

Town-Gown Cooperation in Community Development

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More than 50 percent of all degree-granting public and private institutions are in central cities, according to a 2002 report by the Initiative for the Competitive Inner City. Until recently, most urban colleges and universities remained enclaves of intellectual pursuit, seldom collaborating with surrounding neighborhoods and host cities to address urban problems.¹ Now universities are adopting a perspective that puts more focus on surrounding communities.²

Both external and internal developments inspired the change. Externally, economic and social changes in cities and neighborhoods encouraged universities to enhance the neighborhood and promote urban revitalization. Internally, colleges and universities realized that improving the quality of life in neighboring communities promotes a positive image and furthers universities' ability to recruit students, faculty, and staff.

Unlike corporations that can just leave a distressed area, most colleges and universities' fixed assets make them unlikely to relocate. In fact, colleges and universities are among the largest landowners and developers in their cities and exert a powerful influence.³ Consider that at the end of fiscal year 1996, the book value for urban institutions' land and buildings was almost \$100 billion, including \$8 billion in purchases from only the prior year.⁴ And the importance of universities to local economies is well known. Among the most significant economic impacts are enhancing the industry and

technology base, employing large numbers of people, and generating revenue for local governments through expenditures on salaries, goods, and services.

Partnering for Common Goals

Active involvement from the community is critical to success. To spur economic and community development, urban colleges and universities have developed ongoing relationships with municipal governments and community-based organizations (CBOs). Many universities also have established



offices of community affairs or community engagement. The offices are typically led by someone from the community rather than someone from academia. They serve as both university portal and community liaison.

Meanwhile, local governments recognize the importance of colleges and universities as anchor institutions in economic and community development, and are being increasingly proactive. For example, the Boston Redevelopment Authority now has a person whose role is to be a liaison with institutions of higher education.

As formal partnerships have increased,



Northeastern University's Davenport Commons project presents a model of community housing. Photograph: Mary Knox Merrill

higher-learning institutions have provided practical, technical assistance, such as neighborhood planning or capacity-building for community-based organizations. For example, Pratt Institute's Center for Community and Environmental Design has developed long-term relationships with several New York City CBOs, facilitating a collaborative planning process with community partners, and helping to develop joint agendas driven by local stakeholders.⁵

The University of Pennsylvania's Center for Community Partnerships has integrated academic work with the needs of the West Philadelphia community

through academically based community service (ABCS). ABCS is rooted in problem-oriented research and teaching.⁶ The university offers approximately 160 such courses in areas including the environment, health, education, and the arts.

Other university initiatives intended to support community development include skills training (generally in classes for residents), professional services (such as visiting nurses or legal clinics), information technology (such as shared databases or training for CBO staff), and technical assistance to small businesses. Funding comes from sources such as the Office of University Partnerships

at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

In some cases, colleges and universities are involved in developing retail stores and housing, enhancing historic landmarks or parks, improving local schools, and even providing sanitation and security services. Their activities usually have an immediate impact on the neighborhood and on the city.

One example is Howard University in Washington, DC, which bought and held nearby blighted property for decades. In 1997, it launched a massive revitalization initiative. The initial plan was to rehabilitate 28 vacant houses and build new housing

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The Community Affairs Officers of the Federal Reserve System invite paper submissions for the seventh annual Federal Reserve Community Affairs Research Conference, to be held April 28-29, 2011, in Arlington, Virginia. The goal of the conference is to highlight new research that can directly inform community development policy and practice in the wake of the deepest recession since the pre-War period. Weblink: www.frbsf.org/community/2011ResearchConference.

on 17 additional vacant lots. Since then, Howard has expanded its plans to include rehabilitating a former bread factory into university offices and a community center, renovating a neighborhood hospital, opening a neighborhood security office, adding amenities to street and alley resurfacing, redeveloping open space, launching a major telecommunications infrastructure project, and boosting homeownership for Howard employees and local residents.

In Boston, Northeastern University's Davenport Commons project presents a model of community housing for both local residents and students.⁷ It consists of 125 units of housing for students and staff, 60 affordable owner-occupied units, and 2,100 square feet of retail space. The development process was complex, involving community members, the university, and the City of Boston. Community members were concerned about a range of issues including the physical design and the threat of gentrification. Eventually, the university partnered on the project with Madison Park Development Corporation, a community development corporation, and with two local developers.

In another example, the early 1980s saw Worcester's Clark University establish a revitalization partnership with local residents, businesses, and churches. The Main South Community Development Corporation partnership (now the University Park Partnership) was formalized in 1995. Clark University holds a seat on the board of directors. Today there is a broad-based strategy emphasizing the development of neighborhood amenities and the expansion of economic opportunities for residents and local businesses. In 2004 the partnership was awarded the inaugural

Carter Partnership Award, the nation's most prestigious recognition for collaborations between universities and communities.⁸

Opportunities

The evolving town-gown partnership presents new opportunities and challenges. Some local governments and nearby residents may mobilize to counter university activities because of social and economic concerns, quality of life in the neighborhood, or the planning and design process. Understandably, partnerships have the most potential for success when they balance academic and community needs through a participatory and inclusive planning process.

Members enter a partnership with interests that are important to them but not necessarily to others. Nevertheless, institutions, municipalities, and neighborhoods are recognizing that they are part of a large, complex system and that their fates are intertwined. Universities contribute to the economy, civic life, and the built environment by attracting human capital and technological innovation and by boosting the skills of the workforce. The city and neighborhood in turn support the university's ability to function by offering the public services and social and cultural amenities that help to keep people and jobs in the area.

Successful collaboration requires a sufficient investment of time and resources from each stakeholder to create lasting change. Ongoing communication and long-term relationships can generate goodwill in the neighborhood, support from the public sector, and a sense of cohesion and cooperation within the university itself.

Today, many universities and similar

anchor institutions understand their important role in urban economic and community development and are demonstrating just how well enlisting diverse views can further their own goals and those of the world around them.

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Endnotes

¹ This article is an outgrowth of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy's City, Land, and the University program, launched in 2001, and the report *Town-Gown Collaboration in Land Use and Development*, available at www.lincolnst.edu.

² Although we focus on urban institutions, rural colleges and universities also play a role in community development. In Maine, for instance, it was the institutions of higher education that ensured that broadband came to remote areas.

³ David Perry and Wim Wiewel, *The University as Urban Developer* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2005).

⁴ Initiative for a Competitive Inner City and CEOs for Cities, *Leveraging Colleges and Universities for Urban Economic Revitalization: An Action Agenda* (Chicago: CEOs for Cities, 2002).

⁵ Avis Vidal, Nancy Nye, Christopher Walker, Carlos Manjarrez, and Clare Romanik, *Lessons from the Community Outreach Partnership Center Program* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2002).

⁶ Elizabeth Strom, "The Political Strategies behind University-Based Development," in David Perry, Wim Wiewel, and Carrie Menendez, "The City, Communities, and Universities: 360 Degrees of Planning and Development" (working paper, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2009): 116-130.

⁷ Allegra Calder, Gabriel Grant, and Holly Hart Muson, "No Such Thing as Vacant Land: Northeastern University and Davenport Commons," in Perry and Wiewel (2005): 253-267.

⁸ John Brown and Jacqueline Geoghegan, "Bringing the Campus to the Community: An Examination of the Clark University Park Partnership after Ten Years," in *The Impact of Large Landowners on Land Markets*, ed. Raphael W. Bostic (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2009).

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