

Urban Enhancement: The U.S. University Paradigm

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Abstract

Urban universities in the USA have long played a pivotal role in the communities they serve, enlighten, and develop. Moving further away from the original town-and-gown dichotomy prevalent in medieval Europe, American urban universities are becoming growingly aware of their role as anchor institutions, with a major mission in the revitalization and enhancement of the urban communities hosting them. Engines of metropolitan success, U.S. urban-core universities illustrate the civic responsibility of higher education in a number of partnership models, all indicative of their community engagement as part of the university's comprehensive educational mission.

Key words

Urban university, university engagement, local community needs, scholarship, urban revival, partnerships.

Urban universities as anchors of progress

Why this approach to urban universities and their contribution to community development? Because “more than ever before, societies now look to higher education to promote social cohesion, political stability, and economic prosperity” (Riposa 51). Why this emphasis on urban universities? Again in Riposa's words,

given that the majority of our national population resides either within or at close proximity to urban centers, and that most of the working poor and minorities reside in cities, urban universities are poised to make even greater contributions today than in the past to national and individual development (Riposa 52).

The stakes are high by any standards, with urban universities called to educate the workforce, to develop democratic-savvy citizens, and to contribute to increasing overall productivity. In short, universities located in urban/metropolitan areas are crucial to individual growth and opportunity and to national productivity and development. This is the major tenet that the paper aims to document.

A quick look at urban universities in the USA indicates that they are more than just institutions of higher education based in a city. The modern U.S. urban university continues to be located in an urban agglomeration but, more importantly, it is a socially

involved institution that serves the population of the city or of the region hosting it. As such, urban universities are necessarily “of the city”, not only “in the city”.

The Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (www.cumuonline.org/index.htm, a distinctly U.S.I initiative), emphasizes that urban universities’ destinies are intertwined with the urban communities in which they function, thus accounting for distinct key features and the overall distinct profile urban universities have developed within the American academic landscape.

According to the above Coalition, urban universities will share the following features in the USA: a) they will be located in metropolitan areas, often times in major ones; b) they will strive to achieve excellence through high-caliber teaching, research, and service to the local community; c) they will enroll a diverse student body, thus reflecting the demographic trends in the region; d) public service and a high degree of responsiveness to the needs of the region will enjoy pride of place in the university mission; e) the universities will be an academic hub, serving the region by educating citizens for democracy and for the workforce, but also a cultural and intellectual resource for the community at large; f) the universities will support the local community in different ways, by engaging in partnerships with local organizations and business included; and finally, g) they will use their urban commitment in order to enhance their students’ education. Needless to state that the above features carrying the will verb, do so in order to indicate volition, that is vision and mission respectively, and not a mere future action.

Given the above criteria, close to 100 U.S. universities would qualify as urban institutions of higher learning. Among them there will be prominent institutions like Columbia University and New York University in New York City, University of Pennsylvania, University of Chicago, University of California at Los Angeles, and the like, all major players in the American higher education arena.

In addition to the characteristic features above, urban universities attract a unique educational market: commonly older students, many on part-time or full-time jobs, who choose to pursue an advanced education out of economic necessity in order to better their career prospects and their standing in life. All these characteristics are ultimately subsumed to the quintessential feature of urban universities, a feature that was forged over decades of institutional accommodation to the needs and requirements of the background community, as well as to the challenges and opportunities arising from this urban setting. After all, it is the urban university’s distinct city-embracing philosophy that sets it aside from the other higher education institutions.

...the urban university must see itself inexorably connected to its urbanized milieu and thus seek to develop programs for a broad-based population on a wider range of issues faced by local communities and cities. ... By looking outward, the urban university connects its educational mission to the needs of its immediate surroundings, creating a communication linkage between school and city. ...Indeed, the city becomes a learning center. Consequently, urban universities focus programs on ameliorating deep-seated urban problems. They foster student experience – jobs, internships, service learning – as an essential part of their program but focus impacts on the cultural, political, and economic development in local areas. (Riposa 56)

The current wide-spread realization that an urban university will thrive only in a thriving neighborhood has been gradually emerging as a refinement of the traditional university mission, and has been greatly inspired by the revolutionary work conducted by University of Pennsylvania in the early years of this century with a view to accomplishing urban revival and regeneration in West Philadelphia. The urban university's community involvement and the new models for cooperation and partnership ensuing from it are becoming the norm nowadays in North America, but the town-gown relationship has not always been so smooth and mutually enriching.

