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University Engagement: Ivory Tower or Beacon of Hope?

Ray Suarez

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It's great to be here to discuss a topic so vital to the future of so many cities, and so crucial to the future of institutions of higher learning across the country. Colleges and universities have been thinking about the relationship between themselves and the places they live for a long time. The phrase "town and gown" evokes that old idea of the community of scholars in robes and caps walking the old streets of Edinburgh, Oxford, Cambridge, Bologna, Heidelberg, dreaming of Euclidean proofs, the movement of the planets, or salvation by faith and salvation by works. . . .

Part of the town, yes, but at the same time removed from the essential business of hard-headed townspeople: putting food on the table, cleaning up after a workforce of horses, keeping hostile armies at bay. That ancient gown is gone. The tiny community of scholars is part of a worldwide mass pursuit of education—and the town is still trying to pick up the garbage, collect the taxes, and provide a life of coherence and decency to its residents.

Forging a mutually beneficial relationship between institutions of higher learning and the places they live means so many different things in so many different places that it is folly to try to talk about a unified field theory, a one-size-fits-all explanation.

Around the country, but especially in the West and the Southwest, mid-sized cities are growing with their institutions—mostly public but private as well—as university centers—and are as much a draw to retirees and empty nesters who'll never matriculate as cheap real estate and good local golf courses.

Colleges provide the link to a wider cultural world for the new small-city dwellers of Bozeman, Santa Cruz, Eugene, Pullman, Casper, Laramie, Corvallis, and Golden. Many of the college and university towns of the West and Southwest are the fastest growing places in the United States. If you worried about relocating to

these places because you wondered about access to an out-of-the-ordinary meal, a film festival, dance and theater, lecture series . . . if you're getting older but the idea of moving to a place where you would only see old people was something you found unattractive, these places can be very attractive. Institutions of higher learning draw in and plant in one spot a large group of inquirers, people who are willing to try new things and have the time to try them, if not always the money.

College towns provide something closer to a metropolitan experience, and they often do so in places that are still affordable, walkable, driveable, and small. There is no town-and-gown tension in Reno, in Davis, Riverside, and Irvine. In relatively young places the college is a draw, an amenity, a bauble in the municipal treasure chest, and an attribute around which the city councils are building growth strategies. And to be sure, the coffee shops and bookstores and film series are great, but I would be remiss if I left the impression that those lifestyle items are all schools bring to the party.

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We are on the verge of retiring the best-educated, healthiest and longest lived generation of seniors in the history of planet earth, more than seventy million people over a fifteen-year span starting in 2010. We are on the front edge of that experience already, with pre-boomers, people born in the '30s, retiring en masse, and taking classes . . . learning to do tax prep, getting licensed as real estate brokers and appraisers, furniture restorers and woodworkers, opening home-based small businesses—and looking to educational institutions to launch second careers or enrich the time left after careers are wrapped up and put away. So that's one category, one situation, a relatively happy one.

In bigger, older cities the way forward is less clear. In Philadelphia, in New Haven, in Chicago, and New York, the relationship has been a bumpy one at times, and is still in negotiation, still very much in the middle of a journey, but it's not always clear to where. Take Temple University. It's a fine institution. It

still draws students from around the country to its campus. But its North Philadelphia neighborhood is a ravaged, unwelcoming place.

It is at one moment a huge opportunity, since universities in mature urban centers are notoriously land hungry, but in the case of Temple the situation is a little extreme. Not empty lots, but empty blocks . . . block after block after block. . . . Home to shoulder-high weeds and derelict buildings, here and there an intact block with a few dwellings with lights in the windows.

If you are a recruiter, what do you tell? Do you regale parents with litanies of the cultural wealth of Philadelphia? True enough, the place is a great city. But in the free fall of the last several decades, Temple's home, North Philly, has become a truly awful place. You can hire great faculty, raise your standards, improve your teaching hospital, install new equipment in your terrific campus radio station, and what will people see when they come for a visit? Fine old buildings standing in the midst of widespread urban devastation.

