



John P. Thurber

Colleges and universities with an urban mission can provide a wide range of public policy assistance to their host communities through partnership with municipal government. The author describes one such municipal-collegiate partnership, the Trenton Office of Policy Studies of Thomas Edison State College. This experience shows how metropolitan universities can be most effective by establishing long term relationships that seek to respond to the needs and opportunities of their local partners.

The Trenton Office of Policy Studies: *Building Municipal- Collegiate Partnerships for Urban Revitalization*

Urban institutions of higher education have had substantial experience in seeking to respond to the needs of their host communities. Many colleges and universities in urban areas have recognized both their responsibility and self-interest in addressing local needs. Indeed, the ability of these institutions to attract and retain faculty, staff and students is significantly affected by the quality of life of their surrounding community. To the extent that these institutions are able to improve their urban surroundings, they also improve their own ability to compete and survive as an institution of higher education.

Higher education has a special role in addressing urban problems. With its concentration of intellectual, organizational and financial resources, colleges and universities are perhaps among the best equipped institutions to take on these challenges in our cities. As Ernest Boyer has suggested in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Mar. 9, 1994, p.A48), higher education must use its intellectual talent and other resources to respond to the needs of our cities just as the land grant colleges responded to the needs of agriculture and industry a century ago.

Because of their educational mission and the strength of their human and financial resources, these institutions are well positioned to play a catalytic role in the revitalization of their host communities. Accordingly, metropolitan universities have provided educational and training programs for local officials, shared technical expertise with local organizations and governments, assisted local school districts, and offered students and others to serve as volunteers in the renewal of their surrounding neighborhoods.

Cities also offer a natural laboratory in which learning can occur. Service learning in urban areas has been widely adopted, with many institutions linking community service to a course or an independent study. Through this approach, students are enabled to link theory to practice as they learn about the challenges facing their broader community.

Many urban institutions of higher education have made these types of contributions to a civic improvement agenda. Fewer, however, have engaged in ongoing and close working partnerships with local communities in which they have allowed their partners a major role in setting the agenda. Because of collegiate sensitivity to sometimes difficult town-gown relationships and concerns over competing priorities, metropolitan universities may find it difficult to make a commitment to partner with their neighbors in a collaborative effort to revitalize their community. Faculty and staff at these institutions may also find it difficult to concede to their local partners the power to set priorities and determine direction in such a partnership venture.

The partnership model nevertheless offers significant advantages over a more one-sided or reactive approach to civic involvement. Public-private partnerships are an emerging force for change in numerous communities across the country. Through participation in such a collaborative approach, colleges and universities with an urban mission may better identify the numerous opportunities for constructive intervention in their communities. A partnership approach may also encourage these institutions to recognize more clearly their own stake in the joint enterprise of urban revitalization.

The project described in this paper is an example of a pro-active approach to participation by an urban institution of higher education in a partnership with municipal government. TOPS — The Trenton Office of Policy Studies — is an innovative municipal-collegiate partnership undertaken by Thomas Edison State College and the city government in Trenton, New Jersey. Thomas Edison State College is New Jersey's college for mature adults, with its administrative center in Trenton.

While it has always had a public service agenda, the College created TOPS in April of 1991 as a very tangible expression of the College's commitment to work closely with the city in addressing the broader community's most critical problems. TOPS has proven to be a successful multi-issue collaboration. This project is used here as a model to explore the numerous roles that metropolitan universities can play through such a municipal-collegiate partnership to strengthen the capacity of local government and promote urban revitalization.

The Challenges Facing Trenton and Other Urban Areas

Trenton is an old industrial city famous as the site of the battle of Trenton during the American Revolution. During the early years of the 20th century, it was a major industrial center, producing a vast variety of goods, including steel beams and cable, rubber products, ceramics, automobiles, and cigars. The city's industrial base declined sharply after the Second World War, with the number of manufacturing jobs dropping from roughly 50,000 to fewer than 5,000 today. Once the retail and service center for a large region, Trenton's downtown has also declined steadily since the 1960's as a result of the growth of suburban competition.

As the City's economic base has declined, its population has diminished, and the demographics of that population have changed dramatically. According to the 1990 Census of Population, there are 88,675 people in Trenton, a drop of 32%

from its 1930 peak. That population in 1990 included a far more substantial number of African-American and Latino people than at any time in the past, with 47% of the City's population being African-American and 14% being Latino.

