

# **Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities: 2010 Presidential Address**

Steven Diner

In preparing for my presidential address, I found myself thinking about history, the discipline through which I entered academic life. Before I began spending nearly all of my time on university leadership and administration as a chancellor and dean, I wrote about the history of American higher education and the history of American cities. So please indulge me as I review a bit of history here, because I believe it is very germane to the purposes of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities and the reason we are here.

The American research university - the modern university with departments, disciplines, research focus, and commitment to service - is a late 19th century creation. There were small religiously-based colleges throughout the United States, but the modern university as we understand it today emerged in the United States in the late 19th century. And one of the primary places in which it emerged was in American cities.

The University of Chicago was among the first modern research universities in this country. Columbia University, which had been one of those traditional small colleges for gentlemen, transformed itself into a great research university. Johns Hopkins University and Clark University were also established as research universities in the late 19th century. All of these institutions were located in cities. Moreover, their founding presidents, and many of the distinguished scholars who taught in these institutions, believed that the city was the place to be. This was where a great university could thrive - in a city.

William Rainey Harper, the founding president of the University of Chicago, wrote in 1905, "Urban universities are in the truest sense national universities because the great cities represent national life in its fullness and its variety." His immediate successor, Harry Pratt Judson, wrote in 1911, "In a great city with its crowded population, the limits of the university duties are to be conceived as coterminous with the limits of the city itself. In other words, the university should not be content with the discovery only of scientific truth, which may have the most direct bearing upon city life, but should be especially industrious in the investigation and dissemination of such forms of truth as are directly related to the city." Sound familiar?

Nicholas Murray Butler, the president of Columbia University, reflecting back on its transformation into a research university, wrote in 1937, "There is no doubt whatsoever as to the superiority of the city's opportunities and environment as a place of graduate,

professional, and technical study. Although the university is a national institution, it will be dependent in large measure on support of the city in which it is located.”

The other major impetus for the development of research universities was the establishment of land-grant universities in small towns and rural areas focused on agriculture. After World War II, elite universities in cities abandoned this notion of defining themselves as urban universities. There is no research on exactly why this happened, but I have a couple of guesses. First, social policy, which at the turn of the century was really focused on American cities, shifted to the federal government during the 1930s. So it shifted away from cities specifically. Secondly, there was a vast expansion of American higher education after World War II, resulting in stratification in mission and student populations. Elite universities wanted to distinguish themselves from the more proletarian institutions. Finally, in the years after World War II into the 1960s and 1970s there was a growing national fear of cities. Many people came to believe that cities were crime-ridden, that they were going bankrupt, and that nobody wanted to live there. And indeed, New York City actually went bankrupt. People in the 1970s said that there was no future for New York City. (Tell that to the people today who rent apartments for \$10,000 a month just to be in Manhattan.)

So for many great universities, the city became a problem with which they had to wrestle. The University of Chicago considered moving but decided to stay. It spearheaded a crude urban renewal process for the campus neighborhood, tearing down large numbers of buildings occupied by poor people, leaving vacant lots for many years.

Urban universities got defined as those universities that served low income and minority students. For elite universities and those who aspired to move up in the status hierarchy, the rule became, “The less said about urban location, the better.” In 1983, I was a faculty member at the University of the District of Columbia and I interviewed for an American Council on Education Fellowship in academic administration. One of my interviewers, the provost of a university in a major American city, said to me, “You have a very impressive record. You’re at a mostly black, urban university and have emerged as a leader. You are going to have a great career in an urban university.” He then ticked off a number of universities that had very large low income and minority student bodies. I replied, “What about your university?” He said, “Oh, no! We’re not an urban university.” In other words, we don’t enroll large numbers of poor and minority students.

It is against this background that 20 years ago CUMU was founded. A group of university presidents who shared a vision of a distinct urban/metropolitan mission for their institutions got together to assert the importance of urban institutions of higher education. They felt their mission was not respected in higher education. They wanted to change that and began annual conferences. Over the years, CUMU’s membership has grown. We publish the *Metropolitan Universities* journal, we have a newsletter, we are starting regional meetings, and more and more activity has been going on within this organization.

CUMU is premised first and foremost on the idea that metropolitan areas and cities have extraordinary resources to promote teaching, learning and research. And there is no place that is better suited to teaching, learning and research than metropolitan areas. To advance this mission, universities need to partner with other entities in their home cities to promote urban revitalization and address the needs of the local population. These two things fit together - supporting teaching, learning and research that takes advantage of all that cities have to offer, and engaging with local communities to revitalize the cities in which the universities are located. This is good for everybody. That is what CUMU is about.

What has happened to American cities in the 20 years since CUMU was founded? First, many have experienced substantial if not extraordinary revitalization. Young people today are not afraid of cities as their parents were. Richard Florida, who you'll hear from later today, has written about cities as magnets for the creative classes and how much the creative classes have helped to revitalize them. More and more upper middle class and affluent people now want to live in revitalized central city neighborhoods. There is a growing recognition that the relentless growth of low density fringe suburbs is destructive to the environment.

These things did not necessarily happen because CUMU was founded. We're not that arrogant! But other things have happened within American higher education in the 20 years since CUMU was founded to which we are much more closely tied. Urban universities have become much more residential. Institutions that were once entirely commuter institutions are building more and more housing. That has stimulated the redevelopment of urban neighborhoods and expanded retail around urban campuses. Urban and metropolitan universities have also begun to take advantage of their locations in teaching and research. Service learning, sometimes called community-based learning, is now a major educational activity. It has its own professional association and journal. This is what the founders of CUMU said they wanted to accomplish 20 years ago.

