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Metropolitan universities are best understood in the context of major patterns shaping the development of American urban areas, especially since World War II. In a nation now dominated by large, complex urban regions, metropolitan universities are enmeshed in rising public demands, confusion over mission and responsibility, and pressures to focus, reshape, and "do more with less". Meeting these challenges, however, may demand the ambitious reassertion of the original concept—to serve all major metropolitan constituencies and needs, and provide a path to bring diverse groups together and restore a sense of* civitas *to metropolitan communities.

Metropolitan Universities:

Past, Present, and Future

The metropolitan university in the United States is indeed defined by its name. It means to be a university in every sense of the word—an open intellectual community in which faculty and students share knowledge, pursue truth, hone analytical skills, and provide training in the professions. It is also an integral part of the modern American urban region, with all its complexity, opportunity, conflict, and confusion. This dynamic tension, between institutional purpose and an environment that both impels and hampers it, has produced the metropolitan university and also shaped its options and its future.

I hope in these remarks to tie metropolitan universities to the national and urban history which produced and continues to shape them. I will briefly touch on definitions of the metropolitan university, problems of institutional mission, the dilemma we currently face, and the response we should make to it. I will also suggest that—just as the urban region is *the* critical arena within which we will either resolve our gravest national dilemmas or succumb to the weight of our accumulated difficulties in an increasingly competitive global economy—the metropolitan university may be key to the future of the metropolis and the country as a whole.

NOTE: I am indebted to my friend and co-author, Dr. David R. Goldfield of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, for his comments on this essay. I have drawn rather liberally from ideas expressed in several earlier publications, especially D.R. Goldfield and B.A. Brownell, *Urban America: A History* (2nd ed., 1990) and G.R. Mowry and B.A. Brownell, *The Urban Nation, 1920–1980* (Rev. ed., 1981). I have also benefited from ideas expressed in many other sources, including Joel Garreau's *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (1991); D. Norris, E. Delaney, and K. Billingsley, "America's New Cities and the Universities," *Planning for Higher Education* (Fall, 1990), 1–8; and articles published in *Metropolitan Universities: An International Forum.*

Patterns of Urbanization

The settlement of North America, from the earliest days through the nineteenth century, was presaged and fulfilled by towns and cities. Seaports provided links with Europe and other colonies, while frontier towns secured new territories and sustained the farms and smaller villages that grew up around them. Commerce on the great rivers—the Ohio and the Mississippi—was nurtured by towns that provided the vessels, products, services, and populations that made commerce profitable. By the early twentieth century, the United States, which took such pride in its frontier and rural traditions, was in one basic sense already an urban nation.

The census of 1920 revealed for the first time that more than half of all Americans lived in towns and cities, and that some of these places were rather large: a dozen had more than 600,000 people, three had more than one million, and New York City, with its 5 million inhabitants, was a metropolis by any definition. The main point is that the country ceased to be defined and driven by producers on the land, all of whom were remarkably alike in ethnicity and background; the new force in national life was the city, with its polyglot populations and assorted problems. Some saw in this the ruination of the American experiment; but most Americans, when given the chance, escaped to urban attractions and amenities at the first opportunity.

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The same city building dynamic exists today. New communities are created on new land or within already settled areas. Some older neighborhoods are transformed by new patterns of access or technology, while others are abandoned like fallow fields no longer capable of sustaining life. Tyson's Corner, Virginia is, in its way, as much an expression of economic imperatives, mobility, and entrepreneurial enthusiasm as the smallest Missouri settlement in 1810. And it is, regrettably, no better planned.

Urbanization in the United States was a vigorous and varied process, but with certain recurring patterns and consequences. Whenever technology permitted, cities grew outward. As long as distances were traversed only on foot or by horse, urban settlements were tightly-knit and different uses and functions were close together. The steam railroad in the antebellum era allowed some of the very wealthy to live rustic lives in new outlying estates. But the streetcar in the 1890s began the genuinely radical transformation of the American city, encouraging urban growth over a much larger territory, though according to the regular patterns etched by rails and roadbeds.

The technological completion of this transformation was underway in the 1920s with the arrival of the motor vehicle, without which the metropolis as we know it simply would not exist. This highly individualistic and compelling appliance vanquished space and distance and opened vast new territories to urban settlement, a bonanza of land

development only dreamt of by the western pioneers. Thus did the predominant urban form in America change from the cluster to the marketplace, to the radial center, to the vital fringe, and—within the last decade—to the multi-centered metropolis.