Several recent trends have accelerated the challenges facing Trenton's neighborhoods, as well as many other urban areas. Primary among these are the loss of jobs and income among unskilled workers and the increasing concentration of poverty. The growing concentration of poverty in urban areas has magnified its adverse consequences by compounding family poverty (and its direct impact on adults, youth and children) with the indirect impacts of a broader neighborhood poverty. Pervasive neighborhood poverty is now a far more common experience in Trenton and certain other cities, and puts a severe strain on social services and community institutions.

The most important factor in the growth of poverty in Trenton and many other urban communities is the decline in earnings and employment for less-skilled workers. Women in similar circumstances have experienced stagnant wages and falling employment rates. The central reason for this decline in income is a drop in demand for less skilled workers, particularly in manufacturing. The experience of Trenton is typical of many older industrial cities. Trenton's numerous manufacturing jobs once provided decent employment for a largely low-skill workforce. Today, this workforce competes for a smaller number of generally service/public sector jobs, mostly offering lower real incomes than they had previously enjoyed.

The Establishment of the Trenton Office of Policy Studies

The challenges facing our cities are thus increasingly complex and interrelated. The Trenton Office of Policy Studies was created by the City and by Thomas Edison State College as a joint effort to analyze these and other emerging issues of public policy that affect the citizens of Trenton. It was also designed to be proactive in formulating recommendations and plans for addressing these issues in direct response to the needs and priorities of local government in the city.

Douglas Palmer, who was elected in June of 1990 as the first African-American mayor of the City of Trenton, recognized the need for an entity like TOPS that could offer independent policy analysis and support for new programmatic initiatives. Like other cities, Trenton needed to increase the city government's capacity to respond to new issues. Over the past two decades, Trenton had disinvested in itself and lost many senior and middle level staff. As a result, city government in Trenton had been reduced in its ability to engage in strategic planning, policy analysis or other critical organizational tasks.

While the new administration acted to remedy these internal weaknesses, it also worked to develop new external resources. The mayor initiated a discussion with Thomas Edison State College regarding its willingness to enter into a partnership to provide academic resources and staff for the city. The College was primed for such a partnership, having previously explored a similar relationship with the State of New Jersey.

George Pruitt, the president of the College, had observed some of the ways in which private sector firms effectively use their own policy analysis and research capacities to address critical issues. The public sector generally lacks the capacity to serve itself in this manner. The College saw a potential partnership role in providing practical and useful information for public sector decision makers to inform their decisions. The College determined that it could play a useful role for such

decision makers by responding to their needs for analyses, research, briefings, and other information. Through these efforts, the College would seek to foster more informed public policy decision making, improved civic participation and public leadership, and ultimately to enhance the quality of life in the College's communities.

It was in this context that the city and the College agreed to the establishment of TOPS. TOPS is perhaps unique in the way it was structured through this process. Although fully a part of the College, TOPS' work is entirely devoted to serving the needs of the city. The director of TOPS sits as an invited member on the mayor's cabinet. TOPS and its internal staff and external consultants assist city department directors to develop new programs, institute new policies, and develop strategic plans for the future. In this manner, TOPS represents a hands-on approach to a collegiate partnership with an urban community.

Despite the active involvement of TOPS in the internal life of city government, its independent academic orientation has been essential to the success of the partnership. Basing TOPS outside of City Hall has proven vital in shielding it from the political and practical pressures of municipal government. Indeed, a major impetus for the creation of TOPS was the limited opportunity for thoughtful and reflective analysis in the midst of the day to day crises and stress involved in running the City administration.

TOPS has sought to establish a pattern for its work that is keyed to the opportunities presented by the City's own agenda and its needs and that does not reflect the TOPS staff's own predilections and personal interests. This has meant working on policy issues that range from economic development to public health, and on projects ranging from management and operational reviews to budget planning. Indeed, it has been crucial to the success of TOPS that the office be seen as a resource for the City in a variety of areas, and that it be able to respond quickly and appropriately to its wide range of policy needs.

In establishing TOPS, another goal was to create conduit for other external resources that could be made available to serve the needs of Trenton. Through the partnership, the city has been able to recruit into the city a wide range of resources from higher education and other sources. This has included specialized consultants, new programs, grant funds, volunteers, and other assistance. This brokering and match-making work has been a vital part of the contribution by the TOPS partnership.

TOPS undertakes or sponsors applied research and policy analysis on issues identified by the city as critical needs and opportunities. The purpose of this is not to undertake *post mortems* on policy issues or to sponsor theoretical research, but instead to bring useful and practical assistance to where it is most needed. By bringing together the insights and resources of the academic community, as well as the broader public and private sectors, to address vital public policy issues facing Trenton, TOPS is able to contribute toward improved policy formation for the city.

