

John Bassett

President, Clark University



Campus and Community Collaboration



Photographs by Mamie Marcuss, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

In the 1980s, Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, had a choice. It could turn its geographic focus toward Park Avenue, expanding its campus westward toward Worcester's more prosperous neighborhoods, or it could continue to invest its future in the distressed Main South community. Clark chose the latter and joined the neighborhood in a substantial revitalization effort. The resulting University Park Partnership is today a national model of successful university/community collaboration. Communities & Banking talked with Clark's president, John Bassett, about the project.

C&B: President Bassett, what drew you to Clark University in 2000?

Bassett: Clark is a small, rather unusual, university. Though much like a liberal arts college, it has nine Ph.D.

programs and was originally a graduate research university. I was attracted to this reputation, the school's history, and the chemistry of the campus. Secondly, having lived most of my life in cities, I was interested in Clark's work in the inner-city neighborhood of Main South.

C&B: What is the Main South community like?

Bassett: Main South was at one time a middle- to upper-middle-class neighborhood. But, after World War II, like many of New England's mill towns, Worcester began to deteriorate. Families moved to the suburbs. Companies sold out. Jobs left the city. By the 1980s, Main South was in pretty bad shape. Its old industrial sites had become brown fields, and the community was a center of crime in the city, with rampant drug activity and prostitution. Its residents were among the city's poorest, and unemployment was widespread.

C&B: I imagine that the University's location in a marginally safe neighborhood created tension for students, faculty, and school staff.

Bassett: Absolutely, and Clark knew it had to do something about it. In the early 1980s, most urban universities were handling similar situations by building bigger fences to keep "those people out." Clark became one of the first to try something new. Dick Traina, president at that time, was approached by SeedCo, an organization that was trying to build partnerships between institutions and neighborhoods. SeedCo asked Clark, "How would you like to partner with the neighbors and rebuild the community together?" We agreed to try, and the University Park Partnership was born.

C&B: How has the partnership tackled reviving the neighborhood?

Bassett: We started by rebuilding the University Park neighborhood, just across Main Street from our campus. The Main South Community Development Corporation was formed, and Clark provided unsecured loans for new housing construction and rehabilitation. So far, we've created 220 new housing units in University Park, and we are adding 80 more units just to the north in the new Kilby-Gardner project. Clark has also offered subsidized down payments to its faculty and staff members to encourage them to move into Main South, and we have brought the president's house back into the neighborhood.

C&B: Where has the funding for the effort come from? Has the university put up all of the money?

Bassett: The university has contributed \$8 to \$10 million towards the effort. For the bulk of the funding, however, Clark has used its financial expertise to help leverage \$75 million in federal, state, local, and private dollars.

C&B: One of Clark's mottos is "Challenge convention and change the world." Is Clark's decision to work with the community related to the school's mission?

Bassett: Yes, it is directly linked to what I call our philosophy of engagement—we want our students and faculty to



make a difference in people's lives whether through research, service to others, or work in the community. But beyond our philosophy of engagement, our relationship with the community has become part of our identity, and we have begun to ask ourselves, "How does Clark enfold this work within its curriculum?" We want people to start thinking about Clark as a premier place to study community planning, urban development, and inner-city education.

C&B: Can you give an example of how this is happening?

Bassett: Sure. The Jacob Hiatt Center for Urban Education integrates our education curriculum and faculty research with our work in Main South. Focused on the problems of public education in American cities, the Center provides professional development for



teachers, involves educators in research, and will soon run an urban education institute using the University Park Campus School as a demonstration laboratory.

C&B: The University Park Campus School is the public school that Clark helped to establish in Main South.

Bassett: Yes. It is really an amazing story. UPCS is one of the only places that has taken an at-risk population and shown that it can succeed.

C&B: How did Clark get into the secondary school business?

Bassett: In the mid 1990s, the Superintendent of Worcester Public Schools got together with President Traina, and they started brainstorming. What if we could start a high school from scratch with the principles that we believe are important for education: a small school, high academic expectations, professional development for teachers, and family involvement? They started to lay things out and eventually

got buy-in from the teachers union, the city, and Clark's faculty and administration. They renovated a tumble down elementary school on Freeland Street and opened the UPCS in September of 1996.

“Challenge convention and change the world” is a Clark University motto.

C&B: Today, the school is viewed as an exemplary model of urban education, and as you mentioned, will soon be used as a demonstration laboratory. What makes the UPCS stand out?

Bassett: You walk in, and it's just electric. This is what learning is supposed to be. Seventy percent of the kids are eligible for free lunch. Sixty percent of them do not speak English at home. Fifty percent enter the seventh grade with a third grade reading level. Yet, nobody has ever failed the English part of the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) exam. One key to

this success is intense literacy training in seventh and eighth grade and by ninth grade, a curriculum as rigorous as anything you would find at Exeter or Andover. Normally, two-thirds of the kids in this neighborhood drop out of high school, but every UPCS graduate has been accepted to college. One had a full scholarship to Brown, others to Tufts, Boston College, and Georgetown. Clark has admitted four each year.

