

25 Water-Cooler Fables About Durham and the Realities Behind Them

Clarification and Ready responses to inform conversations about Durham

This document was created at the request of newcomers and residents to better inform conversations

1) DURHAM'S IMAGE AS A COMMUNITY

[Scientific public opinion polls](#) consistently reveal that Durhamites by 7.5 to 1 have a positive or very positive image of the community. Similarly, Durham has a strong image nationwide, 14 to 1 positive-to-negative for cultural, educational and entertainment features and 10 to 1 as a place for business and growth. Durham's image declines dramatically among rivals, 4 to 1 in Orange County and only 2 to 1 in Wake County.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Durham has a poor self-image.*

2) LOCATION OF RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK

RTP was carved in 1959 from Durham pinelands a mere four miles from Downtown as a special Durham County district for research and production. It is now encompassed on three sides by the City of Durham and midway between Raleigh and Chapel Hill. RTP is a business park, owned by the [Research Triangle Foundation](#). It's now eight miles long and two miles wide, spanning 7,000 acres, with an extension into Wake County toward Cary and Morrisville.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *RTP is located between Raleigh and Durham.*



3) ECONOMY

Durham is proud of its heritage, but it began to evolve into a health care and higher education community [as early as 1910](#). That transformation accelerated in the 1960s, and any significant textile/tobacco manufacturing waned by the 1980s. Durham is now home to half of the state's biotech companies, with research and development, health care, and education driving its economy.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Durham is a tobacco and factory town.*

4) WHITE-COLLAR/BLUE-COLLAR JOBS

While Durham is proud of its blue-collar tradition, it now has the highest proportion of [white-collar jobs](#) in the Triangle and a lower percentage of blue-collar jobs than Raleigh/Wake County and 10 percentage points less than the state average. The Durham, N.C., MSA has the highest proportion of creative class workers in the nation and the highest proportion of residents with PhDs in the State and South and 12th nationwide.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Durham is the blue-collar town of the Triangle.*

5) PUBLIC SAFETY

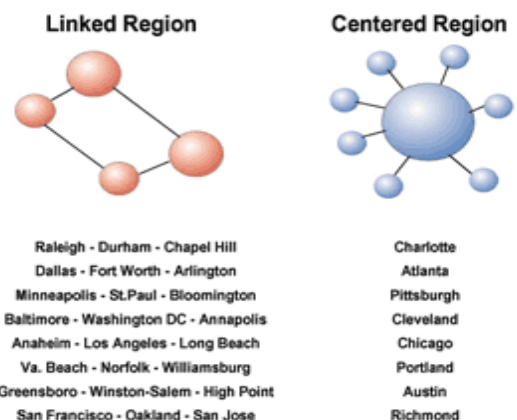
Durham's [crime is at or below average](#) for a cohort of 9 Southeast and 28 national communities of similar size and makeup. In surveys 75% of Durham residents feel safe in the community overall, and more than 85% feel safe in their neighborhood. Durham officials, activists, and residents are very diligent in an effort to further reduce crime in areas where it is a problem. Collective effort has lowered Durham's index crime rate by 45% over the past 10 years. As with all communities, there is a localized area where crime is higher.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Durham has a high crime rate.*

6) THE REGION

Not all regions are centered around one dominant city. The Triangle is one of many polycentric regions with no dominant center. This region is "[family of communities](#)." Think of it much like the universities in each community. They are linked either through competition or cooperation but no one university is dominant region-wide.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *The Triangle is centered around Raleigh.*



7) REGIONAL COMPARISONS

Consultants studying the Triangle (and even some Triangle-wide projects) have been tripped up by this one for years. It is apples-and-oranges to compare a region composed of two MSAs (and no dominant center) to regions like Charlotte, Austin, and Sacramento, which are centered around one dominant community. Solutions that model after centric regions are often impractical in polycentric regions like the Triangle.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Centric and polycentric regions can be mixed in comparisons.*

8) AIRPORT LOCATION

[RDU](#) is located in Morrisville, midway between Downtown Durham and Downtown Raleigh, and straddles the Durham/Wake County line. It is co-owned by the cities of Durham and Raleigh and the counties of Durham and Wake. Half of the enplanements at RDU are visitors, and Durham draws the highest market share within the region.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *RDU International Airport is in Raleigh.*

9) STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Durham school children have long outperformed state and national averages when the results are [disaggregated](#) by race/ethnicity. Durham students also perform well compared to students in a number of other communities, nearby and in the region.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Students in Durham public schools do not perform on par.*

10) RELOCATION PATTERNS

Durham was the fastest-growing major city in North Carolina in the last Census, and it has continued to grow very steadily, both historically and over the first half of this decade. It is natural that Durham's highest [number of relocations by county](#) come from Raleigh/Wake County and Wake County's come from Durham. It has nothing to do with popularity and everything to do with changes in employment, family circumstances, eliminating commutes and other factors.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Durham residents are fleeing to live in nearby cities and counties.*

11) DURHAM'S RELATIONS WITH DUKE UNIVERSITY

Durhamites [brought Duke to Durham](#) and provided the financial foundation for it to become one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Similarly, Duke officials have always worked hand-in-hand with Durham residents to improve the community. Never has this been more evident than today. The vast majority of Durham ACC fans identify Duke as their favorite, and Durham has the largest concentration of Duke alumni, who either remained in Durham or moved back to Durham after graduation.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Duke and Durham have poor relationship.*



12) COMMUNITY PERFORMANCE

A news report once noted that Durham is treated like the “red-headed stepchild” of the Triangle. Durham has always valued that it is different, more textured, and diverse, but there is no evidence in scientific polls that it considers itself the “red-headed stepchild.” In fact, from residents per square mile, jobs per square mile, jobs for non-residents, day-visitors, etc., it is the [engine for the entire Research Triangle Region](#). On top of that, Durhamites are creative, innovative, collaborative, open and welcoming, and above all, proud of their community.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Durham thinks of itself as the “red-headed stepchild” of the Triangle.*

13) RACE RELATIONS

Durham is a diverse, open, and tolerant community, with power shared among various ethnic groups. No one group is a majority. It is also a community that values open expression of opinion and differences: it receives very high rankings for “tolerance” [in scientific matrices](#). Durham is an experiment and model in power-sharing and conflict resolution around difficult socioeconomic issues.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Race relations in Durham are more troubled.*

14) WHAT TO DO IN DURHAM

Durham has what travelers want most, a unique sense of place and cultural identity. That's why it draws [more pleasure/leisure travelers](#) than business travelers. The community's appeal is cultural including cuisine, shopping, festivals, historic sites, visual and performing arts, architecture, spectator and participant sports events, natural areas, markets, and museums. Durham has enough to see and do to absorb three- to five-day weekends, the most popular type of trip.

***WATER-COOLER FABLE:** Visitors have little to do in Durham.*

15) NIGHTLIFE

Durham has around 50 venues that provide [live nightlife entertainment](#) and soon to be 13 performing arts venues. Consult the [Durham Event Calendar](#) for details. Durham, past and present, has spawned many award-winning musicians and recording labels.

***WATER-COOLER FABLE:** There is nothing to do in Durham at night.*

16) FESTIVALS

Durham generates an unusually high number of [nationally acclaimed events](#) for a community of its size, and care must be taken not to undermine their sustainability by creating too many facilities and events that stretch corporate sponsorships and volunteers. The dilemma with corporate sponsorships is that, in the last few decades, Durham's major employers have elected to distribute sponsorships and underwriting based on where employees live vs. where they work. Because half of the people working in Durham commute from elsewhere, half of the sponsorships follow them home. While Durham draws some sponsorships from employers in other communities, there is an extreme imbalance.

***WATER-COOLER FABLE:** Events and facilities can be created without concern for corporate sponsorships, volunteers, and audiences.*

17) ALLIGIANCE TO PLACE

Around 3 out of every 4 residents of the Triangle [prefer to characterize where they live](#) by a specific city, town, or county and prefer to reserve the term "Raleigh-Durham" for the name of the jointly owned airport. The number seeing it as one area shrinks even more the longer a person lives here. National surveys show that, by 4 to 1, people see this area as made of separate but nearby communities. Formally Durham and Raleigh anchor different metropolitan statistical areas.