The TOPS Advisory Board plays a critical role in the work of TOPS to advance the city government's efforts to revitalize Trenton and its neighborhoods. One of the contributions of TOPS lies in identifying those outside of city government who have skills and knowledge that can assist the City to develop its policy and programmatic initiatives. The efforts of TOPS to identify and reach out to these individuals is facilitated by the members of the Advisory Board and their networks of contacts.

The TOPS Advisory Board includes representatives from each of the sur-

rounding institutions of higher education, including Princeton University, Rider College, Trenton State College, Mercer County Community College, and Rutgers University. These representatives are essential in facilitating access by TOPS to the policy and other expertise located within their institutions and the wider academic community. The TOPS Advisory Board was also constituted to ensure that there would be a significant role for business and community involvement. Accordingly, the Board includes representatives of local and regional businesses, state government, community organizations, and representation from the Trenton Board of Education.

Funding for TOPS has been provided by a wide range of foundations and corporate supporters, with core funding provided by the College. The foundations and corporations providing grants over the past four years have included the Fund for New Jersey, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Mary Owen Borden Foundation, the Bunbury Company, the Schumann Fund for New Jersey, PSE&G, and Bell Atlantic.

Challenges in Making the Partnership Work

The effectiveness of the TOPS model has been field tested over the past four years. This has included several false starts, frustrations and challenges.

Several early initiatives might be considered to fall within the category of false starts. Among these, perhaps the most instructive was the misjudgment by TOPS involving the flow of information. The staff of TOPS had assumed that one of its contributions to the decision making process within the city government could be to increase the flow of information that TOPS considered useful and relevant. Therefore, TOPS assigned one of its research interns the responsibility to cull the newspapers, journals and other periodicals, as well as recently published books for materials that might be of interest to city officials. A weekly summary of these materials was prepared and distributed to the mayor and members of his cabinet, as well as to members of the TOPS advisory board and other interested persons. Other selected materials were similarly made available to this audience, including discussion papers on current topics in public policy.

Within several months, a pattern of readership and response was established. Members of the advisory board, staff from the college and certain other individuals were very interested in the materials, and often requested additional copies or further information. They often contributed their own materials to be circulated, and a lively dialogue among this circle was occasionally inspired by the ideas expressed in some of the documents. In contrast, officials from city government generally did not read the materials. Some members of this audience added the materials to the pile of documents that would be read when time permitted, but which generally never again saw the light of day. While in principle these city officials affirmed the usefulness of such materials, in practice they found that the other demands on their time and energy were more compelling.

The lesson from this experience soon became clear. Information is only *useful* to these decision makers if it is actually *used*, and it will only be used if it the decision makers perceive it as relevant and accessible. The city government partners of TOPS must be the ones to determine whether the particular information being offered is relevant to meet their needs, and it must be in a form that can be readily absorbed. Just because the information piques the interest of academics or others outside of government does not ensure its utility to public sector decision

makers. There is no need to produce yet more studies and reports that will simply fill space on the shelves of government offices.

As a result of this experience, the assistance provided by TOPS has become far more focused and client sensitive. This assistance has become more closely tailored to the articulated needs and priorities of the public sector partners. Efforts have been made by TOPS to ensure that the information provided is as accessible as possible, such as by making brief verbal presentations along with executive summaries for all reports and other work products. The background research and other materials that constitute the basis for the presentations are also made available as appropriate and as requested to provide additional support for the decision making process. This approach has proven to be far more satisfactory to all of the partners of TOPS.

Another challenge has been to avoid getting involved in the types of daily problems and crises that consume the time of the leadership of Trenton, as well as most other cities. It has often been tempting to participate in meetings and discussions with the public sector partners of TOPS regarding the wide variety of issues that come before city government each week. For example, TOPS has been requested to participate in issues of relatively limited significance, such as the city's efforts to respond to citizen complaints regarding city services, to consider various minor budget alternatives, and to address particular program needs in various areas. More compelling have been the requests at the same time for assistance in addressing policies regarding privatization of government services, planning for anti-graffiti campaigns and evaluation of strategies for education reform.

The problem with evaluating these various types of involvements is in allocating scarce resources. The challenge has been to determine the areas of greatest opportunity for contribution in public policy and public service by a partnership such as TOPS. There is clearly a need to distinguish between relatively insignificant problems and the more profound issues for which the partnership was created. However, because of the availability of new resources represented by partnerships such as TOPS, government officials may consider these new resources just as they would other senior staff who are available for ever more meetings. For TOPS, the added problem has been to remain responsive to the city's sense of its own priorities, while maintaining its independent judgment in making resource allocation decisions. This has required a careful balance of competing demands, which has not always been successful.

