

The Scholarship of Engagement in a Research University: Faculty Incentives and Disincentives

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Abstract

Arizona State University is developing an identity as a “metropolitan research university.” Focusing on the ASU Downtown Center (DTC) as a core site for expressing the metropolitan mission, a recent study looked at incentives and disincentives for faculty to become involved in the scholarship of engagement through the DTC. The study findings led to recommended strategies to enhance the metropolitan mission at ASU.

Urban and metropolitan universities have become central in ensuring that the citizens of the inner city have access to higher education and that the expertise of universities is used in solving today’s complex community challenges (Mulhollan 1995:1). In addition to the traditional commitments to teaching, research, and service, a metropolitan university encourages the scholarship of engagement and provides leadership to regional quality of life. Researchers agree that articulating and fulfilling an urban and metropolitan mission is a major challenge. The varied, and often contradictory, expectations of faculty, administrators, political officials, and the community can inhibit the development of clear missions. The literature is filled with references to the need for urban and metropolitan universities to address the intra-university debate of research vs. teaching (Englert 1997; Goodall 1970; Greiner 1994), but incentives for faculty to add to their traditional campus endeavors are not always in place.

At the time of this study (2000-2002), Arizona State University (ASU) had recently achieved the status of Research I university in the existing Carnegie classification. ASU uses a multi-campus system to deliver services and instruction. In addition to three campuses (Main, East, and West), ASU had created the Downtown Center (DTC) in 1986 to serve the Phoenix’s urban core. The DTC is a component of the College of Extended Education, and relies on faculty from the ASU campuses to provide instruction and engage in research. In spite of challenges such as varying perceptions by the academic community, the DTC is ASU’s established presence in center city Phoenix.

This study looked into incentives and disincentives for faculty to participate in the scholarship of engagement and in the urban and metropolitan mission of Arizona State University. Operationally, we defined engagement or participation in the metropolitan

mission as teaching and/or doing research at the DTC. The focus of the study was artificially limited, since faculty could be “engaged” in many other ways, or “engaged” from their departments without ever connecting with the DTC. However, given the interest in looking at the role of the DTC in delivering on the metropolitan mission, the operational definition focused on engagement through the DTC.

This article will focus on lessons learned from the study. The review of the literature and data generated at ASU will be presented in synoptic fashion, as background for those lessons. The objective will be to present the recommendations made for ASU in ways that might be helpful to similar campus environments.

Setting the Stage: Brief Contextual and Historical Background

Shortly after the publication of the Kellogg Commission’s *Report on the Future of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges* (1999), Lattie F. Coor, then President of ASU, wrote about the university’s commitment to its metropolitan mission:

Given the complexity of issues facing communities today, the expertise and talent of our universities is needed more than ever before. At ASU this is simply a recommitment to our reason for being. Arizona State University was founded more than a century ago as a normal school charged with the responsibility of preparing teachers to serve the Arizona Territory. As the Territory grew into statehood and Phoenix into the state capital, the normal school evolved into a teacher’s college and then a state college, reflecting the expanding needs of the community. In 1958, Arizona State College became Arizona State University by public referendum. ASU is now the only major research university serving metropolitan Phoenix, one of the fastest growing regions of the country. (Coor 1999:13)

The President’s commentary on the mission, prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association, focused on three descriptors used by the university to define its mission. ASU is described as a “major, metropolitan research university.” “Major,” the document stated, “refers to the competitive level at which we must function” and to the transformation undergone by the university. “Research” referred to the Carnegie classification, which, though changed now, still carries a great deal of weight for many faculty and administrators. “Metropolitan,” the term of greatest interest here, affirms the university’s commitment to “metropolitan Phoenix as its primary service area” (Coor 2000).

Coor’s report added, “Metropolitan Phoenix has widely varying needs requiring a comprehensive array of university programs that are both traditional and nontraditional in nature.” It also stated that ASU’s commitment to the valley had been the driving force in the development of a “multi-campus architecture,” which includes the College of Extended Education (CEE) and specifically the Downtown Center.¹ The history of

each campus is unique. Main, in Tempe, was founded in 1885 as a state teacher's college and grew into a vital 49,700-student center for learning (*ASU General Catalog 2002*). The Arizona Legislature created the West Campus of ASU in 1984 and the East Campus, located at the site of the former Williams Air Force Base, was developed in 1996.

