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## Majoring in Development

Higher ed is an American growth industry — with happy consequences for many cities.

*By John McCarron*

Like marriage, sometimes it's just great — and other times you just can't stand each other. The constant challenge for the nation's 3,000-plus colleges, and the towns and neighborhoods that surround them, is, of course, to maximize the former and minimize the latter.

The bad news is that hard economic times are pressing both sides — town and gown — so much that false economies beckon. Taxpayers are scrutinizing every public expenditure that might benefit tax-exempt academe, even as college administrators are being forced to slash "nonessential" programs, including some community outreach efforts.

This year, Duke University operated without its longtime vice president for community affairs after a prominent foundation cut support of the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership. This at a time when both the college and the city were struggling to close the race and class divide highlighted by the 2007 sexual assault charges — since dropped — against members of the school's lacrosse team.



The good news — and it's news that heavily outweighs the bad — is that there never has been more innovative programming, more executive support at the highest level, or more widespread enthusiasm for town-gown comity and collaboration.

"Colleges and universities have become indispensable actors in the social and economic development

of modern society," argues Eugene P. Trani, president emeritus of Virginia Commonwealth University and now coauthor of *The Indispensable University: Higher Education, Economic Development, and the Knowledge Economy*.

During his 18 years at VCU, Trani led a joint town-gown redevelopment of Richmond's struggling north side and was a force behind what has been called the Richmond Renaissance. "It takes people at the top talking on a regular basis," he now says of the effort. "It takes setting up community advisory boards. It's local purchasing; it's organizing student service projects; it's working with schools and neighborhood groups; it's recognizing and addressing environmental concerns."

Sounds like a lot, given that the core academic mission is educating the young while expanding human knowledge via research. But the payoff has never been greater, according to Trani and others who have pioneered some of the best town-gown practices.

Most benefits to host communities are obvious: growing the local employment base, reinvigorating a tired neighborhood or retail district at the edge of campus, creating cultural and artistic opportunities for nonstudents, and that hottest benefit in the town-gown lexicon: technological transfer. Nearly all universities of consequence now boast some sort of business incubator building or program aimed at transforming esoteric laboratory discoveries into viable off-campus businesses.

### **Return of the boomers**

The biggest benefit, however, is more subtle and only now coming into focus. Smart collegians who enjoy where they went to school often stick around as they begin their careers (think Seattle, University of Washington, Bill Gates Sr. and family). These high-learner and high-earner folks become, in Trani's words, "lifelong advocates" of their college communities, no matter where they live. Experts who track the town-gown nexus report that substantial numbers of retiring baby boomers are leaving their bedroom suburbs and moving back to their old college haunts, albeit to well-appointed condos rather than flea-bitten student apartments.

"Think about it," says Kim Griffo, executive director of the International Town & Gown Association. "In university towns you tend to have excellent health care, gourmet restaurants, wonderful art. Sure, every once in a while you get those empty red plastic cups on the sidewalk. But what a great trade-off!"

Boulder, Colorado, which hosted the association's annual conference this year, shows how it's done with their slick "Got a vibe all its own" video: "With a world-class research university right here in town," intones the sell on lifestyle, "there's no shortage of innovative thinking and creativity."

Even big cities are repositioning as mega-college towns. Baltimore and Philadelphia have put up elaborate websites ([www.baltimorecollegetown.org](http://www.baltimorecollegetown.org) and [www.campusphilly.org](http://www.campusphilly.org)) aimed at pulling alums back to town as well as wooing high school grads looking for an exciting place to matriculate.

In Boston, a city that more or less perfected the art of college town niche marketing, retirees are invited to audit courses at, say, Boston University for \$125 a semester, or to attend seminars on gourmet cooking and wine selection at \$30 per. Griffo advises that hundreds of colleges across the country have added such offerings for nontraditional students, doubtless hoping to be kept in mind when it's time for them to draw up a will and make bequeathals.

Griffo's organization, founded and based at Clemson University, is a font of best-practice information. Its searchable Resource Topics list — for members only — spans issues from alcohol control to campus master plans, from "preservation and revitalization" to HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities.)