A diachronic glimpse at urban universities

The rise of urban universities was triggered by major developments in the American society in the latter half of the 19th century. Some of these developments occurred in the countryside, some in the cities, but jointly they were responsible for ushering in a new type of educational institution. Riposa is offering below a complex picture of the forces at work and of the educational outcomes they generated.

Because technological advances in agriculture and engineering reduced the need for farm labor, and because of rapidly expanded industrialization, located mostly in or around cities, demanding continually enlarging workforces, urbanization became the defining trend in twentieth-century social and spatial arrangements. ... Prior to the Civil War, 85 percent of the national population lived in rural areas; by the 1980s, 85percent resided in urban areas. Technology generated a food surplus to support the cities, provided innovations for industrialization, and created systems to allow humans to live in concentrated spatial relations: industry provided the jobs; urbanization concentrated people in cities. Combined, they fostered the need for universities located within the city to educate a new class of students. (Riposa 55)

As a result, the turn of the 20th century saw an explosive growth in the number of higher education institutions in the USA. The momentous Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act of 1862 and 1890 ushered in a new type of institution, responsible to a large extent for the rise of the US economy and, ultimately, its rise as a world power. The impact of the land-grant universities was, indeed, crucial in paving the way to the developments that drove the USA from its second tier status to world

Indeed, the land-grant college system produced the agricultural scientists and industrial engineers who constituted the critical human resources of the managerial revolution in government and business, 1862-1917, laying the foundation of the world's pre-eminent educational infrastructure that supported the world's foremost technology-based economy. (Ferleger, Lazonick 118)

Current demographic trends account for the urban universities' growing pivotal role in the harmonious development and urban revitalization of the communities in which they are located, with increased responsibilities in terms of their mission as catalysts of urban growth, thereby fostering enriched academic experiences for their students through community involvement. The pressure on urban universities is growing as larger numbers

of students than ever are heading towards them. The numbers are powerful, although the opposite views claiming the U.S. labor market is overeducated may be only temporarily silenced by the back-to-school trends common to periods of economic crisis:

By 1998, half of all Americans ages [sic] eighteen to twenty-two years attended university; by 1997, 15 million of a workforce totaling 114 million enrolled in higher education – four times the number in 1941. Demographics project that by 2010, 40 percent of all jobs will require a university degree. (Riposa 55)

Along different lines, the town-gown relationship has had its ups and downs over time, primarily due to economic reasons. Educational institutions in the USA are usually granted tax-exempt status, on account of their contribution to the 'general welfare' and their provision of 'social goods'. However, not-for-profit educational institutions fall in the same group with hospitals and museums and benefit from the full range of city services, “from police protection and roads to public education for the children of the organization's employees” (Pagano 1). As a result of the university's tax-exempt status and ability not to pay local taxes, that is property taxes on the real estate and the buildings owned by a university, the city resources are disproportionately burdened, especially as concerns the local public infrastructure, specifically law enforcement and roads. In addition, the high spending power of the university, on the one hand, and of its students, on the other, may compound the problem by inflating the costs of living in college towns.

Smaller cities hosting a university – like Ann Arbor in Michigan or Fort Collins in Colorado – may soon find themselves dominated by the university, merely on account of numbers: with student populations accounting for as much as 30% of the overall population in the area, urban universities definitely make a significant impact on the life of the smaller city.

Urban universities' contribution

Still urban universities have a lot to offer to their cities and beyond, that is their regions: in strictly economic terms, the wealth they attract, manage and often time multiply is hard to encompass:

In 2006, colleges and universities in the U.S. spent more than \$373 billion on goods and services – this is over two percent of the nation's gross domestic product. These institutions collectively employ 2 million workers (only a third of these jobs are faculty; the remaining two-thirds are administrative and support staff positions) and are among the fastest-growing employers in the country, adding 300,000 jobs between 1990 and 1999. America's colleges and universities also hold more than \$100 billion in real estate. (Community-wealth.org, Overview: University & Community Partnerships)

Not to mention the university endowments, with Harvard University leading worldwide with over 32 billion USD and followed by Yale with almost 20 billion USD. Commonly perceived as engines of personal development, economic growth and technological progress, universities in general and urban universities in particular are ever more

engaged in community building activities and wealth generating efforts to the benefit of the host communities. But is it only to the benefit of the host community? The civic responsibility mission of higher education has been found to enrich the students' academic experience, at the same time infusing the professors' teaching and research practice.

