

Worcester UniverCity Partnership:
A Paper presented by Armand Carriere, Executive Director, Worcester UniverCity
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In the Beginning

The concept of colleges or universities partnering or engaging with local community organizations to address social or economic ills is hardly a new phenomenon. We have witnessed examples of neighborhood and community revitalization from coast to coast, involving all classifications of institutions of higher education, including community colleges, minority-based institutions, liberal arts colleges, technical and professional schools, and major land-grant and other state institutions. Our host for this 2-day examination of The Power of Place: Regional Higher Education Networks for Community Transformation, the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development, collectively or through the actions of member institutions, have developed initiatives over the years that serve as models to institutions world-wide.

While community engagement may not be a recent phenomenon, the concept has taken on new credibility and heightened visibility in the past 20 years. A confluence of factors such as greater enlightened self interest on the part of the college or university (and a corresponding acceptance both on the campus and in the community that enlightened self-interest is OK), an expanded sense of social consciousness on the part of faculty and students, the dramatic growth of organizations like Campus Compact and their ability to influence linking service with curriculum, and until recently, the timely and much needed infusion of funding from sources like the federal government and the philanthropic community. In a paper prepared for the 20th Anniversary of Campus Compact, James Rooney cited an increase of 75% in Massachusetts alone in the past 10 years of campus-based public service programs, a vivid example of the growth of this movement.¹

A unique variation on the theme of campus-community engagement was established in Worcester, Massachusetts when the Worcester UniverCity Partnership was founded. A formal collaboration among the Colleges of Worcester Consortium, the City of Worcester (including the non-profit community), and the business community was formed in 2005 with an overarching goal of community and economic development.

Worcester is the second largest city in Massachusetts, with a population of approximately 175,000 people. Like many other northeastern cities Worcester was settled by western European immigrants who came to the area to work in the steel and textile factories. Beyond manufacturing, Worcester became a center for banking, finance, and insurance.

¹ Rooney, James Davitt (2006). Town-Gown: A New Meaning for a New Economy. Paper prepared for Campus Compact 20th Anniversary. Chicago, IL

And along the way the city became home to nine colleges and universities. Through the 1960's, Worcester was a prosperous community, with a broad commercial and industrial tax base to support a full array of municipal services.

Like many cities in what is referred to as America's "rust belt", Worcester fell on hard times. Big industry left town, banks were bought out and consolidated, and a formerly prosperous downtown became blighted. This deterioration didn't happen overnight. But the steady decline in business and industry left the community with an unhealthy economic dependency on the "eds and the meds", i.e., the institutions of higher education and the medical facilities.

During this period of decline, the population, somewhat surprisingly, remained stable. Worcester remained the second largest city in Massachusetts and jockeyed with Providence, RI as the second or third largest city in New England. This stability of population, and in the last two years, an actual increase in population, meant that the demand for municipal services remained high, while the tax burden to support city services fell disproportionately on the homeowner in the form of ever increasing real property taxes.

Amid this period of turmoil and decline the colleges of Worcester continued to be economically viable institutions. They remained what we have come to know as "anchor institutions". As the city entered the 21st century it's leadership realized that the local colleges would have to play a leading role in any efforts to revitalize the city. While not the "only game in town", they were certainly critical players.

As more and more people recognized the critical role the colleges could play in the city, an interesting sub-plot was developing. Like most non-profit organizations, colleges and universities in Worcester pay little or no local, state, or federal taxes on assets used for educational purposes. In more robust economic times this was not an issue. But as the ripple effect of reduced federal aid to states and cities combined with the absence of commercial and industrial sources of tax revenue, a small but vocal segment of the community began to look to the colleges as a source of revenue through Payments In Lieu of Taxes (PILOTs).

For supporters of PILOT payments in Worcester the experience of cities like Boston, Cambridge, Providence, and New Haven lent credence to their arguments. If colleges like Harvard, MIT, Brown, and Yale were willing to make voluntary PILOT payments to their respective cities, why wouldn't the colleges of Worcester follow suit? Colleges, after all, had substantial real estate holdings and placed demands on the City's municipal services. And the knowledge that at least one of the colleges had an endowment in excess of \$500 million contributed to the "justification" that colleges should make these voluntary payments.