The CEE was created as a university-wide college to transcend the parameters of specific campuses. As is often the case in large organizations, the missions of the various campuses and units frequently overlap, resulting often in public and faculty confusion of boundaries. It would appear that the administration intended to make its urban/metropolitan presence felt, at least in the city center area of Phoenix, through its downtown facilities (DTC), but perhaps for lack of clarity, faculty perceptions of the seriousness of the metropolitan mission were never strong. Initial ambivalence about the mission of the DTC prevented the creation of structures and fiscal arrangements that would render the DTC more independent. In this way, the DTC continues to face challenges similar to other downtown university facilities throughout the country.

A professor of Public Administration and the first director of the DTC confirmed the DTC's mission dilemma: "The DTC, as the urban presence of the university, was, from the start, politically imposed. The legislators and the regents wanted it but few faculty and administrators were sympathetic to its mission" (Brown 2001). Other faculty and administrators who were also involved in early efforts to provide instructional programs at the DTC shared the perception that organizing metropolitan-oriented programs, including applied research at the DTC, has always been challenging. The general comments were that at the inception, faculty, and perhaps even administrators did not want to add to their burdens by focusing on a mission or locale that would not obviously enhance the university's prestige in traditional academic circles. Thus, the vision of the metropolitan university was hard to operationalize.

The comments received in relation to the challenges of the urban and metropolitan mission of ASU were not unique to ASU. In a similar vein, Rice (1995) discussed the "paradox of hierarchy and diversity in the system of American higher education," adding that "the enormous incongruity between research and teaching produced serious role strain for faculty and organizational fissures that cut across our institutions." What evolved, he added, is a hierarchical conception of scholarly excellence that is tied to the advancement of research and defined in zero-sum terms. (Rice 1995:136)

¹ Valley of the Sun, or "the valley," are commonly used terms to refer to the Phoenix Metropolitan area.

Severino (1996) elaborated on this, suggesting that often university faculty, who graduated from non-urban institutions, are not eager to call their places of employment urban because it connotes inferiority in the academic hierarchy and is associated with the service role (Severino 1996). While these perceptions may have evolved, they have not been eradicated (ICIC 2000).

Developing a Framework for Analysis

The interests and expectations of faculty members, bureaucrats, and neighborhood leaders or special interest groups are often quite different, suggested Brownell in 1995. The mission of the metropolitan university as a problem solver is difficult to harmonize with the individual aspirations of the faculty as researchers and with the distribution of resources and fiscal incentives.

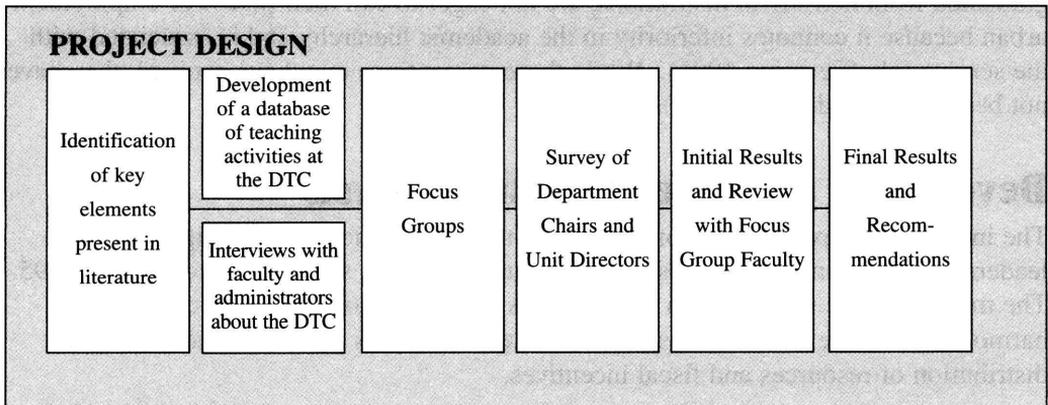
Krahenbuhl (2000) pointed out how sadly common is the dislodging of faculty activities into three distinct spheres: teaching, research, and service. “The integration of teaching, research, and service are fundamental to the soundness of the research university and provide the best use of faculty resources” (Krahenbuhl 2000:6). While this admonition is well-grounded in the literature (Boyer 1990; Glassick et al. 1997; Lynton 1987 and 1995; Moneta 1997; Sid W. Richardson Foundation 1997), faculty culture continues to be governed by the use of an old nomenclature and generally, departments continue to support the reporting of faculty activities in nonintegrated categories, and for a myriad of reasons, administration continues to condone this system.

