Private and Public Institutional Views of Civic Engagement and the Urban Mission

By Barbara A. Holland

Abstract

Traditionally, consideration of the urban or metropolitan university mission has focused almost completely on the experiences and characteristics of public universities. The multi-year Implementing Urban Missions *program, directed by the Council of Independent Colleges, explored how urban private colleges and universities articulate their sense of an urban mission with a focus on the core element of civic engagement. The program evaluation revealed that private institutions have greater and more natural campus consensus than most publics on their civic responsibilities, but capacity and resources are often a constraint on partnership and program opportunities.*

Through the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, the "Urban 13" and other affiliate groups, many public higher education leaders have worked for decades to distinguish the "urban or metropolitan mission" as a distinctive type of institution. These institutions sought to be understood as places that were interpreting the classic traits of a research, doctoral, or comprehensive university within the context of the intense shaping influence of the many challenges and opportunities of their highly-urbanized regions.

Now, as we enter the twenty-first century, there is some evidence that the general conception of an urban or metropolitan mission is gaining recognition across the higher education industry and among some policymakers. The motivation for public institutions to articulate this unique identity was largely inspired by a desire to be treated fairly by various public policy systems; thus, little historic consideration has been given to the possibility that there may also be private universities and colleges who have been similarly shaped by their response to urbanized environments. If the argument for distinctiveness of the urban or metropolitan mission is that the powerful influence of conditions and pressures of the metropolitan context creates a particular set of demands on and expectations for an educational organization, then it seems likely that some private institutions may also have been affected by these external forces. For example, DePaul University and the University of Pennsylvania are well-known private research institutions that also have an identity as urban universities deeply involved in community partnerships; they are also visible leaders in the civic engagement movement. The question becomes whether these institutions respond in the same way as publics to these pressures and demands.

The question of a private college interpretation of the urban mission has not been considered in previous explorations of urban or metropolitan institutions. Yet, if the urban or metropolitan type is to be defined by standard characteristics and descriptors that can be used to assess the mission of any institution, we may discover that educational enterprises other than large public universities may also fit those criteria. In fact, one might argue that objectively demonstrating the applicability of urban and metropolitan mission traits to a more diverse set of institutions may help further validate the claim of distinctiveness, especially of the interactive relationship between city and campus that is the most commonly named feature of urban missions.

This article reports on a three-year study of eight private colleges that embrace an urban mission. The eight were selected through a competitive application process to receive funding from a W. K. Kellogg grant to the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC). Successful applicants demonstrated how the proposed project would deepen and expand the institution's urban mission. For the purposes of this project, called the *Implementing Urban Missions* (IUM) program, the primary conception of the urban mission was one that focused on the intellectual interaction of campus and community. The selected institutions were funded to expand their civic engagement activities, and thus enhance their urban mission through new partnership endeavors that would link faculty and students with community leaders and residents by involving them in mutually beneficial activities. The partnerships were intended to both address an urgent community need while also enhancing the academic tasks of teaching and learning within the context of an urban mission.

Extensive evaluation of these eight cases provides new understandings of the private college interpretation of the urban mission, with a focus on civic engagement or campus-community partnerships as an indicator of that mission. As stated above, if the case is to be made that the pressures of an urban context inspire distinctive forms of research, doctoral and comprehensive public institutions, then it is also useful to consider how the urban context affects the classic mission of the private liberal arts and sciences college in an urban setting.

Basic Urban Mission Characteristics

The distinction of being an urban or metropolitan institution has always depended on an integrated web of traits such as: the kinds of students served (mostly from the region), the learning environments offered (flexible and convenient), the roles and expectations of faculty (multiple priorities and heavy courseloads), the role of campus leaders in the metropolitan area (participation in regional development), and a complex web of multiple campus-community relationships that seem inevitably to connect academic programs to regional characteristics and issues. It is the last factor—the ways an institution's academic agenda reflects its relationship with the metropolitan region—that is most often cited as the core trait or defining element of the truly urban or metropolitan mission.

