Review Essay

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Peggy Gordon Elliott, *The Urban Campus: Educating the New Majority for the New Century*. American Council on Education Series on Higher Education, Oryx Press. 1994. 162 pp.

The idea of the urban campus has been around for a long time but it is still an institution that is poorly understood by those who do not work in urban settings. In the 1950s, Paul Ylvisaker of the Ford Foundation called for the creation of an urban equivalent of the Morrill Act of 1862 and provided support for experiments in urban extension programs from 1959 to 1966. In the 1960s, in response to the tensions building in cities, Robert C. Wood, who was then a political scientist at MIT, proposed the establishment of urban observatories. By the end of that decade, there were over 300 urban centers, but the results were disappointing and the movement waned.

Since the early 1970s, there have been more successful attempts to build university-community partnerships and to employ a new kind of research and instructional approach on urban campuses in which community participants join with university faculty and students to respond to the pressing problems of the community.

Peggy Elliott's book is one in a very short series of attempts to describe the character of the urban campus and explain its special institutional properties. Her work was preceded by two texts written a decade apart. The first was Maurice Berube's, *The Urban University in America*, published in 1978. In this book, Berube laid out an agenda for the urban university as an agent of social change and called for a federal program of investment in urban institutions to halt the decay of the inner city.

In 1988, Arnold Grobman published, *Urban Universities. An Unfinished Agenda.* In a research project sponsored by the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC), Grobman collected information on a set of state university campuses, some urban and some not. From this study of the resources available to the two kinds of institutions, Grobman extracts advice on how "urbans" can better serve their communities. In this text, by the way, I traced down the probable origin of a description, attributed by Grobman to Thomas Bonner, who was then President of Wayne State, of urban campuses, that urban universities "are not merely located in a city, but are of the city, with an obligation to serve the needs of the city's diverse citizenry."

Peggy Elliott prefaces her book with the observation that urban institutions are still not understood and are "sometimes being ignored because they do not fit neatly into the Carnegie Foundation's taxonomy of higher education or any other popular classification such as *U.S. News and World Report*'s annual ranking of institutions " and because most legislators and public policymakers experienced higher education in more traditional settings." In this new book, Peggy Elliott describes the nature of urban campuses, the societal changes that have altered the environment in which educational institutions must operate, the students they serve, the activities of their faculty, and their connections to their communities. Peggy Elliott hopes that this description will "underscore the need for substantial research" and "assist in clarifying existing, sometimes inaccurate, notions about urban campuses...their mission, their students, and their significant role in shaping this country's future."

Elliott makes several important points that can serve as a base for learning more about what distinguishes urban campuses from their sister institutions in higher education.

(1) Unlike its role in other public educational watersheds, such as the land-grant movement, the federal investment in urban postsecondary education arose less deliberately and only in response to the natural forces in urban areas. Urban campuses arose from a variety of pre-existing institutional forms, ranging from municipal colleges to extension centers. These distinctive institutional origins have tended to obscure the deeper similarities of purpose and philosophy that distinguish urban campuses from other institutions. Unlike the land-grant institutions, which emerged from a legislative act, urban institutions do not represent a single model.

(2) One critical characteristic of urban campuses is their pivotal role in holding together a system of urban education that ties together education at all levels from pre-school to advanced graduate programs within a region. Although the concept of a region is only beginning to emerge in the sociological and economic literature and in public policy, it is becoming clear that regions require special educational, social, governmental, and economic strategies in order to maintain functional connections between inner cities and surrounding suburbs.

(3) The customary classification systems used to distinguish institutions are based primarily on the resources available to an institution (e.g. level of academic preparation of its students, sponsored funding, and its size) and academic complexity (e.g. number and output of undergraduate and graduate programs). These characteristics do not take into account how these resources are used. Urban institutions can be found in all of the Carnegie classifications. What distinguishes such an institution from other institutional types are its philosophy, its values, and the design of its educational and research programs, which emphasize commitment and involvement with the people the campus serves.