At least three challenges to fulfilling the instructional and research mission of the metropolitan university identified in the literature are worth some attention here. They provided a framework for analysis and reflection in this study and they are supported by many scholars (Johnson et al. 1995; Brownell 1995; Lovett 2001; Colbeck 2000; Cumming 1995; Bell et al. 1998; Chepyator-Thomson and King 1996). The first challenge is mission clarity; the second is research status and aspirations of administration and faculty; and the third is funding patterns and distribution of fiscal incentives.

Project Design and Data Collected

The project was designed with a view to organizing the findings around three themes: mission clarity, research status, and funding patterns. The study followed the steps in data collection and analysis and in drawing implications and conclusions outlined in Figure 1. One of the most important aspects of this project was the possibility for meaningful conversations and reflection among the participating administrators and faculty. The discussions and reflections that occurred during the interviews and focus groups were one of the most enriching aspects of the research.

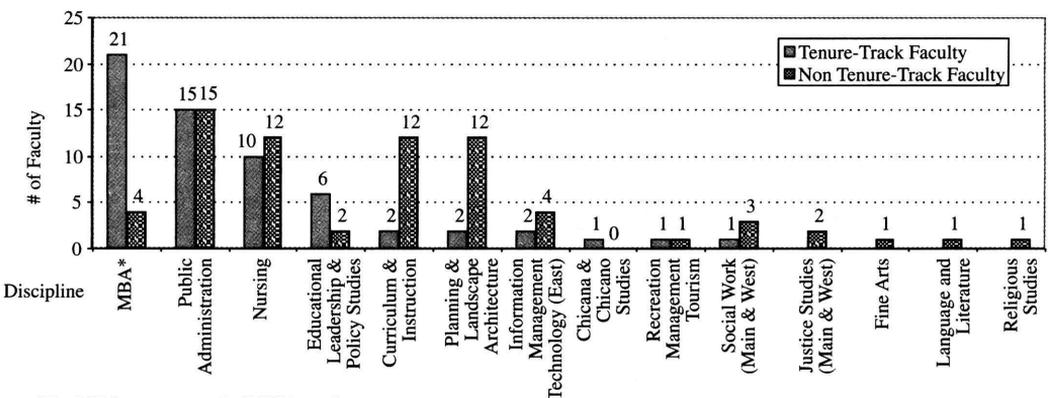
Figure 1.



This project began by examining the teaching and research activities at the DTC during the past five years.² A database of courses taught at the DTC, their sponsoring departments, and participating faculty was developed. The faculty’s disciplinary field, rank and tenure status were also ascertained. Figures were drawn based on the demographic information collected in the database and incorporated in the focus groups discussions. Instructive information was derived from examining the distribution of courses by discipline (Figures 2 A & B) and the distribution of faculty at the DTC by rank (Figure 3).

Figure 2A.

**Tenure-Track and Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Teaching at the DTC by Discipline
Fall 1998 - Fall 2002
- Aggregate Data (N=131) -**



*The MBA program at the DTC is a trimester program.

² By research based at the DTC, we mean projects focused on the urban area, administratively housed in the College of Extended Education (rather than one of the other campus colleges) and housed at the DTC.

Figure 2B.