C&B: I can see why Clark would be an attractive option for these students, given the University's commitment to providing full tuition scholarships to admitted neighborhood kids. I've read that Clark is the only university in the country with this type of financial aid program. Is this true?

Bassett: I'm not sure. The only thing I know is that when I speak at another college about our neighborhood program and I mention the scholarships, the hosting president starts squirming in his seat. All kidding aside, the scholarships apply not just to our UPCS stu-

dents but to all neighborhood kids as long as they grow up in Main South and are admitted to the school on merit. Over the last decade, 25 to 30 students have attended Clark with these scholarships. In combination with a graduate scholarship program for Worcester teachers, Clark has offered about \$5 million in scholarship aid to residents of Worcester and the community.

C&B: That's a major investment in human capital. Back to the UPCS for a moment, some critics have said that the school is only successful because a major university has contributed money and resources to it. How valid is this claim?

Bassett: That's a great question. On the one hand, it is not fair to say that we have poured money into the school. While the project received some start-up funding, UPCS is a public school funded by the city's public school budget. The school's per pupil spending ratio is no different from that of the rest of the city. On the other hand, the college has been involved with the school in numerous ways. We have made our library and gym accessible to UPCS students. Clark's students and faculty have given volunteer time. Plus, I have to think that some of the students' new ambition is inspired by walking through the Clark campus everyday to get to school. In general, I think the criticisms suggest a need for more experimentation. The UPCS will be a long term success only if we learn things from it that can be replicated elsewhere.

C&B: From the UPCS to the new Kilby-Gardner project, the University Park Partnership has been running experiments in Main South for nearly two decades. In this time, has the Main South community improved?

Bassett: The neighborhood has definitely improved and continues to improve. The new challenge is to find that fine line between deterioration and gentrification. We want to make the neighborhood nice, but we also want to make sure that the people who live here can afford to stay here. It is a very hard line to walk.

C&B: How has Clark benefited from the changes in the neighborhood?

Bassett: From a self-interested point of view, the greatest benefit to Clark has been the stabilization of a neighborhood that had been a negative factor in recruiting. We have turned that negative, at the very least, into a neutral. The second benefit has been the positive visibility that Clark has gained from the projects. But visibility can be ephemeral; you need to keep it going.

We want to make the neighborhood nice, but we also want to make sure that the people who live here can afford to stay here. It is a very hard line to walk.

C&B: It certainly seems as if it has been a win-win for both the university and the neighborhood. Were there any challenges along the way?

Bassett: Collaborations and partnerships are not always easy things, and there were some glitches. The biggest problems revolved around building trust with the neighbors. The community did not trust Clark at first, and it did not help when the newspapers printed the headline: "Clark's Plan to Rebuild Main South." We had to work to defend ourselves against the image of an imperialist university and really reach out to the neighbors. Additionally, there were times when funding for a project arrived more slowly than we wanted it to.

C&B: Given these challenges, as well as the partnership's successes, what words of advice would you give to a university that was thinking about partnering with its community?

Bassett: I would say to make sure that it is a partnership and not a paternalistic relationship. That way, you build better trust with your neighbors. Secondly, use

the expertise that you have at the university and leverage your resources. Thirdly, the point person on the community partnership project must have direct access to the president to prevent hold-ups in communication.

C&B: How about the community? What would you say to a neighborhood that is looking to build a better relationship with its resident university?

Bassett: First, I would say, remember that the university is not a cash cow. It is a nonprofit organization that has to make its books balance. Universities are willing to use resources to improve their communities, but all funding cannot come out of the college's pocket. I would also remind the community that making sure its college or university continues to be excellent will help the community more than anything else. You will attract more positive attention for your city if you are the home of an excellent school than if you are the home of a weak school.

C&B: Good advice for both camps. As for Clark and Main South, what do the next 20 years look like?

Bassett: Main South is still a work in progress, and we are committed to finishing it. With the partnership moving along so well, however, I can turn some of my attention to the city of Worcester. I believe Worcester has more assets than any other city of its size in the Northeast, but its public image is weak and good jobs are scarce. Recently, Clark joined the city's nine other colleges and universities, the business community, and the city government to create the Worcester University Partnership to improve economic development in the city. This new work will impact Main South. If there are not good jobs in Worcester for Main South residents, the neighborhood will deteriorate again. Over the next 20 years, Clark will continue to be a partner in the rebuilding of our neighborhood, but we will also take a larger interest in creating a healthy Worcester.