...a new and deeper understanding of the educational importance of engagement is emerging. Leading scholars have shown that by strategically focusing higher education's many resources - from academic programs and research to business practices - universities can improve their core intellectual and academic work - in part by giving students and faculty real-world experience which can inform both research and teaching. (Community-wealth.org, Strategies & Models: The C-W Access Panel)

Fulfillment of educational mission, enlightened self-interest, no matter what name you attach to the above approach, universities tend to be closely connected to the local communities, helping to solve their problems. "Universities are place-based institutions deeply affected by their local environment and surroundings. The futures of universities and their cities have been intertwined." (Harkavy 2). This growing emphasis on the universities' urban-serving mission will ultimately benefit both the community and the higher education institution. In Harkavy's words: "This will allow universities to fulfill their core mission of advancing knowledge and educating caring, engaged citizens with what Benjamin Franklin termed 'an inclination joined with an ability to serve'." (*Ibid.*)

The US university response to the needs of the community has been varied, specific and constantly productive. Aware that community engagement will benefit the community at large and the very university, academic programs, strategies and approaches have been designed to connect the struggling cities with the universities and the innovative ideas they generate. One of the many examples available comes from the University of Oregon:

This is exactly the experiment that is in its third year at the University of Oregon. The Sustainable City Year Program simply asks existing professors of city planning, public policy, architecture, law, product design, economics, landscape architecture, journalism, art administration, and others, to teach their existing courses, from studios to data analysis to lecture courses, in their existing ways, but focus them on issues of interest and need identified by a single city over an academic year. Instead of students working in a vacuum and turning in term papers to the professor, these students work with city staff and community members to put their energy and ideas to work in the real world. (Schlossberg 4)

Community engagement as "scholarship in action", according to Nancy Cantor, Syracuse University chancellor, or "textbook reweaving", a term coined by the School of Architecture at Syracuse University, has inspired the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to design a new classification: in 2006 the Community Engagement classification launched to a university audience eager to seize the opportunity and be acknowledged for their broader, deeper, more meaningful engagement

with the city and its communities. The new classification is intended to encourage universities to continue to create opportunities for local re-development and city sustainability, thereby advancing city revitalization initiatives.

The Carnegie intention is clearly spelled out in the very definition of community engagement below:

The Foundation defines community engagement as ‘the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.’ That definition and the documentation frameworks for the classification and re-classification are intentionally inclusive to honor the diversity of institutions and their approaches to community engagement. (Carnegie Foundation, Community Engagement classification)

Community engagement is a characteristic dimension of urban universities, and of anchor institutions in general. The 2010 report issued by the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities significantly called “Urban Universities: Anchors Generating Prosperity for America’s Cities” states on the opening page that

...urban research universities are an important national asset. They serve as anchors in all of the 100 most populous metropolitan regions in the United States. Their assets - leadership, expertise, capital, land, and resources for innovation – give them unparalleled advantages to help develop our cities and metropolitan areas. (*Urban Universities: Anchors Generating Prosperity for America’s Cities*, 1)

Cities drive the US economy and the anchor institutions they host make a huge impact on the cities and the regions. Urban universities hold pride of place among these anchor institutions defined as “public and private entities committed to their locations” (*Urban Universities: Anchors Generating Prosperity for America’s Cities*, 2). As such, they have all the necessary attributes for becoming engines of urban success and vitality by assuming increased responsibility for economic development and community strengthening.

The current emphasis on the role of urban universities in ensuring prosperity to their metropolitan community requires some perspective and some numbers. As the report of the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities clearly states, in the US the metropolitan areas function as economic engines driving the whole region to progress and development:

...cities and their surrounding regions are key building blocks of our society and the nation’s economy. Although the largest 100 US metropolitan areas comprise

only 12 percent of the nation's land, they contained 65 percent of its population in 2005, possessed 68 percent of its jobs, and created 75 percent of its gross domestic product. (*Ibid.*, 3)

In addition to this, universities further enhance the metropolitan regions. Some telling numbers again from the same report: "nearly 70 percent of our nation's research universities are located in the 100 most populous metropolitan regions. They also contain 75 percent of the nation's graduate-degree holders, and their share is growing." (*Ibid.*, 3)

Alongside hospitals, cultural institutions, foundations and the like, universities influence the host city's economic and cultural identity. All anchor institutions share in common a vested interest in the success of the metropolitan area and its community. But unlike all other anchor institutions, universities have the means and usually the vision allowing them to make a key contribution to the progress of the whole region. Economic power and intellectual sophistication grant urban universities a unique profile among urban anchor institutions. According to the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities,

...urban universities are anchors in all of the 100 most populous metropolitan regions in the United States. They possess a scale of breadth of resources available to few other urban-based entities. Their unique assets put them in unparalleled positions to partner in the development of cities.