The hue and cry for PILOT payments placed the City administration in an awkward position. Given the major roles the colleges had assumed as employers and primers of the economic pump through their purchasing power, "biting the hand that feeds you" was

a caution that occurred to many in the community, including key leaders in the municipal government.

It was at this point in late 2004 that a visionary mayor (and current Lieutenant Governor of the State of Massachusetts), Timothy P. Murray, convened a task force to look at creative ways that the city could better utilize the resources of the colleges and tie those resources more closely to development efforts generated by the city government and the business community. The task force, chaired by then State Senator James Leary, spent a year making a nation-wide study of models of campus-community partnerships and reviewing studies of the economic impact of colleges on their local communities. At the completion of their study, dubbed the “Leary Report”, a recommendation was made to then-Mayor Murray that an organization be established that would seek to improve communication and coordination among the city, including the non-profit community, the local colleges and universities, and the business community.² That structure has become the Worcester UniverCity Partnership.

The Worcester UniverCity Partnership is a unique collaboration of the 13-member (9 in the City of Worcester) Colleges of Worcester Consortium, the City of Worcester (including the non-profit community), and the local business community represented by the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Worcester Business Development Corporation. Each partnering organization has contributed resources, both cash and in-kind, to form the collaborative. A 12-person Board of Directors made up equally of representatives from each participating constituency provides guidance and direction to the Partnership’s Executive Director.

Enabling Factors

There are some common factors that must be present for any partnership effort to succeed regardless of the number of institutions making up the collaboration. Perhaps the most important of these factors is informed leadership. A confluence of positive leadership factors was occurring in Worcester at this moment in time, facilitating the establishment of the Partnership. A youthful and visionary city government, led by the Mayor – who is elected – and City Manager – who is appointed, had recently been put in place. The President of the Colleges of Worcester Consortium, a well established organization with an over 35 year presence in Worcester, was on hand to lend the considerable weight of his organization to the partnership and make available the networking capabilities of the Consortium to initial organizational efforts. And the business community, somewhat moribund in recent years, was coming together under the leadership of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Worcester Business Development Corporation.

Flowing from this executive-level involvement, more specific, hands-on leadership emanated from members of the three partnering organizations. An Assistant City Manager, acting on behalf of the Mayor, serves as the liaison to the city administration. Individual college presidents working within the Consortium took on an active role in

² Leary, James et al. (April, 2004) Utilizing Worcester’s Colleges and Universities to Promote Economic Development and Expansion of the Tax Base. Worcester, MA.

supporting the work of the Partnership. It has been pointed out in numerous forums that in order for partnerships to succeed they need “champions”. Within the group of college presidents in Worcester presidents such as John Bassett of Clark University, Dennis Berkey of Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and Fr. Michael McFarland of Holy Cross, ably fit the definition of champion. Specifically, the role of Clark University in the community, beginning with the work of Dr. Bassett’s predecessor, Richard Traina, and continuing to this day, informed the planning and development of the Worcester UniverCity Partnership.

Another key factor that helps inform a successful partnership is the concept of a shared vision. I earlier described economic development as an overarching theme of the Partnership. The fact that all of the partners can agree on this vision enabled the Partnership to coalesce and move forward. It is clearly in the interest of all three partnering entities that the city becomes, once again, a prospering, healthy community.

A third factor that promotes successful partnerships is an entrepreneurial approach to problem solving, a willingness to take some risks. As I described earlier, the city of Worcester was a traditional, old-line industrial city that happened to have several colleges within the city limits. The colleges educated the city’s young people and provided teachers for the schools and employees for local business and industry – all very traditional and time honored roles for colleges.

The architects of the Worcester UniverCity Partnership recognized that there was potential to go beyond these traditional roles and begin to more fully engage the resources of the colleges. Partnerships have emerged among the city, the colleges, and the business community that involve everything from a multi-million dollar real estate developments that will bring small business, jobs, and market-rate housing to the community, to individual students working on behalf of public and non-profit organizations, producing research studies, media products, and websites. With this entrepreneurial approach come some inherent risks. Colleges are not typically seen as urban developers; products developed by students may not meet professional standards. But the very nature of these partnering activities, for example bringing in the Worcester Business Development Corporation to work with Worcester Polytechnic Institute on a real estate development project, is what enables the project to be successfully completed.