Tenure-Track Faculty at the DTC by Discipline
Fall 1998 - Fall 2002

- Aggregate Data -
(N=61)

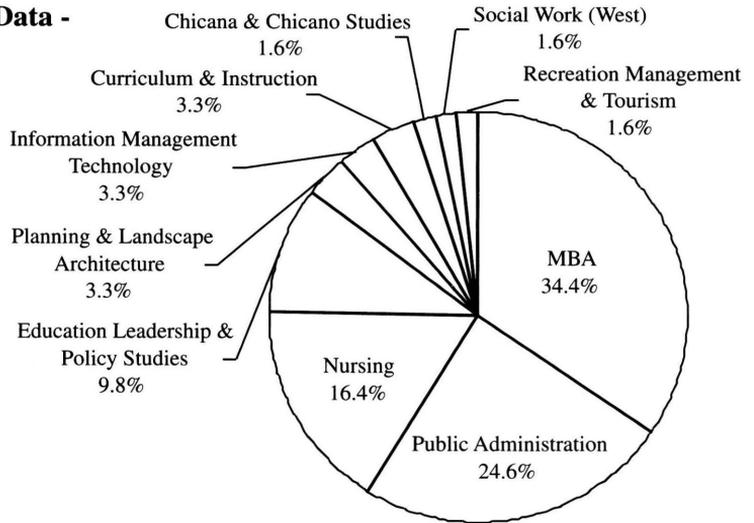
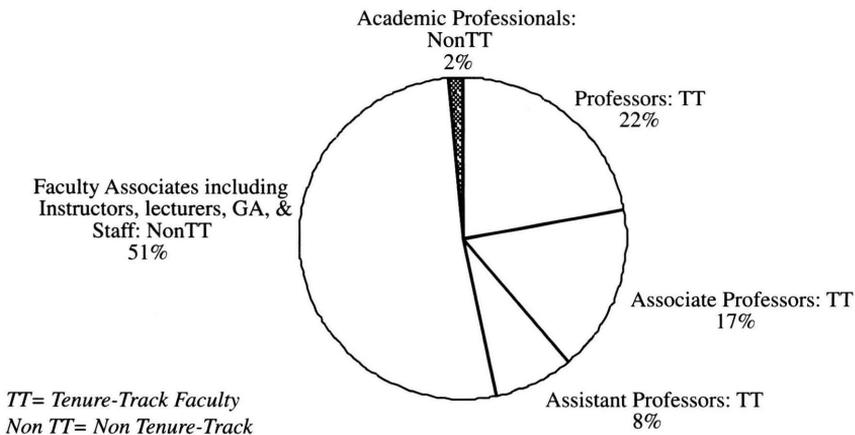


Figure 3.

Faculty Teaching at the DTC by Rank and Tenure-Status
Fall 1998 - Fall 2002

- Aggregate Data -
(N=131)



Simultaneous to the development of the database, the principal investigator conducted interviews with selected administrators and faculty, identified through a snowball approach, to review the history of the DTC, assess current issues, and identify foci for discussion at the focus groups. Emerging concerns included mission, and incentives and disincentives for teaching and conducting research at the DTC.

Fifty-four tenure-track faculty who had taught at the DTC had been identified in the database. Of those, 37 were selected and invited to the focus group discussions. Twenty-two participated in five intensive focus group meetings. The focus groups also reviewed preliminary findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Based on the focus groups and information gathered during the review of literature, the research team developed the survey portion of this study. The survey was targeted to 107 department chairs and unit directors. The sample included academic and service departments located at the main, east, and west campuses, some of which did not have a teaching mission or faculty. The survey was conducted by a four-member team of graduate students in public administration and included 16 items related to the university and the departments' missions and plans. Forty-three department chairs or unit directors responded to the survey. The graduate research team reviewed each survey and disregarded any surveys where the respondent indicated that his/her department did not employ faculty. The final operational sample consisted of 39 surveys. Questions were analyzed with SPSS.

Given the nature of the survey and the smallness of the sample, little can be stated categorically. However, some observations can be drawn. A number of departments incorporated some aspect of the metropolitan mission in their own missions. When queried based on the President's definition of a metropolitan university, a number responded positively to some dimensions. For example, "working with community leadership on important issues;" "conducting research addressing the region's economy;" and "reaching out to the Phoenix community with accessible instruction" were the most common points of agreement. Participating in various Extended Education activities such as televised courses, Internet, summer, or evening courses was a popular "other" response, and teaching at the DTC, while not a prominent response, appeared in the mixture. Doing research with monies flowing through the DTC was insignificant among the aspects of the metropolitan mission mentioned by departments.

