

## [Building Neighborhoods](#)

### Coverage of Federal Urban Policy from United Neighborhood Centers of America

#### [“The Role of Colleges and Universities in Place-based Initiatives”](#)

By [Patrick Lester](#) – August 1, 2010

Several weeks ago we [noted an opinion piece](#) in Education Week by Russell Olwell, a professor of history at Eastern Michigan University, which asked why more universities and colleges were not stepping up to be lead applicants for Promise Neighborhoods.

In our comments on the piece, we expressed a very different opinion. First, we argued that the number of lead applicants that were institutions of higher education seemed quite high to us. We also predicted that their proportion would increase once we found out who actually applied. This turned out to be true.

We went on to point out that many more colleges and universities were at the table than might first seem apparent. We knew from speaking to local projects that even when they were not the lead applicants, they were often still playing important roles behind the scenes. We concluded by expressing some fear that, if anything, universities might be too influential.

That was an opinion that was, shall we say, ‘noticed’ by some of our friends in academia, who gave us a little light ribbing for it (smile).

At the time, we said we intended to bring in someone who knew more to give us a more enlightened view. Today is the day.

Dr. Ira Harkavy is Associate Vice President and founding Director of the [Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships](#) at the University of Pennsylvania. He is a noted expert and historian of university-community-school partnerships ([bio](#)). And for the record, being a good sport, he gave us no ribbing whatsoever! (not that we mind).

We asked his opinion about these issues.

**Building Neighborhoods:** Dr. Harkavy, thank you for joining us. In your opinion, what is the appropriate role for universities in place-based programs like Promise and Choice Neighborhoods? What do they bring to the table and what are their strengths?

**Dr. Ira Harkavy:** Community colleges, colleges, and universities have a crucial role to play in place-based programs such as Promise and Choice Neighborhoods. My opinion is based on three premises:

1. The future of higher educational institutions and their communities and cities are intertwined.
2. Higher eds can make significant contributions to the quality of life in their cities and communities.

3. Higher eds can enhance their overall missions of teaching, research, learning, and service by working to improve the quality of life in their cities and local communities.

Moreover, higher eds are place-based institutions themselves. They have a special responsibility for community problem-solving given their mission, location, resources, prestige, power and influence. By actively engaging in real world problem-solving, place-based, community-focused education with their local communities, higher educational institutions can effectively utilize their vast resources—particularly their human resources of students, faculty, and staff—and significantly contribute to improving the quality of life in America's communities.

Today, higher educational institutions play crucial, multi-faceted roles in their cities and surrounding regions—including in education, research, service, housing and real estate development, employment, job training, purchasing, hiring, business incubation, and cultural development. Higher eds can play a critical role as anchor institutions, providing employment to many and serving as powerful collaborators in economic, educational and civic renewal efforts.

Place-based initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods represent a vitally important community building strategy for promoting collaboration and improving the lives of children in our most disinvested communities. Their power lies in the interconnected nature of the academic, social, emotional, physical and civic development of our young people in the communities in which they live. Schools are at the center of the Promise Neighborhoods strategy and guidelines.

In my judgment, community schools are the most effective and efficient vehicle to incorporate the community in the work of the school, and are key to the success of place-based programs. Community schools bring together schools and community partners (community-based organizations, family, health and mental health agencies, higher education institutions, and others) to help young people succeed and to develop stronger families and healthier communities. The [Coalition for Community Schools](#), which I have chaired since its founding, is the national policy, research and advocacy arm of the community schools movement.

Since 1985, colleagues at Penn and other higher eds have worked to develop and implement the idea of university-assisted community schools. We emphasize university-assisted because community schools require more resources than traditional schools do and because we have become convinced that, in relative terms, universities constitute the strategic sources of broadly based, comprehensive, sustained support for community schools. Moreover, by leveraging the resources of anchor institutions, community schools — and Promise Neighborhoods — will be in a stronger position to sustain their work over the long term.

