Building Effective City-University Partnerships:
Lessons from the Heartland

By *Henry Webber* (Washington University, St. Louis)

I have spent a large percentage of my working life thinking about and acting to strengthen the relationship between universities, communities, and cities. For eleven years, I led the University of Chicago's efforts in this area. For the past four years, I have been helping to shape Washington University in St. Louis's urban strategy. In this Policy Brief, I describe the University of Chicago and Washington University experiences and then offer ten propositions about the characteristics of successful university-city partnerships.

The University of Chicago

The University of Chicago has perhaps the longest history of intense attention to urban issues of any major American research university. There are three reasons for this:

1. **A deep connection between the University and its surrounding neighborhood.** Unusual for an urban university, the majority of the faculty of the University of Chicago lives in the immediate neighborhood. The neighborhood *is* the intellectual community of the University.

2. **A history of deep intellectual engagement with the City of Chicago and applied problems.** Two of the first four units of the University were the Center for Continuing Studies, which educated the public, and the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, founded by John Dewey as a living model of how to revolutionize American education. In the 1930s, the Chicago school of sociology established the field of urban sociology by using the city of Chicago as a laboratory. And in the early 1980s William Julius Wilson, predominately based on research on a set of neighborhoods within a few miles of the campus of the University of Chicago, defined the problem of urban neighborhood distress for a generation of scholars and policy makers and set the intellectual basis for the growth of mixed income neighborhoods as a strategy for neighborhood revitalization.

3. **Institutional need.** In the early 1950s, the city of Chicago entered a sharp period of decline. There was rapid demographic change in the neighborhoods around the University and throughout the South Side and West Side of Chicago and a vicious crime problem emerged. As a result,

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the university was forced to ask the question: Can we continue as a world-class university if we are located in a sea of urban blight?

The initial response to the crisis was urban renewal. In the late 1950s, the University of Chicago partnered with the City of Chicago to become one of the first urban renewal neighborhoods in the country. Together they undertook a dramatic program to preserve a middle-class, mixed-race community in Hyde Park.

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The strategy involved the physical reshaping of the neighborhood: removing vibrant but run-down and crime-ridden commercial and residential properties, reducing neighborhood density, building townhouses, and encouraging University expansion and other institutional uses. In addition, there was a strong focus on neighborhood safety. The University of Chicago developed and still maintains a robust police presence in the Hyde Park neighborhood.

By many measures, urban renewal in Hyde Park was successful; far more successful than urban renewal most places in the country. The neighborhood has maintained itself for 50 years as an attractive, truly integrated urban neighborhood.

On the other hand, the displacement of a considerable number of minority residents during urban renewal contributed to great estrangement between the University and its South Side neighbors and the physical changes in the neighborhood left Hyde Park

attractive but a little boring. The great urbanist Jane Jacobs was very critical of urban renewal in Hyde Park, arguing that it had imposed a suburban plan on an urban neighborhood. She was not, in my opinion, all wrong.

By the time I came to manage the University of Chicago's community agenda in the mid-1990s, the world and neighborhood had seen major changes. The University had won the battle for stability, but now wanted to make the neighborhood more vibrant. Chicago, meanwhile, had completed its transition from a manufacturing and agricultural processing city to the gleaming service center we know today. Neighborhood diversity had become recognized as an asset and it was possible to imagine Hyde Park, not as an island of relative prosperity in a sea of poverty, but as part of a newly revitalized mid-South Side of the city of Chicago, fully connected to downtown Chicago. Finally, there were partners— governmental, community, and foundations—ready to join the cause of neighborhood improvement.

In this milieu, the University, the city, and the community pursued a multi-pronged agenda. The University focused on improving public education by a variety of means, including owning and operating four charter schools in the neighborhoods around the University. The University sought to expand safety by extending the University's police coverage to neighborhoods north and south of Hyde Park. The University worked on improving community amenities — particularly parks and arts options — through joint programs with the City of Chicago and other public agencies. The University also supported real estate development, including the development of affordable housing, the growth of minority contractors, and business growth on the South Side of Chicago.

