

Universities as Anchor Institutions

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Much has been made recently of the role of place-based institutions in the development of cities and regions (AITE, 2009). In fact, the whole notion of the “city” as a “region” is becoming rather compatible with the broader 21st century geography of “urban” (*Brookings Institution, 2008*). For humans, the whole concept of the “urban” is taking on a species-(re)defining nature. Almost everyone, especially beginning with the work of geographer David Clark (2002) and moving forward to demographers, such as the United Nations’ global specialist George Martine (2007), suggests that the human species has been forever altered—with more people now living in “urban” rather than rural settlements. Everyone in this emerging urban majority may not live in a city’s downtown district, but everyone does live in some form of conurbation or metropolitan city or region.

Just as the social and demographic conditions of everyday life for a majority of humans are shifting in the early 21st century, so too are the governmental structures related to these residential groups. In no place is this shift in the metropolis of human settlements more apparent than in the United States, where the conditions of policy nostrums and practices of the central federal government have increasingly “devolved” or otherwise shifted to the state and, especially, the local levels. Practitioners and scholars alike call this the shift from government to “governance.” Presidents, starting with Harry S. Truman and ending with Bill Clinton, have termed this ongoing re-definition of federalist government the move to what another president, Richard Nixon, most brazenly called the “new federalism” (*Biles, 2011*). At the local level, with the fiscal and structural re-invention of the local state well advanced, two operative words have become popular: “partnership” (between institutions, both private and public) and “privatization”—the outsourcing of policies and outright selling of services to private sector providers.

In the midst of such devolutionary and/or privatizing shifts to the local state, or what is called in Europe the “localization” of the central state (*Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2011*), the re-invigoration of “place” has become increasingly apparent. Even more clear has been the “paradox” that such reinvigoration of place in the service of the human species creates in the “space of flows” (*Castells, 1997, p. 378*) between and among the nodes of the “globalizing network societies” (*Castells, 1997*) of modern city/regions. Some practitioners call this the emergence of a global-local political economy

(Swyngedouw, 1997), and they shorten the entire frame of political economic reference with the term “glocalization.” However such practice is contextualized going forward in the 21st century, the role of *place* and the place-based institutions of cities and regions will be recast in new importance as one of the driving conditions of modern urban development and change.

Although market institutions and the corporate and productive capacities they offer are certainly central to the modern development of place, non-market, place-based institutions are also key “anchors” of place, for by their practices, they “root” or otherwise “moor” the people of the urban in place. The role of such *anchor institutions* is not static or un-dynamic. In fact, it is just the opposite—grounded in geographic fluidity (Bauman, 1999), or what social scientist Paul Ylvisaker once called the “elastic meanings” (Ylvisaker, 1989, Chapter 2) of “community.” Good examples of such place-based anchor institutions are universities, hospitals (“eds and meds” as the University of Pennsylvania’s Ira Harkavy calls them in AITF, 2009), community foundations, local governments, and key infrastructure services. All these and more have the potential to be exemplars of such urban anchor institutions—at once “fluid” and dynamic *and*, at the same time, rooted in place. Hank Webber and Michael Karlström (2009) suggest that such institutions and the conditions they exhibit are key to the geography of place and thereby “anchor” the community in real and palpable ways, saying that “anchor institutions are those non-profit or corporate entities that, by reason of mission, invested capital, or relationships to customers or employees, are geographically tied to a certain location” (p. 4). Readers will learn from many of the authors in the essays of this thematic issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* that the leadership of such place-based institutions seeks to understand and evolve their impact on their urban and rural communities. The question for all local anchor institutions is: What do anchor institutions do to advance their communities’ development?

As the title of this collection and the topics of the essays suggest, this is a thematic issue dedicated to the role of the university as a place-based, urban anchor institution. The literature tells us, as suggested above, that the notion of “urban” now stretches well beyond city limits, including the regions (suburban, ex-urban, and peri-urban) that make up what Brookings Institution studies of metropolitan America call “city-regions” (Brookings Institution, 2008). It is important to underscore the evolving contextual geographies of the actors in the essays that follow by suggesting that the spatial immobility of anchor institutions in central cities was considered a

prime characteristic of such institutions and their immediate areas when the term was used early on by the Aspen Institute. The essays in this issue of the *Journal*, however, show how the meaning of “city” and “urban” in such conversations has been changing. The policy and institutional discourses now embrace the central city and the suburbs, ex-urbs, and peri-urbs. The changing meaning of “city” and “urban” might not alter the “immobile” dimension of anchor institution definition; however, it certainly does change the urban space within which anchor institutions are expected to operate. Further, studies of urban life worldwide suggest that more than half of all humans now live in one form or another of “urban” settlement or city-region. Therefore, the notion of “urban” undertaken in these essays on the role of academic institutions in U.S. urban communities also will occasionally stretch beyond the “city” and into the “region.”