Often the largest employers in their cities, urban universities are significant economic engines. In 2006-2007, public and private urban universities together employed one million staff members and spent more than \$200 billion. (*Ibid.*, 5)

The universities' threefold mission of teaching, research, and service eminently qualifies them for active roles in revitalization projects meant for improving their urban environments, as well as for major contributions to community prosperity through goals ranging from public safety to economic development and job generation. The conclusion of the national overview conducted by the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities is exceptionally specific in this respect:

Urban research universities spend \$6 billion each year on public service, money often used to leverage further investments in their communities.

Among USU < urban serving universities > members, all have stated missions of engaging their communities, and most are accompanied by formal strategic plans and specific budget allocations.

Engagement involves administrators, faculty, and staff. At the average USU, nearly 200 faculty members and 20 percent of the student body are engaged in learning through service to the community each year. The typical USD president serves on 10 boards or leadership committees involved in business, technology, government, education, and culture. (*Ibid.*, 9).

There are more figures in what follows, from a different source, but they fundamentally tell the same story. A story of affluent resources in the hands of university authorities

ever more aware of urban engagement as an obligation – an obligation rising from the comprehensive facilities granted by the city to educational institutions tax-wise and not only – and an opportunity to educate their own students as engaged citizens able to handle the real-life problems besetting their communities. The pattern is clearly captured in Judith Rodin’s title “Out of the ivory tower and into the streets” of her volume documenting the large-scale project initiated by University of Pennsylvania in order to redress the distressed urban areas at its doors. Before we take the opportunity to explore the West Philadelphia revival project and the academic trend the title encapsulates, the statistical evidence she provides further clarifies the historic role urban universities have the chance to play in today’s challenged cities in distress and the urban-shaping responsibility they can assume.

In four cities – Washington, San Diego, Baltimore, and Philadelphia – institutions of higher learning and medical facilities account for more than half the jobs available. ... They are capable of generating an enormous impact through their purchasing power, investment strategies, real estate holdings, training and technical capacity, and employment practices. Just think of the scale we are talking about. America’s higher education sector makes up almost 4 percent of our national economy. If it were a country, the sector would have a GDP of more than \$350 billion, greater than half the GDP of Mexico. < Romania’s GDP is in the area of \$180 billion>. In 1996, for example, more than 1,900 urban universities spent \$136 billion on salaries, goods, and services – nine times higher than federal spending on urban business and job development in the same year. (Rodin 3)

In this context, little surprise that, for example, the State University of New York System with its 64 campuses is ideally positioned to act as the “driving force behind economic revitalization and improved quality of life” in the state of New York (*Urban Universities: Anchors Generating Prosperity for America’s Cities*, 10). And this is one of the many instances in which urban universities have stepped to the forefront of metropolitan revival and economic growth.

The University of Pennsylvania ground-breaking project and renewed inspiration

No discussion of universities’ role in urban enhancement would ever be complete without reference to the ground-breaking project conducted by University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia under Judith Rodin’s landmark presidency. With University of Pennsylvania an Ivy League institution of academic prestige and research excellence located in what was then a run down neighborhood beset by a full range of economic and social problems, the university had to make a major decision: to build a fence and isolate the students in the academic ivory tower, oblivious of the urban distress around, or to embrace the community and establish partnerships to solve its multiple problems and generate economic prosperity and a revived urban environment?

The social-economic context was grim and the impact on the university most harmful in all respects. In her own words:

The blight of the neighborhood became the plight of the university – it hurt us academically, institutionally, and in terms of our reputation. (Rodin 3)

Students felt less safe and parents less comfortable sending them here. Crime soared. One in five residents lived below the poverty level. Shops and businesses closed. Families abandoned their houses. The streets filled with trash. Pedestrian traffic vanished. Middle class families moved out, and drug dealers moved in. (Rodin 4)

The university chose to act as the engine of urban renewal and change. The goal was to bring back sustainable economic growth and vitality to the neighborhood, thus helping the neighborhood prosper together with the university. The project took seven years to complete, the university invested over \$550 million on construction programs and adopted a range of holistic, interconnected initiatives in order to inject new life into the neighborhood and to generate sustainable economic growth.