Not all of these strategies were academic in content, but the University engaged faculty whenever possible and tried to build academic

programs that had a community focus as well as scholarly interest, most notably the University's Urban Education Initiative and its Urban Health Initiative. While there is much left to do, the strategy was successful, and the mid-South Side of Chicago is a much more vibrant place now than it was 20 years ago.

Cities need services for vulnerable populations and smart public policies. Academic institutions need to educate students and produce research. The challenge is not to change either party, but to find projects that serve both parties.

Washington University in St. Louis

In 2007, I moved to Washington University in St. Louis. The context was very different and the University faced different challenges. Most neighborhoods surrounding Washington University are strong; some are among the most attractive neighborhoods in the St. Louis metropolitan area. However, as a city, St. Louis is challenged. It is the epitome of an older industrial city (albeit an older industrial city with a great baseball team). The region is not growing much and has not grown quickly for a long time. It is not good for a global university to be in a stagnant region.

To the extent there are pockets of success in the region, the success of the University itself must be noted. Washington University added 3,000 jobs in the past decade and now has 13,000 employees, making it the third largest private employer in the St. Louis region. In total, it has a $5.2 million impact on the regional economy each year.

In this context, Washington University seeks to contribute to regional economic growth

through partnerships with others and also to public discussion of key issues by serving as a center for policy discussion.

The University also seeks to apply its academic strengths to key regional issues, notably in the areas of public health, public education, and growing entrepreneurship and innovation, which it encourages in many ways, including a large investment in a research park. In each area, the University is implementing an aggressive agenda.

Ten Propositions about City-University Partnerships

This work leads me to offer the following propositions about the nature of effective city-university partnerships.

1. **Sustainable partnerships are based on mutual self-interest and have clear rules of engagement.** Cities need services for vulnerable populations and smart public policies. Academic institutions need to educate students and produce research. The challenge is not to change either party but to find projects that serve both parties. Furthermore, academic research on urban issues of interest to cities usually involves access to public data sets such as school records or crime statistics. It is critical that the provider of the data and the academics doing research work out the inevitable issues of exactly what will be done with the data, how it will be released, and whether the public agency will have the ability to comment on results prior to publication. To fail to work these issues in advance is to invite conflict.

2. **Many of the strongest partnerships between universities and cities are based on academic programs that combine service with research and human capital development.** The model for such partnerships is the work of

academic medical centers. The Urban Education Initiative at the University of Chicago replicates this model in another arena. Let me be clear: it is good when a medical school sponsors a free Saturday clinic where medical students and faculty volunteer their time. It is far better when a medical school offers a primary care medicine program that combines partnerships with local community health centers with training resident physicians to serve as future providers in such clinics, and builds a research program in community health. The closer University service efforts are to teaching and research the more sustainable they are.

A key question for all before engaging in academic research on a policy initiative is what will be done with the results of the analysis.

3. **In most cases, academic institutions can only be helpful in solving public problems in areas of pre-existing academic strengths.** As broad and impressive as great universities are, they do not have strength in all areas. It would be very good for St. Louis, for example, if Washington University had a strong regional economics program. We do not and hence need to contribute in other ways to the challenges facing our region.

4. **Academic analysis of key public initiatives is risky for all.** The hallmark of academic research is the independence of the investigator. That means the investigator may well find out that the most cherished program of the city partner — or even the university itself — has little impact on the problem

the program is trying to solve. Research is not consulting. By its nature, it often exposes flaws. A key question for all before engaging in academic research on a policy initiative is what will be done with the results of the analysis.

5. **Universities and their civic partners are likely to value the components of their partnerships differently.** Issues of limited interest to the academy, such as accurate reviews of trends over time, are often of great interest to public agencies. The Consortium on Chicago School Research, for example, has produced many groundbreaking studies done with great methodological sophistication by well-known faculty. Many in the Chicago Public School system have told me that the most valuable report the Consortium does is its annual report, prepared by a junior analyst at the Consortium, on the drop-out rate in Chicago Public Schools.