Just on the other side of the Schuylkill River are two other famous Philadelphia institutions, the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University. West-central Philadelphia has also had its share of heartache in the last several decades. But under the recent past leadership of a dynamic president who realized the future was a perilous place for Penn if the nearby neighborhoods were not stabilized, the university jumped in with both feet to save its piece of the city. It did so as a landlord and developer, densifying, urbanizing, restoring, working hard to make its part of Philly well scaled, walkable, and beautiful. It did so as a public service institution, doing outreach to the alienated neighborhoods that once saw an imaginary wall between their aging homes and streets and the quadrangles and lecture halls of the Ivy League. There have been tensions. There have been gentrification and relocation. But a big chunk of the city west of downtown that might have slid into oblivion is lively, safe, and viable for the future.

In Chicago, on the South Side, in leafy Hyde Park, stands the University of Chicago, 110 years old, but looking and feeling a lot older in spots—the gorgeous quads, the breathtaking divinity school chapels, the lovely old homes. But during the '60s, the neighborhood just south of the university was in full-scale collapse. Arson, abandonment, crime, and a creeping fear in the adjoining neighborhoods slammed down the accelerator on white flight, which only reinforced the cycle of loss and despair. John D. Rockefeller's magnificent creation was in trouble at the relatively young

age of seventy-five. In neighborhoods just to the south, and just to the north, urban decline lapped up right to the edge of the university itself. The university threatened the city with picking up and leaving Chicago.

Looking at the University of Chicago today it's hard to believe that it could have pulled up stakes. After all, colleges and universities are fixed capital. You can't move dorms, libraries, classrooms, labs, teaching hospitals, and the like. They rise and fall with their hometowns. Leaving the place you developed as a school is not easy, in many places not possible. This focuses schools, or should, on the places they live in an important way, because there isn't a lot of choice. There's a backs-against-the-wall mentality that can be very useful.

In a controversial move that has reverberated across the decades, the U of C, in concert with the city, reduced density in the black areas of Hyde Park, made the area a nest of cul-de-sacs and one-way streets that can be difficult to navigate, frustrating to cross. And if you try to walk into the university from the blocks just south, where poor black families live, you'll find that it's not easy. Walls, fences, other barriers force the pedestrian blocks out of the way. The university was, in effect, sealed off from the Woodlawn neighborhood. The school stayed in Chicago, but resentments remain, and Hyde Park, one of the few racially integrated sections of the city, still is marked by the reengineering of those years.

"What is the obligation to a home community that grows from the educative role of institutions of higher learning?"

As cities swooned and declined in the 1950s and especially in the '60s and '70s, campuses withdrew, or expanded away from the urban core, often becoming more isolated in the process, in a way that's difficult to reverse once conditions change.

In New London, Connecticut, industrial decline and population flight slowed and halted, and students wanted to use the city as a resource, as a place of entertainment and employment, internships and the like, but Connecticut College had become a place apart from the city it lives in. Connecticut, under the leadership of president Dr. Claire Gaudeani, worked hard to reengineer the

relationship, physically and institutionally, between the school and the downtown. Syracuse University watched from a safe distance as the city of Syracuse went through terrible times, and now is using transit links, downtown extension centers, and other devices to reconnect.

The things that connect schools to their communities are, as I've discussed, physical, social, commercial. But what about mission? What is the obligation to a home community that grows from the educative role of institutions of higher learning? A couple of things are happening: one is the explosion in further training, certificate programs, let's say for IT systems operators or programmers, in data management for small businesses. An explosion in retraining. . . .

A good friend of mine, caught in large-scale layoffs for one of the Bell operating companies back East, is now, in his early fifties, becoming an RN. The influx of huge new groups of immigrants has brought a boom in ESL courses, citizenship training, and courses meant to help already trained professionals from other countries transfer their credentials from their home countries to full qualification in the United States. The largest single education group among American adults, according to the Census Bureau, is not people with four-year degrees, but the tens of millions of adults with something called "some college." My own kid brother, in his mid-forties, with a successful career in business, is now heading back to finish missing credits and a bachelor's so he can start seminary work to enter the ordained ministry.

Ignoring this enormous pool of talent, underdeveloped human capital, makes little sense. Community colleges are booming. Distressed neighborhoods are looking to help parents with GEDs as a way of keeping youth on track in high school and maybe sending them to college to get a family off the treadmill of poverty. America is a country heading to class.