(4) Although many characteristics of urban universities overlap with other institutional types, there appears to be a continuum of increasing community involvement that distinguishes the more fully developed urban campuses from their non-urban counterparts. Although interpretations of the urban mission may vary, with some campuses attempting to incorporate urban influences into all academic programs and others choosing to confine the most "urbanized" influences to a few academic programs or centers, there is a common underlying philosophy of community commitment that distinguishes urban campuses as a group.

(5) It doesn't really matter what label we attach to this institutional type. In fact, continuing arguments about the appropriateness of one designation or another may serve to perpetuate confusion about what the urban mission really is. Peggy Elliott handles this particular argument with especial grace. She defines urban campuses as "the primary provider of undergraduate education, the primary enroller of minority students, and the support link in research, service and development for the nation's cities."

(6) The continued association of institutional prestige with the presence of a highly selective admissions policy and a record of basic research has inhibited the full expression of the urban mission, which requires that the faculty "face more learning challenges, more diversity and simultaneously more opportunity for innovation and interaction." Until widely accepted ways can be found to document the quality and impact of this broader range of faculty activities, urban campuses will continue to face comparisons to the work of faculty at more traditional institutions who do work for which there is already a generally accepted set of peer-review

based validations available.

(7) Urban campuses are the site of more innovative approaches to research and instruction because there are " no givens, no common set of goals, values, academic prerequisites or aspirations "and because they have always been starved for resources and therefore have been forced to invent new, less expensive ways of doing things.

(8) The frustrations of urban campuses arise from the lack of correspondence between the realities of the urban environment and the conditions of the traditional university. Urban institutions need different ways to assess productivity and costs of operations that can be incorporated into funding formulae and accountability measures. There is also a need to come to terms with the growing misalignment between where academic programs are located in a state and where the students are located. In many cases, it would be logical, but not politically feasible to move programs from non-urban institutions to urban ones.

(9) Few urban campuses are taking full advantage of their situation. They offer fairly traditional liberal arts curricula and support fairly traditional faculty roles. Urban institutions are located in complex environments that offer many opportunities for designing curricula that link the educational goals of the university with the needs of the community in the form of service-learning courses or internships or other community-based educational experiences.

(10) One of the most fundamental assets of urban campuses is the diversity and experience of their student bodies. This is beautifully captured by a letter that Kurt Vonnegut sent to Chancellor Gerald Bepko of Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI) after giving a lecture there in 1991. Vonnegut wrote, "Your students are miles ahead of the Ivy League, since they feel no obligation to pretend America is something it obviously isn't."

These observations and assumptions lead to a set of fascinating research questions:

1. How different is the urban university from other institutional types? Are there some defining characteristics that are truly indicative of an urban institution? Are urban institutions any more different from each other than individual land-grant universities are from each other?

2. Are urban universities really evolving into a different institutional type or have they simply begun to respond sooner and more effectively to societal changes that other institutions have not yet begun to address?

3. If urban institutions are more responsive to changing societal needs, why is this so? What aspects of their organization, institutional values, resource base, and community relationships seem to create conditions that support such responsiveness? Is there a connection between being resource-poor and being innovative? Do adequate resources tend to insulate an institution from societal pressures?

4. How significant are the differences in how different urban institutions are organized? What is the effect of confining university-community interactions to a small number of academic programs or centers as compared with distributing university-community interactions across all campus academic programs?

5. To what extent is its "Carnegie Classification" meaningful in understanding how a particular urban institution interprets its mission? Is "philosophy" the critical variable or are there other features, such as the adequacy of the institutional resource base that are more important in explaining the urban character of a particular institution?

6. Does it matter whether undergraduate and graduate programs are tradition-

ally designed or intentionally linked to the community, or is the nature of the institutional research mission a more important factor in defining the urban character of an institution?

I am sure that any reader of *The Urban Campus* will find that its descriptions and observations generate a stream of questions about urban institutions. Peggy Elliott has done us all a service by capturing an accurate portrait of the condition, behavior, and characteristics of urban campuses today.