

Campus partners for better communities

By Armand Carriere and John Saltmarsh | November 18, 2006

WHAT CAN colleges and universities do to improve communities across the Commonwealth? A campus-community partnership in Worcester could be a catalyst for creative public policy that encourages community engagement as a core mission of higher education.

Like many older cities across Massachusetts, Worcester fell on hard times starting in the late 1960s. Big industry left town, banks were bought out and consolidated, and a formerly prosperous downtown became blighted. Amid this turmoil and decline, colleges in Worcester remained economically viable institutions. As the city entered the 21st century it realized that the local colleges would have to play a leading role in any efforts to revitalize the city.

In late 2004, a task force was created to look at ways to bring together college resources with city government, the business community, and the nonprofit sector. The task force recommended the creation of a vehicle that would facilitate improved communication and coordination among the various sectors. That structure emerged as the Worcester UniverCity Partnership, a unique collaboration of the 13-member Colleges of Worcester Consortium, the City of Worcester, and the local business community represented by the Chamber of Commerce and the Worcester Business Development Corporation. Worcester has made building the capacity of higher education for community revitalization a major priority of its community and economic development policies and programs.

This is what needs to be done at the state level. In December 2005 the Brookings Institution issued a report analyzing the impact of higher education as "a competitive asset for communities" in Pennsylvania, which, like Massachusetts, has a high density of higher education institutions that have the potential to boost the renewal of the state's beleaguered communities.

The Brookings report offers a series of recommendations for state wide policy that invests in higher education for the purpose of community economic revitalization.

The report recommended that the governor create a state Higher Education Advisory Board (like the one established in Worcester) that would bring together education, municipal and state government, business, and nonprofit leaders to focus on how colleges and universities can partner with the state, assisting it in meeting its economic development goals.

Such an advisory board could consider innovative policy proposals, such as the Brookings recommendation to create a grants program to facilitate university partnerships in community development. For example, the Ohio Urban University Program is a network linking the resources of eight urban universities with the communities they serve in cooperative efforts to improve the state's urban areas. Seeded by a \$500,000 allocation in 1979, the program has grown to an investment of \$8.2 million and leveraged an additional \$10 million in university dollars.

Through a system of public and private colleges, Massachusetts has a network in place, in communities and regions such as Boston, Lowell, Worcester, southeastern Massachusetts, and the Pioneer Valley, that could help identify urban challenges and facilitate solutions to improve

the quality of life in these communities.

The Brookings Institution also recommended the establishment of a state payment-in-lieu-of-taxes program to enhance the fiscal capacity of municipalities to partner with higher education institutions in redevelopment projects. Under such a program, the state would award grants to municipalities with colleges and universities to help offset revenue losses incurred from higher education's tax-exempt status. Such a program in Connecticut currently returns more than three quarters of projected property taxes on institutions of higher education and hospitals to municipalities.

For the past two years, the Worcester UniverCity Partnership along with the New England Resource Center for Higher Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and with the support of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, has sponsored a series of meetings focused on higher education institutions and their role in helping to renew communities.

The Brookings report recommends that a state advisory board could expand on these kinds of meetings and sponsor an annual conference so leaders can exchange information, establish priorities, and identify best practices to tackle common problems. This could galvanize the creation of new community-university partnerships, as well as provide a venue for identifying additional opportunities.

The future of higher education in Massachusetts should include policies that promote community engagement to help provide a more prosperous future for communities across Massachusetts.

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