Cities and the Urban University

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As the country faces crises of homelessness, food insecurity, climate change, and environmental sustainability, as well as a widening gap between rich and poor, higher-education institutions are becoming more aware of the importance of responding to these issues — particularly in their local communities.

Colleges, especially in urban areas, are often situated in high-poverty communities of color while catering to a largely white student population. And frequently, they are one of the largest or the largest employer, procurer, and real-estate developer in their city or region.

The interdependence and conflict of town and gown isn't new, but colleges have come to understand that if they

truly want to play a beneficial role locally, they can't repeat the mistakes of the past, when they "were very much in their communities, but not of," says Charles Rutheiser, senior associate for civic sites and community change at the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Over the past few decades, colleges have increasingly acknowledged and even embraced their role as an anchor institution, embedded in communities over which they have enormous influence. But to ensure that relationship is a positive one — and to become true partners — means colleges should listen to what is needed rather than impose ideas, as well as understand that all university/community projects must be mutually beneficial, experts say.

Such partnerships also cannot be

undertaken as discrete projects but require a holistic approach both on campus and in the community. While the work differs depending on the individual aspects of each campus and its surrounding city, some trends have emerged.

Economic inclusion

One of the ways a college can most affect a local community is through its buying, hiring, and real-estate decisions. And increasingly universities are working to understand how they can shape those efforts to better serve their neighborhoods.

The University of Chicago, for example, conducted a deep dive about a decade ago into how it could play a more beneficial role — in terms of economic inclusion and community development — in the South Side neighborhoods that surround the institution.

"It takes intentionality," says Alyssa Berman-Cutler, executive director of community development in the university's office of civic engagement. "If you just go to the largest bidder, that is who you will get."

In its contract with its food provider, the university requires that the company work with local businesses and source from them for the university's cafeterias, kiosks, and cafés on campus. It now buys much of its maintenance supplies from a local business that is also more diverse than the previous nonlocal company it purchased from.

Hiring is another key factor. Berman-Cutler says 30 percent of Chicago's work force comes from the nine neighborhoods surrounding the university; as part of an overall effort, the university is more explicit about its willingness to hire people with a criminal background.

Sometimes a national incident can spark a change. After the 2015 death of Freddie Gray while in police custody in Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University focused on what it could do for the local community as one of the state's largest employers and procurers. It created HopkinsLocal, a program committed to specific goals that will lead to greater economic inclusion in the city of Baltimore. That includes: expanding local hiring with an emphasis on career advancement; increasing

university spending and construction contracts with Baltimore businesses, with a focus on minority-owned, women-owned, and other disadvantaged businesses; and investing a portion of its endowment with a minority-owned company.

Lessons learned: When hiring, universities need to look beyond ZIP codes, which can hide economic disparities, to the neighborhoods themselves. And when buying, they should consider not just the million-dollar purchases; supplies bought by individual departments add up, which can make a big impact when acquiring from local, women-owned, or minority-owned businesses.

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Leveraging coursework

On many campuses, the old idea of individualized service learning has evolved into something much deeper: integrating community needs and student coursework. Colleges make the connection in many ways, but a key element is that the work is of equal value to both the students and the community.

The University of Pennsylvania offers roughly 80 Academically-Based Community Service courses each year through its Netter Center for Community Partnerships. These courses range across majors from physics to music to nursing. One example: an architecture class that studied inclusive

design and co-designed with the local disability community.

"This is a big change," says Ira Harkavy, associate vice president and founding director of the Netter Center. "The idea is that academic work can improve the quality of life."

One growing trend is connecting local governments to university resources; for example, the University of Wisconsin at Madison does this through its UniverCity Alliance.

Gavin Luter, the alliance's managing director, connects faculty, staff, and students with local and regional communities looking to create sustainable projects. Faculty members across departments agree to have their students take on specific projects, which can range from developing an infrastructure for bike paths to researching how to improve mental-health outreach to creating an opioid-use data dashboard.

Over the last six years, more than 2,000 students have worked on 264 projects in 20 communities. One sticking point for some in the community-engagement world: Localities do pay the university about $30,000 for five to seven projects, Luter says, which mainly pays for his salary and some extra supplies and travel when needed.

UW Madison is also part of EPIC Network, a nonprofit association that connects higher-ed institutions with local governments and communities. It includes almost 40 U.S. colleges and about 17 international institutions doing similar work.

Community-school partnerships

Connecting colleges and pre-kindergarten-to-12th-grade schools is not a novel idea, but the concept has grown to encompass much more than piecemeal relationships. Increasingly these networks develop through partnerships with community schools, which integrate support from nonprofits, businesses, and universities to serve their students and families more fully.