It all began southern-style, she says, with informal meetings on a park bench between the mayor of Clemson, South Carolina, and the president of the eponymous university. Now Clemson ranks number one in the "town-gown relations" category of the *Princeton Review's* annual ranking of colleges. And ITGA has enlisted 140 members — both towns and gowns — with its annual conferences, newsletter, and a website: [www.itgaonline.org](http://www.itgaonline.org). Its partners include the Society for College and University Planning at [www.scup.org](http://www.scup.org) and a more multinational online umbrella group called [www.towngownworld.org](http://www.towngownworld.org).

So compelling are the benefits of town-gown synergies that most universities and colleges of any size have vice presidents who deal specifically with community relations. Less so, however, on the budget-pinched municipal side, although pity the municipal director of planning and development who fails to stay on top of what "the U" is up to.



### **All kinds of PILOTS**

When it comes to limiting the negatives, smart towns get ahead of the curve. Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl of Evanston, Illinois, says she spent the better part of a weekend last spring riding in a police squad car in order to nip in the bud any problems arising from Northwestern University's annual Armadillo music festival.

"We love the students — except when they're drunk," deadpans Tisdahl, who has done much to repair what had been one of the more dysfunctional town-gown relationships in the nation.

Like a lot of troubled marriages, money problems are at the root. Northwestern is the dowager Chicago suburb's largest employer and landowner, yet the college holds a 160-year-old state charter exempting it from paying property taxes. Over the years town and gown sparred constantly over whether NU paid its "fair share," especially whenever the university expanded its campus and took property off the tax rolls.

From time to time Evanston would counterattack by, say, trying to impose a tax on student enrollments (it failed) or establishing a historic preservation district to keep the school from buying up old Victorians near campus. But no way would the school — which predates the town — obligate itself to payments in lieu of taxes ... or PILOTS as they're called in the patois of public finance. So Evanston jacked up fees that the school (and other nonprofits such as hospitals and churches) do have to pay, such as those on municipal water and tickets to entertainment events, including Big 10 football and basketball games.

More recently the chill was broken when Northwestern and Evanston found other ways to cooperate. The school bought the city a \$550,000 fire truck. Stadium neighbors got reduced price admission to nonconference football games. And most effective of all, hundreds of students took up service projects around town, from tutoring public school students to holding a dance marathon to benefit the Evanston Community Foundation.

"I don't know if we're at the break-even point," says Mayor Tisdahl about the balance of payments every college town surely computes. "We do all pay more (in taxes) because they pay less. But we are getting there."

### **Person to person**

Tisdahl, like many in the town-gown trenches, ranks one strategy ahead of all others: building personal relationships. One of her first acts after taking office in 2009 was to deliver a batch of home-baked cookies to the home of university president Morton Shapiro, who was also new to his job. She followed up by hosting a welcoming dinner party. The fire truck donation was announced soon thereafter. Now when problems arise, such as a local vendor getting dropped by NU purchasing, she picks up the phone and, most often, things are put right.

"At the end of the day," says Tisdahl of the recent town-gown reconciliation, "we're lucky to have them and they're lucky to have us."

Next project: a micro-lending and advisory program to help young local entrepreneurs, to be coordinated by NU's prestigious Kellogg School of Management. The program follows a similar effort

launched this year by Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business. Ohio's New Entrepreneurs (ONE), funded through Ohio Third Frontier, is recruiting the area's brightest young tech entrepreneurs to an 11-week "boot camp" where their ideas can be developed into business plans for new technology start-ups.

"This is the type of talent we want to attract and keep in Ohio to allow our economy to flourish," said Mark Kvamme, the state's director of job creation, at the induction of this summer's first class.

Personal relationships are all well and good, but most successful partnerships are backed by a more formal town-gown process. After all, mayors and university presidents come and go. Advisory committees do not.

The city of Fort Collins and Colorado State University maintain a community liaison project to promote positive relationships between students and nonstudents living near campus. Students are firmly but cheerfully briefed on local ordinances and standards, on enforcement and prevention.

Many town-gown efforts have become quite elaborate, especially if the mission includes development of real estate, often to spruce up a part of town that needs a facelift. A sampling of such projects points up two important lessons: Involve the community as much as possible and be prepared to roll with the vagaries of the real estate market.