Throughout these changes, American cities grew larger and more dominant in the national life. As they covered more and more territory, their uses, functions, and peoples became increasingly separated. Working and living arrangements, once close together in the center, were later divided between center and suburb, linked by rails and roads. The modern city was one of clearly distinct functional areas—manufacturing, commercial, residential, and variants thereof—engraved in new zoning codes enacted in the early twentieth century. Perhaps most importantly, people once separated by social class, race, and occupation were now also much more separated in space. The Chicago sociologists in the 1920s described these patterns as if they were the products of universal laws of human settlement—with downtown manufacturing areas and commercial districts giving way to close-in slums and eventually to high-class suburbs. While this pattern was, to some extent, replicated in other countries and cultures influenced by the automobile, it was primarily North American.

The shaping and reshaping of urban America gained momentum after World War II, at precisely the same time that American higher education was also transformed. A wave of returning veterans, impelled by government benefits, flooded the housing market, stimulating the construction of millions of new homes, most of them on the fringe of the established cities. They also flooded the nation's college classrooms and brought a booming business to maternity wards. The greatest democratization of higher education in American history, a massive expansion of the urban region brought on by new migrations, and a large, sustained flow of federal support were the primordial ingredients for the gestation of the modern metropolitan university.

Government policy indirectly financed the suburban boom through mortgage subsidies and new highways that penetrated outlying areas and tore through inner-city communities. At the same time, the decline of inner cities and many older neighborhoods accelerated. By the 1950s, efforts to "renew" deteriorating downtowns—also encouraged by government policy—focused on clearing out slums to make way for sparkling new civic centers—and even a few universities. As the suburbs grew, new colleges were built, and established private colleges in near-by communities became public. These "urban" universities were thus expanding at the same time that some parts of their local regions were in headlong decline.

Urban Crisis

The American metropolis was clearly in trouble. This was partly due to patterns of urban settlement but it was mostly because of incongruities and pathologies imbedded in American life. Whatever their causes, these problems led to the crisis of the cities in the 1960s—tragically

illuminated by firestorms of racial discontent—and to the first widespread attempt of the Federal government to deal with specifically urban problems. Urban universities were among the recommended solutions, and many of them eagerly accepted the challenge.

The urban crisis had many dimensions, but the array of problems was daunting: racism, poverty, crime, deteriorating infrastructure, inadequate and inequitable transportation, and a declining civic mentality. The new suburbs—containing millions of relatively well-to-do, and largely white, urbanites—were regarded by many policy makers and academics as a major part of the problem, since they siphoned off economic resources and human talents from the communities and populations that sorely needed them. Some universities were found in the inner cities while others inhabited the remote suburbs. It should be noted that the while suburbs eventually accounted for over two-thirds of the business establishments and the majority of populations and jobs in metropolitan areas, they are not—despite images in movies and on TV—all alike: some, especially close to older cities, were also quite established and suffered the same economic decline and chronic problems as many downtowns.

Problems of Definition

As America became more urban, it became more difficult to precisely define the American city. As the line separating urban from rural, and even downtown from suburb, became blurred, a basic dynamic in American cultural life was gone—namely, the divide between country and city that underlay so much of our literature, art, and popular culture. It also became more difficult to define ways of living that were peculiarly "urban."

The same dilemma confronts us with respect to the university. For just as we cannot readily define a metropolis (other than a large, dispersed urban area), we cannot precisely define a metropolitan university. Since the nation is metropolitan, few colleges or universities except the most isolated do not have at least some metropolitan connections or relevance. Major state universities, regardless of location, have responded to the rising demands to address social and economic problems. Even land-grant institutions typically have academic programs in critical areas like social work, health care, architecture, and planning which may focus on economic development and urban problems.

At the same time, universities identified as urban or metropolitan have placed great emphasis on providing solid academic programs in the basic arts and sciences and advanced graduate programs that cannot be distinguished in quality and focus from those in more traditional institutions. The term "urban university" no longer describes, as it once did, an open admission institution with mostly undergraduate and applied academic programs staffed by mostly part-time faculty.

Clearly, though, a reasonable definition lies somewhere in the combination of location and orientation (as expressed in institutional goals and actions), both of which are essential. A location somewhere within an urban region must exist alongside a declared commitment to serve

the broad educational needs of that region. And the term "metropolitan" is preferable because it emphasizes a larger, rather than smaller, area of concern and responsibility.

Problems of Mission

Service to the local area is usually expressed by giving priority to local partnerships (public and private), educating diverse populations, and responding to a variety of civic needs. We are already familiar with roles that metropolitan universities have played in facilitating regional assessment and planning, providing skilled expertise for addressing local problems and educated professionals for important local institutions (e.g., government and public schools), developing and applying new technology, attracting higher-wage jobs and industries, and—of course—serving diverse and sometimes place-bound populations previously denied a fair share of educational opportunity.

