Victor Borden

Given the insufficiency of current popular measures of university "quality," this article examines several efforts to assess the contributions of urban and metropolitan universities to the individuals and communities they serve. These efforts may contribute to a better public understanding of these universities, but their primary benefit will more likely be institutional self-reflection than the discovery of specific measures.

Assessing the Educational Effectiveness of Urban Universities

In many ways, urban and metropolitan universities represent a window on the future of higher education. Most of these institutions now enroll a large number of nontraditional students but there has always been a significant population of older and commuter students, juggling work and family obligations with their own aspirations for personal and career growth. With the rapid expansion of distance and distributed education technologies, an increasing array of educational providers are attempting to penetrate a market of time and place-bound learners who seek to combine educational pursuits with work and family commitments. Colleges and universities in large metropolitan areas have long represented a significant and vital component of higher education attending precisely to such a population. They have provided opportunities for learners at all stages of life, whether in a summer "youth scholars" program, matriculating directly from high school, taking courses to gain credentials within a career path, changing career paths, or pursuing personal interests.

Urban and metropolitan universities are distinguished by more than the type of student population they enroll. These institutions work with community colleges and primary and secondary educational systems in the area to form a seamless web of K-doctoral education. They engage with the local business community and social welfare agencies to contribute to the social, economic, and technological developments of the nation's population centers, and many provide health services directly to the citizens of their community. Finally, they often house some of their area's significant cultural resources, such as theaters and museums.

Unfortunately, today's most popular measures of college and university "quality" do not reflect these essential components of the urban university mission. Rather than access, they focus on selectivity and exclusiveness. Rather than lifelong learning, they focus on those who enter directly from high school and enroll full-time and continuously to graduation. Rather than community engagement, they emphasize internal resources. These traditional measures fail to represent what many urban universities seek to achieve. Moreover, a recent report by Adelman (1999) suggests that they do not accurately represent the college experience of a large and growing proportion of students who complete their studies at more than one institution.

In this article, we examine several current efforts to identify, articulate, and assess the contributions of urban and metropolitan universities to the individuals and communities they serve. But before doing so, we should consider the political and social context within which these institutions operate and from which current concepts and measures of institutional and educational effectiveness arise.

Current Conceptions of Institutional Effectiveness

Our consumer-oriented culture places great value on measures of quality, effectiveness, and efficiency. In business, education, and government we have come to expect reliable information to guide our decisions about what to buy, where to direct our attention, and how to spend our tax dollars. As with any product or service, judgments of effectiveness and efficiency require a prior understanding of function and purpose. To measure the institutional and educational effectiveness of urban and metropolitan universities, we must start with the question of whom they serve and toward what ends.

The need for and presence of metropolitan and urban universities is not a recent phenomenon. Their significant growth over the past 30 years attests to the increasing role these institutions play in reshaping higher education to meet the needs of the U.S. populace and economy. Ironically, as pressures for institutional accountability have grown, many urban and metropolitan universities have felt handcuffed by a set of values and standards that do not reflect well upon their increasingly important missions.

Commonly used performance indicators reflect the values of institutions that serve more traditional students, or at least that serve students in more traditional ways. Attention to these measures pushes many urban institutions to feel they must make changes that may at best be futile and are often counterproductive. For example, increases in average SAT or ACT scores of entering students would likely improve several measures that have gained importance in the public arena (e.g., selectivity and retention). However, these same efforts could well undermine crucial urban university mission components, such as providing access to traditionally underserved populations. Perhaps most importantly, such efforts often deflect attention from more central aspects of educational effectiveness, such as the quality of student learning and the role of higher education in personal development, social welfare, and community improvement.

In their article entitled, "Studying College Students in the 21st Century: Meeting New Challenges," Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini (1998) lament recent transformations in college student characteristics. They state explicitly that just as we were starting to recognize what constitutes a quality undergraduate experience—small insti-

tutional size, strong faculty emphasis on teaching and student development, full-time, campus resident students, frequent interaction between faculty and students—fewer students are attending colleges and universities that meet these conditions. In fact, they go so far as to use Charles Dickens' "best of times/worst of times" characterization to describe the situation. The new reality is that while we know more about what conditions contribute to effective undergraduate education, societal and economic forces around us make it more difficult to create and sustain such environments.

The bias represented in Pascarella and Terenzini's work is clear and prevalent throughout the most well-respected literature in higher education. Regardless of their missions, histories, or environments, colleges and universities are being judged according to a value system and a corresponding set of measures that were developed to reflect a limited portion of the higher education landscape during a specific episode of its history. To their credit, the authors recognize that we need to "rethink—perhaps even redefine—what we consider to be the desired outcomes of an undergraduate education" (p. 152). In addition, we must redefine the indicators of effectiveness in undergraduate education and public engagement.