The most critical component of the model is that the work is integrated into both the public school's and university's curricula, creating a real-world problem solving approach and fostering sustainable partnerships. By providing academic opportunities for students and faculty to engage in community problem-solving, place-based research, teaching, learning, and service, higher eds can effectively utilize their vast intellectual resources and powerfully contribute to both improving the quality of life in America and advancing the quality of learning and scholarship.

Although all too often higher eds have tried to distance themselves from the poverty in their own local environments, things are changing rapidly. Colleges and universities are increasingly becoming engaged civic institutions, largely through efforts to improve their local environment and to reduce poverty and disadvantage in the communities of which they are a part. Service-learning, volunteer projects, institutional investment and support are some of the means that have been used to create democratic, mutually beneficial, mutually respectful partnerships designed to make a profound difference in the community and on the campus.

Throughout the 1990s, hundreds of universities established offices or centers aimed at encouraging partnerships with the community. Hundreds of thousands of college students participate in various community-based activities. [Campus Compact](#), a national coalition of college and university presidents and a leading proponent of service-learning, has grown from 3 institutions in 1985 to over 1,100 in 2009, approximately a quarter of all colleges and universities in the United States.

One relatively recent effort to promote democratic, mutually beneficial university-community partnerships is the [Anchor Institutions Task Force](#). In winter 2009, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was advised by a national Task Force, coordinated by the University of Pennsylvania, on how HUD could increase its impact and strategically leverage anchor institutions, particularly higher education and medical institutions (“eds and meds”), to improve communities and help solve significant urban problems. This Task Force, which I currently chair, is continuing, functioning as an ongoing think tank, developing long-term strategies, and making the case for the crucial role of anchor institutions in economic and community development. The Task Force is an individual membership organization, comprised of democratic-minded academics, university presidents, and other civic leaders who subscribe to the Task Force’s mission and core values: collaboration and partnership; equity and social justice; democracy and democratic practice; and commitment to place and community.

While this movement for the democratically engaged civic university has grown throughout the US — indeed worldwide — much more needs to occur. This idea is captured in the title of a forthcoming report by my colleagues at the [Democracy Collaborative](#) — *The Road Half Traveled: University Engagement at a Crossroads* — which highlights the work at ten leading colleges and universities (including Penn) but claims that there is much work to do for these institutions to truly and effectively serve as anchors in long-term community revitalization. A significant challenge of this work has been moving beyond limited (and at times palliative) community involvement towards the establishment of deep, lasting, democratic, collaborative partnerships that solve significant real-world community problems.

**Building Neighborhoods:** Now that we have heard some of what universities can bring to the table, let’s look at some of the potential criticisms. Some critics have complained that universities approach low-income communities in a paternalistic and undemocratic way. How valid are these criticisms and what can be done to address them?

**Dr. Ira Harkavy:** This criticism is certainly valid. No doubt universities must change if society is to become increasingly democratic. I have made the argument many times before that higher eds have a long way to go before they radically change their hierarchical cultures and structures

and really use all of their enormous resources to help transform their local communities into democratic, cosmopolitan, neighborly communities.

John Gardner, arguably the leading spokesperson for the democratic, engaged, cosmopolitan, civic university thought and wrote about organizational devolution and the university's potential role for nearly a generation. For him, the effective functioning of organizations required the planned and deliberate, rather than haphazard, devolution of functions.

To extend Gardner's observation, I contend that universities and colleges, to realize their great potential and really contribute to a democratic devolution revolution, will have to do things very differently than they do now. To begin with, changes in "doing" will require recognition by higher eds that, as they now function, they — particularly universities — constitute a major part of the problem, not a significant part of the solution. To become part of the solution, higher eds must give full-hearted, full-minded devotion to the painfully difficult task of transforming themselves into socially responsible civic universities and colleges. To do so, they will have to radically change their institutional cultures and structures, democratically realign and integrate themselves, and develop a comprehensive, realistic strategy.

**Building Neighborhoods:** Many community residents are wary of universities who may seem more interested in research than helping their communities, for example some who may "take the data and run." At its worst, some may cite historical examples such as the infamous Tuskegee experiment. What measures can universities take to improve town-gown relations and prevent local populations from feeling like lab rats?

