here's a paper showing that this is the main way universities increase a region's human capital: https://t.co/ofu256tsFi

5/Research also pulls in business investment.

Companies want to partner with university labs, so they can commercialize the technologies the labs produce. So they invest in the labs, and sometimes they even put their offices in the town.

6/So should we be worried that college enrollment is dropping?
https://t.co/NiVzQVgn5I

Answer: A little bit. But mainly because this means less tuition money that can be used to fund university research labs.

7/Yes, it would be great if universities were allowed to admit more foreign students (who pay high tuition that can be used to fund research labs that draw in smart workers and business investment).

BUT, the most important thing is to fund research more!!

8/Myth #2 is the idea that a university only helps a region if it creates a new technology cluster - a "next Silicon Valley".

Critics of university-centric development like to point out that the probability of succeeding at this is very low.

But this doesn't really matter.

9/Universities help regions even when they don't become the "next Silicon Valley".

My hometown of College Station is no Silicon Valley. But College Station, and its surrounding region, are thriving thanks to a university.

https://t.co/2GduLv9SL5

10/Even a humble, non-prestigious university can help a declining region in real, important ways.

Beyond the research-and-investment thing I discussed earlier, universities also draw in residents from small towns, creating pleasant small cities.
https://t.co/2xqpKdMZUs

11/And even if a town doesn't become a tech cluster, universities can help local business, government, and nonprofit leaders plan local industrial development.

https://t.co/hYSbEKxeV8

12/Finally, Myth #3 is the idea that university-centric development needs prestigious universities like Harvard to build new branch campuses.

In fact, this is unlikely to be a useful approach. https://t.co/uxUcLHzmON

13/We already HAVE tons of universities and colleges in almost all regions of America.

What we have to do is UPGRADE the RESEARCH CAPABILITIES of the second- and third-tier universities.

14/How do we upgrade existing 2nd- and 3rd-tier universities?

1. By spending more research dollars there

2. By encouraging companies to partner with the labs there

3. By letting these universities admit more high-paying foreign students

4. A new land grant program?

15/To sum up, the three big myths of university-centric development are:

1. The myth that education is the main thing universities do for a town

2. The myth that universities need to create the "next Silicon Valley"

3. The myth that new branch campuses are the answer

16/University-centric regional development is about research. It's about drawing in businesses. It's about drawing in people and creating a pleasant, efficient city in a declining region. It's about coordinating leadership to boost local growth.

And it works.

(end)