While Pascarella, Terenzini, and other higher education researchers take a thoughtful approach to these issues, the popular media is more inclined to use what is readily available to compare institutions on more common dimensions. For example, the *U.S. News & World Report* annual college rankings are based on a weighted formula that considers student selectivity (entering student test scores, high school ranking, and acceptance rate), faculty resources (faculty salaries, percent with Ph.D.s, student/faculty ratio, percent full-time faculty); graduation and retention rates, total expenditures per student, and alumni giving [see their web site: <http://www.usnews/edu/college/rankings/weight.htm#graduationperformance>]. Clearly, few, if any of these measures reflect the key aspects of the urban university mission mentioned above: access, lifelong learning, and community engagement.

Urban and metropolitan universities have in common more than just proximity to large metropolitan areas. They share an obligation to serve the needs of the city's diverse citizenry (Grobman, 1988). However, they are not a uniform group of institutions. For example, they include institutions with and without residence halls. Some have selective admissions policies and others are open access. Some are characterized by large medical or law schools, others are not. Some have well-defined campuses, while others are distributed throughout their metropolitan regions, in office buildings, learning centers, and shopping malls.

Urban universities are distinguished not only by their close working relationships with their surrounding communities, but also by the types of students they serve: compared to traditional college students, urban students are generally older and more often part-time students who come in and out frequently throughout their college careers. The following list of urban and metropolitan university characteristics was generated at a preconference workshop of the 1998 Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities conference in San Antonio, Texas:

- Students have many more extensive work and family obligations than those at other types of four-year colleges and universities.

- Although dealing with a wide range of student talents, urban institutions are much more likely to serve larger numbers of underprepared students (i.e., be less selective), and to deal with those who have a much wider spectrum of support needs, academically as well as socially.
- Faculty at urban universities are (or should be) more involved in interdisciplinary research applied to the complex social and economic welfare issues of the region.
- Urban and metropolitan universities employ large numbers of part-time faculty who are often members of the community with significant applied experience. They may be less likely to rely on graduate assistants than their counterparts at large residential public universities.
- The urban university works in collaboration with the public and private sectors of the region, forming partnerships with area business, government and community agencies, and regional primary and secondary educational systems.
- Urban institutions are challenged to provide holistic and often sequential programs to students who take varied and often nonlinear paths through one or more colleges and universities.
- The urban university serves to raise the level of educational attainment of its region, especially among traditionally underserved populations.

If traditional indicators do not reflect the mission or clientele of urban universities, how then do we measure the contributions and effectiveness of these institutions? The next section summarizes three interrelated efforts that seek to do so.

Efforts to Articulate and Assess Urban University Effectiveness

The RUSS Project

Since 1996, three urban universities have been collaborating on a project funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts to examine several specific issues regarding the mission and clientele of urban universities. The project, which is entitled "Restructuring for Urban Student Success" (RUSS), focuses on activities designed to meet the needs of the changing student demographics, specifically through the use of learning communities in the freshman year. The three participating institutions—Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), Portland State University, and Temple University—are studying together their individual attempts to align faculty, resources, and services with the needs and interests of mostly first-generation students enrolled in these public, commuter institutions.

The specific work of the RUSS collaborative is: to construct and administer an entering student survey tailored to urban students; to carry out campus-specific data collection and evaluation that answers questions about the relationship between learning communities and student outcomes; to reciprocate as peer review teams for one another; and to disseminate the results of the project.

Following preliminary research, the RUSS group determined that many existing instruments used to measure the characteristics and needs of incoming students may not be suitable in an urban university setting. As a first step, the group began work on developing a new instrument to help describe and define the nature of the urban student population. After an initial administration of a common entering student survey (in Summer 1998), the three institutions decided not only to move toward identifying a core of common questions, but also to allow each institution to include questions that were pertinent to their idiosyncratic structures, programs and processes.

Two of the three participating institutions are now testing these hybrid entering student surveys while the third is focused on tracking changes in student perspectives over the course of their early college experiences. Beyond meeting the requirements of the grant project, the institutions plan to continue their research on urban universities and students, and to link with other activities under way nationally to develop a common database for research on these urban schools and their students. While literature on urban institutions has increased in the past 20 years, only recently has emphasis been placed on describing the characteristics and needs of the urban student related to institutional policies, curricula, or student services. The RUSS group hopes to make a strong contribution to this growing field of inquiry. (Further information about the RUSS project is available through the project web site: <http://www.universitycollege.iupui.edu/russ/>).