A final word on entrepreneurship. The very construct of the Partnership itself, i.e., multiple colleges, the city (including the nonprofit sector), and the business community is in itself an entrepreneurial approach. Typically, community partnership models have linked single higher education institutions with one or more community partners. The Partnership model Worcester is developing is, in my view, unique.

Viewing partnership activities in the light of mutual benefit to be derived will be another factor contributing to good partnerships. Reduced to its simplest form, this could be thought of as enlightened self-interest. In Worcester the work of Clark University would not have become a national model of community engagement and a motivating force behind the UniverCity Partnership if they had not been forced to react to the blighted

conditions surrounding the campus. But the University did react, and in ways that included major “bricks and mortar” contributions as well as more typical capacity building partnership activities.

In spite of lingering town-gown tensions, Clark’s immediate neighbors recognized that Clark’s motives, however self-serving, would also serve the community’s best interests. Results of this on-going collaboration include a nationally-recognized junior/senior high school, a state of the art Boys and Girls Club, shared athletic fields, and improved housing stock throughout the neighborhood. Working with a partnering Community Development Corporation (CDC) on all these initiatives has enabled Clark to build the capacity of the CDC.

Early Progress/Lessons Learned

As described above, a successful partnership can only be achieved if all parties perceive mutual gain or benefit. Beginning with the earliest discussions regarding the establishment of the Partnership, the city and the business community knew what they wanted from the colleges: a concerted effort to expand and grow their economic impact. A list of economic indicators was established, borrowing liberally from the work of Harvard economist, Michael Porter.³ This list described distinct roles colleges play in a community, including the college as employer, the college as purchaser, the college as real estate developer, and the college as provider of intellectual capital. It was in the city’s and the business community’s interest to have the colleges vigorously address these areas of economic impact. It was then a question of whether addressing these factors would be in the colleges’ interests.

A revitalized local economy is certainly in the interest of the colleges of Worcester. Though only one college among the nine could be considered a downtown campus, the other eight institutions understand the benefits to be gained from a more thriving, economically healthy community. In the early stages of development the UniverCity Partnership had little difficulty convincing the local colleges of the wisdom and importance of supporting local merchants, trying whenever possible to direct their purchase of goods and services to Worcester owned and operated businesses.

Early results were encouraging. Collectively, the colleges in Worcester spend approximately half a billion dollars on goods and services. A 24% increase in goods and services purchased locally was realized in 2005-2006 when compared to the previous year (\$51.3 million vs. \$41.1 million)⁴. This increase, surpassing a goal of a 5% increase established in consultation with the Worcester City Council, was the result of strong leadership at the presidential level, advocacy by the Partnership, and a commitment by college purchasing and procurement staff to target local businesses whenever possible.

³ Initiatives for a Competitive Inner City & CEO’s for Cities, (2002). Leveraging Colleges and Universities for Urban Revitalization: An Action Plan

⁴ Semi-Annual report submitted to City of Worcester, (January, 2007), Worcester, MA

But as this process has become politicized, frequently in response to continued calls for PILOT payments (this is especially true around times of municipal elections), colleges have begun to adopt a more defensive posture regarding their purchasing policies, citing anything from limitations on what can be purchased locally, to the larger, more dramatic contributions they are making to the community.

Another obstacle is presented, ironically, by a business partner within the UniverCity Partnership, the Chamber of Commerce. As a regional Chamber of Commerce, its membership includes businesses outside the city limits of Worcester. The Chamber cannot justify singling out Worcester businesses at the expense of member businesses outside the city limits. This self-serving approach, as understandable as it may be, could be interpreted as running counter to a specific objective of the University Partnership.

Another partnership has been developing around the colleges' role as employer. A hiring initiative is underway targeting unemployed or under employed Worcester residents for entry-level or beyond positions at local colleges. Working through the City's Workforce Development office, Worcester residents can be screened and made job-ready for the job openings on the campuses.

It should be pointed out that the workforce at the colleges is currently comprised of approximately 28% of Worcester residents⁵. Through the efforts of the Workforce Development office and again, through the advocacy efforts of the Partnership, it is the hope that this percentage increases. While the colleges are gaining qualified personnel, the community is benefiting from increased employment, closer ties to the colleges, and the greater purchasing power that result from this employment.