Since the University of Pennsylvania project has won national recognition, it may be relevant to survey the five directions adopted that ultimately led to the exceptional success and sounding acclaim that continue to inspire educational institutions worldwide. In the words of the visionary university president who took university engagement to unprecedented levels of complexity and urban success through university-metropolis integration:

First, we would restore clean, safe, well-lit, and green streets and neighborhoods. Second, we would work to provide high-quality, diverse housing choices: both home ownerships and rental across a spectrum of price points. Third, we would revive commercial activity and accelerate overall economic development that would spill back into the community to expand growth and opportunity. Fourth, we would improve the local public schools. And fifth, we would collaborate with the city to expand the role of an anchor institution in leading and helping Philadelphia to realize its own aspirations.

We knew that economic development, retail construction, public education, home ownership, affordable housing, and safe, attractive streets all leverage one another, creating a dynamic multiplier effect. (Rodin 6)

In short, a massive effort aiming at community revitalization and civic leadership enhancement that has reshaped western Philadelphia at the end of seven long years, setting an inspirational example of comprehensive university engagement with the community. The project significantly impacted the neighborhood as it helped a new pattern of urban development emerge and materialize to sounding acclaim. To what extent did it benefit the university as well?

Certainly in multiple ways, all valuable. But the enhanced civic dimension of academic education appears to top all others. And because the psychology professor, the native of Philadelphia, the concerned parent, the university president who engineered this large-scale change in urban engagement and civic development is uniquely eloquent about the

consequential process she set in motion out of love for her home town and the remarkable institution she was at the helm of, I will rely again on her insightful prose:

... in the process, we demonstrated just what a powerful impact a university can make when it accepts that its destiny is entwined with that of its neighbors – not just an impact in the community, but in the consciousness of its students, who, because of our engagement, entered their post-Penn lives better prepared, as Ghandi said, ‘to become the change they wish to see in the world’ (Rodin 4).

I am making room for copious citation as her prose is vibrant and specific, and her vision most inspirational:

It is especially incumbent upon universities to engage in their communities because it is the best way to prepare students to engage actively in the world. It is not enough to produce brilliant doctors, lawyers, artists, scientists, and scholars. We must produce good citizens – we must teach people how to think and to act, to do good and to do well, and to commit to the heavy lifting of building community. In this way, Penn’s engagement with its neighbors has had as profound a regenerating effect on the university as it has on the neighborhood.

... Faculty became energized in their search for new ways to bring knowledge and experience to bear on local problems and beyond. ... This was no longer scholarship about the community - ... - this was scholarship with the community, directly engaging its needs and its potential... We educated through action, building on the powerful notion that talented students would contribute more to society when they left Penn, if we offered them an institutional example of active civic engagement while they were here. (Rodin 12-13).

The project has attracted universal praise and has sparked university engagement initiatives across the United States. Unprecedented in the complexity and magnitude of the transformation accomplished at urban level, this project has been looked upon as the long waited herald of a new era in which town and gown rejoice in mutual reinforcement and success, in which learning is enhanced by acting, and theory is backed by practical applications. As such, universities no longer need to be confined inside walls, walls as a powerful visual representation of the university viewed as apart from the outside world, and not part of it. The walls surrounding universities, from medieval times to the present, are not the solution to contagious urban problems and universities are not protected from the problems of the urban community by their impressive walls. The walls and the disregard for the community outside that they symbolize will only further deteriorate the neighborhood and aggravate the plight of the community, ultimately firing back on the university, as proved by the University of Pennsylvania experience.

The Penn project set new standards and launched a new and productive paradigm of university engagement with the community. As aptly summarized by former president Rodin,

In our way at Penn – and in the wide range of endeavors others are undertaking across the country – we are tearing down the inheritance of these walls. And we are building, in their place, new opportunities. Opportunities for universities to model civic engagement for their students, by breaking down the curricular barriers between analyzing and assessing the world and actively shaping it. Opportunities for universities to do well for themselves by doing good in their communities. (Rodin 14)

In the wake of the Penn success, urban universities have risen to the challenges posed by the economic crisis and have been able to embrace their community in an array of innovative approaches aimed at bringing economic prosperity to their metropolitan areas or improving the economic situation and the overall quality of life, thereby generating community and economic development.

Urban universities are, indeed, exceptionally qualified to be active players in urban community development. Their unique resources combining “talent, research capability, advanced technologies, real estate, and understanding of local issues” (*Urban Universities: Anchors Generating Prosperity for America’s Cities*, 19) can generate impactful change when they choose to apply their academic expertise to local community needs and work in partnership with the community to solve them and be mutually enriched. The multitude of university-initiated projects for urban community revival and/or development all over the United States serve to convincingly prove it.

The United States has set the pattern for the world in so many areas. It is to be hoped that urban universities as anchors generating prosperity for their cities will follow the trend and inspire the vision of university authorities outside the US as well.

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