In many respects, these efforts have been highly successful even when they were not dramatic. But the problems and patterns of American urban development also pose serious difficulties for many major institutions, including the metropolitan university. For one thing, many campuses are located in neglected, blighted areas or at the far urban fringe—impeding access for many people in either case. Shifting patterns of urban migration, investment and disinvestment, and serious ills like poverty and crime can quickly redefine—and undermine—a university's physical environment and its opportunities. For another, the obvious application of faculty expertise to the solution of local problems is deceptively difficult. As we have often painfully learned, the interests and expectations of faculty members, bureaucrats, and neighborhood leaders or special interest groups are often quite different. In this respect, metropolitan universities may have oversold their capacity to actually solve problems and improve local government and conditions, while neglecting their central role to educate.

The Dilemma

Metropolitan universities confront a dilemma created by their history and environment. They were charged with responding to rising local needs at precisely the same time that local urban areas were undergoing unprecedented, and often perilous, transformations. Impelled by educational demands and local community needs following World War II, metropolitan universities now find themselves hard pressed to meet public expectations that are both rising and conflicting, and to fulfill missions that are threatened by looming budget cuts.

Part of the explanation simply lies in the fact that metropolitan universities are, alas, metropolitan: they are shaped and delimited by the problems and opportunities of their metropolitan environment. At the root of their dilemma, in fact, is a modern American metropolis that

is fragmented by race, social class, and economic function and spread over a huge territory, further divided into at least several counties and perhaps dozens of independent political subdivisions. Rather than held together by common interests, large metropolitan areas are rather more often microcosms of conflict across the political spectrum. This internecine warfare is alarmingly sometimes conducted on the floor of the state legislature, often to the detriment of metropolitan universities.

By their very nature and purpose, true metropolitan universities have no single constituency, but rather multiple interests demanding very different things: large and small businesses and various minority groups, neighborhoods, and municipal governments. Rather than one chamber of commerce, there are several or many—some promoting the central city and others marketing the suburbs. City halls may dot the metropolitan landscape, reflecting varied jurisdictional interests. Neither the state nor federal governments are much help, with their ambivalent and shifting attitudes and policies about access and higher academic standards, graduate and undergraduate programs, research and teaching, and financial aid.

The Response

A rational solution to this dilemma, of course—especially considering our funding problems—is to take the modern management approach: to assess, "rightsize", and focus. In such a diverse environment, no institution or group of institutions can be all things to all people. We have heard the advice at innumerable national meetings and workshops: use strategic planning to reveal the greatest needs and opportunities, and pursue these intensively with a new organizational structure configured to new priorities and specific goals. Build on selected, existing strengths, and pick carefully the projects or community groups you intend to work with. Reevaluate the mission statement, refine your publicity and admissions information, and maximize your competitive advantages in more clearly delimited service areas. In short, find yourself a "niche" and fill it.

All this seems to make sense, and it certainly makes regents and legislators happy. But it may also mean the demise of the metropolitan university as we have known it, and an end to the unique role that such institutions can and should play in our nation's development into the next century. For better or worse, the metropolitan university must address the problems of the metropolis rather than selected, limited parts of it. The shareholders of the metropolis are all its citizens. When a major metropolitan problem is the fragmentation of interest and purpose, becoming yet another specialized institution dealing with only several fragments does not present a solution.

The opportunity and burden of the metropolitan university—if it is to be a metropolitan university—is to serve the entire urban region and all its diverse populations, interests, and elements. It cannot deal only with the inner-city underprepared or the suburban professionals; it must be concerned with the needs of both. It cannot identify its interests

solely with the largest city in its region or with its suburbs, but rather help them to recognize mutual interests and work together. The most important role of the metropolitan university is to be a facilitator, communicator, convener, and bridge. What other institution—except perhaps government itself—has the capacity to interpret one group to another, serve as a neutral site and forum where problems can be discussed and resolved, bring the latest knowledge and technologies to bear on the problems of the dispossessed, join the vigor and capacity of business with the compelling needs of the public at large, and—perhaps most importantly, help restore a sense of *civitas*, of belonging to one polity and community?

The metropolitan university must therefore define itself in terms of its environment

The metropolitan university must therefore define itself in terms of its environment, with all the potential confusion and uncertainty that entails. It *must* be many things to many people, and it must attempt to do this during the most troubling financial period for higher education since World War II. This is certainly the most ambitious educational agenda since the Morrill Act.

The metropolitan university must of course be selective in the specific activities it undertakes. But this cannot be at the expense of any major metropolitan interest or constituency. No institution can meet every need for local development, but the metropolitan university must be involved in every significant political, economic, and social dimension of its complex, extensive community. No higher education institution can solve the problems of the public schools or eliminate violent crime, but if these are major problems they must in some way be part of the university's academic and service agenda—whether or not they have formal programs in teacher education or law enforcement. For the deepest problems of our country are urban problems, and all segments of our metropolitan areas reflect them.