Being a partnership begun and supported by two institutions requires an ongoing investment of time to continually build trust and confidence on both sides of the partnership. It was an initial strength of TOPS that both sides of the partnership (the city and the College) viewed TOPS as belonging to themselves — perhaps even more than to their partner. However, as TOPS became more focused on being responsive to the needs of the city and the College's external community, some at the College came to see it as being perhaps too separate from the College and its academic function. If TOPS is to continue into the future, it must be seen as a central part of the College's mission. A key challenge for partnerships such as TOPS is, therefore, to establish them as a core function of the college and central to its life. Priority must be given to involving substantial parts of the college community (faculty, staff and students) in its work and activities. This will strengthen the partnership and improve the relationships on which it is built.

The distinct differences in organizational cultures and attitudes between the two sides of the partnership has presented another kind of challenge for TOPS. This

has accentuated the usual challenges of working in partnership. It has taken time to move beyond the usual ways of thinking about organizational structures and lines of authority in this regard. Indeed, the notion that TOPS would be a part of the College, but that its agenda would be set largely by the City, was regarded by some on both sides of the partnership with a certain degree of skepticism.

Nevertheless, through TOPS, the College has established a durable relationship with its host community based on trust and support. The College has deepened its relationship to the Trenton community and broadened its public policy mission. It is fully committed to promoting the work of TOPS and ensuring its ongoing viability. For Thomas Edison State College, TOPS is a central expression of the College's public service commitment.

Projects and Activities

The assistance provided by TOPS has proven useful to the City's efforts in several policy initiatives of importance to the City. The various major projects that have been addressed since the inception of TOPS in 1991 demonstrate the wide range of issues that have been addressed and illustrate the range of resources that can be brought to bear using the partnership model. This wide range of issues and projects also perhaps demonstrates our more limited of success in maintaining a central focus for the work of TOPS. A summary of several of these projects are provided below:

Economic Development

Perhaps the most significant area of work for TOPS over the past four years has been its policy analysis, research, and outreach in support of economic development. The work of TOPS in the area of economic development has focused on several areas:

Economic Development Strategy Research — TOPS completed an analysis and series of recommendations concerning economic development strategy for Trenton, including the identification of the business, commercial and industrial sectors offering the greatest opportunity for employment growth.

Economic Development Corporation Planning Process — TOPS has conducted outreach efforts to provide technical support and planning assistance for the creation of an economic development corporation for the city. TOPS helped to identify the critical strategies, opportunities and legal issues for the City and the broader community related to the creation of such a corporation.

Focus Groups for Economic Development Planning — Working in close partnership with the City, TOPS helped to organize and host a series of focus group sessions involving over one hundred representatives of key sectors of the local economy. The focus group sessions served to inform the City's broader economic development planning process.

Course on Local Economic Development Planning — TOPS co-sponsored with Rutgers University a graduate-level course on local economic development planning, which was taught in Trenton using Trenton as a case-study to examine the best approaches to economic development for a local municipality.

Housing

TOPS has engaged in applied research initiatives to support the city's housing

efforts. These research projects have been designed to have practical application to, and be shaped by, the city's housing needs. The activities of TOPS in this area include:

Mortgage Lending Study — TOPS examined mortgage lending practices and community reinvestment performance in Trenton by banks, thrifts and other mortgage lenders.

Lead-Based Paint in Trenton's Housing Stock — In response to research and clinical results suggesting that lead paint in Trenton's housing stock is a critical housing and public health issue, TOPS worked to support the efforts of other partners, including the city, local hospitals, and others, to formulate a strategy to address this acute and persistent problem.

Neighborhood Revitalization

Revitalizing Trenton's neighborhoods is a critical priority. TOPS has worked closely with the City to help develop these strategies and to build new partnerships in this area.

Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community Program — The Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community program is a central element of the Clinton administration's community revitalization strategy. The program requires each applicant city to identify a target area from among its most distressed neighborhoods and to develop a comprehensive strategic plan for the area's revitalization. TOPS provided intensive support and assistance for Trenton's broad-based community planning process that resulted in a comprehensive neighborhood-based strategy.

Neighborhood Environmental Issues — TOPS examined urban environmental issues related to the revitalization of Trenton and Newark neighborhoods. These included air quality, open space, water quality, noise pollution, lead paint and lead poisoning, and a wide range of other issues. As part of this project, TOPS conducted an inventory of all urban environmental programs and initiatives in both Trenton and Newark and developed an innovative program assessment and management matrix.