Urban and metropolitan universities today have formed extensive partnerships with urban school systems. There have been a number of sessions at this conference about the role of urban universities in addressing the needs of inner-city schools to make opportunity available to low income students. Urban universities have partnered with civic groups and not-for-profit organizations, businesses and others to build citywide and metropolitan partnerships to enhance the capacity of local governments and not-for-profit organizations. Urban universities have engaged in economic development, technology transfer, and have fostered entrepreneurship. Universities have been magnets for the development of retail. Institutions like the University of Pennsylvania have undertaken major redevelopment programs in partnership with community groups to transform the neighborhoods in which they are located. All of this has happened in those 20 years.

In the meantime, a plethora of new higher education organizations with an urban focus have complemented CUMU and have emerged, particularly in the last decade, and some in the last few years. The Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU) was founded to lobby for an urban renaissance bill that will get the federal government to recognize what urban universities can do for cities in the way that land-grant universities did for agriculture more than a century ago. It is focused on strengthening communities, the education pipeline (K-12 education) and urban health. The USU undertook a major survey of its members to gather data that can be used for political purposes and lobbying. CUMU, working very closely with USU, has done a similar survey for an even larger number of institutions. The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities has aligned itself with USU. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities established an urban division with which CUMU works closely. The National Outreach Scholarship Conference, consisting of scholars from about 15 research universities has been holding annual conferences since about the time CUMU was founded.

A new Anchor Institutions Task Force, founded through the University of Pennsylvania, is bringing together universities and other types of anchor institutions to demonstrate to policymakers the role that universities, hospitals and others central city institutions can play in urban revitalization. In the meantime, the Carnegie Foundation has started a new classification system for engaged universities. And higher education's preeminent leadership development program, the ACE Fellows, has developed a relationship with CUMU and requires all fellows to learn about urban universities. If I can be forgiven for bragging about my own institution, ACE's curriculum now requires all fellows to study and do an exercise on one real university. For the last two years, the fellows studied my institution, Rutgers-Newark, with regard to its community engagement and racial and ethnic diversity. Did all these things happen because CUMU began 20 years ago? I'd like to say "yes," but I'm not sure we can take full credit. This is a national and international movement that transcends any one organization. We at CUMU, however, have been at its core from the very beginning.

Some other developments have also highlighted the importance of urban universities to higher education and to our society as a whole today. There is growing national interest in fostering community service. That is reflected in the establishment of the Corporation for National Community Service in 1990 and passage in 2009 by Congress of the Edward Kennedy Serve America Act. Promoting service, not just in urban universities, has become a major theme in our society and in higher education. The United States is experiencing a major new wave of immigration. The largest number of immigrants and minority students enrolled in four-year institutions attend urban universities. My own university, Rutgers-Newark, has been ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* for 14 years in a row as the most diverse doctoral university in America. Our student body consists largely of immigrants and children of immigrants. Our nation is also experiencing a new wave of nativism. Urban universities with large immigrant populations play a key role in addressing the needs of immigrants and in combating hostility to and fear of these new Americans.

There is growing national concern about the need to increase the number of Americans with college degrees. We are falling way behind as a nation economically because we do not graduate enough young people from college. Low income students have the lowest rates of college attendance, so it is particularly important to increase their college attendance and graduation rates. Those who currently attend college are enrolled largely in urban institutions. Furthermore, the rapid increase of the cost of higher education due to cutbacks in state funding has made the problem worse.

There is also growing recognition by policymakers of the role of urban universities in the revitalization in cities. Several university presidents and chancellors were invited to a meeting at the White House this summer to discuss urban universities as anchor institutions. Urban affairs staff members wanted to talk with us about how urban universities can be a key to the Obama administration's urban revitalization initiatives.

The founders of CUMU 20 years ago could not have imagined that urban and metropolitan universities today would be so hot and be the center of so many national priorities. So what does all this mean for CUMU and urban universities generally? First, we must continue to strengthen and expand our engagement with our urban and metropolitan communities. We cannot rest on our laurels. We must keep doing what we are doing and do more of it. We must do it better. Second, as urban universities become increasingly attractive to more privileged and better-prepared students, it is very important that we not forget our commitment to first generation students, to low income students, and to students from poor and working-class neighborhoods in cities. We cannot let the growing attractiveness of cities squeeze out those whom we have served for many, many years.

Third, we should also remember that we are not all-purpose social services agencies. People come to us with lots of ideas, "We need somebody to do this, and we need somebody to do that." First and foremost, teaching, learning and researching are at the core of what we are about, and our engagement with our communities should be based on these. As the presidents of the University of Chicago and Columbia University and others recognized a century ago, American cities have the best possible location for universities. We should build on that location, take the fullest advantage of that location, and do it in ways that strengthen our communities. What better time to do it than now, when the country, the world, and our cities all look to us for leadership?

## **References**

Quotations taken from Steven J. Diner, *A City and Its Universities: Public Policy in Chicago, 1892–1919* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 19.

## **Author Information**

Chancellor Steven J. Diner has headed Rutgers University-Newark since July 2002 and was President of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities from 2008 to 2010. He came to Rutgers with a lifelong interest in cities, universities, and the connections between them, both past and present. Dr. Diner's publications include *A City and Its Universities* (1980), *Housing Washington's People* (1984), and *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (1998), as well as numerous articles and essays on the history of American higher education, urban history, and the history of public policy.

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