The fast-growing University of Maryland put together a 40-member steering committee — 20 campus leaders plus 20 community and political leaders — to help guide build-out of its 2002 master plan. A main goal was to make "livable" a tawdry scramble of gas stations, parking lots, and warehouses that line the approaches to campus along U.S. Route 1 north of Washington, D.C.

The university's chosen developer proposed a \$700 million, 38-acre East Campus addition complete with a grocery store, bookstore, entertainment venue, and fitness center. But inevitably those facing displacement parted company with the planners, as did knowledgeable skeptics who sought more emphasis on walkability, environmental sustainability, and access to transit.

One major blowup: the university's long opposition, only recently dropped, to state plans to align a proposed light-rail system through the heart of campus. The back-and-forth even spawned a website — [www.rethinkcollegepark.net](http://www.rethinkcollegepark.net) — that has become a sounding board on the overall plan and its implementation.

Ultimately it was the great recession of 2008–09, not the critics, that put a hold on the project, which now is being re-scoped and re-phased under the guidance of a replacement developer, the Cordish Company. "They build projects that create the sense of place," says Ann Wylie, the university's vice president for administrative affairs. She predicts that East Campus "will bring a new urban character to College Park by creating a vibrant district of retail, residential, office, much-needed affordable graduate housing, hotel, and entertainment uses that will stimulate downtown revitalization."

But not without continued input by an informed public, argues David Daddio, a founder of the "Rethink" site who's been writing lately about NIMBY opposition, reflected in the city council, to building more dormitory rooms near College Park's downtown. Only by taking all sides into account, Daddio cautions, will there be "an agreement between the developer and community groups to bring much-needed amenities to the area that the vast majority of people would like to see."



## **Ivy League hardball**

Similar frictions have slowed Columbia University's expansion in West Harlem. New York City's Ivy League entry tried to make all the right moves when its "Manhattanville" expansion was announced in 2002. But no lineup of community advisory committees could mute the running battle — or dialogue, if you will — that ensued between the university and hastily formed coalitions of sympathetic students aligned with low-income residents of the 17-acre expansion zone.

After much to-and-fro, the university in 2009 won final city and state approvals by extending an olive-branch package that includes a \$20 million affordable housing fund, generous relocation assistance for those living in the zone's 132 residential buildings, two new parks, including one with Hudson River frontage, and promises of local hiring and community service.

Construction is now under way, beginning with demolition and utility upgrades throughout what was primarily a run-down warehouse district located just north of the school's historic Morningside Heights campus.

Also under way: temporary relocation and restoration of the historic 1948 Mountain View diner car, long a favorite among New York City cabbies, which may add a touch of humane nostalgia when it is returned to a prim new neighborhood of academic buildings.

## **Productive partnerships**

To be sure, not every town-gown real estate redo has to be as contentious or time-consuming. For more than three decades the city of Hartford, Connecticut, and Trinity College have been working together through a town-gown organization called the Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance, or SINA.

Threatened by housing deterioration and increased gang activity, the college, the city, and two nearby hospitals launched this urban redevelopment effort back in 1977 to stabilize home ownership and improve schools in the struggling Frog Hollow and Barry Square neighborhoods.

SINA's centerpiece is the Learning Corridor, a 16-acre campus adjoining the Trinity campus that includes four magnet schools and a teacher training center. Under a further expansion announced this June, a new advanced placement high school will begin sending students to classes at Trinity itself.

Housing renewal is also in the works, despite the economic recession and foreclosure plague. Built or rehabbed in partnership with a private developer, SINA's Cityscape Homes are aimed at moderate-income first-time buyers with price points beginning at \$160,000. Subsidized financing is also available, although there are deed restrictions to ensure the homes remain affordable to subsequent buyers.

"The wonderful thing is that we are finishing homes and selling them in this market," says SINA executive director Luis Caban of the initiative, which has restored dozens of dwellings in what might otherwise have become abandoned crime magnets. Caban credits Trinity for encouraging SINA "to develop initiatives with the community as opposed to for the community."

## **Small town, big alliance**

There are problems in smaller college towns as well, but there the upside of town-gown cooperation can be even more dramatic. Mayor Nancy Chaney of Moscow, Idaho, considers the University of Idaho to be her city's greatest asset and key to its economic future. She's also chair of the University Communities Council of the National League of Cities, where she sees how institutions of higher learning can become any city's ultimate asset.

