

This article compares relationships between universities and their local communities in Britain and the USA, as seen by a British observer. It points to the institutional changes necessary to make community involvement a reality, central to the mission of the urban university. However, whereas a growing number of US institutions are taking these community relationships seriously, current external pressures are limiting the ability of their British counterparts to do the same. The American experience suggests, nevertheless, that British institutions have much to gain from a greater degree of commitment to their local communities.

Solving Problems or Salving Consciences?

Anglo-American Perspectives on University-Community Relationships

Introduction

This article discusses relationships between universities and their local communities, largely with respect to urban areas, in Britain and the USA. It draws upon my own experiences of attempting to find ways in which my own work and my own institution might become more involved in the East End of London. It is also based on my experiences of investigating university-community relationships in the USA; in the course of this I visited numerous universities in various cities, concentrating on three types of initiative: schemes to promote student community service and to link it into the undergraduate curriculum; partnerships with public schools; and university involvement in urban development.

Inevitably this experience was somewhat impressionistic and it would be foolish to draw conclusions about a higher education system comprising some 3,000 very diverse postsecondary institutions.

Although relationships between urban institutions and their communities in the USA have been the subject of persistent debate about the possibility of replicating the Land Grant institutions in an urban context, the issue has assumed heightened salience in recent years for several reasons, and a substantial range of initiatives are seeking to rethink the relationship between large urban universities and their immediate communities. Among the baser motives for involvement are:

- guilt for past actions: universities located in urban areas have often adopted an arrogant, insensitive approach to physical expansion);

- institutional self-interest, due to rising crime; and
- accountabilities to local and state governments. As non-profit institutions, many universities seek to extract concessions from governments who are keen to expand their tax base.

More positively, universities are responding to criticisms that they lack a social purpose, seeking to create partnerships to shore up urban education systems, and in some cases beginning to act as vehicles for neighborhood stabilization and economic development. In the latter context, universities and other non-profit institutions are, by default, the only significant players in many inner city areas, due to capital flight, and they therefore have a significance to the community and local economy which goes beyond their direct physical presence.

The sense of social crisis facing America's large cities, and the absence of a strong university (not to say government) response, is well captured by Harkavy and Puckett (1992) who deplore the contrast between the deconstructionist bickering, mandarin practices, and islands of horticultural beauty that characterize some large research institutions, and the inland seas of violence, dereliction and despair that surround them. Apocalyptic as this may sound, it will resonate with many familiar with large American cities. A recent report by the Milken Foundation provides interesting statistics on the demographics of many university neighborhoods.

In Britain the sense of crisis and breakdown of community is not, to date, so evident. Given the stronger financial base of British local government, and, in particular, the existence of various redistributive mechanisms which transfer funds from richer to poorer localities, the variations in public provision of educational and other community services are by no means as great as is the case in the USA. Nor is there the same sense that educational systems are failing the nation's youth, although there is growing concern at the employment prospects for and social marginalization of young men with low educational attainment. In addition, because local government is generally more powerful in Britain, public-private partnerships are not as significant as in the USA, and because public-private partnerships in urban development have so far been less significant, universities would not be expected to step into the breach in the way that sometimes appears to be the case in the USA. Thus the socio-economic conditions that motivate university-community engagement in America are not so pressing, at least as yet.

What is driving a reappraisal of university-community involvement in Britain is the major changes in the education system, notably the end of the "binary divide" between universities and polytechnics, the rapid expansion of the participation rate of secondary school graduates in higher education, and the institution of national competition for research funds. These processes are changing the identities of institutions at the same time as the expansion of student numbers means that institutions have a dramatic physical impact as buildings are redeveloped and new ones provided.

For different reasons, then, universities on both sides of the Atlantic are asking the same sorts of questions. However, the responses to those questions are somewhat different. Drawing mainly on the activities of American universities, I attempt to draw out lessons which institutions could learn in both countries and to point to the kind of institutional changes likely to be necessary to make a reality of community involvement and to make it central to the mission of the urban university.