The eight private colleges and universities in this program, all members of CIC and located in major urban regions, are small to mid-sized institutions with enrollments ranging from just under 2,000 to almost 9,000. In the discussion below, it becomes clear that the private colleges in the IUM program also have many of the traits strongly associated with an urban mission. In fact, from their inception these institutions have seen themselves as strongly connected to and shaped by their urban contexts. Their commitment to an urban mission has a long history and continues to evolve as community conditions and academic programs change. The project revealed that the two traits private urban colleges hold most strongly in common with public urban institutions are: a history of educating a diverse and often under-served group of students, and a tradition of and lasting commitment to involvement in the neighborhoods and communities that surround their campuses. However, these private institutions also have very different histories, cultures, traditions, capacities, and resources than public urban or metropolitan institutions. By looking at the urban mission through the lens of the private college or university, we see that the broad concepts of the urban mission are uniquely interpreted by each institution according to the specific assets and characteristics of the campus and the region. As Victor Borden has said of public urban and metropolitan universities: "We have much in common, but we also have significant differences. Because we are community-connected and responsive institutions, we each develop unique features that reflect the nature of our communities. We all have multiple missions, multiple demands, multiple constituencies" (Borden 1998).

This article will share some observations about the private colleges and universities in the IUM program regarding interpretation of the urban mission, with the primary focus being on the relationship of the campus to the city. The findings are organized along the core features that shape any institution's mission: student characteristics, institutional size and capacity, history and motivation, faculty roles and attitudes, governance and leadership, and resources.

Student Characteristics

Students at urban institutions tend to be from and to remain in the immediate service region. There are exceptions to this in both public and private arenas, but for most who think of themselves as urban mission institutions, there is a strong presence of students from the immediate region and a strong local alumni concentration. Among the IUM program institutions, a few drew students from across the nation, but most attracted a student body that was predominately from the greater metropolitan region or the state. The more regional the student body, the more clearly the institution was concerned about the relationship between community relations and a future enrollment base. For some private colleges and universities, future enrollment stability may depend greatly on the institution's local reputation and attractiveness, which can inspire the institution to be attentive to local needs and expectations. This can be a strong motivator for the campus to support civic engagement endeavors that enhance neighborhood relationships and create interest in their college among potential students.

Students tend to choose private colleges or universities intentionally because of the campus' educational values, prestige, or unique learning environments. Many of these students enter college with a predilection toward volunteerism and service, even if they are working while in college, and they assume, correctly, that private institutions have traditionally valued student service activities. Students at public urban institutions more typically focus on their perceptions of low admission standards, convenience, price, or even a belief that "public schools are easier" when choosing where to enroll. In fact, some of the IUM program institutions are access-oriented institutions and serve large numbers of first-generation, part-time students who are not fully prepared for college academic work. Students of both public and private institutions in large urban areas tend to lead complex lives characterized by competing demands such as jobs, families, and commuting; school is not always the highest priority and the students' focus on education is of a highly practical nature. They expect their learning experiences to be flexible, convenient, efficient, and relevant to their busy lives. These pressures contribute to an institution's perception of its urban mission.

In addition, students at urban mission institutions tend to bring local perspectives into the classroom, both from their work and life experiences. At public and private institutions, faculty gain a sense of the urban influence on the campus mission through the ways that students introduce real questions and issues into the classroom from other aspects of their work and home experiences. The characteristics, background, expectations, and lifestyles of urban students clearly have a dramatic impact on an institution's sense of its mission.

Size of the Institution

Smaller, private institutions seem to have greater internal consensus on their institutional mission, as well as a rather realistic perception of institutional capacity and strengths. Large, public urban universities more often express multiple interpretations of mission and confusion about a complex array of constituencies—"if we are an urban university does that mean we are not going to be a great research university?" Public institutions are more likely to exhibit divergent perceptions of the fiscal status of the institution, as well as a sense of a lack of control over resource allocations from public coffers.

Creating a sense of shared purpose, common mission, and campus community spirit may be easier at a public or private campus small enough to convene the entire body of faculty in a common discussion or compact enough to promote frequent interaction among colleagues. Private colleges tend to have smaller and flatter administrative organizations where many individuals hold multiple roles. Campus events, governance structures, and even facility configurations tend to engage a larger percentage of the campus community in daily interactions among faculty, administration, and students. This more compact organizational culture seems to foster relatively open communications and broad access to institutional information, more so than the vast organization of a large institution, public or private, that tends to operate more at a college or departmental level, thus leading campus members to hold highly diverse views of the overall campus mission based on unit beliefs and goals.

Small private institutions seem to have a greater awareness than their larger public counterparts of the need to work with their campus neighbors to ensure institutional success. For small institutions with limited resources, external campus neighborhoods, organizations, and facilities are critically important donors or partners that can, for example, augment limited campus capacity to present cultural events and diverse learning opportunities. Unlike larger public or private institutions that may have the political clout and financial resources to acquire and even gentrify surrounding neighborhoods to engineer an ideal campus context, small private colleges in urban neighborhoods recognize the need to collaborate with the neighborhoods around them as an extension of the campus that affects student enrollment and campus life. Limited resources and power mean the smaller college is strongly motivated to work in partnership with the external community to develop a neighborhood context and relationship to ensure a livable community and capacity that can sustain academic program quality as well as enrollment levels.