"Universities are resources that give our communities an edge," Chaney says. "And even if you don't have a university within your borders, towns are learning to build bridges, build relationships, to tap into this energy regionally."

"You'll find that a lot of so-called best practices in the town-gown area are problem oriented — how to stop fights at football games, how to keep students from drinking too much or leaving their used sofa on the sidewalk. We deal with those things, sure. But our emphasis is on the benefits — how to leverage your relationship with a university so both can advance their causes."

Moscow can point to a list of town-gown initiatives that would be impressive in Austin, Texas, or Columbus, Ohio — never mind in a hamlet of 24,000 located among Indian reservations in the verdant Palouse valley just across the Washington State border.

There is the Palouse Knowledge Corridor, a linkup between the University of Idaho and Washington State University at Pullman that is attracting what Chaney calls "clusters of complementary interests." Since its launch in 2006, the corridor has pulled in more than 20 companies along Route 270 in five clusters: electronics, biotech, environmental services, advanced materials, and information services. One successful company, GoNano Technologies, sprung out of campus-based research in 2007 and, although it's not yet a significant employer, recently drew a major investment by 3M Corporation.

There is the University of Idaho Service Learning Center where students are prepared for, and assigned to, one of more than 100 agencies that provide students "the opportunity to apply classroom learning in the real world, develop and practice the skills of citizenship, and explore how they can be active agents in producing social change." Faculty are encouraged to include service in their course requirements and on any given day in Moscow, Chaney says, students can be seen doing everything from shoveling snow from sidewalks to cleaning up Paradise Creek, to drafting plans and grant applications for native American tribal councils.

### **Silo lofts and mutt struts**

The Moscow-University of Idaho alliance is even doing urban renewal — that is, if you count cleaning up and redeveloping the derelict rail yard that used to separate the campus and Moscow's business district. Now it's called Legacy Crossing, where John and Miranda Anderson — architecture instructors at the university — are converting a massive but obsolete complex of grain silos into a mixed use development of loft residences, offices, and a restaurant.

The town and university recently helped obtain state predevelopment grants as well as a \$475,000 federal EPA grant for environmental remediation. By completion in 2032 the 163-acre district is expected to add \$108 million in locally taxable development along with 550 new jobs carrying a \$17 million annual payroll.

"That kind of creativity you don't get everywhere," Mayor Chaney says of the silo project and light industrial park envisioned for Legacy Crossing. "Special things happen when you bring together a great university, cooperative local government, and 11,000 energetic students and faculty."

Like Evanston's Mayor Tisdahl, Mayor Chaney of Moscow insists such things begin with person-to-person outreach. Two years ago this October Chaney presented incoming University of Idaho president Duane Nellis with the ceremonial keys to Moscow, but not before declaring that she knew he'd be a good fit ever since he helped her judge dog costumes at the town's annual July 4 Mutt Strut.

Since then they've been exchanging handwritten notes, coffee breaks, and ceremonial visits. She'll attend an ROTC commissioning ceremony on campus. He'll show up at a municipal employee retirement dinner. Together they lead the annual Moscow CommUNITY Walk, a springtime rite celebrating all that can be accomplished through cooperation and mutual respect.

Wim Wiewel, the former urban planning dean at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who went on to become the president of Portland State University, has written widely on the subject and predicts such partnerships will grow in importance going forward.

"Both sides suffer from memories of the past," Wiewel says, referring to traffic foul-ups and fraternity parties gone rogue. "But with the economy and tax revenues in slowdown, and innovation coming on as the main driver, both sides are looking to partner more and more."

In times like these, he might have added, even a rocky marriage is better than no marriage at all.

*John McCarron is a Chicago-based urban affairs writer.*

### **Resources**

**Images:** Top — Mayor Nancy Chaney and University of Idaho president Duane Nellis together at the 2011 CommUNITY Walk in Moscow, Idaho. Photo S.M. Ghazanfar. Middle — On the eve of Clemson University's season-opening football game, which can bring as many as 86,000 fans to the city of Clemson, student organizations and community groups celebrate with the First Friday Parade. Photo Clemson University. Bottom — Columbia University's expansion in West HARlem comes with public open space, retains the existing street grid, enhances access to the waterfront, and limits building heights to those of the surrounding neighborhood. Image Field Operations L.L.C.