Major Current Developments in University-Community Involvement

Student Volunteerism and Study Service

No visitor to the USA could fail to be impressed by the scale of volunteerism currently sweeping American campuses. Accurate and comparable statistics are difficult to obtain, but some institutions report that up to two-thirds of graduating seniors are engaged in community service and at least one study reported that this proportion could be generalized across all postsecondary institutions. National coalitions such as Campus Compact and Campus Outreach Opportunity League have an expanding membership covering a growing proportion of postsecondary institutions; and, as is well-known, some institutions have engaged in lengthy debates about whether or not to mandate community service. Given the participation rate in American higher education volunteerism on this scale must, by definition, affect a substantial proportion of America's rising generation. I doubt whether the proportions involved in the UK are anything like as large: although student tutoring initiatives are expanding rapidly this is from a small base, and I would be surprised if the proportion of students engaged in campus-based volunteer service programs exceeded five percent, if that.

Britain therefore has a lot of catching up to do, but if it does, a number of lessons will need to be learned to avoid reinventing wheels. Debates will have to be settled about whether to mandate volunteerism, about how to integrate community service into the curriculum, and about providing an infrastructure to institutionalize it. It should also be pointed out that historically a great deal of British higher education has been dominated by the single-honors degree, in which students specialize in one subject at an early stage in their university education. Advocates of some form of study service therefore have greater difficulties incorporating it into this system, by contrast with the broad-based undergraduate education system offered in American universities. Furthermore, as a rule, British universities place less emphasis on acquiring the skills for civic participation than do American ones. Thus an institution would not regard it as its duty to provide opportunities for students to engage in volunteer service. It might, indeed, legally be prevented from using public funds for that purpose. As a consequence student volunteerism is generally left to the students themselves to fund and organize, as an adjunct to the Students' Press Union, which is not a trade union but the umbrella organization for student societies, services and welfare. Voices have cried in the academic wilderness for many years, calling on British universities to expand their efforts in this direction, but to little avail.

However, there are grounds for expecting an expansion in this kind of activity. If properly integrated into academic programs, service learning, with its emphasis on problem-solving and reflection, may contribute towards equipping students with transferable skills which will be in increasing demand. Some government-funded initiatives, such as the Enterprise in Higher Education program, have linked students with community organizations for internship-style activities. Whatever party is in government, the role of the voluntary sector will increase, and this is one way to help individuals prepare for that.

Finally, the same kind of alienation from the political process and cynicism about the capabilities of government is evident in Britain, so that some commentators are calling for a wider program of civic education involving all students in their

final year at school. This has also led to proposals for a national service initiative, partly modelled on the Clinton scheme, although in practice the proposals focus on school-leavers, particularly at-risk youth, rather than on college students.

Partnerships With Schools

The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 provoked a debate about falling education standards in the USA which continues today. The substantial extent of partnership activity of higher education with schools can be put down to a number of factors:

- the mass access to, if not completion of, higher education in the USA, and hence concern with the quality of recruits;
- the large numbers of children 'at risk' and the need to try to maximize the participation of such children in postsecondary education;
- the need for integration of minorities and developing culturally-sensitive pedagogies and support networks to ensure that they can succeed in higher education; and
- the failures of the public school system.

Much publicity about these partnership schemes focusses on high-profile initiatives such as "I have A Dream," but in practice the most interesting programs are those aimed long-term at systemic reform. There is a great deal of individual and *ad hoc* activity, which is uncoordinated, and one wonders sometimes whether university-school collaboration in the US is effectively reaching areas of greatest need. One can also ask whether it is serving the interests of university faculty by providing a convenient social laboratory for their work, rather than meeting needs defined by the community itself. In addition there is little evaluation of precisely what works, so that dissemination of valuable new ideas is still at an early stage.

There is a growing recognition of the need for coordinating structures to ensure that university-school partnerships go beyond the rather *ad hoc*, altruistic activity that characterizes collaboration at present. For example, the Pew Trusts' initiative, Community Compacts for Student Success, seeks to bring together educational, business, and community leadership in a long-term plan to improve educational outcomes for all school students. These entail a critical examination of existing partnership activities to review what initiatives actually work, to ensure that duplication is avoided, and to focus resources where they would have the greatest impacts.

