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POINT OF VIEW

Universities and Cities Need to Rethink Their Relationships

By RICHARD M. FREELAND

As president of a major urban university, I believe that academic institutions have much to offer their communities. Too often, however, longstanding suspicions on both sides of the relationship impede constructive collaboration. We need to change the way universities think about their cities and the way cities think about their campuses.

Three kinds of interactions have historically characterized universities' relationships with their surrounding communities. First are what I call incidental impacts. Universities provide jobs. We spend money. We construct buildings. We attract research dollars. All of those things benefit our cities, and we are quick to claim credit. But those effects are byproducts of our efforts to strengthen our institutions.

A second category is intentional contributions, which occur when universities consciously set out to strengthen their cities. We create research institutes focused on regional development. We support the public schools. We enroll students from our neighborhoods. Our students and faculty members work in local clinics. Such activities draw upon a rich tradition of community service dating from the land-grant movement of the mid-19th century.

As we think about intentional contributions, though, it is useful to distinguish between defensive actions taken to protect our institutions from harm and civic-minded actions that strengthen the community. An initiative to ameliorate urban blight around a campus because such conditions adversely affect admissions is different in spirit than a program to enhance K-12 education by housing a city high school in university facilities and enriching the school's curriculum.

A third kind of interaction is the extracted benefit, frequently confused with an intentional contribution. An extracted benefit is something the city demands of the university as a quid pro quo. The classic case involves campus expansion. The institution needs a zoning change. The city wants a park, scholarships, or affordable housing. The latter becomes the price of the former.

Historically the most-significant positive effects of universities on cities have been incidental impacts, and a large percentage of what we label intentional contributions have really been extracted benefits or substantially defensive in nature.

For their part, cities have often viewed universities as a burden because our tax-exempt status denies the city revenues. That perspective has led cities to resist the growth of universities or to demand that any approved expansion be accompanied by payments in lieu of taxes. Also in city officials' minds are the iconic town-gown tensions: the impact of student populations on housing, parking, and municipal services. Cities often want universities to compensate them for those demands on local resources.

Cities and communities have also seen universities as sources of subsidy for municipal activities. In responding to requests for financial assistance from public agencies and neighborhood organizations, a university can never forget that it will need political support for future growth.

Recently cities have begun to realize that successful universities can promote economic, social, and cultural vitality. The report "Leveraging Colleges and Universities for Urban Economic Revitalization," from the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City and CEO's for Cities, concluded that "leveraging academic assets ... remains one of the greatest untapped urban revitalization opportunities in the country."

Understanding the benefits academic institutions can bring to cities might well lead civic leaders to work actively with a campus to help it develop. However, in my experience during more than three decades at urban universities, private and public, they have been perceived as problems, and politically squeezed for funds, far more often than they have been treated as assets to be nurtured. The rhetoric regarding universities' economic value has, for the most part, not yet been translated into practice.

The negative patterns of town-gown relations are no longer viable. The old impulses toward separation on one hand, or coercion on the other, must be set aside. Once, perhaps, universities could flourish by setting themselves apart from their communities. Over the last four decades, however, it has become evident that city-based universities ignore at their peril the well-being of their communities. The strength of some of our greatest institutions, including Columbia and Yale Universities, and the Universities of Chicago and Pennsylvania, has been threatened by urban decay in nearby neighborhoods that has diminished campus safety and attractiveness. And, as David C. Perry and Wim Wiewel point out in their new book, *The University as Urban Developer* (M.E. Sharpe, 2005), campus planners have learned from experience that old-fashioned solutions to such problems, through which powerful institutions attend to their own interests at the expense of local communities, are no longer politically workable.

Universities also have solid academic reasons to become involved in their communities. At Northeastern, for example, education is greatly enhanced by a service-learning program that places students in community-based organizations, and by student participation in local architecture, civil engineering, and business endeavors. Moreover, our flagship program of cooperative education, in which students are employed by local companies in a series of semester-long paying jobs linked to their majors, depends on the economic strength of the region.

Similarly, the research of our faculty in a range of fields, including sociology, political science, criminal justice, and law, is consistently informed by work with city agencies and neighborhood organizations. Scholars associated with our Center for Urban and Regional Policy have greatly enriched their understanding of housing issues -- and contributed to a vital public-policy discussion -- by working with a statewide task force seeking solutions to Massachusetts' desperate need for affordable housing.

Cities are equally dependent on universities. In Massachusetts, for example, at a time when economic cycles, corporate mergers, and patterns of outsourcing have resulted in major losses of corporate-sector jobs, university-based employment has increased. Three of the state's top 25 employers are now academic institutions, and an additional five are teaching hospitals linked to area medical schools.

In a period when major companies are relocating their operations with startling frequency, universities are among the most likely institutions to still be where they are today in 10, 25, or 50 years. In addition, the local presence of a world-class research community in the life sciences is directly responsible for a surging biotech industry that has led, in recent years, to new offices in Boston and Cambridge for major pharmaceutical companies like Merck, Pfizer, and Novartis.

Both universities and cities need to act on the basis of these new realities. Universities should move from merely coexisting with our communities, or reaching out to them only when we need something, to incorporating regional vitality into our planning for institutional growth. Civic leaders should think less about what they can extract from local universities and more about how they can help those institutions flourish.

Some initiatives have pointed the way. In the mid-1990s the University of Pennsylvania, working with leaders from west Philadelphia, committed millions of dollars to enhancing the neighborhood, reducing crime, improving the schools, and promoting economic growth. The resulting progress has been a national model of constructive town-gown interaction. Clark University in Worcester, Mass., has been widely recognized for its University Park Partnership with local residents to improve public safety, promote economic development, support K-12 education, and increase recreational opportunities. Similar collaboration has occurred at Yale in New Haven, Marquette in Milwaukee, the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, Case Western Reserve in Cleveland, Virginia Commonwealth in Richmond, and Trinity College in Hartford.

At Northeastern, where urban engagement is central to our institutional character, we are participating in two efforts to take the idea of university-community partnership to a new level. We are working with the Boston Redevelopment Authority and a city-appointed, community-based task force to review the development needs of both the university and the surrounding areas, with the goal of crafting a physical master plan for the university that also advances the interests of our neighbors. Simultaneously, we are part of a coalition of local colleges and universities and representatives of key nonacademic constituencies, working under the auspices of the Boston Foundation to improve our region while also promoting Boston's all-important academic sector.

I hope such efforts will create the much-needed new paradigm for town-gown interactions, leaving behind the old obstructionist and coercive behaviors. Colleges and their surrounding communities have much to gain in seeking new understandings, and much to lose by maintaining the status quo.

Richard M. Freeland is president of Northeastern University.