



## UNIVERSITIES, COMMUNITIES, AND CITIES Forging Sustainable Partnerships

There is no sizable university in the United States that has not experienced some conflict with its surrounding community. Much of the time the issues are modest, easily resolvable, or, though time consuming to manage, not a threat to institutional goals. At other times, community concerns can become far more problematic to institutions, delaying and adding to the cost of expansion, threatening the institution's attractiveness to potential students and faculty, or damaging its reputation. Hank Webber, vice president for community and government affairs at the University of Chicago, and Valerie Jarrett, University of Chicago trustee, suggest several strategies for managing the larger conflicts that arise between universities and their communities. They describe university-community relations as an art, the goal of which is to maximize the chances of creating win-win results among universities, communities, and cities.



### MISSION CONTROL

- ✘ Institutional decisions inevitably create winners and losers. The essence of successful university-community relations is determining how to maximize win-win results.
- ✘ The need for universities to expand to achieve their core missions is the primary source of tension between universities and the cities and neighborhoods in which they are located.
- ✘ The cost of conflicts between universities and their surrounding cities and communities flows from delayed projects, additional expenditures, and damaged reputations.
- ✘ Universities should commit and consistently adhere to clearly defined principles and processes of engagement with local communities and elected officials.
- ✘ The symbiotic relationship between universities and cities must be recognized and communicated.



## Why the Conflict?

Universities are widely recognized as beneficial to society and their host cities. The most successful metropolitan areas of the United States in the 1990s were, without exception, those that had strong universities. Further, the teaching and research mission of universities is widely accepted and admired by the public, and most Americans want their children to go to college and earn a degree. Why, then, is there tension between universities and the cities and neighborhoods in which they are located?

First and foremost is the need for universities to expand in order to achieve their core missions. Research, particularly in the sciences and medicine, requires a seemingly never-ending set of new and large buildings. The largest private research universities in the country have been adding two million square feet of research space per decade during the past 50 years—and there is no sign that this rate of growth is slackening. At the minimum, institutional expansion means greater campus density, more congestion, and more local activity. In most cases, however, it also means large-scale

institutional growth on land adjacent to the campus—land that often is not owned by the university. In some cases this land is part of vibrant and successful communities; in other cases it may be derelict or underutilized. But all land has various options for use, and even the most distressed parcels have many alternative futures. Institutional expansions inevitably require the consent of local governments, which are often quite responsive to neighborhood interests.

Competition for students, faculty, and staff is also driving institutional expansion. Increasing societal expectations for the amenities of campus life, as well as the need to create attractive local environments, require significant expansion and are another source of conflict. This competition for human capital has spurred many universities to undertake community initiatives to improve declining neighborhoods surrounding their campuses so as to better attract top talent. Similar to university expansion, efforts at neighborhood improvement require the cooperation of local communities and public sector agencies.

The tax-exempt status of colleges and universities can generate conflict as well. While universities contribute much to their host cities and communities, they also utilize public resources, such as fire and police services, without providing the local property taxes that usually pay for such services. Tensions can be particularly acute in cities and towns where large amounts of the total land area are owned by not-for-profit institutions.

Finally, the conflict between universities and communities in many ways mirrors the larger societal issues of race and class. Major universities usually have majority white faculties, student bodies, and senior administrations. Large minority populations, if they are present on campus at all, are often disproportionately found in lower-paid service positions. This situation mirrors one of the most unpleasant realities of modern America. The dynamics of attracting students and faculty nationally and service workers locally make this unfortunate result very common and can create tensions with surrounding minority communities. Some of the most difficult university-community relations issues of the past few decades have had their roots in tension over university employment practices, particularly those affecting lower-paid workers.



## Strategies for Managing Conflicts

Much progress has been made in the past few decades: universities have become far more successful at articulating their cases relating to the economic value they generate for cities in terms of jobs, increased retail sales, and new business formation. In addition, institutions have become more willing to structure new arrangements for payments in lieu of taxes.

The challenge is to structure university processes and decision making to maximize the chance of creating win-win results among universities, communities, and cities. There is no blueprint for doing so. Institutions differ, communities differ, and local circumstances differ. But experience and reflection suggest that, beyond simply financial solutions, the following strategies are worth considering as part of an integrated strategy of managing university-community relations:

*Build the case with large units of government and the public for the value of institutional expansion and neighborhood improvement.* Local conflicts are often mediated by larger units of government. Permission for institutional growth, for example, is usually granted by cities or counties. Disputes with local community groups are often about influencing these larger organizations. Cities or

For reasons of fairness and public perception, universities should think hard about the basic rules that govern their dealings with local community and local elected officials... When deciding on principles of engagement, institutions are wise to remember that they will often be expected to meet higher standards than corporate norms.

counties are usually far more receptive to the larger issues of job creation, improvements in patient care, and economic development than are local groups. Through the work of CEOs for Cities and the Institute for Competitive Inner City, local and regional leadership have increasingly come to recognize the economic value of universities and academic medical centers as stable pillars of local economies. A common mechanism of informing both the public and policy makers about the economic value of universities and academic medical centers is the production and dissemination of economic impact studies.

*Commit to principles and processes of engagement.* For reasons of both fairness and public perception, universities should think hard about the basic rules that govern their dealings with local community and local elected officials. Will the institution seek to use powers of eminent domain, and if so, when? Will land be bought or held without public acknowledgment of ownership? How much notice will be provided about future institutional plans? Institutions can and will make different decisions on these issues, but the importance of having clear institutional positions and processes and consistently adhering to them cannot be overemphasized. When deciding on the principles of engagement, educational institutions are wise to remember that they will often be expected to meet higher standards than corporate norms.