Campus History and the Urban Mission

Civic engagement as a core element of an urban mission starts from a different place in the private college context than in a public setting. The intentions of founders and the historic role of service in the mission are more explicitly known and celebrated at private colleges when compared to the often more generic missions of public institutions which primarily emphasize comprehensiveness and growth. Private colleges, as teaching institutions, tend to articulate a specific set of learning objectives they hold for their graduates, and to create intentional learning experiences for students that promote certain values and skills. This plays a role in the choices made by students to attend a particular private college because of its overall intellectual and social ambiance and explicit philosophy and values. While public institutions with urban or metropolitan missions often have historical roots as institutions meant to increase access to postsecondary programs in the region, most have chosen to focus on developing greater research and graduate program capacity more than creating intentional learning environments for undergraduates. The discussion of the public institution's mission in developing the economic, cultural, social, and human capital of the urban region is a more recent one, and sometimes comes in conflict with faculty aspirations to become a larger research university with a national or international reputation for scholarly excellence. Simply said, the notion that an urban mission institution should be attentive to and engaged in the preparation of future citizens and in the direct amelioration of critical urban problems seems to be more naturally accepted at private colleges that continue to be guided by their historic roots.

As a result, the exploration of civic engagement by the faculty and students of private institutions points to some different concerns and priorities than those raised in public campus settings. In particular, there is little question among private college faculty about the appropriateness of service activities because they fit naturally with the historic purposes and philosophy of the institution. Most of these colleges have long-standing traditions of extensive faculty and student involvement in both voluntary and required co-curricular service activities that are seen as reflections of their commitment

to the development of the students' personal, spiritual, and social attributes. Unlike public urban universities, where curricular-based activities have been the most effective starting point for expanding faculty commitment to civic engagement endeavors, the integration of engagement into curricular contexts seemed less critical at private colleges where engagement is expressed broadly across the institution in many different forms. The private college's struggle is less about how intellectually relevant civic engagement is to their mission than about how to fund and support new, more extensive forms of campus-community partnerships. The private institutions in the IUM program had ambitions to increase service learning in the curriculum, for example, but found expense and capacity to be an enduring obstacle; or in other cases, faculty felt that current co-curricular approaches were sufficient.

In some ways, this strong connection to historic values and purposes can have a negative or limiting effect. The church-related colleges, especially, may tend to think of their community service activities as charitable works—projects that extend a helping hand to the needy of the community. Like many land-grant universities, church-related colleges and universities may struggle with a history of one-way interactions with the community where the campus holds all expertise and power over the relationship and decides what is good for the community. The more current definition of civic engagement is one of engagement as an intellectual activity that requires strong partnerships—reciprocity between campus and community—and attention to mutual benefit and shared expertise. Few, if any, contemporary communities tolerate being treated as supplicants or see themselves as the willing recipients of charity. In addition, the full benefits of civic engagement, including positive community relations and enhanced campus neighborhoods, cannot be achieved without lasting collaboration between town and gown. Like their public counterparts, private colleges must seek to develop cooperative partnerships with their communities in ways that allow for sustained exchange of knowledge and learning experiences that enhance both institutional capacity for student learning and civic capacity to improve quality of life.

Faculty Roles and Attitudes

Ironically, despite their ability to articulate a strong link between new conceptions of civic engagement and the mission and values of their college, private college faculty raise some of the same reservations about the availability of resources and rewards for civic engagement as their public counterparts. The tradition of addressing the civic and social education of students through co-curricular activities seems adequate to some private college faculty, and they may have questions about the effort, time and cost involved in expanding civic engagement activities into new arenas such as course-based service learning. While their campus missions clearly place the highest value on good teaching, they must also maintain a research agenda sufficient to maintain currency in their field and intellectual credibility among their colleagues. The fiscal reservoirs of small private colleges are small and budget flexibility is limited, so many faculty take on various administrative roles and extra duties to help get necessary tasks done for the college. Like public institution faculty, they work long hours and must address competing expectations about how they use their time.