On the surface, this again seems like a win-win program for colleges and the community. But as we're seeing with the local purchasing effort there is pushback developing among the colleges. A highly visible plan to target Worcester residents for employment in entry-level jobs, in the minds of some local college presidents, puts an unnecessary burden on the colleges to "deliver" these jobs. Even though assurances have been made that only qualified persons will be referred and the final hiring decision will always rest with the college, there remains the sense that expectations of local hiring will have been raised within the community and whenever a non-local resident is hired another strike against the college is recorded.

To be fair the pushback on some of these issues is often within the context of a college or university's overall contribution to the community, a contribution that is frequently quite significant.

The colleges are also partnering with a public-private arts initiative, the Worcester Center for the Performing Arts, to restore a long-abandoned downtown theater. The colleges have made a long-term financial commitment to this project in return for special access to the theater, blocks of tickets to scheduled performances, and the opportunity to incorporate the theater into their theater arts curriculum. The theater can also be

⁵ Colleges of Worcester Consortium website, (March, 2007), Worcester, MA

highlighted to prospective students and their parents as part of a college admissions effort. While the some of the colleges felt less enthusiastic than others regarding this contribution, again, because of the scope and significance of other contributions to the well being of the community, all recognized the value and importance of this renovated theater to the greater community.

In all of the examples of partnership cited above the mutual benefit to all collaborating parties was evident. A successful and robust business community attracts new business; more jobs relate to greater spending and additional tax revenues; real estate development, as in the case of the theater, provides an entertainment and educational venue while revitalizing the downtown; and service learning initiatives provide students with practical experience while saving city agencies and non-profits thousands of dollars in consultant fees or administrative costs.

Where an occasional lack of perceived mutual benefit can be observed involves the application of the colleges' intellectual capital. While there is little or no reluctance on the part of the local colleges to engage their campus resources in service to the community, there can be a lack of understanding or appreciation on the part of the community as to what benefits will accrue to the colleges through these activities. The colleges must perceive an educational benefit if they are going to commit the time and talents of their faculty and students to community generated projects. Colleges frequently find themselves in the position of explaining that they are not social service agencies; they are not commercial ventures; they are not suppliers of "free labor". In a community like Worcester where colleges create such a large footprint, these distinctions become extremely important in the development and sustainability of potential partnerships.

Even when colleges are making significant capital contributions to the City and students and faculty are contributing literally hundreds of thousands of hours in one form or service or another there is always in the background the expressed sentiment that these contributions are never enough. And this can generate a defensiveness on the part of the colleges that leads to the above described opposition to seemingly mutually beneficial local hiring or purchasing initiatives.

In creating the UniverCity Partnership the Task Force viewed a number of models around the country, including many of the "usual suspects" such as Trinity College in Hartford, the University of Pennsylvania, hometown Clark University, and several other programs with which I have more than a passing acquaintance, Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPCs). The great work being done at all these institutions provided encouragement to the Partnership planners that similar success would be possible in Worcester. Consciously or otherwise, the thought, "If a partnership built around one college is good, how much better could it be if we engaged nine colleges?" occurred to Task Force members.

What appears to be overlooked was the need for a basic financial foundation for the Partnership enterprise. All of the examples viewed by the Task Force and all of the

campus community partnerships that I have observed have had thousands of dollars of “seed money”, and in many cases, much more than that, available to them. This seed money enabled a sponsor to hire staff, fund programs, buy-out faculty time, hire consultants, etc. While providing a salary for the Executive Director and in-kind support of office space, telephones, computers, clerical support, etc., those responsible for establishing the Partnership infrastructure have made available approximately \$7000 a year to spend on everything else. This limited funding, coupled with some missteps in establishing non-profit status for the Partnership, seriously limit the Partnership’s ability to do much of anything beyond, in the immortal words of Tennessee William’s Blanche DuBois, “rely on the kindness of (others)”.

And this is not to say that the “kindness” is not proffered. As alluded to above, the Partnership can point to numerous examples of cooperation and collaboration from faculty and administrators, city and non-profit officials, and persons in the business community. Service learning is alive and well and expanding within the colleges of Worcester. Student hours, in the form of volunteering, internships, work study, and other examples of engagement in the community, approach 500,000.