The metropolitan university cannot even afford to focus precisely on the local area. For one thing, excellent academic programs cannot be judged in local or regional terms. For another, in a truly interdependent world, local problems are also global problems. In fact, metropolitan universities need to be our most internationally minded and oriented, since most multi-national companies are located in or near our major cities and the keys to national success in global competition—whether in manufacturing, technology, communications, services, or education—are with few exceptions to be found overwhelmingly in metropolitan areas, and demand up-to-date knowledge, language training, and cultural awareness.

This argues for a very broad-based, long-term approach that recognizes the problem of metropolitan fragmentation (socially, economically, and geographically) and attempts to work within it and ultimately to meliorate it. In fact, the method may be as important as the content, the process as important as the specific goal. As the university is involved, others become involved and engaged. The metropolitan university may not unilaterally solve any problems, but it may nevertheless be a critical factor in their solution.

The dilemma gives way to a challenge that will require enormous knowledge and leadership. It will also require new tools. Even universities with multiple campuses in the metropolitan region cannot overcome the barriers of poverty, sickness, inadequate transportation and all the other factors that restrict physical mobility. If the university is to be everywhere at the same time, it can only do so through technology—the same technology that has the power both to further fragment and to join metropolitan society. Given its mission, the metropolitan university should almost by definition be a leader in the development and application of communications technology. In this sense, "distance" learning is a more pressing need within urban regional boundaries than it is across state or national lines.

In carrying out this ambitious agenda in a time of public skepticism, metropolitan universities must be fully accountable for what they do, and meticulous in explaining themselves and their programs to the public. The more extensively involved they are in diverse metropolitan projects, the more carefully they will need to consider and develop appropriate faculty workload and reward policies, tend to basic expectations such as solid undergraduate instruction, and find better ways of reporting the value of partnerships and public service initiatives. The public will want to know if there is substance behind the rhetoric and whether they are getting their money's worth. More difficult—certainly in terms of the traditional higher education model—is the necessity to prioritize research programs, at least in terms of university support, to determine the degree to which they fit into the metropolitan agenda. Inevitably, this will encourage applied research in general and basic research which has particular relevance for local interests.

All higher education institutions must be innovative to make any headway at all in this climate, and metropolitan universities—which often lack extensive alumni bases and established foundations—must be more innovative than most. New necessities include collaboration and resource-sharing with other universities, including so-called "flagship" institutions, to address metropolitan needs; fashioning new and more ambitious partnerships with business and industry; initiating local coalitions to pressure state legislatures or coordinating boards to ease the often heavy-handed restrictions on the use of educational technology, and thus reach many otherwise inaccessible pockets of the urban region; and pressing the application of new technologies to the greatest possible extent that resources will permit.

The metropolitan university must be a model and exemplar of its mission, and therein perhaps lies its greatest initial challenge. The most important bridge it builds must be across its own campus. Students from the suburbs come together—often haltingly and suspiciously—with students from other economic and ethnic backgrounds. The university is one of the few places in the metropolitan area where such diverse elements are to be found engaged in common pursuits in such a small space. Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians seek their place along with more established groups in the national future through education. Women lay claim to equal roles with men in the professions and in all intellectual endeavors. A university without diversity, fraught with ethnic

turmoil, and failing to address the critical issues associated with social conflict and the need to forge a new community from many diverse cultural perspectives is not in a very good position to provide leadership for others. The metropolitan university must be a microcosm of its region, but one that not only reflects regional problems but also harbors hope for the future through a positive redress of grievances and a sense of new possibility. Only then can it reach out and bridge the metropolitan community. To truly minister unto its region, the metropolitan university must heal itself.

Metropolitan universities must be prepared to carry their case to legislatures and the general public, to request greater support and recognition for an even broader mission. The timing could hardly be less fortunate; obviously, such talk runs against powerful currents of specialization, compression, and reduction. But the future of our urban regions will not wait, and many parts of those regions are clearly in crisis. Though it may seem ephemeral to many, education is the most powerful tool we have to achieve fundamental, persistent change—to raise standards of living, to meliorate barriers of race and class, and to fashion a new civic consciousness that reaches beyond ethnic group or neighborhood and embraces the larger society as expressed by the metropolis. It is by no means certain that we can do this, or that the nation can rise to all the challenges that now confront it; but it is probably impossible without strong, vital institutions of higher education that are dedicated to serving their entire regions by providing good teaching, quality research, a global perspective, and—by example as well as by precept—a new sense of metropolitan community.

Suggested Reading

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