Thus, private college faculty were observed expressing reservations similar to their public colleagues: How will we have time for this new work? Will we be rewarded for these efforts? Will this work drain resources from other priorities? Because private institution faculty generally feel a more natural affinity for the intellectual purposes of civic engagement, these questions are less about the relevance of civic engagement to the mission than about a concern that these will be new responsibilities that will add to an already overwhelming workload. For these reasons, private college faculty often look for new financial and staff resources as signs of support and reward for their civic projects. This is similar to the perspective of those public faculty who readily accept the importance of engagement to the urban mission; they also look for resource investments as a sign of institutional commitment to these activities. A major distinction between public and private environments is that among the faculty of public urban and metropolitan universities, there are still many who question the fundamental intellectual quality and validity of civic engagement endeavors, especially in the relevance of community-based scholarship to promotion and tenure expectations.

Both public and private college faculty explain their support for civic engagement as the essence of the urban mission by citing a similar array of motivational factors: personal/spiritual commitment to service, relevance of community service to the discipline, and evidence of the positive impact on students and/or community. However, the greater centrality of teaching and clearer articulation of a particular set of learning objectives for students means that it is easier for private college faculty to understand the relevance of community-based activities to students' intellectual and social development. Private college environments also articulate clear expectations about faculty-student interactions which are intended to be a hallmark of private educational environments. Faculty in private colleges are expected to be mentors and models for students in that their teaching and actions should exemplify the goals of the curriculum, including elements of service, empathy and respect for others, and social responsibility. While most public urban institutions hope their faculty will mentor students and focus on specific learning outcomes, that role is often less structured and explicit, and is often assigned to professional staff in student affairs. In addition, the idea that faculty should be models for students can be highly controversial in a public university environment which more strongly promotes a relationship of neutrality if not formal detachment between the campus, personal values, and civic issues. A question for further study is whether faculty with strong personal values related to public service are more likely to choose a career in private colleges.

Governance and Leadership

Presidential leadership in support of partnerships between campus and community can be quite different in public and private campus contexts. Both environments call for strong presidential leadership to affirm the centrality of civic engagement to the mission of the institution. However, in a smaller, private college, the effective president is more likely to be seen as the embodiment of the campus' mission and values, and thus must be a proactive participant and role model for faculty and students. Several of the case study CIC presidents held important and visible civic roles that helped build

valuable learning and resource partnerships for the campus. Most exerted direct interest in, if not supervision of, aspects of the urban mission project funded by the CIC grant; they did so because of their understanding of the critical importance of the link between the campus and the community. Presidents also sought to inform college trustees about urban mission projects and to illustrate the value of engagement activities to enrollment, retention, image, and fund raising objectives.

In public urban universities, the president is also a critical voice that must consistently articulate, to internal and external constituents alike, the vision of the urban mission and the centrality of civic engagement as a distinctive academic element of the urban mission. While many public urban presidents may personally engage in civic activities, this is seen as part of their duty as public officials and is not likely to inspire faculty interest in civic engagement as scholarly work. The governing boards of public urban institutions may understand the role of civic engagement as an element of the urban mission; however, the primary role and time-consuming task of the public board is to represent the public interest by ensuring the efficiency and fiscal accountability of the institution. Public urban university leaders often share examples of their public service, outreach, or engagement activities with their boards as an illustration of the uniqueness of the urban mission. These activities may be seen by some board members as examples of appropriate academic service to the public; others may express concern about the costs and risks of becoming involved in external matters over which the institution has no control or direct responsibility.

Among both public and private boards and presidents, enthusiasm (or the lack thereof) for civic engagement activities is often strongly affected by their assessment of the potentially positive or negative impacts of such projects on image and resources. Generally, private colleges seem more tolerant of the risks inherent in community relationships, especially if the project has strong potential to enhance enrollment, program capacity, or resources. There seem to be several possible explanations for the different perspectives on risks and liabilities. Private college governance oversight responsibilities do not include an explicitly political dimension related to the receipt of public financial support and associated pressures for continuous public accountability. The more compact nature of the small college organization also suggests the possibility of greater intentionality and focus in creating partnerships and, therefore, the potential for more control over quality and probable outcomes of a specific activity. In addition, small private institutions seem more realistic than publics about their specific academic strengths and weaknesses, and therefore are better able to make informed, and perhaps less risky, choices about which projects to implement. For the same reason, private colleges are highly unlikely to entertain any external partnerships without assurances of enduring revenue sources. While reducing risk, this practice can also limit flexibility and timeliness in responding to unexpected opportunities to engage in academically relevant and interesting work with community partners.

Public institutions may have some greater resource flexibility than privates to respond more quickly to new partnership ideas and engagement opportunities. At the same

time, this responsive capacity, if not appropriately coordinated, can result in scattered, disconnected, ineffective, competing, or redundant engagement activities across the larger institutional landscape. More advanced urban institutions are creating infrastructure to help coordinate and monitor partnerships and engagement endeavors so as to ensure quality and reciprocity.