The Urban University Portfolio Project

The "Urban Universities Portfolio Project: Assuring Quality for Multiple Publics" (UUPP) is a national initiative aimed at developing a new medium, the institutional portfolio, for communicating about the work and effectiveness of urban public higher education. The UUPP brought together six leading urban public comprehensive universities to create institutional portfolios that would describe and document how well the institutions were fulfilling their missions and do it in a way that spoke to a range of internal and external audiences. The portfolios have a particular focus on student learning and on accomplishments and characteristics unique to urban institutions, such as use of the rich learning opportunities afforded by the urban environment and efforts to adapt academic offerings to the diverse needs of urban students.

Funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and cosponsored by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), the three-year project has two main emphases. First is to enhance understanding among both internal and external stakeholders of the distinguishing features and missions of urban public comprehensive universities. Second is to enhance the capacity of these universities to communicate through the institutional portfolio about their effectiveness in achieving their missions.

The six universities participating in this project are collaborating to produce a template for institutional portfolios that allows universities to reflect on and improve their own practices, and that helps their many external audiences understand their work, accomplishments, and effectiveness. They are also developing their own portfolios, in both paper and electronic formats.

The lead university and fiscal agent for the project is Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis. The other participating institutions include the University of Illinois at Chicago, Portland State University, California State University–Sacramento, the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and Georgia State University. A National Advisory Board of distinguished members representing government, business, foundations, and higher education advises the project about its aims, practices, and progress. An Institutional Review Board, comprised of higher education leaders and members of accrediting organizations, works with the participating institutions on portfolio development and contributes ideas and expertise to the project as a whole.

Throughout the first year of the UUPP (1998-99), the participating institutions discovered as much about their differences as about their similarities. The sources of these differences include institutional characteristics (e.g., size and program mix) as well as political environments (e.g., relationships with other public institutions in their own states). Moreover, the UUPP has learning outcomes as its focus, for which there are no widely accepted measures. As the project enters its second year, participating institutions seek first to define evidence and measures by their own campus standards, while simultaneously exploring aspects of similarity across the institutions.

Further information about the UUPP is available from the project web site: <http://www.imir.iupui.edu/portfolio>.

The Urban University Statistical Portrait

Among the three projects considered in this section, the Urban University Statistical Portrait Project is most directly related to the issue of deriving measures of urban university effectiveness, and to define measures of such effectiveness first requires a more comprehensive conception of the mission and clientele of these institutions.

In the winter and spring of 1998, a series of workshops and meetings were held in a variety of settings and among a broad cross-section of urban and metropolitan universities, each with a central purpose the further development of a statistical portrait. The urban and metropolitan universities that sought to develop this portrait recognized that there were great differences among them. In some ways, the effort at hand was to find ways to measure and articulate these differences. Each participating institution hoped to enhance its ability to describe itself to its external publics. More importantly, participating institutions sought to exchange information that would support program evaluation, institutional benchmarking, and internal planning and improvement efforts.

One of the first meetings related to the project was a preconference workshop at the 1998 Coalition for Urban and Metropolitan University Conference in San Antonio, Texas. Through a series of discussions, breakout sessions, and working groups, participants at this meeting articulated a set of objectives and then a set of questions that would lead to measurement development. To access a complete list of objectives articulated at this meeting, go to <http://www.imir.iupui.edu/urban/April3Rep.htm>.

At San Antonio and in following meetings, participants raised concerns about the impact that creating a formal, measurable description of the metropolitan mission might have on some institutions. For example, some institutions experience conflicting emotions about adopting a metropolitan or urban mission if it is perceived as *not* choosing

some other mission or identity, such as that of a Research I university. Others feel that they are unique and cannot imagine that there are core elements common to most urban and metropolitan institutions. There was also some concern that creating a statistical portrait of our institutions may lead to judgments about institutions and negative comparisons about quality, e.g., are there excellent and average metropolitan universities?

The Urban University Statistical Portrait Project next progressed through a series of meetings among the institutional researcher officers affiliated with universities of the Urban 13 coalition. In April 1998, the group met and developed a series of potential measures.

Another advance made at that meeting was the formulation of an initial work plan for development. This plan was revisited and revised at the next group meeting, which took place in October 1998, again in conjunction with the Urban 13 Academic Officers' meeting. The revised plan delineated the effort according to six action areas.

1. Key indicators: Develop and exchange a core set of measures to reflect the contributions of urban universities to their communities.
2. Exchange data: Form data exchange consortia among subgroups of urban and metropolitan universities to serve the immediate information needs of participating institutions. Analyze requests to yield potential key indicators.
3. Web data: Assemble data collected by governmental and other agencies (e.g., IPEDS, Common Data Set, Faculty Salaries by Discipline and Rank, Delaware Instructional Productivity Survey) into a commonly accessible web-based database.
4. Common surveys: Develop common surveys or survey items to collect data for key indicators in standard form and format.
5. Indicator research: Commission research efforts to develop measures for areas of interest that are currently not well defined.
6. Dissemination: Support efforts to "tell the story" of urban universities to local, regional, and national publics, using the identified key indicators and other mechanisms.