It is true that surveys of news media show a near-even split between the perception of separate communities vs. one big place. The media have divided the world into large, multi-community viewing, listening, listing, or marketing areas. Oftentimes these multi-community areas get misused as the names of single "places."

***WATER-COOLER FABLE:** People think of Durham and Raleigh as one place.*

18) HOUSING FOR EXECUTIVES

Durham is more affordable and closer to employment centers, but it also has a variety of housing options including vibrant historic neighborhoods, urban lofts, modern planned neighborhoods, grand golf course communities, and areas with homes and several acres, including farms.

***WATER-COOLER FABLE:** Durham lacks housing for executives.*

19) NOTORIETY FOR CONVENTIONS

Durham hosts more than 4,000 conventions and meetings each year, but it is different from similar-sized destinations in North Carolina. Durham mostly hosts conventions and meetings that are international/national/regional in scope (65%). It is true that most third-tier destinations (like Raleigh, Durham, Greensboro, or Winston-Salem) host predominantly state conventions, even if they aren't the state capital. Durham is also home to 37 associations, of which 65% also happen to be international/national/regional in scope.

***WATER-COOLER FABLE:** Durham draws mostly local and state conventions.*

20) LAND AREA AND DEVELOPMENT

Durham is the state's fourth-largest city, shoehorned into the 17th smallest county in land area. Also, a third or more of the county was set aside in watershed to create Falls Lake, so that Raleigh and Wake County could develop. Durham must take steps to protect its unique sense of place and cultural identity from [population pressures](#). One thing is a given: Durham will come to rely more and more on visitors and health care to fuel the business climate and to spread the burden of funding local government services.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Durham will always have plenty of developable land.*

21) DESTINATION MARKETING

Visitor bureaus are local tourism development authorities, by nature designed to reinvest local occupancy taxes from business in a specific city or county in order to fuel that specific business climate and expand its tax base. They participate in scores of cooperative marketing efforts to stretch marketing dollars, while ensuring specific community brands. The three major universities that give the polycentric Triangle its name have proven that rivalry can be invigorating. Similarly, independent marketing keeps several different destinations on the shelf, ensuring many more bites of the tourism "apple."

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *CVBs promote regions rather than destination communities.*

22) MAIL DELIVERY ADDRESS ASSIGNMENTS

For some time now, the United States Postal Service (USPS) has assigned street delivery designations for mail with little or no regard for actual physical locations. While this may permit the USPS to better deploy employee capacity, such designations are very confusing for visitors, newcomers, and residents. In the early 1990s, Durham led a successful effort to correct the addresses for thousands of businesses in Southeast Durham that had been mis-assigned as Morrisville. The same will need to be done for those in Southwest Durham mis-assigned as Chapel Hill, Northwest Durham mis-assigned as Hillsborough, Northeast Durham mis-assigned as Butner, etc.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Postal addresses reflect actual physical locations.*

23) DURHAM CIVIC CENTER

The name of the [publicly owned civic center](#) is simply "Durham Civic Center." A privately owned hotel with a Marriott franchise leases the air rights above the building, and it is appropriately named "[Durham Marriott At The Civic Center](#)." The owners of the hotel also contract with the City and County to manage the public Civic Center, but the naming rights were never sold or transferred. The Civic Center is governed by a publicly appointed Durham Civic Center Authority.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *The name of Durham's largest meeting facility is Durham Marriott At The Civic Center.*

24) VISITORS

Visitors have little awareness of local regions. There are two reasons that less than 5% combine visits to more than one community on the same trip. One, there is so much to do in some communities like Durham that spending time commuting back and forth to other communities is undesirable. Two, hills and dales, duplicate street names and places as well as irregular street patterns create distance friction that studies have shown makes a mile at home feel like 20 miles when visiting another place.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *Visitors travel to regions not communities.*

25) I-85

This is a great trivia question. I-85 is a north-south Interstate, but through Durham it predominantly [runs east-west](#). Durham is one of the nation's few communities traversed by two major Interstates (I-40 which runs east-west, and I-85, which runs north-south) and one of the very few through which two major Interstates run parallel.

WATER-COOLER FABLE: *I-85 is an east-west Interstate.*



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