To repeat, just as the notion of “urban” has changed, so too the notion of *urbanite* has shifted, as the earlier references to demography suggest. The studies cited indicate that more than half of all humans worldwide now live in one form or another of “urban settlement.” With this shift in the “urban-ness” of the human species has come a shift in the institutions and the purposive practices of urban higher education. The essays in this thematic issue, either directly or indirectly, address these shifts in cities and regions, the increasing experience of “urban-ness” of human life itself, and the institutions and their roles in the city-regions of the United States.

Before we introduce the essays in this thematic issue of the *Journal*, and the ways they address the issues referenced above, we want to suggest that the entire topic of the university as an engaged, anchor institution is a strategic element of the modern academy (*Gaffikin & Perry, 2009*) embedded in the practices of university leadership. More precisely, top-level *leadership* matters when establishing a university’s approach to place-based engagement, especially in a research university, where decentralization at the disciplinary, college, or academic unit level is the norm. Clark Kerr, the founding chancellor of the University of California system, is reported to have described the organization of the academy as a group of disparate faculty members with a common parking problem. Others describe such decentralization as “organized anarchy” where, if “left to their own devices, most faculty members (and their departments) will bend to the daily preoccupations of research and teaching, satisfying ‘service’ requirements with a campus or faculty committee” (*Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 43*) assignment. When it comes to a university’s reward system, this “anarchy,” ironically, does adhere to, if not outright produce,

order of two varieties. First, there is disciplinary order. A scholar's reputation is "substantially influenced by the disciplinary community at large, through the control of access to the communication network of the discipline—journals, presented papers, awards and other such anointing from the community" (*Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 40*). Second, when it comes to rewards, this anarchy has the potential to generate a certain class system. Those who *do* choose to partner with communities or participate in public service, and make their disciplinary discourse local rather than national or international, are in danger of becoming "second class citizens" of the academy, subordinated to discipline-directed faculty members. Again it requires, as the essays in this thematic issue suggest, institution-defining leadership to activate and keep legitimate the practices of university faculty, staff, and student engagement.

A third element of the place-based or anchored and engaged higher education institution that emerges in the essays is resources or funding. Programs of engagement, especially those that seek to expand to sites of creative knowledge, need stable, recurring funding so that their efforts are clearly embedded in the long-term future of a university. A disappearing start-up account is not enough. If a university seeks status as an "engaged university"—an institution that through its place-based relations strengthens its role as an urban anchor institution—then this must be registered in the institution's fiscal and structural investment in the process. Again, the only way such resources will achieve recurring and/or institutionalized status is through leadership—where decisions concerning higher education will be reciprocal investments in the community, the city-region, or the *place* of which the university is a part.

Using the immediate features of university place-based engagement as a starting point, one important characteristic of the majority of the essays that follow is their being written by top leaders of the case study institutions. More particularly, four of the essays are either authored or co-authored by university or college presidents: Nancy Cantor is the chancellor of Syracuse University and along with Peter Englot and Marilyn Higgins has co-authored an essay on "making the work of anchor institutions stick." Here readers will see Cantor, Englot, and Higgins suggest that the geography of "place" is not, by itself, enough—time matters as well. A university, like Cantor's Syracuse University, must take the time to engage its neighborhoods, city, and region before it can really see itself as an "embedded" and, even more important, "trusted" institution of the region, able to build, along with a full constellation

of local partners, a *lasting* “civil infrastructure” and, ultimately, a “social infrastructure” of place or community.

This notion of lasting time is carried forward by other higher education leaders in this thematic issue. James T. Harris, the president of Widener University, has, along with Marcine Pickron-Davis, written what he calls a “retrospective,” decade-long review of the historical journey of his university to reclaim its role as a regional anchor institution. Harris and Pickron-Davis offer the lesson that the “anchoring” role of the university in a region *takes time*, and emerges in a host of collaborations or partnerships with other regional institutions of place such as hospitals and health-care centers, faith-based institutions, community organizations, and key market-based corporate entities. For Harris and Pickron-Davis, Widener University has taken time and reached out to engage partners throughout the region and, in the process, solidified its role as an “inextricably bound” anchor of regional growth and development.