Both public and private urban institutions must also be alert to the rise of unrealistic expectations of the community regarding the capacity of the campus to respond to public needs and issues. There is a general myth that all postsecondary institutions are well-funded and have vast untapped financial capacity to address urgent public needs. Many community partners approach urban mission institutions, public or private, assuming the college or university will have funds to make direct investment in community projects. This public pressure tends to be greater for public urban universities because as recipients of public funds, they may be seen somewhat like a public library—expected to provide services on demand and on a *pro bono* basis.

In response to these challenges, both public and private institutions with strong engagement agendas have found that the creation of a supportive and coordinating infrastructure unit is a highly effective strategy for managing internal and external concerns and expectations, as well as for promoting quality control and sustainability in campus-community interactions. However, such strategies represent a significant and sustained investment of institutional funds.

Resources and Creativity

Throughout this analysis, we see again and again that the commitment of private colleges to contemporary conceptions of civic engagement and campus-community partnerships is limited far more by resource questions than by intellectual interest. Public urban institutions tend to struggle with questions of intellectual relevance as the much greater obstacle, although resources are also often a concern. Civic engagement among private colleges is more likely to be on a project-to-project basis as specific fund sources become available. Tight and often inflexible institutional budgets make it nearly impossible to identify gap funding to sustain projects between gifts or grants. This limiting force is also reflected, unfortunately, in the reality that many private colleges do not have the human or fiscal resources to compete for large federal grants that require massive institutional commitments of personnel and/or significant matching funds.

Among the CIC cases, the most promising program activities have inspired their institutional leaders to seek specific endowment gifts or new local funding relationships to sustain the work. In some cases, aspects of the CIC projects will continue through connections to curricular and co-curricular activities that do not require new funds. Most of the IUM program institutions used some of their grant funds to create some campus infrastructure—a person and/or a center—that would help coordinate campus-community interactions, provide some faculty development and assistance, conduct evaluations, and seek additional financial resources. While there are some exceptional examples among public institution presidents, private college leaders seem more bold

and creative in seeking partnerships with other types of organizations—schools, faith-based organizations, and businesses, that may lead to new streams of direct or indirect support for their programs.

Conclusion

In the CIC *Implementing Urban Missions* program, the goal was to help a set of private institutions strengthen their urban mission through the enhancement of the civic engagement agenda of the institution. While the urban mission has many features and traits, this project chose to focus on that which many public and private urban institutions see as most defining—their strongly interactive relationship with the metropolitan region they serve. Today, many colleges and universities that would not describe themselves as having an urban or metropolitan mission are also exploring their civic mission or their agenda for linking academic work to public purposes; an area of academic work currently called civic engagement. However, for urban or metropolitan institutions, public and private, that engagement agenda and civic relationship is a core characteristic that deeply shapes the entire academic culture of the institution. For urban mission institutions, these factors play out in a large metropolitan context that presents both serious challenges and major opportunities related to economic, social, cultural, and human conditions. Unlike campuses not located in large metropolitan areas, public and private urban institutions cannot selectively attend to community problems, needs, visions, and strategies. It is not always an overstatement to say that the very survival of an urban postsecondary institution, in terms of sustained enrollment, campus safety, alumni and donor support, reputation, and image, may depend on the campus' effective contribution to and involvement in metropolitan development and planning activities. From the IUM project, we can see that private urban institutions have a more natural affinity for the civic elements of the urban agenda and an easier appreciation for the intellectual value of community-based learning and scholarship. Aside from that rather strong difference, public and private institutions that identify with the urban or metropolitan mission share in common the vast challenges of organizing, sustaining, funding, and evaluating the complex partnerships between campus and community that are fundamental to their mission.

This challenging context for public and private urban-serving institutions also offers an opportunity to create powerful experiences that enhance the academic tasks of teaching, learning, discovery, and application of knowledge. Increasingly, we understand that the ivory tower or campus with walls that separate the institution from social and civic realities is not only likely to be a bad neighbor, but also a place not known for active learning and engaged scholarship that involves students or faculty in the application of knowledge to societal needs. For many traditional, residential institutions, engagement in community-based learning and scholarship is an interesting new concept for knowledge exploration that may selectively enhance the experience of faculty and students. For colleges and universities, public and private, that are daily engaged in the challenges, problems, and opportunities presented by the immediate context of their large metropolitan regions, the notion of active intellectual engagement in educating future

citizens and enhancing quality of life across the metropolitan area is not an academic option, it is the essence of their academic culture and institutional success.

References

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