

# **The Road Half Traveled**

## **University Engagement at a Crossroads**

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## Preface

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Over the past ten years a great deal of momentum has begun to build as anchor institutions — particularly, universities — have become increasingly engaged in local community and economic development. It is now widely recognized that place-based (and largely public or non-profit) anchors are important economic engines in many cities and regions, both through their role as significant employers but also, increasingly, through a broad range of related institutional economic activities.

Increasingly, university presidents, administrators, faculty, and students alike have come to understand that by using its economic as well as its intellectual influence, higher education can form effective local partnerships to improve the social and economic conditions of the metropolitan areas in which they are located.

This idea of the university being engaged in enhancing both the social and economic welfare of the community is not new. Indeed, the U.S. tradition of the land-grant college, dating back to 1862, was predicated on a similar commitment. But it was the image of the isolated “ivory tower” that often defined universities for much of the post-World War II period. Although the process is still only partial and backsliding cannot be discounted as a possibility, that norm is now breaking down.

While still a minority within higher education, a growing number of universities have actively and increasingly effectively embraced their role as local economic anchors. Their efforts have involved very substantial investments — sometimes in the hundreds of millions of dollars, as well as the dedication of countless hours of faculty, staff, and student time — to help improve low-income and disinvested neighborhoods in their regions.

In some cases, urban crime helped spur these initiatives. But there have also been many other factors behind the shift: an intellectual movement that identifies “engaged scholarship” as essential to the university’s educational and research missions; increasing pressure to fill social service and infrastructure gaps that stem in part from the declining revenue base of state and local governments; and a growing realization among many university officials that the health and viability of their institutions is inextricably bound up with the stability of the neighborhoods adjacent to their campuses.

A central objective of this report on ten leading university efforts is to assess the growing anchor institution movement and analyze some of the implications of various emerging directions. While there have been many reports and stories on universities and anchor institutions, we have aimed to move beyond promotion, public relations, and anecdotes to ask how these initiatives affect (positively and negatively) low-income communities and residents locked in generational poverty, and how such strategies can be more sharply focused for greatest impact. Through a cross-section of ten urban universities and colleges that have been leaders in one respect or another within the

general movement, the report aims to describe what it means (and what it can mean) for a university to consciously embrace an anchor institution mission.

There is no question that over the past 10 to 15 years, there have been a number of important advances in university-community engagement. Notwithstanding this progress, a central question remains: will anchor institution strategies, as presently constituted, make a substantial difference toward the economic well-being of low-income families and to the stabilization and revitalization of the neighborhoods in which they live?

By and large, even the best of the current anchor strategies do not specifically target and measure the impact of their economic and community development activities on low-income neighborhoods. In many cases, the reason for this failure is obvious: anchors making these investments are motivated by goals such as improving public safety and transportation in the surrounding area, or creating a more student-friendly retail environment next to campus. Benefiting low-income residents, particularly economically, often is at best a secondary motive.

Often useful efforts may produce quite worthwhile general benefits to the community-at-large — and certainly contribute to the improvement of the built environment surrounding campuses — but the *direct* impact on low-income children and families is often less dramatic than some boosters suggest. Indeed, in some cases, such as when families are compelled to move due to increased rents or property tax assessments resulting from certain types of university-fueled economic development, the impact on low-income residents can be highly detrimental.

What is ultimately required, we believe, is a much deeper level of institutional engagement than is common in many efforts if there is to be significant change. This requires that anchors commit themselves to consciously and strategically applying their place-based economic power, in combination with their human and intellectual resources, to better the long-term welfare of the places in which they reside in general, and the welfare of low-income residents in particular.

For such strategies to be successful, they must be rooted in a comprehensive vision of community building. In the case of many low-income, disadvantaged neighborhoods, this will require concentrated investments on the part of local universities that are aimed quite specifically and strategically at stabilizing and subsequently revitalizing the community and its economy.

As the ten institutions profiled in this report demonstrate, a great deal has been learned and accomplished in recent years, and, building on this, a new opportunity now exists for urban universities to fully achieve a powerful new fulfillment of their anchor institution role. It is our hope that "The Road Half Traveled: University Engagement at a Crossroads" will serve as an important road map for institutions that seek to advance their work to a new level of critical impact.