How are local institutions responding? Some are designed to meet the needs of the nontraditional student. Others have to perform a gut check, stretch a little, or risk missing out on a population of millions who need what they have.

For many colleges and universities it doesn't take some wild flight of invention to extend their mission to forge links with their home communities. My son attends a small college preparatory public high school in Washington, D.C. called the School without Walls. Housed in a crumbling, century-old elementary school building that may deserve the name School without Walls more

than it intends, it can't really count on the cash-strapped D.C. public schools to give its students much attention, but they do get help from George Washington University. School without Walls has been moving into ever-closer collaboration with the Graduate School of Education of George Washington U, creating a mutually beneficial relationship; the high school is a laboratory of the Grad School. Education has been a natural fit for community service and outreach. Look at Rutgers and Boston College, both of which have become the receivers of particularly distressed small-city public school systems.

But it doesn't end there. Architects, designers, and urban planners have worked with city administration to reclaim lost parts of the urban fabric. Sagging commercial streets in fading downtowns have had empty theaters become properties of nearby colleges, revived venues for music, dance, Chautauqau-style lecture series, and film festivals in space that was sitting vacant. Instead of an eyesore, you get an anchor for commercial development. Legal counseling clinics, night schools, and other college-related services are finding new homes on old Main Streets. It puts these institutions back in the heart of community life, keeps towns and cities viable as homes for these institutions—a win all around.

When towns have no other interested buyers for commercial real estate, no other operators for landmark properties like theaters, the college is welcomed in as the only game in town. In denser, more successful areas, something quite different happens. Look at New York University. Much of Greenwich Village, it seems, is either owned or operated by NYU, keeping relationships with the neighborhood tense, encounters marked by phrases such as "land grab," "eviction," "urban removal." If you ask its neighbors, they'd tell you NYU is proof that there is something called "succeeding too well."

But one of the great hallmarks of NYU's presence in lower Manhattan is the borderlessness of its footprint. There is no barrier, no bright white line, no gates or entryway that marks the school. It is the city. The city is the school. Very different from Yale's campus in troubled New Haven, which might as well have a moat and a drawbridge.

Yale is coming late to the party, realizing that its troubled relationship with its hometown, its isolation from the city, is as much a threat to its own future as New Haven's. Yale cannot succeed if New Haven collapses. UW–Madison can do good things for Madison, which is already busy enough being a state capital,

but a Madison in decline can only threaten the university. It's just as true of Minneapolis, Bloomington, Lansing, Ann Arbor, and other homes of great public universities.

Postsecondary education in the United States has moved in just two generations from being something available to a small elite, to a mass rite of passage for American teens, and toward a lifelong learning model for large age cohorts of people in their forties, fifties, and sixties. The old, historic homes of colleges and universities have caught many of the same diseases of older towns and cities across America. Not only are their own futures in jeopardy, but so are the futures of the schools that have grown with them. And schools have realized the things they teach are many of the same things their hometowns need. We are coming to the peak of a forty-year convergence of circumstances, of need, of market power, of social change, that could be moving colleges and universities to a new golden age of integration with the places they call home. One example is Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, under the leadership of President Evan Dobell, who is now in decidedly un-Hartford-like Hawaii. President Dobell was one of the school leaders to see the possibilities earlier, and Trinity and its hometown are much richer for it.

"America is a country heading to class."

Institutions of higher education, public and private, are moving through a crisis period of tapped-out states, funding cuts, tuition increases, and layoffs. Public schools may have an even more acute obligation in this sphere because they are socially owned goods, paid for by all the people of a city, a county, a state. Colleges may have more will than wallet, but that doesn't release them in any way from their obligation.

But that perfect storm of factors is breaking over the heads of colleges all over the country. These can be great times. I hope they grasp this historic opportunity. Isolation, building a moat around themselves, will hamper their futures, handicap their publics, will keep them from living up to the chance they've been given. It makes good sense to rise to meet these new realities, and the places that succeed will be the ones that do.

Ivory tower or beacon of hope—you can be both.

Thanks.