Urban University-Community Partnerships: Why Now and What Could (Should) Be Next?

Ira Harkavy
Director, Center for Community Partnerships,
University of Pennsylvania

The increased engagement of college and university students with the problems of society through community service, particularly service learning, has become sufficiently widespread to merit substantial coverage in a leading daily U.S. newspaper. In fact, the "Education Life Supplement" in the August 4, 1996 issue of *The New York Times* heralded a change in American higher education.[1] Titled "Trying to Build Better Citizens: Universities are Aiming Beyond Academics with a Focus on Community," the supplement examined this engagement and also alluded to an analogous development: the movement among higher educational institutions in general, and urban colleges and universities most specifically, toward becoming genuinely civic institutions devoted to improving the quality of life in the neighborhoods of which they are a part.

The movement of universities from historically, actively, consciously attempting to be "a part from" to becoming "a part of" their local environments is, in some measure, a response to a growing chorus of voices calling for a more engaged, active, and connected university. That chorus of voices, some dating back to the early 1980s, began to be heard and recognized as significant following Ernest Boyer's March 1994 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on the need to create a "New American College" which would be "a connected institution . . . committed to improving, in a very intentional way, the human condition."[2]

Urban University-Community Partnerships: Why Now?

Although the impact of Boyer's inspiring vision has been profound, other developments more fully account for the accelerating movement of institutions of higher education toward becoming connected institutions, devoted to meeting their civic and societal responsibilities. For urban colleges and universities, the reasons for engagement are particularly clear and compelling. The state of the American city itself is indeed reason enough. There is no need to recite the litany of horrors affecting our cities and many of their citizens. Suffice it to say that the problem of the city is

increasingly identified as the strategic problem of our time. When convening the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlement (Habitat II), the international organizing committee unequivocally stated that "sustainable urban development will be the most pressing problem facing humanity in the 21st century."[3]

The problem of the city may already have become the most pressing problem facing urban colleges and universities. Stated simply, "higher eds" cannot move (as other more mobile institutions have increasingly done) to escape from the poverty, crime, and physical deterioration at their gates. The impact of a declining physical environment on a university's ability to recruit and retain students, faculty, and staff is obvious. Perhaps less obvious, but no less important, is the impact of faculty flight to "safer ground" (with better public schools and services) on a university community itself. As Julian S. Levi of the University of Chicago noted in 1963:

> A university is more than a collection of scholarly commuters. It is, rather, a community of scholars living with one another and with their work. The relationship of student and faculty is disrupted if the community around the university cannot attract and hold faculty members as residents.[4]

Self-interest rooted in the day-to-day effects of physical location is only part of the explanation for the changing stance of urban higher eds toward their localities. The financial, public relations, and political costs of institutional aloofness are becoming too steep to bear. It is untenable to be perceived as a distant island of affluence in a rising sea of poverty and despair. It is particularly untenable given the major role universities play in shaping modern society.

In his extraordinarily influential *Universities and the Future of America,* then-Harvard President Derek Bok highlighted "the growing importance of universities" since Pearl Harbor.[5] Noting that "all advanced societies depend increasingly on three critical elements: new discoveries, highly trained personnel, and expert knowledge," and that American "universities are primarily responsible for supplying two of these ingredients and are a major source of the third," Bok described "the modern university as *the central institution in modern society*" [emphasis added].[6] As the central institution in modern society, what is the university's responsibility for the condition of society? According to Bok, plenty — particularly given the widely held belief that "higher education in the United States has no peer":

> If universities are so important to society and if ours are so superior, one might have thought that America would be flourishing in comparison with other industrialized countries of the world. *Yet this is plainly not the case* [emphasis added]. . . [The

"great challenge facing industrialized societies" is:]
. . . . how to build a society that combines a healthy,
growing economy with an adequate measure of
security, opportunity, and well-being *for all its
citizens* [emphasis added].[7]

Leaders of urban universities are acutely aware of the necessity
of "taking up" that challenge — or at least appearing to do so.
Universities face public scrutiny as never before. Public funds are
increasingly tied to direct and relatively short-run societal benefit.
Foundations are also interested in seeing how their support of
higher education will help improve K-12 schooling, increase civic
responsibility, and strengthen community, among other solutions to
pressing public problems. To put it in another way, "altruism pays"
— doing good may well be the best way for universities to do well.

