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Can New York Rival Silicon Valley?

Mayor Michael Bloomberg plans to build a new engineering school. But will that help to foster the next Facebook or Apple, and keep it in the city?

Silicon Valley's Head Start

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The mayor's aspirations in building a new science and engineering campus are laudable. Serendipity played a vital role in the formation of Silicon Valley, and fortune may smile upon New York City's plan -- but in my estimation, overtaking Silicon Valley even in 20 years is unlikely.

The most likely outcome is that many of the very best graduates of New York City's new campus will move to Silicon Valley. This is already true, in the case of M.I.T. and Harvard in Boston, Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, the Universities of Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin, and elsewhere. For those driven to compete against and work with the best technologists in the world, Silicon Valley is the mecca.

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Silicon Valley is monomaniacal about technology. Without such an attitude, New York City will find it difficult to compete successfully in building the great technology companies of the future. All the things that make New York City what it is -- Wall Street finance, music, fashion, the arts -- about these, Silicon Valley simply does not care. A new campus will not change this profound cultural difference. New York City is M.B.A. and M.F.A. friendly, not engineer friendly.

My hunch is that, if Michael Bloomberg is successful at creating another great science and engineering university, we in California will thank him for an investment that creates a new source of superb engineers. They will be especially needed and welcomed if California continues to cut funding to its universities.

In the Californian tradition, I say, "go for it."

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