The survey responses by and large confirmed the information gathered through the focus groups. In the survey, incentives related to tenure and promotion appeared to be less salient. Tenure and Promotion were never mentioned as incentives for teaching at the DTC (Figure 4) but only a small number of respondents mentioned them as a disincentive (Figure 5). It must be noted, however, that the survey was specifically addressed to department chairpersons, who were to report comments they received from faculty. Department chairpersons are both faculty and administrators and identify with one or the other depending on the culture of specific departments.

Figure 4.

Q: When encouraging faculty to teach at the DTC, do faculty mention any of the following as incentives? (mark all that apply) (R: 39)

OTHER

- We encourage outreach and distance education in general, but not at one specific venue.
- Annual performance reviews.
- Geographical location of faculty personal residences makes the DTC of value.
- None. It is part of our culture.
- Offer mileage.
- This hasn't been done.
- We are required to do it.

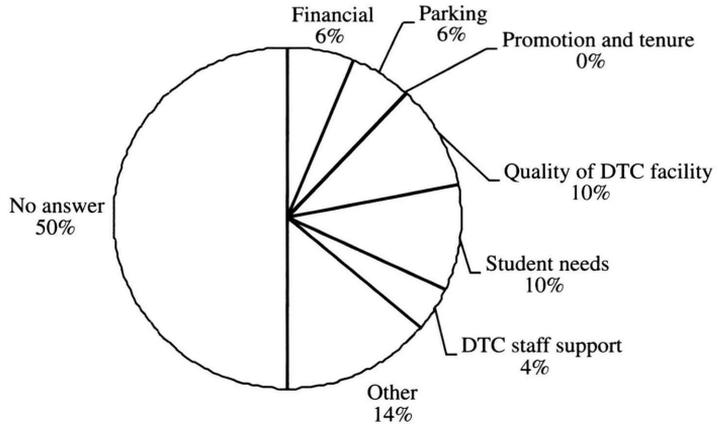
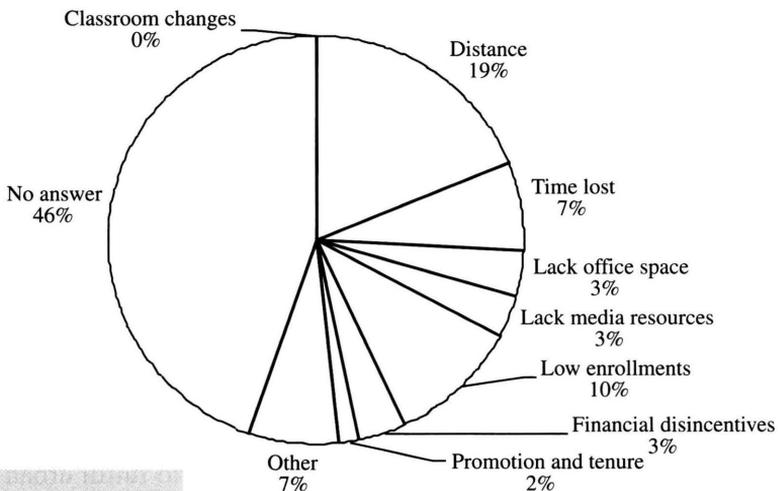


Figure 5.

Q: In encouraging faculty to teach at the DTC, do faculty mention any of the following as disincentives? (mark all that apply)



OTHER

- Having to transport classroom materials
- Lack of studio-style classrooms with storage for student work
- Other resident department faculty draw the assumption that DTC faculty are not working if they are not on the East campus everyday.
- Security concerns about walking to cars at night downtown

Results of the Study: A Summary of Interpretations

Issue 1: Mission Clarity

The survey results indicated that, in general, units understood the urban and metropolitan mission. The focus groups made it clear that departments and faculty lacked the operational tools to fulfill that understandings. The survey revealed that many department missions incorporated characteristics of the urban and metropolitan mandate. However, it appeared that the urban commitment rhetoric did not always translate into action, as far as teaching in a metropolitan site and conducting research under its auspices were concerned. The focus groups participants were in agreement about this.