If doing good is really the best way for universities to do well,
then doing so should result in an improved academic product.
In other words, a university
that works with its neighborhood in
a serious and sustained fashion
should find that it more
successfully advances its mission of
advancing and transmitting
knowledge to advance human
knowledge. Has any university
provided the needed "proof in
practice?" Not to my knowledge.
Hopeful examples do exist,
however, across American higher
education. The focus of this essay
is The University of Pennsylvania's
work with a community
partnership, the West Philadelphia
Improvement Corps.

> **. . . a university that works with its neighborhood in a serious and sustained fashion should find that it more successfully advances its mission of advancing and transmitting knowledge to advance human knowledge.**

University of Pennsylvania and the West Philadelphia
Improvement Corps: An Illustration of Strategic
Academically Based Community Service

For the past eleven years, faculty, students, and staff from the
University of Pennsylvania have been participating in the West
Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC) partnership with public
schools, community groups, and other organizations to create
university-assisted community schools in Penn's local environment
of West Philadelphia. WEPIC has identified the university-assisted
community school, which functions as the center of education,
service, and engagement for all residents of a specified locality, as
the vehicle for creating face-to-face, neighborly community in an
area plagued by urban blight, poverty, and decline.

Penn State University, through its Center for Community Partnerships, has contributed to creating university-assisted community schools through the development and extension of strategic academically based community service, which has as its primary goal contributing to the well-being of people in the community both now and in the future. It is service rooted in and intrinsically tied to teaching and research, and it aims to bring about *structural* community improvement (e.g., effective public schools, neighborhood economic development, strong community organizations) rather than simply to alleviate individual misery (e.g., feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, tutoring the "slow learner").

To call for strategic, academically-based community service is much easier than actually putting it into practice. A number of Penn faculty members have, however, initiated unusually successful projects, among them Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., Zellerbach Family Professor of Sociology and Research. Approximately two years ago, he began a strategic-academically based community service seminar that linked his students to University City High School. Adjacent to Penn's campus, UCHS has consistently been placed near or at the very bottom of Philadelphia high schools in academic achievement. With 88.5 percent of its students representing low-income families, 50 percent of its students receiving a D or an F in at least one course, an average combined SAT score of 643, and the eighth-worst suspension rate and seventh-worst absentee rate among Philadelphia's public high schools, UCHS is visible testimony to Penn's need to do more and better in its work with West Philadelphia.[8] Furstenberg was the first of approximately fifteen faculty members to connect his or her academic work with the UCHS. This wave of Penn involvement is the direct result of an extraordinarily able and progressive principal.

Furstenberg has published widely on teenage sexuality, pregnancy, and childbearing as well as divorce, remarriage, and step-parenting. In recent years, his work has focused on adolescent sexual behavior, changes in the well-being of children, and urban education.

I have known Furstenberg since 1967, when he was a new assistant professor and I was a sophomore at Penn. Since the early 1990s, I had "made the case" to Furstenberg that he turn his research and teaching toward West Philadelphia. A grant from the Ford Foundation to the Center for Community Partnerships and the College of Arts and Sciences to develop academically-based community service courses in sociology and three other departments enabled Furstenberg to pilot a West Philadelphia seminar. Since he cared deeply about the dreadful condition of public schooling in Philadelphia and wanted to do something to reverse those conditions, and since he found the UCHS to be in particular need of assistance and advantageously located for serious and sustained engagement, Furstenberg focused his attention on that high school.

Furstenberg's project, designed to study *and* to help reduce teen pregnancy, involved participatory action research from its beginning.[9] At its core is a two-semester senior thesis seminar — Sociology 302, "Community Research and Community Service." Seminar students work with teachers in four small learning communities (schools-within-schools designed to "break-up" large impersonal schools into smaller, more human- and learning-friendly units) in which they help to incorporate a teen pregnancy-prevention project into the curriculum.

Sociology 302 is also divided into task forces that design a proposal for reducing teen pregnancy at the UCHS. One task force focused on designing a sexuality-education program for teens; another worked on the transition from high school to the workforce; and a third examined the transition from high school to college. Each task force produced a paper and presented it to a group of teachers who had been meeting regularly with Furstenberg to discuss how to lower the school's pregnancy rate, increase its attendance, and lower its drop-out rate.