But the absence of any kind of serious financial underpinning can inhibit the Partnership from gaining the cooperation of busy faculty at participating institutions. The mixture of colleges in Worcester is a rich one, but aside from the state medical school, there is an absence of research-focused, well resourced institutions of higher education. Teaching loads at most of the colleges are heavy and the inability to buy the time of faculty who might be interested in UniverCity Partnership-driven projects presents a serious barrier to accomplishing the goals of the Partnership. This lack of adequate funding also impacts Partnership staffing and programming capacity.

A related issue concerns the above mentioned furor over Payments In Lieu of Taxes (PILOTs). While the colleges and the City of Worcester have held steadfast in their support (albeit modest) for the Partnership there has been a vocal minority of citizens who feel that not only should the colleges be “paying” more, but public dollars should not be used to support programs and agendas that are felt to be the colleges’ responsibility. And in a community that is facing a \$21 million deficit, an administration that vigorously supports the goals of the Partnership cannot ignore the concerns of taxpayers, predominantly homeowners, who bear the burden of the cost of community services. The current level of support is likely to stay in place, with little or no chance of any increase.

An unintended consequence of PILOT payments could be the withdrawal of services currently in place by the colleges or contemplated projects being taken off the drawing board. This could potentially damage the UniverCity Partnership initiative. The example of Brown University in Providence, RI has been cited frequently as a case where the University agreed to a PILOT payment to the City of Providence but eliminated a contribution equal to the PILOT payment to a collaborative city-campus effort in Providence.⁶ The embedding of service learning and other pedagogies of engagement

⁶ Worcester Regional Research Bureau. (March, 2004). “Will PILOTs Fly in Worcester? Taxing Nonprofits and Other Options” Worcester, MA

may enable the colleges to take a higher road and continue their dedicated community work. But the option to say, “We gave already at the office”, when the UniverCity Partnership comes seeking support for an economic development initiative, would be a real one.

A final obstacle, and one that should not come as a surprise to members of the academy, is the difficulty of coordinating the resources of multiple colleges, particularly faculty time and talent. While the Colleges of Worcester Consortium has worked hard over the years to make consistent as much as possible among the member institutions, one is still faced with different institutional schedules, different teaching requirements (class loads), differing levels of community commitment, etc. The true potential of the Worcester UniverCity Partnership will be the ability to tap complimentary resources at different institutions to develop a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary approach to community-identified problems. This potential is proving to be elusive.

Some of the difficulty can be explained by the relative newness of the Partnership. There is also the issue of course planning. If the application of campus intellectual capital to community issues is limited to regularly scheduled course work, the lead time necessary to ensure this involvement could be considerable. As pointed out above, not having the capacity to buy-out faculty time to enable an interested faculty member to devote his/her time to a community project is problematic.

While there are examples of faculty from different institutions collaborating on community-based projects, there is nothing close to a tradition of this practice in Worcester. The Partnership is beginning to see growing interest in this practice, with much of the leadership coming from the state schools.

And finally, as the UniverCity Partnership evolves the role of the business partners has become less clear. I’ve alluded to the ambivalence the Chamber of Commerce feels toward any type of preferential targeting of Worcester businesses. Until recently the UniverCity Partnership office was housed within the Chamber of Commerce, but a lease issue caused the Chamber to move and no space was made available to the UniverCity Partnership. For all intents and purposes this physical move has taken the Chamber out of any on-going participation with the Partnership, save the presence of the Chamber Director on the Partnership Board of Directors.

The Worcester Business Development Corporation, the other business partner, stepped into the breach, providing office space in a newly renovated building as well as continuing to serve as pay agent for the Partnership’s Executive Director. But except for some early involvement with the solicitation of support from the colleges for the renovated downtown theater the support of the Business Development Corporation has become rather passive.

The Worcester UniverCity Partnership is most definitely a work in progress. The potential is enormous. Worcester, MA is a city whose size will allow the impact of the nine colleges to be felt. However, the Partnership must grow beyond the single

Executive Director with no appreciable budget. The Partnership must work to overcome the inertia that prevents faculty from different institutions to come together in interdisciplinary and inter-institutional teams to address significant community issues.

Above all, the community and the colleges must abandon what to many is an adversarial relationship. PILOT demands exacerbate this tension. The colleges and the industries they are spawning are the life blood of the community. Much more creative thought must be put into how the colleges best serve the community and how the community makes the best use of the college resources. The UniverCity Partnership is in a position to inform this discussion and engage the colleges in efforts that serve everyone's interest.

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