6. **University-city partnerships have high transaction costs and require staff with skills at "bridge-building."** Staff who have experience on both sides of the fence are critical to successful partnerships.

7. **Neighborhood change is difficult to achieve and inevitably is conflictual.** Neighborhoods change slowly over long periods of time. Even at best, those changes do not benefit all. There are always winners and losers. Therefore, universities that seek neighborhood change must expect conflict.

8. **Contributing to regional economic growth is both expected of universities in much of the country and difficult to achieve.** Universities are not economic growth machines. They select faculty because of their contributions to knowledge creation and teaching ability, not because faculty are marvels at job

or firm creation. At the same time, the decline of other industries in many cities, along with the growth of university budgets and the examples of Route 128 and the Silicon Valley, inevitably turn public attention to universities as tools for economic growth. Getting better at company formation and technology transfer is a virtual requirement for universities, particularly public universities, over the next decade.

9. **There is great value in universities developing operating programs that test new ideas.** The best bridge between theory and practice is the development of models of progress. Such programs force academics to deal with real world implementation problems and, if successful, provide proof on the ground of success. Charter schools, community health clinics, and early childhood education centers are examples of model program areas. Praxis is a good thing.

Partnerships between universities and cities are inherently challenging. The two sides have different goals and different priorities. At the same time, such partnerships have the potential for great value.

10. **Universities can and should serve as forums for regional discussions of key issues.** Universities are appropriate forums of thoughtful discussion, analysis and reflection on the most important challenges facing regions. They are places where diverse people within and outside the academy gather for serious work, in public or private and in large or small groups. Few universities have adopted this role as well as they might.

Concluding Thoughts

Partnerships between universities and cities are inherently challenging. The two sides have different goals and different priorities. At the same time, such partnerships have the potential for great value. Cities have no better potential partner than those large universities that have increasingly become the economic, as well as educational, leaders in their communities. Cities need the ideas, energy and outside view represented by universities, their faculty and students. Universities are in the business of contributing to solutions for the most important and pressing problems in our society. There are no more important problems than preventing crime, reversing neighborhood decay, and improving the performance of large urban school systems. Working through the inevitable challenges to build sustainable partnerships between universities and cities is work well worth doing.

BOSTON AREA RESEARCH INITIATIVE POLICY BRIEFS

"Building Effective City-University Partnerships: Lessons from the Heartland" by Henry Webber (Washington University, St. Louis) April 2012.

BOSTON AREA RESEARCH INITIATIVE WORKING PAPERS

"Custodians and Custodianship in Urban Neighborhoods: Patterns in Requesting Government Services for Public Issues," by Daniel Tumminelli O'Brien (Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University) Forthcoming.

Boston Area Research Initiative

The Boston Area Research Initiative (BARI) is a collaborative effort to spur original research in the greater Boston area that is on the cutting edge of social science and public policy. A research partnership among the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston and key agencies in Boston, BARI also seeks to forge active and mutually beneficial relationships among university researchers and policymakers.

Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston

The Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston is a university-wide entity that aims to improve governance of Greater Boston by fostering better connections between scholars, policy makers, and civic leaders. The Institute was founded and funded by The Phyllis and Jerome Lyle Rappaport Foundation, which promotes emerging leaders. More information about the Institute is available at www.hks.harvard.edu/rappaport.

Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study

The Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University is dedicated to creating and sharing transformative ideas across the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences. The Institute's Academic Ventures program fosters collaborative research projects and brings together faculty from across Harvard University to develop innovative academic programming across a wide range of disciplines. Conferences and lectures also provide opportunities for the public to engage with scholars, challenge assumptions, explore emerging ideas, and study timely issues of public policy. Learn more about the people and programs of the Radcliffe Institute, including the Fellowship Program and the Schlesinger Library, at www.radcliffe. harvard.edu.