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La. finds 'cultural economy' flush

Study measures impact of sector

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Louisiana's cultural economy is growing at a faster pace than the state's overall economy, according to a state-commissioned study to be released today that for the first time takes on the mammoth task of identifying and charting the effects of the cultural sector on the state's economy.

The culture sector generates 144,000 jobs, 7.6 percent of the state's employment. That's bigger than the tourism industry, which generates 126,000 jobs, Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu said. "And we're not double-dipping."

What's more, culture-related employment grew 6.3 percent compared with 2.3 percent overall growth statewide from 1998 to 2002, according to the study, conducted by Mt. Auburn Associates, a Massachusetts consulting firm.

Jobs in the sector include those related to culture, such as jobs in museums. Some entertainment jobs, such as those in broadcasting, film, music and live entertainment are included, but not those associated with sports and tourism. Culinary arts jobs, such as those connected to catering, cookbooks and specialty foods manufactured in the state are included, but not jobs in restaurants.

"This is a ground-breaking study. It's unique because for the first time Louisiana has been able to quantify the cultural economy," said Landrieu, whose office commissioned the report. "We knew it was significant, but we honestly didn't know just how big. "

For at least a year, Landrieu has been behind an effort to take advantage of Louisiana's culture for economic development. He is hoping the study will be the basis to create tax-incentive programs, workforce development programs and the like targeting the state's cultural sector.

The study did not determine the economic impact of the cultural economy, but it did seek to define it and measure it. And it sets the groundwork for impact studies to be conducted, Landrieu said.

State leaders in the arts, economic development and tourism will gather with Landrieu today at the Sheraton Hotel in New Orleans for a day-long conference, known as the Culture Economy Summit II, to promote the effort. It is the second summit in as many years. Representatives from Mt. Auburn also will be on hand to present the results of the study, titled "Louisiana: Where Culture Means Business."

The report studies six industries: culinary arts, design, entertainment, literary arts and humanities, preservation, visual arts and crafts. The study says the employment number is conservative because it doesn't count workers such as a musician on the staff of a local college because a college is not a cultural enterprise. Musicians in an orchestra are included. About 10,000 cultural jobs aren't counted because of that overlap, the study estimates.

One reason behind the push to identify and nurture Louisiana's cultural sector is that it is a key player in cultural heritage tourism, a fast-growing sector of the tourism market.

"Tourists are starting to go to places that have deeper and richer culture and deeper and richer food," Landrieu said. He is hoping to add value to the sector mostly made up of small businesses. "The overall point is that we have tremendous opportunities that we have not taken advantage of in the state. There is no state that can replicate the richness of our culture," he said.

But the study also recognizes the state has plenty of obstacles. The study likens the state's cultural economy to Louisiana's other major natural resource: oil. "Louisiana has an abundance of cultural 'oil,' but much of it remains untapped and economically dormant," the study said.

The state has to do a better job of producing, distributing, marketing and supporting its culture to better realize an economic benefit from it, the study said.

One weakness the study points to is the state's ability to support its artists professionally and economically.

"Louisianians pride themselves on their culture," the study said. "But among artists, there is a widespread belief that the affection falls short of respect, and too often fails to translate into meaningful economic remuneration."

The result is that work for artists is not consistent and their wages are low. The danger is that artists will give up those jobs, or worse, they'll take their skills to other states and sell Louisiana culture there, the study says.

Landrieu aims to create professional networks as well as opportunities for entrepreneurial training to encourage cultural-focused businesses and practitioners to stay in the state.

Among its suggestions, the study says the state should foster awareness in the cultural sector, invest in education and training programs for it and market it along with other major industries.

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