The central role of universities in these collaborations is unknown in a British context. Also novel from a British perspective is the extent to which partnership activity can be legislatively mandated. One would expect this in California, perhaps, where the legacy of the "Master Plan" is strong, but, as is well-known, universities in various jurisdictions have been required to collaborate with school boards. Good corporate citizenship aside, it may be the case that local governments have leverage over universities when reviewing their taxation status, and they can therefore require greater collaboration.

Indeed the whole area of school-university collaboration is developed only on a very small scale in the UK. Typically it would incorporate small-scale 'taster' courses, designed to stimulate students' interest in academic subjects; student tutoring programs; some *ad hoc* and informal linkages between Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and universities, which might involve limited support to pupils from

schools in disadvantaged areas to help them obtain a place at university, as well as granting university admissions officers some discretion with regard to admission requirements. Of course there is collaboration in terms of educational research, but on the conception of school-university collaboration as understood in the USA, is much more limited in the UK.

Why is this the case? The UK has a nationally-prescribed curriculum for those up to age 16, so in general there is less diversity in the system; a national curriculum would be a constitutional violation in the USA and therefore school-university collaboration is one way schools and school boards respond to local needs. In addition, the presence of substantial numbers of minority students from poor families in American public school systems necessitates much more invention in teaching content and methods.

A further factor is that the UK does not have the disparities in funding between school boards described so vividly by Jonathan Kozol, and British schools do not have to contend with the social dislocation of inner city America. If the inner city environment in the USA was a viable, functioning community and if schools were adequately resourced, much of the school partnership activity would arguably not be needed. In effect it is an attempt to bail out unsatisfactory public education systems operating in unpromising environments, and what is really required is more fundamental school reform and social change.

Universities and Community Development

Urban development in the USA is the responsibility of a great many institutions and partnerships, in which universities often play a central role. Some of this is part of a well-established urban mission, in which university research efforts are targeted at the needs of local organizations. This is being complemented by some efforts to make universities' resources available to community organizations. In addition, as a consequence of urban decline, some institutions are becoming increasingly involved in neighborhood stabilization efforts. In respect of community-based research, both British and American systems face the same difficulties: how to reconcile the long-term commitment necessary to develop a beneficial partnership with a community, with the national and international demands to publish high-quality research. There are no easy answers to this dilemma, short of a reconsideration of faculty reward structures. However, there are interesting initiatives in both countries which seek to democratize access to university resources; various foundation and government-sponsored programs in the USA such as the Urban Community Service grant program do so, while in Britain the Community Research Exchanges in Liverpool and Manchester, or the Northern Ireland Science Shop, offer good illustrations. The latter are essentially "clearing-houses" for matching community needs for research with the skills of faculty and students within universities. Such activities are generally working against the grain of the competitive, publication-driven higher education system. Among their characteristics are a collaborative model of inquiry, which aims to facilitate matching the skills and resources of researchers with the needs of community organizations; and a participatory and action-research approach, in which research and teaching activities are oriented towards — indeed partly driven by — community concerns.

There are some signs, in the USA, of a move away from the 'urban observatory' approach of earlier university-city collaborations, in which the university's role was that of a detached, technocratic observer rather than that of an active participant.

The involvement of American universities in neighborhood stabilization efforts has no obvious parallels in the UK. Such efforts include: financial backing and technical assistance to community-based organizations, to enable them to attract finance for low-cost housing; creation of umbrella partnership organizations, seeking to pull together all the major players in a locality; and geographically-focused purchasing and recruitment strategies. Foundation and government support has been forthcoming for these measures, as capital flight means that some urban areas have few major economic stakeholders apart from non-profit organizations. There are few parallels with such activities in Britain, despite the recent expansion of the system which has produced considerable capital investment. British institutions are typically much smaller than American universities. The billion-dollar budgets of certain American private institutions place them in a different league altogether. As a consequence even carefully-targeted schemes for focusing purchasing or recruitment would have little impact.

The role of the university in the USA is basically as "a neutral agent concerned with the vitality of its immediate community, or as an 'entrepreneur in the public interest,' serving as a catalyst for mobilizing resources. . . . (this role requires) an institutional base so that a strategy of constructive change can be pursued for a long time" (Hanson, 1983, p. 179). Major urban education institutions arguably can fulfil this role to a greater degree than any other actor in the American inner city. In the absence of major government initiatives and expenditures, the condition of America's large cities arguably makes university engagement not an optional extra but an institutional imperative.

