## **Study Creatively** Gauges Economic Success

**BY SHERRY SQUIRES** 

o determine just how creatively a city is going about its business takes research savvy, thoughtful analysis and, well, a little creativity.

Boise State senior biology major and undergraduate research assistant Ryan Cooper put all three to the test. The result: a creativity index that ranks Boise, Seattle and Portland in a number of key areas that are believed to contribute to their economic success.

"This was my first significant research project, followed by an intensive biological research project," Cooper says. "After years of studying about these concepts, research actually lets you see how they are applied. I don't know how I would feel about my education without these experiences — it would be a lot of book knowledge. Research has completely made my undergraduate education."

And it has given leaders in Boise's government, businesses and arts groups a real tool to measure and pursue economic strength and growth. Nationally known expert Richard Florida popularized the idea of a city's creativity being vital to its economic development. While numerous economic indicators and measures exist, none have been localized to Boise like Cooper's creativity index.

Cooper's research was done through Boise State's Centre for Creativity and Innovation in the College of Business and Economics. Directed by international business professor Nancy Napier, the center promotes awareness of the value of creative enterprise as a driver of economic vitality for organizations, communities and countries.

"We're looking at what cities and organizations can do to add value," Napier says. "Many would say creativity is a resource. It can happen anywhere and it's renewable."

In his book, The Rise of the Creative Class, Florida ranked Boise No. 9 in the United States when it comes to attracting creative people. The danger was that it is easy to become complacent when a city seems to be riding high, Napier says. How Boise could continually improve was the starting point for the index.

"We wanted to know if it makes a difference that we are remote geographically," Napier says. "At first we thought it could be a detractor, but it looks like remoteness could be an advantage. Having to be self-sufficient has fostered stronger and more entrepreneurial organizations and seems to draw people who think of themselves as pioneers."



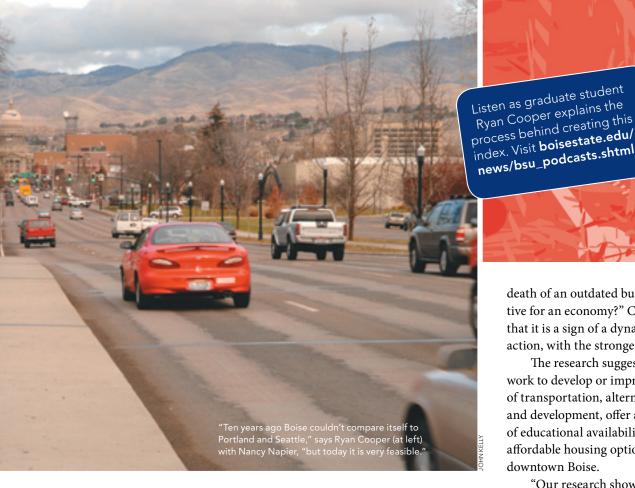
Boise is, in a sense, a test tube for a number of ideas.

The research started about 18 months ago in an interdisciplinary class on creativity and innovation cooperatively taught by Napier and John Gardner, a professor of engineering who was recently named Boise State's associate vice president for energy research, policy and campus sustainability (page 10). Fourteen Boise State students worked to devise measures of creativity and innovation at work in the city of Boise. Cooper stayed with the project as an undergraduate research assistant.

He organized focus groups and pulled data from a variety of sources. He then looked at cities across the United States and isolated their strengths and weaknesses to set an upper and lower limit for the index. Finally he had to determine what criteria could be accurately and objectively measured and also were believed to be a factor in the economy.

His research found that Boise is neck and neck with Portland and Seattle when it comes to fostering creativity, which is believed to be an indicator of the economic success of a city.

Currently, Boise ranks 6.7 on a 10-point scale, with Seattle ranking 6.8 and Portland ranking 6.9 on the creativity index. Boise ranked high — with a score of 9 or 10 — and equal to or better than both Seattle and Portland in the categories of income per capita, crime rate, air quality, labor and living, commute time, and recreation sales and establishment. It ranked below both cities in commute type (alternative transportation methods), natural amenities, recreational



death of an outdated business could be a positive for an economy?" Cooper says, noting that it is a sign of a dynamic economy in action, with the strongest firms surviving.

The research suggests that Boise should work to develop or improve alternative forms of transportation, alternative forms of energy and development, offer a more diverse array of educational availability and increase affordable housing options, particularly in downtown Boise.

"Our research shows that Boise's on the rise and doing some of the right things while

still retaining the benefits of being smaller," Cooper says. "Ten years ago Boise couldn't compare itself to Portland and Seattle, but today it is very feasible."

The project left a lasting mark on Cooper's education, while Cooper has made an invaluable contribution to the center and the community.

"I've often said that our students are our greatest resource," Napier says. "Getting them involved in research is vitally important."

opportunities, educational attainment, educational opportunities and green infrastructure.

Some of the results may surprise Boise residents, Cooper says, especially that Boise ranks below the other two cities when it comes to recreational opportunities, and that it scores very high in the air quality category. Seattle and Portland's access to a variety of recreational opportunities is higher because of their direct access to water, among other things. Cooper says the research results represent an "extensive hypothesis" at this point meant to stimulate thought and elicit feedback. He and Napier are already collecting feedback and continuing to refine the index. They will also present it to a number of leaders in the valley in the coming months.

"It has created 10 to 20 more questions than it has answered and I think that's what good research does," Cooper says. "Instead of us generally asking what makes Boise tick, now we can ask specific questions such as, 'Why is our educational opportunity so poor?' or 'Why don't we have more green development in Boise?""

One of the most unique measurements of the research was business churning — the birth and death rates for local businesses as an indicator of dynamism in the economy. Boise scored a 7 compared with a score of 6 for both Seattle and Portland.

"Who would have thought that the