Each Sociology 302 undergraduate also writes an individual research paper based on his or her experiences at the high school. Papers have focused on such topics as race relations, school culture, teen fatherhood, and the impact of work. Finally, Furstenberg, his students, and UCHS students have been conducting a baseline survey of the school, collecting data on teen parents and demographics of the school population in general. This information is being used to develop a more comprehensive intervention designed to reduce teen pregnancy at UCHS.

Reports from the field and seminar have been exceedingly positive thus far. In a recent phone conversation, Furstenberg described this work as the most electric teaching he has done in nearly 30 years at Penn. Moreover, the principal and Furstenberg are planning a significant expansion of the project to begin in fall 1997.

Conclusion: Urban Universities Taking the Lead

Although Furstenberg's work illustrates the potential of strategic academically-based community schools, it is just that — an illustration. More generally, Penn's work with WEPIC and its university-assisted community school project is still at an early stage, even after more than eleven years of partnership. In spite of the best efforts of many colleagues, and in spite of Penn's increased focus on improving conditions in its local environment, the schools and communities of West Philadelphia have actually deteriorated since 1985. That scenario is almost certainly similar to those of other cities — whether or not they have experienced increased engagement from their local universities. Among the various reasons conditions have deteriorated: wider societal "forces" — including job and population loss — federal and state policies forsaking cities and their residents; globalization of the economy,

and illusory, incremental government efforts that fail to address the underlying causes of America's "chronic" urban crisis.

Most of these "forces" are, of course, not immutable; change is indeed possible. For change to occur, as Bok in effect argued, the university — as the institution primarily responsible for creating new knowledge, educating tomorrow's leaders, and shaping the American schooling system — must take the lead in helping to solve the *seemingly* intractable problems of our urban schools and communities. To do so will require a comprehensive institutional response that engages the broad range of resources of the urban university, including the talents, abilities and energy of faculty and students involved in academically based and traditional community service, as well as the considerable economic power of higher eds as large employers, purchasers of goods, and owners of real estate.

Other "forces" are moving the American university, particularly the urban university, from a position of isolation to that of partnership and involvement with its neighbors. It remains to be seen whether that movement will be serious, sustained, and significant enough to produce the knowledge *and* structural change needed to create and maintain attractive, highly livable, and humane cities that are centers of learning and progress in the twenty-first century.

Notes

[1] *The New York Times*, "Education Life Supplement," August 4, 1996: 4A.

[2] Ernest Boyer, "Creating the New American College," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 40 (27): A48 (1994).

[3] United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Habitat II Clearinghouse Web Serve," http://huduser.org/habitat.html. The exact quotation can be found at URL gopher://huduser.org:73/00/habitat/about/ habbro.txt.

[4] Julian S. Levi, "Ground Space for the University,"in *The University, the City, and Urban Renewal: Report of a Regional Conference*, ed. Charles E. Dobbins (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1964), 11.

[5] Derek Bok, *Universities and the Future of America* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 2-4.

[6] Ibid, 3.

[7] Ibid, 4.

[8] School District of Philadelphia, *School Profiles*, URL - http://partners.upenn.edu/wp/k12/uchs/profile.html.

[10] Participatory action research is predicated upon a mutually-beneficial, collaborative, and democratic realtionship between academics and non-academics. Academic researchers learn from and with members of a community, research with and not on people, and contribute to solving significant community problems and significant scholarly problems. For further discussion of the approach, see William Foote Whyte, ed. *Participatory Action Research* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publishers, 1991).

About the author

Ira Harkavy (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania) is Associate Vice President and Director of the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. He teaches in the departments of history, urban studies, and city and regional planning, and is Executive Editor of Universities and Community Schools. Harkavy recently served as Assistant to the President, Director of the Penn Program for Public Service, Vice Dean of the School of

Arts and Sciences, and Executive Director of the Program for Assessing and Revitalizing the Social Sciences also at Penn. He is currently a consultant to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and its Office of University Partnerships. Harkavy's research has focused on school and community revitalization in Philadelphia and other cities. In recent years, he has written on how to involve universities effectively in democratic parnerships with local public schools and their communities. The West Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC), a partnership linking the University of Pennsylvania and the West Philadelphia community, emerged and developed from seminars and research projects he directs with other colleagues at the university.