One lesson which may be learned from these efforts is that there is little point in institutions engaging in partnerships which depend too heavily on the institution itself. Without attempting to build the capacity of the community to solve its own problems, community groups will always be in a position of dependency; however remote it may seem, there is always the possibility that major urban universities could merge, close or relocate. This is where forms of knowledge imply and reinforce existing power relations: disinterested technocracy or political advocacy do not enable a community to do research on its own, just as physical redevelopment which depends on continued injections from the university's endowment and on the continued voluntary advice of university specialists will not enable a community to stand on its own in a competitive financial climate. However, universities still operate in a market, and the extent to which they can, consequently, open access to their resources to low-income groups is limited. As Wainwright has recently pointed out in his book *Arguments for a New Left*, there are clear constraints on the democratization of knowledge and its use.

Summary

Before we get too carried away with enthusiasm for university-community involvement we should put it in context. The impact school partnership projects make, when set against the social circumstances of many at-risk children, may be limited; neighborhood stabilization efforts contend with the continued suburbanization of economic activity and inner city decline. Inevitably, they represent a drop in the ocean when compared with the present conditions of many inner city areas, and with the reductions in federal aid to cities of some \$50 billion during the 1980s. There is also severe institutional inertia within the academy.

Nevertheless there are several general points that may be made. The first is the question of *evaluation*: how do we know we are "making a difference," to whom

and for what purpose? What is the real impacts of the range of service-learning programs on all engaged in them, for example in terms of political attitudes or civic participation? Do they genuinely equip students with valuable skills? Do school partnerships have anything other than marginal impacts? Across all these activities, evaluation is limited: one estimate, from an academic who had researched these issues extensively, was that some 75 percent of partnerships between universities and schools had no serious evaluation work built into them.

Secondly there is a question of *coordination*. Much of the work described here depends on individual or group voluntary effort, which one would not want to discourage. However, much of this effort may be duplicative and diffuse, thereby reducing its actual or potential impact. The availability of foundation money, especially for projects relating to secondary education, is perhaps a perverse incentive: grants may be obtained by universities but not for purposes which local educators deem the highest priority — yet acquiring the grants benefits the university faculty involved. There are efforts to rationalize this by providing coordinating structures into which voluntary efforts must fit, and these need to be encouraged.

Thirdly, what is a “partnership”? The notion of genuine partnership between low-income community organizations and billion-dollar research universities seems difficult to sustain. More generally the geographical range and the numbers of agencies involved in many partnerships reviewed here make one question whether they are adequately focused enough or whether they are talking shops which merely contribute to massaging the consciences of some of the individuals and institutions involved.

Finally, all these activities occupy a small proportion of the activities of the American university; despite the optimism of some commentators, the American university system is far from being reinvented. If the initiatives described here are to become more than the province of a small coterie of the committed, there will have to be internal changes to the academic reward system, giving much higher priority to types of scholarship other than that of discovery (McCallum, 1994). However, part of the problem here is a restricted definition of what is meant by public service: the mission of academic institutions is often viewed as a tripartite one involving teaching, research, and service, but usually service, conceived narrowly as intra-university administration, or as service to learned societies, receives a much lower priority than the other two.

By contrast, what may be needed is a model of *academically-related public service*, in which research and teaching activities are focused on the needs of an immediate geographical community. Society can no longer afford self-contained, inward-looking universities, and the benefits of integrating teaching, research, and service into a wider conception of academically-based public service, focused on the complex social problems facing America, could be considerable. Readers of this journal will need no instruction from me on the American debate on faculty roles and rewards, but it is fair to say that this debate is rather more advanced than in the UK. At present, given the quadrennial competition for research funds instituted by the government, institutions are engaged in an unseemly scramble to sign up those whose publication records are thought most likely to improve a department's ranking in the next rating exercise in 1996. It is a reasonable inference that scholars who have dedicated their work to community collaboration are unlikely to have the publication records that will find favour in that sort of struggle.