Some of the focus group participants believed that for the urban and metropolitan mission at a Research I university to become real, it would be essential for the central administration to issue, in the words of one faculty, “clear marching orders” to departments and units. Only the enthusiastic support of the upper layers of the academic structure, it was said, would translate the mission into action. However, others cautioned that the strong academic ethos of decentralization and individualism would likely make this advice impractical. Some faculty believed that only external pressures (meaning the political structure or powerful constituencies) brought about real change, but they also recognized the unique dimensions of change when dealing with highly autonomous faculty. The role of the Board of Regents, whose members are appointed by the governor in Arizona, was mentioned and questioned. The perceptions and behaviors of its members had much to do with the urban mission at all levels. And then, of course, there was always the nagging but central question of resource allocations. While it was easy to talk about a metropolitan commitment, allocating resources to it was another matter.

Additionally, both the focus group discussions and the survey revealed that the DTC is not always on the faculty’s “radar screen” and few colleges from the ASU campuses incorporate the DTC into their missions as a location for conducting teaching or research.

The focus group discussions revealed that the lack of clarity about the DTC mission seemed to discourage faculty and unit administrators from committing to it. Focus group participants debated whether the DTC should be a revenue-generating center or a location used to facilitate the instructional mission of ASU. While it was acknowledged that the DTC was created by the legislature to fulfill urban needs, at least in part, it was also acknowledged that no special instructional resources had been put into place when it was created. This left the university to engineer ways of defining and focusing on urban needs. Thus, urban needs had been variously defined through the years: as the needs of the business constituency, or the needs of government agencies, or the needs of departments to create new markets, but seldom as the broad instructional or research needs of downtown customers.

Issue 2: Research Status and Aspirations of Faculty and Administrators

Participants at the focus groups agreed that units' missions are often driven by national disciplinary considerations and a tenure and promotion system that is based on traditional research activities. Participants also seemed to agree that departments often could not deal with seemingly contradictory expectations inherent in the mission of the University—Research I status, growth in student credit hours generated, and satisfaction of external constituencies. Given the confusion, departments often sacrificed elements of the urban mission and focused on research.

Consistent with the findings in the literature, the study showed that the majority of programs offering instruction at the DTC were professional. Public administration had the longest historical presence; programs in urban planning and business administration also had faculty teaching at the DTC. Other professional programs such as nursing, social work, and education had a variable presence. Not surprisingly, it appeared that the aspirations of the faculty and administrators in these professional programs were often more tightly aligned with the urban and metropolitan mission. Many of these programs were oriented to upper-level professionals, raising a question as to the university's responsibilities to all layers of the socioeconomic strata. It was also noted that much of what was done as part of the urban mission often focused on capturing specific markets in the urban area rather than on creating programs that might be attractive to urban populations. The need to examine the real nature of the urban educational needs against the mission of various departments was highlighted. Some departments felt that they were still in the process of building their own images within the main campus and could not afford to send faculty to off-campus locations.

Issue 3: Funding Patterns and Distribution of Fiscal Incentives

The incentives and disincentives that featured prominently in the focus group discussions re-appeared in the survey. As has been stated, tenure and promotion figured less centrally as a disincentive in the survey but was never mentioned as an incentive. Again, this was probably a reflection of the nature of the survey participants. Even though in the focus groups many participants were already tenured academics, the survey respondents were department chairs, probably wearing their administrative hats. Nevertheless, participants seemed to agree with the literature that it is difficult to achieve tenure and promotion through teaching at off-campus sites. The focus groups agreed that research is probably the driving force in tenure decisions and that may inhibit delivering on the urban mission. The scholarship of engagement was discussed and many hoped the Boyer (1990) and Lynton (1995) models might become more of a driving force. It was clearly stated that any form of additional engagement would have to be supported by a realignment of resources and other incentives.

The potential costs or penalties for faculty teaching off campus were also a concern. Examples were given of untenured faculty who volunteered for off-campus teaching assignments but were not rewarded for their efforts. The consensus was that faculty seldom get tenure just for good teaching. One participant stated that the departments

ignored teaching off campus unless teaching in general was poor and negative decisions were to be made.