*Develop local partnerships with local citizens groups.* Local partnerships are key to building a base of community support, mediating issues of disagreement, and developing the relationships and trust that can be useful in times of stress. Strategic linkages in the areas of job training, child care, and the use of local and minority vendors are particularly promising. For example, using local and minority vendors builds the economic base of the surrounding community, creates local employment, and can provide an overdue and valuable challenge to some traditional contracting relationships.

*Leverage university resources and programs to meet community needs.* Considerable, and often under-recognized, opportunities exist for universities to serve faculty, students, and staff and build academic programs while also contributing to local communities. A good example is employer-assisted housing programs, whereby universities subsidize the cost of housing for faculty and staff. Such programs can both make living near work affordable for employees and contribute to neighborhood revitalization. Professional schools can meet both the training and research needs of the university and the service needs of communities. The model for this strategy is the teaching hospital, which provides excellent patient care to local

communities, trains the next generation of medical providers, and develops new mechanisms of treating disease. This model is now being applied to public education as well: universities are developing new public schools that serve local students, train new teachers and principals, and function as laboratories for research in educational practice.

*Recognize that communities are not monolithic.* Like universities, communities are made up of many different voices. The challenge for institutions is to recognize the diversity of local voices and to seek relationships with as many interested groups as possible.

*Accept that trade-offs are inevitable.* Certain institutional decisions will inevitably make some people worse off. A reasonable compromise is to, when possible, offer compensation to the point that the aggrieved parties are no worse off than they would have been absent the institutional actions. The trade-offs do not need to be monetary to be effective. For poor communities bordering universities concerned about institutional expansion, for example, this principle might suggest that universities compensate the community by providing additional jobs or helping with public education. Building more parking or providing support for improved public transportation is often the trade-off for increased street traffic. Perhaps surprisingly, many of the most difficult university-community problems involve wealthy communities, in part because the institution cannot provide any benefits that the community does not already have.

*Involve academic programs in community engagement activities.* Most university resources and energy are harbored within academic units. Strategies to involve academic programs in community activities are necessary to maximize university involvement in the community and to facilitate engagement of the greatest resource of the university—the ideas and energy of faculty and students—at the community level. Faculty involvement is particularly important for sustainability. Every campus can cite exemplary cases of work done by faculty that contributes to community life. The challenge is to support and grow these efforts.

*Be a good corporate citizen.* Universities, like all large organizations, are judged by the public in large measure by whether they do their part to support local groups and are open to the community. Universities' reputations are helped considerably by making campus venues available

Considerable, and often under recognized, opportunities exist for universities to serve faculty, students, and staff and build academic programs while also contributing to local communities.

to the public at no or modest cost and by hosting community events. Active communication to local communities about campus events can be particularly useful.

*Become more diverse.* Universities located in communities with large minority populations could benefit considerably from efforts to increase their proportions of minority students, senior administrators, and faculty. One very effective strategy appears to be programs that increase the number of students attending the institution from the university's host community and city.

*Recognize that resource limits are unlikely to be accepted by local parties.* Universities, like all large institutions in competitive markets, are deeply aware of resource limits. All departments believe they do not have the resources they need to achieve their mission. Budget decisions are always vexing and difficult for senior university officials. From the perspective of communities, particularly low-income communities, however, large universities are very wealthy institutions. Claims that a change might cost an additional few hundred thousand dollars in a project that costs many tens of millions of dollars are unlikely to be persuasive.

*Support the work of students in the community.* Students have the potential to be useful ambassadors. Students can work with community groups and elected officials, tutor in local schools, and provide a type of non-threatening help that no formal institutional university program can match. They also can join with local opposition groups in ways that attract considerable attention. There is no strategy that prevents this from happening, but good on-campus communication and the involvement of students (to whatever extent is feasible) in the development of an institution's community strategy can help.

*Do not ask elected officials to do what they cannot do.* Public officials often play key roles in mediating local disputes with citizens. They can be a critical source of support. It is unreasonable, however, to ask local officials to take stands that will impair their future electoral success. Institutions must demonstrate that their positions have at least some support in local communities before asking for the support of elected officials.

*Communicate and network locally as well as nationally.* Universities often believe that their contributions to local communities are undervalued. In part, this is an issue of communication. National universities tend to prioritize national and regional communication vehicles, which are not typically local communities' news sources. Targeted effective local communication must be a priority.

## Conclusion

Some conflict between universities and their local communities is inevitable. Institutional decisions create winners and losers. The challenge for universities is to learn to craft agreements with cities and communities that reflect the institutions' values and strategic goals. American society expects universities to meet high standards for honesty, integrity, and seriousness in teaching and research. They should meet the same high standards in university-city-community relations. The institutional challenge for universities is not, in most cases, a lack of will. It is a lack of experience and expertise. Universities would do well to learn from the community development movement and recruit senior staff with expertise in crafting successful, sustainable partnerships of joint benefit. These partnerships form the basis of long-term, symbiotic relationships between universities and their communities that are often crucial to the achievement of institutional missions.

---

Henry Webber is vice president for Community and Government Affairs and senior lecturer in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. Webber can be reached at [hwebber@uchicago.edu](mailto:hwebber@uchicago.edu).

---

Valerie Jarrett is a trustee of the University of Chicago and a managing director and the executive vice president of The Habitat Company. She is currently chairman of the Chicago Stock Exchange Board. Jarrett can be reached at [vjarrett@habitat.com](mailto:vjarrett@habitat.com).