This raises the question of the contrasting funding bases of higher education in the two countries. Much work in the USA draws upon alumni and other charitable

support, which permits institutions a degree of autonomy unavailable, by and large, to UK universities. The monolithic funding bases of UK higher education are inimical to innovation; endowment and other sources of funding are far more limited. This means that institutions who conceive of themselves, rightly or wrongly, as research universities, are highly unlikely to develop meaningful community links beyond symbolic gestures, since their financial viability depends almost entirely on how well they perform in research terms. Even the former polytechnics, which were established with part-funding from local authorities, in order to offer a model of applied scholarship linked to the needs of local business and public services, are in danger of losing some of their strong local orientation as they strive to compete with the more established research institutions.

Community involvement seems highly unlikely to infuse the research and teaching activities of most traditional British universities in this Darwinian environment. And it is highly unlikely that institutions will unilaterally develop the kind of initiatives reported here — a classic prisoner's dilemma. It is significant, for instance, that institutional reports and plans make much of the volunteer involvement of students, despite the fact of minimal institutional support for such activities and the almost total absence of their integration into the curriculum. If this is the best they can do, community involvement has not got very far.

These are, unfortunately, pessimistic remarks, and a reading of the most recent statement on university-community involvement in Britain would not lighten the tone. The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, which brings together chief officers of all universities in the UK, recently sponsored a research project to investigate the linkages between universities and local communities. The issue has been given salience by a number of developments: the changing character of local governance, with partnership activities between major institutional players becoming more significant; the physical impacts of the expansion of higher education prompting institutions and local authorities to examine the costs and benefits of universities; the ending of the binary divide, prompting institutions themselves to re-examine their roles and relationships. The report (CVCP, 1994) is heavily focused on the economic aspects of university-community engagement: economic multiplier studies of the impact of institutions, impacts on the physical environment, particularly those resulting from the recent wave of new construction in higher education, discussion of the role of universities in technology transfer, and so on. Teaching is barely mentioned and community service, on the part of students, barely rates a footnote; questions like access to museum, leisure, and library facilities actually receive more attention.

The tenor of the report is that relationships between universities and communities are something which, by and large, are a good cause activity, that as responsible corporate citizens universities should be involved in the affairs of their locality, and that appropriate structures should be created to manage that interface, such as fora in which senior management can meet their equivalents from local government and business. Memberships of governing bodies or statutory agencies, breakfast meetings between chief executives and senior university personnel, *ad-hoc* task forces: these are all very well, but community links can easily reduce to symbolic gestures and talking shops which salve more consciences than they solve social problems. Instead, British higher education might consider three ways in which greater community involvement could benefit higher education institutions.

Firstly, through a stress on service as part of an education for citizenship. If

properly integrated into academic programs, service learning, with its emphasis on problem-solving and reflection, may help equip students with transferable skills. As universities increase in size, engaging students in this kind of activity could make a substantial impact on schools and voluntary organizations. Secondly, orienting research and other efforts towards the needs of the community requires different ways of working than those driven by government research assessment criteria. If a university is to be more engaged in its community, it might be characterized by a greater emphasis on participatory research, rather than the unidirectional linkages typical of much academic work, and on cross-disciplinary collaboration, rather than disciplinary and departmental fragmentation. The new universities may have to consider whether, in seeking to improve their research ratings, they will lose their strong local grounding and links with community organizations; the older universities may have to consider whether the lack of perceived strong local links will detract from their identity.

Finally, the more universities' internal operations are driven by an intense competition for research funds, the less likely they are to foster a sense of communal involvement and cooperation and the more likely they are to promote a competitive individualism which pays little regard to a wider notion of community. The most positive lesson to be learned from America is that, if properly organized and supported, community involvement can become a vital part of — if not yet central to — the university's mission. Engaging faculty and students with problems on an institution's own doorstep can provide a means of integrating teaching, research, and service, as well as a way of revitalizing the education of the next generation and socializing them in a spirit of service. In this era of globalization, perhaps we need to start by thinking and acting locally, and, to descend into Kennedyesque rhetorical antithesis, we might ask not what universities can do for their communities, but what community involvement can do to invigorate the universities.

Note: I should like to acknowledge the support of a Harkness Fellowship of the Commonwealth Fund of New York in 1992-93. I was based in the Center for Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania, where I was generously hosted by Ira Harkavy, whose assistance I gratefully acknowledge.

Suggested Reading

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