In 2015, the University of Pennsylvania, in collaboration with the Coalition for Community Schools and Rutgers University

at Camden, organized a University-Assisted Community Schools Network. About 70 higher-education institutions are now part of this network, which shares resources and best practices to advance partnerships between universities and community schools.

The State University of New York at Binghamton, for example, has worked closely with economically disadvantaged Broome County for a decade. At first, social-work and education faculty helped to connect social-work interns to provide services to students, specifically antibullying and family-engagement efforts.

The program evolved, and Binghamton now works with nine of the 12 pre-kindergarten-through-12th-grade school districts, encompassing 43 community schools; it annually places about 25 social-work interns in the schools from the university's department of social work.

Binghamton University Community Schools, housed in the College of Community and Public Affairs, also helps train, develop, and support community-school coordinators, who are crucial for connecting schools' needs with local partners.

"That's a challenging role, and often community-school coordinators don't receive comprehensive training," says Naorah Rimkunas, an assistant professor in the

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university's department of teaching, learning, and educational leadership.

Numerous other colleges have taken on similar efforts, including evaluating how well the community-school partnerships are working.

Off-campus classes

Coming onto a college campus can be intimidating and sometimes logistically difficult. So, a number of colleges have created off-site centers that offer numerous programs, including those that help community members learn how to develop local businesses and nonprofits.

The 20-year-old Westside Leadership Institute, in Salt Lake City, is a University of Utah partnership with community-based organizations. The institute offers semester-long classes and workshops for a cost of $50 for community members, who then focus on a specific issue or project. One example: Realizing there was a dearth of mental-health services readily available to Latinos in the area, some of the institute's students came up with the idea of Latino Behavioral Health Services and founded the nonprofit organization in 2013; it now has five locations throughout Utah.

At Drexel University's Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships, located off campus in West Philadelphia, community members can enroll in B Smart, a 10-week entrepreneurship program taught by Drexel staff and a local nonprofit, with Drexel faculty and students acting as business mentors.

The center also offers what it calls side-by-side classes, where students and community members take a class and learn next to each other; about 100 faculty members have been trained in this pedagogy, says Lucy Kerman, Drexel's senior vice provost for university and community partnerships.

An example, she says, was a culinary course on how to make family recipes healthier. "Half were Drexel students, and half local residents," Kerman says. "And one of the things they learned is that all of their family recipes were completely unhealthy, right? They got to share family stories and learn as equals."

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THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

SMU IS FORTUNATE TO BE PART OF THE GREAT CITY OF DALLAS, A VIBRANT COMMUNITY AND A PROVING GROUND FOR FACULTY AND STUDENTS TO SOLVE COMPLEX PROBLEMS WITH LASTING IMPACT.

This is an exciting time to be at SMU. I arrived on campus as the new dean of the Moody School of Graduate and Advanced Studies just this summer. Already, though, I have come to recognize our University as an academic community that consistently achieves excellence and is poised for further growth in a city whose bold spirit creates extraordinary opportunities for faculty and students to perform groundbreaking research.

From studies that highlight inequities in the distribution of urban resources and suggest means of reform, to investigations on the impacts of urban greenspace on public health, SMU and Dallas are partnering on research that has the potential to change our community and other communities nationwide.

SMU is also investing in supercomputing technology that will advance data-driven discoveries across disciplines. Last year, the University announced a partnership with accelerated computing leader NVIDIA to supercharge our high-performance computing capability. These investments put us in the fast lane as a leader in the active application of artificial intelligence and machine learning. North Texas is continuing to grow as one of the country's premier technology hubs. In combination with the thriving Dallas tech industry, our investments in supercomputing and other emergent technologies will have real benefits for the region and will support cutting-edge research and technological development that address significant national and international issues.

I am proud of the Moody School's generous fellowships and SMU's top-notch facilities that attract academic talent and propel scholarly success. We are connecting our graduate students to the resources they need to conduct innovative research and creative projects, finish their degrees and launch successful careers. Started with a $100 million investment, the new Moody School will expand our excellent graduate programs and research in the forward-looking ethos of Dallas – home to more than 20 Fortune 500 headquarters.

The enterprising spirit of Dallas is part of our DNA. The connection between the University and our city shapes our students' academic and research experiences and the world-changing research to which they contribute. I'm proud of our scholars who advance our deep commitment to thinking big and doing good within our communities and beyond.

Sincerely,

ROBIN S. POSTON
Dean, Moody School of Graduate and Advanced Studies
Associate Provost for Graduate Education

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