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New Path for University Success: Community Ties

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Thirty-three armed robberies hit on or near the University of Pennsylvania's Philadelphia campus in September 1996. Broken glass, trash and sometimes discarded drug paraphernalia littered the area. Dark, empty streets made students and staff feel jumpy.

A month later, walking with his fiancée to his nearby apartment on Halloween night, Vladimir Sled, a 38-year-old Russian emigre and Penn biochemist, got caught in a scuffle with robbers. He was stabbed several times and died shortly afterward at the University of Pennsylvania Medical Center.

That was the decisive moment, the indisputable signal, writes Judith Rodin in her just-published book, "The University & Urban Revival," that the great research university she then headed would have to make a radical turn.

Penn could claim great wealth, intellectual pre-eminence, Ivy League status. With close to 300 acres on its campus, an enrollment of 23,000 -- and 24,000 employees at the university and the medical center, it's Philadelphia's single largest private employer.

But suddenly, in what Rodin recalls as those "terribly scary" days in 1996, it was clear. Set in a community devastated by post-World War II urban renewal and flight to the suburbs, Penn had tried many community outreach programs, including some in local public schools. But it hadn't been enough. The institution's preservation was now at risk. "Nothing short of a revolution" in how Penn dealt with its neighborhood would now suffice, Rodin writes.

Almost immediately, steps in what would become known as Penn's "West Philadelphia Initiatives" started. A "clean and safe" operation was announced, seizing on the late Jane Jacobs' concept of "eyes on the street" and James Q. Wilson's theory that "broken windows" telegraph a message of absent public order inviting crime.

So policing services weren't just stepped up sharply; Penn launched a campaign to repair broken windows, fix cracked sidewalks, clean up graffiti and litter, and light the streets, including thousands of fixtures on privately owned properties.

The university's neighbors were engaged in a conscious effort to build "social capital" -- a caring and effective area. A 2.2-square-mile University City District (UCD) was set up, on the model of

central Philadelphia's highly successful business improvement district. UCD removes graffiti and trash, counsels home and business owners, and deploys several dozen "safety ambassadors" to patrol the streets 16 hours a day to help deter crimes and keep the area clean and attractive.

A stunning variety of similar initiatives followed. A historic park was revived and a farmers market added. Neighborhood watches were enhanced. University police foot patrols were coordinated with Philadelphia city police. A tree-planting and streetscape-tending urban gardening collective started up.

On a parallel track, Penn intervened to bolster homeownership and upgrade the deteriorated housing stock in University City, including attention to rental stock and protecting its low-income neighbors from being forced out by gentrification. The university pledged it would never again seize local residential property for its own expansion. It encouraged, and itself invested strategically, in major new retail development to turn stretches of low-grade buildings and parking lots into attractive, welcoming streets.

Penn also worked to help local businesses (many minority owned) share significantly its hundreds of millions of dollars in yearly purchases of goods and services. And it started up a new, model local public school.

At every step, university trustees offered business counsel, specially designated university staff worked on strategy and operations, neighborhood residents were consulted, and faculty, wherever possible, were drawn into the new programs and outreach.

It was a daunting task. Some faculty were highly skeptical, fearing diversion of scarce dollars from their staff slots and research. Others asked if community building was a university's job at all.

But Rodin (now president of the Rockefeller Foundation) insists a university worth its salt "has to show itself, its neighbors and its students it's willing to take on the thorniest issues of its time ... to put real skin in the game."

Why universities? Corporations, Rodin notes, have become so global "that the city where they sit is less vital to them." The biggest job-providers in many cities, universities and medical schools, may find civic leadership thrust on them -- and fittingly, "because they generate what makes today's Knowledge Economy."

Seizing civic leadership, Rodin argues, "made me a much better president -- more credible in other areas where I chose to speak out."

As for Penn itself, she argues, it tripled both its research funding and endowment and rose from 16th to fourth in the *U.S. News & World Report* yearly ranking of American colleges and universities during the 10 years she was president.

Other universities that remade their community ties -- Columbia in New York and Hartford's Trinity College are top examples -- have also prospered. The message to all universities is clear:

Your time for leadership has arrived; being a constructive, good neighbor isn't fluff -- it's absolutely critical.

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