The notion of leadership, and the resources and rewards such leadership has at its disposal, is made clear in two essays by the presidents of community colleges. Eduardo Padrón, the president of Miami Dade College, has contributed an essay on the place of the college in mobilizing the “engaging power of the arts.” Here, leadership in the person of the president of Miami Dade College makes a tremendous difference; the notion of reciprocity between the community of Miami and the world is clearly mediated through the college. As Padrón writes, the educational mission of the community college includes “quality of life in the community”—a community where the notion of “arts,” like the notion of “quality of life,” includes many factors—everything from public intellectuals to world leaders, to the cultural traditions of the diverse communities of Miami. Again, the importance of leadership as the center force enabling an institution of higher education to continuously and adequately engage the multitudinous issues and challenges of place is a clear feature of this essay.

In a brief reflective note, President Thomas McKeon of Tulsa Community College writes about the contributions of the college to the region’s emerging “entrepreneurial ecosystem,” in particular the synergy that has been created between the community college’s Center for Creativity and the new activities of enterprise that have developed in the southern end of Tulsa’s downtown corridor. McKeon has focused the efforts of the institution on a “place” filled with long-term historical roots of economic dynamism and

renewal, allowing for change that, as he states in the essay, goes to the heart, “the very essence of higher education.”

The fifth essay in this thematic issue is, in some ways, a summation of the first four. Fred McGrail, vice president of communications at Lehigh University, writes a case study about the university and its signature role in the transformation of place—in this case the relationship of “Lehigh University and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Partnering to Transform a Steel Town Into a College Town.” The key features of the first four contributions all are in play in McGrail’s essay: the role of leadership, and the belief that engaged, place-based development takes time—time that needs to be filled with “partnerships” or collaborations with other community anchors or place-based actors. What sets this essay apart from the others is the description of a university, Lehigh University, that is actively engaged in a process of restructuring the *industrial* economy of its place, its community. Bethlehem, Pennsylvania is shifting away from its historical roots as a steel town. Today, the university is the central anchor of place and of economy. This is true “heavy lifting” for an institution—to shift its role as a non-market institution into a region-defining entity—for both the place and its market. The story McGrail tells is both summative and highly instructive.

The last two contributions to this thematic issue are also, in their own ways, both summative and instructive of new modes of assessing the role of the university as an “anchor” of a neighborhood, city, or region. No review of the university as an “urban anchor institution” would be complete without some attention to the shifting policy foci of the federal government and the increasing importance of universities as urban anchors in the devolutionary context of contemporary federalism. This topic is well addressed in the sixth essay in this thematic issue by the University of Michigan’s Elizabeth Hudson, titled “Educating for Community Change: Higher Education’s Proposed Role in Community Transformation Through the Federal Promise Neighborhood Policy.” In this piece, Hudson investigates a federal comprehensive community initiative, the Promise Neighborhood program, in order to understand higher education community engagement in an embedded context. The Promise Neighborhood program aims to improve youth opportunities using a model like the Harlem Children’s Zone. Through a qualitative analysis of the 21 nationwide Promise Neighborhood program awardee applications, Hudson discovered that higher education institutions commit to these partnerships through mission-related practices associated with teaching, research, and

service; capacity-building practices, including teacher training and community leadership development; programs and services, including direct community services; and administrative functions, such as grant management contributions. Hudson argues that starting to understand engagement from the perspective of community goals offers insight into the practices that compose what she calls “higher education’s civic mission.”

The concept of higher education has certainly morphed from the old and rather “unengaged” ivory tower notion to a new, highly engaged, place-based or community-based concept. This new concept embraces teaching tools like service-learning. The goals and strategies of service-learning have been evident in most universities for some time, and they have been key ingredients in a full range of disciplinary and professional training programs at liberal arts and community colleges for much longer. Using the dynamic features of John Dewey’s learning paradigms (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007), Kurt Lewin’s (1935) attention to social issues and problems, and Whitehead’s admonition about “inert” knowledge (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007), contributors Robert Kronick and Robert Cunningham write about the normative re-invigoration of the role they suggest that all institutions of the academy should take when engaging in “service-learning.” In this essay, they offer recommendations for both the academy and the community in an era when the notions of anchor institutions, civic engagement, and university-assisted schools all contribute to the process of making universities “solid citizens” (as the authors say) within their sphere of influence. To this end, the teaching and learning project of the academy (whether community college or research institution) reaches its zenith through engagement in solving social problems. In short, service-learning requires an active, if not always “activist,” institution of place.

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