**Dr. Ira Harkavy:** Authentic, democratic partnerships have several key characteristics in common. In October 2004, I attended the third in a series of conferences sponsored by the [Kellogg Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good](#), held at the Johnson Foundation's Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The working group I was part of specifically identified democratic purpose, process, and product as crucial for successful university partnerships with schools and communities.

First is purpose: A successful partnership must be known for its democratic and civic purposes. This is in keeping with the democratic mission that served as the central animating force behind the development of the American research university. An abiding democratic and civic purpose is the rightly placed goal if higher education is to truly contribute to the public good.

Second is process: In accordance with the purpose discussed above, a successful partnership should be democratic, egalitarian, transparent, and collegial. Higher educational institutions should go beyond the rhetoric of collaboration and conscientiously work with communities, rejecting a unidirectional, top down approach, which all too often has characterized university-community interaction. The higher educational institution and the community, as well as members of both communities, should treat each other as ends in themselves, rather than as means to an end. The relationship itself and welfare of the various partners—not developing a specified program or completing a research project—should be the preeminent value. These are the types of collaborations that tend to be significant, serious and sustained, that lead to a relationship of genuine respect and trust, and that most benefit both the partners and society.

And third is product: A successful partnership strives to make a positive difference for all partners. Contributing to the well being of people in the community (both now and in the future) through structural community improvement (e.g., effective public schools, neighborhood economic development, strong community organizations) should be a central goal of a truly democratic partnership for the public good. Research, teaching, learning, and service should also be enhanced as a result of a successful partnership. Indeed, working with the community to improve the quality of life in the community may be one of the best ways to advance learning within a higher educational institution.

**Building Neighborhoods:** Where do universities need to go from here? How do we get there?

**Dr. Ira Harkavy:** Universities should make solving community-identified universal problems that are manifested in their local communities (substandard housing, inadequate healthcare, unequal schooling, etc.) a very high institutional priority. Their contributions to these solutions should count heavily both in assessing their institutional performance and in responding to their requests for renewed or increased resources and financial support. Government can be an indispensable catalyst in this process.

Now is an appropriate moment to create a new compact between government, higher educational institutions and their communities. Government should encourage community colleges, colleges, and universities to do well by doing good—that is, to better realize their missions by contributing significantly to developing and sustaining democratic schools and communities. Enlisting universities as key partners in Federal, place-based initiatives can help to leverage the vast but yet to be fully tapped resources of higher education to improve the quality of life and learning in their local communities, as well as society in general. The Federal government—by enlisting universities as key partners in place-based programs such as Promise and Choice Neighborhoods—can and should stimulate that examination and change. Moreover, government can help higher eds and other anchor institutions engage their full set of resources—human, academic, cultural, economic—with their community, forging democratic, mutually beneficial, mutually respectful partnerships.

In this approach, the Federal Government functions as a collaborating partner, effectively facilitating cooperation among all sectors of society, serving as a powerful catalyst and providing the funds needed to create stable, ongoing, effective partnerships. This strategy also requires creatively and intelligently adapting the work and resources of a wide variety of local institutions (e.g., higher eds, hospitals, neighborhood and faith-based organizations) to the particular needs and resources of local communities. It assumes, however, that universities and colleges, which simultaneously constitute preeminent international, national, and local institutions, potentially represent by far the most powerful partners, “anchors,” and creative catalysts for change and improvement in the quality of life in American cities and communities.

As I noted previously, for universities and colleges to fulfill this role, they will have to do things very differently than they do now. Critically, universities need to be judged by new criteria. We have to hold higher eds accountable by insisting that they be rewarded with Federal support to undertake community and school partnership activities only if they follow the “Noah Principle”—funding given for building arks (producing real change), not for predicting rain

(describing the problems that exist and will develop if actions are not taken). Funded activities should further demonstrate community benefit, not simply benefit to the university, as well as transparent and democratic collaborations with local partners. Finally, there needs to be accountability for results that are measurable and sustainable.

In sum, the Federal government has an unprecedented opportunity to inspire higher educational institutions to work in collaboration with their local schools and communities to help solve truly significant, community identified, real world problems and, by doing so, help America realize the democratic promise of America for all Americans.