Infrastructure

The need to address Trenton's infrastructure continues to be an important priority for the City, and one that is closely related to economic development and neighborhood revitalization concerns. Examples in this area include:

Parking — TOPS conducted a comprehensive analysis of vehicular parking availability and related issues in Trenton, as well as of the impact of a proposed parking tax on local businesses, shoppers, commuters and others.

Health Care

Public health issues remain a critical concern for the City. Examples of the work of TOPS in this area include:

Health Summit — TOPS assisted the City to organize the Mayor's Health Summit, which is a bi-monthly forum and coordinating council on local health issues. The Health Summit represented the first time in Trenton that all of the hospitals had been called together to discuss issues of common concern.

Needle Exchange Study — TOPS conducted a literature review project on the sensitive issue of needle exchange programs for intravenous drug users as a

strategy to reduce the transmission of HIV/AIDS.

Perinatal Substance Abuse — TOPS participated as part of a multi-disciplinary team of leaders from the Trenton community in an intensive effort to develop a strategic plan to address the prevention of perinatal abuse of alcohol and other drugs.

Education

Education and the improvement of Trenton's schools are a central concern for the City. The work of TOPS in this area includes:

The Role of Parents in Educational Attainment — TOPS sponsored a research project to compile the relevant research examining the role of parents and parent surrogates in the educational development of their children.

School Reform Proposals — TOPS has worked with the mayor to analyze proposals for school reform in the city and to formulate proposals for a greater involvement by municipal government in supporting educational development for at-risk children and youth outside of the schools.

Public Safety and Crime Prevention

The fear of crime and concern about public safety has been uppermost in the minds of many local residents. The work of TOPS in this area includes the following:

Weed and Seed — Work on the Weed and Seed program was the first project undertaken by TOPS following its inception in April of 1991. TOPS played a key role in the planning and application process for Trenton's Weed and Seed program, which is a comprehensive community-based anti-drug and anti-violence program.

Juvenile Auto Theft — In 1992 and 1993, as auto theft was becoming a critical problem for city residents and visitors alike, TOPS conducted a research project to analyze confidential data from the Trenton Police Division regarding auto theft. As a result of this project, a new strategy was developed to target youths with multiple arrests and their siblings for prevention education and other efforts.

Youth Violence Research — TOPS prepared a summary of the research on the causes and impacts of youth violence in urban areas, and a review of several programs and initiatives that have been cited as successful interventions in this area.

Planning

TOPS has been active in assisting the City in several planning initiatives. In addition to the efforts described above, examples of the work of TOPS in this area include:

Strategic Planning Process for City Government — TOPS has been active over each of the past four years in assisting the City to develop a strategic planning and priority-setting process.

Open Space Master Plan — TOPS assisted the city to complete its first-ever Open Space Master Plan. The Plan will serve as a blueprint for improvements to Trenton's park and recreation system and will assist the City to manage its extensive and vital open space resources.

City Government Operations

The City government is committed to improving the effectiveness of its op-

erations. The work of TOPS in this area has included the following:

The Trenton Management Review Commission — In early 1993, TOPS helped to create the Trenton Management Review Commission (TMRC). The TMRC was established to undertake a comprehensive management and operational review of the City of Trenton. The purpose of this review is to increase the City government's efficiency and effectiveness in providing services and in its other operations.

Host City Study — TOPS completed a comprehensive review of Trenton's economic and fiscal relationship with the state as its "host city" and state capital.

City-County Relationships — Shortly after completing the *Host City* study on the relationship with the State, TOPS assisted the City to examine its programmatic relationships with Mercer County.

Human Relations Policy — TOPS assisted the mayor to formulate an action plan to improve human relations in Trenton. The plan outlined recommendations regarding the City's strategy in this area and included a proposal that the City Council create a human relations commission.

Conclusion

In its first four years of operation, TOPS has contributed to the policy development dimension of city government. It has allowed the best insights of the broader community and the resources of the academy to be focused on the vital public policy issues facing the City of Trenton. TOPS' work has demonstrated the unique potential of municipal-collegiate partnerships. TOPS has shown that this partnership model can enable institutions of higher education to provide significant contributions to the public interest at the local level.

Colleges and universities with an urban mission have significant potential to assist their municipal governments to address the critical needs of their communities. Through TOPS, a covenant has been built between the college and community based on an understanding that our problems are inextricably intertwined and that solutions will be found and implemented over time. TOPS has demonstrated that colleges can become useful and effective partners in service to their communities. In particular, TOPS has demonstrated that a partnership with public policy decision makers can be established that is mutually beneficial and sustainable. TOPS continues to provide a model of how municipalities and academic institutions can work together to put knowledge to work in service to the public.