Financial incentives to departments offered by the CEE for teaching at the DTC were discussed. Many suggested that standardizing the incentives, which currently varied depending on the academic unit, would be beneficial. Others felt that it was best for faculty to assimilate an ethos of service and collective commitment to a particular way of doing things rather than rely only on incentives. One former chair believed that if serving the needs of the urban and metropolitan constituencies became a clear part of the department's traditions, then individual faculty members would believe that it was a valuable role for them. Teaching, "on-load" or "off-load," at the urban off-campus location was discussed. It was noted that programs that teach at the DTC off-load have no problem finding faculty. These are generally business programs where market rewards are greater. On the other hand, many who teach on-load do it because of a commitment to the urban mission. Even though many faculty believed that standardizing institutional procedures was necessary, when it came to the "on load" or "off load" question, most emphasized that variability was beneficial.

In summary, on the positive side, all faculty seemed to agree that resources (including money, travel, graduate assistants, good parking, etc.) were important incentives to teach in the urban location. Also, smaller classes, supportive staff, and a quality environment were viewed as incentives. Disincentives that were discussed included the lack of library and media resources at the DTC, but the bigger perceptual issue was the marginalization of off-campus offerings.

Conclusions: Lessons Learned

In July 2002, a new president with a very broad and ambitious agenda was inaugurated at ASU. The language of "engagement" continued but the financial circumstances of the university changed. The DTC continues to be in an ideal position to engage with the community, but just how that engagement is defined and what constituencies are included in this engagement will make a big difference. All universities have been crippled by serious budget cuts; re-allocating resources under these circumstances is not an easy task and can do little for engaging urban groups that cannot generate additional monies. So the challenge of the mission of the urban and metropolitan university will remain at the center of all activities. Who does the metropolitan university serve? How does it generate resources? What disciplines are likely to be salient in the engagement? What kind of infrastructure will be put in place to support engagement?

Faculty involved in this project made a number of recommendations based on this research and included action principles applicable to ASU. Suggestions emerged from the discussions of faculty and chairs at the focus groups, who clearly understood the broad picture. The survey data typically confirmed the thrust of the discussions, within the limitations of a small number of respondents. Not all the recommendations from this study will be applicable to other settings, but the rationale used to cast the ASU

recommendations can guide other universities facing similar dilemmas. The following are potentially generalizable lessons learned:

1. Prestige in research still looms large when departments and faculty consider off campus assignments. The academic tradition and emphasis on “judgment by peers” at the time of tenure and promotion is most often based on frequency of publications and cannot be ignored. For the scholarship of engagement to be more than rhetoric it must translate into personal rewards for faculty and into tenure and promotion.
2. Because of rewards, faculty who want to engage in urban research often do so through their own “home base” or departments, not through colleges of extended education that cannot influence their tenure. Negotiations that diffuse home college and department allegiances are essential for faculty to view off campus urban locales as attractive central city laboratories. When off campus locales such as downtown centers do not have their own faculty and are viewed as mere satellites of “main campus” locations, it is hard for them to establish an interdisciplinary and professional faculty whose interests focus on the urban and metropolitan mission.
3. City markets offer substantial enticements for certain professional departments (e.g., business, fire management, and early childhood education). In a market driven economy, the situation is different for departments that cannot generate contracts to support their urban offerings. It may not be possible to fulfill the urban mission only through revenue generation. Certain aspects of the mission do not produce external revenue and thus require public support.

Few cities have remained immune to the attractions of downtown universities and most are aware of the benefits of an educational presence in the inner city. The press has highlighted examples of successful town/gown relationships. Virginia Commonwealth, the University of Pennsylvania, and a few others, are names heard frequently as universities that understand the opportunities that cities bring to students and faculty. The press cites mostly optimistic cases. Yet, sobering notes are introduced when faculty discuss the issue of engagement. Do universities have the capacity of be the economic engine of the cities? Are universities prepared to put in place the resources necessary to do this? Metropolitan universities may have oversold their capacity to actually solve problems and improve local government and conditions because the engagement aspects of the mission are not a priority for faculty who are driven by disciplinary considerations. Furthermore, administrations can seldom afford to push faculties in directions they cannot go, do not support, or downright oppose.

Addressing the Ninth Annual Conference of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities in Ypsilanti, Votruba (2003) raised questions similar to those generated and highlighted in this study. While the enthusiasm for the agenda of engagement is there, this study would strongly suggest that there are many missing elements in making it a reality, at least in the research-intensive universities.

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