While Waiting for Better Measures...

The efforts just described have in common a quest for a better shared understanding of the role and effectiveness of urban universities as vital contributors to the higher education landscape. As an active participant in all three of these projects and co-editor of an earlier volume on performance indicators (Borden and Banta, 1994), I would like to offer some reflections on the promises and perils inherent in the search for better measures of educational and institutional effectiveness for urban universities or any other type of institution.

Comparative institutional data on relevant measures can enrich our understanding of an institution's educational and institutional effectiveness, but are mostly misleading when used to judge effectiveness or efficiency across institutions.

The experiences among the small subset of urban universities involved in the projects described previously reveals far more variability than commonality. There is no short list of quantitative measures that captures the essence of such complex multidimensional enterprises as an urban university, or most other colleges and universities for that matter. The discovery of these within-group differences makes the search for better measures more challenging. More importantly, it deflects attention away from how one institution may measure up against others, and toward how one institution measures up against its stated goals and objectives.

The search for more relevant measures is useful, but should not get in the way of searching for better ways of assessing institutional effectiveness.

A lack of relevant data and measures can become a crutch for inaction. Just as there are multiple methods of inquiry across academic disciplines, there are many valid and useful forms of inquiry and assessment that utilize forms of evidence aside from quantitative measurement.

Much of the benefit of attempting to better articulate and/or measure institutional effectiveness derives from the process and not from the products.

Broad local participation in well-defined efforts, such as the projects described earlier, helps campus constituents and national groups develop a common language and, ultimately, develop better consensus on purposes and objectives. Identifying common elements of purpose and objectives is a prerequisite to developing relevant and useful measures and other forms of evidence, just as sound theory is prerequisite to useful empirical research. Recent efforts in assessing institutional effectiveness in Europe and Asia have gone so far as to move away from the development of common measures and toward examining the processes in place that assure quality (Dills, 1999).

Urban universities may learn more from each other by focusing on process effectiveness, rather than on shared problems or student profiles.

The RUSS project had a particular focus on the types of structures and processes used by the three participating institutions to serve a similar type of first-year student population. All three had some manifestation of learning communities, supplemental instruction, K-16 partnerships, and regional educational consortia. At the same time, each one approached the development of these processes within a unique political and cultural environment. Although project participants generally recognize that what works at one of these institutions may not be successful at any of the others, each institutional team is learning valuable lessons about ways to improve their own programs by studying the programs of the other universities.

This strategy is the essence of the approach used by the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC), an international leader in benchmarking best practice in the education and business sectors (see APQC web site: <http://www.apqc.org>). Rather than looking at measures out of context, their approach derives value from the richness of experience gained through an in-depth examination of the processes that work well at "model" institutions and the conditions that support them.

Conclusions and Implications

Urban universities, like all institutions of higher education, face significant challenges in trying to explain to the consuming public what they do, for whom, and how well they do it. The lack of relevance among the most commonly used indicators of institutional effectiveness is not an urban university problem, *per se*. However, pressures to succumb to traditional measures and concepts derail us from our true urban missions and often misguide program evaluation and improvement.

Several notable efforts are under way to develop measures that are more appropriate to urban universities. These efforts may contribute to a better public understanding of the mission and role of urban universities, but their primary benefit will more likely be related to the institutional self-reflection involved in the process than to the discovery of specific measures.

There will probably always be college ranking and classification systems. State and federal mandates for common and simple measures are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Although compliance with these requests cannot be ignored, they are not likely to affect—in any constructive way—the ability of a college or university to improve its educational or institutional effectiveness. Therefore, time and energy devoted to fulfilling these external requests should be minimized. Instead, all colleges and universities would be better served by devoting as much effort as possible to broadly participative self-study, assessment, and program evaluation in the context of institutional mission and goals.

Toward this end, it is very useful to seek out institutions that operate within similar contexts and cultures to compare structures, practices, and processes. Collecting information in common forms and formats helps support this effort and results in more relevant and comparable measures. In sum, developing better and more useful measures among urban universities will most likely occur as a byproduct of engaging in collaborative assessments of the institutional processes and structures that support common elements of the urban university mission.

Suggested Readings

Adelman, C., *Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Borden, V. M. H., and T. W. Banta, "Using Performance Indicators to Guide Strategic Decision-Making," *New Directions for Institutional Research 82* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

Dills, D. D., *Implementing Academic Audits: Lessons Learned in Europe and Asia* (Unpublished manuscript) (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999).

Grobman, A. B., *Urban State Universities: An Unfinished National Agenda* (New York: Praeger, 1988).

Pascarella, E. T., and P. T. Terenzini, "Studying College Students in the 21st Century: Meeting New Challenges," *The Review of Higher Education 21* (1998): 151-165.